

Leadership Refresher: Planning

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Learning Objectives

- Understand the challenges of running a trip during AMC Phase 2
- Identify important considerations when selecting location and route
- Identify challenges regarding participant selection and group dynamics
- Prepare for variable conditions on the day of the event

Planning During Covid-19 AMC Phase 2

Covid-19 presents us with a rapidly changing conditions that greatly increase the difficulty of planning and leading outings for the AMC. Everyone, including seasoned veteran trip leaders, are encouraged to create detailed written plans in preparation for upcoming trips

State and Local Travel Restrictions

Be mindful of state and local closures, stay at home orders, and shelter in-place advisories. If either the origination or destination points for an activity are closed due to travel restrictions, the trip does not meet the minimum requirements for Phase 2 activities (and must be cancelled if already posted to ActDB).

Even if destinations are open for travel, consider the risks of spreading the infection across state and county lines. Some organizations are still asking that outdoor activities be limited to no more than a short drive from participants houses.

Closed Destinations

Individual land management organizations may have additional restrictions or may be closed all together.

Some popular locations may have implemented mandatory parking pass reservation systems, may close temporarily if they reach capacity, or may impose special restrictions during busy times such as weekends or holidays

Best practice is to call the land management organization to discuss current restrictions as people have reported finding that online resources do not always match the information obtained by speaking directly with a representative of the organization.

Changing Rules

Stay informed about local requirements such as mandatory face coverings, occupancy limits, etc.

Do not plan activities for states with mandatory 14-day self-isolation requirements unless leaders and participants are restricted to residents of that state.

Considerations When Selecting Location and Route

Avoid Popular Destinations

Popular “tourist” destinations should be avoided since increased crowds increase safety risks. Additionally, these destinations are prone to capacity limits and other variable restrictions which can complicate planning

If you cannot avoid popular destinations, consider visiting during a less crowded times such as early mornings or weekdays.

Alternatively, use a less traveled route when traveling near a popular location. For example, instead of following the Falling Waters / Old Bridal Path loop for Lincoln and Lafayette in the White Mountains, consider Using the Skookumchunck trail to summit Lafayette instead. In this case, the summit may still be crowded, but there should be much less contact with other hikers on the trails.

Consider Choke Points

When planning a route, be mindful of “choke points” where people are forced into closer proximity. Some examples of choke points include:

- Boat launches
- Portages
- Narrow trails along cliff sides (or other features that prevent you from stepping aside to make room for others)
- Road crossings that require people to cluster together before making the crossing
- Trail junctions (especially for leaders that traditionally use trail junctions as a landmark for people to stop and regroup)
- Water sources
- Boardwalks / bridges / bog bridges

If choke points cannot be avoided, plan for ways to mitigate clustering together. For example, participants wait at their car until it is their turn to use the boat launch or crossing roads in smaller groups. Be sure to account for the added time this will require.

Limited Resources

Consider resources that you require for you activity, such as designated campsites, toilets, bear vaults, etc., that may place limits on the number of participants you will be able to support.

For example, the Kinsman’s Pond campsite in the White Mountains only has 4 tent platforms (3 single and 1 double). Following single occupancy tent requirements, this campsite will not support a backpacking trip with the maximum AMC limit of 10 participants. Even if you were able to safely arrange 10 tents onto those platforms, there will be other groups attempting to use the campsite.

In addition to public facilities, also consider group gear and how it will be shared and sanitized. For the most part, the use of group gear should be avoided by requiring each participant to bring their own equipment (example no communal cooking). In some cases, such as rock climbing, it will not be possible to avoid having two people on a rope at one time

Carpooling Restrictions

The AMC reopening plan highly discourages carpooling but does not outright ban it. Some chapters may have additional restrictions. For example, Worcester Chapter has completely banned all carpooling.

If carpooling is prohibited (or you have decided to avoid the risks associated with it) your trip cannot include a car spot. For activities such as biking, routes will be limited to out-and-back or loops. For paddling, trips will be limited to flatwater.

Also consider the increased number of cars that will be required and the total size/popularity of the parking lot/trailhead. As with considerations about limited resources, some parking lots may not have enough parking spaces for a full group of 10 or it may be unlikely that 10 spaces will be available based on the popularity of the area.

Trips that do include carpooling (when allowed by the chapter) must clearly indicate that a carpool is required as part of the trip description on ActDB.

Easy Evacuation Plan

In the event of a medical emergency (including if a participant begins showing symptoms of COVID-19), you must be able to evacuate quickly. Avoid routes such as traveling to the Bonds in the White Mountains from the Lincoln Woods Trailhead where, at any point during the ~19 mile trip, the fastest way to evacuate is to return to the starting point.

Even for non COVID-19 emergencies, it is important to have multiple escape routes because local Search and Rescue efforts have been crippled by COVID-19.

An easy evacuation route will also help in the event that a participant discovers that they are in poor physical condition for the activity after extended time spent at home.

Trail Conditions

Trail maintainers have also been affected by COVID-19 and standard springtime maintenance is far behind schedule (in areas where it's even been allowed to resume). Despite the lack of maintenance, these areas have seen above average usage as people attempt to find escape from stay at home orders.

