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## Labor Day Weekend - Be Aware Around Water

### *County Drowning Prevention Task Force, Gold-Medal-Winning Olympians, and Parents of Victims Work to Save Lives*

**Newport Beach, Calif.** – Drowning prevention task force members, gold-medal-winning Olympians, and parents of drowning victims today stood to promote awareness around water in advance of Labor Day Weekend. Speakers at Marina Park, with Newport Harbor as a backdrop, highlighted an ongoing media campaign, designating a specific person to watch the water, and the importance of water safety for all age groups regardless of swimming ability.

“Holiday weekends attract more people to our beaches, which means we need to be even more aware of the safety of people in the water,” said Orange County Task Force on Drowning Prevention Chair Al Murray, who is also a Tustin councilman. “Hopefully, our OCTA bus campaign, our outreach in print and on-the-air with radio spots is helping to keep our message out there, at the forefront of people’s minds.”

An Orange County Transit Authority (OCTA) bus, wrapped with a giant public service announcement, was outside the venue where the event was being held. More than 230 similar OCTA busses have drowning prevention campaign messages, as do 400 posters, 80 stand-up banners, and 116 radio spots. In addition, the county’s Health Care Agency has sent direct mail to more than 4,000 operators of public pools.

“It is essential that if you’re around the water, at a pool or at the beach, to designate a responsible adult to be a ‘Water Watcher’, someone who will pay complete attention to people in the water, without distraction,” said Third District Supervisor Todd Spitzer, as he held high in the air, a ‘Water Watcher’ tag. “Even at the beach, a ‘Water Watcher’ can provide critical assistance for our busy lifeguards on Labor Day Weekend. No one should ever be in the water alone, adult or child, because the other person may be the one who saves a life.”

The OCTA bus PSAs were developed from focus group input by staff of the Orange County Health Care Agency, who also serve on the task force, in partnership with Westbound Communications and OCTA. The campaign is focused on children and adults with the taglines, “*It Only Takes Seconds to Drown; Always Watch Your Child Around Water,*” and “*Think Twice Before Swimming Alone, Never Swim Alone.*”

“Growing up in Newport and spending countless hours in the pool, and in the ocean, I learned the importance of water safety at a very early age,” said Kaleigh Gilchrist, 2016 gold-medal-winning Olympic water polo team member. Having consistent awareness of your surroundings, of your friends and of yourself, is the key to a successful, fun, and safe day in the water.”

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Thus far in 2016, 21 drowning incidents have involved children up to 4 years of age, two have been fatal. At this time last year, there were 29 incidents and four were fatal. With adults, 65 and older, in 2016 there have been seven incidents and seven fatalities. At this time in 2015, there were eight incidents and seven fatalities.

In 2015, 40 incidents involved children up to 4 years of age, five incidents were fatal. There were 30 drowning incidents in 2015 involving adults 55 years of age and older, 22 were fatal, nearly half of all drowning fatalities for the year.

The Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) compiles drowning statistics countywide that are submitted on a voluntary basis. As such, the number of incidents vary from year to year, depending upon which cities report and when or if they report. Last year, according to OCFA, there were 118 drowning incidents and 50 fatalities in the county, compared with 86 drowning incidents and 43 fatalities in 2014.

“Losing a child is hard, losing one unexpectedly is harder,” said Foster Parnell, whose son Anthony drowned in the ocean. “Many young people don’t understand the importance of doing the right thing. Unfortunately, Anthony’s decision to ignore the warning signs at the beach was a fatal mistake. In memory of Anthony, please teach your children about obeying warning signs and the importance of water safety around pools or the ocean.”

According to the Orange County Health Care Agency and the Centers for Disease Control, drowning remains the number one cause of accidental death for children 1 to 4 years of age. Seniors, 65 years and older, especially older males, are the most at risk for drowning incidents. They also have the highest drowning incident death rate.

All cities within Orange County are in the process of adopting technology to facilitate the uniform reporting of drowning incidents. Newport Beach is one of the first cities within the county to implement the software for this purpose. It’s expected that all cities within the county will have adopted the software by the end of 2017.

The Orange County Task Force on Drowning Prevention, working with the Association of California Cities, Orange County (ACC-OC), the Building Industry Association of Orange County, the Tri-Counties Association of Realtors, the Orange County Realtors Association, and the California Pool and Spa Association, is also in the process of evaluating changes in state legislation that could reduce drowning incidents and fatalities.

Formed in August of 2015, the Orange County Task Force on Drowning Prevention is a 25-member advisory panel that includes the heads of countywide public health, public safety, government, non-profit organizations, parents of victims, and Olympic medal-winning swimmers. It was convened in August 2015 to develop recommendations on methods and strategies to reduce drowning incidents and fatalities in Orange County.

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**Attachments:**

PSAs

2015 Drowning Stats

2016 Drowning Stats

OC Drowning Prevention Task Force Members