

Risk Management

by Michael Gentile, J.D.

Pool and spa safety: What's the standard?

When it comes to safety, sanitation and water quality in swimming pools and spas, the standard of proper care required can vary from state to state and even town to town. The operator of a public pool, which by definition in many state statutes on public health would include hotels, motels and resorts, can turn to a number of sources at any level to find information that will aid them in caring for their pool. These sources include on a national level the National Spa and Pool Institute (NSPI) and the National Spa and Pool Foundation (NSPF). These organizations can provide information on recommended standards for pool and spa safety, sanitation and water quality.

On the state level, state public health statutes generally provide minimum requirements that must be met to comply with state law. These statutes, however, do not limit the "home rule" powers of local governments to pass more stringent regulations and many counties and municipalities do just that. Since a local health department inspection and permit is usually required for pools in commercial establishments, knowledge and adherence to these rules are essential for hotel managers.

While it is impossible to detail all of the specific local requirements, this article will provide an overview of the minimum standards and advisory recommendations from a sampling of state and national associations and then provide some direction to pool operators as to how they may ascertain their specific local requirements.

Pool Design

In terms of the design or configuration of the pool the operator can expect minimum requirements in the following areas:

- Provision of ladders, stairs, or recessed steps with mandated sizes and height limitations, made with slip-resistant surfaces. Depending upon the width of the pool these accommodations may be required on both sides.
- Provision of handrails or grab rails around the pool made of non-corrosive material with no sharp edges and securely fastened.
- Limitations as to the height and slope of pool walls and floor.
- Requirements for non-slip surface finishes, deck markings, depth markers, and pool wall and floor coloring
- Artificial lighting for pools and spas used after sunset.
- Pool enclosures, walls or fencing, no less than four feet high with lockable, self-closing and self-latching doors or gates.

Safety Equipment

The minimum safety equipment required in a public pool is as follows:

- Two U.S. Coast Guard-recognized ring buoys attached to ¼ inch rope that is no less than half the width of the pool in length.
- One rescue pole or "shepherds crook" that is a minimum of 8 feet in length.
- A ¾ inch rope with colored floats to differentiate the shallow and deep ends of the pool.
- A backboard, preferably mounted on the wall in the pool area
- A first aid kit
- An emergency telephone, wall mounted, with an outside line and emergency numbers and procedures mounted next to it.
- Depending upon the size of the pool, at least one elevated lifeguard chair.

Water Quality

With today's emphasis on preventing disease transmission, water quality is very important. Ascertain the optimal levels for chemicals from state and local regulations and keep the chemical feed equipment at those levels. This includes maintaining disinfectant at their regulated levels:

- pH (7.2-7.8)
- alkalinity (80-120 ppm)

- calcium hardness (200-400 ppm)
- total dissolved solids (below 2500 mg/liter)

Summary

As stated at the outset, the requirements presented here are minimum standards. Many local health departments require much more for a pool to pass inspection. It is recommended that pool operators take the following steps to assure compliance with all regulations that apply:

1. Review their pool operation with their legal representatives and their insurance carrier.
2. Determine the state and local health department standards that apply to their pool. Those agencies may be located through the American Public Health Association at www.apha.org.
3. Take all steps, including education and training, required for pool operation.

By following these guidelines, pool operators will provide a safe and inviting pool and spa environment for their guests.

Read more about it:

- In the next issue of TRC, read about training and certification requirements for staff members of hotel swimming pools.
- Related articles in TRC include Vol. 4, No. 3 “Limiting Liability of Swimming Pools”; Vol. 7, No. 3 “Hotel Signage is Essential Safety Precaution”; and Vol. 11, No. 2 “Simple Inspection Reduces Maintenance and Increases Swimming Pool Safety for Guests.”

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Hot tip

The Center for Disease Control’s website provides swimming pools operators 12 tips for the prevention of recreational water illnesses. It can be accessed at www.healthyswimming.org