



Liability & Property Pool Workers' Compensation Fund

RISK CONTROL SOLUTIONS

A Service of the Michigan Municipal League Liability and Property Pool and
the Michigan Municipal League Workers' Compensation Fund

SLEDDING HILLS – MANAGING THE RISK

Each year, adults and children look forward to the beginning of winter and the opportunity to go sledding. Many public entities allow sledding on hills under their jurisdiction. This activity can lead to large losses if your municipality does not have appropriate measures in place to protect the safety of those who use your sledding facilities.

Sledding and Injuries

Every year, thousands of youths and adults sustain injuries sledding down hills in city parks, streets, and resort areas. The Consumer Product Safety Commission recently conducted a study to highlight the amount of property damage and physical injuries related to sledding and found:

- There were 160,000 sledding, tubing, and tobogganing related injuries in 2015
- 15,000 of these injuries required emergency room visits
- The cost of these injuries totaled more than \$4 billion dollars in medical, legal and liability, pain and suffering, and work-loss related costs
- The majority of these injuries were experienced by kids 14 and under
- The most common sledding-related injury was head injuries (15%)
- 43% of these were injuries to the brain
- Sleds can reach speeds of 25 mph

The fun of sledding is in the thrill of traveling down a steep hill at a high speed. The high number of sledding-related injuries results from a dangerous combination of speed, a steep hill, a rough or slick terrain, a lack of good control, and obstacles in the sledding course.

You can't take too much out of this combination without losing what makes sledding fun. However, you can develop a loss prevention program for your sled hills that helps citizens to enjoy this popular winter activity safely.

You can minimize losses and reduce your liability by addressing the following important areas:

- Hill design,
- Preseason setup,
- Supervision,
- Inspection and signage, and
- Educating the community.

Hill Design

The following are some items to consider when laying out sledding areas:

- Is the sledding area away from roads?
- Is there plenty of room to stop safely?

- Is there a safe area to climb back up the hill?
- Is there a flat staging area at the top of the hill?
- Is the hill too steep (30-degree slope, maximum)
- Is the area free from hazards like trees, playground equipment, or anything else someone could collide with?
- Are all immovable hazards, like trees, surrounded by protective barriers like hay bales?
- No make-shift ramps or jumps permitted.
- Are there ponds or rivers nearby that may not be completely frozen – block with hay bales?
- The hill should be well-lit or limit sledding to daylight hours.

Preseason Setup

Just as you do in your playgrounds, conduct a preseason hill inspection before the first snowfall. Use the inspection to identify hazards and to develop a plan for eliminating the hazard. Document both the preseason inspection and follow-up corrections. Maintain these records.

Documentation is necessary for two reasons. First, a checklist or other method provides a system to verify that you have addressed all noted hazards. Second, if someone is injured and brings a claim against you, you may need to prove that you have taken appropriate steps to prevent the injury.

After you complete the inspection and have addressed the hazards, you need to install the sled hill signs. If you provide a warming house at the sled hill, you should also inspect it inside and out.

Finally, assign an individual or a specific department that will conduct the daily sled hill inspections.

Supervision

Supervision can offer a measure of safety. The presence of attendants may reduce rowdiness and unsafe behavior on the part of participants. Those who supervise should enforce rules but do so correctly to limit the liability arising out of supervision. They must know how to interact with the public and to maintain control without creating hostility. One of the main ways to avoid liability associated with sled hill attendants is to train them. At a minimum, the following should be part of the attendants' orientation.

- Procedures for emergency response,
- Basic First Aid & CPR,
- Procedures for enforcing sled hill rules,
- Conditions that might result in hill closure,
- Proper posting and maintenance of signs,
- Procedures for inspecting the hill,
- Non-participation in sledding activities, and
- Incident/accident reporting procedures.

Training should take place before each sledding season. Document the content of the training you provide and have participants sign in to verify attendance.

Inspection

Regular inspections are important to identify new hazards that might develop before an injury occurs. Documented inspections, like preseason checks, are necessary to demonstrate that you have taken reasonable preventive measures to protect the safety of participants and observers. You should focus on preventing hazards during the inspections and make sure you perform them routinely. Although daily

inspections are desirable if your resources permit this, weekly inspections are acceptable. The important point is to maintain the schedule once you have set it up.

Signage

Signage warns users of the risks associated with sledding. It also establishes rules for the hill and advises users that sledding is prohibited in specific areas or on certain hills.

You should post a sign at every hill in your jurisdiction unless you have a widely publicized ordinance that prohibits sledding on hills that you have not designated as sled hills.

If you know that people are using a non-designated hill for sledding, you should take action. If an injury occurs at one of these hills, the injured party may argue that you knew about the sledding activity and therefore should have been responsible for maintaining the hill. To avoid this type of situation you should post a sign that advises potential users that this is not a designated sledding hill. The sign, along with the ordinance, will help reduce your liability.

