First Aid Notes
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Being notes and background to assist debates over the question of wilderness first aid vs other first aid training for search and rescue team members.

Background: Red Cross First Aid Courses*
The old Red Cross Standard and Advanced First Aid courses came out in 1973. I used to teach them. Standard took 16 hours.† Advanced took 40 - 60 hours. Then, the Red Cross added a “Basic First Aid” which was a dumbed-down version of Standard First Aid. Then they killed the Standard and Advanced First Aid courses. Now, as there are no Standard or Advanced First Aid, there’s also no Basic First Aid, just First Aid.

The current American Red Cross First Aid offerings are:

- ARC First Aid for Students - 2 hours
- ARC CPR for Students - 30 minutes
- ARC First Aid and CPR for Students - 2.5 hours
- ARC Adult First Aid/CPR/AED - 5.5 hours
- ARC Adult + Pediatric First Aid/CPR/AED - 6.5 hours

Note that it's also possible to challenge and get certified by an instructor without going through the training. It is also worth noting that, for backcountry use, CPR and AED training are essentially useless.

National Safety Council also offers "OSHA-Compliant" first aid courses:

- NSC First Aid: 4.5 hours
- NSC First Aid, CPR and AED: 5.75 - 6.25
- NSC Advanced First Aid, CPR and AED: 16 - 40
- NSC Emergency Medical Response: 48 - 60

Background: OSHA Requirements
Red Cross does not make public the detailed content of its first aid courses, noting only that they "meet OSHA standards." By this, they mean 29 CFR 1910.151, which states "1910.151(b) In the absence of an infirmary, clinic, or hospital in near proximity to the workplace which is used for the treatment of all injured employees, a person or persons shall be adequately trained to render first aid. Adequate first aid supplies shall be readily available."

See also a directive at

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* This is put together mostly from old texts on my bookshelf and my memory; I apologize for any mistakes, and welcome corrections.
† I am not a fan of hours-based classes, and strongly support competency-based credentialing. Nonetheless, hours are one way to compare courses when we don't have access to details of the curriculum.
that confusingly states

"Persons who have a current training certificate in the American Red Cross Basic, Standard or Advanced First Aid Course shall be considered as adequately trained to render first aid in fulfilling the requirements of the Occupational Safety and Health Standards, Subpart K., Medical and First Aid (29 CFR1910.151(b)), The American Red Cross Standard Course is the recommended MINIMUM level of first-aid training."

This OSHA webpage has guidance that is even less formal than a letter of interpretation:

https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/medicalfirstaid/programs.html

"First aid training is primarily received through the American Heart Association, American Red Cross, National Safety Council (NSC), and private institutions. The American Heart Association, American Red Cross and NSC offer standard and advanced first aid courses via their local chapter/training centers. After completing the course and successfully passing the written and practical tests, trainees receive two certificates; (adult CPR and first aid). An emphasis on quick response to first aid situations is incorporated throughout the program. Other program elements include: basic first aid intervention, basic adult cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and universal precautions for self-protection. Specific program elements include training specific to the type of injury: shock, bleeding, poisoning, burns, temperature extremes, musculoskeletal injuries, bites and stings, medical emergencies, and confined spaces. Instruction in the principles and first aid intervention of injuries will cover the following sites: head and neck, eye, nose, mouth and teeth, chest, abdomen, and hand, finger, and foot injuries. Employers are responsible for the type, amount, and maintenance of first aid supplies needed for their particular program. The training program should be periodically reviewed with current first aid techniques and knowledge. Basic adult CPR retesting should occur every year and first aid skills and knowledge should be reviewed every three years. OSHA recommends that CPR training include having trainees develop 'hands-on' skills through the use of mannequins and partner practice. The references below provide further fundamentals to help develop and maintain first aid program and skills."

[emphasis added]

In 1996, the American Red Cross developed a wilderness first aid module to add to their entry-level first aid classes. The text was called "When Help is Delayed" and it was pretty good. Disclosure: I and others of the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference were major contributors to it, the two people on the cover were even members of the ASRC. Now it's almost impossible to find these courses and the national American Red Cross doesn't even admit that they offer it, though a few local chapters here and there still offer the course.

Also, in 2014, the Red Cross started a new course, Wilderness and Remote First Aid, which lasts for 16 hours. The curriculum was basically donated to the Red Cross by the Boy Scouts of America. The text materials are available online at:


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As far as I can tell, the American Heart Association has never offered first aid classes outside of CPR and AED classes, certainly nothing that meets OSHA requirements.
It has been roundly criticized by other providers of wilderness first aid courses, as this BSA/Red Cross course doesn’t adhere to the recommendations of the Wilderness Medical Society, published in 2013: *Minimum Guidelines and Scope of Practice for Wilderness First Aid.*¹

I have to agree. If you’re looking for a definitive statement of what a wilderness first aid course should entail, who do you trust more? The Boy Scouts, or an international physician-led medical society that publishes a peer-reviewed medical journal?

I did a point-by-point comparison of the WMS wilderness first aid curriculum with the requirements of OSHA, and it meets them all. Except for that one phrase “confined spaces.” And note it’s not crush injury or entrapment, it’s “confined spaces.” And it’s not having a safety plan, or rescue plan, for confined spaces, that’s in separate OSHA requirements. It’s first aid for the medical condition of “confined spaces.”

I have no idea what first aid for “confined spaces” is, or why it would be different than regular first aid. I’ve been teaching first aid and EMS for 45 years, and practicing emergency medicine for almost 30 years, but I’ve never known of any first aid for a confined space. Some people like confined spaces, as they make them feel secure; most cavers are like this. Some people hate confined spaces with a passion – we call this clausrophobia, maybe that’s what OSHA means – and the solution for this is to get out of the confined space. Sometimes it’s hard to get someone out of a confined space, which is why there are courses in trench rescue, collapsed building rescue, mine rescue, and cave rescue (which I’ve been doing for 45 years and teaching for most of those years). But there is no first aid treatment for being in a confined space other than learning one of these rescue disciplines which are clearly beyond the scope of a first aid course; even the awareness-level course for cave rescue (Orientation to Cave Rescue) is longer than the old Red Cross 16-hour Standard First Aid course. So I think we can reasonably ignore this demand for teaching a non-existent first aid discipline.

Reference