

# **Building Defensible Standards for Thermal Bathing and Contrast Therapy**

## **A Framework for Safety, Trust, and Operational Integrity**

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Longevity Law standardizes risk architecture for thermal bathing spaces through risk reviews, educational development, and certification pathways.

### **About the Author**

MacKenzie Boling, Esq. is the founder of Longevity Law LLC, where she standardizes risk architecture for thermal bathing spaces through risk reviews, educational development, and certification pathways. A practicing attorney and former massage therapist, her work focuses on the legal, operational, and ethical frameworks shaping sauna, cold plunge, contrast therapy, and bathhouse businesses in the United States. Her writing explores how emerging thermal bathing spaces can grow with greater clarity, stronger operational foundations, and a more credible basis for long-term trust.

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### **Thesis Statement**

Thermal bathing traditions may be ancient, but their modern commercial implementation in the United States often lacks sufficiently defined standards for safe, coherent, and defensible operation. As sauna, cold plunge, bathhouse, and contrast therapy offerings expand across hospitality, wellness, and recovery settings, the industry faces a growing need for standards that address not only environmental and physical safety, but also communication, screening, staff role clarity, operational integrity, incident response, and consumer trust. This white paper argues that such standards are necessary to support the sustainable growth, insurability, legitimacy, and long-term credibility of thermal bathing spaces in the United States.

### **I. The Need for Defensible Standards**

Thermal bathing and contrast therapy are expanding rapidly across the United States. Sauna studios, bathhouses, guided contrast experiences, cold plunge memberships, recovery clubs, hospitality integrations, and ritualized bathing concepts are gaining visibility in both urban and destination markets. What was once culturally specific, regionally rooted, or limited to niche wellness communities is now being adapted into modern commercial offerings at increasing speed.

This development is not inherently problematic. In many respects, it reflects a meaningful cultural shift. Consumers are seeking experiences that feel embodied, restorative, communal, and disciplined. Thermal bathing spaces can meet that demand in powerful ways. They can create environments that support regulation, ritual, recovery, and repeated behavioral engagement. They can also offer an alternative to more commodified or purely aesthetic models of wellness.

The problem is not expansion itself. The problem is expansion without a sufficiently articulated operating framework.

More operators are entering the space. Public exposure and consumer adoption are increasing. Service designs are becoming more varied, and ritual formats are becoming more ambitious, immersive, and commercially visible. As the field grows, it is no longer defined only by straightforward hot-and-cold access. It now includes guided experiences, social bathing environments, performance and recovery positioning, hospitality-driven programming, and branded ritual offerings that may differ significantly from one business to the next. That variation is not necessarily a weakness, but without a coherent framework it can produce confusion about what guests are being offered, what operators are responsible for, and what responsible implementation actually requires.

In the current U.S. market, thermal bathing businesses are often being built through a combination of inspiration, intuition, imported tradition, hospitality design, and consumer demand. What is frequently missing is a clear articulation of what sound implementation should look like in practice. Operators may invest heavily in aesthetics, programming, and guest appeal while underinvesting in the less visible systems that shape actual exposure: consumer-facing language, contraindication screening, role clarity, emergency readiness, waiver quality, event documentation, insurance alignment, escalation pathways, and operational consistency.

This gap matters because thermal bathing is not a neutral environment. Heat stress, cold exposure, slippery surfaces, altered judgment, intense physiological response, social pressure, alcohol-adjacent or hospitality-adjacent settings, guided ritual formats, and variable guest health status all create circumstances in which poorly defined systems can have consequences. The issue is not that thermal bathing is uniquely dangerous. The issue is that it is sufficiently demanding, sufficiently immersive, and sufficiently variable to require more intentional structure than many operators currently realize.

At present, the field often relies on fragmented assumptions rather than clearly articulated standards. Some businesses borrow language from traditional bathing cultures without translating that language into workable systems. Others borrow from fitness, spa, hospitality, or biohacking models that do not fully account for the realities of thermal exposure and contrast-based programming. Still others rely too heavily on informal norms, broad waivers, or “common sense” expectations in settings where guest understanding may be inconsistent and staff judgment may be uneven. The result is a growing industry without a sufficiently unified operational logic.

