

The State of “State” Guards

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There are some real contrasts between the California State Lifeguard Service and other California lifeguard agencies. The most notable one is that all permanent career State Lifeguards are peace officers. This is an anomaly in lifeguarding that has advantages and disadvantages. Law enforcement problems can be taken care within the agency without calling for back-up from the outside. State lifeguards provide what management calls “more bang for your buck.” Theoretically they can do it all. They can make all sorts of aquatic rescues, lead & supervise the seasonal lifeguard staff, do an interpretive program, and, later in the day, arrest a drunk on the beach, or take someone into custody in the campgrounds for domestic violence. And the theory holds true; as long as there are adequate seasonal lifeguards on duty to focus on the pure aquatic function.

One of the downsides is that State Lifeguards that would prefer not to strap on the gun and want to focus on traditional lifeguard duties are relegated to seasonal status. There are few benefits at this level. A recent comparison of State Lifeguards to other California agencies indicates that the ratio of permanent to seasonal lifeguards is much less than unofficial “standards in the industry.” Only recently has upper management reluctantly looked at the possibility of allowing permanent non-peace officer lifeguards in areas where the aquatic need outweighs the aquatic/law enforcement need. This is not a simple issue. Many rank and file peace officer lifeguards are not friendly to the idea of “diluting” their ranks. It is a difficult issue. Will State Parks find the balance? We shall see.

But let us return to the theory. Once again, having adequate numbers of seasonal lifeguards to focus on pure aquatics has made this arrangement viable in the past. However, as rural State Parks become “citified” the seasonal lifeguard support has not grown to meet the need. To me this is most evident in San Diego County. Since I have worked these State beaches since 1966, I have seen incredible growth here. And it is not slowing down. What was adequate for lifeguard services just 10 years ago is now not nearly enough. Add things like year ‘round school, the advent of the bodyboard too often used without fins, much improved wetsuits, more and more people learning how to surf, relatively warm year ‘round water, and you have a considerable increase in aquatic activity. State seasonal lifeguards budgets have not kept pace with this public safety need. As a result, the theory is facing challenge.

The State Lifeguards in San Diego have clear indicators for adequacy of service. We are contiguous with Oceanside City, Encinitas, Solana Beach, Del Mar, the City of San Diego, Coronado, and Imperial Beach. I can’t think of another lifeguard agency with so many neighbors. These local communities value the beach lifestyle and recognize the importance of lifeguard services. They have kept good pace with increases in beach usage. In our case, it is relatively difficult to convince management that lives and recreates in Sacramento that added support is needed for urban beach parks in Southern California. Times are tough. Who would have predicted the energy crunch, a downturn in the economy, and the expenses for added security since 9/11? Well, they are a reality and state agencies are faced with non-negotiable budget reductions. Lifeguards are not exempt from these cuts.

Shifting to a broader perspective, State lifeguards in Central and Northern California are on the world’s frontiers of ocean lifeguarding. Small cadres of permanent and/or seasonal lifeguards are up against a cold, harsh, merciless ocean along a rugged rocky coastline. In places like Pismo Beach, Santa Cruz, Monarch Bay near San Francisco, and Russian River they are regularly put in situations wherein they have to consider their survivability before effecting rescues. State Lifeguards are on the leading edge in this dangerous frontier of lifeguarding. When was the last time you asked yourself before starting a

rescue if you believed you would live through it? These people are true unsung heroes on lifeguarding's frontier.

I wanted to believe that when Governor Davis emptied public safety during the current budget crisis, it would include lifeguards. State lifeguards are public safety on two counts; aquatic and law enforcement. Nevertheless, that exemption is apparently not forthcoming. Although we are not funded comparably to other agencies we still manage to lifeguard the frontier and some of the most challenging beaches in Southern California. On any given day our seasonal lifeguard staff compares in quality with the lifeguards of any other agency. They are well trained, dedicated, public safety professionals who truly take their jobs seriously. We just are not there in numbers compared to other agencies in what used to be called the "off season." In Southern California there is no longer an off season!

So what is the State of the State Lifeguard Service? We are seemingly at the crossroads again, but, from the frontiers of lifeguarding to the beleaguered Southern California beaches, we are hanging in there, brother, hoping to survive the latest budget dive.