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PERSPECTIVES A MESSAGE FROM NRPA'S LEADERS

Water Safety



Welcome to the annual aquatics issue. I've been very eager to write this month's Perspectives column and will begin with a bit of a personal share.

In the wake of my father's passing, I found myself flooded with so many memories, one of which I had almost completely forgotten. Not too long after it opened in 1976, my family went on a very special vacation to Fort Wilderness campground in Walt Disney World and spent one of the days at its River Country water park. I had taken swim lessons at our public pool and knew the basics of how to swim but was nervous about deep water — especially if touching the bottom with my feet placed the water's surface well over my head. My mom talked me into going down the park's slippery slide falls with the promise that I would be able to touch the bottom easily. Well, I landed in the water and went down into what I now know was eight feet of water. I couldn't find the bottom and panicked. I remember choking in the water, flailing, and eventually being pulled out by a lifeguard. My moral of the story: trust but verify.

I share that experience because a lot has changed since the '70s. Learn-to-swim programs have evolved significantly from a focus largely on swimming skills and techniques to overall water safety, drowning prevention, water acclimation and survival skills. Adaptive pro-

grams and community outreach efforts, especially those happening right now, have begun to close the wide gaps in water access and safety and reduce the disparities in accidents and drownings, which often are higher among underserved demographics.

Water park design and aquatics management practices have evolved considerably since the '70s to the sophisticated field of today, which centers safety standards and a holistic approach. Creativity and technological innovations in the design of pool and water park elements have flourished, as have the aid of smart technologies like RFID bands, which make enjoying aquatics facilities even easier. Accessibility tools and designs have opened up aquatics access for people with disabilities more than ever. And advances in environmental sustainability have improved water and energy efficiency and helped parks embrace natural landscaping and sustainable materials in whole new ways.

Foundational to all of the above evolutions is a mindset shift around water safety that has infused all aspects of aquatics and aquatics management. We now recognize that none of this is an "either/or" proposition — for example, "either you can have a safe experience or you can have a fun one," or "either you can offer an aquatics program that is affordable or you can offer one that centers guest experience and sustainability." These aren't binary choices anymore. The field has truly risen to the challenge and is offering a wealth of advancements in programming, training, equipment and design.

River Country was innovative in its day, which demonstrates one of the things I love most about the field of parks and recreation — we never stop learning and innovating. And in our field of public parks and recreation, our learning and innovation centers the health and well-being of our communities, always.

I hope you enjoy the content in this issue and find an idea or two that can help you as you plan out your summer-focused programs and projects.

KRISTINE STRATTON

President and CEO



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Youth Sports Survey Shows the Need to Get More Girls in the Game

By Samantha Serrano

hether playing on a team league or after school with friends on a neighborhood field, youth benefit from playing sports. Young people who participate in youth sports reap several immediate and long-term benefits, from enhanced mental and physical health to improved academic performance and career success. However, not all children participate in youth sports and experience these benefits, especially girls. That is why NRPA and Nike are partnering to improve girls' sports participation. Through this collaboration, they plan to address and advance gender equity in youth sports.

In October 2024, NRPA and Nike launched the Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation Survey to better understand the state of youth sports delivery through parks and recreation by identifying gaps and opportunities for advancing youth sports equity. Findings from the survey, summarized in the Youth Sports in Parks and

Recreation report, show that many agencies have begun to take steps to narrow gender gaps, but more work is necessary in the field.

Park and recreation agencies offer a variety of youth sports activities, most with mixedgender options.

Park and recreation agencies pro-

vide structured team and individual youth sports and unstructured, independent play opportunities at park and recreation facilities. Team sports leagues (91%) and sports camps/clinics (81%) are the most common youth sports activities offered by park and recreation agencies. Almost all agencies (99%) provide mixed-gender options for their youth sports, while 67 percent include girls-only and 57 percent include boys-only sports opportunities. Most often, girls-only options include softball (reported by 65 percent of agencies), cheerleading (46%), lacrosse (38%) and basketball (37%).

Girl participants and women coaches are underrepresented in youth sports.

The typical youth sports program offered by park and recreation agencies uses 125 coaches to serve 2,000 youth annually. Overall, 35 percent of participants in agencies' youth sports programs are girls and 25 percent of coaches are women. When compared to the 51 percent of the U.S. adult population that are women (tinyurl. com/3aa9fske) and the 49 percent of the U.S. youth population that are girls (tinyurl.com/3k2yj7r4), these results highlight the underrepresentation of women and girls in youth sports. Further, almost half of agencies (45%) report a gender gap between the number of girls versus boys participating in youth sports programs offered.



Most agencies (80%) report that girls face barriers to sports participation in their communities.

Agencies most frequently noted the lack of women role models in leadership and coaching positions (71%) and the challenge of navigating changes in adolescence (35%) as the top barriers to keeping girls engaged in sports. Other barriers include competing responsibilities, lack of facilities, lack of cultural accommodations and transportation, lack of time, lack of equipment and sports attire, safety concerns, and girls' lack of interest in the types of sports available.

Implementing a Variety of Strategies to Address Gender Gaps

Agencies that identified gender gaps in their youth sports programming are addressing disparities by:

- · Recruiting more women coaches
- Identifying age-focused approaches to prevent dropout of girls in sports during middle school years
- Discontinuing co-ed competitive leagues in favor of gender-specific leagues
- Offering more convenient play times
- Providing uniforms styled for girls
- Lowering fees
- Offering sports that girls want to play

For one agency, switching from historically co-ed leagues to girls-only leagues for many of their programs had resulted in "positive feedback [because] it ... helped girls feel more comfortable trying a new sport or continuing participation."

Advocacy campaigns help improve girl participation and increase the number of women coaches in youth sports.

About a third of agencies (35%) had engaged in a campaign to increase the number of girls in youth sports within the previous 12 months. These efforts included school mandates to promote girls' sports, one or multiday events providing opportunities for girls to play sports through clinics and classes, and the use of social media and marketing to model the participation of women in sports. One successful agency shared, "We implemented a National Girls and Women in Sports day event. We [offered] it within walking distance if transportation was an issue...made it free to eliminate the socioeconomic barriers and brought in mainly female coaches.... It was so successful. It's [now] an annual event we hope to grow and expand upon."

Advocacy campaigns can increase the number of women coaches in youth sports.

Given that the lack of women role models is the top barrier for participation of girls in sports, the field has an opportunity to grow in this area. Additionally, almost a fifth of agencies (18%) had engaged in a campaign or initiative to increase the number of women coaches in youth sports within the previous 12 months. Some successful strategies included using social media and marketing for recruitment, offering financial incentives, and providing training and mentorship to create "an empowering environment for female coaches in [the] sports community."

Planning for the Future Now

Park and recreation professionals



recognize their role in addressing gaps and advancing equity to provide all youth the opportunities and benefits of youth sports. Agencies continue to advance this work with successes in increasing opportunities and decreasing barriers for girls in sports. With additional support from NRPA and Nike's partnership, this work will be scaled to build the scaffolding for a future where girls can equitably access and experience the benefits of youth sports with more women coaches to serve as prominent role models. Check out the full report at nrpa.org/Research.

Author's Note: Thank you to the park and recreation professionals nationwide who completed the survey.

Samantha Serrano is Senior Research and Evaluation Manager at NRPA (sserrano@nrpa.org).

NRPA PARK PULSE

People Visit Parks and Recreation for Myriad Reasons

More than half of U.S. adults visit their local parks and/or recreation facilities to:



Gen Zers (73%) visit their local parks and/or recreation facilities to exercise or be physically fit. **Parents (69%)** visit their local parks and/or recreation facilities to be with family or friends.

The NRPA 2024 Annual Engagement With Parks Survey was conducted by Wakefield Research (www.wakefieldresearch.com) among 1,000 nationally representative Americans, ages 18+, between June 24th and July 7th, 2024, using an email invitation and an online survey.



Visit nrpa.org/ParkPulse for more information.



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The Push for Realistic In-Service Training

By Samantha Charette, MS, CPO, CPRP

n-service training is a vital responsibility of any aquatics professional. Planning and implementation of regular training not only maintains skills for staff, but also ensures safety for the patrons who frequent the facility. Aquatics professionals must do their due diligence to guarantee that training is effective and relevant, thus the push for more realistic training.

A Long-Standing Practice

Past practice in the industry revolved around a large training prior to the start of the season, before "releasing staff to the wolves" for the summer. In recent years, and as the industry has further evolved, an emphasis on continual training to keep staff fresh and engaged has become standard practice.

