Surf rescue emergency response system – A strategy to reduce coastal drowning deaths in New South Wales

Dean Storey[1]

Surf Life Saving NSW[1]

In an Australian first, Surf Life Saving New South Wales (SLSNSW) has implemented a 24/7/365 Surf Rescue Emergency Response System aimed at enhancing the response of surf rescue resources to coastal emergencies that occur at unpatrolled beaches/locations or after service hours. The Surf Life Saving Australia 2009 Coastal Safety Report (1) has identified that of the 46 people who drowned on NSW beaches during 2008–2009, 40 (87%) occurred at unpatrolled beaches where/when no 'on-duty' lifesaving services were immediately available. Swimmers caught in rip currents and rock fishermen swept from rocks feature as the main contributors to this toll. The average annual coastal drowning figure has increased over the past decade and NSW continues to hold the highest coastal drowning rate in Australia.

Surf Rescue services across the state are often the most appropriate and well positioned resources to respond to coastal (inshore) emergencies, however historically the awareness of – and communication to – these resources by NSW Police as the search/rescue authority have been informal, inconsistent or non-existent. As a result the most appropriate surf rescue resources were not being notified of incidents, or significant notification delays were occurring. Today the Surf Rescue Emergency Response System facilitates the coordinated response of surf rescue resources along the 2137km of coastline and 721 accessible beaches of NSW. This is done via one 24/7/365 'point of contact' (phone: 13SURF) which NSW Police uses to notify 'surf rescue' resources of a coastal emergency anywhere in the state. 13SURF is not a public phone number, but rather an internal emergency service number for police use.

The delivery of the system is twofold. Firstly a small team of qualified and experienced lifesaving personnel (volunteers) are rostered on shift as State Duty Officers (two at any one time). These personnel take the emergency response calls and task the most appropriate surf rescue resources. Secondly a team of full time staff manage the communications, IT and data systems from the SLSNSW State Operations Centre in Sydney. This infrastructure ensures accurate contact information and data is always held by the State Duty Officers and that 100% of emergency calls from police are taken within 30 seconds. Importantly, resources available and activated by this Emergency Response System extend beyond just SLSNSW assets, and relationships with other surf rescue organisations and emergency services are paramount to the success of the system.

Surf Rescue resources include:
• Paid Lifeguard service (SLS/Council)
• SLS Volunteer Lifesaving Clubs
• SLS Emergency Callout Teams
• SLS Regional Duty Officers
• SLS Rescue Water Craft Units
• SLS Offshore/Jet Rescue Boats
• SLS Helicopter Rescue Services

This initiative has and continues to involve the cooperation of a number of levels of government and peak body organisations, including:
• NSW Police (Marine Area Command, Police VKG's, PolAir, Local Police units)
• NSW Council Lifeguard Services
• Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA)
• Marine Rescue NSW
• State Emergency Service (SES)
• NSW Government – Department of Sport and Recreation & Industry & Investment
• Australian Government, including the Department of Health and Aging (DOHA)

Lives Saved
Since its inception in January 2008, over 600 emergency response requests have been made by NSW Police through the system, with hundreds of lives saved that would have otherwise been lost. The success of the Surf Rescue Emergency Response System in NSW has seen the model adopted in other States across Australia – forming a new 'standard' in 'surf rescue' response operations nationally. In June 2010 SLSNSW received a Surf Life Saving Australia Innovation Award for this initiative.

Reference
(1) Surf Life Saving Australias 2009 Coastal Safety Report http://www.slsa.com.au/site/_content/resource/00003104-docsource.pdf

Corresponding Author
Dean Storey, Lifesaving Manager
Surf Life Saving NSW
PO Box 307, Belrose, Sydney NSW Australia 2085
Email: dstorey@surflifesaving.com.au
Website: www.surflifesaving.com.au
Telephone: +61 2 9471 8000