

Crowd Management Strategies

Presentation to the
Independent Review Panel of Building Safety Enforcement Powers
City of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

By

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1. Introduction: A formidable challenge

Co-chairs Andrea Zopp and William Cousins of the Independent Review Panel of Building Safety Enforcement Powers and panel members, thank you for inviting me to discuss with you some of the techniques, procedures and programs that the city of Chicago could adopt or promote to improve our safety at clubs and concert halls.

The comments and recommendations I present here are based on my understanding of Mayor Richard M. Daley's charge to this distinguished panel.

It is my understanding is that this panel is to place on the mayor's desk recommendations that will prevent another E2 club-type disaster. That tragedy took the lives of 21 young people who, among hundreds fleeing a perceived life-threatening danger, were drawn into a deadly crush. This horrific situation was compounded by the fact that the E2 club had been ordered shut by the Cook County Circuit Court seven months earlier.

A priority of the mayor is to establish a system that will improve communication between city enforcement agencies. But, this panel has also wisely expressed a willingness to address other issues and factors that played a part in the February 17 disaster, recognizing, I assume, that these other dangers may be present at Chicago venues today. Further, this panel may also be acknowledging that the Great White concert tragedy in West Warwick, Rhode Island, also casts its shadow over our community and communities across the US.

Taking a broad view suggests that the panel is up to the mayor's formidable challenge. This is good. Because no quick fix or half solution will bring Chicagoans the standards of safety they deserve and the city has a duty to provide.

2. Lessons learned

Chicago stands at the crossroads of civic good and political expediency. This is not an unusual position for communities caught in calamities that shake their spirit and self-perception.

Following the Cocoanut Grove night club fire in Boston that took the lives of 492 people in 1942, city leadership helped establish new standards of fire safety in Massachusetts and across the nation.

The same is true in the aftermath of the 1977 Beverly Hills Supper Club fire in Southgate, Kentucky, where 165 people died. Once again, new state and national construction and fire safety standards were put in place.

Then in 1979, following the 11 crowd crush deaths at The Who concert in Cincinnati, city leaders and a special citizen task force assembled a wide range of thoughtful legislation and guidance. I know because I was there. Now, nearly a quarter of a century later, Cincinnati's crowd safety successes are still studied by communities around the world. And since that tragic concert, the city has not suffered one major concert venue incident.

And, finally let's not forget the 602 lives that were lost in 1903, following the devastating fire at the Iroquois Theatre not many blocks from here. Civic determination and public leadership brought us many new fire safeguards.

The lessons of history are clear. In each case, where government, community leaders and citizens worked together for long-term solutions, the benefits were enjoyed by future generations.

3. Basis of opinion

If I may take a moment to introduce myself, it may help this panel better understand the basis of my opinions and recommendations.

I am the founder of Crowd Management Strategies, a Chicago-based international crowd safety consulting firm. Crowd Management Strategies specializes in concert and pop culture event planning, management, research and guidance.

My firm also manages Crowdsafe.com, the leading website on event and concert crowd safety issues, standards of care, and education. In 2002, the site attracted 70,000 visits from people in 94 countries.

Currently, I am a member of the National Fire Protection Association's Life Safety Technical Committee on Assembly Occupancies. NFPA is the leading national organization addressing life safety standards associated with the tragedies in Chicago and West Warwick.

I am also a member of South Africa's SABS Technical Committee 184: Health and Safety at Live Events. This government group is currently drafting a national event safety guide.

4. Chicago experience

Circumstances surrounding, and related to, the E2 tragedy are not unfamiliar to me. I have spent more than a decade observing safety conditions of Chicago's pop culture scene. I have attended scores of clubs and concert venues as a crowd safety expert and as a patron.

What I have observed has often been troubling: overcrowding, locked and blocked emergency exits, poorly trained security, fire code violations, building code violations and a general disregard for the safety of patrons. On occasion, I have shared my observations with the Chicago Fire Department, Building Department, the Mayor's office, the Chicago Park District, local media and the public.

In 1994, I worked with the Illinois PTA for six months in an attempt to convince Chicago fire and building officials to address the serious safety violations at many clubs and concert halls. I regret to say that our effort failed.

Persistence paid off in 1995. An investigative news project by journalist Larry Yellen of FOX News Chicago exposed numerous crowd safety, fire and building violations at clubs and concert halls. I served as a volunteer consultant for that series.

Following the FOX News exposé, city officials took action against the clubs and concert halls featured in the stories. Officials in the fire and building departments also pledged to consider incorporating additional safety procedures.