However, it is no longer enough to simply practice rescues during facility off hours. In an age where focus and engagement have diminished due to advancements in technology, we need to create realistic scenarios to emphasize the importance of the job at hand and further treat our lifeguards as exactly what they are: first responders.

Something ingrained in my mind many years ago was the concept of preventative lifeguarding — the notion that if you are doing your job correctly, rescues will be minimal. However, lack of occurrence can equal lack of experience for a lifeguard presented with an active emergency. By providing scenario-based training in addition to skill-based training, we can best prepare our staff for a multitude of emergencies that may arise.

Upping the Ante

While you will never fully know how staff will react and respond in an emergency, providing the most realistic in-service scenarios can best prepare them for the if and when. Utilizing realistic manikins that emulate more typical body types and body parts provides staff with the comfort of working with a variety of body types and further prepares them to act without hesitation.

According to the National Library of Medicine, gender disparities do, in fact, exist in male versus female CPR application. In fact, the study that looked at data regarding cardiac events found that just 39 percent of women received CPR from strangers in public versus the 45 percent of men who received the same care (tinyurl. com/3zsazndf). Factors contributing

to this include a general lack of comfort involved with working near the presence of breasts, which can be attributed to the fact that typical manikins resemble a male body. However, park and recreation professionals can also use manikins that resemble a female body in training (tinyurl. com/5seu7am).

Additionally, we need to recognize and explain to staff that real-life crises will be messy. Utilizing fake blood, foam and other such substances will help prepare staff for the bodily fluids that they will inevitably experience during an emergency.

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Parks and recreation has long been known for leveraging relationships within the communities they serve and pooling resources to achieve the outcomes they desire. Town of Manchester, Connecticut, and its recreation division were recently recognized by the Connecticut Interlocal Risk Management Agency (CIRMA) for its commitment to providing realistic training in collaboration with the fire department, police department and ambulance service (tinyurl.com/ysf3hcy6).

Recreation Supervisor Joshua Charette has been in the aquatics field for more than two decades. He started as a lifeguard for the department in 2004 and has since come full circle, overseeing the same aquatics program where he got his start. When he took control of the aquatics division in 2020, he led the charge on

taking training to the next level. "Any day something can happen, and these guards need to be ready. We want people to know that the lifeguards are not just here in a guard chair but are ready to go at any moment."

His passion for training has helped position his lifeguards as a reputable first line of defense when acting in an emergency. The ability to effectively work with first responders for the town ensures a streamlined hand-off and more efficient care for the community.

SEE ALSO: "SwimATX: An Innovative Lifeguard Training Program," Sonia Myrick, Parks & Recreation, June 2016, Vol. 51, Iss. 6, tinyurl.com/yt9ed3a8.

Samantha Charette, MS, CPO, CPRP, is Recreation Lead at East Windsor (Connecticut) Parks and Recreation (scharette@eastwindsor-ct.gov).





Social-Emotional Learning to Strengthen Cudahy Community

By Tina Kreitlow

he Cudahy Recreation Department in southeastern Wisconsin has grown exponentially in the past decade. As a result of such significant growth, we regularly evaluate our programs for relevancy and quality. As a part of that evaluation, we knew this was the year to be more intentional in our training efforts beyond program-specific expectations. Our leadership team determined that while we want our participants to gain skills from their program involvement, we also hope they come away from their activity with confidence, belonging and fellowship among the participants.

Heading into the fall of 2024, we began training all staff and volunteers, including our aquatics staff; staff of childcare programs, such as beforeand after-school care and summer camp; instructional and competitive sports coaches; and enrichment program staff in social-emotional learning (SEL), with a focus on experience and connectedness. In the end, we want kids to have fun, to want to keep coming back, and to build life-

long joy for the activity and a bond with their peers and instructor.

Implementing SEL Training

In partnership with the Positive Coaching Alliance, all staff and volunteers working directly with youth will be trained in "Coaching for Winning and Life Lessons" this year. Several key points in this training align with the messages we want our staff and volunteers to enter each

program day with, promoting the values of dignity, respect and safety. Every time our staff or volunteers are in front of their participants, they control the environment and culture being created with every interaction. Our goal is to ensure we are delivering progress toward building confidence and a sense of belonging.

Creating a Positive Culture

Sports Manager Ryan Kelly has seen the benefit for our coaches and volunteers, and believes our training efforts have created a sense of continuity. Kelly explains, "Coaches know their expectations of themselves better and what to expect from their peers. It's almost like having a set of expectations or guidelines that everyone can all use together

to produce the best and most applicable, appropriate program. There's a sense of direction that helps shift the culture and create confidence as a coach in what they're doing."

Julie Bock, aquatics manager and aquatics professional for more than 30 years, believes aquatics is all about building confidence and safety in and around water. "Teaching kids how to swim is the byproduct of creating respect for water and the confidence to know what to do when around water while keeping the learning fun and engaging."

From her experience leading aquatics programs, Bock firmly believes in hiring for character and training for skill. She develops a family environment with her team of staff members who are open and supportive of each

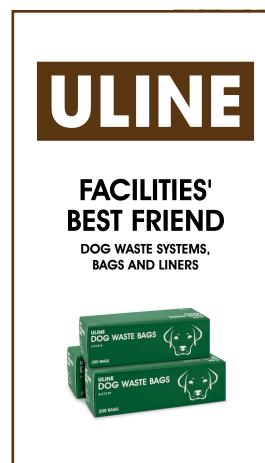
other. With a focus on SEL training, this year is an easy transition for our aquatics team because "each new swim instructor is already paired with a mentor trainer, so they can see how our culture is built within each class, and when participants are shown an open and comfortable environment, the relationships build organically within the classes among students," says Bock.

Promoting Programs

This focus allows us to promote our programs more systematically, highlighting the ancillary benefits of participating in Cudahy Recreation programs, such as developing social skills, building confidence, creating positive relationships, gaining exposure to new interests and fostering leadership. Additionally, as a community recreation department operated through the local school district, these specific training efforts help us align more seamlessly with our school community. Recreation staff and volunteers are better equipped to use common language and best practices that teachers are using during the school day. This wrap-around cohesive messaging strengthens the impact on our local youth and families.

In Cudahy, we know this is the right direction for our program to leap from being a solid operation serving thousands of people each year to being a program that builds lasting relationships and impact among our participants.

Tina Kreitlow is Director of Recreation at Cudahy School District (kreitlowtacudahysd.org).







Creating Space for Support

Why families may not disclose their child's needs

By Lisa Drennan

any families of children with disabilities or who are neurodivergent choose not to disclose their child's needs when enrolling in recreation programs. Understanding why families make this choice can help recreation staff create more inclusive and supportive environments.

It's not uncommon for recreation staff to feel frustrated when a child's unique needs only become apparent mid-program. Instead of wondering, "Why didn't the family tell us?" it's important to consider the challenges parents face. Years of judgment, rejection or a desire for their child to fit in can make disclosure seem risky. By making disclosure safe and routine, recreation programs can ease these fears and build trust.

Reasons Behind Nondisclosure

• Fear of exclusion: Families may

worry that disclosing their child's needs will lead to being denied program access.

- Past negative experiences: Many have faced judgment or rejection, making them hesitant to share.
- Desire for normalcy: Some parents or guardians want their child to participate without labels or assumptions.
- Unclear processes: Registration forms or materials may not explicitly invite disclosure.

Recreation programs have the opportunity to change this narrative by demonstrating a commitment to inclusion at every step.

Creating a Welcoming **Environment**

- Inclusive registration forms: Use language like, "We welcome children of all abilities! Please share any supports that will help your child thrive."
- Clear policies: Highlight inclusion in marketing materials and policies to show your commitment.
- Confidential options: Offer easy, confidential ways for families to share their child's needs.
- Normalize accommodations: Frame accommodation requests as standard practice, reinforcing that all children deserve support.

Building Trust Through Empathy

Train staff to respond empathetically and reassure families that their child's needs will be supported. Proactive outreach, such as pre-program check-ins, allows staff to ask if specific supports are needed. Sharing success stories of past accommodations can help families feel confident in disclosing.

When families trust that their child will thrive, they're more likely to disclose needs upfront. Without this information, unmet needs can lead to negative experiences, staff frustration and dropouts — damaging the program's reputation and enrollment.

