



# ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT

## Standard Operating Procedures - 6.04 Water Rescue



### WATER RESCUE

---

Effective: September 12, 2024  
Scheduled Review: September 12, 2027  
Approved: Fire Chief Mike Kennedy

---

#### I. PURPOSE

To establish a standard and safe approach for conducting water rescue operations. The objective is to carry out a successful rescue operation, which poses the least amount of risk to the personnel involved. Due to volume of people who use the Huron River for recreation, this body of water routinely provides rescue incidents throughout the calendar year.

#### II. DEFINITIONS

Water Rescue - Is defined as any incident that involves the removal of victim(s) from any body of water other than swimming pools.

Hot zone - Is defined as the area within fifteen (15) feet of the water's edge. All personnel within the "hot zone" shall wear personal flotation devices (PFD) and have such appropriately fastened / donned.

Flooding incidents - When water level overtops the banks in any part of a stream, river, canal, creek, lake or dam, or overland associated with drainage before entering a watercourse. This also includes flooded urban areas such as streets and bridge underpasses.

Swift water incident - The removal of person(s) from threat or harm from water that is moving faster than walking pace.

Water Rescue Awareness - Minimum capabilities of any responder who, in the course of their regular job duties, could be called to respond, or could be the first on scene of a water rescue incident. At this level, the responder is not considered a "rescuer". Competencies within this area include:

- Scene assessment and incident size-up
- Resource ordering
- Site control and scene management
- Hazard recognition and mitigation
- Talk victim to shore
- Reach out with a device to pull the victim to shore without entering the water.
- Throw a rope or flotation device to victim to pull them a shore.

Water Rescue Operational - The responder at this level should be capable of hazard recognition, equipment use, techniques necessary to perform shore and boat based rescues, and participates in technical rescue under the supervision of technician level personnel. Competencies within this area include:

- Perform in-water rescues via boat.
- Management of thermal related stress.
- Victim packaging and transfer of information.
- Planning a response within the capabilities of available resources.
- Implement a planned response consistent with the organization's capabilities.



# ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT

## Standard Operating Procedures - 6.04 Water Rescue



Water Rescue Technician - A rescuer capable of hazard recognition, equipment use, and techniques to coordinate, perform, and supervise a technical rescue. This may involve search, rescue, and / or recovery operations.

### III. RESPONSE

In the event of a reported water rescue or drowning:

1. Single company response shall be sent to a drowning reported at a swimming pool.
2. For any reported person or animal ice / water rescue incident in open water, e.g., lake, pond, or river.
  - i. Still alarm assignment shall respond.
  - ii. One person from Station 5 or the nearest available unit, shall drive the water rescue vehicle and tow package to the nearest launch site closest to the reported water incident.
  - iii. Depending on dispatch information, the initial incident commander (IC) may notify the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office Dive Team (WCSO) and / or the Washtenaw County Swift Water Technical Rescue Team (WCSW) prior to arrival of resources.
3. Operations level water rescue involves shore-based or boat-based rescue. Operations personnel may enter the water within fifteen (15) feet of the shoreline to assist with launching the boat or docking of the boat. This is only be done in "standing" water conditions.
4. Technician level water rescue involves rescuers swimming in water to perform surface and subsurface rescues. Only personnel who are trained and equipped to operate at this level should attempt these actions.

### IV. INITIAL ACTIONS

1. Communicate visible patient(s) location(s) to responding units and maintain visual contact until the victim(s) is rescued.
2. Establish a unified incident command system incorporating the various agencies and departments, while performing/staffing appropriate ICS functions.
3. For non-visible victim(s), attempt to prevent witnesses from leaving the scene, keep them separated, and interview them for victim location information.
4. Begin triangulation of non-visible victim's last-seen location.
5. Utilize on scene resources, such as aerials, bridges, buildings, etc., to perform a visual survey of the search area.
6. All personnel operating in the hot zone will wear PFDs.

### V. WATERCRAFT OPERATIONS

1. Utilize appropriately secured PFDs, helmets, and thermal protection.
2. Maintain communication on the assigned incident channel.
3. Respond to the reported patient location and attempt a surface water rescue if appropriate.
4. Mark last-seen location; if patient is no longer visible.
5. Start a search pattern from the last-seen location.
6. Pick up WCSW or WCSO members and support rescue/dive operations as directed.



# ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT

## Standard Operating Procedures - 6.04 Water Rescue



### VI. OPEN WATER ACTIONS

Strategic priorities for victims in the water or vessels in distress

1. Protection of rescuer
2. Protection of teammates
3. Protection of victim life

Water rescue risk assessment for rescuing victims, low to high.

