

# How to prevent drowning

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## It starts with training, education and building a better lifeguard

By **KORIE WILKINS**

Of The Oakland Press

ROCHESTER HILLS - Fred Carter has spent his whole career trying to build a better lifeguard.

The married father of five has studied hundreds of drownings in Michigan and beyond for years, trying to find common denominators to improve training for lifeguards. It's his life's work.

"If we're going to reduce the number of drownings, we need to know how and why they happen," said Carter, who lives in Birmingham.

Carter was hired in the mid-1980s to be the beachfront coordinator at Thelma Spencer Park, after the drowning death of a small child. A career lifeguard, Carter said there hasn't been a fatality at the popular park in Rochester Hills since. He said guards at the park do 15 to 18 surface rescues a year and, in 2001, they rescued a little boy using protocol developed by Carter.

"We have an unprecedented safety record," he said. "We've been fortunate, but we also do a lot of training and we have good lifeguards."

"This has been my focus, my business, something that I care deeply about."

## A lifetime of experience

Carter, 50, has been studying why drowning deaths occur for about 20 years. He's sifted through hundreds of records and plans to write a book. It wasn't a personal tragedy that prompted Carter to study drownings - although he says he knew a girl who drowned when he was a teenager - but an interest in saving lives.

"I have a lifetime's worth of experience," he said.

After starting out as a teenager working as a lifeguard at pools in Michigan, Carter worked at a large waterpark in Texas for a few years. He moved back to Michigan in the early 1980s and felt the only thing he was good at was lifeguarding.

He makes most of his money testifying at trials involving drowning deaths and also owns a small company that trains guards. He started collecting data on drownings in 1986 to improve his own training. Carter wanted to see if there were a pattern in why people drown. If there were a pattern, he surmised, maybe there would be a better way to train guards and save lives.



Fred Carter looks on during lifeguard training at Thelma Spencer Park in Rochester Hills. [To purchase a copy of this photo](#) -The Oakland Press/TIM THOMPSON

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### **Efforts pay off**

Oakland County, with more than 3,000 miles of shoreline and 450 named lakes, is a swimmer's paradise. Preventing drownings is on the minds of many in the county, especially law enforcement.

Sgt. Dan Toth of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office Marine Division said that, like Carter, he grew up in Oakland County and knew of people who drowned.

"We're both interested in actual data, analyzing it so you can take it and use it to prevent drownings," Toth said. "He's passionate about it, as am I."

Toth said he has also studied drownings and compares notes with Carter from time to time. The two men agree that training has to be based on data - facts.

And, it's obviously paying off in Oakland County. Last year, there were four lake drownings and four pool drownings. Toth said that, 30 years ago, Oakland County had a few dozen drownings a year - as many as the entire state of Michigan averages now.

The number of lake drownings in the county in 2005 was the lowest number since records were started in 1946, Toth said.

So far in 2006, there has been one drowning.

"We know education has played a big role," Toth said. "All drownings are preventable."

### **Staying safe**

So why do people drown? Carter said it's any number of things. Inexperience in the water; going in to rescue a pet, child or an item; or accidentally slipping and falling in the water are all factors. About 35 percent to 40 percent of drownings in Michigan in the past 25 years were what Carter calls "voluntary entries." The rest are because of "stress entries" or "involuntary entries."

According to the Centers for Disease Control's Web site, about 4,000 people a year die of drowning. Most drownings occur in open bodies of water, but for children, most occur in swimming pools.

One way proved to prevent drownings, according to the CDC, is to use lifeguards. Swimming in a protected area can reduce the risk of drowning to one in 18 million.

Julie Sommers, community safety and aquatic manager for the American Red Cross Southeastern Michigan Chapter, said that, under the state's public swimming pool code, there are some bodies of water that must have lifeguards with specific training. The Red Cross' goal is to train those guards, she said. To be a lifeguard, a person must be at least 15 years old and a strong swimmer.

"We want someone who is comfortable in the water," Sommers said.

Lifeguards must go through 28 to 30 hours of training, learning water rescue, first aid, CPR and other skills. Guards must be recertified in CPR every year, and licenses are valid for three years, she said.

"Techniques change all the time," she said. "We want people to be confident in their skills."

B.J. Fisher, director of health and safety for the American Lifeguard Association in Virginia, said there is a lifeguard shortage in the United States. He said liability issues, expensive training and low pay have all contributed. And with many bodies of water, such as hotel swimming pools, lakes and rivers, already unguarded, Fisher worries about public safety issues with fewer guards on duty.

"It's terrible," he said.

Guards can keep the swimming public safer, officials say, by understanding why people drown. According to Carter, many believe that when people are drowning, they show signs of distress such as splashing, waving their arms or calling for help. However, Carter said, most people - especially children - drown without making a sound. It also happens very fast. Most children, he said, drown in water that just covers their heads.

One of Carter's findings led to his missing child method. Under the method, Carter trains his guards to assume the child is in the water. And he also trains guards not to wait to be approached. When an anxious-looking parent is spotted, Carter said guards are trained to approach the parent to ask what's wrong.

Using that method and his height theory, the life of a little boy was saved.

"To my knowledge, that had never been done before in this country," he said. "Nonswimming young children usually drown at their height. So, that's where we send the guards."

In addition to lifeguards, people can prevent drownings, Carter said, by teaching everyone to swim at an early age. Also, swimming only in the presence of lifeguards is a key factor. Drownings are like the sinking of the Titanic: A series of unfortunate events often combine to create a tragedy.

"If you look at these past drownings, you can teach a lifeguard to look for certain things and act accordingly," Carter said. "I'm trying to widen the window of opportunity to save someone."

With summer kicking into full swing, local officials are hoping boaters and swimmers make educated choices before heading to the beach or the pool. Sometimes, it's as easy as abstaining from alcohol, closely watching small children and knowing how to swim that prevent drownings.