Leading with genuine inclusion fosters trust, ensuring all children feel welcomed and valued. This approach not only improves the experience for participants of all abilities, but also enhances program quality, retention and community confidence.

A Story of Disclosure and Inclusion: The Difference a Welcoming Environment Makes

Priya and her 8-year-old daughter, Asha, recently moved to town, hoping for a new beginning after years of challenges. Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at 5, Asha struggles in group settings, where her stimming and echolalia often lead to isolation. Priya tries to support Asha's needs while navigating her husband's denial of the diagnosis. They both want Asha to "be like everyone else."

Scenario 1: The Recreation Department Lacks a Welcoming Environment

Priya stared at the swim class registration form. One question caught her eye: "Any special accommodations needed?" Her heart pounded. If she disclosed Asha's autism, would they deny her a spot? Would they think Asha was too much trouble? She decided to stay silent, hoping for the best.

On the first day, the pool's noise overwhelmed Asha. She clutched Priya's hand nervously. The rushed instructor didn't make eye contact. "You can do this," Priya whispered, but Asha flapped her hands to calm herself. The other children stared and whispered. Asha wandered away, unnoticed by the instructor.

Priya's frustration burned. Without knowing Asha's needs, the program couldn't help her. They left early, and Priya's hope for a fresh start shattered. She wished the program felt safe enough to share Asha's needs.

Scenario 2: The Recreation Department Fosters Inclusion

Priya smiled as she read the swim class registration

form. Under "Any special accommodations needed?" a note said: "We welcome children of all abilities! Please share any supports that would help your child thrive." Relief washed over her. This felt like an invitation, not a risk.

She wrote, "Asha has autism. She may flap her hands or repeat phrases when overwhelmed. She loves water but might need help staying with the group." A few days later, a staff member called to thank her and reassure her they were ready to support Asha.

On the first day, the instructor greeted them warmly. "Hi, Asha! I'm so glad you're here." She calmly explained the routine and let Asha choose a pool toy. The noise was still loud, but the instructor checked in often and offered her waterproof noise-cancelling headphones if needed. When Asha flapped her hands, no one stared — it was just part of the class.

As Asha smiled and dipped underwater, Priya's heart swelled. The inclusive approach made all the difference. They'd found a place where Asha could belong.

Lisa Drennan is the Founder of MERGE Diverse Abilities Inclusion Consulting (lisadrennan@mergeconsulting.org).



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Connecting Community to Nature in Detroit

By Justin Taylor

quitable access to nature is imperative in creating healthy and resilient communities, especially in urban areas where green space may not be as vast. As part of NRPA's Resilient Park Access grant, City of Detroit worked alongside community partner organizations to develop pocket parks to invite residents into nature. In addition to contributing to Detroit's aesthetics, this project fosters stewardship, environmental education and alignment amongst agency departments. Here are a few of those stories:

Nature Pockets

"In an effort to increase nature access [for] Detroit residents, the city... has created Nature Pockets in seven parks across the city.... A Nature Pocket treatment could range from added tree canopy to a wildflower meadow or a raingarden. As a longterm project partner, environmental nonprofit The Greening of Detroit was comfortable providing its typical community forestry program of 1.5" caliper tree stock as street and park trees, but [the organization] also supported revisiting something more novel with younger tree stock.

What started as a 'mini forest' in the original grant proposal became two distinct woodland developmental patterns: a bareroot Miyawaki Forest (tinyurl.com/ nfpem4ju) in addition to a larger tree (1.5" caliper) and meadow installation in a large field behind Lasky Recreation Center, which serves a diverse, all-ages population in northeast Detroit....

The design of the site and forests were led by city staff. Tree and shrub species were chosen based on their appearance in both dry-mesic Southern forests and mesic Southern forests in Michigan with similar climatic and urban conditions, per the Michigan Natural Features Inventory....

The Miyawaki Forest was planted in May 2024, with the larger tree meadow installation planted in the fall of the same year. We convened over 400 volunteers for this project, including a local high school student group who continued in summer stewardship to take care of the trees as they established."

- Christina Ridella, Volunteer and Community Outreach Manager, The Greening of Detroit

Library Partnership

"A year ago, two librarians stopped into the Detroit Exploration & Nature Center, inquiring about the space and how we could work together....

BUILD TOGETHER, PLAY TOGETHER.

As we kept thinking about a way to connect the community with the Nature Pocket project, we thought, 'Where better to start than with that inquiry for collaboration [from] our librarian friends?'....

Together, we came up with the Nature Exploration Backpack that each branch of the Detroit Public Library will receive two of.... We wanted to make sure that we created something that people could continue to use as they got to know the parks in their neighborhood and beyond, which is why the backpacks include Michigan-specific field guides, a zine of Detroit birds, and a Nature Pocket Guide of the different typologies of each site. We've also included an Ecology School Pocket Guide created by a partner, Families in Nature, that has science-based activities to do while spending time in a local park.... There are so many different organizations reflected in these backpacks, so we'd like to thank everyone [who] took part, especially the Sherwood Forest Librarians!"

- Rachel Felder, Naturalist, Detroit Parks and Recreation

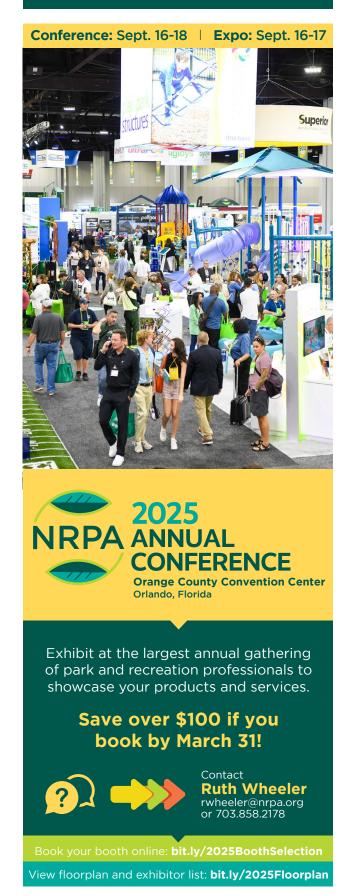
Maintenance Plans

"About a decade ago, [City] of Detroit was emerging from the largest municipal bankruptcy in history. The focus of the General Services Department was to mow the grass and pick up the trash.... Since then, the department has come to recognize not just the value and importance of natural spaces, but also their unique maintenance needs. The Nature Pockets project has helped pilot several different natural spaces typologies that are in neighborhood parks and has created impetus for the city to develop maintenance plans for these parks. It requires coordination across many divisions within the department.... As we get the first maintenance season of the Nature Pockets under our belt, there have been a lot of lessons learned, areas mowed too early, sites that flooded — but it all has been valuable steps to getting the various teams to communicate together and to understand what is needed to maintain our natural spaces. We continue to develop staff knowledge and skills, and dedicated time [for expanding] the program across the city, so that all Detroit youth have access to nature within their community."

– Juliana Fulton, Deputy Chief Parks Planner, City of Detroit

Author's Note: Thank you also to Jac Kyle, manager I – nature programming at Detroit Parks and Recreation for contributing to this article.

Justin Taylor is Program Specialist at NRPA (jtaylor@nrpa.org).



Accessible Recruitment

Expanding your lifeguard applicant pool

By Kate Connell

iring for aquatics jobs isn't just about finding qualified candidates — it's also about breaking down barriers that can prevent talented individuals from applying to or succeeding in lifeguarding positions. Whether it's access to foundational swim lessons or concerns about acquiring expensive certifications, these challenges can make part-time and seasonal aquatics positions seem out of reach for many folks looking for temporary but meaningful work opportunities in their community. By addressing these obstacles head-on, we can create a more inclusive and diverse part-time aquatics workforce that directly reflects the community. This will help to protect and foster long-term interest in this area of parks and recreation, in turn, making our aquatics facilities and programs safer and more enjoyable.

Understanding Barriers to Aquatics Employment

Barriers can exist for anyone, but they can have a compounding effect in hiring due to systemic disadvantages and historical advantages around race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, social class, education level and more. Understanding the obstacles that accompany different individuals and underrepresented groups allows insights into the reality many may face regarding access to training and competency in and around water. It

also lets us address challenges folks may encounter when entering the aquatics field, like insecurity about being able to complete aquatics trainings or weighing the benefits of keeping a well-paying part-time job that requires less investment in training and fewer risks versus pursuing a future career in aquatics.

