

Florida EMS Advisory Council meeting
January 28-30, 2009
Daytona Beach, Florida

Open-Water Lifesaving (OWL) constituency group meeting summary

Attendees:

Joe McManus	USLA-SER, Pres./Indian River
David Thorne	USLA-SER/PBC Ocean Rescue
Dennis Ward	USLA-SER/PBC Ocean Rescue
Corky Young	Bay County-Panama City Fire
Vicki Grant	FL DOH-Medical Quality Assurance
Betsey Hines	FL DOH-Medical Quality Assurance
Michael Hohl	Pompano Bch F/R-EMS Division Chief
Walter Liddell	Florida Highway Patrol-Tallahassee
Phil Metz	Destin Fire Control, Medical Division Chief

United States Lifesaving Ass'n President Joe McManus opened the constituency group meeting yesterday at 11:00am and welcomed attendees. He described the need to standardize and consolidate open-water lifesaving in Florida. He feels we're beginning to craft our own strategic vision for OWLs. The USLA website (www.usla.org) is a great resource for information for those interested in any aspect of open-water lifesaving and the USLA also publishes a training manual for open-water lifersavers.

The USLA training manual focuses heavily on rescue operations moreso than medical response. Joe noticed that the by-laws of the EMS-Advisory Council don't mention the word "rescue". Like firefighters, lifeguards must first rescue the victim from the dangerous environment, and physically transport the victim to a location safe enough for emergency medical aid to be rendered. No rescued victim is released without a medical evaluation and the care that's indicated. Therefore, for open-water lifeguards, "rescue" and "medical" are conjoined in our approach to "emergency" care.

Currently FL statutes make little mention of lifeguards, but we are mentioned in FS401.435. Statute 401.435, requires DOT-First Responder, or better, medical certifications for lifeguards, and a memorandum of understanding between the local medical director and the lifeguard agency. Pres. McManus suspects that there may be lifeguards agencies who aren't complying with FS401.435 thus resulting in licensed EMTs practicing in Florida for years without the legitimate medical oversight that the legislature intended.

Updating the situation in Lake Worth, Joe mentioned that commissioners voted to remove lifeguards from Lake Worth's beaches two days a week (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) to save money. Beach drowning statistics are not so much attendance-driven, but rather conditions-driven. Whut-I-mean-is...If there are rip currents on a rainy Tuesday and Wednesday, then those few beachgoers are at much greater risk than the big crowd on Saturday when the ocean may be calm.

Joe is working with city commissioners to alleviate this problem in Lake Worth, but the fundamental problem is that Lake Worth's lifeguards are administered by the Leisure Services Department. Being administered by a bonafide public safety department will help earn beach safety the appropriate priority in Lake Worth and elsewhere.

In recent years many lifeguard employers have successfully moved their beach lifeguards to Fire/Rescue, Public Safety or Emergency Services, including Miami-Dade, Ft. Lauderdale, Manatee County, et al. Others, including Lake Worth and Palm Beach County, have not been receptive to moving beach lifeguards to a public-safety department.

Joe reflected that after a year of political action in Brevard County by the USLA, due to the terrible record of drownings there, Brevard commissioners narrowly voted in favor of providing year-round lifeguards. It's a resounding victory for proponents of safe beaches, especially in the current economic climate. This recalls the efforts the USLA made some years ago to address a terrible spate of drownings along the panhandle beaches.

Phil Metz (from Destin Fire) spoke highly of the USLA's resources. He described how Destin lifeguard chief Joe D'Agostino has built a quality lifeguard service there in large part with USLA resources. Destin now has one of the most progressive Junior Lifeguard programs in the nation. For example, the Destin Jr. Lfgd. program is so rigorous that the kids earn phys ed credit at school.

Phil has been studying Destin's drowning statistics for years past and has discovered some extraordinary results. Such as that 87% of the persons who drowned were non-local residents (i.e., tourists). Also, drownings generally involve a high rate of alcohol/drug impairment, but in Destin very few drowning victims were impaired by alcohol/drugs. And the average age was 56 years old, much much higher than state and national averages. What's more, 56% drowned after going in to save someone else. It's plenty dangerous for trained rescuers, but much too dangerous and often deadly for untrained rescuers.

Phil mentioned that having trained lifeguards serves a very important purpose: it keeps firefighters, out of the water. Too often rescuers need to be rescued---or recovered. Phil also emphasized the importance of getting rescued drowning victims off the beach as quickly as possible so ALS treatment can begin in a more secure environment, like an ambulance.

Michael Hohl of Pompano Beach F/R talked about the need for empirical research which for example compares response times by lifeguards on foot compared to using an ATV, or swimming compared to using a paddleboard or jetski or boat. The USLA does not issue standards for how many towers or how far apart, or when an ATV or boat is necessary given the predictable response distances, etc. All agreed that would be valuable info.

The USLA will host a seminar and rescue demonstration in Panama City Beach on March 27th. Joe also mentioned the USLA offers an Aquatic Response and Rescue Training for non-lifeguard first responders, like firefighters, ambulance staff, coast guard, FWC, etc. Lastly, Joe mentioned that associate memberships in the USLA are available to interested non-lifeguards who want to support our efforts and involvement with the Advisory Council. It's all available, and more, at www.USLA.org.

We adjourned at 12:30pm

Submitted by Dennis Ward