

Panthers, YMCA Provide Free Swimming and Water Safety Lessons

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Panthers Community Champions: YMCA of South Florida

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The Florida Panthers want to help make the water safer for young swimmers this summer.

As part of the organization's ongoing Community Champions Grant Program, a donation of \$25,000 was made to the Greater Hollywood YMCA during the 2018-19 season, with those funds going towards providing more than 175 underserved children in Broward County with free swimming and water safety lessons.

In an extension of their partnership, the Panthers and Greater Hollywood YMCA held a poolside press conference on Thursday to further enforce the importance of water safety as kids prepare for summer.

"Water safety and drowning prevention is critical here in South Florida," said Lauren Simone, the Executive Director of the Florida Panthers Foundation. "Unfortunately, drowning is the leading cause of death for children under 18, and the majority of those kids are under the age of four. It couldn't be any more critical to talk about this issue, especially since kids here are in and around water all the time."

In a report released by the USA Swimming Foundation, Florida's 51 child drownings in 2017 not only ranked first in the nation, but also showed a disturbing increase of more than 20 percent from 2016. Across the entire nation, drowning remains the leading cause of unintentional deaths in kids ages 1-4.

"With Memorial Day weekend upon us, we have to get serious, serious about this," said Sheryl Woods, the President & CEO of YMCA South Florida. "This past spring break we provided swim lessons to about 2,500 children, thanks in part to the generosity of the Panthers. We have a curriculum that's very specific about water safety and drowning prevent. Then we roll that into lessons so that these kids get a chance to get acclimated around water, but also know that they know how to insure their own safety."

In addition to swimming lessons for children, Woods added that it's also important for adults to become more aware and take on added responsibility when in and around bodies of water. For that reason, the YMCA created a "Water Watcher" tag, which is co-branded with the Panthers, for adults to wear around their necks while at the pool, beach or anywhere else where kids are in danger of potentially drowning.

On the back of the tag is a pledge that states:

I pledge to be a Water Watcher to keep kids safe in and around water by:

- *Actively watching the children*
- *Keeping my eyes on the water.*
- *Avoiding distractions.*
- *Pulling all children out of the water, call 911 & begin CPR in an emergency.*

"Someone needs to be in charge," Woods said of the pledge. "You think when there's a bunch of adults around a pool that everyone's watching the pool, but that's not really true. This pledge brings a reality to that ownership and supervision. We hand these out all across the two counties in South Florida. We encourage all families to stop by and get one. Use them to make sure your kids are safe around water."

According to the YMCA's website, formal swimming lessons reduce the risk of drowning by 88 percent.

"We welcome anyone from the community to stop by the YMCA," Woods said. "They can either pick up one of these tags or come for water safety and swim lessons. It's our mission to not turn anyone away."

If a family cannot afford swimming and water safety lessons, the YMCA will happily support them.

"They just need to walk in the door," said Tara Montenegro, the YMCA of South Florida's Executive Director of Aquatics. "They need to pick up a phone or go to our website or just stop by and ask a question. There will always be someone to help. We want to make it as easy as possible to learn."

For more information about the YMCA's swimming and water safety programs, please visit <https://ymcasouthflorida.org/program/aquatics/>.