

**PA Voluntary Rescue Service Recognition Program
(VRSR)**

2025 Swiftwater Rescue Program Update

Acknowledgements

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And countless other water rescue professional who provided input and feedback throughout this process.

Introduction

The 2025 update of the VRSR Swiftwater program is designed to move Pennsylvania team credentialing to align with Federal NIMS typing guidelines for Swiftwater/Flood Search and Rescue. The Federal NIMS typing guidelines for Swiftwater teams and personnel were updated in 2021 to reflect lessons learned from numerous large-scale and catastrophic flood events around the nation. These guidelines are built upon national standards, best practices, and real-world experience. By aligning directly with NIMS typing guidelines we will increase our interoperability, be able to support mutual aid requests, and demonstrate the professionalism of the Pennsylvania swiftwater rescue community.

Summary of Changes

The primary changes in the 2025 update include the realignment of the Pennsylvania team types to match Federal NIMS typing guidelines. This results in significant changes to the personnel and watercraft requirements of teams.

	2024 Version		Previous Version	
	Personnel	Watercraft	Personnel	Watercraft
Type 1 Team	16	4	14	2
Type 2 Team	12	2	6	1
Type 3 Team	6	1	4	1 (non-powered)
Type 4a Team	4	0	3	0

The changes in personnel and watercraft requirements allow for a more dynamic and flexible approach to the rescue mission and allows teams enough personnel to staff critical positions such as an incident commander, operations section chief, safety officer, and backup teams. There were also minor changes in the required EMS providers on each team type.

The training requirements for most members remain nearly the same except for the addition of FEMA L-984 All Hazards Task Force/Strike Team Leader for Team Leaders. This course is a requirement of federal NIMS-typing and will allow for greater interoperability and common workflow for Team Leaders on mutual aid deployments.

Revisions were made to the equipment cache list including the addition of several tools that have proven valuable at real-world incidents, the elimination of some seldom used or unneeded items, and the additional requirement for decontamination included in Federal NIMS typing guidance. The below notes are only summaries of key changes and are not all-inclusive of every change in the equipment lists. Please see the full equipment list for additional information.

Communications Equipment

- Provisions were made to recognize that some portable radios and cell phones are inherently water resistant.
- Mobile radios are required for each vehicle that will be deployed with the team.
- A key tenant of communications for deployable teams is interoperability therefore it is recommended that teams utilize p25 compliant radios programmed with national interoperability channels and have a marine band radio available.
- Recognizing the move towards the national SARCOP plan for GPS mapping, teams can utilize phone or tablet-based GPS solutions as long as the unit is not dependent on cellular connectivity (offline maps) and can export common map file types.

Team Equipment

- Minor revisions were made to the general team equipment category including the addition of tools to remove vehicle glass, a toolbox to support minor repairs to equipment, and marking tape and paint
- Quantities were adjusted to reflect team size and concept of operations

Victim PPE

- Victim personal protective equipment quantities have been adjusted to recognize common sizes and quantities needed.
- Federal NIMS typing specifies that Type 1 teams should be capable of performing rescue of animals so appropriate canine PPE has been added to their equipment list.
- Victim PPE kits are designed to be deployed one per boat

Rescue Equipment

- The rescue equipment cache was updated to allow for modern mechanical devices and g-rated 11mm (7/16") rope.
- Quantities were updated to allow Type 1 teams to operate as two distinct squads
- Litters and rescue swimmer boards are required per boat according to NIMS typing guidelines

Rescue Boats & Accessories

- Rescue boats are now specified to have a 20hp minimum motor but the boat and motor should be sized appropriately for expected conditions

Personal Equipment

- The requirement for float coats for team personnel has been eliminated since all personnel will be equipped with personal flotation devices and the victim PPE cache has been expanded.
- Quantities have been adjusted to match updated personnel requirements.

Medical and Decontamination

- The medical equipment is intended to provide limited first aid and CPR to team members and immediate life saving actions for patients until they can be transferred to an EMS agency.
- Due to the contaminated nature of floodwaters, field decontamination of personnel and equipment is important. The list of decontamination equipment is based upon Federal NIMS typing documents.

Concept of Operations

The general concept of operations for the PA VRSR Swiftwater Teams is:

- Type 1 Teams are designed to respond to large scale natural disasters and other waterborne incidents and may operate as two distinct squads each with two boats (four total) appropriately sized and powered for expected conditions.
- Type 2 Teams will operate as a single squad with two boats appropriately sized and powered for expected conditions.
- Type 3 Teams may operate independently or can be paired with another Type 3 team to form a combined unit with two boats appropriately sized and powered for expected conditions.
- Type 4a Teams will support operations such as flood evacuation (currents less than 1 knot), shore-based and operations-level rescuers/backup.
- All teams at a minimum are able to provide basic first aid and CPR and may provide higher levels of medical care in accordance with Department of Health licensure, protocol, and medical command policies.
- All teams may be called upon to be self-sufficient for a period of time as specified in the mission request.
- Teams should ensure that appropriate policies and procedures are in place and members have adequate insurance and worker's compensation coverage for mutual aid responses.
- Organizations not able to meet the personnel and equipment requirements of the VRSR typing program are encouraged to pursue regional collaboration and resource sharing.

Implementation Plan

- This program change will be implemented over a period of three (3) years, beginning on 01/01/2025 and ending on 12/31/2027.
- New organizations submitting to the VRSR program are expected to meet the new program requirements upon publication.
- Current VRSR teams will have the option to immediately recertify under the new standards if they meet them or remain at their current typing level if they cannot meet the new standards prior to their expiration date. No recertifications under the old standards will be granted after 12/31/2027.

- Teams who recertify under the old standards during the update period will have until 12/31/2027 to meet the new typing standards and have an update inspection completed. Existing VRSR teams who fail to meet the new standards by 12/31/2027 will be decertified.
- After 12/31/2027, the Type 1A, 2A, or 3A designations will not be used for VRSR SWR recognition, resource ordering, or deployments.

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