



ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT

Standard Operating Procedures - 6.13 Water Rescue



WATER RESCUE

Effective: August 15, 2025
Scheduled Review: August 15, 2028
Approved: Fire Chief Mike Kennedy

I. PURPOSE

To establish a standard and safe approach for conducting water rescue operations. The objective is to carry out a successful rescue operation, which poses the least amount of risk to the personnel involved. Due to volume of people who use the Huron River for recreation, this body of water routinely provides rescue incidents throughout the calendar year.

SOP 6.04 Ice Rescue shall be reference for operations where ice is present.

SOP 6.12 Boat Operations shall be referenced for water rescue involving use of the rescue boat.

II. DEFINITIONS

Water Rescue - Is defined as any incident that involves the removal of victim(s) from any body of water other than swimming pools.

Hot zone - Is defined as the area within fifteen (15) feet of the water's edge. All personnel within the "hot zone" shall wear personal flotation devices (PFD) and have such appropriately fastened / donned.

Flooding incidents - When water level overtops the banks in any part of a stream, river, canal, creek, lake or dam, or overland associated with drainage before entering a watercourse. This also includes flooded urban areas such as streets and bridge underpasses.

Swift water incident - The removal of person(s) from threat or harm from water that is moving faster than walking pace.

Water Rescue Awareness - Minimum capabilities of any responder who, in the course of their regular job duties, could be called to respond, or could be the first on scene of a water rescue incident. At this level, the responder is not considered a "rescuer". Competencies within this area include:

- Scene assessment and incident size-up
- Resource ordering
- Site control and scene management
- Hazard recognition and mitigation
- Talk victim to shore
- Reach out with a device to pull the victim to shore without entering the water.
- Throw a rope or flotation device to victim to pull them a shore.



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Water Rescue Operational - The responder at this level should be capable of hazard recognition, equipment use, techniques necessary to perform shore and boat based rescues, and participates in technical rescue under the supervision of technician level personnel. Competencies within this area include:

- Perform in-water rescues via boat.
- Management of thermal related stress.
- Victim packaging and transfer of information.
- Planning a response within the capabilities of available resources.
- Implement a planned response consistent with the organization's capabilities.

III. PERSONNEL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Personnel Floatation Devices - shall be worn by all crew boat crew members and boat operators.

Helmets – shall be worn when the river discharge ≥ 650 in cubic feet per second.

Dry Suits - Drysuits are typically used in colder water temperatures where exposure to cold water can lead to discomfort or hypothermia if not properly protected.

- Below water temp $\leq 60^{\circ}\text{F}$ or air temp $\leq 50^{\circ}\text{F}$: Drysuits are required. These are considered very cold conditions, and without proper insulation, the risk of hypothermia increases significantly.
- Below water temp $> 60^{\circ}\text{F}$ or air temp $> 50^{\circ}\text{F}$: Wetsuits are typically sufficient for most divers in these warmer temperatures. Drysuits are not usually necessary, but they might be used in specific situations where the crew member needs to minimize water exposure, e.g., contaminated water.

IV. RESPONSE

Single company response shall be sent to a drowning reported at a swimming pool.

For any reported person or animal water rescue incident in open water, e.g., lake, pond, or river a still alarm assignment shall respond.

V. INITIAL ACTIONS

1. Communicate visible patient(s) location(s) to responding units and maintain visual contact until the victim(s) is rescued.
2. Establish a unified incident command system incorporating the various agencies and departments, while performing/staffing appropriate ICS functions.
3. For non-visible victim(s), attempt to prevent witnesses from leaving the scene, keep them separated, and interview them for victim location information.
4. Begin triangulation of non-visible victim's last-seen location.
5. Utilize on scene resources, such as aerials, bridges, buildings, etc., to perform a visual survey of the search area.
6. All personnel operating in the hot zone will wear PFDs.



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VI. OPEN WATER ACTIONS

Strategic priorities for victims in the water or vessels in distress

1. Protection of rescuer
2. Protection of teammates
3. Protection of victim life

Water rescue risk assessment for rescuing victims, low to high.

Reach – Reach out with hand or other object (stick, pike pole etc.) to pull the victim out.

Throw - If the victim is too far out in the water to reach, rescuer(s) should attempt to throw the victim a throw bag or some piece of positive flotation, e.g., PFD, rescue ring. Downstream personnel should be in position during the actual rescue operation. If the victim is able to grab the throw bag, the rescuer can pendulum belay or haul the victim to the nearest bank. Care should be taken to assure the victim will be belayed to a safe downstream position.

Boat - Deployment of rescue boat to affect the water rescue.

Go - If it is not possible to conduct a boat rescue, consider putting a rescuer in the water to reach the victim. This is a very high-risk operation. Only rescuers with the proper training and equipment shall be allowed to enter the water. Prior to the rescuer actually proceeding into the water, he/she shall discuss the action plan, including specific tasks, objectives, hazards and alternate plans. The rescuer shall never be attached to a lifeline without the benefit of a quick release mechanism.

WCSO can initiate dive operations at their discretion, if the risk/benefit analysis indicates that there is a probability of rescuing a viable patient and there is a reliable last-seen location. Both the fire and police supervisor/commander should physically co-locate, if possible, and remain together until the incident transitions to a recovery

Recovery - Once the IC(s) determine that the incident has transitioned from a rescue to a recovery; the established AAFD unified incident command system should transition to the respective lead law enforcement agency of scene.

VII. KEY SAFETY POINTS OF FLOOD AND SWIFTWATER RESCUES

1. Always wear a personal flotation device (PFD).
2. Do not don turnout gear if operating within fifteen (15) feet of water's edge.
3. Always deploy upstream spotters above the location of rescue operations – ideally on both sides of the river.
4. The priorities at the scene are always self-rescue first, the rescue and security of fellow teammates second, and the victims last.
5. Always have a backup plan.
6. Always keep it simple.
7. Always use the right equipment.
8. Never put your feet down if swept away and swimming.
9. Never count on the victim to help in their own rescue.



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10. Never tie a rope around a rescuer.
11. Once the victim is contacted, never lose contact.
12. Given the choice between a fire helmet and no helmet, always go with no helmet.
13. Finally, always be proactive.

VIII. HOIST RESCUE – UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

In the event where shore rescue has failed, a request shall be made to the US Coast Guard. The US Coast Guard Air Station Detroit is located on the Selfridge Air National Guard base. Air Station Detroit is dispatched from the Ninth District Command Center 1-800-321-4400.

The USCG will not provide a standing agreement to do a hoist rescue. However, if the incident commander or other senior officer calls with a person trapped and no other options, there is a good chance they will come.

Radio communication can be made with the air crew via the following MPSCS talkgroups. These are in the Statewide E zone on all radios.

Air LZ 1

Air LZ 2

USCG Aviation 1

USCG Aviation 2