

HAUNTED HOUSE

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Celebrate Halloween in a big way by having a Haunted House. This is a great way for residents and staff to have lots of fun and get the community involved with your facility. Review the idea and get approval from your administrator or director, then meet with the department managers and start planning it with the team. Invite people to participate and step out of their traditional roles to help (i.e., Health Information Manager to give recipes and cook, Diet Aide to decorate, family members to help with costumes). **Tip:** *If you encourage people to be part of the Haunted House team, you are more likely to get their support.*

Discuss having a Haunted House with your residents and determine where it will be held. Keep in mind that the room will be out of commission at least 7 to 14 days for preparation and clean up. At Rowan Community, we use a family room area. **Tip:** *See what donations (i.e., candy, small toys, coloring books) are available in your community. Ask staff and families to donate bags of candy. Have extra candy in case you run out before the event is over.*

Host the event on Halloween night. Offering a Haunted House or trick-or-treating event during the afternoon or on a different day will have less attendance, and the trick-or-treaters may not dress in costume. We hold the event from 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. on Halloween night. **Tip:** *Serve the residents an early dinner such as box lunches with disposable products for easy clean-up.* Employees can bring their children and still have time to host trick-or-treaters at their homes. This time reduces the number of teenagers. (Teenagers usually make rounds in our neighborhood after 8:00 p.m.)

DECORATIONS AND COSTUMES

The most effective way to decorate your facility is through the costumes worn by residents and staff. This can get everyone in the mood and change the atmosphere more than anything you hang on a wall. **Tip:** *Ask staff and family members to adopt residents to assist them with costumes.* Have a contest to celebrate the staff and residents who get dressed up and/or who decorate doors or other areas of the facility. I love to make a fuss over the people who participate because it encourages future participation. Gather costume supplies (i.e., hats, costume jewelry, headbands) well in advance asking for donations and getting them from thrift stores. Residents can wear hats, decorated headbands, and costume jewelry and have faces painted.

One of the biggest draws for our neighborhood is that we decorate the exterior of the facility about a week in advance of the event. Some of our outdoor decorations include a fogger that makes the front yard look spooky, angel hair stretched over tree branches and other decorations to look like cobwebs, tombstones made out of Styrofoam slabs that are painted gray and have clever epithets written on them with black paint, spotlights on featured items, brown paper bags with sand bottoms and battery-operated candles to light the path from the street, and orange and black lights around the front door where there are bales of hay and Jack-o'-lanterns with battery-operated lights in them. **Tip:** *Have a resident and staff member dressed in costumes by the street to encourage people to come in.*

PUBLICITY

We make flyers to hand out. Our Haunted House is wheelchair-accessible, so we include this information in the flyers. Flyers are given to teachers at the local elementary school to hand out to the students. We post flyers at the local library and businesses. Since our facility is in a residential area, we pass out flyers around the neighborhood. The great part about doing a Haunted House year after year is that people start calling us as early as August to see if we are doing it. There is nothing better than Haunted House groupies!

Contact the media about a week in advance and fax them a written reminder earlier in the day of the event. Take lots of pictures to post on bulletin boards and e-mail to the newspaper after the event.

THE EVENT

We use a pirate theme inside the lobby area. A skeleton dressed in a pirate costume with an eye patch and triangle hat is just inside the door. We have poison and other warning signs around him. A treasure chest is at his feet with a partially-opened lid with creepy items dangling out. We have resident greeters dressed in costumes that scare (I mean welcome!) the guests, and they hand out trick-or-treat bags. **Tip:** *The bags are used to increase the PR value of the event. Save money by purchasing orange or black plastic bags and putting stickers on them with the facility's name, address, and phone number. Flyers about your next community event and job openings or a flyer for recruiting volunteers can be put inside the bag. The residents can prepare the bags a few days in advance.*

After going through a balloon arch, a person dressed as a fortune teller directs people toward the Haunted House. She has a lit crystal ball to tell fortunes. Monster-sized footprints taped to the floor lead visitors to the Haunted House entrance. Along this path are residents in costumes who are seated (most are in wheelchairs) with plastic pumpkins that are filled with items to give to the trick-or-treaters. **Tip:** *Give sugar-free candy or non-edible items to residents with diabetes. This doesn't always work. I gave a resident with diabetes pencils to hand out one year. I later saw chocolate around her mouth. She was trading pencils for candy bars from the trick-or-treaters.*

The Haunted House is made by creating the illusion of a meandering path through an empty room. We did this by making frames from PVC pipes that are draped with black cloth. **Tip:** *Dismantle the PVC pipes to use each year. Cover all the light sources and walls with the black cloth. At the entrance, use black cloth cut in strips (carwash style). A motion-sensitive witch cackles and stirs a cauldron as people walk by. We use a lot of black light and lights on a string (like Christmas tree lights) with white or purple bulbs in them. These, in addition to the indoor fog machine, create a Haunted House ambience. We made a tree out of cardboard whose branches are decorated with lights. The great part is that a person is inside, and some of the branches are really his arms. Because people are not expecting any movement, they react when the tree reaches out to touch them. We have a mad scientist in a white lab coat with Einstein-like hair and a little blood who is doing experiments with beakers that have colored water and dry ice in them. **Tip:** *We have costumed staff strategically located to monitor what is going on. This includes someone at the Haunted House entrance who gives a signal when small children are coming through so that we do not frighten them. It also keeps vandalism from taking place. We have a hall of pictures that are motion-sensitive that make sounds as people walk by. There are alcoves where creepy items are offered for guests to feel such as cow tongue, heart, peeled grapes for eyes, etc.**

At the end of the Haunted House, there is a head on a platter. (This is my favorite feature.) A person is seated in a chair, and the body is hidden by a large box with a hole cut in the top for the head. The box is covered with a red and white checked tablecloth with napkins and eating utensils. **Tip:** *Glue all the items down for safety. The head is painted white with scars and blood, and a platter is around the head. There is a fake knife that looks like it has pieced the head. Next to the head is a wild-looking chef. As each person or group goes by, he lifts the dome that has been covering the head, to expose it. At first, the person does not move, then the eyes get big and move around and this scares people. **Tip:** *If you do not have a dome top, make one out of aluminum foil.**

The guests are escorted to the decorated dining room where we have a party going on. Snacks are served, and people can play games and bob for apples. **Tip:** *Escort guests directly outdoors from the party area for traffic control. If this event gets big, it may be necessary to have valet parking for traffic control.*

OTHER TIPS

- ✓ Keep track of visitors by counting the trick-or-treat bags handed out.
- ✓ Ask the residents and staff for feedback after the event. Write down what was successful and what needs to be improved next year.
- ✓ Take pictures of the details for next year.

Maxine is the Administrator at Rowan Community in Denver, CO with residents ranging in age from 30 - 95. The majority of the residents are in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. She has been employed by Pinon Management for five years. Maxine has been a nursing home administrator since 1997. She has a Master's degree in Health Care Administration and is a Therapeutic Recreation Specialist and Certified Eden Alternative Associate. CF