



Drowning Prevention

Hawai'i Injury Prevention Plan 2012-2017

Injury Prevention Advisory Committee

Injury Prevention and Control Section

Background and Accomplishments

Drowning prevention has been a priority issue for the Hawai'i State Department of Health, Injury Prevention and Control Section (IPCS) since 1991. Hawai'i has accomplished much in the area of drowning prevention with the benefits of highly engaged experts, exceptional ocean safety officers across the state, active involvement from the visitor industry, and strong collaborative partnerships in the community.

- ▶ The Hawai'i Beach Safety website (www.hawaiibeachsafety.org) was developed in 2006 and provides beach ratings based on comprehensive risk assessments that were conducted on all guarded and unguarded beaches in the state. The site also features safety information about hazards (e.g., rip currents, dangerous shore breaks), prevention tips, surf reports, special alerts (e.g., box jelly fish notices), and warnings. Information on the website is updated several times each day. Partners on this project include the Ocean Safety and Lifeguard Services Division at the City and County of Honolulu, the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association, ocean safety and lifeguard partners on neighbor islands, the University of Hawai'i School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology, the Hawai'i Tourism Authority, and the Hawai'i State Department of Health.
- ▶ In collaboration with the Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools, IPCS co-produced the video, "Be Ocean Minded" about the Junior Lifeguard Program. Lifeguards from all islands were interviewed to talk about ocean safety, prevention tips, and the value of the Junior Lifeguard Program. The county-based Junior Lifeguard Program runs during the summer and trains teenagers (13-17 years of age) in ocean skills, beach condition assessment, and lifesaving techniques. The video serves as a recruitment tool for the program and copies have been distributed across the state.
- ▶ In 2009, IPCS surveyed over 500 beach goers on O'ahu, both residents and visitors, to assess the impact of four types of beach warning signs: strong current, high surf, dangerous shore break, and waves breaking on ledge. Results showed that about half of those surveyed saw the signs, and among those, 66% thought the signs would influence their behavior.
- ▶ IPCS worked with the Swimming Pool Association of Hawai'i in 2009 to conduct a survey of 1,300 residential pool owners on O'ahu. The impetus for this project was to inform pool owners about a federal law designed to protect children against entrapment from the suction of pool drains and pumps. This 2009 law, the Virginia Graeme-Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act, is mandatory for commercial pools but not for residential pools. The survey asked about drain covers and pumps as well as fencing, safety latches on gates, whether there were kids in their home and if so, whether the kids participated in swimming lessons. Pool owners also were provided with pool safety and entrapment prevention information. A follow-up survey determined what safety changes pool owners made. During the survey, 163 swimming pools or spas were identified as having potentially dangerous equipment; 65 pool owners voluntarily upgraded their pumps and drains.

Recommendations

In 2010, IPCS led a statewide needs assessment that included a review of best practices for drowning prevention, in-depth telephone interviews with ten key stakeholders (i.e., representatives of organizations involved in prevention efforts, and potential partners), and two strategic planning sessions with partners from the community and the visitor industry. IPCS used the information gathered through this process to develop and prioritize the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Establish a task force to develop a statewide approach to drowning prevention

Each week in Hawai'i, at least one person fatally drowns. As an island state, it is essential that we create a safer environment and provide residents and tourists with information they need to have a safe and enjoyable experience in and around the water. A statewide task force for drowning prevention would bring key partners together to coordinate drowning prevention efforts, and provide guidance to IPCS moving forward. Partners in the community, including the visitor industry should be broadly represented on the task force, and efforts should be made to engage educators.

Recommended Next Steps

- ▶ Work with existing groups, including the Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources and the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association to create a task force, build membership and define a clear mission.

Recommendation 2: Implement a statewide educational campaign to increase ocean safety awareness among residents and visitors

The majority of drownings in Hawai'i are ocean-related, and half of those fatalities are among tourists. Clear and effective messages for residents and visitors of Hawai'i need to be developed, tested, implemented, and evaluated. Messages may be communicated through existing communication channels, including the Hawai'i Beach Safety website and the Hawai'i Tourism Authority's Travel Smart Hawai'i website. Efforts should be made to engage partners throughout the message development and dissemination process.

PARTNERS

American Red Cross -
Hawai'i State Chapter

City and County of Honolulu
Department of Parks
and Recreation

City and County of Honolulu
Ocean Safety and Lifeguard
Services Division

County of Hawai'i Department
of Research and Development

County of Hawai'i
Fire Department

County of Hawai'i Ocean Safety

County of Kaua'i Ocean Safety

County of Kaua'i Office of
Economic Development

County of Maui Office of
Economic Development

County of Maui
Aquatics Division

Hale Koa Hotel

Hawaiian Lifeguard Association

Hawai'i State Department of Land
and Natural Resources

Hawai'i Tourism Authority

Injury Prevention Advisory
Committee

Kama'aina Kids

Kaua'i Lifeguard Association

Kaua'i Visitor Bureau

O'ahu YMCA

Resorts and adventure
tourism companies

Swimming Pool
Association of Hawai'i

University of Hawai'i School
of Ocean and Earth Science
and Technology

YMCA of Honolulu

Attention also must be paid to visitors' sources of information. Hawai'i guidebooks are of particular concern as they often direct visitors who are less familiar with ocean swimming and conditions to unguarded locations without explaining the potential dangers.

Recommended Next Steps

- ▶ Solicit partner input to develop and test clear, consistent prevention messages for visitors and residents.
- ▶ Engage partners in message dissemination and evaluation.
- ▶ Educate writers and publishers of guidebooks about drownings in Hawai'i and encourage them to include accurate information in their publications about safety conditions.

Recommendation 3: Evaluate current drowning prevention efforts and disseminate information about best practices

Drowning prevention is a complex public health concern. There are numerous factors including the age and ability of the individual, the body of water (e.g., swimming pool, ocean, stream), and current conditions (Quan, et al, 2007). More information is needed about what works to prevent drowning in Hawai'i.

Currently, there aren't many evidence-based strategies or best practices to prevent drowning. There are several promising practices that have strong behavioral elements, and very few environmental or legislative interventions. More research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and education materials currently in use (Quan, et al, 2007). Results from such research would help solicit support from partners and policy makers, and inform decisions about resource allocation.

Equally important to completing the research will be disseminating information about best and promising practices to key audiences in the state as well as the broader drowning prevention community.

Recommended Next Steps

- ▶ Evaluate the Hawai'i Beach Safety website, www.hawaiibeachsafety.org, to determine effectiveness and use of the site.
- ▶ Provide data support and technical assistance to practitioners that need assistance evaluating their own drowning prevention programs.
- ▶ Evaluate effectiveness of safety efforts, including the provision of rescue tubes, at unguarded beaches across the state.
- ▶ Disseminate information about effective safety efforts in Hawai'i through partner organizations.