That absence of structure carries practical consequences. As more consumers enter the market, the potential grows for inconsistent guest experiences, preventable incidents, uneven staff

responses, and trust breakdowns that could have been mitigated through clearer expectations and stronger operational discipline. In parallel, insurer scrutiny is likely to increase as thermal bathing models become more visible, more numerous, and more varied in their execution. A field that expands quickly without coherent standards may become harder to insure, harder to defend, and easier to dismiss as inconsistent or trend-driven rather than professionally grounded.

Standards help solve that problem.

They do not exist to sterilize ritual, suppress innovation, or flatten cultural nuance. They exist to create clarity around what responsible operation requires. They establish a shared baseline for how businesses communicate risk, define staff roles, prepare for foreseeable incidents, support informed participation, and align front-end experiences with internal discipline. In emerging industries, standards function as infrastructure. They make it easier for serious operators to build well, for consumers to understand what they are entering, for insurers to assess exposure with greater confidence, and for the field itself to mature without being undermined by preventable inconsistency.

The need is especially pressing because the industry is still young enough to be shaped. This is a moment when norms are being formed in real time. The businesses that enter the market now will influence what guests come to expect, what incidents become normalized, what insurers come to fear, and what regulators may eventually scrutinize. If the field develops without clearer operating standards, it risks becoming harder to defend, harder to insure, and easier to dismiss as trend-driven rather than professionally grounded.

A more structured approach offers a different path. It allows thermal bathing spaces to preserve experiential richness while also developing the systems necessary for durability. It supports a model of growth that is not merely attractive, but coherent; not merely popular, but trustworthy; not merely innovative, but resilient.

The question, then, is not whether thermal bathing should continue to expand. It is whether that expansion will be supported by standards capable of protecting guests, guiding operators, and strengthening the long-term legitimacy of the field.

## **II. What Thermal Bathing Standards Should Address**

If thermal bathing and contrast therapy are to mature as credible and durable commercial offerings in the United States, the field requires more than general enthusiasm for sauna, cold plunge, or ritualized recovery. It requires standards capable of addressing the actual conditions under which these experiences are marketed, delivered, supervised, and repeated at scale.

Such standards should not be limited to equipment specifications or generalized warnings. Nor should they focus so narrowly on physical environment that they ignore the communication, staffing, procedural, and consumer-trust dimensions that shape overall exposure. A meaningful framework for thermal bathing should instead address the full operational ecosystem in which these offerings occur.

At minimum, that framework should address the following categories.

### **A. Representation and Consumer-Facing Communication**

Standards should address how thermal bathing businesses describe their services to the public. This includes the language used on websites, menus, membership materials, signage, staff scripts, social media, and promotional content.

Consumer-facing communication matters because it shapes guest expectations before the experience begins. If offerings are described in overly vague, overstated, medicalized, or misleading terms, guests may misunderstand the nature of the experience, the role of the staff, or the outcomes they should reasonably expect. Standards in this category should promote clarity, accuracy, and consistency in how services are represented, particularly where claims may create confusion, overpromise results, imply medical expectations, or suggest therapeutic certainty that exceeds the operator's actual role or substantiation.

### **B. Screening, Consent, and Guest Readiness**

Standards should address how businesses evaluate guest readiness for thermal exposure and contrast-based experiences, identify obvious contraindications, and communicate foreseeable stressors, limitations, and participation-related considerations.

This does not require transforming thermal bathing into a clinical environment. It does, however, require a more coherent approach to informed participation. Guests should receive sufficiently clear information to understand the nature of the experience they are entering, the intensity it may involve, and the conditions under which self-limitation, staff support, or deferral may be appropriate. Standards in this category should support meaningful informed participation through appropriately structured screening, consent, and disclosure practices that fit the setting and the intensity of the offering.

### **C. Scope of Service and Staff Role Clarity**

Standards should address what staff are responsible for, what they are actually doing in practice, how those responsibilities are communicated, and how service boundaries are maintained.

