

Commit to Lifeguard In-service Training

Lifeguards need comprehensive and ongoing practice to maintain readiness, so in-service training must be mandatory. Author Stephen King said, “There’s no harm in hoping for the best as long as you’re prepared for the worst.” In-service training helps prepare lifeguards to be their best when the worst happens. Consider the following when planning in-service training.



- **Mark the calendar** – Create an in-service training schedule showing meeting dates for the entire year. Provide a copy to every lifeguard.
- **Mandatory monthly training** – Regardless of how busy the aquatics facility gets, training should be required and conducted monthly. Keep records including attendance, topics or activities covered, date and time, names and signatures of participants, also noting suggested improvements. Plan make-up sessions for anyone who missed the scheduled training.
- **Back to basics** – Revisiting the basics is a good idea. Discuss topics such as preventive lifeguarding surveillance, defined zones of the aquatics facility, victim recognition, and the level of professionalism needed to be a lifeguard.
- **Advanced rescues** – After covering the basics, examine the more challenging skills. Allow for extra time to thoroughly teach, analyze and critique all lifeguards. Make sure deep-water rescues and spinal injuries are on that list. Offer positive feedback and encouragement, as well as constructive criticism where appropriate.
- **Increased heart rate and adrenaline** – When adrenaline and heart rate go up, proper lifeguard skills go down. Lifeguards must train under stress and anxiety to deliver life-saving protocols while under stress and anxiety.
- **Put cellphones away** – Cellphones, smartwatches, and other electronic devices are unnecessary distractions for a lifeguard. These things must be stored before starting a shift.
- **Monthly CPR refresh** – Lifeguards should be recertified in CPR every other year, and maybe more often depending on regulation or the guidelines of the aquatics facility. However, it should be part of standard monthly training.
- **AED training** – Staff should know how to use the AED (automated external defibrillator). Using an AED trainer (a mock AED only used for training purposes) helps lifeguards perform better in emergencies. Consider real-life scenarios and practice this skill regularly.
- **Emergency Action Plan preparedness** – Have an EAP (Emergency Action Plan) the entire lifeguard team can follow. Going through the motions repeatedly increases success during real-life emergencies. Lifeguards should receive emergency response training monthly, specific to the facility. Lifeguards and other aquatics safety team members should regularly practice the emergency action plan.
- **Endurance and speed** – Lifeguards need to be in good physical condition to perform life-saving protocols while under stress. Performance isn’t just about skills; it’s also about fitness. Have lifeguards complete endurance swims to ensure they can meet the demand of rigorous swimming in the event of an emergency. And because time is of the essence, add speed to the fitness evaluation.
- **Think outside the pool** – Make training fun. Create unique challenges such as relay races with skills training built-in, even setting up an obstacle course in the water.
- **Scanning** – One of the most critical lifeguarding skills to learn is scanning. Good scanning skills stop minor problems from becoming major ones.
- **Rule enforcement** – Your pool, your rules. Make them as strict as you want, but ensure the facility provides support so lifeguards feel comfortable enforcing the rules. Be fair and consistent. Consider training lifeguards in conflict resolution and assertiveness.
- **Know your lifeguards** – Understand each lifeguards’ abilities to handle an emergency with professionalism,

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confidence, and skill. Be sure lifeguards are ready physically, mentally, and emotionally to serve in this role. Thoroughly document when a lifeguard has failed an exercise, a skill-based scenario, a rescue, or other training. Identify whether more training is needed or if remediation or dismissal from lifeguard duties is necessary.

- **Scenario-based training** – Design lifeguard training with all possible scenarios in mind. Outline protocols for the appropriate professional response. Have lifeguards work on their technique in a hands-on, classroom environment. Encourage collaboration and full participation! Have lifeguards create their own situations for others to perform.
- **Motivation** – The lifeguards on staff may be naturally competitive. Take advantage of this by using competition as motivation during training. Break up the team forcing individuals to interact with other lifeguards they don't know. Competition builds excellence, and fostering friendly competition is a great way to keep lifeguards engaged with the training.
- **Natural leaders** – Ask each lifeguard to lead a single training session. Empowering them to share their knowledge is a great way to assert the importance of having a proper understanding of lifeguard skills. Spotlighting the skills of trained staff provides less seasoned lifeguards with a trusted resource for information. Senior members can give instructions, correct behaviors, and identify skill improvements.
- **EMS and fire department training** – An excellent in-service training is cross-training with local first responders. The team gets a proper understanding of what these professionals do during an emergency, allowing them to ask questions. The fire department or local EMS should be familiar with the facility, personnel, and protocols and customize the visit around that.
- **Recognition and awards** – Giving staff recognition for their skills achievement or outstanding performance is an effective motivator. Not every aspect of a lifeguard's in-service training needs to focus on the job. It can be about fun too. After all, enjoyment and happiness are important keys to retaining staff. Call out achievements or milestones by recognizing individuals in front of a group. Even sharing a silly award is a great incentive.

Reasons why creativity is key when running in-service training programs:

1. Creative in-services mean higher lifeguard attendance, which means better skills development.
2. Lifeguard training can be tedious and repetitious. Creative teaching methods are more engaging, ensuring participants get more out of the session vs. going through the motions.
3. Changing the syllabus to highlight new scenarios or different protocols to practice is a creative way to keep training interesting. Small changes go a long way to building out a lifeguard's skill set.
4. Training should be fun for everyone. The more fun the instructor and staff have together, the more everyone can bond over learning.

All these reasons add up to more effective, beneficial in-service training. The goal is to help ensure that lifeguards are prepared to recognize, respond, rescue, and resuscitate a swimmer at a moment's notice. Remember Stephen King? "There's no harm in hoping for the best as long as you're prepared for the worst." While much of what takes place during an in-service is just communication and skills development, a lifeguard sits alone on the stand. There's no time to think; they must act on what they've retained in their muscle memory and trust the protocol.

Improving how a facility conducts in-services ensures lifeguard staff continue to learn and grow. And it's essential for making sure safety is the highest goal.