

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing, and Surviving a Crisis in a Nonprofit*

by Melanie L. Herman and Barbara B. Oliver.  
2001. Nonprofit Risk Management Center:  
ISBN#1-893210-06-5. \$20.00

Reviewed by Greg Friese

*Vital Signs* is a concise and well written guide for program administrators to prepare for and respond to a crisis. As the authors define it, "The intent of crisis management is to enable your organization to minimize damage from adverse events and resume normal operations as soon as possible." This theme is evident throughout the book and helps focus crisis planning. After reading *Vital Signs*, a program administrator or risk management committee will recognize the importance of having a crisis management plan and will have the tools and basic knowledge to write one.

*Vital Signs* is a collection of definitions, recommended actions, and resources that can be customized for the unique mission and activities of any organization. The authors, Herman and Oliver, are the Executive Director and Director of Communications, respectively, of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. The authors deliver presentations and training on risk management and write on subjects ranging from emerging human resources risks to managing fund-raising risks. Other recent books by the authors include *Enlightened Risk Taking: A Guide to Strategic Risk Management for Nonprofits* by Melanie Herman and George Head; *Coverage, Claims and Consequences: An Insurance Handbook for Nonprofits* edited by Melanie Herman; and *A Risk Management Guide for Youth-Serving Nonprofits* by Barbara Oliver and John Patterson.

Vital signs, such as pulse and temperature, are indicators of how the human body's critical systems are functioning. The authors use the vital signs concept to understand an organization and "to establish a baseline for a future diagnosis. When you detect an aberration, determine the source, identify treatment methods, apply the methods and evaluate the results." *Vital Signs* is a useful metaphor for titling a book, but it is not entirely necessary for explaining risk and crisis management concepts.

Crisis management is a subset of risk management planning. The authors assert that crisis management "focuses on enabling the organization to achieve its mission in extraordinary circumstances." Crisis management includes steps to identify risks, strategies to prevent a crisis, action steps to take during a crisis—action team tasks, contacting media—and crisis recovery to ensure program continuity.

The first two chapters help the reader understand what a crisis is, how a crisis might develop, and the types of crises that can effect any organization. Using these broad categories, the reader can imagine the different crises that may befall their organization. The third chapter has a brief, yet useful, description of the risk management process. A thorough bibliography and list of publications from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center are available for the reader who needs more information on risk management planning.

Chapter 4, the heart of *Vital Signs*, is divided into three phases: Anticipating a Crisis, Preventing a Crisis, and Surviving a Crisis. For outdoor organizations, a crisis situation is a matter of when, not if. The information in chapter 4 is excellent for anticipating organization-specific crises, designing strategies to avoid them, and developing responses for when they do occur. *Vital Signs* has an appendix of 14 worksheets, such as crisis assessment, crisis action steps, and media strategy checklist, that can be customized for any program. Each worksheet has an example and is a starting point for reflecting on your own organization, discussing crisis prevention with staff or volunteers, and identifying how your crisis action team will act during a crisis.

Although the book is written and marketed to nonprofit, community-serving organizations such as homeless shelters or literacy programs, its information is applicable and accessible to for-profit and nonprofit outdoor education and adventure recreation programs like summer camps, college outdoor recreation programs, or outfitters. At times the difference between emergency response (evacuating a burning building) and crisis response (how to continue program delivery after the building is destroyed) is blurred in *Vital Signs*. It seems to me that risk management planning is the first step, emergency response is the in-the-moment reaction to an emergency, and crisis response is minimizing damage and resuming normal operations.

Nonetheless, the strengths of this book are its reliance on general concepts that can be broadly applied, customizable worksheets that will be the primary documents of a crisis action plan, and encouragement to prepare for an eventual crisis. I will place *Vital Signs* next to my red binder Crisis Action Plan and use it as a resource during a crisis.

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