

What Conventions and Visitors Bureaus can do for you

by Edith Wagner

Hi. I'm Edith Wagner. I'm the editor of Reunions magazine and these podcasts are done to add to your reunion planning resources. We hope you enjoy them, learn from them and will let us know if they help.

Today I'm starting a series of podcasts about the role convention and visitors bureaus can play in helping you plan your reunion.

Whether your next reunion is in your city or someplace far, far away, you **MUST** take advantage of the local convention and visitors bureau commonly known as a CVB. Sometimes they're called a convention and visitor center or commission (CVC) such as the St Louis, Missouri, CVC or convention and visitors association (CVA) as in the Las Vegas, Nevada, CVA. These organizations exist to promote and help you enjoy their area.

CVBs are governed in different ways. Some are a non-profit, non-government agencies, funded by a local lodging tax. Some are membership organizations, some attached to governments. Gina Mann at Las Vegas, Nevada, CVA points out "Professionals working for CVBs are not commission based employees so they do not drive up the price of your reunion. Your CVB liaison is only there to coordinate efforts on your behalf." Their web address is VisitMesquite.com.

Contact CVBs while you are still deciding where to hold your reunion. They will provide information to help you make your decision. Then, once you've chosen their area, take advantage of the many services the CVB offers.

Many reunions benefit from local CVB assistance. Oakland, California, CVB has a popular Hometown Host program, which is designed to show the people of Oakland how they can help their community, by introducing friends and family to all that

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Oakland has to offer as a reunion destination. The Hometown Host program also offers a web site with many reunion planning tips and they many services and goodies waiting for reunions. Their web address is www.oaklandcvb.com,

Whether you're planning a reunion for the first time or are just running short on time, CVBs can provide extra resources, ideas and, in some cases, extra hands reunion planners need.

CVBs offer various services depending on their size and the size of your group. The majority of CVBs provide these services complimentary.

- assistance gathering proposals for accommodations and venues
- familiarization tours (FAMs) and site inspections
- promotional literature to send to your members before the reunion to encourage them to come or upon arrival to urge them to take advantage of the area
- help locating services such as transportation, recreation, catering or picnic facilities
- suggested tour itineraries and access to group rates.

When you contact the CVB, ask what is complimentary and what they charge for. In most cases, if there are charges, they are minimal. Sometimes services are free depending upon the number of sleeping rooms a reunion group uses at local lodging. If enough sleeping rooms aren't used to cover the value of services requested, there may be a charge.

CVBs can be a reunion planner's right hand when it comes to finding and securing the right venue. One of the important services CVBs provide reunions is proposal gathering. Use CVBs to do the legwork gathering information. They can get information about amenities, airport transportation, meeting space, complimentary services and special deals. To distribute your request for proposal, also known as an RFP, the CVB will need to include your expected arrival and departure dates, number

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of sleeping rooms you'll need and your budget limitations.

The CVB sends the RFPs to area hotels they know can accommodate your reunion's needs, the ones that meet your reunion specifications. Actually, they save you the time of calling sold out, too small or too expensive properties.

Some CVBs have proposals sent directly to you, others combine all the bids into one document for the your review. The CVB does not make any decisions for you. They gather the information for you to make your own decisions. And it is always wise, before making a final decision that you or someone in your reunion membership, visit the facility to make sure it is everything they've said it is ... and more.

Stacey Fox at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, CVB agrees and says arranging visits is an important part of their service. Their web address is gettysburg.travel.

Every CVB provides enough free visitor guides, area attraction maps and literature to share with everyone attending the reunion. Freebies depend on the bureau and your reunion size. The Louisville, Kentucky, CVB provides a free Reunion Planning Kit. Their web address is gotolouisville.com. Lenni Neimeyer at Branson/Lakes Area CVB in Missouri, offers Reunion Planners Guides. Their web address is explorebranson.com.

CVBs are a great resource when searching for services such as local transportation. Most CVBs will suggest tour itineraries for reunions or for members with special interests. They can make referrals for almost any reunion need. Julie Nikolai, at the Estes Park CVB in Colorado, says she may help find a photographer for family photos, determine group recreational plans that require advance reservations (ie: horseback riding, river rafting, guided hiking or llama treks) or even help locating a baker for special cakes. Their web address is estesparkcvb.com. If you reunion is in Des Moines, Iowa, Jennifer Pickar, says the CVB will send someone to officially welcome your reunion to their area. You can find them on the web at SeeDesMoines.com.

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CVB staff members' knowledge of their city, sites and activities is key, but their personalized service is the greatest benefit. After working with Kimberly Ghys at Lake County, Illinois, CVB, Bob Bowen said Kimberly was an important reason they'd chosen Lake County for their reunion. Find more at lakecounty.org. Dori Muehlhof says Montana's Flathead Valley CVB provides site inspections, local supplier coordinator and tour and activity suggestions. They're on the web at montanasflatheadvalley.com.

CVB staff are an invaluable resource for reunion planners. The opposite side of the coin, and one you should use to your benefit, is the economic impact your reunion brings to their city.

In the past several years this has been demonstrated in several areas. A news release from the Omaha, Nebraska, CVB declared that over 25 military reunions held there in one year brought more than 5,000 people increasing the city's revenue by \$3 million. The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, CVB estimated that just three family reunions generated over \$230 per day per member. Two of the reunions welcomed 75 each and the third had 200.

With these positive impacts, your reunion will be welcomed by the CVB. In fact, you can look at your reunion as a gift to your family and to the area where it is being held.

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There are lots of ways to communicate about reunions.

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