Do as much research as possible regarding current conditions and be prepared for poor conditions and difficult to navigate areas.

Backup Plans

Create a backup plan if you arrive and your chosen location is closed, out of parking spaces, or over capacity. If possible, find a nearby location that is easy to get to and offers a similar activity.

Consider sharing the backup plan with registered participants so it is easier to redirect them to the alternate location.

Considerations Regarding Participant Selection and Group Dynamics

Group Size

Local regulations always take priority over the AMC maximum group size limit of 10 people.

Based on the research done while planning the location and route, it may be a good idea to have a group size below the maximum allowed. Some trips that would be practical for a group of 4 or 5 might be overcrowded with the full ten (based on choke points, limited resources, parking spaces, etc)

Consider how far apart people will need to be spaced and how this will impact the group's ability to communicate and socialize, especially with masks on which muffle speech. Also consider how practical it will be for everyone to gather around when you need to speak to the group (example: trip talk).

If you do chose to bring a larger group, consider nonverbal means of communicating such hand signals

Participant Fitness

COVID-19 has impacted the physical fitness levels of a large portion of the population. While some have taken this time as a chance to increase their daily routine, many have been sitting home getting little to no physical activity.

It is recommended to plan hikes that are easier than you are normally used to in terms of both distance and pace: especially if you, yourself, are attempting to get back into shape after staying at home.

Interacting with Travelers Outside Your Group

We can only set the behavior expectations for the participants on our trip. The behavior of others around you will be out of your control and you will need to be prepared for how to handle situations where others are not following proper social distancing, mask usage, etc. In an unsafe situation, move the group away from the problem as soon as possible.

Avoiding popular destinations will help reduce the risk of encountering others misbehaving. People traveling in more remote locations are typically more experienced and understand and follow proper etiquette compared to the causal "tourists" that flock to popular locations.

Avoid stopping at or near choke points to further reduce these risks.

Be Mindful of Where Your Participants Live

The further people travel from their home to the destination, the more likely they are to cause infections across state/county lines.

Participants living in locations with travel bans/restrictions do not meet the criteria to join a Phase 2 activity.

Consider limiting registrations to people living in a similar geographic region (example Worcester County residence only for a trip within that region), especially if numbers begin rising again the Northeast.

Contact Information

While it has always been important to collect contact information, given the rapidly changing conditions we are experiencing, its more important than ever to collect as much contact information as you can (and bring it with you on the trip!). You should have at least one means of communication (text, IM, phone call) that is faster than email communication.

Ask for the best means of contacting a participant on the day of a trip in case there are last minute changes or cancellations. Avoid planning trips to locations where you will not have cell coverage if a location is closed or out of parking spaces and you need to move to an alternative location.

Many people do not pick up their phone for unknown numbers. If you plan to use phone calls, consider giving out your phone number to participants ahead of time and let them know they should be prepared for a phone call.

Preparing to Lead the Event

Prepare a Checklist and Use It That Morning

In addition to the standard list of tasks for the day of an event (example check gear, trail conditions, weather, etc), checklists should be expanded to include tasks related to COVID-19. Tasks include but are not limited to:

- Verify that all participants have signed the e-waiver
- Verify that no new travel restrictions or registrations have been issues
- Verify that the destination is open and accepting visitors
- Verify that your mask, hand sanitizer, and gloves are in the car and ready for use

Prepare to Enforce the Rule

Safety is always the first priority on any trip. With the added risks from COVID-19, even more responsibility is placed on the leader to uphold the requirements and risk mitigation strategies of the AMC

Given the mixed public response to mask and social distancing guidance, leaders should be mentally prepared to confront participants in the unfortunate event that they refuse to follow AMC requirements. This may be more challenging for leaders that naturally attempt to avoid confrontation.

Preventative measures such as discussing the proper wearing and storing of masks and social distancing during the trip talk can help prevent incidents later in the trip.

Arrive Early

Be prepared to arrive earlier than normal for your event. This will allow you to assess conditions at the destination and redirect participants to a back up location if required. Additionally, arriving early allows you to ensure that participants don their masks upon arrival and keep them on until after the Trip Talk

What If Analysis?

With the issues presented by COVID-19 on top of normal activity risks, it is important to attempt to plan for as many potential challenges as possible and to have backup plans. For example:

- What if the parking lot is full or the destination is closed upon arrival?
- What if someone does not feel well at the start of the trip?
- What if someone begins to not feel well during the trip?
- What if someone does not bring the appropriate gear?
- What if you've forgotten your gear?

Prepare to Cancel

None of us like doing it, but situations beyond our control may require us to cancel or cut short an activity. The mountains, lakes, and rivers will be there later when it's safer to visit.

Final Thoughts

Leader-Only Practice Trips

It is highly recommended for new leaders to participate in a leader-only practice trip before hosting events for participants. This will allow leaders to identify and overcome the new challenges associated with new COVID restrictions.

Stay Safe!

A final note on safety: emergent conditions may outpace state, local, destination, and AMC guidance and requirements. When in doubt about the safety of an event, please err on the side of caution.