

# Lifeguard or swim team coach? They should not be both.

By Lisa Knapton

When the scorching heat of summer hits, for many people, the community swimming pool is the place to be. Though swimming pools do not generate a lot of revenue, community members love them and the demand for them is growing. Many WCIA members own and/or operate swimming pools offering popular recreational pool programs including but not limited to swimming lessons, water aerobics and special events. Another reason community swimming pools are so popular is that they facilitate competitive swimming practices and competitions.

Competitive swim teams are generally sponsored by schools, non-profits and sometimes even WCIA members sponsor swim teams. WCIA does not receive many claims surrounding swimming pools and their use, but when claims do arise in this area, they are typically a sizeable exposure to the member and the membership as a whole, in terms of severity.

Over time, nationwide, there have been several instances of swim team participants drowning during swim team practice sessions and there has been a common denominator identified in many of these drownings; the lack of a separate, certified lifeguard dedicated solely to the provision of constant surveillance of the pool during practice. Instead, many swim teams place the responsibility for lifeguarding on the swim team coach while he or she is coaching the team.

This is not a newly emerging issue, either. As far back as 1983, the American Red Cross Lifeguarding textbook stated “the facility should provide separate lifeguard supervision for additional safety during these activities. One person cannot safely perform the duties of a lifeguard and coach or instructor.” All five major lifeguard training providers teach lifeguard students that their sole responsibility is providing a constant and dedicated watch of the entire pool and have no distractions. This best practice standard should not only be followed during practice sessions but also during competitions. It is possible for even a strong, competitive swimmer to require help should a medical problem arise.

The practice of using a dedicated lifeguard instead of swimming instructors during group swimming lessons is even more critical since many of the participants are just learning how to swim and are at a higher risk due to their lack of swimming experience.

Washington State exempts lifeguard requirements when a swim coach or instructor is present, however, from a risk management perspective, the best approach is to have a dedicated lifeguard as well as the coach or instructor present at all swim team practices, competitions and swimming lessons. This should also be a written requirement in use agreements with other organizations using member swimming pools for those purposes.

For additional risk management advice regarding swimming pools or to request review of a draft swim team use agreement, please contact your WCIA Risk Management Representative.