

# No Child Should Ever Drown In A YMCA Pool

By Christopher Mogridge

No child should drown in a properly managed YMCA swimming pool. There are some key facts YMCA professionals should know. Drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death among children in the United States. There have been five drownings this year in YMCA swimming pools of which four were children. Each year, 4,400 people drown in the U.S., of which 1,500 are children. One-third to half of those children drowned in guarded pools.

“Clearly, despite all our efforts, what we are doing today to guard our pools is not working, and we have to improve it immediately and sustainably,” says Neil Nicoll, President and CEO of the YMCA of the USA.

All four children who drowned this year drowned during special events. Two-thirds of the drownings in YMCAs have been during special events, such as birthday parties, day camp, day care, and when pools are used by outside groups.

Weekends are a higher risk time. Three out of four children drowned on Saturdays. The children who drowned were representative of high risk groups. All were young boys, and three out of the four were minorities. Some were disabled.

Lifeguards are not always the first to recognize a drowning child. Good policies and protocols are often found to have given way to poor practices and procedures.

The consequences to a YMCA and a community when a child drowns in a YMCA pool are devastating. Insurance

exposure and liability pale compared to the exceptionally high cost of the lifelong impact of a drowned child on his or her family and friends. The impact on the lifeguard, the rest of the YMCA staff, and the community are unimaginable.

How does a YMCA regain the community’s trust where it was once considered the safe haven, where parents entrusted their children as if they were with family?

## Root Causes

The majority of YMCA pools across the U.S. are guarded by a single lifeguard.

Best practices call for two guards on duty whenever the pool is open to ensure adequate scanning coverage and emergency management.

The majority of YMCA lifeguards are young, part-time, and inexperienced. They sometimes lack the necessary judgment and in-service facility-specific training required to safely guard and manage a YMCA swimming pool.

The age, experience, and credentials of YMCA aquatic leadership are inadequate with the lack of a career path. Turnover is high.

Supervision of lifeguards is often inadequate. Regular, documented hourly visits to the pools by senior staff who themselves are trained to recognize “Rescue Ready” guards and to evaluate if best practices are being followed, is lacking.

Aquatic emergency action plans are sometimes untested and not practiced.

Emergency action plans must be tested and evaluated for effectiveness. Effective emergency action plans must be practiced monthly by all staff involved, including aquatic, member service, and other emergency response staff.

New lifeguard orientation and training, and lifeguard in-service training is sometimes inadequate. Yearly lifeguard in-service training calendars are not created and distributed, and attendance is rarely enforced. Agendas are focused on department and scheduling problems and isolated skill reviews.

## Focus On Readiness

Agendas, instead, must focus on lifeguard readiness. Provide scenario rescues from victim recognition to extrication and resuscitation using AED trainers,



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oxygen administration, and suction.

Lifeguards will not be ready for the real thing if they are not provided the opportunity to execute and manage entire rescues using your YMCA facility-specific equipment. In-service training must include enforcement and management of deep water testing protocols and scanning workshops. Scanning workshops must be reinforced by unexpected use of silhouettes and red cap or red ball drills to gauge vigilance and 10/10 scanning.

Swimmers are not being deep water tested and non-swimmers are not being restricted to shallow water, wearing colorful identification. Non-swimmers who cannot stand in the shallow water are not being required to wear a personal flotation device (PFD) or remain within arm's reach of a parent or adult caregiver at all times they are in the water.

Protocols to manage the deep water testing process must be developed, implemented, and enforced at all times. Special consideration must be given to the development of protocols to manage the deep water testing and restrictions for outside groups, special events, birthday parties, and rentals that often occur on weekends when senior supervision is lean.

Lifeguards are generally not the first to recognize a child in distress or on the bottom.

Lifeguards must have one job only: guard the pool. We still observe guards taking and recording chemical readings, counting and recording swimmers, installing and removing lane lines, or assisting a member in or out of the water. Distractions result in drownings.

We are seeing more lifeguards now that appear to be Rescue Ready but in fact are not proactively scanning left to right and bottom to top. They are gazing, staring, or fixating. Scanning and victim recognition is demanding work and requires training and reinforcement.

Training lifeguards in triage scanning and reinforcement through regular monthly in-service trainings with unexpected scanning spot checks is critical. (Triage Scanning — First Priority: scan the bottom of the pool; Second Priority:

distressed swimmer recognition; Third Priority: rule enforcement.)

Lifeguards are being deployed with little regard for protection zones, pool design, glare, agitation, and obstructions. Guards should be positioned high on lifeguard stands so visibility of their

*‘Lifeguards are often not the first to recognize a drowning child.’*

entire assigned protection zone is facilitated. The lifeguard must be able to scan his or her protection zone from left to right and from the bottom of the pool to the surface within 10 seconds, and get to a victim within 10 seconds.

Vigilance, along with Rescue

Readiness, is critical and often overlooked. Guards must be supported with regular rotations and breaks so they can remain alert and aware. A rotation every 20 to 30 minutes and a 15-minute break every two hours is recommended at indoor pools.

#### Trends Acerbate

More indoor and outdoor YMCA pools are being designed as water parks with multiple aquatic venues including one- and two-story water slides, zero entry pools, zero depth, and wading pools with water toys such as Lily Pads and frog slides.

Spa facilities, such as whirlpools, along with lazy rivers, wave pools, and warm water pools are provided to attract, entice, and retain members. Resident camping is exploding its aquatic venues beyond traditional swimming and boating to include large inflatable blobs, wet willies, and water zip lines.

The complexities of providing safety

and well guarded facilities when confronted with this new YMCA world of aquatic attractions and toys can be daunting. It requires a new generation of highly qualified and experienced aquatic professionals.

Technology also is adding layers of complexity to aquatic safety and rescue. Telephones and single activation site pool emergency alarms are no longer considered adequate. Multiple alarm

sites or wireless remote activators carried by each lifeguard are becoming the standard.

CPR is no longer the gold standard of resuscitation technology. Oxygen administration and the use of suction devices are becoming the standard, in addition to CPR Automatic External Defibrillators (AED). Lifeguard training and training in the use of AEDs, Oxygen and suction, are often taught at different

times by different instructors. Students are rarely provided the opportunity to practice all their rescue and resuscitation skills together.

**Need Multi-Skills**

Although many lifeguards are proficient at any one skill in isolation, when confronted with a scenario including the use of all their separate certifications, they become confused and unable to per-

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*‘Vigilance along with Rescue Readiness is critical and is often overlooked.’*

form. It is incumbent on each YMCA to train its lifeguards on their facility-specific equipment and use scenarios to ensure competence.

Top leadership commitment to risk management and the control and prevention of drowning will result in “immediate and sustainable” action. Commitment to hourly supervision and documentation of lifeguarding activities in all YMCA swimming pools must be managed whenever the pool is open and active.

Leadership must be committed to new lifeguard orientation and monthly lifeguard in-service training and spot checks. There must be a commitment to development and implementation of effective policies and protocols to manage deep water testing and restrictions for outside groups, special events, birthday parties, and rentals. **P**

*Full details in your February Perspective*



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