How a Tourism Community United Around Water Safety

Kissimmee Florida, United States of America
Experience Kissimmee
Regional Areas (including counties, regions, provinces)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story
Kissimmee, Florida, a family vacation-home destination near the Everglades headwaters, faced a troubling public safety pattern: Osceola County recorded 67, 51 and 70 drowning or submersion incidents in 2022-2024 respectively, concentrated in vacation-rental-dense areas, with 70% of toddler drownings occurring during non-swim times even when an adult was nearby. Though public health intervention fell outside its usual scope, destination marketing organisation Experience Kissimmee stepped in as a convener, bringing together fire rescue, EMS, the sheriff's office, healthcare providers and hospitality partners into a Water Safety Task Force from August 2025, which generated over 100 ideas before refining them into a practical "Mission Zero" strategy: pre-arrival safety videos embedded in vacation-rental booking communications, a "Water Watcher" wristband programme designating an actively supervising adult at pool areas, and staff training on water safety and autism awareness. The initiative also strengthened funding for local children's swim education and is now being explored by hotels and other regions. The lesson: complex challenges rarely fit neatly within one sector, and a DMO can drive meaningful change not by acting alone but by convening the right partners and grounding solutions in the everyday operational reality of those who must implement them.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Kissimmee sits at the heart of Central Florida, welcoming millions of visitors each year to a destination known for its spacious vacation homes, world-famous attractions, diverse cultural influences, and access to the headwaters of the Everglades. Families from around the world choose Kissimmee as their home base, drawn by the flexibility of staying together under one roof and the opportunity to create lasting memories across generations.

Tourism is deeply woven into the fabric of the community. It supports more than a third of local jobs, drives economic opportunity, and connects residents and visitors through shared experiences. The destination's identity is shaped by a blend of old Florida heritage, Latino culture, outdoor adventure, and hospitality that welcomes everyone from first-time visitors to families returning year after year.

At its core, Kissimmee is a place built around bringing people together. Visitors come here to spend meaningful time with the people who matter most. And that spirit of connection would ultimately shape how the community responded to an emerging challenge affecting residents and visitors alike.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For a destination built on family vacations, the data revealed a difficult reality.
Local public safety partners, including Fire Rescue, EMS, and the Sheriff's Office, identified a troubling pattern: a high volume of drowning and submersion incidents, especially in areas dense with vacation rentals. These events reflect a growing trend, and behind each is a family whose vacation, and sometimes life, changed in an instant.
Drowning remains the leading cause of preventable death in Florida for children ages 1 to 4, with up to 450 unintentional deaths annually. Locally, Osceola County recorded 67 incidents in 2022, 51 in 2023, and 70 in 2024, with spikes during peak travel months such as April and July.
Clinical insight from Nemours Children's Hospital underscores the impact: for every fatal drowning, many more non-fatal submersions require emergency or inpatient care. Children under five, especially boys, face the highest risk, which increases in vacation settings where pools are unfamiliar and routines are disrupted.
Notably, 70 percent of toddler drownings occur during non-swim times, and in nearly 90 percent of cases, an adult is present. These incidents are rarely due to neglect, but to brief, silent moments. Risk is even higher for children with autism spectrum disorder.
This is not only a public safety issue, but a community challenge tied to the visitor experience, raising an important question about the role tourism organizations can play in addressing it.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Experience Kissimmee is a destination marketing organization (DMO) primarily funded by the tourist development tax, with a mission centered on driving visitation and supporting the visitor economy. Public health intervention is not within its traditional scope.

When presented with this information, the organization recognized a gap. There was no coordinated framework connecting tourism, public safety, and the visitor experience around this issue, even though many of these incidents were occurring in spaces directly tied to the visitor economy.

So, Experience Kissimmee expanded its impact by becoming a convener.
The vision that emerged was to bring partners together around a shared commitment to reducing drowning incidents in the destination, particularly within vacation homes, by reinforcing one core behavior: active adult supervision.
This effort became known as Mission Zero, not as a promise of control, but as a unifying goal that could align a community around prevention, awareness, and shared action.

The Journey: How change happened
The initiative began with a conversation. In May 2024, pediatric drowning trends were raised during a Kissimmee Cares Committee meeting — Experience Kissimmee's community engagement and charitable giving initiative —, planting the seed for what would follow. By April 2025, County leaders approached Experience Kissimmee to explore how the tourism sector might contribute to a broader solution.
From there, the work unfolded deliberately.
An internal strategy session in May 2025 aligned marketing, partnerships, and stewardship teams around a shared direction. In the months that followed, outreach expanded to include vacation rental managers, resort operators, attraction partners, and frontline public safety and health officials.
By August 2025, these efforts culminated in the first convening of the Water Safety Task Force. What made this moment significant was not just who was in the room, but the way the group worked. Participants were invited to contribute openly, generating ideas without constraint and mapping where current systems were falling short. More than one hundred ideas were captured in those early discussions.
What happened next proved equally important. The breakthrough was not simply assembling stakeholders. It was creating a space where public safety officials, healthcare providers, hospitality leaders, and tourism partners could tackle the challenge together. Through interviews and follow-up conversations, concepts were refined, simplified, and shaped into something that could realistically be implemented at scale.
This iterative process turned a broad set of ideas into a focused strategy grounded in day-to-day operations.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
By late 2025, the task force transitioned from planning to execution. The result was not a traditional awareness campaign, but a targeted approach designed to meet visitors at a specific and often overlooked moment: before they arrive.