As thermal bathing businesses become more experiential, staff roles may become less obvious. In some settings, staff may be facilitating atmosphere, timing, instruction, ritual, or general guest support. In others, they may be perceived as offering individualized guidance with health-related implications, even when no such role is formally intended. Standards in this category should clarify the difference between hosting, facilitation, education, supervision, and any language or conduct that may cross into clinical implication or unsupported therapeutic positioning. Clear role boundaries help protect both guests and operators from confusion that can undermine trust and create avoidable exposure.

#### **D. Environmental and Session Safety**

Standards should address the physical and procedural conditions that shape the safety of the guest experience. This includes heat, cold, transitions between modalities, supervision patterns, circulation paths, hydration expectations, emergency readiness, sanitation logic, environmental design, and operational consistency.

Thermal bathing environments are dynamic. They often involve elevated temperatures, intense cold exposure, slippery surfaces, dim or immersive atmospheres, altered pacing, and varied guest tolerance. Standards in this category should therefore extend beyond broad warnings and consider the operational realities of how guests move through space, interpret cues, and respond under stress. The goal is not to eliminate intensity, but to ensure that intensity is supported by coherent systems.

#### **E. Programming Structure and Ritual Format**

Standards should address how experiences are sequenced, guided, and operationalized, especially where offerings move beyond simple facility access into structured sessions, facilitated rituals, themed experiences, or repeated programmed circuits.

As thermal bathing businesses innovate, programming may become more immersive, branded, or emotionally charged. That creativity is part of the field's appeal, but it also raises operational questions. Standards in this category should consider the level of structure being imposed, the degree of guest autonomy preserved, the communication of pacing and expectations, and the consistency with which programmed experiences are delivered. The more guided or ritualized an offering becomes, the more important it is that its internal logic be clear and supportable.

#### **F. Incident Response, Documentation, and Escalation**

Standards should address what happens when something goes wrong. This includes immediate response expectations, event documentation practices, internal reporting channels, complaint handling, and escalation logic.

A business does not become credible merely because it hopes incidents will be rare. Credibility depends in part on whether foreseeable problems have been anticipated and whether the organization can respond with consistency rather than improvisation. Standards in this category should support reasonable preparation for guest distress, slips, falls, exposure-related events, interpersonal issues, complaints, and other disruptions that may arise in immersive or physically demanding environments. They should also encourage documentation systems that allow operators to show reasonable systems, learn from events, and respond with discipline rather than ad hoc judgment.

## **G. Operational Integrity and Risk Allocation**

Standards should address the backend systems that shape total exposure, even when guests never directly see them. This includes insurance alignment, waiver quality, staffing logic, policy coherence, vendor and equipment considerations, and the internal decisions by which risk is identified, assigned, and managed.

This category matters because the credibility of a thermal bathing business depends not only on what it offers, but on how well its internal systems support what it offers. Operators may present a polished guest experience while still relying on fragmented documentation, inconsistent policies, weak insurance alignment, or unclear accountability structures. Standards in this category help connect external experience with internal rigor and clarify the operational choices that shape overall exposure.

## **H. Trust, Ethics, and Field Sustainability**

Finally, standards should address the broader trust relationship between thermal bathing businesses, their guests, their insurers, and the field itself.

An industry can lose legitimacy not only through catastrophic failure, but through repeated inconsistency, exaggerated claims, preventable confusion, and public experiences that erode confidence over time. Standards in this category should therefore support ethical communication, appropriate restraint, responsible positioning, and an operational philosophy that values long-term credibility over short-term novelty. In emerging fields, trust is not a soft concept. It is a structural asset. Businesses operating in this space are not only shaping their own reputations; they are shaping whether the field as a whole is perceived as serious, trustworthy, and sustainable.

Taken together, these categories reflect a broader point: thermal bathing standards must address not only whether a space looks intentional, but whether it operates coherently. They must connect front-end experience with back-end discipline. They must help businesses preserve ritual

richness while also building systems capable of supporting safety, trust, and operational integrity at commercial scale.

A standards framework that addresses these categories will not answer every operational question in every setting. It will, however, create a more defensible baseline from which operators, educators, insurers, and future governance structures can begin to build.

### **III. A Standards-Informed Future for Thermal Bathing Spaces**

If thermal bathing in the United States is to mature into a respected and enduring sector, it will need more than demand, design, and momentum. It will need mechanisms that translate broad principles into practical application.