Stand Out as an Ideal **Workplace Choice**

Individuals seeking part-time employment, especially as newcomers to the workforce, often have

choices in where they work. Leveraging your park and recreation agency's commitment to inclusion allows you to consciously build your processes, messaging, and approach to recruiting, hiring and training. Aquatics industry best practices, such as providing reguired certifications for the position and paying your new hires to attend trainings, are a great foundation to standing out as equityminded. It is helpful to be a flexible manager who is creative with scheduling, transportation and other situational barriers that vary by employee. Advocate for fair, competitive hourly wages and part-time employee benefits and inclusive policies that support your team members — like not requiring doctors' notes when your team is ill, which may cause undue burden on team members without insurance, who are disabled or have limited ability to visit a healthcare provider.



Create Long-Term Pathways to Water Competency

In 2023, the American Red Cross shared that a primary barrier for those pursuing lifeguarding and swim instruction jobs is their perceived lack of competency in and around water and their concern that they will not pass the skills tests required to become certified (tinyurl. com/4bn3fc4z). A considerable part of the recruiting process needs to begin before potential candidates turn 16 years old by ensuring agencies and aquatics professionals are contributing to the momentum and success of learn-to-swim programs, beginning at a young age. Providing additional swim lesson opportunities for the "missing middle" ages of preteens, teens and even young adults also can work to address the disparity in access to swim lessons and eventually employment in aquatics settings. Working to qualify more candidates means a broader applicant pool, safer swimmers community wide, and an ability to continue to uphold high safety and risk management standards for incoming lifesavers. Finding ways to subsidize learnto-swim programs with income-

qualifying scholarship programs, partnerships with school districts, and the integration of water safety into other public health educational campaigns can support these goals. More and more municipalities also are beginning to offer pre-lifeguarding preparation courses to help young potential job seekers and offer opportunities to learn, train and practice the lifeguard prerequisites required in certification courses.

Meet People Where They Are

I've used the phrase "meet people where they are" since my early yoga teacher years — in this case, I mean it figuratively and literally. To recruit diverse talent, you need to be in your community and surrounding areas and engage folks at a variety of social infrastructure hubs and organizations. Engage in areas adjacent to your organization, including libraries, senior centers and transit divisions. Visit all types of schools and malls and reach out to nonprofits that serve a broad base of community members, subgroups and affinity groups. Re-envision a team that looks less like a high school swim team —

but yes, we still want some of those athletes! — and more like a group of folks with various strengths, life experiences and purposes for working in aquatics. Utilize equity-minded "soft skills" of active listening and problem-solving skills when you are part of conversations about why different folks aren't applying for parttime or seasonal aquatics jobs. Build relationships with individuals who will help you access new audiences of potential future staff.

Rethink Your Interview Process

To ensure equity in your interview process, it's important to conduct a thorough audit of how interviews are structured and delivered. Begin by examining your job descriptions and job announcements to eliminate gendered terms and jargon that may unintentionally discourage candidates from diverse backgrounds. Replace terms like "he or she" with nongendered language and avoid biased language, such as "native English speaker" or buzzwords like "multitasking," which can disadvantage certain groups. As a best practice, include the pay range even if you are in a state where it's not legally mandated. When preparing your interview questions, shift from behavioral questions that often focus on storytelling to situational ones that better assess a candidate's practical problem-solving abilities, like "What would you do if...?" or "How would you handle ... ?" Behavioral questions will allow candidates with limited or no experience to still highlight their workplace value. Resist the urge to save time by conducting wide-sweeping group job interviews, which are still popular in water park and seasonal aquatics spaces, that can unfairly disadvantage candidates who are neurodivergent. Instead,



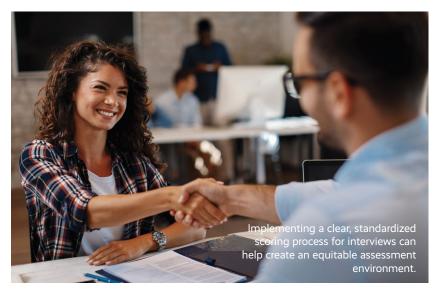
find ways to run more efficiently structured interviews. Implementing a clear, standardized scoring process can help create an equitable assessment environment, where every candidate is evaluated based on the same criteria so scoring bias doesn't favor candidates unfairly.

Educate Interviewers on Best Practices

It's critical to build diverse interview panels to ensure multiple perspectives are represented and to reduce the likelihood of bias influencing the hiring decision. Providing introductory-level bias awareness training for hiring managers and decision-makers will help them recognize tendencies to make snap decisions, frame their potential overconfidence in their own ability to find the "perfect candidate," and identify their own affinities or natural liking in certain areas due to their own experiences and identities, which can help them be mindful of unconscious biases and make fairer choices despite them. Finally, move away from the concept of "culture fit" and focus instead on "culture add," valuing the unique contributions diverse candidates can bring to the team. This approach ensures your interview process is both inclusive and effective in attracting a wide range of qualified candidates, which will create a more inclusive and dynamic workplace culture.

Problem Solve Potential Obstacles

It's likely you'll encounter situations where candidate skills aren't up to par with the certification organization curriculum, or they're unable to meet the pre-requisite requirements and standards. Working through likely scenarios that can occur will allow you to create mind-



ful solutions. Consider offering cross-training opportunities within your organization or non-aquatics jobs that they can apply for to help support aquatics operations while they build their skills. This not only helps bring individuals into the fold, but also allows them to gain valuable experience while working toward the necessary certifications. Additionally, providing tailored coaching or mentorship programs can help bridge gaps in skills and build confidence in candidates who may be unsure of their abilities. By identifying these potential obstacles early and creating supportive pathways, you can make the process more accessible and encourage a wider range of candidates to apply.

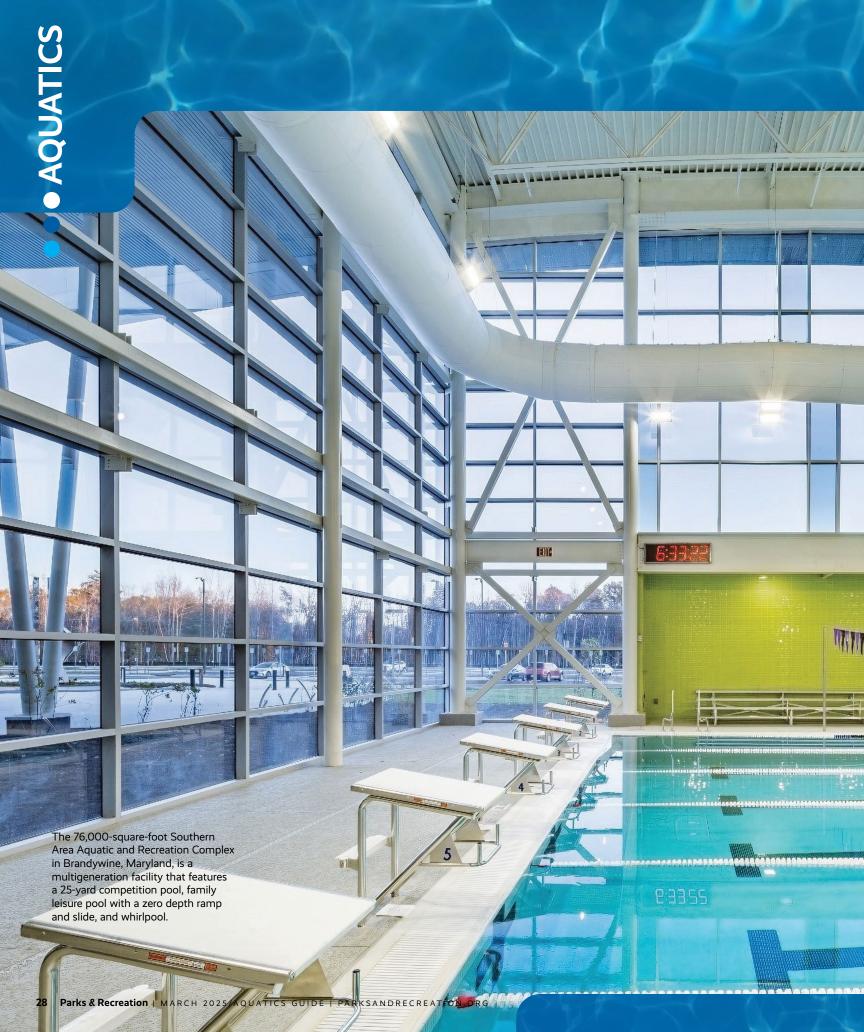
Maintain a Culture of Belonging

All the shiniest and best efforts to "diversify your team" ultimately will fail if you are not intentionally building a workplace of belonging and ensuring your employees are safe to be themselves. Operating from your agency's diversity, equity and inclusion statement and using those values as guidelines for behaviors, training and expectations will assist in your efforts. Still, some of the most hidden work in our inclusion efforts requires us as leaders to learn from mistakes, engage in challenging conversations

and commit to our own personal unlearning on a regular basis. Tangibly work to create aquatics ambassadors who can talk about the efforts being made at job fairs and through referral programs, elevate your poolside leaders who embody the values you are focusing on, and find ways to layer the importance of diversity into your operations from the pool rules you enforce to the aquatics programs you offer.

