



**American Red Cross
Scientific Advisory Council Statement
National Aquatic Staff Shortage**

Introduction

It's not unusual for the country, states, and locales to experience a shortage of qualified aquatic staff from time to time. Usually, we find that the ship "rights" itself with some standard practices that can help return and ensure a consistent flow of individuals to meet demand. Currently, as with much of the other supply chain issues brought on by the pandemic, we are bearing witness to a human capital shortage in the form of aquatic managers, certified lifeguards, and swim instructors.

The following statement is presented as a support mechanism to provide some context to the situation and extend information about continued best practices and potential solutions for those delivering aquatic services. This statement may also be helpful in supporting conversations between upper organizational administration and those on the front lines of aquatic service delivery.

Background

Many in the field of aquatic management understand that one key to ensuring a dependable workforce of lifeguards and instructors is to develop the flow beginning with those just learning to swim and then fostering them on to become lifeguards, instructors, and even management staff. When something intervenes and disrupts this flow, we tend to see shortages occur. Repairing and reestablishing the flow then becomes a vital part of the solution. Although, in the past, we have seen this occur in pockets within different locations and in differing settings, the pandemic produced an event that impacted everyone at once - halting most programs in a way we have never had to navigate. Children unable to take swim lessons, competitive aquatic sports programs unable to operate, and lifeguard and swim instructor courses coming to a halt in unison. This not only disrupted the aquatic flow for many but also stopped it cold in its track.

Questions abound as to what the long-term impacts will be and what it will take to get back on track. The following are suggestions based on strategies that have worked in the past for facilities, along with recommendations for continued sound operations that support how you can continue to operate safely with our current challenges.

Operations: *Safety First - Always*

The struggle is real, and so are the pressures placed on aquatic managers to open facilities that people are accustomed to using and perhaps under the same operating hours as in the past. The

following are best practice reminders to help support a safe and enjoyable facility if open and dealing with a staffing shortage.

1. Do not compromise on what you've been trained to know is appropriate regarding operational realities such as the size of zones for lifeguards, the timing of rotations and breaks, capacity limits, and activities allowed. Set your lifeguards up for success by evaluating the visibility of your zones and the response times from each lifeguard station with the Red Cross Zone Verification Drills program.
2. Reduce the areas within the aquatic space that are available to patrons as a way to maintain appropriate coverage. When this is done, clear signage and effective barriers must be used to let patrons know what is and is not available to them.
3. Be flexible and nimble. Depending on staff availability day to day, you may need to adjust the available aquatic space.
4. Help educate your non-aquatic superiors and the general public about the standards for a safe aquatic facility and why they are in place to relieve any pressure to work outside of your training.
5. Continue to avoid single guard situations.
6. Don't overextend your staff when it comes to work hours. Adjust where needed to keep them fresh and effective and feeling good about staying rested and ready.
7. In extreme cases you may need to consider adjusting daily, weekly, and seasonal schedules. This could include limiting hours per day, limiting days per week, and even a shorter season overall. This strategy is preferred over considerations to provide unguarded, swim at your own risk, aquatic spaces.

Lifeguards

1. Reestablish and maintain your aquatic flow as soon as possible. This will most likely involve additional marketing and communication to let people know you're in business. A hands-on personal approach may also help kick-start the process.
2. Connect and tap non-traditional sources for staff such as parents, grandparents, retirees, master's swimmers, and school teachers in the community who have flexibility in their schedule.
3. Help de-mystify the requirements around becoming certified. Many people may not consider the option to become a lifeguard due to misconceptions around swimming requirements needed to enter and complete certification.
4. Be ready to offer in-season training courses and training for new employees. Even if someone comes on late, they could end up being a long-term investment.
5. Educate young people and others on the unique transferable skills that are attained from becoming a lifeguarding and how those skills are beneficial for their future.
6. Offer trainings that consider the schedules of those you're recruiting and be flexible on working with them.

7. Although increased wages are being viewed as one of the key solutions, many people will come to facility if it's established as a supportive, positive, and professional place for people to work. Work climate can make a big difference.
8. Be creative in your collaboration community wide. Take a leadership role in bringing everyone together in the aquatic community and work on a unified plan to improve the situation based on everyone's strengths. Guard sharing is a much better strategy than competing for staff.
9. Create opportunities for those who need to improve their skills to become certified. Specialty swim sessions, such as the Red Cross Lifeguard Prep Badge and Junior Lifeguarding, are geared toward the specific skills needed to enter a lifeguarding course to help prepare them and build confidence. This also allows you to encourage them to keep working towards the goal and create a positive relationship about coming to work for you in the future.
10. As this season starts to wind down, think ahead to your upcoming needs. Offer a training schedule that considers school breaks starting in the fall and winter to help get your team trained. Then, get the process started to get them secured for your next employment surge.

Water Safety Instructors

Many of the concepts listed in the Lifeguards section above can also be applied to shortages of Water Safety Instructors. Below are some additional related items to consider.

1. Make group lessons your priority and pay instructors accordingly to make it worth their while. In many cases, private or semi-private models often pay more to instructors. *Flip the pay scale!*
2. Resist the urge to overfill classes. In the short term, students might be compromised in safety and the learning experience. In the long run, this could be a detriment to the reputation of the program.
3. Utilize instructor aides to maximize enrollment in classes. For this to work, you'll need to train aides on their roles and also the lead instructor on how to best use them.
4. Communicate with your parents/guardians who have or have had children taking swim lessons in your program to gauge their interest in becoming instructors. You most likely will find some who have previous experience and would welcome the chance to get back into it.
5. Tap into school teachers and, if available, college students pursuing a degree in education. Teachers will already have a jump on the skill set needed and the latter could use it as a skill and resume builder. Some college programs will even provide practicum credit for the experience.

The Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council fully recognizes the challenges that aquatic facilities are facing with staffing shortages. We wish all of our providers and colleagues the best as you move toward solutions that work for your facilities.

To assist you with your work as you manage lifeguarding operations please consider taking an [online Lifeguard Management course](#), utilize the free tools to evaluate and adjust lifeguard zones and response times. Access the Lifeguard Zone Evaluation Drills in the Red Cross Learning Center. Go to 'Classes', then click 'Course Materials', then 'Lifeguarding', then 'Teaching Resources'. Look for items called 'Zone Evaluation Instructions,' 'Ask Drill Template,' and 'Lifeguard Station Response Time Testing Template.

For those interested in formally evaluating the performance of their lifeguards and lifeguarding operations, visit [this page](#) for more information about the Red Cross Aquatic Examiner Service.

To help you prepare the talent pool of future aquatic staff, offer the American Red Cross Junior Lifeguarding course and/or have your Water Safety Instructors teach one of these targeted badge programs to help potential candidates meet the prerequisites for the certification courses: Lifeguard Prep Badge or Water Safety Instructor Prep Badge.