

Residents complain to municipalities about neighbours' lack of protective fencing around backyard pools

Sue Montgomery

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MONTREAL - As the alarming number of drownings in Quebec this summer continues to rise, residents are complaining to their municipalities about the lack of protective fencing around their neighbours' backyard pools.

The city of Terrebonne, where a 23-month-old died on June 26 after being removed from life support two days after falling into a pool, has received nine complaints so far this year, and has sent an inspector to check each one, spokesperson Joël Goulet said.

Longueuil received 20 complaints between May 2011 and July 6, four of which came in the last week, spokesman Alexandrine Coutu said in an email. The municipality sends an inspector within 48 hours of receiving a complaint to make sure the pool in question is up to code and, if not, residents are given 48 hours to fix the problem, she said.

While Terrebonne makes sure citizens obey a provincial law requiring a fence around all pools built after July 22, 2010, it also plans to post safety advice on its website to help locals prevent drownings, Goulet said.

All municipalities are bound by the provincial law, but pools built before the cut-off date need only be protected by a fence around the yard. Some critics, including Debbie Friedman, trauma director at the Montreal Children's Hospital, say it's not adequate protection.

"This fencing thing is ludicrous," Friedman said in an interview. "You can drown in a new pool and not an old one? It defies logic."

Dollard des Ormeaux's annual drowning prevention week, which starts July 21, will tackle some of the issues surrounding the 41 drowning deaths so far this summer in Quebec, up from 27 at the corresponding date last year. The aquatic centre will stage drowning simulations, offer boating and swimming safety tips, and offer Swim-to-Survive programs.

Friedman says more is needed, including municipal bylaws requiring all pools to be fenced in.

While Quebec's education minister has promised a Swim To Survive program for all Grade 3 students starting in the fall, Friedman said the course should be offered to even younger children and should have been instituted at least five years ago.

"Imagine if 41 people died of meningitis," she said. "The whole population would be vaccinated."

The most recent drowning was Sunday in Laval's Ste. Rose district when an

18-month-old child was found unconscious in the family's in-ground pool. She was taken to a nearby hospital, where she died about two hours later.

In Kirkland, a 16-month-old girl drowned on Wednesday morning after she was found unconscious and not breathing in a residential pool about 9: 40 a.m.

Friedman pointed out that, according to Safe Kids Canada, a national injury-prevention program, the majority of drowning deaths among young children involve those under age 5, and many of these deaths take place in backyard pools.

"People need to understand what vigilant supervision is around a pool," she said. "They shouldn't be sipping sangria and sitting there texting and chatting.

"Someone should be assigned to watching the kids in the pool and not just out of the corner of your eye."

smontgomery@montrealgazette.com

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