As we continue to build a more inclusive and equitable aquatics workforce, it's essential to remember that true change requires both commitment and action. By addressing barriers, fostering a culture of mentorship and providing opportunities for growth, we not only increase diversity in our hiring practices, but also ensure a safer and more welcoming environment for both staff and communities. Ultimately, a workforce that reflects the diverse people it serves creates a ripple effect, inspiring future generations to see aquatics not just as a job, but also as a meaningful part of their lifelong employment history. With intentional effort, we can reshape the future of aquatics teams, offering a wider range of individuals the chance to thrive in these critical roles while building a culture of safety, inclusivity and community.

Kate Connell is Senior Manager of Sales and Strategic Partnerships at HydroApps.



Strategic Criteria in Aquatics

Easign Essign

Tips for designing safe, sustainable, accessible and user-friendly aquatics facilities

By Eliel Alfon, AIA, NCARB

ith their array of unique comfort, safety and performance considerations, indoor aquatics facilities are one of the most challenging and complex building types to design. Natatorium design must carefully balance many factors, including user safety and comfort, energy consumption, and operational and accessibility objectives. Here are some key criteria to consider for a successful aquatics facility design.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LITTLE DIVERSIFIED ARCHITECTURAL

Healthy User Experience

User safety is the paramount design criterion. Water quality, air quality, lighting and material selection all play a role in creating a safe and comfortable indoor pool environment.

Pool water quality is the key to maximizing user safety and comfort, as well as the driving force for reducing energy consumption. High pool water quality is controlled by water filtration equipment that filters contaminants out of the water and chemical treatment systems, like chlorine, that kill germs and bacteria. There is a wide variety of filtration and chemical treatment systems on the market that are customized to the size, shape and aquatics program for every natatorium. While sand media filters have dominated the marketplace for years, regenerative media filters are emerging as a preferred choice that uses approximately 90 percent less fresh water, 50 percent less energy and 30 percent less chemicals. For large competition aquatics venues, the addition of ultraviolet light (UV) water treatment systems is the new standard. UV systems provide crystal-clear water and virtually eliminate the need for chemicals.

Air quality within natatoriums is directly related to pool water quality because it is laden with vapor from the pool water's evaporation. The natatorium air we breathe is critical to maintaining a healthy atmosphere, illustrating the delicate relationship between pool water quality and the indoor atmosphere.

The air temperature in natatoriums should be maintained two degrees Fahrenheit higher than the pool water temperature, and relative humidity needs to be maintained at 50 percent to 60 percent. This balances the need to reduce pool water evaporation and condensation on surfaces as much as possible. The distribution of conditioned air should be concentrated on the pool decks, where the users are, with low return to capture chloramines, and high return over the pool water to maintain a positive airflow. The HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) units for natatoriums are highly specialized. Dehumidification units with heat recovery are designed to handle the highly vaporized atmosphere and then remove the latent heat and use it





to heat the newly conditioned air in cold months. In warm weather, they switch to an economizer fresh air mode. It is highly recommended that the design team perform a Computer Fluid Dynamics (CFD) analysis to ensure effective air circulation. Be aware that the pool atmosphere must be kept under negative pressure to minimize water vapor penetration to adjacent spaces.

Lighting design has a direct impact on patron safety and comfort. Given their large volumes, natatoriums require a lot of lighting. A combination of natural and artificial lighting is recommended for indoor aquatics facilities to enhance safety and reduce operating expenses. The best distribution of artificial lighting is at the pool pe-

rimeter above the pool deck. This approach makes it easier for maintenance, reduces water glare and enhances lifeguards' ability to see trouble. Windows should be located high enough to prevent glare on the water surface.

When designing aquatics facilities, material selection must delicately balance patron safety and ease of maintenance. Slipping on a wet pool deck or locker room floor is a common event that can lead to major injury. Pool decks and locker room floors should, therefore, be slightly textured to reduce this fall possibility, but not too textured as to impair deck drainage or be uncomfortable to walk on. Several options are available, such as 2x2 ceramic tiles or cementitious finishes that enhance sure footing. Se-

lections of pool deck finishes must have a slip resistance of 0.50 of 0.55 minimum DCOF (dynamic coefficient of friction) per ANSI A326.3 or 0.60 preferable. Because of all the hard surfaces, acoustic controls are also essential for aquatics facilities. Several sound-absorbent materials, such as lapendary panels and moisture-resistant fiberboard, resist the vapor-laden air.

Energy and Water Consumption

Indoor aquatics facilities consume more energy than almost any other building type. To mitigate this significant energy use, sustainable design criteria should be an integral part of the building design process.

Energy Use Intensity (EUI) is a standard measure of energy usage

in building design. The target EUI for aquatics facilities with 75 percent wet spaces should be in the range of 120 to 140 kBtu/ft2 EUI. Credits are available for a variety of sustainable strategies, including the use of renewable energy sources, high-efficiency ERU units, and the utilization of natural lighting. When renewable energy sources like photovoltaic panels or geothermal are used, EUI could decrease to 80 to 100 kBtu/ft2.

Natural lighting integration can reduce energy consumption dramatically while contributing to a safe and healthful atmosphere. The right natural lighting strategy can eliminate the need for artificial lighting all day long. Staging artificial lighting levels for different instruction, recreation and high-competition venues also can save significant operational costs.

Water consumption reduction can result in reduced environmental and operational impacts. High-efficiency pool water filtration systems that have lower backwash demands, humidity controls, low-flow showers and low-flow flushing fixtures all can contribute to achieving this objective.

Operational and Maintenance Criteria

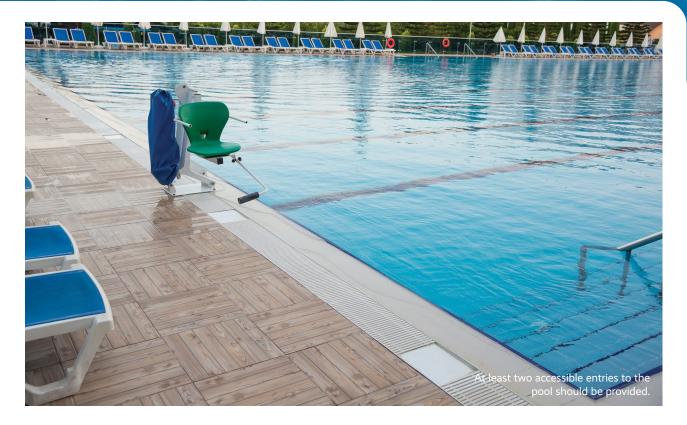
Selecting effective materials is an essential part of the aquatics facility design process. Not only do these facilities have to beat back the weather on the exterior, but they also are water laden and attacked by chemicals on the interior. These factors affect every surface, structural element and moving part of the building.

Structural elements like steel trusses must receive special coatings to resist the penetration of water vapor and condensation from reaching the steel, which will result in the structure's deterioration.

Concrete must be treated with special coatings to prevent water vapor from reaching the reinforcing bars.

Heavy timber structures promote lower embodied carbon and lower maintenance costs in pool environments. Wood structural elements, however, seal themselves. The outside one-eighth inch of wood reacts in tandem with the water vapor to seal itself. After years of use, the virgin wood inside the section is as structurally





sound as the day it was cut.

Doors and door frames deteriorate quickly in wet areas. All doors and frames in wet areas, including locker rooms, should be made of aluminum, stainless steel or fiberglass. This guideline is especially true in the pool pump rooms and chemical storage rooms.

Renewable energy sources like photovoltaic systems can also contribute to lowering the energy profile of aquatics facilities.

Fabric ductwork is a cost-effective alternative to exposed spiral aluminum ductwork with minimal maintenance requirements.

