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In wake of Iowa tragedy, area Scout camp 'prepared'

Camp Tamarack lives up to group motto with plans for weather, other emergencies.



Pat Bridges of the LaSalle Council of the Boy Scouts of America, left, gives BSA safety inspectors John Current, center, and Bob Lancaster a tour of the waterfront recently at Camp Tamarack in Jones. Tribune Photo/BARBARA ALLISON

ADAM JACKSON Tribune Staff Writer

JONES -- On a recent sunny summer morning, a group of men walked the shade-dappled lanes of Camp Tamarack and spoke of the unspeakable.

Just days after four Boy Scouts perished when a tornado ripped through the Little Sioux Scout Ranch in Iowa, adult leaders at Camp Tamarack were faced with a severe storm bearing down on their own slice of wilderness -- and the campers staying there.

"We were monitoring the whole thing," Camp Tamarack Director Aaron Bradford said, strolling through camp with representatives of a Boy Scouts of America camp inspection team. "You don't take

chances with weather like that."

Fortunately, the storm blew over with little more than heavy

rain and gusty winds, while those at the camp waited it out in the camp's dining hall. But it is times like that when the true meaning of the Boy Scouting motto of "Be Prepared" comes to light. And at Camp Tamarack, which is operated by the LaSalle Council of the Boy Scouts of America, following that motto not only helped campers find shelter from that severe storm, it also earned the camp a near-perfect score on its annual inspection by state and national BSA personnel this month.

LaSalle Council Scout Executive Pat Bridges said Camp Tamarack, which consists of more than 500 acres of wooded wilderness and glacial lakes in the remote hills of eastern Cass County, received 97 out of 100 points on a recent facility inspection by national representatives from the Boy Scouts of America.

"That's a testament to a lot of hard work by the camp staff," he said.

Camp Tamarack plays host to more than 12,000 Scouts and leaders yearly from both in and out of the eight counties within the council.

The goal of camp staff is to help campers enjoy themselves and learn the skills and lessons central to the Scouting tradition, from woodcraft to leadership. And they want that experience to be a safe one, Bridges said. "We have plans in place for just about everything you can think of," Bridges said. "And every leader is trained about what to do if we have to implement those plans."

The Camp Tamarack emergency plan includes detailed and specific plans for all the mishaps one might expect at a camp versed in indoctrinating boys into the outdoor world. Lost campers are covered, as are

missing swimmers, fire emergencies and approaching severe weather.

But what happens if the entire camp has to be evacuated? Or an earthquake occurs? Or terrorists stage a concerted attack on the area, taking campers hostage? Yep, there are plans for those events, too, and resident ranger George Kornfeld, who maintains the camp's operation throughout the year, knows them all.

"It is our job to do everything we can to be ready for anything," Kornfeld said.

One of the best ways to do that is to educate Scout leaders and their charges, who come to camp each week throughout the summer. To alert groups throughout the camp to an emergency situation, the facility has a siren that sounds different tones to indicate the emergency, and the camp holds a training session about the tones at the beginning of every camp week. Since the tragedy in Iowa, those training sessions have become serious business, Kornfeld said.

"I think everybody is being a lot more attentive now," he said.

That includes the men charged with making sure the camp conforms to the latest safety standards. Once a year, the camp receives a visit from representatives of the Boy Scouts of America Central Division, who give the entire facility a complete once-over.

Camp Tamarack's inspection came just a week after the disaster in Iowa, and was fresh in the minds of men like Jim Fox and Al Brothers, who were part of the inspection team. After spending the morning testing everything from water heaters to camp staff credentials, they were impressed with what they saw.

"This is a well-maintained camp," Brothers said. "Basically, we just come to make sure everything is up to the standards the (Boy Scouts of America) have set, and they do that very well here." Bridges said that the camp's dedication to safety is reflected in the low incidence of accidents and injuries. Although there are the occasional sprained ankles, wasp stings and asthma attacks, he said, serious incidents are few and far between, with a heart attack suffered by an adult leader the most recent.

And if the unspeakable did ever happen? Kornfeld noted that many of the reports of the tragedy in Iowa included accounts of the level of emergency response and calm competence displayed by the Scouts themselves.

He believes that if a disaster ever did befall Camp Tamarack, the Scouts there would do the same.

"We hold mock disaster drills with these young men. We train them in first aid and safety," Kornfeld said. "If something terrible happened, I'd like to think that being with a group of Boy Scouts would be a pretty safe place to be."

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