



World Water Safety

INTERNATIONAL LIFE SAVING FEDERATION

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LIFESAVING POSITION STATEMENT - LPS 08

MINIMUM AGE FOR TRAINING AS A LIFEGUARD

BACKGROUND

Lifeguards are generally responsible for observation of a beach or recreational water area to anticipate problems and identify an emergency quickly, carry out rescues, give immediate first aid, communicate with swimmers and recreational water users, enforce regulations where appropriate, promote awareness of specific and general hazards and report incidents (WHO 2003).

Setting an appropriate minimum age is critical to the safety of lifeguards, their co-workers, and the public they serve.

Since 1980, the USLA has maintained the position that lifeguards serving natural environments, whether surf or non-surf beaches, should be *at least* 16 years of age. In 1980, the USLA co-sponsored a national conference, the final report of which became the *Guidelines for Establishing Open-Water Recreational Beach Standards*. This was a consensus-based process incorporating existing research and expertise. Participants included representatives of the American Camping Association, American Red Cross (national office), National Safety Council, YMCA of the USA, Council for National Cooperation in Aquatics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Coast Guard, Boy Scouts of America, the National Park Service, several major municipal lifeguard agencies from throughout the USA, and several medical experts.

This group agreed by consensus as follows: “The minimum age for persons employed as lifeguards at open-water recreational beaches should be 16 years.” The rationale listed in the report was as follows:

“Lifeguards are hired to assume the responsibility for the protections and rescue of people from a potentially dangerous environment. They should be well trained, have a high level of skills, be willing to accept a significant amount of responsibility and, at times, risk their lives. Sixteen years old appears to be the minimum age at which individuals have the necessary maturity and judgment to assume such responsibilities. Usually, younger lifeguards are initially posted on

the less demanding sites until they understand the physical and cultural parameters of the guarded areas. Age 16 may be too young in certain instances, such as public beaches near large cities that often have constant and sometimes violent social incidents. Age 16 may also be too young for beaches that have high-energy regimes and at which there is a need for on-the-job training to recognise and understand the complex environmental processes that could endanger both the casual swimmer and the lifeguard.”

Interventions which lifeguards are expected to make, especially those that involve rescue, people missing in the water, or resuscitation, create maximum stress on the responsible lifeguards. This stress can markedly amplify the existing danger to the lifeguard, particularly as adrenaline impacts response. Rarely is any emergency a “textbook” case, so improvisation under stress is commonly required. This is not unusual in public safety employment, and anecdotal information suggests that for most public safety jobs the minimum age ranges from 18 and 21.

Psychological impact and injury is also a continual reality in public safety employment. The March 2007 issue of Aquatics International Magazine contains an article subtitled, “Should we make our youngest lifeguards come face to face with death?” In this the author reports on three lifeguards involved in situations involving fatalities. Two were still experiencing nightmares five years after a death at their pool. All had left aquatics (and lifeguarding) after the incidents.

An issue commonly addressed in lifeguard training for all environments, both pool and open water, is the panicked victim who grabs the lifeguard, submerging both. In fact, many drowning deaths nationwide each year involve would-be rescuers who attempted to assist a person in distress, not just the original victim. In such cases, maturity is an essential element to helping the lifeguard avoid panic.

Lifeguards sometimes work alone and must therefore think and act independently, but backup systems typically involve responses of several lifeguards. A workforce at a given worksite may involve youth lifeguards who must depend on others of a similar level of age and maturity to assist them.

Clearly, there is no magic age level that is appropriate to every person with respect to their ability to carry out emergency service work. It can reasonably be stated that some people over the age of 18 may perform in an immature manner while under stress in a life-threatening emergency, and that a particularly emotionally mature 16-year-old may handle the same situation with aplomb. However, it is impossible to construct objective, real life and death emergency situations under which to test prospective workers. Thus, reasonable benchmarks must be set based on existing research and expert consensus.

There are some international lifesaving organisations who believe people under the age of 16 should not be permitted to work as lifeguards at natural water and swimming pool environments. There also those who suggest 16 years is not old enough for a beach lifeguard and, indeed, many lifeguard employers set higher minimum age requirements.

During 2007 the ILS Education Committee conducted a survey of ILS members to determine the age as a pre-requisite for ILS Certificates. The survey included minimum age for training and certification / plus qualifying statements. The survey found that 50% of respondents had a minimum age of 16 years (n = 25) and none with an age under 16 years. As a consequence, the Education Committee in September 2007 resolved the following recommendations.

STATEMENT

1. That ILS recommends the minimum age at which someone can be qualified as a lifeguard is 16 years.
2. This minimum age is a training requirement and is not a consideration for employment.
3. The ILS certificate guidelines are considered foundation training and that additional orientation, venue specific and local environmental and regulatory familiarisation/training should be undertaken.

REFERENCES

1. (ILS Age Survey 2007), *“Recommended Minimum Age for ILS International Lifesaving and Lifeguarding Certificates”*, International Life Saving Federation, Leuven, Belgium, September 2007
2. International Labour Organisation, www.ilo.org
3. (USLA 1980), *Guidelines for Establishing Open-Water Recreational Beach Standards*, United States Lifesaving Association, 1980
4. (USLA 2007), *Proposed Rules for Child Labor – Lifeguard Age*, Correspondence to Officer of Enforcement Policy, U.S. Department of Labour, United States Lifesaving Association, May 2007
5. (WHO 2003), *Guidelines for safe recreational water environments Volume 1, Coastal and fresh waters*, World Health Organisation. Geneva, 2003

Position Statement approved by the ILS Board of Directors on 3 February 2009.