Reach – Reach out with hand or other object (stick, pike pole etc.) to pull the victim out.

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, e.g., PFD, rescue ring. Downstream personnel should be in position 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.

Boat – Deployment of AAFD rescue boat to affect the water rescue.

Go - If it is not possible to conduct a boat rescue, 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 shall 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, objectives, hazards and alternate plans. The rescuer shall never be attached to a lifeline without the benefit of a quick release mechanism.

WCSO can initiate dive operations at their discretion, if the risk/benefit analysis indicates that there is a probability of rescuing a viable patient and there is a reliable last-seen location. Both the fire and police supervisor/commander should physically co-locate, if possible, and remain together until the incident transitions to a recovery

Recovery - Once the IC(s) determine that the incident has transitioned from a rescue to a recovery; the established AAFD unified incident command system should transition to the respective lead law enforcement agency of scene.

### VII. ICE RESCUE ACTIONS

Each rescuer shall be dressed in an ice rescue suit. The rescuer is to be secured to the water rescue rope with a locking carabineer attached to the ice rescue suit on one end and the other end attached to a secure anchor point with a non-locking carabineer. A Stubai carabiner shall be attached to the water rescue rope, six (6) feet from the rescuer's chest. This equipment provides buoyancy, exposure protection and reduces the chance of injury to the rescuers. The ice rescue suit harness worn by the rescuer provides the rescuer with a lifeline as well as providing a proper method for the line tenders to pull the rescuer and victim to safety with the water rescue rope.



# ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT

## Standard Operating Procedures - 6.04 Water Rescue



Line tenders shall be equipped with warm clothing, gloves, boots, and hats. Each line tender shall wear a PFD and a pair of ice crampons. This will provide the line tender with buoyancy and stable footing on the ice.

Self-rescue - The first unit on the scene shall attempt to talk the victim into self-rescue. This method works well when the victim is close to shore, responsive and is not showing any signs of hypothermia.

Reach - If the victim is in early stages of hypothermia but is able to understand instructions and hold on, the following rescue methods may be used to retrieve the victim. This can be accomplished by: rescue pole, pike pole, or water rescue throw line (75 feet).

Go - If self-rescue or reach options are not feasible, then a rescue team shall have to go retrieve the victim using the following procedures:

1. When the rescuer places a hand on top of their head, that is the “okay” signal and the pull team shall start pulling. If during the pull the rescuer again places a hand on top of their head, the pull team shall cease immediately until the rescuer again signals okay by placing a hand on top of their head.
2. A second rescuer shall be dressed in the proper equipment and ready to respond in the event the primary rescuer has trouble.
3. If a victim goes beneath the ice cap, the rescuer shall not enter the hole where the victim was last seen.
4. The rescuer shall approach the holes and do a visual check for the victim.
5. If the victim is seen, a rescue attempt shall be made.
6. If the rescuer is unable to locate the victim, the rescuer shall exit the area.
7. An area of “safe ice” in the immediate area must be located so the WCSO divers can work in close proximity to the last known location of the victim.

WCSO can initiate dive operations at their discretion if the risk/benefit analysis indicates that there is a probability of rescuing a viable patient and there is a reliable last-seen location. Both the fire and police supervisor/commander should physically co-locate, if possible, and remain together until the incident transitions to a recovery.

Recovery - Once unified incident command determines the incident has transitioned from a rescue to a recovery, the established AAFD unified incident command system should transition to the respective lead law enforcement agency of scene.

### **VIII. KEY SAFETY POINTS OF FLOOD AND SWIFTWATER RESCUES**

1. Always wear a personal flotation device (PFD).
2. Do not don turnout gear if operating within fifteen (15) feet of water's edge.
3. Always deploy upstream spotters above the location of rescue operations – ideally on both sides of the river.
4. The priorities at the scene are always self-rescue first, the rescue and security of fellow teammates second, and the victims last.
5. Always have a backup plan.
6. Always keep it simple.
7. Always use the right equipment.
8. Never put your feet down if swept away and swimming.



# **ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT**

## **Standard Operating Procedures - 6.04 Water Rescue**



9. Never count on the victim to help in their own rescue.
10. Never tie a rope around a rescuer.
11. Once the victim is contacted, never lose contact.
12. Given the choice between a fire helmet and no helmet, always go with no helmet.
13. Finally, always be proactive.