A segment from this series ran again following the E2 club and Great White concert disasters. If you saw the update of the original series, you will remember my 1995 warning about what was to come if city safety agencies did not take action against venues in Chicago that were ignoring safety laws: “[City officials] will do something sooner or later,” I told Fox News. “It’s just a matter of whether they do something before there is a disaster or after.”

5. E2 Disaster: Aberration or expectation?

One thing I hope this panel will appreciate is that the E2 club tragedy was a disaster waiting to happen. It was not a one-off incident. Even now, from the southside to northside and from the westside to the lakefront, there are clubs and concert halls operating under unsafe conditions.

6. Recommendations: Administrative, Legislative, State and Federal, and Public Awareness

A comprehensive strategy to prevent future club and concert hall calamities must be set in place. I believe the city of Chicago has the resources, talent and leadership to do this.

A safer Chicago club scene can be achieved by creating new initiatives and by adopting existing standards and guidance used by other communities.

The following are my recommendations to this panel. They are divided into four categories: Administrative, Legislative, State and Federal, and Public Awareness.

6.1. Administrative

- A. Expand the membership of the Independent Review Panel of Building Safety Enforcement Powers to include other areas of expertise related to the E2 tragedy and the broader issues of club and concert hall crowd safety. For example, life safety

standards, law enforcement, crowd management, fire and building safety, and pop culture events.

- B. Adopt the National Fire Protection Association's Life Safety Code standards addressing such things as emergency egress, ingress, standing room environments, crowd managers, fire sprinklers and the use of Life Safety Evaluations.
- C. Increase funding for fire and building departments to cover safety inspections during evenings and weekends.
- D. Improve the dissemination of information to city enforcement agencies about public assembly venues in violation of safety laws. This can be done through traditional police daily roll calls, emails, and by posting notices on the city of Chicago's private network or intranet.
- E. Post the name of venues with serious public safety violations on the city of Chicago's website for public access.
- F. Solicit the assistance of non-for-profit safety organizations such as the National Fire Protection Association.

6.2 Legislative

- A. Create an annual facility license for public assembly venues ranging from clubs to large venues. A license would document, in one place, important data about the venue including, its use, layout, and crowd safety and emergency evacuation preparedness.

A special city interdepartmental committee would approve licenses. Committee members could include, among others, department representatives from the building, police, fire, streets and sanitation, and the mayor's office.

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- B. End the practice of “grandfathering” that exempts certain existing buildings from important public safety requirements when converted to new uses, such nightclubs and concert halls.
- C. Ban pyrotechnics at venues without sprinkler systems (and fire marshal approval).
- D. Establish heftier fines, including criminal prosecution, for violators of laws protecting public assembly audiences.
- E. Increase qualifications required to obtain a private security license by requiring competency in crowd management and emergency evacuation.
- F. Require venue management (or event promoter) to submit first aid incidents to the appropriate city agencies. This data would help police, fire and paramedic services better allocate services by providing advance information about the type and frequency of incidents that occur at public assembly venues. The requirement would also alert the city to problematic venues and events requiring special attention.

6.3 State and Federal

- A. Solicit the assistance of state and federal agencies for safety research and training grants for city agencies and local universities.

6.4 Public Awareness

- A. Promote a telephone hotline number or email address exclusively for public comments or complaints about non-emergency safety problems they observe at clubs, concert halls and other public assembly venues.
- B. Establish a public education program on crowd and fire safety awareness for the City of Chicago’s cable channel and for the public schools.

- C. Produce a special club and concert safety awareness brochure for the public.
- D. Create a memorial honoring the victims of the E2 club tragedy. This could take the form of a plaque, sculpture, garden or crowd safety programs for venue operators, public safety officials and young people.

7. Conclusion: Crossroads

At the start of my comments, I said that in the aftermath of the E2 club tragedy, Chicago stood at the crossroads. One way leads to a higher standard of care for patrons of clubs, concert halls and other public assembly events. The other routes us back to where we stood before February 17.

How the city responds to the E2 club disaster—and the Great White concert tragedy—will impact the lives of Chicagoans for decades to come.

To a large extent, the path Chicago takes will depend upon the leadership of this panel and the determination of Mayor Daley and city council.

Communities around the world are watching us. I say “us” because as Chicagoans we are all in this together. Which path will we take? How decisively will we act? And for many, the question is simply, will we show the world that Chicago works—even under great adversity?

8. Documents supplied to the Independent Review Panel of Building Safety Enforcement Powers

Correspondence between the Illinois Congress of Parents and Teachers and various city officials (Chicago, IL, July 25, 1994 to March 20, 1995).

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Curriculum Vitae of Paul Wertheimer, Principal, Crowd Management Strategies (Chicago, IL, March 2003).