The initiative introduced a pre-arrival communication model that integrates directly into the guest journey. Vacation rental managers are equipped with email and text templates that can be embedded into their existing booking communications. These messages direct guests to a centralized water safety page hosted by Experience Kissimmee, where a short, highly engaging video emphasizes the realities of supervision and how quickly incidents can occur.

To encourage participation, the experience is paired with an incentive. Viewers unlock access to a rotating collection of local discounts and offers, positioning safety as part of the vacation experience rather than separate from it.

At the property level, partners introduced the Water Watcher program, using simple, highly visible wristbands to designate a responsible adult actively supervising the pool area at any given moment. This shift helps move supervision from passive awareness to intentional action. Additional components, including water safety and autism awareness training for hospitality teams, further extend the initiative's reach. The momentum created through this collaboration has also supported broader community efforts, including expanded access to swim education programming for local children.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of the most important lessons from this process is that complex challenges rarely sit within a single sector. Addressing them requires creating space for shared ownership.

This initiative demonstrated that a DMO can play a meaningful role not by leading in isolation, but by convening the right voices, asking the right questions, and helping translate ideas into action that fits within existing systems.

It also reinforced the importance of listening, not only to data, but to the people responsible for implementation. By grounding solutions in operational reality, the group was able to move from aspiration to application in a relatively short period of time.

For other destinations, the takeaway is not to replicate a specific program, but to recognize the value of connection. Paying attention to local challenges, engaging partners early, and building solutions collaboratively can unlock opportunities that extend far beyond traditional tourism outcomes.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

What began as a localized effort continues to grow in reach and relevance.

The collaboration has strengthened relationships across public safety, health, and tourism sectors, creating a foundation for alignment. Local governments have stepped forward with funding to support swim education, reflecting a broader commitment to long-term prevention.

Within the industry, interest is expanding in ways that signal evolution. While initially designed for vacation rentals, hotel and resort partners are now exploring how to adapt the model to their guest experience. Rather than replicating it exactly, they are integrating pre-arrival messaging, on-property awareness tools, and staff training into existing frameworks. This shift demonstrates how a targeted solution can influence broader hospitality practices.

Beyond the destination, the framework is gaining attention as a model for other regions. Presentations to regional and statewide groups have opened the door for adaptation and scaling, while new partnerships are expanding the initiative's scope to include safety around natural bodies of water.
What began as a response to a local challenge has evolved into a model for how destinations can leverage partnerships, influence behavior, and create positive outcomes that extend beyond tourism

Awards or Certifications
While still in the early stages of implementation, the initiative has already been recognized through its integration into existing systems and partnerships across the region.
The framework has been adopted into property management communication platforms, incorporated into local safety discussions, and presented to regional leadership groups including the Osceola Health Leadership Council. These moments of recognition reflect validation from those working closest to the issue.
The initiative has also contributed to broader alignment with regional and statewide efforts, including invitations to share the model with the Orange County Drowning Prevention Team, the Central Florida Water Safety Task Force, and Florida's WaterSmartFL network.
The effort is supported by a publicly accessible resource that anchors the program and allows for continuity across partners.

Web Articles
https://mynews13.com/fl/orlando/news/2026/05/08/water-safety-initiative-geared-towards-fl-vacationers-ahead-of-summer

https://www.travelabilityinsider.com/blog/2026/04/12/kissimmee-community-corrals-to-save-lives-through-youtube/

Other Relevant Links
https://www.experiencekissimmee.com/water-safety

Quotes or Testimonials
"As Sheriff of Osceola County, the safety of our residents and visitors is always our top priority, especially around water... That's why I strongly support the Water Safety Initiative developed in collaboration with Experience Kissimmee and our community partners. This program provides simple, effective tools and tips, such as adult supervision, pool barriers, and alarms, that can save lives." — Sheriff Christopher A. Blackmon, Osceola County Sheriff's Office
"In Florida, drowning is the number 1 cause of preventable death in children ages 1-4... The Florida Department of Health in Osceola County encourages vacation home rental managers to participate in Experience Kissimmee's innovative water safety initiative to help keep our

residents and visitors safe as they enjoy time in our community." — Vianca McCluskey, Administrator, Florida Department of Health in Osceola County

"Through collaboration with Experience Kissimmee and the Osceola County Water Safety Task Force, we've implemented several practical and guest-friendly initiatives across our vacation rental properties. One of the most impactful has been our Water Watcher program... I strongly support the program developed by the task force and believe it provides an excellent framework for any organization looking to make a meaningful impact." — Haley L. Hall, Resort General Manager, Reunion Resort & Golf Club