



LIFESAVING SOCIETY®

The Lifeguarding Experts

**Lifesaving Society Ontario
Aquatic Staffing Shortage Symposium Report
January 2018**

Aquatic Staffing Shortage Symposium Report

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Introduction

The Lifesaving Society values its partnership with its affiliates and has a vested interest in supporting and assisting when challenges surface that impact affiliates' ability to offer programs and support drowning prevention in Ontario.

Lifeguard staff shortages in municipalities across Ontario has necessitated reducing available programming. This has prompted action by Lifesaving Society Ontario to investigate and help mediate the situation. While there is speculation as to why less National Lifeguard certified individuals are pursuing lifeguard positions, there is little understanding as to the cause of the issue.

To respond to these challenges, affiliates have implemented various strategies to attempt to increase and retain their staff rosters.

On October 22, 2015, the Lifesaving Society hosted a day-long symposium for affiliates to explore the issue of aquatic staff shortages in Ontario. This symposium included a focus group style workshop to discuss and brainstorm problems, solutions, and new ideas regarding staff shortages.

This report presents the results of those focus groups to help affiliates identify best practices for improving staff recruitment and retention.

Explanation of Symposium/Focus Groups

The symposium exploring aquatic staff shortages in Ontario took place on October 22, 2015, and proceeded with the following agenda:

1. Presentation on recruitment and retention of staff by human resource specialist (60min).
2. Presentation from City of Edmonton on how they met the needs of their staff.
3. Lunch (60min).
4. Ontario Affiliate focus groups & brainstorming (120min).

During the focus group and brainstorming sessions, affiliates were asked the following questions:

1. What are affiliates currently trying?
2. What are some new ideas?
3. What are best practices for staff retention and recruitment?
4. Other questions we need to ask to make more informed decisions.
5. What are specific steps we need to move forward to improve the staffing situation?
6. How can the Society help?

Affiliate participants were organized into three groups of 10–12 people with one facilitator. Conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative research technique where texts of similar themes are grouped together.

Consequences to Understaffing/What are the Implication

- What happens when you don't have enough staff?
- What are the end results and effects of not being able to fill the schedules?

The initial big picture of this issue was discussed but there are many potential components that are created by the fallout:

- Waitlists.
- People not learning to swim, or progressing through lessons, as quickly as desired.
- Participants leaving the system as they could not successfully meet the program requirements and therefore moving to different pursuits.
- Decrease in revenue streams.
- No more private lessons
- Holes in schedules, where they need to be canceled or combined.
- Can't offer the same flexibility to customers when creating privates as staff are needed to fill regular schedule.
- Can only offer ones advertised in their own block of time.
- Staff working four or five times a week which can be burdensome for students.
- Not prepared for pool rushes.
- We often try to overstaff to prepare for summer rushes, but staff start off with only a few number of hours. People then go find other jobs and when rush hits in summer, not enough staff.
- Reduction in programming
- Not enough staff to meet programming needs.
- There is room in the pool for lessons, but staff are not available
- Senior staff are needed in the water more which makes the management of the of aquatics programming challenging.
- Head guards are having to go in the water to teach to cover for missing staff which means classes cannot be canceled

Current Challenges

Cost of Certification and Recertification

To walk on the pool deck as an employee, potential staff must complete the certification process. Potential staff must attend many hours of training and pay for courses in advance before they can actually begin their aquatic career.

Program Participation Numbers have not Transitioned to Staff in Aquatic Departments

Participation numbers in leadership programs have increased, however, there has not been a correlating increase in the number of applicants. Most program participants are looking for supplementary personal incentives other than job employment, such as resume building for school applications, and parental/ personal gratification.

Potential Staff Think Differently About Work

- The pool of teenagers we are hiring from has changed their work focus.
- In the past, we had lifeguards and instructors who needed to work and who would work multiple shifts a week totaling between 15–20 hours, in order to pay for school.
- We now see a greater emphasis on school and extracurriculars to develop a well-rounded application for the school of their choice. A part-time job is a secondary thought. Those who are looking for part-time work are only interested in one-to-two shifts per week (around ten hours per week) so they still have time to pursue other activities and responsibilities.

Organizational Mindset

- Lifeguarding and swim instruction is seen as “a way to pay for post-secondary school” rather than a potential career path.
- Challenges are created because staff are often limited to part-time status which in some situations leads to limited hours and/or no benefits. This limitation seriously affects the potential for people to see the aquatic field as a viable option for their future.

Pay Disparity

- The wages of aquatic staff across Ontario varies greatly from minimum wage to over a high end of \$25 per hour.
- With pay being a factor in a potential staff choosing the line of work, the variety of pay is seen as one of the factors that affect staffing levels.

