Run/walks are classic fundraising events for nonprofit organizations. With advanced planning, you can pull off a successful event! Like any event, attendance and fundraising results are very important, but run/walks involve extra challenges and expenses including marketing, registration, and safety. **Start small the first year – you can always grow your event larger over the years. It is better to do your event really well than to commit to too much and execute poorly.**

This guide will walk you through the process of organizing a run/walk event for the VHL Alliance, covering logistics like choosing a date, location, and t-shirts, along with volunteer management and promotion. We suggest starting six to nine months in advance to pull off a successful event.

**PART 1**

**Start with the Big Questions**

You need to answer five main questions in order to plan a successful event. Who, what, when, where, and why. These questions lay the foundation and will help you structure your fundraising event.

**What kind of run/walk event are you putting on?**

You have lots of options, including a short fun run, a trail run or hike, a 10K or half marathon, or the classic 5K distance. Knowing what kind of event you want to put on will help you establish the rest of the details.

Here are a few questions to help you decide what kind of event is right for your organization and community:

- How active/physically fit is your audience and community?
- How many races and other physical challenges take place in your area?
- What size event are you capable of executing?
- How much space can you find for this event?
- Do you want this to be a competitive race or a fun run?

It’s also good to keep in mind that you can include more than one physical event. For example, if you’re hosting a 5K, you can also add a one-mile fun run for kids. Just don’t overextend yourself. **It’s better to do one event really well than commit to too much and execute poorly. You can always add on in the future.**

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Who will be supporting and participating?

An event is only as good as the people involved. And it's not just about the participants.

First, you should think about who will be spearheading and leading the initiative. When it comes down to it, who will be responsible for the success of the event? Is there someone who will co-chair the event with you?

You should also consider your pool of volunteers. Run/walk events require a lot of support. Use your friends and family, but you can also reach out to schools, churches, and businesses to recruit more volunteers. You can estimate how many volunteers you will need based on the number of participants and the different amenities and activities at your run/walk. Ultimately, though, it's better to have too many volunteers than too few.

Finally, who is going to be ready to run on the big day? Start by looking at your audience of donors and supporters and how many of them are likely to get involved. You should also look at other local events and reach out to fitness groups. People who have run in other races are great prospects for your event. Get in touch with local high school and college cross-country and track teams, too. Even if they don't all participate, they can help spread the word to the local running community.

When will your run/walk take place?

The sooner you set the date, the better. We suggest giving yourself at least 2-3 months in advance of the event for planning and proper execution. People can't mark their calendar and reserve the date if your 5K is “sometime in May.” Setting a date goes hand in hand with finding a location.

To start, talk to the VHLA staff to check the organization calendar to see which dates are out of the question, especially if you would like a staff member to try and attend your event. Choose some potential days (mostly likely a few Saturdays and/or Sundays) to work with and then move on to your city's event calendar. You don't want to compete with another race or parade that falls around the same time. May Awareness Month is always a great option!

Finally, scout potential spaces such as parks, trails, or schools and find out when they are available. Ideally, you'll be able to find a date that works for you, doesn't overlap with another event, and is also available at your location. If the stars don't align the first time around, consider whether your potential audience will be drawn by a competing event, or if you're willing to change locations. Consider how each of your options will support your goals and make a decision from there.

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Where will your run/walk start and finish?

You have to start somewhere. You have to end somewhere too. When and where are closely intertwined so you should work on both issues at the same time.

- Are there any viable locations near you?
- Where have other community events like this been held?
- Which locations are convenient for local residential neighborhoods?
- Are these locations close to local businesses and potential sponsors?
- Will you have to pay to use this location? How much?
- Will potential locations have enough space for a run/walk of this length?
- How many people do you expect to attend the event?
- Does the location have adequate parking space for your event?

You will have to juggle several priorities when making this decision. On the one hand you want to keep cost and labor down, so you have to think about travel time, accessibility, and venue costs. But you also want a place that will work for your run/walk course and any educational or entertainment features that you plan to incorporate. Always keep in mind that your run/walk course can be multiple laps of a single path or an out and back with a turnaround point.

Some sporting stores (such as Road Runner Sports) will help you with the event details and logistics in exchange for promoting their store. Call your local store for more information.

