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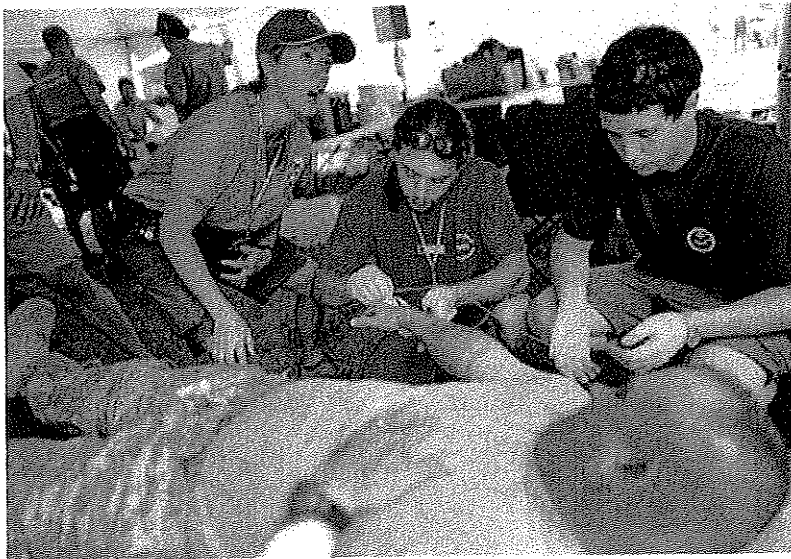
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Scouting officials emphasize safety at jamboree

By MARK BOWES



When 30,809 Boy Scouts and their 3,770 adult leaders begin arriving tomorrow at Fort A.P. Hill in Caroline County for what could be the last National Scout Jamboree in Virginia, the issue of safety will be paramount and put into practice like never before.

Alarmed by the accidental electrocution deaths of four Scout leaders at the last national jamboree in 2005 -- and the thousands of heat-related ailments of boys overwhelmed by blistering temperatures -- Scouting officials have adopted firm new rules and innovative procedures designed to limit safety and health-related problems during this year's 10-day event.

"Obviously, from the last jamboree, the rules were there, but they were lax rules and they weren't enforced, and they were somewhat ambiguous in interpretation," said Jonah Bowles, co-chairman of the Boy Scouts of America's Heart of Virginia Council Jamboree Committee covering central Virginia, which is sending 360 boys and 40 adults in 10 troops.

That attitude has shifted notably, Bowles said.

"All the rules this Jamboree, whether they appear to be very important rules or whether they appear to be insignificant rules, will be strictly enforced -- because every rule is in place for a purpose," he added. "So that's probably the biggest change that there is. It's just a change of mind-set, which also requires that everybody thinks safe."

Ian Coddington, who will lead Heart of Virginia Council Troop 1709, said the safety issue has been the No. 1 topic since the earliest days of preparation.

"Scoutmasters going to the Jamboree have been inundated . . . with e-mails and [other information] pertaining to safety in every shape, manner and form," said Coddington, who last led a Jamboree Scout troop in 1985.

Matt Hadley, who will lead Heart of Virginia Council Troop 1712, said he's held preparatory meetings with his boys since late December "and each step of the way we've promoted safety. The safety is about hydration and general first aid, those are the basics of it." Hadley is director of Publishing IT for Media General Inc., owner of the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

The most notable rule adopted as a result of the deaths five years ago is a requirement that no Scout structure -- including tents, flagpoles or gateways leading into individual troop sites -- can be higher than 10 feet. That directly addresses one of the contributing factors in the 2005 tragedy. The four leaders were electrocuted when the center pole of a large canopy tent they were helping a contractor erect touched overhead power lines.

The 10-foot height restriction was put in place after national Scouting officials consulted with the Rappahannock Electric Cooperative, which supplies electricity to the Fort A.P. Hill Army base, said National Jamboree Director Larry Pritchard.

"That's just a good kind of be prepared, preventive measure that we've put in place," said Pritchard, citing the Boy Scout motto.

Officials also have banned metal from gateways and flagpoles in troop subcamps, which can attract lightning during storms. Wood and PVC poles are being used as substitutes.

While some have grumbled privately at that requirement, many Scout leaders believe it's worth the inconvenience.

"With the thunderstorms we get around here, you don't want to risk lightning strikes," Coddington said.

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How to beat the heat -- and get tens of thousands of Scouts to keep watch on the temperatures and their health -- also has been a source of serious study since the last Jamboree.

