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ICE/COLD WATER RESCUE by Chris Huston

As fall arrives and with winter being on its way, the time for Ice Water Rescue season draws near. In November, we should review the basics and get our hands on the tools and equipment needed for a safe Ice/Cold Water Rescue operation.

Key Information:

Personal Floatation Device or PFD, no one should go near the water, within 10 feet, without one. Adding potential victims does not help the operation.



Identify who is the rescuer/s and who are on the shore crew. We must have a way to get the rescuer out/off the ice before the rescuer goes. Ropes should be set up immediately and have enough responders to operate them. Additional companies/Mutual Aid should be called early so enough personnel are on scene to mitigate the rescue.



TEACH – REACH – THROW – ROW - GO:

Teach – instruct the victim to help him or herself, as much as possible. Direct the victim to stay calm and try to pull his or herself out of the water. This is dependant upon the condition of the victim. The Teach should continue throughout the incident. This comes in the form of direction and keeping the patient at ease.

Reach - Will a pike pole or other object reach them? An aluminum ladder is another option.

Throw – Attempt to use a rescue throw bag.

Row – Depending on water/ice conditions, a boat or ice sled can be used.

Go – Our last resort is to send a rescuer in the appropriate PPE to perform the rescue.



Patient care – After the victim is removed from the frigid waters the first priority is to have sufficient medical treatment and transport. Medical units should be dispatched with initial rescuers to prevent any delay in treatment and transport. Severe injury and even death can occur when a person is immersed in icy water for as little as 15 minutes. Factors such as age, medical conditions and even drugs/alcohol can affect their outcome. The patient must be slowly re-warmed to prevent "re-warming shock." The outer shell warms faster than the core temperature causes this complication. Using the best privacy measure available, gently remove the patient's wet clothes and replace with dry ones or cover with blankets. DO NOT use heaters set to high temperatures. The back seat of a piece of apparatus with mild temperatures is a good alternative until the transporting unit or agency arrives.

Ice/Cold Water Rescues are a high risk, low frequency event. As the temperatures hover around freezing we must stay vigilant with our Ice/Cold Water Rescue training and skills.