If you designate hills as unsupervised sledding locations, you should include the following wording on the signs:

- Hours of operation,
- Danger - Use hill at your own risk,
- Use of a helmet strongly recommended,
- Users assume full responsibility for determining if conditions are safe for sledding,
- Parents are responsible for children. No supervision is provided,
- Use caution when sledding and be considerate to others,
- Sledding is a hazardous activity and presents substantial risk, and
- Makeshift ramps or jumps prohibited.

You should also post signs at supervised hills that, at a minimum, include the following:

- Hours of operation,
- Danger - Use hill at your own risk,
- Use of a helmet strongly recommended,
- Users assume full responsibility for determining if conditions are safe for sledding,
- Parents are responsible for children,
- Use caution when sledding and be considerate to others,
- Sledding is a hazardous activity and presents substantial risk,
- Sled only in designated areas,
- All participants must sit in a forward-facing position, steering with their feet or a rope tied to the steering handles of the sled. No one should sled headfirst down a slope, and
- Makeshift ramps or jumps prohibited.

Public Education

In addition, you should consider establishing a program that educates the community about sledding safety. Use your community's web site and bulletin boards to post information. Work with your community's schools to spread the message. The following are some important points that all participants should know:

- Use sledding equipment that the rider can steer and stop. Sleds without a steering mechanism are the most dangerous since the rider has no way of avoiding objects in his or her path.
- Avoid sliding carpets, inner tubes, cardboard sliders, snow discs and other sledding equipment that is difficult to control.
- Select a sled with metal runners over a plastic sled. Runner sleds elevate the rider off the ground and away from small, stationary objects. A plastic sled, by nature of its design, will strike anything in its path.

Choose sturdy sleds with secure handholds. Ensure there are no jagged edges, splinters or protruding parts on your sledding equipment.

- Always sled down the hill sitting up or kneeling on the sled. Never slide down head first or standing up.
- Before sledding down the hill, make sure your path is clear of obstacles and other people right down to the bottom of the hill.
- On the way down, keep your arms and legs tucked in.
- If you fall off the sled or stop unexpectedly, quickly move out of the way of other people who are sledding.
- Roll off a sled that won't stop.
- Walk back up the side of the hill, away from other the area where people are sledding.
- Move quickly to the side and walk up and away from the sliding path after finishing a run.
- Know your limits. Rest if you are tired. Go inside if you are cold.
- Dress properly:
 - Wear hats, mittens or gloves and warm, waterproof clothing including footwear.
 - To prevent strangulation, children should wear a neck warmer instead of a scarf and they should never wear clothing with drawstrings as they may get caught under the sled.
- Never ride into a snow bank – there could be hidden dangers such as a tree stump or rocks.
- Never use alcohol or drugs while sledding or while supervising children who are sledding
- Parents should ensure children follow all safe sledding tips.
- A responsible adult should actively supervise children under 12 years of age.
- A responsible adult should ride on the sled with children under five years of age.
- Adults should monitor children for wet clothes, chilling, frostbite and fatigue.
- Wear an appropriate helmet (such as a bike or ski helmet) to reduce the risk of serious head injury. (Currently there is not a helmet specific to sledding available. Children should wear a properly fitted helmet that has been designed for high impact collisions.)
- Only sled in the daylight or on well-lit hills.

Focusing on hill design, supervisor training, preseason setup, inspections, signage, and education for the public, will help you to establish a strong loss control program for your sled hill. Providing a safe environment and warning participants of the potential risk and taking reasonable measures to protect them from unseen hazards will make a safe and happy sledding season.



Important Contact Information

MML Risk Management Services
Loss Control Services

734/662-3246 or 800/653-2483
800/482-2726

Note: This document is not intended to be legal advice. It does not identify all the issues surrounding the particular topic. Public agencies are encouraged to review their procedures with an expert or a competent attorney who is knowledgeable about the topic.

Sample Sled Hill and Warming House Inspection Checklist

Location of Hill: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Weather Condition: _____

	OK	Needs Work
All signs in place and clearly visible. Installed at parking lot, at warming house, at the top of the hill, and at other points of entry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hill is free of large bumps, dips, jumps or moguls.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hill free of debris and obstructions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fencing is in place, secure, and free of jagged edges.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Barriers are in place, secure, and padded (Pads, hay bales, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stairs, if any, are in good condition with secure handrails.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Path to the top of the hill is clearly defined with barriers to protect walkers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emergency phone (pay or otherwise) available and operational.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warming house, if any, is in good condition and free of debris.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warming house heating system is operational.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warming house has fire extinguisher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warming house lighting is operational.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
First aid kit is available.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supply of accident/incident forms is available.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stairs and walkways clear of ice and snow.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Benches, chairs, and tables are stable and free of splinters or jagged edges.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Maintenance Performed on Hill:

Comments:

Signature of Inspector:

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