

**Travis County Emergency Services District No. 9**  
**Westlake Fire Department**  
**Standard Operating Guideline**

**Subject: Swift Water/ Water Rescue Response**

**Effective Date: February 01, 1999**

**Authorized By: Chief Paul Barker Revised Date: June 6, 2003**

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**I. Purpose**

To establish a guideline for TCESD#9 during Swift Water and Water operations. Swift water and water rescue are the responsibility of the Westlake Fire Dept., however, the WFD will request the assistance of the Austin Fire Department and/or Austin Emergency Medical Service, as needed.

**II. Policy**

All Westlake Fire Dept. personnel who are involved in water-related emergency calls will adhere to these policies and procedures in order to maintain a safe, consistent, and reliable operation.

- A. An Incident Command System and Command Post shall be established and announced over the radio. The standard green rotating beacon light should be used to mark the CP for other agencies.
- B. The IC shall evaluate the incident, determine the mode of operation (rescue or recovery) and if additional resources are needed.
- C. A Safety Officer that is knowledgeable in water rescue operations will be appointed.
- D. The WFD Accountability System will be used for all personnel and victims on the scene. A Personnel Accountability Report (PAR) will be called for prior to termination of the incident.
- E. All personnel on the scene and inside the Danger Zone of a water-related incident shall wear Personal Flotation Devices (PFD's), swiftwater helmet, and have with them a throw bag when within 15 feet of the water. (Exception – when the operation is at a swimming pool).
- F. Bunker gear will not be worn in the Danger Zone on water-related incidents.
- G. PFD's shall be applied to victims at the earliest opportunity.
- H. All personnel performing any water rescue should have strong swimming skills.

**III. Procedure**

**A. FOR ALL WATER RELATED INCIDENTS:**

- 1. Establishing Danger Zones with scene tape 15 feet from the waters edge and maintain scene safety for all personnel.
- 2. Size-up the scene using the following information:
  - Victim status and location
  - Water conditions
  - Best access for incoming units and the victim(s)

- Location of the Command Post.

The size-up shall be reviewed by the IC and updated every 5 to 8 minutes or as dictated by the conditions.

3. Personnel on the scene should attempt to locate any witnesses who can help determine the location of the victim(s) and the details of their circumstance.
4. The IC shall stay alert of changing weather and water conditions and their impact on the incident. This information should be communicated to all personnel on the scene.
5. The IC shall establish an Incident Action Plan as soon as possible. The Action Plan is based on current and predicted circumstances and identifies the four "W's".
  - What is going to be done,
  - When it's going to be done
  - Who will be doing it
  - Watch out situations

The Action Plan should be reviewed with all personnel on the scene so all are aware of the Plan.

6. Medical treatment and transportation teams should be on scene during all water related incidents. Prompt evaluation of victims and rescuers as they come out of the water is a priority. Hypothermia and trauma injuries can be expected for anyone subjected to extended exposure to swift water or floodwater.

**B. RESCUE PROCEDURE** - If the incident is in the rescue mode, the following considerations should be reviewed before a rescue attempt is made:

1. IC will develop an Action Plan and meet with all personnel involved.
2. All necessary equipment will be laid out and checked. Backup systems will be used if possible.
3. The Action Plan will include focusing strongly on retrieval of any personnel who are committed to "Go Row or Tow" techniques.

The following procedure will be used to determine which rescue technique to use to access victims:

- **TALK** the victim into self-rescue. If possible, the victim can be talked into swimming to shore or assisting the rescuers with his/her own rescue. If a victim is stranded in the middle of a flash flood, this will not be prudent.
- **REACH** - If possible, the rescuer should extend his/her hand or some other object, such as a pike pole, to remove the victim from the water.
- **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 (i.e., PFD, rescue ring). Personnel should be positioned downstream 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.

First responders who have had a basic level of rescue training should be able to conduct the above rescues without the help of a Technical Rescue Team (T.R.T) from AFD or A/TC EMS.

If the victim cannot be reached by either of these methods, the IC should consider stopping the operation until additional resources arrive. If the operation becomes a high risk one, the IC may want to request AFD to assist with the operations of the incident. The IC should review the Action Plan with the AFD IC. At all times, the Westlake IC will be responsible for the incident and remain the Incident Commander.

- **ROW** - If it is determined that a boat based operation shall be run, Command should assign the operations to the mutual aid department supplying the boat and assign personnel to assist in establishing an anchor for a rope system or other rigging that is needed. All personnel will be made aware of the Action Plan. The TRT will be responsible for seeing that the rope system used for the boat based operation is built safe and proper. A minimum of 2 point tether should be built for swift-water operations. PPE for victim(s) should be considered when developing the Action Plan.
- **GO** - If it is not possible to ROW (boat base operation) to the victim, the IC should 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 should 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 and objectives, hazards and alternate plans. The rescuer shall never be attached to a life line without the benefit of a quick-release mechanism. The rescuer should take, as a minimum, a PDF to the victim. Members shall not perform breath-hold surface dives in an attempt to locate a victim beneath the surface of the water.
- **HELO** - At times the use of a helicopter is the most reasonable method of reaching the victim. Helicopter operations over water are considered high risk operations. The IC should consult with A/TC EMS District Commander and the pilot to determine the risk/benefit of the use of a helicopter. If the pilot says he/she can do the operation, the IC should consider it. The IC should turn the Operations of the air rescue over to the A/TC EMS District Commander and make that part of the Action Plan. The IC will have the final say on the use of a helicopter for water rescue operations. A/TC EMS District Commander and the pilot will have the final say on how the helicopter will be used.

#### 4. ASSESSING THE VICTIM

Once the rescuer(s) have reached the victim, they should do an immediate assessment of the victim; a quick assessment of the ABC's and the exact method of entrapment. If the victim is conscious, the rescuer

should determine if the victim can assist in his/her own rescue. If the victim is unconscious, the rescue must be quick. If the victim can assist in his/her own rescue, the rescuers should proceed with the rescue Action Plan. The victim should be brought to shore as soon as possible.

### **C. RECOVERY**

If the IC has determined the incident is a recovery operation, the AFD Dive Team should be requested.

### **D. TREATMENT**

As soon as the victim is brought to safety, an assessment should be done by ALS personnel. Treatment shall be administered as per local protocol. If necessary, the victim shall be transported to the appropriate facility. All persons exposed to swift water, floodwater, or contaminated water shall be rinsed off (decontaminated) after exiting the water.

### **E. INCIDENTS ON LAKE AUSTIN (STILLWATER)**

1. The first arriving unit should make contact with all witnesses and do everything possible to determine the exact spot where the victim went down by having the witnesses stand in the exact spot they were in when they observed the victim go under. Use triangulation of sighting if there is more than one witness.
2. The IC should contact AFD's Dive Rescue Team if they have not already been notified.
3. Lake Austin is in the City of Austin's jurisdiction. The IC will turn the incident over to AFD when they arrive on the scene and all relative information about the incident will be given to AFD's IC.

### **D. SWIFTWATER**

1. When positioning apparatus, always be alert to changing conditions. Look for the possibility of the water rising up to POV's and department vehicles.
2. Positioning personnel upstream (as lookouts) and downstream (with throw bags) should be done as soon as possible.
3. When planning a rescue attempt that involves wading evaluate four factors:
  - Water depth (depth affects the buoyancy of the rescuer)
  - Water speed (as water speed increases slightly, forces against rescuers increase greatly)
  - Creek bottom condition (slippery creek bottoms reduce the footing of rescuers)
  - Number of rescuers (more rescuers working together will be safer than one or two rescuers)