A written framework, by itself, is only the beginning. For standards to influence real-world conduct, they must be interpreted, taught, applied, and revisited over time. That means the future of this field depends not only on articulating what responsible operation should include, but also on developing ways to evaluate alignment, improve implementation, and signal seriousness to the public.

One important function of a standards-oriented model is assessment. Businesses benefit from more than general guidance; they benefit from structured review processes that examine whether the way they market, staff, sequence, supervise, document, and internally support their offerings is actually consistent with the level of care their concept requires. In this sense, review is not merely corrective. It is translational. It helps convert abstract principles into business-specific analysis.

Education is equally important. A category cannot mature through enforcement alone. Operators, facilitators, founders, and emerging leaders need opportunities to understand the reasoning behind the framework, not just its conclusions. Educational development helps explain why certain practices create confusion, where pressure points tend to arise, how stronger decisions can be made earlier, and what sounder operational judgment looks like in context. In a young industry, education is one of the primary ways norms are formed before they are tested by failure.

Visible markers of alignment may also play a meaningful role. Where clear criteria and a credible review process exist, certification pathways can help distinguish businesses that have taken concrete steps toward stronger implementation. A seal or similar marker should never function as decorative branding alone. Its value depends on whether it reflects an intelligible framework, a real assessment process, and a threshold for continued use. When properly

grounded, such signals can help guests, collaborators, and counterparties identify businesses that have invested in disciplined operation rather than relying solely on presentation.

Over time, a more developed ecosystem may emerge around this work. That ecosystem could include continuing education, periodic reassessment, public-facing guidance, refinement of criteria, and eventually a more formal advisory or stewardship structure to support revision and interpretive consistency. Not every element must exist immediately. But the long-term trajectory should move beyond isolated business choices and toward a more coherent model of professionalization.

This is especially important in a sector that draws from tradition while adapting to modern commercial realities. Thermal bathing does not need to become sterile in order to become credible. It does not need to abandon atmosphere, ritual, or cultural richness in order to become more professionally grounded. What it does need is a stronger bridge between the guest experience and the internal systems that sustain it.

A standards-informed future would make that bridge more visible.

It would encourage operators to think more carefully about what their offerings require behind the scenes. It would help educators teach with greater precision. It would give insurers and other external stakeholders a clearer basis for understanding how different businesses are approaching responsibility. It would also make it easier for the field to evolve without becoming defined by avoidable disorder.

The larger goal is not uniformity for its own sake. Thermal bathing spaces may vary in style, scale, ritual intensity, and business model. What matters is that variation occurs within a more coherent framework for judgment. A healthy field can accommodate difference while still expecting discipline.

That is the opportunity now in front of thermal bathing in the United States: not simply to grow, but to grow with clearer structure, stronger internal logic, and a more credible foundation for the future.

#### **IV. Why This Matters Now**

The need for standards in thermal bathing and contrast therapy is not theoretical. It is timely.

Thermal bathing spaces are expanding at a moment when consumer interest is accelerating, public visibility is increasing, and business models are diversifying faster than the field's operating norms are solidifying. More operators are entering the space. More consumers are

encountering sauna, cold plunge, contrast therapy, and bathhouse experiences for the first time. More offerings are being packaged not merely as amenities, but as rituals, memberships, recovery systems, lifestyle practices, and identity-driven wellness environments. That growth creates opportunity, but it also raises the stakes of inconsistency.

As public adoption increases, so does the likelihood that guests will arrive with varying assumptions, expectations, health profiles, and levels of familiarity. Some will understand thermal bathing as a disciplined personal practice. Others will encounter it through social media, performance culture, hospitality branding, or loosely translated wellness narratives that emphasize outcomes more than context. In that environment, unclear communication, weak screening, overstated claims, or inconsistent staff roles are no longer minor internal issues. They become field-shaping problems.

This matters now because industries are often defined early by what they normalize.

The businesses operating in the present moment are helping establish what guests will come to expect, what insurers will come to question, what incidents may become predictable, and what regulators may eventually scrutinize. If a field matures without sufficiently defined standards, inconsistency can harden into industry habit before better practices have been clearly articulated. At that point, corrective efforts become more difficult, more expensive, and less persuasive than if structure had been built earlier.

