

Case Study: City of Chicago

Following yet another drowning death, this time of a 13-year-old girl caught in a structural current, a witness to the drowning fought for change. Water Safety Task Force Metro Chicago was formed in 2018 to address the high drowning rates in Lake Michigan and in other local water sources - both at home and in nature. The Task Force coordinates multiple agencies to create effective policy and programming that establishes a culture of water safety and sets a standard for drowning prevention in the Great Lakes region.

As soon as the Task Force was formed, members identified the lack of data as a barrier to developing effective programs and policies. No single agency had comprehensive drowning data. There was virtually no sharing of data between organizations and agencies. Given the lack of drowning, there was no clear understanding of the current situation. An early priority became consolidating and analyzing data for fatal and nonfatal drownings by race/ethnicity, age, gender, and home town to assess the number and cost of drownings in the region. As data gathering protocols are developed and data is gathered, targeted initiatives have been put into place.

Action Taken:

- Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project has been collecting data on Great Lakes-related drowning incidents since 2010¹. The information on their website is the most comprehensive data source for the area.
- Lurie Children's Hospital developed a distressed swimmer and rescue data collection tool for then public, pool, and lakefront agencies, and first responders. The tool is currently being piloted.
- Drowning data was requested, and received, from the Illinois Syndromic Surveillance system.
- Dupage County Health Department was awarded two consecutive federal grants to create implement Protect Swimmers 10 million (10M). The agency's aim is to prevent drowning and suction entrapment through training of code enforcement, training of health and building department regulators, and through a public awareness and education program.
- Lurie Children's Hospital incorporated questions about water safety and drowning in the Voices of Chicago poll. The responses have provided valuable information about attitudes and abilities around water safety and was used, in part, to engage the media about drowning in the Chicago Metro area, garnering 24 media placements in print, social and broadcast media with 95 million impressions.

¹ <https://glsrp.org/statistics/>

- Chicago Police Department identified that drowning falls under “missing persons” in the national database from the Uniform Crime Reporting Program and has recommended change at the national level.
- Chicago Public Schools hired a dedicated Aquatic Safety Manager, certified all PE teachers who teach aquatics in American Red Cross Lifeguarding training, added semester-long lifeguarding classes, and is actively working to expand the number of female lifeguard candidates. They are working with Lurie Children’s Hospital to extend key lifeguard training to include Emergency Medical Response certification.
- Lurie Children’s Hospital held Focus Groups to assess community engagement and attitudes about drowning and water safety, with an emphasis on assessing diversity and equity. Groups were convened on the South, West, and North Sides.
- Chicago Park District is improving lakefront safety, including location marker signs to assist in communication with 911 through the Chicago Office of Emergency Management, the installation of over 100 rescue stations with life rings, and installation of consistent rip current signage, in partnership with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The Park District is also providing, and evaluating public water safety education programs. 93 events were held in Summer 2021, the first year.
- Illinois Department of Public Health database was accessed by Lurie Children’s Hospital to map Cook County pools. Analysis is identifying ‘swim deserts’, and determining if, and how, inequities in access to pools exists, and how such inequities link to drowning rates.
- National Weather Service collects Great Lakes drowning statistics to aid in rip current prediction. Statistics and data about deadly Lake Michigan rip currents led to Chicago’s inclusion in the first documentary on rip currents in the U.S., which has been broadcast on PBS in Chicago, providing life-saving information to the public².
- Chicago Fire Department equipped all land and water vehicles with water rescue equipment and is developing a public education campaign to inform the public on how to report accurately the nature and location of a water emergency.

² <https://www.ripcurrentrescue.com/>