

Open Water Drowning Prevention Policy Strategy: Physical Open Water Barriers

BACKGROUND

The creation of physical open water barriers, such as fences, is an effective method in reducing access to open water. Rural areas in Washington State have large areas of unfenced water, such as irrigation canals, ponds and whitewater rivers. Long emergency response and transport times from these remote sites to hospitals impact drowning survival and underscore the need for primary prevention of drowning.

STRATEGIES/OBJECTIVES

- Identify and promote standards for fencing around open water areas, such as private ponds, irrigation canals and ditches.
- Provide information and education to the community on fencing around open water sources.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

- Developed plan to assess current policies and identify educational resources and needs in rural areas.
- Formed partnership with Washington State University Extension Office.
- Applied for funding in 2014 from the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, but did not receive grant.
- Included fencing as a prevention strategy as part of education on open water.
- Co-authored chapter in Drowning Handbook on Physical Barriers¹.

IMPACT

- Funding was not available and little progress was made on this project. We included the strategy of physical barriers for open water as one strategy in thinking comprehensively about drowning prevention. Given the proven evidence of four sided fencing around pools as a drowning prevention measure, barriers around open water should be evaluated.

HEALTH EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS

- Physical barriers around open water, such as ponds or irrigation canals, are a significant issue for rural areas. Not only are children more likely to have access to open water when living on farms, they are also less likely to have access to lifeguarded areas or designated swim areas.

¹ Drowning Prevention Handbook. Bierens, JLM (ed.) DOI 10.1007/978-3-642-04253-9_24, Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg; 2015. Bennett E and Linnan L. Physical Barriers. pages 181-185.

PARTNERS

- Washington State University (WSU) Extension Office
- Possible partners for future projects include: WSU Extension Offices, Colville Native American Tribe, Farm Bureau, Future Farmers of America, American Red Cross, American Camping Association, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Marine Law Enforcement and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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