Accessibility and Privacy

Accessibility requirements are magnified in aquatics facilities where locker rooms play a key role in the user experience. The locker room layout should be clear upon entry and avoid any dead ends. Ide-

ally, the locker room should have a wet side where showers and toilets are located and a dry side for lockers and circulation. This wet-side and dry-side layout also applies to the distribution of air in locker rooms to maintain a positive airflow. Dry-treated air should be supplied over the dry-side activity, i.e., locker area, and returned over the wet side, i.e., shower and toilets. Pool deck access to toilets should be convenient to answer the call when needed.

Family-changing rooms should be included to provide enhanced privacy for families or anyone who needs additional privacy. The current design trend requires more family-changing suites. Provide at least one family-changing suite with a larger area to accommodate a changing bed for those with a disability who may require assistance. If possible, provide at least two accessibility entries to the pool using handicapped lifts or handicapped ramp access.

Teamwork

Lastly, teamwork is the key to achieving optimum aquatics center design for your unique needs. Once you have determined the program requirements for your proposed facility, it is time to engage an architecture and engineering team with proven experience in the design and construction of aquatics centers. Working together as a team, you will be able to identify, evaluate and optimize the multitude of decisions required according to their cost, sustainability and design objectives.

Eliel Alfon, AIA, NCARB, is Design Principal at Little Diversified Architectural Consulting (eliel.alfon, alittleonline.com).

Aquatix® by Landscape Structures

Water play isn't just about cooling off — it's about discovery, excitement and unforgettable moments. At Aquatix® by Landscape Structures, we push the boundaries of interactive water experiences. With nearly 40 years of experience, Aquatix is a forerunner in water feature and spray park design, fabrication and construction. Our cutting-edge designs turn ordinary splash pads into "splashtastic" adventures where imaginations soar.

Our AquaSmart® Packages have been bringing thrilling water fun to communities of all sizes. And with the introduction of the new packages — K and L — there is more opportunity to deliver maximum fun! Both packages feature two HydroLogix® systems, enabling larger and more dynamic splash pad designs. With enhanced interactive water play elements and a streamlined installation process, these packages provide an efficient and cost-effective solution for expanding splash play offerings.

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Water play doesn't stop when the sun goes down. With our LED Jumping Jets and new accent lights, splash pads come alive after dark, transforming the space into mesmerizing nighttime attractions. Jumping Jets create leaping streams of glowing water, adding energy and movement to any space, while accent lights illuminate water features with vibrant color. Customizable effects allow communities to design dazzling water shows that captivate both kids and adults. Whether paired with nonsequential water features or synchronized displays, these lighting innovations elevate the water play experience to an entirely new level.

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Aquatix water-based activities are transforming communities around the world, creating spaces where laughter echoes, friendships form and memories last a lifetime. Features like the AquaGather Station, Nautilus Slides, and Hydra-Hub 1 and 2 are more than just splash pad elements — they are epicenters of fun and connection. From bustling urban centers to small neighborhood parks, these innovative water play structures ignite imaginations and build stronger communities, ensuring that every splash pad leaves a lasting impression on generations to come.

At Aquatix by Landscape Structures, we're working together to transform the landscape of play every day by creating splash pads that inspire and bring communities together. Learn more about Aquatix and our full offering of aqua play products by visiting aquatix.playlsi.com.





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Diving Into Aquatics Center Success

By Johnny Crosskey

n a typical season at Pelican Bay Aquatic Center in Edmond, Oklahoma, 50,000 visitors participate in a variety of programs, including swim lessons, lifeguard training and special events. With dual slides and plenty of space to splash around, it's the perfect place to chill on a summer day.

Pelican Bay is an important component in building a great quality of life in Edmond. However, not every city has been as fortunate to have an aquatics center in its backyard.

Aquatics centers are considerably more expensive to operate than other recreational facilities because of their built-in costs, including water treatment, filters and the additional equipment needed. According to an article in Community Playmaker (tinyurl.com/yjmb7jve), aquatics centers can cost as much as \$1 million per year to maintain. However, the critical importance of aquatics is undeniable. According to a study from the National Library of Medicine, participation in formal swim lessons reduces the risk of drowning for children ages 1 to 4 by 88 percent. In that way, having community swimming pools can be considered a matter of public safety.

Community Activation

Like all recreational facilities, aquatics centers are meant to be hubs for community connection. Their ultimate success lies in this quality. The highest-performing aquatics centers commit to community activation through their programs and events. Aside from important standards, such as learn-to-swim programs, swimming camps and swim teams, facilities like Pelican Bay and the Artesia Aquatics Center in Artesia, New Mexico, have developed aquafit programs that draw adults who want to make swimming a part of their fitness regimen. Speaking of driving adults to the pool, Adventure Cove in Abilene, Texas, recently started a program, called

Water Walkers, in which they invite older adults to use their lazy river as a walking trail.

A full and creative calendar helps build engagement and brings people to your aquatics center who wouldn't normally attend. For example, Pelican Bay hosts Doggie Paddles. During this event, dogs and their people are welcome to splash around for a fun afternoon.

Solving the Lifeguard Conundrum

Being a lifeguard was once a highly coveted position among teens. Now, with so many options and shifting preferences, it's become harder than ever for pools to maintain lifeguard staff. In 2023, a lifeguard shortage impacted a third of the 309,000 U.S. pools, according to the American Lifeguard Association. Feeder programs, like the Junior Guards program, offering more perks and providing competitive wages can help communities combat this issue.

Despite the challenge, aquatics centers are a critical piece to the quality-of-life puzzle in any city. When communities are intentional about maintaining these community assets, they can even enhance their reputations. Studies have shown that property values near recreational facilities, including ones with pools, can be up to 20 percent higher, making pools a potential economic driver as well.

Pelican Bay Aquatic Center in Edmond, Oklahoma, is an important component in building a great quality of life for the community.

Johnny Crosskey is Content Director at The Sports Facilities Companies (jcrosskey@sportsfacilities.com).

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Starting a Successful Adaptive Swim Program

By Kristin Munroe, LGIT, WSIT, Jim Cyrus, AFO, Jason Cutchins, AqP, CPRP, WSIT, and Linda Cosby

ccording to the CDC, drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 4 in the United States, with even higher rates among individuals with special needs. This underscores the urgency for effective and inclusive swimming education.

However, many efforts fail due to rigid adherence to traditional structures that do not accommodate the unique needs of participants. To establish a meaningful program, it's essential to define clear goals and align them with your facility's mission. For example, an inclusive approach might aim to provide accessible, affordable swim lessons tailored to diverse learning styles and abilities. Success should be measured against these objectives, allowing for adjustments based on feedback.

Gwinnett County (Georgia) Parks and Recreation began its journey with the end goal of true inclusivity. We wanted to offer lessons that were available to all, at an affordable fee, with an enjoyable curriculum tailored to diverse learners and abilities. After much time and effort, we developed a program that offers inclusive parent-assisted classes regularly. These classes have been met

with strong community reception and successful participation rates.

Also keep participant and facility needs in mind when building a program structure and process with your team. Do not be afraid to try things and adapt them over time. Cookie-cutter traditional structures may not serve all participants best, especially those who need additional services, so keep in mind the general nuances of adaptive programming: the same instructor is preferred for ritual and routine; additional instructor and caregiver support is preferred and includes caregivers, parents and siblings who learn how to encourage and assist swimmers; physical needs differ; roadblocks/barriers must be identified; and additional evaluations and specialized equipment may be needed. Lesson location, time, class ratios and even fees/funding are important. For example, we learned early on that to reach our program goals we would need to consider having caregivers in the water alongside participants, as is done with traditional parent-assisted classes, to educate the caregivers on participant lessons and behavior and to foster learning.

sive parent-assisted classes regularly. These classes have been in

Creating Effective Adaptive Swim Programs

To build an effective adaptive swim program, consider these steps:

Assemble the right team: Re-

cruit passionate and well-trained instructors.

Design flexible program structures: Consider factors like consistent instructors to establish routines, caregiver involvement, and specialized equipment or accommodations.

Prioritize safety for all: Evaluate physical needs, identify potential barriers, and provide advanced training for instructors and support staff to handle unique behaviors and scenarios.

Pilot and evolve: Start with small-scale initiatives, such as one-time events, private lessons or group sessions, and gather feedback to refine your approach.

Invest in training: Choose a methodology or certification program that addresses gaps in traditional training and educates support staff and lifeguards to manage diverse behaviors effectively.

