



1 October 2024

Office of Polar Programs Director's FY 25 Safety Policy Reminder

The Office of Polar Programs (OPP) continually emphasizes the significance of safety and embraces a safety-oriented culture across all locations, whether a stateside office or a remote polar research site. Whether a new or experienced member of our safety conscious community, you are integral to our safety system and expected to be a "safety champion" to protect yourself and the team. This collective effort ensures safety in some of Earth's most hazardous environments.

Our strong safety culture is built on a foundation of shared responsibility. It's not just about individual actions, but about our collective effort. Regardless of role, each person is empowered to ask questions, identify hazards, and speak up when necessary. This collective effort, when combined with the actions of others, creates a safe working (and living when deployed) environment for all of us.

This results-based approach is grounded in the principle that our experiences shape and reinforce beliefs and actions. When individuals consistently see positive outcomes stemming from safe behaviors, such as reduced accidents or improved productivity, their beliefs in the effectiveness of these behaviors are strengthened. This cycle fosters a culture where safety becomes ingrained as a core value rather than a mere compliance requirement. Tell "good news" safety stories often and give credit to those who champion safety in their arena! It's the storytelling, especially stories that are relevant to our extreme environments that make people listen more closely because they come from the experiences of our fellow deployers and they serve as strong influencers for a positive safety culture. I challenge all of you on your individual teams to start your day, or week, with a positive safety story that came out of your past day or week's performance! I bet you have many!

Fatigue

Fatigue is a real risk in our deployed environment whether on a station, in the field, or on a vessel. Fatigue has two components - mental and physical - and both require management with formal planning (Fatigue Management Plans are an OPP Safety Policy requirement). Research has proven that many of us are sleep

deprived, and that's even before we deploy to a place with 24 hours of daylight, or in the winter, 24 hours of darkness, either of which can further affect sleep cycles. This increases risk of a tragic incident that could result in a serious injury or, as we have seen on a few sad occasions, a fatality. One slip in our personal risk awareness for any reason, not just because of fatigue, could be fatal to ourselves or our colleagues working or performing research in our vicinity, not to mention emergency responders who might be needed for life saving actions. Take care to monitor your fatigue by asking yourself several questions: "How am I feeling this morning?", "How was my buddy at breakfast?", "Does my team look rested and seem composed before or even during an activity? Leadership should fully support short temporary work "pauses" anytime work or research behavior appears that it is going to be unsafe due to fatigue. Any concerning or negative answers should be disclosed to your PI or supervisor for their engagement as soon as symptoms of fatigue are noticed.

Infectious Disease

As you will have heard by now, we have shifted from managing COVID-19 as an emergency, to handling it as an endemic virus, like other infectious diseases. Despite the often-reduced severity of individual infection (as compared to pre-vaccination disease), COVID-19 outbreaks can still impact our operations by removing key personnel, increasing the workload and risk for others. To mitigate the various risks, vaccination efforts are a preferred proactive strategy. Compliance with [CDC vaccination recommendations](#) remain essential to help ensure that all team members are available and can perform their crucial roles effectively.

Physical Qualification (PQ) Process

We are continuing to improve and simplify the PQ process. The *PQ Guidelines* are now publicly available on the [OPP PQ webpage](#) under "Resources". We updated several of the guidelines and have also eliminated several of the more-invasive aspects of the physical exam. In addition, we extended the Two-year PQ up to age 65. While recognizing the PQ process will never be easy, we are trying to make it more user-friendly. In the USAP, there is an electronic PQ submission system in place which we are hearing has already had a positive impact on participant's PQ processing and decreased frustration both at the participant level as well as for UTMB. As always, we need participant honesty to help ensure your personal safety while deployed and ask for your continued cooperation. You should know that purposeful "non-disclosure" is taken very seriously, and falsification could be prosecutable by the Department of Justice not to mention keep you from ever being deployed to our Polar environments again. Just don't do it.

University Colleagues

For all research activities, OPP will maintain an increased focus on ensuring our partner institutions and universities understand the Safety Policy, and corresponding expectation with compliance. Academic Risk Management Offices have an essential role to provide safety-related support for their research teams prior to deployment. The key to the success of field safety is early identification of hazards and development of mitigation strategies to ensure the availability of adequate resources. Following through on a field risk management plan also involves communication with the entire science team as well as coordination with multiple stakeholders. To an equal degree as with other activities, research teams are expected to develop “high risk” Hazard Control Plans (HCP) and follow the process identified in the Safety Policy when required. It is human nature to perform better when we feel safe, which can ultimately lead to more successful science with valuable published research findings. We recognize field time is limited, so we are here to help in any way to make you safely successful. Your science is the reason we are here. We need to ensure it is safely performed and with reasonable residual risk.

Supportive Resources

The U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) expects that U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) participants should uphold the highest ethical, professional and legal standards, as set out in the Polar Code of Conduct that all deploying personnel sign. NSF continues its commitment to combatting sexual misconduct at all supported stations, sites, and field camps. Everyone should be able to safely perform their duties, research, and other activities without risk to one’s life, emotional health, and/or focus which can further increase risk of a safety incident. Be a good community member and help ensure the safety of all your Polar family! If you see somebody in potential danger, use the skills learned in your SAHPR bystander intervention training to safely step in and say something or use a distraction technique to disrupt the perpetrator. If you are not comfortable with a situation or you yourself feel at risk, tell somebody who can help as soon as possible.

In the Antarctic, if you have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment or sexual assault in the current or prior USAP seasons, you can seek support and help through the confidential sexual assault and sexual harassment USAP Victim Advocate (USAPadvocate@LDSScorp.com; 720-568-1083). Additionally, if you need crisis support for sexual assault or sexual harassment, you can reach the NSF

Antarctic Helpline ([NSF Antarctic Helpline.org](https://www.nsf.gov/antarctic/helpline) or 833-673-1733). In the Arctic, call 1-844-235-9059 or submit a report through the [Ethics Point Intake System](#).

The Sexual Assault and Harassment Prevention and Response (SAHPR) program office is available to support survivors and victims wherever NSF-funded activities are conducted by providing resources, advocacy, and support with navigating how and where to initiate a report of sexual harassment, sexual assault and/or stalking. To contact the NSF SAHPR program office, email saferscience@nsf.gov.

Importance of Safety

Whether working in NSF or contractor offices states side, telecommuting, or during deployment, each member of the OPP team at large, whether employee, grantee, contractor, IPA, or military, or other is valued and makes a meaningful contribution. Working together, we can demonstrate that safety – including both physical and psychological safety - is a core value. (More information is available in the NSF OPP Safety and Occupational Health policy, <https://www.nsf.gov/geo/opp/policies.jsp> and related station Standard Operating Procedures).

If you want to learn more about the OPP safety culture, talk with your team leader. If you have any questions about the OPP Safety policy or our collaborative FY 25 Strategic Safety Management Plan (SSMAP), you may also contact the Safety and Occupational Health Officer, Mr. Jon Fentress (jfentres@nsf.gov).

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