

After drownings in Fargo area, new American kids learning water survival skills

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Mar 2nd 2019 - 6am.

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Youth attend a water survival class Feb. 25 at Hulbert Aquatic Center in West Fargo. Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor
Michael Vosburg

FARGO — The tragic drownings last summer of a 6-year-old

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South Sudanese boy and 9-year-old Liberian-American girl prompted police here to create free water survival programs for new Americans.

Further inspiration for starting the program, said Fargo Police Cultural Liaison Officer Vince Kempf, was a special report by The Forum following the drownings that illustrated an alarming trend, locally and across the U.S. and Canada.

Of the five unintentional drownings in the Fargo-Moorhead area between June 2017 and June 2018, all victims were either black, American Indian, immigrants or children of recent immigrants.

A drowning expert with the American Red Cross, Linda Quan, told The Forum that “drowning is a cultural problem,” and reaching out to those populations at greater risk of drowning is an effective preventative method.

That's what Fargo and West Fargo police are now doing, and it's the same approach Quan took when she recognized higher drowning rates a decade ago in Seattle's Vietnamese community. Also, a drowning prevention program in Canada, the Lifesaving Society, recognized that immigrants were four times more likely to drown.

“It’s true they (new Americans) were less likely to know how to swim,” Kempf said.

Last summer in the span of three days, 9-year-old Grace Bettie drowned at a swimming hole in nearby Buffalo River State Park on June 27. Then on June 29, 6-year-old David Logulomo drowned in a West Fargo retention pond by his family's apartment.

"The whole purpose is to hopefully prevent an incident like the unfortunate ones we've seen in the past," said West Fargo Cultural Liaison Officer Ryan Feltman, who is leading West Fargo's water survival program.

The back-to-back tragedies led community leaders to reach out to law enforcement in Fargo and West Fargo. Officers then reached out to the Hulbert Aquatic Center in West Fargo and to pool staff at Concordia College in Moorhead to work out details of these life-saving lessons.

"We started thinking about what we could do with this situation. We reached out to the various aquatics centers in the area, and they were already thinking about that as well," Kempf said. "We already have a waiting list of people that want to get in the program."

The first group of 13 kids finished a six-week program at Concordia, and a dozen kids were wrapping up the program at Hulbert. Kempf said the goal was to get 100 to 150 new American youth through the program, so free lessons will be offered until that goal is reached or funds run out.


There's no cost to kids participating due to donations to Badges of Unity, a youth-focused program through the Fargo Police Department that looks to address key issues. Feltman said the West Fargo Police Department is taking donations to sustain the program for as

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long as there's interest in the community.

Feltman said the programming is more geared toward water survival skills rather than traditional swimming lessons. Kids between the ages of 6 and 14 are taught how to stay afloat and be comfortable in water. He said many of the kids at Hulbert's program were more timid when the classes first started in the beginning of February, but most have found a level of comfort and enjoy spending time in the water.

He said the programs are for anyone who doesn't know how to swim, and are not limited to new Americans. The program is aimed at youth at risk of drowning, including new Americans.

Carlson plans on expanding programming for new American kids this summer by offering free classes on hiking, fishing and camping. He said the programs will go hand in hand with swimming safety.

Those interested in the swimming safety program can call the Fargo police at 701-235-4493, or West Fargo police at 701-429-1290. Free transportation for kids is provided to and from lessons.



1 / 2 Instructor Paulina Bekkum, center, helps teach a water survival class Feb. 25 at Hulbert Aquatic Center in West Fargo. Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor Michael Vosburg

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