Safety Training for Remote Aquatic Environments

Introductory Note

On April 23 and 24, 2001, a group of people representing several groups met at Harvard University to discuss the need for enhancing the safety of outdoor leaders and persons in their care journeying to remote areas where they might be exposed to aquatic hazards. The result was a position statement, a set of recommended elements to address in establishing guidelines to improve safety, and a strategy for developing the guidelines.

Position Statement

Outdoor leaders, and people in their care, are often exposed to remote aquatic environments[1] that present unique hazards and perils. Fatalities and injuries occur as a result.

There is a lack of broadly accepted guidelines for prevention of and response to drowning, near drowning, and other injuries in remote aquatic environments. The development of guidelines could be expected to enhance the outdoor experience, to raise awareness of the risks, and to reduce the incidence of injury and death.

The guidelines should include appropriate practices and training recommendations that balance safety, practicality, and effective use of resources. They should address a wide range of groups, environments, and activities.

These guidelines should be developed through a process that involves input from recognized aquatic safety organizations, industry associations, and organizations leading trips in remote environments. The process should invite feedback and seek consensus.

The purpose of developing these guidelines is to assist organizations in improving their training and practices regarding water safety in remote environments.

Signed April 24, 2001, Cambridge, Massachusetts, by:

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[1] Remote Aquatic Environment – Any aquatic environment that is not a designated, appropriately lifeguarded swimming area or waterfront facility where the risk of drowning, near drowning, injury or other loss is possible. Attributes of remote aquatic environments include, but are not limited to, environments where rescue equipment is not available or must be improvised.

Recommended Elements of the Guidelines

The following are elements that should be addressed in establishing guidelines.

Administration Guidelines

- The program should be properly documented
- Leaders:
  - Minimum requirements for number of rescue-trained leaders for each group
  - Minimum age for leaders
  - Minimum verified skills for rescuers (including minimum swimming skills)
  - Pre-requisites skills prior to training
  - Training outcomes for leaders – minimum required knowledge and skills
  - Minimum level of CPR training
  - Required preseason Training
  - Required in-service Training
  - Health & fitness standards
  - Essential function capabilities of a leader
  - Minimum number of hours for training of leaders
  - Minimum level of first aid training
- Participants:
  - Medical screening
  - Aquatic skills assessment
  - Informed consent (from parent or guardian if a minor)

Equipment Guidelines

- What equipment is required under what circumstances
- Training that compensates for lack of equipment
- Improvised equipment principles

Training Guidelines

- Environmental assessment
- General:
  - Screening and skills development
  - Prevention (training for both leaders and participants)
  - Group Assessment
  - Preparation – Management of aquatic activities, to include, but not necessarily limited to:
    - Boundaries
    - (Lifeguard) positioning
    - Supervision
  - Rescues
  - Portable rescue equipment and its use
  - Improvising rescue devices
  - Personal Safety of Rescuer
  - Search and Recovery
- Site specific:
  - Situation assessment (site-by-site)
  - Aquatic situations and hazards