

New York City Sets a High Bar for Lifeguards. That Could Be a Problem.

The city requires its pool lifeguards to meet standards similar to those set for ocean lifeguards, beyond what the state sets.

By Hurubie Meko

Aug. 27, 2022

As temperatures climbed into the high 80s on a sunny afternoon this week, dozens of people trying to cool off at the public pool in McCarren Park in Williamsburg had only half the usual space, as the other side sat empty, blocked by traffic cones and caution tape.

A national lifeguard shortage has left pools and beaches across the country understaffed and, in some cases, shuttered. And in New York City, the summer season has been marked by reduced capacity, unannounced pool closures, long lines to get in and the cancellation of free swim lessons.

But the city's shortage isn't only because of a lack of applicants, some seasonal lifeguards have said. Another problem, they said, was how difficult the city had made it for people to qualify to work at pools and beaches.

This year, 900 applicants took the city's lifeguard training program test, and about 26 percent passed, according to city data. To qualify, recruits must swim 50 yards, or about the length of an Olympic-size pool, in 35 seconds or less.

The city's lifeguard requirements are similar to those at state-run beaches in Long Island, where lifeguards must be able to swim 100 yards in 75 seconds or less to prove they have the strength and stamina to traverse long distances and rescue people in sometimes rough ocean waters.

But New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has less rigorous requirements for lifeguards at its pools and other facilities: They must swim a 50 yard sprint in 45 seconds or less and 200 yards in under four minutes. Nearly 90 percent of applicants passed that swimming test in 2019, according to a state data.



A lifeguard shortage has meant some pools, including McCarren Park Pool in Williamsburg, have been partially closed much of this summer. Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

When considering the difficulty of the requirements, Thomas G. Gill, vice president of United States Lifesaving Association, nonprofit professional organization of beach lifeguards and open water rescuers, said the 100 yard swim in 75 seconds would probably be the most challenging for most swimmers; the 50 yard swim under 35 seconds would be slightly less demanding; and the 200 yard swim would be the easiest.

“Guarding the pools and guarding the oceans are all very important and should always have lifeguards present no matter where you are,” Mr. Gill said.

“But,” he added, “the potential distances covered for rescue in an open water situation is exponentially higher than the potential for a pool.”

Usually, the city aims to hire between 1,400 and 1,500 lifeguards to fully staff over 50 public pools and city-run beaches. This year, it hired just 500 people to start off the season, including the new recruits, a number that increased to 786 by Fourth of July weekend, after a cohort of returning lifeguards were requalified.

Although the state also experienced some lifeguard staffing shortages at the beginning of this season, leading to the cancellation of some free swim lessons, most of their lifeguard slots were filled this summer, according to a spokesman.

Overall, the state has acted more nimbly in their response to the national shortage than the city, said Adam Ganser, the executive director of New Yorkers for Parks, a research and advocacy organization. “The city really needs to act much more quickly on this issue and ramp up on the recruitment earlier and start looking at a much wider group of who could be in these positions.”

Crystal Howard, assistant commissioner of the Parks Department, said changes to the lifeguard program, including entry requirements, need to be approved by both the New York State Department of Health and the union that negotiates for the city’s lifeguards.

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Thea Setterbo, the director of communications for the union, said that if the city wanted to increase recruitment, it needed to raise wages, saying that it is “the single most effective tactic for addressing the lifeguard shortage.”

A spokeswoman for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Meghan Lalor, added that the agency is “exploring many options to boost numbers and enhance recruitment for next season.”

Data showing how many people failed to qualify in past years is not available, Ms. Howard said. She said the agency did not track the times of swimmers who failed the test.

The lifeguard shortage is not a new problem, Mr. Ganser said, but it is an urgent one. As the world gets warmer because of climate change and summers in the city grow hotter, access to swimming pools for people who don’t have air conditioning in their homes is critical, he said.



A lifeguard watches over swimmers at a public pool in Astoria, Queens. Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

Janet Fash, who has worked as a chief lifeguard at Rockaway Beach for 31 years, said the qualifications for city lifeguards need to be re-evaluated. The skills needed to lifeguard in a pool are different from the skills needed to rescue people in an open-water setting, she said, and the exams should reflect that.

“What it comes down to is if you’re a pool lifeguard, how long are you actually going to have to swim?” she asked.

A spokeswoman for the New York State Department of Health, which oversees lifeguard certification requirements statewide, said the minimum standard set by the city was intended for qualifying surf lifeguards at beaches and “exceeds the requirements for other lifeguard supervision levels,” such as pools.

The state sets minimum requirements lifeguards must meet, but state officials said municipalities are free to set their own standards.

Surf lifeguards who watch over beaches have a higher skill requirement to ensure they are equipped to respond to emergencies in ocean waters, the state spokeswoman added.

The city did make efforts to increase recruitment ahead of summer. The qualifying season was extended into late April, the number of sessions where tests were administered increased from 15 in 2021 to 29 in 2022, and the department reached out to about 300 school principals and about 3,000 swim coaches in search of candidates.



Public pools provide a place for New Yorkers to cool off during heat waves, which are expected to become more frequent because of climate change. Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

Mayor Eric Adams also reached a deal with District Council 37, the union that negotiates for the city's lifeguards, in early July that temporarily increased lifeguard wages and changed the qualification standards for lifeguards who work in the city's 17 mini-pools, usually found at playgrounds, enabling the city to hire 78 returning lifeguards in a two-week period, according to a spokeswoman.

Ms. Fash said the city needs to do the same for all lifeguard positions.

The state agency, which started the hiring season late because of a wave of Covid cases last winter, held 65 qualifying sessions across New York starting in March and going into the summer.

Ms. Fash said she has seen the requirements change over her career — when she began, beach lifeguards had to swim 440 yards in a time that was 30 seconds shorter than the certification requirement now. During one of her first summers on the job, in the early 1980s, she said she remembered the city kept the hiring window open all summer to mitigate a lifeguard shortage.

Eleven lifeguards took different shifts at McCarren's Olympic-sized pool on Wednesday afternoon. Opening to full capacity would require a rotation of 24 lifeguards, according to the parks department.

A group of lap swimmers darted from one side of the pool to the other in a small section specifically roped off for them. Anna Miller, 35, who lives nearby, said she has come to the public pool regularly this summer and has yet to see the entire pool open.

Still, she said, "I am obsessed with the pool."

"Even though it has problems this year, it's one of the hidden gems in New York City," she added. "It's free and it's a beautiful space where nobody has cellphones and you can just tune out from the world."



Swimmers were cordoned off into sections at Astoria Pool in Queens during one of the last weeks of the summer season this year. Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times