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Part 2

Fundraising, Budgeting, and Registration

One of the primary aims of charity run/walks is to raise money for the cause. Anyone who participates in run/walks and races knows that there is typically a registration fee. Often, the fee will be smallest for those who register beforehand and increase the week or day of the event. Registration with fundraising retains the simplicity of a registration fee but opens the door for additional revenue through peer-to-peer (p2p) fundraising. Participants register for the event and pay the fee to gain entry, but after that a personal fundraising page is created and participants have the choice to fundraise more for the cause. **The VHL Alliance staff is more than happy to help you set up your event and registration pages** (see vhl.org/p2p).

Sponsorships

Sponsorships can be a big part of these events and may come in the form of cash gifts or in-kind donations, and is a great way to raise more money. Businesses are usually acknowledged in race materials, on event t-shirts and signage, and publicly thanked at the event, so recruiting sponsors early on will make it easier to finalize the design of banners and t-shirts. If you do get a last-minute sponsorship, make sure the business is aware of what materials are already printed and tell them how you will be thanking them.

Sponsors can contribute cash or in-kind contributions. For example, you could ask a local café to donate breakfast food for participants to enjoy when they finish. Grocery stores may be willing to provide bottled water or other foodstuffs. **The VHL Alliance is more than happy to help you create a customized proposal for soliciting sponsors for your event.**

Drafting a Budget

Just as it’s important to plan for the event’s revenue, you must also budget for a run/walk’s expenses. Run/walk events typically have higher overhead than a traditional fundraising campaign, due to the costs of equipment, first aid, insurance, t-shirts, and other amenities. Creating a budget beforehand will help you make many smaller decisions and inform your fundraising goals as well.

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Begin by making a list of all the projected expenses of the event. Your list may look something like this:

- Insurance (talk to VHLA)
- Permits
- Marketing/Promotion
- Portable Toilets (unless one is provided at the venue!)
- Timing Equipment Rental (optional)
- Sound System Rental (optional)
- Table and Chairs
- T-shirts
- Race Numbers & pins (Amazon)
- First Aid
- Post-Race Food
- Water coolers and cups
- Miscellaneous Supplies

**Try and get as much donated as possible.** You can then look into pricing specific to your location and number of participants. You may be starting out with a specific amount allocated for the event. In that case, it may be necessary to use your budget to determine how large your event will be.

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Part 3

Logistics and Details

There are lots of things to consider when planning your run/walk and once you have answered some of the big questions from part one, you can dive into more details. It's important to know who else will be involved with this event and get in contact with them early. You will also have to settle on what amenities you will provide at your run/walk. And of course, with any event there are safety and security concerns to consider and plan for.

Volunteers

You will need a large number of volunteers to put together your event (see page 11 for more). Make sure and let them know how important they are.

Schools and churches are great outlets for recruiting volunteers. Many companies and offices also volunteer at community events, so contact local employers to see if they want to get involved. A sponsor might also have employees who would like to help.

Supplies and Amenities

As run/walks have grown in scale and popularity, so too have the amenities that are offered. The most important amenity (which is expected at any run/walk) is water stations. To keep participants hydrated, you should have a water station every mile of your course and at the finish line. Sports drinks are also common at run/walk events, and you can save money by asking a supplier to attend. Many companies are willing to donate their product and send promotional staff to a run/walk.

Most races offer some kind of recovery food at the end of the race, such as bananas or protein bars. Ideally, this is another area where you can recruit donations and sponsors. If you don't find businesses or companies willing to cover food, it's best to keep your offerings simple and low-cost. Some good options that can be purchased in bulk are:

- Bananas, apples, other fruit
- Protein bars, cereal bars
- Bagels

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Other than food and water, t-shirts are the most common run/walk amenity. This wearable souvenir serves two purposes:

1. To promote your organization and event
2. To recognize partners and sponsors

The usual design is to put the VHLA's logo on the front and the sponsorship logos on the back. VHLA has some pre-designed t-shirt ideas if you are interested. Be cognizant of your deadline for the t-shirt design when soliciting donations and sponsorships.

