

It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Liability: An Employer's Checklist for Holiday Parties

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The holiday season has arrived and soon organizations throughout the country will hold their annual holiday celebrations. This much coveted tradition is a great way to network and celebrate with colleagues. It is important, however, for employers and HR professionals to be aware of the various risks related to such events to ensure a safe and festive celebration.

While planning holiday events, employers may want to consider taking the following precautionary measures:

- Remind employees of the Company's policies, and expectations of appropriate workplace behavior. Such policies should expressly state that when alcohol is served, employees are expected to enjoy it responsibly.
- Reiterate that policies against discrimination and harassment apply with equal force at any work-related events.
- Reinforce that members of management are expected to set a good example.
- Limit and/or monitor the amount of alcohol served and consumed. Consider holding the event at a location that has a liquor license and/or hiring a professional bartender so alcohol is distributed by a professional who is trained to recognize when individuals may have over-indulged. It is not advisable to allow employees to serve themselves because then there is no one monitoring their consumption.
- Provide tasty "mocktails" for those who do not consume alcohol.
- Arrange for transportation to and from the event.
- Confirm that vendors are appropriately licensed and insured.
- Be mindful of mental health during this time of heightened stress for many individuals. Remind employees of employee assistance programs that may be available to them.
- If applicable, remind employees to give work-appropriate gifts for any holiday exchanges.
- Ensure holiday customs are work-appropriate and avoid any, for example, that may give rise to sexually-charged scenarios, like hanging mistletoe.
- Use secular language and symbols to ensure inclusivity of a religiously diverse workforce.
- Consider holding the event after working hours and remind employees and contractors that attendance is voluntary.
- If attendance is mandatory, ensure wage and hour laws are followed.
- Avoid sponsoring or attending after-parties.

An office holiday party can be a wonderful opportunity for organizations to celebrate their success from the prior year while looking forward to what next year will bring. These parties are often one of the highlights of the year, but employers need to take care when planning to ensure a safe and festive event. Have fun but proceed with caution! Should you have any questions about implementing policies for your upcoming party, contact DanaLynn Colao of Saiber LLC's Employment & Labor Law Practice.