

Every 30 minutes

Frequent assessments can lead to more vigilant lifeguards

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On a recent road trip, a restroom sign in a small-town fast-food restaurant caught my eye. It read, “Management Monitors this Facility Every 30 Minutes.”

I’ve seen similar signs that document hourly restroom checks, often verified by employee initials, but this sign really impressed me. Not only does the *manager* check the restrooms, but he or she checks them every half-hour.

The sign had large red letters on a white background; this restaurant clearly wanted its patrons to know that it valued cleanliness enough to have the manager regularly inspect the restrooms.

If a fast-food restaurant can devote time and effort to checking its restrooms, can’t we spend the same time and effort checking our lifeguards? Doing so would significantly increase safety, improve guard morale and provide a dose of good public relations.

Urgency versus importance

Many aquatics supervisors will claim that their workload won’t allow them to regularly check the performance of their guards. Unfortunately, we often spend our time on *urgent* matters rather than on *important* matters. Opening the doors on time, stocking



locker-room supplies, opening cash registers and backwashing filters are all urgent and necessary daily chores. While aquatics managers have many and varied responsibilities, none are more important than making sure lifeguards are on duty, properly dressed, positioned correctly and vigilantly scanning the water.

Because we certify, provide orientation for and constantly train our guards, we assume they’re doing a good job if they’re simply stationed poolside. But we all know that lifeguarding can be a boring and tedious job. Even the most conscientious and best-trained guards can occasionally waiver in their commitment to water safety.

Many facilities have head lifeguards supervise other guards. While this is a step in the right direction, sometimes head guards aren’t as effective as they should be because they’re too close in age and experience to the guards. Head guards can fall prey to the same distractions that affect other guards.

Administrative presence

It’s time to kick it up a notch and have management become more involved in guard supervision. Not only should we check these young people regularly, but we should also provide

constant encouragement and let them know that we care.

To get top management to monitor lifeguards, we first need to get management out of the office. Observation through a window or from the main entrance of the facility is not adequate for quality supervision. When a manager actually walks around the entire pool or park, both guards and guests detect the administrative presence.

Granted, it’s not realistic to expect the head of the organization or manager on duty to monitor each facility every 30 minutes. This goal, however, becomes more achievable if the supervisory responsibility is spread throughout the office through the creation of a safety committee. A safety committee can consist of office staff and parent volunteers; checking the guards doesn’t require a high degree of expertise, just a good pair of eyes and common sense. The idea is to have a mature adult make the rounds.

When monitoring guards, we should be good cops rather than bad cops — greet the guards pleasantly and provide positive comments and encouragement. A simple “on task/off task” checklist can help keep the reviews objective.

For agencies with numerous pools and little or no supervision on site, the 30-minute check could prove difficult. In these situations, monitoring the guards every hour, or six times a day, may make more sense. The elapsed time between supervisory visits is not as important as consistent, regular checks.

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This simple checklist can help monitor lifeguard behavior.

Lifeguard Behavior	On Task	Off Task
Positioned properly	✓	
Appropriately dressed	✓	
Attentive behavior	✓	
Systematic scanning	✓	
Social talking		✓