Build community partnerships: Collaborate with local organizations, parent groups and health-focused agencies to enhance resources and outreach.

By fostering inclusivity and addressing the unique needs of all learners, aquatics facilities can make a meaningful difference in drowning prevention and swimming education.

Kristin Munroe, LGIT, WSIT, is Aquatic Coordinator; Jim Cyrus, AFO, is Aquatic Division Manager; Jason Cutchins, AqP, CPRP, WSIT, is Aquatic Division Manager; and Linda Cosby is Aquatic Specialist at Gwinnett County (Georgia) Parks and Recreation.

Gwinnett County

(Georgia) Parks and

Recreation developed an adaptive swim pro-

gram that offers inclu-

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Water Odyssey[™] by Fountain People designs and manufactures high-quality interactive water features with superior design support to help the park and recreation industry budget, plan and fulfill its water play-area plans. Our design team collaborates with architects, land-scape architects, aquatic consultants, artists and end users around the world to develop innovative aquatic play environments and equipment. Water Odyssey specializes in creating unique, project-specific products to turn the customer's vision into a reality.

Water Odyssey provides a wide range of aquatic play solutions for toddlers to teens, including ground sprays, interactive features that spin

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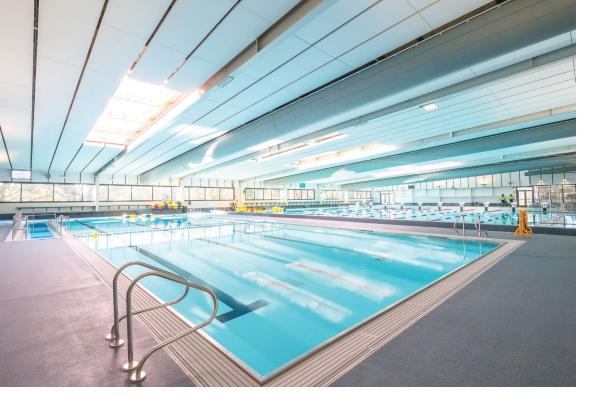
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Aquatics Staff and Facility Auditing

By James Wheeler

t was summertime in the 1970s. I was riding my bike through the park to get to work at the pool when I noticed the aquatics supervisor having lunch and looking down into the pool area. I realized he was observing staff as they finished swim lessons and set up for open swim. Fast forward 20 years later, I met aquatics auditing pioneers Jeff Ellis and John Hunsucker and learned the foundational elements of aquatics audits. It was not until I met these people and learned about auditing that I realized my original aquatics supervisor was practicing rudimentary aquatics observational auditing while he ate lunch every day. It was then I learned the importance of this essential practice.

Auditing Strategies

Safe and successful aquatics operations that meet the diverse needs of our communities require having many operational best practices in place. Of course, there are many administrative requirements and duties that need to be done well when operating your aquatics facility. Most agencies have internal standards for record keeping, budget management, customer service and in-service train-

ing. Aquatics operational auditing of staff, safety equipment and facilities is another essential part of a comprehensive aquatics program.

Today, there are many individuals, companies and agencies that offer a full spectrum of auditing services. Many agencies have their own internal auditing program where some or all elements of an evaluation — including observations of operations, facility inspections and staff

testing — take place. Some of these agencies perform their own internal audits and then supplement them with some external audits. Another good option is "peer-to-peer" auditing where you find someone you trust and respect from a neighboring agency to do your audit. Once you find a friend, you can decide upon audit elements and desired outcomes for "neighbor-to-neighbor" audits. Whichever option you choose, make sure everyone agrees on the purpose, areas to be evaluated and the reporting structure. The real "art" of auditing is being able to evaluate operations, facilities and staff and provide feedback in a constructive manner that helps improve operations without anyone's feelings getting hurt.

Auditing Goals

An audit should reflect a snapshot in time. They are best when random and unannounced. One goal of an auditing program is to document the operational practices, performance levels or standards of care that happen whenever the aquatics facility is open. This means one could visit on a Saturday morning, Tuesday night or Friday afternoon, and one would find the appropriate staffing levels, supervision, operational practices, facility cleanliness, and staff rescue and care skills whenever the pool is open. These outcomes can change with operational hours and programs, different managers, and variances from lifeguard to lifeguard. The goal is to document a record of the same good performance, conditions and skills at the facility



whenever an audit is performed. In the end, one wants to prove that it is a well-operated facility, in good condition, run by competent staff.

Getting Started

A good audit checklist can encompass a large amount of evaluation elements, and it would be difficult to list them all here in detail. Because there are so many areas, it is good to break the evaluation elements into workable pieces. Five areas that one should consider for evaluation are observations, customer service, safety equipment, facilities and rescue skills.

It is recommended to start with an observation of your operational practices. Try to pick a time when the pool is in use and when there are lifeguards and senior staff onsite. When performing an observation, focus on safe operational practices. Consider the number of lifeguards on duty and their placement in relation to the activity taking place in the pool, supervision, scanning, rescue readiness, professionalism, communication and rotations. Always make sure the only duty lifeguards have when in station is watching the water to keep it safe. Also check to make sure that facility amenities, such as diving boards, water slides or inflatables, are operated to industry and manufacturer's standards.

After I have observed a few lifeguards and rotations, I introduce myself to the front counter staff. This is the customer service portion of the audit, during which one can consider things like posted flyers and fees, customer service counters, restroom cleanliness, functioning showers and toilets with supplies, non-skid surface of



the floors, and ADA-compliant amenities. This is where customer experience and locker-room standards are evaluated.

Inspecting for Quality and Safety

Once in the facility, safety equipment and other equipment need to be inspected to ensure they are in place, functional and meet any codes or laws. Evaluate pool equipment like lane lines and swim-gear storage. Then move on to rescue gear, including AEDs, backboards, rescue tubes, emergency "go" or "crash" bag readiness, and any code-required items, such as reaching hooks or ring buoys.

A good facility periodic inspection program should be in place and should occur regularly outside of an audit. Regular inspections and audit facility checks should be based on any local, state or federal codes. There are many items to inspect, and these may include decks, drains, tiles, handrails, steps, pool ladders, lifeguard stands, lane line

and pool cover reels, starting platforms, diving boards and slides, to name some. Check everything from the pool grates and Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act compliance to fences, barriers, overhead lights and outlets.

Mechanical rooms should be inspected regularly by maintenance workers and their supervisors. Most operators are certified and well trained to perform this task. Be sure to focus on well-marked doors and chemical storage rooms, as well as the ability to access electrical panels, eyewash stations, valves and gauges, pumps, heaters, and filters. Also, check for clutter on work surfaces, things piled on heaters or filters, and proper chemical storage. Pool logs for daily chemical levels, chemicals added, repairs and special projects should be up to date.

A final and important part of any audit focuses on staff ability to rescue drowning victims, whether active or unresponsive and on the top of the water or at the bottom. Focus on communication, entries, rescue method, retrieval of person and proper removal from the pool. When staff are available, make sure to do a scenario or two to ensure proper care is given during different incident scenarios.

It takes commitment to safety and effort to build a good program. With help from other professionals and by using available resources designed to ensure facility safety, good operational practices and well-trained staff, it is possible to improve your facility operations and ensure the extra layer of protection that comes from aquatics auditing.

James Wheeler is General Manager at Hayward Area (California) Recreation and Park District (whej@haywardrec.org).

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Best Practices in Aquatics Facility Management

Procedures, techniques and ideas from tried-and-true programs

By Richard D. Carlson

quatics facility management encompasses myriad tasks and responsibilities. "Multitasker" and "person of all trades" are synonyms for the aquatics manager. Consider some of the following best proven practices in managing aquatics facilities, whether they be a pool or waterfront. No matter if you are a seasoned professional with years of experience or a new and novice manager, there is always something to learn.

In the course of some of my work experience, I have conducted investigations and inspections of facilities that have had an aquatics injury incident or fatality. It is a primary goal of mine to help educate aquatics managers to safeguard not only their members and the public using their facilities, but also their staff and themselves from any possible legal actions. While most of us have learned from experience what not to do, here are brief highlights of procedures, techniques and ideas gleaned from tried-and-true programs that

include operations and administrative duties and responsibilities.

Analyzing Your Facility

The first step in optimizing your aquatics operations is to identify your needs for your specific facility. What is the physical size and layout of your facility? How many people will be using the facility? And of course, what is the financial situation of your organization? Is it able to support the operation and staffing? Don't forget to consider legal, regulatory and/or insurance requirements.

