

APPENDIX A

Lifeguards

This annex draws upon the extensive experience of the International Life Saving Federation (ILS)¹ and comments received during the preparation of these Guidelines. It relates to people who are trained and positioned at recreational water sites to protect water users and who may be paid or voluntary. They may be referred to as lifesavers, lifeguards or given some other title. For simplicity, the term lifeguard has been used throughout this annex. The following sections outline points for consideration when setting up or running a lifeguarding scheme.

A.1 Lifeguard qualifications

Lifeguards are generally responsible for observation of a beach or recreational water area to anticipate problems and identify an emergency quickly, carry out rescues, give immediate first aid, communicate with swimmers and recreational water users, enforce regulations where appropriate, promote awareness of specific and general hazards and report incidents.

Lifeguards should have appropriate training and hold a suitable current qualification. This would normally be from an appropriate and recognized training and assessment agent. Lifeguards should, for example, be competent in lifesaving methods, swimming and the most current methods of resuscitation. Requalification should be undertaken at regular intervals, and practical rescue and resuscitation skills should be practised frequently. Both fitness and technical knowledge are required. Good practice would generally require that records be kept of all training and qualifications and be available for inspection.

Lifeguards should have locally-specific knowledge concerning the presence of natural and artificial features, the topography of the area, tides and currents, hazards posed by local animals, the distance to qualified medical assistance, hazards and risks, public relations, crowd management and local operating procedures.

Minimum standards for the training of lifeguards have been proposed (<http://www.ilsf.org>).

A.2 Lifeguard observation points

Lifeguard observation points must have a clear and unobstructed view of the area of supervision, including both the water and the beach. Lifeguard observation points

¹ The ILS is a non-profit confederation of major national lifesaving federations worldwide.

are ideally elevated (the higher the better, within reason) and provide the lifeguard with protection from the elements. These are often referred to as lifeguard “towers”. They should provide adequate space to allow the lifeguard to stand and move while observing the water and a place for necessary rescue and first aid equipment. The design of a lifeguard observation point should include a way to respond on foot to a rescue without breaking observation of a swimmer in distress.

Lifeguard observation points should be placed to allow observation of the area under control. At coastal recreation areas, they should be placed as close to the water edge as practical at high tide and may be moved at intervals with the changing tide, so that they will be close to the water edge at all tidal stages. Where a beach is divided by a jetty or other obstacle to clear observation, each part should ideally be independently observed.

A.3 Lifeguarding equipment

Lifeguards on duty should be easily identifiable at a distance, in a manner that sets them apart from others at the beach, such as by a uniform. To properly perform their duties, lifeguards require appropriate rescue equipment. The most basic rescue device is a rescue float. The most common of these are tubes of flexible closed-cell foam rubber and buoys of hard plastic. Other examples of basic lifesaving equipment are the rescue board (a surfboard adapted for rescue), binoculars and swim fins. Lifeguards are frequently involved in first aid and need to be appropriately equipped for this work. Lifeguards are often provided with a telephone or radio for communication. As record keeping is necessary, report forms should normally be provided.

More advanced rescue equipment can be useful. Rescue craft have proven effective in offshore rescue of swimmers, boaters and others. While costly, they receive a high degree of public support. They are most frequently deployed in areas of dense use or particular hazard. For effective use of rescue craft, good communication linked to rapid deployment is important. In some cases, the provision of a motor vehicle may also be appropriate.

All equipment should be inspected frequently and replaced or repaired as necessary.

A.4 Lifeguarding policies

Lifeguard organizations should develop written “standard operating procedures”. These would contribute to the water safety plan (section 13.2) and should contain details on risk assessment, a plan of the recreational water (outlining hazards, access points, vantage points and blind spots, information points, zones, positioning of public rescue equipment and protective features), supervision requirements (e.g., lifeguard provision, rotation systems, qualification, surveillance levels and daily routines) and the duties of other recreational water staff.

An “emergency action plan” should be formulated to guide lifeguards in handling emergencies that can be reasonably anticipated. It should provide step-by-step procedures for each member of the team: rescue management, continuity of supervision

during rescue, communication procedures during an incident (both within the team and with external agencies), aftercare and peer support.

Lifeguard levels of performance should be established and incorporated within the policies.

A.5 Lifeguard duty period

Lifeguard supervision should be maintained during times of significant use. Sufficient regular breaks should be incorporated into duty periods. When on duty, lifeguards should not perform other tasks that might detract from observation.

Warning signs should be posted if lifeguard service is interrupted, and the beginning and end of this period should be communicated with, for example, megaphones and signs.

A.6 Lifeguard staffing levels

Lifeguard staffing levels should be appropriate to the use of the area of responsibility and provide for public safety in a manner consistent to ensure safety. Responsibility should not be left with a single individual. Lifeguards work more effectively in teams. These teams should ideally be managed through a central administration capable of providing necessary relief, backup and resources.

Two primary factors influence the staffing level needs for lifeguards: attendance and risk. Attendance typically varies according to season, day of the week, weather and other factors. Risk can vary according to surf, rip current intensity (which is usually directly related to surf), wind (which may enhance surf size), water temperature and other factors. The number of lifeguards staffing a beach area should be adequate, regardless of fluctuations in attendance and risks. The provider of lifeguard protection must therefore either adopt a system to effectively vary staffing according to fluctuations or set a consistent staffing level aimed at the highest levels of attendance and risk. Most lifeguard providers address this via a mix of the two. That is, they set regular staffing levels somewhat below the level needed to address the highest levels of risk and attendance, but somewhat above the average levels. Then, they develop a system to enhance staffing levels when unexpected crowds and/or risks present themselves. Varying staffing levels by day of the week is also common in areas where attendance fluctuates predictably.

People in distress in the water rarely wave or call for help, being panicked and occupied in trying to keep themselves afloat, and even nearby swimmers are often unaware of the problem. Thus, lifeguard vigilance is of key importance. It is a tremendous challenge to maintain concentration in the face of the monotony of watching swimmers for extended periods of time. Training may help, but does not eliminate normal human reactions to boredom. Regular breaks are therefore important and may also be necessitated by the environment in which lifeguards operate, which may be hot and/or windy. Lifeguards must consume generous quantities of fluid to prevent dehydration and assist with concentration. Breaks allow for simple human needs along with relief from prolonged periods of scanning and physical inactivity.

A.7 References

Brewster BC, ed. (1995) *The United States Lifesaving Association Manual of Open Water Lifesaving*. Huntington Beach, California, Prentice Hall.

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