Not Connected to our Target Market

- We now live in a digital world and our potential staff have embraced it completely. However, when we are limited to using social media to recruit potential staff, it creates a disconnect to the group that we draw most of our staff from.

Ideas Currently Being Implemented by Affiliates

Recruitment Strategies

Approximately 10–15 year ago, we were able to pick the best staff from the pool of applicants. In comparison, there are some facilities today that are hiring all applicants. Due to the limited interest in this profession we now have to go out and find our potential staff before they apply. Developing and working on a recruitment strategy is imperative to the longevity of this profession. Here are some current strategies being used in the Aquatic industry.

Employment recruitment booths

- Get out there and sell the benefits of working as a lifeguard and swim instructor.
- Setup a booth at fairs, community events, high schools, and in recreation facilities.
- Focus the message on the rewards and outcome of a career working in aquatics and the transferable skills that can be applied to numerous professional careers i.e. medicine, emergency services, health services, education, etc...When outside the pool environment there will be a different demographic of potential staff. The goal is to show them how aquatics could be the perfect job for them.

Engaging swimmers at a young age

- Let's get kids to dream about one day becoming lifeguards or swimming instructors.
- Engage the swimmers in your swim lesson program. Teach them the benefits of these positions at a young age and in every single level of your program. This will help guide them on the right path and ensure more people become certified thus increasing the potential applicant pool.
- Host parent/participant information nights and/or invite participants near the end of the swim program to learn about the aquatic continuum.
- Other ideas include volunteer and mentoring programs developed specifically for this purpose. Junior Lifeguard Club and Lifesaving Sport are just two great examples of programs that give participants a taste of what to come.
- Provide materials at the end of each course that instructs members how they can become an aquatic professional.

Get your schools in the pool

- Swimming is a life skill, and we need to make an effort to engage schools in ensuring all kids experience Swim to Survive lessons. Why not take the same approach with lifesaving programs, as they are job skills and get high school kids in.
- There have been a couple of organizations and school boards who have partnered up to offer aquatic leadership programs as credit courses through the schools.
- It may also be beneficial to approach individual guidance offices about part-time employment opportunities for students.

Promotional media

- Social media is king, take advantage of it! You may be one viral video away from a bunch of future lifeguards knocking down your door.
- Use video to sell the job, have your staff explain why they became a lifeguard, show the fun and everything that lead you to becoming a lifeguard.
- The use of other promotional material can be effective. Posters and handouts get the word out and are quite cost effective.
- You can also use social media to connect your current and futures staff. Creating a Facebook page for your department where people can ask questions and get answers, as well as where your staff can share their work experience and positive stories.

Hiring Practices

Our potential staff's behaviours have changed. It is time for us to look at our hiring practices and change our plan to follow the needs of potential lifeguards and instructors.

Casual employment status/Leave of absence program

- Develop casual staff procedures to keep staff who go to school engaged in helping with coverage hours on weekends, or school breaks when they are home.
- A leave of absence program can allow staff to take time off when school or life get stressful, without giving up their position.
- It facilitates the capacity to create a larger coverage teams in order to relieve the stress of covering shifts, and helping with non-regular shifts.

Free courses if working

- Offer staff development courses and leadership opportunities if they take a certain number of shifts.
- Hold daytime advanced programming for potential day time staff. Offer the training so candidates attend without payment until they have started working for you.
- Pay for staff recertification(s) if they are working a minimum number of hours per week or have signed a year contract.

Hire adults and train them afterwards

- Interview and hire adult staff before they step into their Swim/Lifesaving Instructor and Lifeguard courses. Create the attitude that they have a goal to work towards.
- Look for hiring partners such as Ontario Works, who will help pay for the training of potential staff.

Work together to get the staff hired

- Large municipalities can work together to hire staff and then spread the resources between neighbouring facilities.
- Conduct regional screening and interviews to widen the pool of applicants to draw from.

Create entry level positions

- Create an entry level position that they can work at and gain experience before they become certified. They can help with lessons, help keep the facility clean, and keep guests happy. You could also run this as a program that candidates register for. The Junior Lifeguard Club can be expanded to include this type of volunteer work for a full experience of what it is like to be a lifeguard and/or instructor.
- Create a full-time position to teach leadership and training, this ensures there are fewer hours to cover

Leadership Courses

Review your leadership programming. Some affiliates have had success by changing how they schedule aquatic leadership courses. Offering non-traditional aquatic programming can help keep and attract youth before they obtain all their certifications.

Change leadership program times

- Offer courses during the week rather than just on weekends.
- Track the birthdays of candidates in your leadership courses and schedule future training around those dates.
- Join efforts with other nearby facilities or municipalities to offer a daytime leadership training program for adults.