The issue is not simply whether individual incidents occur. It is whether the field develops a reputation for coherence or confusion. A sector marked by inconsistent communication, uneven safeguards, preventable incidents, and blurred service boundaries may become harder to defend, harder to insure, and easier to dismiss as trend-driven rather than professionally grounded. By contrast, a sector that develops clearer norms is better positioned to build public trust, attract serious operators, and demonstrate that growth is being matched by discipline.

Insurer scrutiny is likely to become increasingly important in this context. As thermal bathing businesses become more visible and more varied in form, questions of underwriting, risk allocation, documentation, supervision, and operational controls are likely to intensify. A business category that lacks sufficiently defined standards may present itself to the insurance market as novel but unstable. A category that can articulate clearer expectations, by contrast, becomes easier to understand, assess, and potentially support.

This also matters now because thermal bathing is still young enough, in its current American commercial form, to be meaningfully shaped. The field has not yet fully calcified. Its norms are still being written in real time by founders, operators, educators, facilitators, consultants,

insurers, and early adopters. That creates a narrow but important opportunity: standards can still function as formative infrastructure rather than merely reactive correction.

Standards, in this sense, are not anti-growth. They are what make durable growth possible.

They help ensure that innovation is not detached from responsibility, that experiential richness is not built on operational vagueness, and that public enthusiasm does not outpace the systems needed to support it. They help distinguish serious stewardship from improvised expansion. They also help preserve the long-term credibility of thermal bathing itself by reducing the likelihood that preventable inconsistency will define public perception of the field.

Without structure, thermal bathing businesses may grow in visibility before they grow in stability.

That is why this matters now. The question is not only whether thermal bathing and contrast therapy will continue to expand in the United States. The question is whether that expansion will be guided by standards capable of supporting safety, trust, operational integrity, and long-term legitimacy before avoidable instability becomes part of the industry's foundation.

## **V. Conclusion**

Thermal bathing and contrast therapy are entering a new phase in the United States. What was once peripheral is becoming increasingly visible, commercial, and culturally influential. That evolution brings real promise, but it also brings responsibility.

As more businesses enter the sector, more guests participate, and more operators experiment with format, pacing, and positioning, the absence of clearly articulated standards becomes more consequential. The question is no longer whether thermal bathing is growing. The question is whether the structures surrounding that growth are developing with equal seriousness.

This white paper has argued that the answer cannot rest on aesthetics, enthusiasm, tradition, or market demand alone. A field becomes more credible when it can define the conditions of responsible practice with greater precision. For thermal bathing spaces, that means building a framework that addresses communication, readiness, staff boundaries, environmental conditions, internal procedures, backend accountability, and the broader stewardship of public trust.

The aim is not to strip thermal bathing of its richness. It is to support a version of growth that can endure. A space may be beautiful, culturally resonant, and deeply affecting, but if its internal systems are unclear, inconsistent, or weakly aligned with the experience it offers, its foundation remains vulnerable. By contrast, a business that pairs strong experiential design with sound

operational judgment contributes not only to its own stability, but to the legitimacy of the sector more broadly.

The stakes extend beyond any single operator. The norms established now will influence how guests interpret these spaces, how insurers evaluate them, how incidents are understood, and how the field is perceived in the years ahead. A sector that develops with greater coherence is more likely to earn confidence. A sector that expands without sufficient discipline risks undermining itself.

For that reason, the development of standards in thermal bathing should be understood not as an administrative exercise, but as an act of field-building. It is part of how an emerging category defines its values, protects its participants, and creates conditions for lasting credibility.

Thermal bathing traditions may be ancient, but their future in the American commercial landscape will depend on more than heritage alone. It will depend on whether the businesses shaping that future are willing to pair innovation with rigor, experience with accountability, and growth with structure.

That work is still early. Which is precisely why it matters now.

### **About the Author**

MacKenzie Boling, Esq. is the founder of Longevity Law LLC, where she standardizes risk architecture for thermal bathing spaces through risk reviews, educational development, and certification pathways. As an attorney and former massage therapist, she works at the intersection of wellness innovation and legal reality, with a focus on sauna, cold plunge, contrast therapy, and bathhouse operations in the United States.

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