If you are using the VHLA's registration platform, you can easily get a count of how many t-shirts you will need in each size. There will probably be day-of registrants, volunteers, or surprises, so err on the side of having some extra t-shirts. When it comes to unknown attendees, bigger sizes are better. A too-big shirt won't fit well, but a too-small shirt won't fit at all.

**Safety and Administration**

**PERMITS**

There are important legal and safety concerns that are inherent to any run/walk event. Your first administrative concern is getting permission to hold your event. If you're using any public streets or places you will need approval from your city and police department. Contact your city government to find your local application process.

**COURSE EQUIPMENT**

You will most likely need some equipment to mark and separate your course from traffic or other dangers. You will also need portable toilets (approximately one for every 50 attendees). You can rent this equipment from local vendors or speak to your police department about barriers. Balloons and handmade signs can also work for directional.

**WAIVERS**

Every participant needs to sign a liability waiver before the event takes place. That way, the liability waiver is ready from the very beginning. Always have spare copies of the waiver at the event. When people register or check-in, if they did not complete the online waiver agreement, make sure that they sign a paper copy. Just in case, make sure every waiver is collected and saved by the registration volunteers. **VHLA has a standard waiver for you to use.**

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INSURANCE

There are many insurance companies that offer one-time event policies for run/walks. Consult your own legal or insurance expert to determine what type of policy is necessary in your case. VHLA can help!

FIRST AID

Any athletic event has the potential for injury and you must be prepared to respond to both minor issues and emergencies. The finish line is a good place to put your primary first aid station. Not only will most participants end up there anyway, it will also be next to your finish line banner or clock, which is easy to find. Your first aid station should be stocked with bandages, ice, and antiseptic.
Part 4

Promotion

Once you know what your run/walk event is going to look like, you need to spread the word. The first part of marketing and promoting your event is to get the word out to your audience of supporters. From there you can appeal to your entire local community. Leading up to the event, you should also promote the fundraising aspect of your run/walk, both in terms of general donations and peer-to-peer fundraisers.

Reaching Your Audience

The most obvious candidates for participants and fundraisers at your event are people who already know and love your organization. Plan a multi-pronged approach to encourage supporters to register, create fundraising pages, and donate.

You can begin with an email addressed specifically to existing supporters to announce the event. Again, the more notice you can give, the better. If you want to get the ball rolling on registrations, you can even offer a discount code to people who have donated in the past.

Another important part of promoting your run/walk to your audience is to make it visible on social media. This can start with simply announcing the date or details of the event, revealing the event logo, and sharing the amenities or activities you will have that day.

Once you have some supporters registered for the event, ask if you can feature them in a Facebook or Twitter post. It doesn't have to be fancy, but introducing someone who has already committed to participate provides a little social proof and encourages others to join in.

Promoting to the Public

Your social media is a great resource for people new to VHLA, but to reach out to more potential participants and fundraisers, you must go beyond your usual communication outlets.

Local publications and media are a great place to start. You can start by creating a press release to offer the most important details (date, location, cause) and distributing it to all local media, but you will probably fare better if you reach out to specific outlets.

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If you can recruit cross-country and track teams from local high schools and colleges, it will help you reach a bigger pool of potential participants. If there are a few teams participating, up the bar and have them face off in a fundraising competition.

And don't forget to contact adult running groups as well. Many cities have groups that meet and train regularly.

Keep an eye on run/walk events preceding you own, as well. Someone participating in an event in March may be looking for their next 5K in April or May. Why not yours?

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Part 5

Managing the Big Day

It is reassuring to get on top of planning and promoting your run/walk event, but there will always be plenty to do the week and day of your event. You can start the week well-prepared by planning how you will use your volunteers to accomplish tasks that can’t be done ahead of time.

A good first step is to create a checklist of all the areas that will need to be set up and all the stations you will need people to be working at during the event.

How to Manage Staff and Volunteers

Managing the people working at your event can be daunting. Consider looking at your run/walk event as an organization with different functions. Some of the areas you will need people to help with are:

- Registration and check-in
- Water stations and food
- First aid
- Marking the course
- Parking
- Entertainment and other activities
- Clean up and break down

By splitting your volunteers into these different areas, you are making sure everyone knows what they are responsible for and where they should be. Every group, however, should have a leader, someone you have worked with and who you can trust to make decisions. When you schedule and check in your volunteers, tell them who their team leader is so they can ask for direction if they need it. The team leader can then explain to their volunteers what each individual will be doing that day.

