

GET KIDS PADDLING RESPONSE TO THE JEREMIAH PERRY DROWNING + NICHOLAS MILLS TRIAL

We, at Get Kids Paddling, are profoundly saddened by the tragic death of Jeremiah Perry. We feel that the circumstances around his devastating death continue to be improperly addressed. We wish to make the following statement to help reduce subsequent tragedies while preserving the benefits of outdoor pursuits.

A. WHAT WAS THE MOST RELEVANT FACTOR IN THIS DROWNING?

Tragically, a non-swimmer went swimming without a PFD. This is never a good idea. Even competent swimmers in unfamiliar waters can encounter difficulties.

B. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS TO ADDRESS FUTURE DROWNING RISKS

1. Mandate the wearing of a PFD as a primary policy above any other swimming measure. Some paddling organizations have a mandatory policy of wearing PFDs whenever participants are: i) on water, ii) in water, or iii) in proximity to water and in danger of falling in. Data clearly demonstrates that a key factor in preventing drowning in natural water bodies is to wear a PFD. By implementing this policy, the tragic death of Jeremiah Perry could have been avoided. A policy change from an over-reliance on lifeguards to one mandating the wearing of PFDs is required.

2. Mandate water site management in any of the 3 water situations listed above. The certified trip leader, who is in charge, must reduce risk and maintain the integrity of the area through thorough site assessment and ensure that participants are aware of precautions and locations where PFDs and other risk reduction mitigations (e.g. a buddy system) are necessary.

3. Ensure that the person in charge of water site management is appropriately certified. This certification must include training in trip-leading scenarios which may be encountered at any water site, such as: fluctuating water conditions, river/lake rescues, dark water and bottom variations, rocky shore obstacles, reading water, and understanding changing weather conditions. Some of this training is outside of the current parameters of lifeguards, but lies entirely within the scope of certified canoe/kayak trip leaders.

C. RISK MANAGEMENT RESPONSES TO AVOID:

1. Do not ban or suspend excursions requiring students to be in or near water. Such a ban would only result in a loss of valuable outdoor experiences. The use of PFDs should ensure that all participants, regardless of ability or background, benefit from experiences which foster mental health resiliency and provide essential safety and life-skills training, while developing an appreciation for the natural environment. Rather than banning or suspending these experiences, we must prioritize the need for a significant change in water site management policy.

2. Do not institute new or additional swim tests. Mandatory use of PFDs reduces the need for swim tests. Leaders need to verify that all participants (including non-swimmers) wearing properly fitting PFDs, can comfortably and confidently maneuver in the water. Preventing non-swimmers from attending only serves to further restrict outdoor pursuits from non-swimmers or marginalized groups who might need it most. Adding additional swim tests (without PFDs) at water sites on trip exposes the students to additional unnecessary risks - including drowning and hypothermia.

3. Do not ask for more lifeguards on trips. The presence of lifeguards on a trip might instill a false sense of security leading to complacency among trip participants *and leaders*, especially in water situations that are unfamiliar to the lifeguard. Canoe/kayak trip leaders are trained to safely react to and mitigate far more variables (such as dark water paddling/dark water rescue/PFD maneuvering scenarios) than lifeguards trained in pools.

D. SUMMARY

A PFD, properly worn by participants, and a certified trip leader, who understands the risks and informs those participants and their buddies of the safety parameters, are safer solutions to this preventable problem. This would correct the imperfect requirement of a lifeguard's presence that is currently used as policy. Statistics have borne this out, and will continue to do so if significant changes in policy are not made. Annually, the major contributing factors to a large percentage of preventable drownings are: the lack of a PFD, being alone in water, or being inadequately equipped in cold water conditions. Certified canoe/kayak trip leaders can confidently address these variables with participants prior to and during trips. Policy decisions driven by statistics and good risk management practices are urgently needed - not decisions driven by poorly informed perceptions, or ultimate risk avoidance following tragic events.

(Note: See <https://www.lifesavingsociety.com/drowning-research/drowning-reports.aspx> for the most current national and provincial statistics by the Lifesaving Society.)