

POWAY: School district wants to equip all its schools with defibrillators

Official says risk of sudden cardiac arrest prompted Poway Unified to act

By ANDREA MOSS - amoss@nctimes.com | Posted: Friday, June 25, 2010 7:31 pm



Pictured above (L-R): Enrique Christopherson (Cardiac Science), Maureen O'Connor (San Diego Project Heartbeat), Dr. John Rodgers (Scripps Clinic Cardiologist), Robert Roy (The Travis R. Roy Sudden Cardiac Arrest Fund), Katherine Morris (Poway High Graduate).

Poway Unified School District officials want to equip all 37 of the district's schools with automated devices that almost anyone could use to restart the heart of someone experiencing cardiac arrest.

The district's Board of Trustees gave the plan an initial green light Monday, with final approval expected in August.

Steve Salvati, director of risk management for the 33,000-student district, said Thursday that he knows of just one case in which someone went into cardiac arrest and died on a Poway Unified campus.

The student involved experienced a type of heart stoppage that would not have been helped by an electronic shock from one of the automatic devices.

However, the "ever-present" risk of undiagnosed heart conditions that could precipitate a life-threatening emergency with little or no warning is spurring the district to act, he said.

"Part of it is sports-related injury," Salvati said. "In children, that tends to be where you see the most heart condition- or heart attack-related deaths."

Teachers, parents attending school events and other visitors also could have a heart-related emergency at any time, he said.

Commonly referred to as AEDs, automatic external defibrillators are relatively simple devices that someone with no medical background can use to automatically diagnose potentially fatal cardiac arrhythmias.

The machines also can deliver an electrical shock that restores a heart's normal rhythm, when necessary.

The district already has 12 defibrillators at eight sites, including the swimming pools at Poway and Mt. Carmel high schools.

Salvati said that, because those machines were acquired individually over a period of years, the district has no formal policy or set of procedures covering the devices.

The plan being developed would ensure that every school has at least one defibrillator and establish standards for their accessibility and maintenance and for staff training in the devices' use.

Salvati said equipping all Poway Unified high schools with the devices and teaching those campuses' athletic trainers how to use the machines by summer's end would be the first goal.

That effort got a boost Monday with the donation of three defibrillators. One came from Bob Roy, whose 14-year-old son Travis died in 2005, about a month after he suffered a heart attack at his Murrieta middle school.

Bob Roy told the school board that although school officials and medical personnel responded quickly, Travis was not shocked with a defibrillator for 23 minutes. The jolt restarted his heart, but the delay left the teen in a coma until he died, said his father, who now runs a nonprofit dedicated to increasing public awareness of the potential for sudden cardiac arrest.

Scripps Clinic cardiologist John Rogers and recent Poway High graduate Katherine Morris donated the other two devices.

Salvati said the comprehensive plan would see all of the district's elementary and middle schools eventually getting their own defibrillators.

San Diego Project Heart Beat, a nonprofit organization that has helped place more than 5,500 automatic external defibrillators around San Diego County locations, has agreed to maintain Poway Unified's devices and train district staff members to use them.

The organization's program manager, Maureen O'Connor, was unavailable for comment Thursday. She told the school board the survival rate for someone whose heart has stopped goes from about 4 percent to 73 percent when an automatic external defibrillator is nearby.

Poway Unified is the 20th San Diego-area school district to develop a comprehensive defibrillator plan, O'Connor said.

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