Staff Selection and Training

The next consideration is the selection of your staff. Determine how many staff members you need. There may be regulatory requirements on staffing either through state bathing health codes or insurance.

The selection of staff should be like picking an athletic team. Start with a complete job description inclusive of non-aquatics duties if needed, such as gate, maintenance, etc.

Have an application process to include a pre-application for screening applicants to ensure they meet the minimum requirements for eligibility, such as age and certification. Interviews help both you and the applicant to learn about each other.

The most important parts of selection are testing skills and knowledge. Every applicant, whether new or returning, should be tested in their water skills and CPR/first aid. There should always be pre-employment testing for every lifeguard.

Check certifications and ensure they are valid and current. Do not take a certificate on face value. Check the certification and confirm it is legitimate and valid. The Red Cross and StarGuard use QR codes for quick validation.

Training Aquatics Staff

Orientation for all staff should review expectations, duties, responsibilities, schedule and legal requirements. Provide basic training for certification for new staff members. In-service



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training is important and should be mandatory. The industry standard in aquatics for in-service training is four hours per month. In-service training should be relevant, ongoing, in the public view, documented and site-specific, utilizing existing equipment and protocols. Incorporate daily or weekly drills. Do this during open hours so your members can see what your guards do.

Establish daily personal training. Have your guards get in the water every workday and swim for at least 10 minutes per shift. As many of us may be or have been coaches in sports, we have our teams practice every day. So why not have your guard team practice every day as well?

Emergency action plans promote efficiency in saving time and reducing decision making in a moment of crisis. Practice emergency action plans frequently during both in-service training and your operating hours. Keep it simple. Rotate assignments. Your supervisors should test and examine lifeguards constantly to ensure they are rescue ready and able to react intelligently and competently in emergencies.

Staff Supervision

Supervision of your aquatics staff should include MBWA (management by walking around). Practice omnipresence by being present at different times of the day and during various shifts. Try to catch your staff doing well. Praise in public and correct in private. Your omnipresence could include daily emails or texts sharing good news, events, rescues, problem areas, etc. Conduct staff meetings with your lead people frequently. This could be a short five- to 10-minute daily or weekly meeting. Review what

went right or wrong and how to fix what went wrong, if anything.

By using incentives, such as increased pay, instructor certification, training, flexible hours, schedule benefits, supervisory roles and other opportunities, you will find recruitment and retention increased.

There should be evaluations. It's a necessity, like a report card. Feedback is the breakfast of champions! Use these for promotion, advancement or increased responsibility and for reference letters. No one should receive a poor evaluation. If so, then the manager is not doing their job.

Discipline should be progressive. Correct any safety or legal issue immediately. The progression should begin with teaching, coaching, remediation, testing, review, suspension and finally termination. Each step must be documented.

Managers and supervisors should know their health codes as well or better than your inspectors. This is their job and responsibility.

Equipment

Equipment must be in good working order and condition. It must be available close at hand, and all staff must be properly trained in its use. This includes basic and site-specific equipment. Maintaining an inventory justifies your requests for replacements. Maintenance of equipment is important for longevity. Reuse old equipment for training. Recycle for other programs, training or trade. Replace as needed. Develop a schedule for replacement to help in budgeting.

Managing multiple facilities is an art and a skill. Delegation helps. Rotate staff. Constant inspections of staff, equipment and facilities is important.

Reporting

"If it's not in writing, it doesn't exist." Document everything. Make reports simple and easy to fill out. Narratives should be clear, concise and accurate. Review these daily reports frequently. Review information needed. Consider having a rainy day in-service training on report writing. Stress the importance of completing reports in a timely manner. All are official documents and can be subpoenaed. These include applications, personnel records, certifications, training, incidents, maintenance, policies and procedures. Use these for your annual report to justify your actions, needs and budget.

Make sure your policies, procedures and standard operating procedures match what you practice. If not, either change the policy or practice. Review these annually and get input from your staff to update as needed. Make sure this information is available to your staff at all times. Have sign-off sheets for your staff.

Standard of Care

You have a responsibility to adhere to the standard of care. Make sure your standard of practice meets or exceeds that standard of care. Remember that minimum standards are only one criterion from below standards. Continually raise your standard of practice.

Collaboration

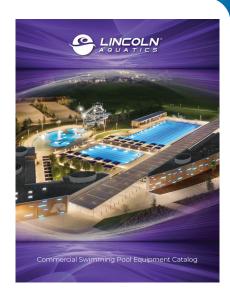
Work with your staff and consult with peers in the field. You will find that sharing helps you stay grounded and grow professionally.

Richard D. Carlson is a member of the New Jersey Aquatic Safety Coalition (njaquaticsafetycoalition@gmail.com).

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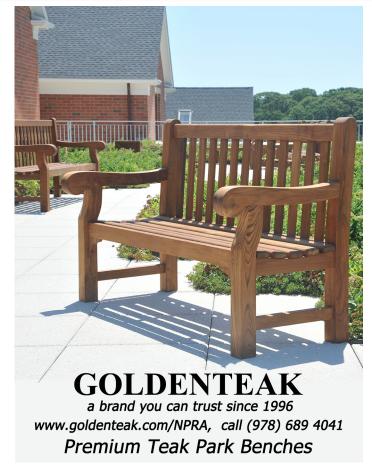


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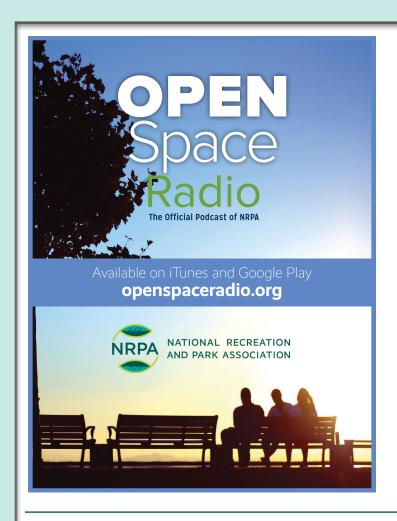


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Park Bench

From Canvas to Conservation

A childhood interest grew into the opportunity of a lifetime when Montgomery Parks' (Maryland) operations manager — and unofficial waterfowl afficionado — Jennifer Scully was invited to judge the 2024 Federal Duck Stamp Contest, an art competition hosted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"My elementary school art teacher introduced me to the Junior Duck Stamp Program. My entry did not even come close to winning, but the contest left an impression on me," says Scully. Her passion for drawing led to a degree in biological illustration and a career in parks. Along the way, she has hosted yearly exhibits of Duck Stamp contest winners at Montgomery Parks' Black Hill Discovery Center, where she was the manager. She has been a regular judge of the Maryland Junior Duck Stamp Design Contest and also judged the National Junior Duck Stamp Contest. Those experiences, and her arts background, earned her a place on the five-member national contest judging panel this year.

The Federal Duck Stamp Program started in 1934, with the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act. The law requires hunters to purchase a yearly stamp as a license to hunt waterfowl. Since its inception, the program has raised \$1.1 billion and saved more than 6 million acres of land for wildlife. It is widely touted as the most successful conservation effort ever put forth by the federal government.

"The Federal Duck Stamp Contest brings together groups who might not naturally gel — hunters, stamp collectors, art enthusiasts and conservationists — all to champion these stamps and the mission to conserve habitat," says Scully.

"Before the competition, I had to keep the fact I was a judge secret. The location was secret, and then when you are judging, there are up to 20,000 people watching online," she says.

Why all the advance secrecy? To prevent anyone from trying to influence the judges. Although there is no cash prize for winning the Federal Duck Stamp Contest, the winning submission is nicknamed the "million-dollar duck" because that is the sum the artist usually earns from sales of the print after a win.

South Dakota artist Adam Grimm won this year's Federal Duck Stamp Contest with his acrylic painting of a pair of spectacled eiders. His work will be featured in mid-February when Scully hosts the Federal Duck Stamp Art Exhibit, with the junior and adult winners at Montgomery Parks headquarters in Wheaton, Maryland.

Scully says if she is not involved in judging the contest next year, she may enter a painting in the competition.

"I just love the Duck Stamp program and how it brings people together. We should never underestimate the power of creativity and sharing it with the world. I think that's why people come to parks, because we can offer the space and inspiration to do that."

- Christina Hudson, Public Relations and Outreach Specialist, Montgomery Parks, The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission



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