

Open Water Drowning Prevention Policy Strategy: Safer Water Recreation Sites

BACKGROUND

- Children and teens deserve safer places to play and swim in Washington State's open waters.
- Unlike public health-regulated pools, designated swim areas have few safety regulations. Currently, the Washington State Administrative Code only regulates sanitation and water quality for designated swim areas. Federal, state and/or local agencies may be responsible for designated swim areas, but each organization may have different policies and procedures.
- Defining criteria and establishing designated swim areas for swimming and playing will provide an opportunity for safer water recreation. These designated swim areas are defined by a boundary and have shallow and deep areas, with a gradual slope and no sudden drop-offs. Some swim areas also have lifeguards.

STRATEGIES/OBJECTIVES

- Identify existing water recreation safety standards for bathing beaches, swim areas and other high-use water recreation areas to address issues, such as drop-offs, lifeguard coverage, water risks and rescue equipment availability.
- Develop Washington State Designated Swim Area Guidelines for safer water recreation site standards for Washington State's bathing beaches and swim areas.
- Promote access to lifeguarded beaches during summer recreational months.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

- The Washington State Department of Health, Seattle Children's, and Safe Kids Washington developed tools to assess swim sites, including the [Open Water Swim Area Safety Checklist \(PDF\)](#) and the [Community Water Recreation Safety Checklist \(PDF\)](#) to help individuals, organizations and communities identify gaps in water safety, and develop policy and program changes to fix the gaps.
 - The checklists were developed based on a review of existing public health, educational and environmental report cards, and feedback from water recreation and injury prevention experts.
 - The checklists were piloted by five Safe Kids coalitions in Washington State, which assessed more than 50 open water sites on lakes, rivers and inland saltwater sources. The groups used the assessments to identify policies and programs to improve open water safety.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

- The checklists, trainings and report card tools were then shared with injury prevention, water safety and water recreation organizations, such as the Washington State Drowning Prevention Network, Safe Kids coalitions, emergency medical service trauma regions, and local and state parks departments.
- Promoted lifeguarded beaches.
 - Developed a list of designated swim areas, including those with lifeguards, and created three flyers and a Google Maps version for King County.
 - Promoted swimming in lifeguarded areas as a primary message in communications to media.
- Developed the [Washington State Designated Swim Area Guidelines](#) to increase access to safer water recreation activities by developing new and improving pre-existing designated swim areas; creating new policies and revising current policies related to designated swim areas; and advocating for funding and resources to develop or improve designated swim areas.
 - Piloted use of guidelines and evaluated with pre and post surveys to beach managers and environmental health specialists.
 - Integrated with the Department of Health Water Recreation Program guidelines.
 - Final guidelines were emailed to 58 swim beach managers and 24 local environmental health specialists to begin using.

IMPACT

- The “Open Water Swim Areas Safety Checklist” and the “Community Water Recreation Safety Checklist” offer several benefits to help communities, counties and states assess and improve safety in open water, such as at lakes, rivers and bathing beaches.

	Yes	No	Notes
Designated Swim Area (Bathing Beach Only)			
Marked by rope or other marker			
Clear, visible maximum depth marker			
Depth marker provided in shallow swimming area			
Float line separates shallow from deep swimming area			
Clear of rocks, weeds, lily pads, or other potential hazards			
Beach is glass free			
Other:			

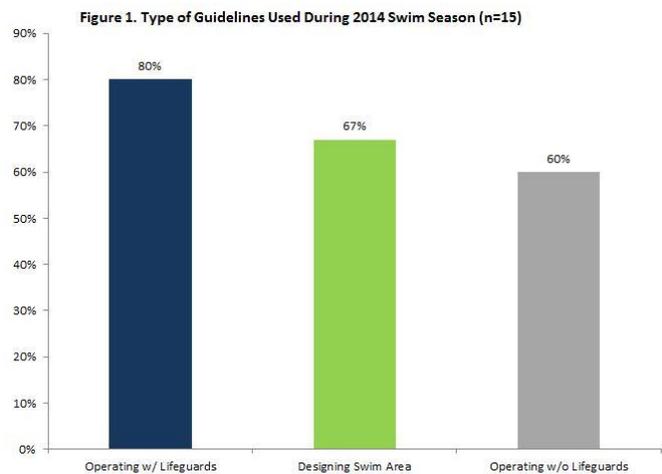
IMPACT CONTINUED

- The checklists and tools help identify strengths and gaps in open water safety.
- The checklists and tools help generate data, and formulate policy, environmental or system changes to improve open water safety. For example, Safe Kids Snohomish County presented results of the checklists/report cards to the Snohomish County Parks Advisory Board, which voted unanimously to support Safe Kids Snohomish County's open water safety work.

2014 Designated Swim Area Guidelines Impact:

Beach managers and environmental health specialists were surveyed after they received the Designated Swim Area Guidelines. Highlights from the survey include:

- About 75% of beach managers who responded used the guidelines during the 2014 swim season. Of those who used the guidelines, 80% used information from the section focused on operating without lifeguards; 67% used information from designing designated swim areas; and 60% used information from the section focused on operating with lifeguards.
- Half of all beach managers surveyed promoted the guidelines within their organization, while 65% reported they definitely or probably will use the guidelines in the future and 55% reported they definitely or probably will adopt some or all of the guidelines in the future.
- Water quality (45%), hiring lifeguards (40%) and signs (40%) were the most commonly used guidelines.
- About 25% of those who used the guidelines made them an official policy or procedure.



HEALTH EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS

Making safer open water swim areas available is important from an equity standpoint. Open water swim areas are often free or a single fee making them less expensive than swimming in a pool. Many areas of Washington State do not have a public pool.

PARTNERS

- Beach managers and administrators
- Environmental health specialists
- Washington State Department of Health Water Recreation Program

PARTNERS CONTINUED

- Injury prevention and water safety experts, such as Safe Kids Washington and local Safe Kids coalitions around the state
- Washington State Drowning Prevention Network

Other Key Resources:

- 10 States Standards
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) draft Model Aquatic Health Code
- New York State Sanitary Code for Bathing Beaches
- United States Lifesaving Association Guidelines for Open Water Lifeguard Agency Certification
- United States Lifeguard Standards Coalition
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Washington State Environmental Health Directors' Guidance for Recreational Waters and Beaches

DISSEMINATION

- Joint Annual Meeting of the Safe States Alliance, Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research, and CDC Core I & II State Injury Grantees.
- 2013 Safe Kids Childhood Injury Prevention Conference, Washington D.C., presentation focused on the safer site guidelines and life jacket loaner programs.

LESSONS LEARNED

- While there are standards statewide for public swimming pools, there was a lack of buy-in for standards related to open water sites.
- Many different agencies control open water swim sites.
- Local communities lack funding to make changes.
- It is essential to regularly revise swim area guidelines and checklists based on changing research, laws and information on water recreation safety and designated swim areas.
- Stakeholders were more comfortable starting with guidelines vs. a policy.

EVALUATION SUPPLEMENT

[2014 Washington State Designated Swimming Area Survey Results \(PDF\)](#)

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