Every volunteer should know who their lead is and be able to stay in touch using cell phones or walkie-talkies. It’s always smart to save and print a contact list ahead of time.

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Signs, Directions, and Parking

One group of volunteers should post signs and direct participants to the appropriate parking area.

You should know the exact location and parking situation ahead of time, so that you can include the information on your fundraising pages. Even then, walk yourself through the experience of someone trying to find your event.

If there is restricted parking near your run/walk, make that clear to attendees and volunteers. Registration, first aid, and information booths should all be clearly marked as well.

Registration and Check-In

The easiest is to make sure to register participants ahead of time. With a run/walk, however, even those who sign up ahead of time will need to check in to receive their race number (bib) and timing chip (if you're using them). This is why your check-in table should be set up and staffed well in advance of the race start.

When pre-registered participants arrive, they will give their name to the volunteers at the check-in table, who will confirm that they have registered and paid. The volunteer then issues and records which number the participant receives. If possible, you can use laptops or tablets to check in runners through a shared document. This ensures that everyone has access to the most up-to-date registration information. But you should absolutely have printed copies of the check-in list in case you run into any technical issues.

You will probably have some people who show up planning to register that day. Depending on the size of your event, you may want to designate a second table where those people can sign up. This process will take a little longer because you will have to get name and contact information, collect payment, and have the participant sign a waiver. One way run/walk events encourage people to register ahead of time is by increasing the registration fee on the day of the event. This is a standard practice, but be sure to note the day-of fee on the event page.

If participants are receiving a t-shirt or any other gift, it is best to include that in the registration process, or simply put this station nearby.

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Part 6

Crossing the Finish Line and Following Up

When the last participant has crossed the finish line and the crowd has gone home, you can finally breathe a sigh of relief. Pat yourself on the back for getting this far, but like any other campaign, your run/walk event isn't truly over until you reengage with supporters and learn from your results.

First things first, you will need to do some cleaning up. Be sure that your volunteer schedule includes people to help pack up and collect trash. Any rented equipment (portable toilets, sound systems, road barriers, tables, chairs, etc.) should be returned promptly to avoid extra fees.

Following Up

Once the clean-up is over, your next priority is thanking and engaging with participants. Prepare follow up emails and surveys for donors, fundraisers, and other participants. Any new contacts from the event are potential future contributors, so don't leave them hanging.

In your follow-up message, include:

- A sincere thank-you
- Some results or highlights from the event
- A link to compelling content, such as an impact story or pictures/video
- How much the event raised

Your volunteers deserve a big “thank you” as well. If numbers allow, a handwritten card to volunteers can add the personal touch that keeps someone involved for years to come.

Like anyone else who gives to your nonprofit, sponsors and partners should also be thanked for their help. It's important to maintain strong ties to local organizations and businesses, and a little recognition now could pay off the next time you hold an event. Again, personal messages make the best thank-yous.

Update on the Event's Impact

While your thank-you message should go out a day or two after the event, you should also reengage with participants, volunteers, and sponsors after you've had time to calculate your revenue and what kind of impact it will have. Surveys have shown that the
communications most donors want from a nonprofit are impact stories, so show them a specific program or person who will benefit from your run/walk event.

**Debriefing Your Team**

It's important to ask for the input of participants and your staff and volunteers. Meet with your volunteer team leaders and ask how they thought the day went.

Start the conversation with questions like these:

- Do you feel you had enough volunteers and that they were competent?
- What went smoothly or pleasantly surprised you?
- What were your biggest challenges?
- Were there any issues you felt unprepared for?
- What changes should we make next year?

It's smart to get multiple perspectives after the event. Everything may have looked fine to you, but one station may have been in trouble. Soliciting this feedback will not only help you plan for your next event, but also strengthen the bonds with your volunteers. They will be more likely to help in the future if they feel appreciated and heard now.

After reviewing the financial results and the viewpoints of staff and volunteers, create a list of action items to make your next run/walk even better.

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