

DOING THE RIGHT THING THE RIGHT WAY

Creating Self-Sustaining Lifesaving Organizations Worldwide

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There is nothing quite as rewarding for American lifeguards as bringing the lifesaving skills and experience they've accumulated to countries less fortunate than our own – places that lack a lifesaving network advanced to the levels with which we are familiar, or even any lifesaving network at all.

In recent years, there's been an impressive array of training projects initiated by US lifesavers to carry the wick of knowledge to far away places and light new candles of lifesaving. Just to name a few there have been training missions to Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, and Fiji. Lifesavers from Canada and Australia have also provided valuable assistance in the countries of our hemisphere. There's no way to truly quantify the good these lifesavers have done or the number of deaths prevented by these efforts. The benefits are incalculable.

How though, do we coordinate and track all these efforts? How do we make sure we are not unknowingly duplicating efforts? How do we provide aid in a way that avoids a dependence upon the limited aid we can provide? How do we provide this training in a way that is respectful to the local population and local lifesaving entities' rights to tailor a drowning reduction program that suits their specific needs? Perhaps most importantly, how do we do all this in a way that shares our knowledge and experience, but avoids imposing our own views on others (how do we break the model of colonialism)?

Resolving issues like these is one of the key roles of the International Lifesaving Federation (ILS), of which we are a founding member. The ILS (www.ilsf.org) helps coordinate lifesaving aid to promote the most effective outcomes possible. Divided into four regions (Asia Pacific, Europe, Africa, and the Americas), the ILS is the world authority in the global effort to prevent drowning and supports national lifesaving organisations aiming to improve water safety, water rescue, lifesaving, lifeguarding, and lifesaving sport. Coordinating aid within regions is delegated to the regions themselves.

The Secretary General of the Americas Region (ILS-AM), which encompasses North, Central, and South America, along with the Caribbean, is tasked with helping facilitate and coordinate development projects within the region, and to liaise with our member countries from the other three regions when projects cross the regional boundaries. The SG (Peter Davis) works closely with the President of the region (B. Chris Brewster) and the Board of Directors. The Board includes representatives from the national lifesaving organizations already in place in the region. Currently we have member organizations representing Canada, the USA, Mexico, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, the British Virgin Islands, Jamaica, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Chili, and Brazil. Eventually, we will have national lifesaving associations in every country of the Americas, but that will take time. The goal is to address all of the issues that providing aid involve, and to do all that can be done to promote aid that results in self-sustaining lifesaving organizations that can eventually address most or all of their own needs.

Obviously there is much more need than there are available resources, so we need to make sure our limited capabilities are used wisely in coordination with other projects. One thing that seems to help minimize duplicated effort is that there is now a sort of central clearing house for who is doing what where. For example, we recently learned of two groups working independently in Ecuador and have taken steps to promote collaboration.

Through trial and error, and learning from others in ILS, we have assembled some key strategies:

1. **Sustainability is the key.** Individual training trips have value, but the recipients can come to rely on them and to become dependent. There are so many places with need that we have to expend our limited, individual resources wisely to make the best possible use of what we have. There should always be

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a plan for long-term sustainability aimed at helping the local recipients of aid become self-sufficient. That way, when we have further energies and resources available, they can be devoted to other needy areas.

2. **Coordinate with the national lifesaving organization.** If there is a national lifesaving association already in the country we would like to help, it is crucial that we consult with them first. Otherwise, we could inadvertently undermine their authority and do greater damage than good.
3. **Promote existing local entities.** US lifesaving agencies are generally quite advanced. If we come from a place that is perceived as being more developed or stronger than where we go to provide aid, we need to take care not to disrespect local knowledge and local leaders. For example, the Beach Patrol in Galveston, Texas has a collaborative program with Veracruz, Mexico. If visiting Galveston lifeguards continue, year after year, to be the trainers and equipment providers, without a plan to co-teach with locals and eventually support them in their teaching, they could be putting the Veracruz lifesavers in the position of not being seen as "experts" by their local population. So next November there is a plan for the newly formed Mexican Lifesaving Association (AMS) to lead the instruction, with the Galveston guards taking a backseat in the supporting role. This gives the AMS the chance to be seen as the experts and helps them spread their influence. Eventually, Veracruz may not need assistance at all and the Galveston lifeguards will be free to provide aid elsewhere. The importance of putting locals in the "power position" can't be emphasized enough. The old adage really applies here of "Teach a man to fish and he'll eat for the day, teach him to fish and he eats forever"
4. **Make donations carefully.** One of the things that is greatly needed all over the world is basic lifesaving equipment. Taking or sending buoys, whistles, fins, and rescue boards to a place where they are difficult to obtain can really give a new program a jumpstart. In this though, we need to be wary of two things. The first is to ensure that the equipment is donated to people who will responsibly look after it and maintain it in the best possible condition. If it disappears, the donation is wasted. The second is to avoid becoming the commissary of lifesaving equipment. Providing equipment at first can be critical, but we don't want to substitute local planning to eventually achieve self-sufficiency.
5. **Listen to the locals.** One of the temptations is to take an organizational model that works in our part of the world and assume it will work the same somewhere else. But ours is an affluent country with vast resources. Even so, all US lifesaving organizations struggle for funding. Social and political issues differ greatly from place to place. We must remember that our perception of what is needed is often very different than the groups we are attempting to help.
6. **Coordinate your efforts.** As previously noted, the ILS delegates responsibility to each of the four regions to coordinate lifesaving aid to promote the best efficiency. Americas Region President B. Chris Brewster and Secretary General Peter Davis communicate continually with contacts throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America, and even Pacific Islands to help identify areas of need and to promote coordination of aid. Before initiating aid, send them an email and ask about how it might fit into the big picture. They can advise if there is a national association in the country, what other aid has been provided there, some good contacts in neighboring countries, and what strategies have helped maximize assistance efforts for long term sustainability. If the aid will occur outside the Americas Region, we need to extend similar courtesies to the ILS Region where the aid is proposed to be provided. The Americas

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Region Secretary General can facilitate that communication to ensure that similar steps are taken to promote efficiencies and avoid bad feelings. Keep him posted as a project progresses so that he can track it for future reference or to put you in touch with others on the ground in that area.

Using this approach there has been considerable success. When the ILS was formed in 1993, there were only two fully organized national lifesaving associations in the Americas Region: the Lifesaving Society of Canada and the USLA. Now there are national lifesaving associations in the Americas Region from Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and the British Virgin Islands. Lifesaving development works, when approached the right way.

Finally, we'd like to extend a special thanks to all of you out there who are and have been involved in different development projects in the Americas. Little by little, we are spreading the word and building lifesaving capacity throughout our region. Most importantly we are reducing the potential for drowning. If done properly, a small effort on our part can make a huge difference as what we do snowballs.

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Lifesaving Development Checklist

- Check with ILS Americas Region Secretary General
- Submit the plan to the national lifesaving organization in the country (if any)
- Develop a plan that aims at self-sustainability
- Consult carefully with local lifesavers (if any)
- Include local lifesavers in instruction
- Provide equipment carefully, to ensure that it survives
- Avoid creating dependency
- Report and coordinate with the ILS

