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Unguarded beaches in South Florida pose risk to swimmers, cities

July 23, 2012 | By Ihosvani Rodriguez, Sun Sentinel

The signs tell you to swim at your own risk. That doesn't stop many from swimming in unprotected stretches of South Florida's beaches.

The near-drowning earlier this month in an unguarded area of Hallandale Beach -- and the resulting controversy over the city's privatized lifeguards -- has put a spotlight on South Florida's patchwork beach rescue system.

(Sun Sentinel/Joe Cavaretta)

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From Hollywood to West Palm Beach, most beachfront cities employ teams of lifeguards certified by the U.S. Lifesaving Association, which means they meet minimum standards for fitness and emergency medical training.

But even in those cities, most stretches of sand behind condos, hotels and private homes remain unguarded because of the high costs that come with providing lifeguards in little attended areas.

"There really is no formula (to protecting beaches). It all depends on the situation of the beach," said Chris Brewster, president of the U.S. Lifesaving Association. "There might be places where having no lifeguards makes sense because there are hardly any people there."

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control reports that nearly three quarters of all beach drownings occur in unguarded areas.

In contast, Brewsters's association reports that the odds a swimmer will drown on a beach protected by a lifeguard are one in 18 million.

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Hallandale Beach is now rethinking how to protect swimmers on the beach, particularly along the unguarded stretch of shore where a young man nearly drowned earlier this month. The company that provides lifeguards for the city, Jeff Ellis Management, is not seeking to renew its contract following a flap that made international headlines.

Maksim Samartsev, 19, a tourist from Estonia, was swimming behind his father's condo building on the beach when he was pulled underwater by a riptide. Former Hallandale Beach lifeguard Tomas Lopez left his stand and raced into the unprotected stretch of beach to help rescue Samartsev. Officials with Jeff Ellis Management fired Lopez for leaving the area the company is designated to protect. Lopez now attends school full-time.

Public lifeguards say such a scenario is unlikely to repeat in their zones, as they often race outside their designated areas if a nearby swimmer needs help.

In Boynton Beach, lifeguards often find themselves crossing the city boundary for rescues in the

neighboring town of Ocean Ridge, where there aren't any lifeguards behind the exclusive beachfront homes.

Fort Lauderdale lifeguards keep ATVs at the southernmost and northernmost lifeguard stands in case of emergencies in adjacent unprotected beaches.

Lifeguards in Pompano Beach routinely patrol stretches of unguarded beaches by riding ATVs several times each hour, including areas behind private condos.

The day Lopez lost his job, a Pompano Beach lifeguard who was on an ATV patrol spotted a man vomiting in an isolated and unproteceted area of the beach. Within seconds of the lifeguard's arrival, the man, who was not identified, collapsed face first into the sand, said city spokeswoman Sandra King.The lifeguard applied CPR until paramedics arrived.

"Just because it's outside the boundaries doesn't mean you don't go help someone in danger,' King said.

Fort Lauderdale's policy to keep ATVs revved up and ready to be deployed into unguarded beaches went into play on last week. A 25-year-old woman passed out while riding a parasail behind a private hotel. The lifeguard on duty arrived on an ATV and applied first-aid before paramedics arrived, said department spokesman Matt Little.

The tourist, who was not identified, was transported to the hospital and later released after being treated for a heat stroke, said Wayne Mascolo, the owner of the parasail company.

Some smaller cities have no professional lifeguards at all. In 2008, Lauderdale-by-the-Sea learned it would cost about $1.5 million to put lifeguards on its 2-mile beach. The town opted to rely on a volunteer beach patrol team, post warning signs at all beach entrances and provides life-preservers along the shore.

While swimmers in unprotected areas do so at their own risk, the towns and cities that don't provide lifeguards incur little risk.

Dan Abbott, a Broward lawyer who specializes in municipal law, said that under change in the law enacted in 2005, governments can no longer be held liable for injuries or deaths caused by changing surf and other naturally occurring conditions along coastal areas.

"In natural waterways, such as an ocean, governments are not responsible for making people feel safe in," Abbott said. "There are some risks that come with swimming in which you can't sue."

While some cities provide some sort of a safety net even in unprotected beaches, Brewster of the U.S. Lifesaving Association said the best precaution a swimmer could take is not swimming in those area at all.

"Always look for a place with a lifeguard," Brewster said. "There are many things that will happen out there even to the strongest of swimmers. Why take your chances?"

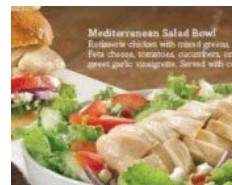*ijrodriguez@tribune.com; 954-356-4605 or @GeoRodriguez on Twitter.*

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