At the 2005 event, hundreds of boys and visitors were felled by blistering temperatures as they were awaiting President George W. Bush's initial scheduled visit at the July 27, 2005, opening show, which had to be canceled as a lightning storm approached.

In all, nearly 3,500 of the Jamboree's 43,000 participants in 2005 fell sick from sweltering heat over 10 days, including about 500 people on July 27, when the heat index rose to 121 degrees, according to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dozens that day were taken to Fort A.P. Hill's medical clinic and to hospitals in Richmond and Fredericksburg. Military personnel carried boys on stretchers and tossed water bottles to the arena crowd.

Participants, observers and the CDC were critical of the way the BSA prepared for and handled the heat in 2005.

In the five years since, national Scouting officials have consulted with the U.S. Northern Command Joint Task Force, under the U.S. Department of Defense, "to help us build our safety tools to make sure that all our Scouts and visitors are in a safe environment," Pritchard said.

Perhaps the most significant development from that collaborative effort was the Scouts' decision to adopt a military-style heat-index system at the Jamboree that involves using color-coded flags at all program and activity sites, nearly 60 in all.

"We took what they knew and used and worked together with all of our Boy Scout program experts to craft a plan for us that was appropriate for our Scouts at the Jamboree," Pritchard said. "So we took military learning and applied it to the Boy Scouts."

Depending on the heat and humidity at any given hour during the day, a flag of a certain color will be raised to alert Scouts to the current temperature within several degrees, the level of exertion they can safely engage in, the amount of water they should drink and the rest they should take.

The system includes white, green, yellow, red and black flags, with white being the least severe (78-81.9 degrees) and black being most severe (over 90 degrees).

Each Scout, adult leader and Jamboree staff member will be issued small heat-index cards that they will wear around their necks with a lanyard. The cards display the heat-index system by color and temperature, along with the minimum amount of water they should drink per hour for that level of heat and humidity.

As a bonus, the backs of the cards articulate the Jamboree's "Lightning Policy," which tells Scouts when and how to respond to a storm with lightning.

"It may be the first time that anyone other than the military has used a [heat-index] system like this in the country," Pritchard said. "Not only is it a good tool for us at the Jamboree, but it's also a tool that all of our Scouts and leaders can take back to their local council, so they can then apply it to their summer camp or high-adventure programs."

The Jamboree's heat-index system will be backed by hourly temperature updates from the U.S. Northern Command Joint Task Force's weather service. "They can help us plan and anticipate what the weather will be," Pritchard said. "[Their] weather forecasts are as good as what you see on The Weather Channel or any local TV station."

The weather forecast calls for high temperatures in the low 90s tomorrow through Friday. There is a chance of showers and thunderstorms Tuesday and Wednesday.

In yet another change aimed at preventing mass heat casualties at Jamboree arena shows, organizers have switched the time of the first show on Wednesday from early evening to morning. The show will begin at 10 a.m., which will allow Scouts to march to the arena from their campsites in the cool of the

morning, Pritchard said.

"In past Jamborees, both of these [shows] have been early evening events, which has [forced] Scouts in the farthest campsites to leave their areas at 3:30 or 4 o'clock to march to the arena in the hot sun," Pritchard explained.

With the change, the Wednesday show will be over before the sun reaches its peak, he said. The second show on July 31, which celebrates Scouting's 100th anniversary and includes fireworks, will remain an evening event.

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In another layer of safety, the Scouts -- in addition to their heat-index cards -- will wear on a lanyard another small card that lists the "10 Safety Essentials" they need to safely participate. They are a water bottle, sunscreen, hat, hand sanitizer, lip balm, rain gear, personal first aid kit, flashlight, Jamboree map and Jamboree identification.

"It's just a simple checklist," Pritchard said. "It's right there in front of the Scouts so they know what they should have with them at all times."

Robert B. "Chip" Delano, who will lead Heart of Virginia Council Troop 1705, seemed to take the new rules and restrictions in stride -- a necessary imposition that should reduce the odds of another tragedy and fewer Scouts falling ill from the heat.

Delano was also a Jamboree Scoutmaster in 2005, and his troop was on the other side of camp when the four adult leaders from Alaska were struck down.

"You hope that things like that don't happen," he said. "But when you put 40,000-some people together for 10 or 12 days, just by the numbers, things will sometimes happen, unfortunately."

Hadley, of Troop 1712, said the proposed safety measures will be only as good as they are executed.

"I think they have done a good job of trying to make a difference," Hadley said. "Now time will tell how much of a difference. But it's not lip gloss. I think they have worked hard to make changes that have come directly as a result of lessons learned -- some the hard way, some just good lessons to be learned along the way."

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