



Capt. Kyle Brooks (left) of the Franklin Fire Department waits to be rescued by Capt. Ron Macy during a cold-water training exercise in the Franklin Lakes subdivision. -- Gary Moore / staff photo

Small area ponds present icy threat

Venturing onto surface could lead to drowning

By Sharon Dunten

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A frozen pond is a temptation many youngsters are unable to resist, but the consequences can be tragic.

Four boys in Massachusetts died Saturday when they plunged through the ice on the Merrimack River and drowned. Two other boys were rescued.

Sunday evening, a 13-year-old boy fell through the ice on a pond on Indianapolis' Westside. Wayne Township firefighters rescued him. He was taken to Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis for treatment of hypothermia.

The teen had ventured onto the ice of a retention pond at Chapel Glen Estates housing addition to retrieve a football.

These small, numerous ponds most worry safety authorities.

Capt. Matt Stewart of the Wayne Township Fire Department said after Sunday's incident that people should not walk or skate on the ice even if it seems thick.

Jerry Richert of the Franklin Township Fire Department agrees.

"In the past, we have seen children playing on the ice or trying to rescue a pet or toy from a retention pond, and we have also seen ice fishermen, ice skating and sledding on the ponds," Richert said.

He is coordinator for WARN (Water Awareness in Residential Neighborhoods).

Franklin Township firefighter Tom Beckner said it is frightening to see footprints on frozen retention ponds. He said he has approached adults and children seen on ponds and explained the dangers of using them for recreation.

Richert said, "When parents go looking around for their kids outside this winter, I don't want these retention ponds to be the last place where people check."

He says retention ponds should be the first place parents look because time is of the essence.

"It buys us a little time more in the wintertime because of the cold water and the near-drowning phenomenon, but sometimes we don't have that much time," Richert said.

In a near-drowning incident, the victim has begun to drown and might not have a pulse when removed from the icy water, but resuscitation efforts are successful. Near-drowning victims also might have serious injuries to their lungs and brains.

Richert also is the department's dive team coordinator. He continues to train the team in water rescue and recovery monthly, even during the winter months, in what Richert calls "contaminated ponds." Debris such as trees, fencing and garbage can hamper rescue efforts.

"Cars have been driven into ponds to hide them. The dive team doesn't know if they are empty, so they go in," Richert said. "We need to keep people out of retention ponds, so we don't have to go find them."

He said people who live near retention ponds should be aware of their hidden dangers, such as underwater obstructions, limited visibility and underwater entanglements such as erosion netting found on the banks of retention ponds.

"In most retention ponds, there are small shelves of shallow water, then the pond drops very deep," Richert said.

His strongest advice is to never let children play on frozen retention ponds or wade or swim in a retention pond.

He encourages neighborhoods with retention ponds to become educated through the WARN. program.

"It is very important to know the bodies of water in your area," he said.

He added that homeowners living next to retention ponds should keep rescue equipment available and close by in case of an emergency. He said parents never should leave children unsupervised around the ponds or any source of water.

With more than 100 residential retention ponds in Franklin Township, the concern for public safety led Richert in 2001 to develop the free educational program WARN. It is for all of Marion County, not just for Franklin Township.

Richert has led seminars as far away as Maine and even overseas in Portugal, and he continues to promote the program locally.

"Franklin Township has a huge water hazard problem, and retention ponds are a big part of it. Look at all the water we have in Franklin Township with new subdivisions," Richert said.

Because most new subdivisions are building retention ponds to aid in drainage control, he said educating residents about the dangers has been a large undertaking and the response to the program's education has been slow.

"There is no magic solution to our problem," said Scott Bowers of C.P. Morgan, one of Indiana's largest homebuilders. C.P. Morgan recently donated \$45,000 to the program for the next three years.

"Parents and children need more public education so accidents can be avoided."

Bowers said he feels the program is a "hidden gem" for water safety programs, and marketing it is critical.

"C.P. Morgan approached us and wanted to be proactive," Richert said.

With the company's help along with support from the YMCA of Greater Indianapolis, Emmis Communications and Schneider Engineering, Richert hopes to enhance marketing to communities, schools and especially neighborhood associations.

The program is offered in Franklin, Perry and Decatur townships. Presentations may be scheduled through fire departments.

Also, free kits are available, including a CD for PowerPoint presentations, live action videos for adults and children, and reading materials. The Web site www.warnonline.org also offers information about the program.