



UNITED STATES  
**CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY COMMISSION**  
4330 EAST WEST HIGHWAY  
BETHESDA, MD 20814

**CHAIR ALEXANDER D. HOEHN-SARIC**

**Remarks of Chair Alexander D. Hoehn-Saric**

**National Drowning Prevention Alliance and Association of Aquatic Professionals Annual  
Water Safety Conference**

**Thursday, February 16, 2023  
8:45 AM Mountain Time**

Good morning! Thank you all for coming to this important conference and thanks to the National Drowning Prevention Alliance and Association of Aquatic Professionals for inviting me to speak today. We at the Consumer Product Safety Commission are grateful for all the work you do to stop drownings.

Because this is a joint conference this year, I realize CPSC and our role in pool safety and drowning prevention may be new to some of you. The CPSC is a small federal government agency with an important mission: protecting consumers from product hazards.

Fifteen years ago, Congress enacted legislation that put drowning prevention and pool safety front and center in our work. The Virginia Graeme Baker Act (VGBA) – named after a young girl who died after getting entrapped in a spa drain – has made an enormous impact on pool safety across the country.

I want to take a moment to recognize and give thanks for those who have championed VGBA from the start. This includes Virginia Graeme Baker's family, especially her mother, Nancy Baker, who is here; Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Senator Amy Klobuchar; and the family advocates and industry stakeholders who all worked together to make the Act a reality.

VGBA demonstrates what we can accomplish when we work together towards the common goal of public safety. Since the Act's passage in 2007, drowning deaths from drain entrapments have been nearly eliminated, making VGBA a huge success.

The Act has three key components. First, it established strong mandatory standards for drain safety at public pools and spas. Second, it called for the CPSC to provide information and education to the public about drowning prevention. The *Pool Safely* campaign – one of our signature safety programs – grew out of this legislation.

And finally, VGBA established the *Pool Safely* campaign grant program. These grants provide much-needed resources for state and local governments to fund education, training, and

compliance efforts. This, in turn, ensures that drowning and drain-entrapment prevention remain critical public safety priorities, not just for CPSC, but for all levels of government.

Since 2007, CPSC has awarded 27 grants totaling nearly \$6 million to assist jurisdictions in reducing deaths and injuries from drowning and drain entrapment. Just last year, CPSC awarded nearly \$1.2 million in two-year grants to state and local governments.

Tomorrow, we will be announcing our next round of grant funding, with a goal of awarding \$2 million in grants, ranging from \$50,000 to \$400,000. Thanks to some revisions to VGBA that were made at the end of last year, the terms of these grants and the eligibility of applicants will change, including an expansion of eligibility to tribal governments. I encourage everyone in attendance to look for that notice and consider whether your local jurisdiction may qualify. You can find more information about our grant program at [www.poolsafely.gov](http://www.poolsafely.gov).

VGBA was a big step in the right direction for drowning prevention, and CPSC will continue to build on this success. But I see two areas where we need to increase focus and attention, and where I urge everyone in this room to work with us.

First, we must do more to reach communities who are most affected by child drownings. Racial disparities in pool and spa drownings have been an ongoing issue in the United States. The history of systemic racism and discrimination has had a profound impact on children in historically excluded communities. Black children, today, are statistically more likely to drown than their white counterparts.

Recent CPSC data show that Black children from ages 5-14 account for 32% of nonfatal swimming pool and spa drowning incidents treated in emergency rooms, while they only represent 15% of the overall population.

Contributing to drowning deaths and injuries across all children is a shocking lack of swimming skills. The USA Swimming Foundation found that 64% of Black children and 45% of Hispanic children lacked those skills – those are rates higher than you find for white children. And when you add income inequity into the analysis, the numbers show an even starker disparity. According to the Foundation, 79% of children with household income less than \$50,000 lack appropriate swimming skills.

The historical exclusion of Black children from pools due to race contributes to this disparity. For example, segregation meant Black Americans were banned from many municipal swimming pools, or were relegated to fewer – and often more inferior – facilities than white Americans, if they had them at all.

We all know that one of the best predictors of children knowing how to swim is whether their parents know how to swim. Because many parents of color were prevented from learning that life-saving skill, it never got passed down to their children.

This is a cycle that can be reversed. To do so, we must work to make sure we are reaching ALL Americans with essential water safety information, particularly if they have been left behind in the past.

This means targeting our messaging to meet Americans where they are. We want our tips and outreach to be directed at all consumers by sharing our guidance in English and Spanish and among a diverse array of media outlets and other trusted voices.

We've begun to reach out to these communities to hear directly about what works. How is our message getting across best? And how can we share it better in the future? These direct conversations have shown us the power of personal stories and the impact of current data on both the public and our own strategies.

CPSC also works with our many collaborators to help spread pool safety tips. Diversity in Aquatics, the USA Swimming Foundation, the Shawn Delifus Foundation, and Black Swimming Association are just a few of the collaborators that CPSC is excited to work with to continue to address these disparities.

CPSC is committed to improving our outreach to the most at-risk Americans and we welcome your ongoing support in this effort.

Another area of pool safety that we're committed to address is the pattern of deaths of very young children who fall – or climb – into residential pools and drown. The vast majority of drowning deaths among children younger than five years old occur in private pools at their own home or at the home of a family member or friend – and often during non-swim time. And the majority occur when adults have lost contact with the child or don't know their whereabouts. These parents and caregivers often think that a child is napping or watching TV, when, in fact, the child has wandered outside unnoticed and has climbed into a pool.

I know that many of you incorporate messaging about barriers, locks, and alarms into your efforts. And the *Pool Safely* campaign makes such messaging a priority. But there is clearly more that we need to do to protect children who are too young to swim. I hope that we can all work together to strengthen our outreach and education in this area, and to prevent these tragedies.

Before I close, I want to take a moment to recognize the members of Families United to Prevent Drowning and other memorial organizations who have taken unthinkable family tragedies and channeled their grief into preventing future drownings. I – along with the entire CPSC staff – are deeply grateful for your dedication to this cause, which has made a huge difference in the lives of many other families. Your devotion to your loved ones and courage to share your stories are remarkable.

I also want to acknowledge our extensive collaborator network, who are so vital to the work we do. Both the National Drowning Prevention Alliance and the Association of Aquatic Professionals have been tremendously helpful over the years, and I thank them again for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

Thank you all for your attention and dedication to water safety. Drowning is preventable and thanks to everyone here, lives have been – and will continue to be – saved.