

## BETTER PREPARING LIFEGUARDS TO TAKE ACTION

BY STEPHANIE SHOOK



Lifeguard training should include daily, weekly and monthly refreshers to keep skills sharp and responsive.

**LIFEGUARDING** has advanced over the years into a professional, front-line public safety essential. Lifeguards are expected to be trained in the latest and most advanced water-rescue skills and techniques, while meeting and understanding the evolving laws, regulations and policies of state and local government.

“Lifeguards are professional responders and they need to be held to that standard,” said Roy Fielding, a member of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council and a Vice Chair for the Model Aquatic Health Code section on Lifeguarding and Bather Supervision for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Today’s lifeguard should be participating in regular pre-service and in-service live drills. He or she should understand such patron surveillance dynamics as glare and visibility, and how to handle them when necessary, and be capable of completing incident reports

that will stand up to the scrutiny of inspection and the potential rigors of litigation.

These exacting standards are just the beginning. The scope of lifeguarding has changed with the tremendous growth and innovation in shallow-water and waterpark environments with multiple features such as slides, winding rivers and water-play zones for toddlers. Lifeguards must be prepared for a host of new, more sophisticated aquatic attractions—including such concerns as extreme-shallow water neck and back injuries and the unique requirements of catch pools, in which a slide drops the patron into the water.

With this much innovation in the waterpark

industry and safety expectations higher than ever, lifeguard training must be comprehensive, effective and contain key components of best science and best practice.

Any program training and/or managing today’s lifeguards should consider the following principles:

### NEVER LOSE SIGHT OF THE BASICS.

All lifeguarding classes, whether general in nature or tailored to specific water environments, should require full water competency as a prerequisite. For example, the Red Cross has an Aquatic Attraction Lifeguarding course that teaches safety and rescue techniques for extreme shallow water environments. However, all participants still must pass a water competency sequence test and successfully retrieve, in less than 50 seconds, a 10-pound diving brick in three feet of water 20 yards away from the entry point before they can take the course. Whether a lifeguard for one year or 30 years, demonstrating basic competency should precede any kind of specialty training.

### CERTIFICATION IS JUST THE FIRST STEP.

Every newly certified lifeguard should feel justifiably proud of his or her accomplishment. But certification is only the beginning. People lose knowledge and skills quickly unless they are refreshed and repeated at regular intervals, and lifeguards are no exception. When the goal is readiness to save lives, it is essential that lifeguards engage in regular, in-service training where the core principals of basic training are continually repeated and re-visited.

“Whether it’s 10 minutes or an hour” said Fielding, “ongoing relevant training will be a positive.”

The industry’s best lifeguarding programs assist pool managers in structuring an in-service training program for lifeguards. They should include the vital feature of unannounced site visits by trained personnel who subsequently provide feedback, including lifeguarding observations and skills evaluations. Immediately following a surprise inspection, examiners should provide an immediate assessment that includes recommendations and goals for improvement. Then, the program should help lifeguard supervisors conduct ongoing assessments of the lifeguards on a daily basis.

### TRAIN FOR THE REAL THING.

In the span of a lifeguard’s career, he or she will spend many hours watching the patrons in the

water and perhaps only a very few minutes actually responding to an emergency. It is imperative that when those few minutes do arrive, lifeguards are ready to put their training into use. In-service training must provide opportunities for lifeguards to “live-drill” as a team.

According to Joe Gray, who leads the Red Cross Instructor Training Academies, “If the lifeguards don’t understand their roles, then there can be a breakdown in a rescue. Picture a waterpark—you’ll have roving guards, guards in lifeguard stands, guards at the top of slides and emergency back-up guards in the break room. They all have a role to play. One or two might respond to the emergency. Others will handle crowd control or notify supervisors. If any of them fail to do their assigned task, the rescue attempt can break down.

It goes back to the in-service training. If you can work on communications and rescue skills throughout the year and practice as a team, then you get in sync with each other.”

#### KEEP SCIENCE ON YOUR SIDE.

The science of safety must underpin any lifeguard training program, whether it is the First Aid/CPR/AED component of a basic certification course or a specialty class for a particular water environment. Researchers continue to study crucial aspects of first response in water environments.

New developments must be incorporated into basic and in-service training to ensure that lifeguards are ready with the best life-saving techniques science can offer. Lifeguard certifying agencies should work with experts and practitioners to study the evolving science and incorporate it into their training. For example, a recommendation from the Scientific Advisory Council advises lifeguards to intervene with pool patrons who engage in breath-holding games during play and hyperventilation prior to lap swimming. These unwise behaviors can lead to black-outs or distract lifeguards from other emergencies.

#### MODEL GOOD BEHAVIOR.

Because no federal regulatory agency is responsible for water facilities in the United States, most waterparks are regulated at the state and local level. In an effort to assist these regulatory bodies, the CDC recently partnered with public health organizations, industry and academic partners to develop a set of guidelines called the Model Aquatic Health Code (MAHC).

Based on the latest science and best practice, this code covers the prevention of drowning, injuries and the spread of recreational water illnesses. It also makes recommendations regarding the design and construction of water venues, including waterpark features. It’s a solid blue-print for safety and efficiency and can be the go-to document for all concerned parties.

Serious injury or even death in a waterpark can occur in seconds, thus making effective training for lifeguards a paramount public health necessity. Olympic track and field great Jesse Owens succinctly described the necessity of good training, but he might have been talking about lifeguarding: “A lifetime of training for just ten seconds,” he said.

Though new waterpark attractions will always be on the horizon, the one constant is the need for effectively trained lifeguards—a priority that never goes out of style.



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