

XQRAC December 2021 recommendations for Harmony Brigade Rallies “Reduce risks and proceed with caution”

Last Minute Update: *The Omicron variant has now appeared in a number of states. There were not enough data at the time of the release of this advice to draw conclusions as to Omicron’s transmissibility, its potential for serious disease, or the effectiveness of current vaccines against it. Brigade planners need to monitor Omicron carefully and be ready to change plans as conditions dictate.*

One year ago, the eXtreme Quartetting™ Reopening Advisory Committee (XQRAC) recommended no rallies be held. In May 2021, we recommended to proceed with caution. Today the XQRAC advises Brigade leaders to plan to ***reduce risks and proceed with caution***. Our recommendations are based on conditions as of December 1, 2021 for Rallies to be held during the next annual cycle. Below is our reasoning for our advice and recommendations on how to proceed.

The rise of variants of concern (such as Delta and now Omicron) and their rapid spread have shown us that the pandemic conditions can change quickly, and that the SARS-Cov2 virus is not going away soon. We need to continue to be vigilant. Brigade style singing, with the goal of singing robustly just inches away from every other participant for several days makes our rallies prime ground for a super-spreader event. For the foreseeable future, no one can guarantee a Covid-19 free Brigade Rally, no matter what precautions are taken. But we can take steps to significantly minimize the risk of transmission. Brigade leaders need to assess the organization’s own risk tolerance in planning rallies and should add their own local requirements as they think necessary, but should never feel pressured into having a Rally if they do not feel it is as safe as possible for all.

1. Risk of infection is significantly reduced when only fully-vaccinated people sing with other fully-vaccinated people.

The highly effective vaccines have contributed to significant reductions in case rates, hospitalization rates, and mortality rates. As the effectiveness of the vaccine against infection wanes over a 6 month period, boosters have become available and Brigade singers should get the booster as it becomes available to them. Although breakthrough cases (getting infection despite being fully vaccinated) do occur, the vaccines and boosters have been shown to provide significant protection from severe disease and death, and likely reduce transmission instances. Brigade leaders should be sure (in the most private way possible) that singers are fully vaccinated. The requirement for fully-vaccinated status may prevent participation by some individuals who are advised by medical authorities to not receive vaccination at this time or for other reasons, but this requirement is essential for the rally to proceed without increasing risks. There are always trade-offs in life, and here the choice is between safety for those who attend the rally, versus allowing the broadest possible participation. We recommend that traditional Brigade rallies be reopened at this time only if the requirement for all attendees to document proof of vaccination is strictly enforced.

2. Singers with recent “natural immunity” should be included.

Research shows that recovering from a properly diagnosed case of Covid-19 provides broad protection against reinfection, but for various reasons immunity wanes over time. The people who are most protected from reinfection are Covid-19 survivors who also get fully vaccinated. If a singer can prove—with medical evidence provided in the most private way possible—that he/she has recovered from Covid-19 within 150 days of the Rally, they should be permitted to participate even though they may not be fully vaccinated.

3. Rapid testing provides last minute reassurance.

Breakthrough cases of Covid-19 do occur. A good number of the people infected by breakthrough infections suffer very mild symptoms or are asymptomatic, but they potentially serve as sources of transmission to others. In order to minimize the risk of active Covid-19 infections at a Rally, singers should show results of a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours of arrival at the Rally. Brigade leaders should consider providing a rapid result antigen test site upon arrival for any participant who does not have proof of the 72 hour negative PCR test. Of course, any positive results would result in non-participation for that individual. Brigade singers need to self assess their health at the Rally and stand down from participation if they become ill.

4. Masks.

Follow state, local, and hotel mandates on mask wearing. Even if masks are not required in singing areas, some singers will want to sing with a mask on and their wishes about that should be respected. Every participant should keep a mask with them at all times. Use masks as required in the hotel non-singing spaces.

5. Ventilation.

Check with the hotel to make sure that singing spaces are ventilated at the maximum rate. It is preferable if the venue uses “single pass air” but that is generally not the way businesses ventilate their spaces due to energy concerns. If weather and the hotel rules and local ordinances permit, encourage quartetting outdoors when possible.

6. Sing only in Brigade spaces with Brigade singers.

While in non-singing spaces within the hotel, singers should follow hotel guidelines for mask wearing and social distancing. Singing should only take place in areas designated by the Brigade for singing. Under no circumstances should non-participants be permitted to be in the assigned singing spaces, except for hotel staff. The Brigade cannot possibly monitor the vaccination status of any visitors and we must take steps to maximize Brigade participant safety and protect any visitors from infection. If they don't have Brigade lanyard, they shouldn't be there.

7. Postpone or cancel traditional show and sing-outs.

Sing-outs in schools, retirement communities and for other audiences, and concerts by Rallies should be avoided for the foreseeable future due to the difficulty of verifying the vaccination status of all guests and audience members. Since we do love to sing to an audience, the BHS and HFI have both offered to assist Brigades in producing virtual shows that can also be used as fundraisers and for public and youth outreach which helps fulfill the mission of Brigades. Consider video recording a show with no outside audience and putting it online with help from BHS or HFI.

This takes significant planning in advance, so don't wait until after the Rally. Another option may be to offer an outdoor show (weather permitting) in accordance with local guidelines.

8. Communicate and be understanding of all.

Let Brigade singers and potential singers know—with as much advance notice as possible—what conditions and/or restriction will be in place for a Rally. Understand that due to any number of factors, some singers will want to opt out of Brigade singing until the pandemic become less threatening to them. Some singers will want to roll ahead with singing regardless of the risk. Respect everyone's individual risk tolerance level and don't pressure them to participate or to not participate. Temporarily modify or excuse membership rules regarding consecutive years of attendance to allow singers to make their own decision without penalty. Make sure all participants sign informed consent and release forms available from BHS.

Should conditions change in any way, Rally organizers will need to be flexible and change plans along with the conditions. Keep in mind that it may even become necessary to postpone or cancel the Rally completely. In addition to the advice of the XQRAC, the Barbershop Harmony Society also offers guidance on getting back to singing as safely as possible at <https://www.barbershop.org/landing-pages/covid-19-resources-for-barbershoppers>. We all want to get back to ringing chords together, but we should only do so in the most responsible way possible.

Thank you.

The eXtreme Quartetting Re-opening Advisory Committee

Dr. George Korch and Dr. Gary Holmes, Co-chairs
Calvin Schnure, principal writer
Don Schreiber, President AXQHB
Tamara Hitchcock
Dr. Donald Salz
Stephanie Schmidt
Mark Schuldenfrei
Rick Yarto
Blair Brown, BHS Board liaison
and the memory of Dr. Dale Bieber