

Emergency Response Guide

for Lake Erie Boaters

Prepared by Lakeshore Towing - Erie, Pennsylvania

Key Emergency Contacts

Lakeshore Towing	
Phone:	(814) 453-6387
VHF:	Channel 16
Coverage:	PA waters of Lake Erie (directly); all U.S. waters via Interlake affiliates
Availability:	May 1 - Nov. 1
Best for:	Urgency: stuck/stranded, no immediate danger to life

USCG Station Erie	
Phone:	(814) 434-3648
VHF:	Channel 16
Coverage:	~800 sq mi along Lake Erie shore to intl. border
Availability:	Year-round
Best for:	True emergencies: immediate risk to life or property

This guide is for informational purposes and does not replace formal boating safety training. Always follow USCG and local regulations. When in doubt, call for help.

When Should I Call for Help on Lake Erie?

The first step to responding to an emergency is recognizing when one is happening. Call for immediate assistance if you encounter any of the following scenarios:

Immediate Danger Situations

- **Taking on water** that cannot be controlled by pumps
- **Fire or explosion** on board
- **Collision** with another vessel, object, or person
- **Running aground** with hull damage or inability to free your vessel
- **Loss of steering or propulsion** in heavy traffic, rough conditions, or near hazards

Medical Emergencies

- Serious injury, chest pain, difficulty breathing, or loss of consciousness
- Hypothermia or heat-related illness
- Any condition requiring urgent medical attention

Weather & Environmental Hazards

- **Severe weather** threatening vessel safety (high winds, lightning, large waves)
- **Fog** so thick that you cannot navigate safely
- **Caught in dangerous conditions** beyond your vessel's or crew's capabilities

Stranded or Adrift

- **Mechanical breakdown** with no auxiliary power
- **Out of fuel** and unable to reach port
- **Anchor dragging** toward hazards
- **Disabled and drifting** toward dangerous areas

When in doubt whether your situation qualifies as an emergency, call anyway. It's always better to request help early rather than wait until conditions worsen.

Initiating a Distress Call

VHF Radio Distress Call

The standard method for life-threatening emergencies is to use your VHF Marine Radio on Channel 16 to make a MAYDAY call.

Note: MAYDAY is for serious and life-threatening emergencies only! If you are not in grave or imminent danger but need urgent assistance (e.g., engine failure, controllable leak), use the signal "PAN-PAN" (pronounced pah-n-pahn) instead, followed by the same information.

Procedure

1. **Tune to Channel 16.** Ensure your radio is on and set to high power.
2. **The Distress Signal.** Say "MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY." Then say "THIS IS [Your Vessel Name and/or Call Sign]" (spoken three times).
3. **The Distress Message.** Say "MAYDAY" and your Vessel Name. Report your Position clearly and slowly. Report the Nature of your Emergency (what happened). Report the Number of people on board and the condition of any injured. Describe your Vessel (type, color, length). Say "OVER" and wait for a response.
4. **Repeat.** If you receive no immediate response, repeat the full distress call.

Digital Selective Calling (DSC)

If your VHF radio has DSC capability and is connected to your GPS: press the Red DSC Distress Button to automatically transmit a digital distress alert on VHF Channel 70 (156.525 MHz), which includes your vessel's unique MMSI (Maritime Mobile Service Identity) and your current GPS position. The USCG continuously monitors Channel 70 for these digital alerts. This is the fastest and most efficient way to signal distress.

You can register your recreational vessel for a domestic-use MMSI number through an issuing body such as BoatU.S. or U.S. Power Squadrons.

What Information to Give During an Emergency

Essential Distress Information (P.O.L.E.M.)

Info	Details
Position	Your exact location using GPS coordinates (lat/long) or a bearing and distance from a known landmark.
Onboard	The number of people currently on board and the condition of any injured persons.
Location	The name and/or call sign of your vessel (repeat 3 times). Also mention your vessel's description.
Emergency	The nature of your distress (e.g., "Sinking," "On fire," "Man Overboard," "Medical Emergency").
Measures	The kind of assistance required and what immediate action you are taking (e.g., "Using the bilge pump," "Preparing to abandon ship").

Additional Information

- **Vessel Description:** Type (sail, power), length, color of hull, superstructure, and distinguishing markings.
- **Seaworthiness:** Is the boat taking on water? Is it operable?

What Happens Next

Non-Emergency Situations

For situations where there is no immediate threat to life or vessel (e.g., engine failure, out of fuel, soft grounding), you would have used a PAN-PAN call or a direct call to a commercial towing service like Lakeshore Towing.

1. **Ensure all crew are safe.** If conditions are rough, have everyone put on a PFD.
2. **Maintain position.** Drop anchor to prevent drifting into hazards. Monitor your GPS position and drift rate.
3. **Listen to working channel.** After the initial call on Channel 16, switch to the assigned working channel (often 22A for the USCG).
4. **Attempt safe fixes.** If trained, you may attempt minor repairs. Do not attempt repairs that risk injury in rough seas.
5. **Ready the towing gear.** Clear your decks and have lines, fenders, and the bow cleat ready.
6. **Increase your visibility.** Turn on navigation lights if visibility is poor or it is near dusk/night.

What Happens During a Lake Erie Tow

Here's what to expect when Lakeshore Towing arrives at the scene:

1. **Assessment.** The operator will assess the condition of the vessel, water, and surroundings.
2. **Tow line.** The operator will pass a heavy-duty tow line (often flexible nylon) to your deck.
3. **Secure the line.** You will secure the tow line to your vessel's strongest point (bow eye or tow bridle).
4. **Chafe guards.** The operator will help place chafe guards wherever the line rubs against your boat.
5. **Under tow.** The operator navigates slow and steady. Keep your wheel centered if steering is functional.
6. **Monitor.** Watch your tow line connection continuously and report any issues over radio.
7. **Docking.** Follow the operator's instructions for final approach. Secure your own dock lines once positioned.
8. **Paperwork.** The operator completes paperwork for payment (membership plan or direct billing).

Emergency Situations

For situations involving grave and imminent danger (after a MAYDAY call to the USCG on Channel 16), the focus is solely on survival.

1. **Put on life jackets.** Immediately have everyone put on their PFDs. Secure all straps. This is the single most important action.
2. **Fight fire / control leak.** If there is a fire, use extinguishers, turn off fuel, position the boat so fire is downwind. If taking on water, locate the leak and use all available means to plug it.
3. **Ready the ditch bag.** Ensure your abandon-ship bag is accessible: EPIRB/PLB, flares, handheld VHF, water, first aid, medications, documents.
4. **Maintain radio watch.** Keep VHF tuned to Channel 16. Be ready to transmit your position again.
5. **Deploy visual signals.** Orange smoke signal in daytime, aerial red flare at night. Activate EPIRB/PLB if available.
6. **Maintain control.** Calmly assign crew specific tasks. Keep everyone together.
7. **Safely abandon ship.** If you must abandon, stay with the vessel or wreckage if possible - it is a much larger visual target. Secure the life raft and ditch bag before entering the water.

U.S. Coast Guard Sector Buffalo coordinates search and rescue operations throughout the eastern Great Lakes, with 24/7 emergency response on Lake Erie handled by USCG Station Erie.

Lake Erie Boat Safety Guide

Before You Head Out

- **Get a Safety Check:** Before the season begins, consider getting a free Vessel Safety Check from the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary or America's Boating Club to verify your boat meets all federal and state requirements.
- **Inspect Vessel and Equipment:** Check fuel and oil levels, ensure your bilge pump is working, and that you have an effective anchor with enough line for the depths you will be traveling.
- **File a Float Plan:** Provide a float plan to a reliable person on shore. Include your boat description, passenger names, planned route, expected return time, and a contact number.
- **Check the Weather:** Lake Erie weather can be notoriously volatile. Check the marine forecast before leaving. If a small craft advisory is issued, stay home. Monitor NOAA Weather Radio (162.400 MHz) while at sea.

On the Water

- **Boat Sober:** Operating a boat under the influence is extremely dangerous and illegal (BAC of 0.08% or higher). Impaired boating is one of the leading causes of fatalities on the water.
- **Pay Attention:** Maintain a proper lookout at all times. Follow the USCG Navigation Rules for collision avoidance.
- **Respect No-Wake Zones:** In Pennsylvania waters, operate at slow, no-wake speed within 100 feet of shoreline, docks, launch ramps, anchored vessels, or a person in the water.
- **Use an Engine Cut-Off Switch:** If your powerboat is less than 26 feet, you must use the ECOS link (lanyard) when on plane. This stops the engine if the operator falls overboard.

Safety Preparedness Kit

- **Life Jackets (PFDs):** One USCG-approved wearable personal flotation device per person.
- **Type IV Throwable Flotation (Boats 16'+):** Not intended to be worn, but to extend to persons thrown overboard. Includes rings, cushions, and rafts.
- **VHF Marine Radio:** Vital for communications and distress calls. Cell phone coverage is spotty on Lake Erie.
- **Nautical Charts and GPS:** Carry up-to-date nautical charts or ensure your chartplotter/GPS is functioning.
- **Visual Distress Signals:** On the Great Lakes, you are required to have approved VDS for both day and night use (e.g., flares, distress flag, or an electric SOS distress light).

Peace of Mind on the Water

An annual Lakeshore Towing Membership provides unlimited tows, on-the-water jumpstarts, and gas and parts delivery - plus invaluable peace of mind all season long.

Call (814) 874-0698 | Visit [LakeshoreTowing.com/membership-plans](https://www.lakeshoretowing.com/membership-plans)