Encourage the leadership route for students

- Talk to the candidates in your courses and let them know you will be accepting resumes at the end of the course.
- Speak with your trainers. Who would they recommend you hire? Go to the last day of the course/exam and offer those candidates a job.
- Include a recruitment advertisements on one of the panels of your report cards.
- Email recruitment information directly to parents of Learn to Swim and Swim Patrol students.

Engaging with leadership candidates

- Have knowledgeable customer service staff who can answer questions about the leadership path.
- Develop leadership programming that keeps youth engaged by volunteering with your programs, working on their swimming skills, leadership skills and fitness.

Provide volunteer opportunities and jobs to junior students

- Hire junior staff who have Bronze Cross and/or assistant instructors to work or volunteer as slide attendants, help with swim tests and assist swim instructors.
- Increase Learn to Swim class sizes by hiring and using assistant instructors.
- Provide volunteers and junior staff with branded merchandise to help them feel like they are part of the team.

Provide subsidies for programs

- Offer a discount off advanced courses to junior staff to encourage them to get certified.
- Use the accumulation of qualifications to help staff move up the pay scale.
- Develop and give “splash cash” to volunteers that can be used towards their next aquatic leadership certification.

Staffing

Hiring on an ongoing basis and creating a positive and supportive work environment is essential when faced with a staffing shortage. Pay incentives alone might not be enough to attract and hold on to aquatic staff.

Coordinate hiring and sharing of staff between municipalities

- Plan training sessions and courses so that they do **not** conflict with other facilities nearby, to ensure lots of training opportunities are available in the area.

Get feedback from instructors

- Use instructors and trainers as a reference and hire potential staff directly from your courses on the last day rather than just during traditional hiring periods.

Provide incentives to staff

- Be more flexible in allowing staff to miss more than one instructional shift in a session. Is there an option to schedule a makeup class instead?
- Give staff incentives like an extra dollar an hour at the end of a session if they did not miss any shifts during the session.
- Offer bonuses for referring a friend for employment.
- Give staff free admissions to swims/fitness memberships so they can train on their own time.
- Offer competitive pay rates.
- Schedule snack breaks during busy or long shifts and give the staff a few minutes to socialize together.
- Offer staff discounts on advanced leadership courses and/or free recertification(s).

- Reward staff with an additional vacation day.
- Offer staff a higher pay rate for shifts that are difficult to fill (e.g. early mornings).

Pay staff to complete training sessions

- Seek government grants that compensate for staff training.

Flexible training schedule

- Staff training sessions are usually mandatory but offer two or three different dates and let the staff select which day they would like to attend based on their schedule.

Morale boosting for staff

- Team building activities such as water polo, bowling nights, holiday parties.
- Theme day(s) or week(s) where staff can wear costumes.
- Host “Swim In” movie nights for staff.
- Team potluck dinners.
- Post photos taken at staff socials around the office.

Staff recognition

- Recognize staff in front of peers at staff training sessions or at staff socials.
- Post positive feedback from parents where all staff can see.
- Acknowledge staff for a job well done through small gifts or cards.

New Ideas not Currently Being Implemented by Affiliates

Lifeguarding is often thought of as a part time job for students. A shift in this perception could expand the labour pool considerably.

Career Programs for Staff

- Include Lifeguard in aptitude testing in schools along with other professions such as firefighter, paramedic etc.

Conditional Hiring and Interviewing

- Offer desirable shifts to those who are also willing to take shifts that are difficult to fill.
- Package shifts together i.e. one weekend and one evening.

Employee Benefits

- Offering benefits to staff will make the job more appealing to adults. This can be cost effective as you are filling more shifts with one individual, thereby reducing training costs.

Offer Free Courses

- The high cost of completing all aquatic leadership courses necessary for employment can be prohibitive to some potential staff.

Government Lobbying

- Lobby to bring swim lessons back to the school curriculum.
- Initiate a partnership with job retraining programs to include lifeguarding.

Partner with School Boards and Universities

- Allow for high school students to work in aquatic jobs as part of a co-op placement.
- Apply to the school boards to allow aquatic leadership courses to count as high school credits.

Recruitment & Promotion

- Allow staff to promote their jobs themselves, create YouTube videos and Facebook pages that they can share with their friends.

The Role of the Lifesaving Society

Affiliates look to the Society to take the lead in helping to bring attention to the positive aspects of being a lifeguard and to assist affiliates in their efforts to promote and encourage people to enter the aquatic field for employment. The Society can also help in raising awareness about the value and responsibilities of being a lifeguard or instructor.

Hiring Staff – Best Practice Document

- For use by those hiring to gain support for successful methods “this is the way that the experts consider how we should be hiring our staff”.

Job Promotions Campaigns

- YouTube videos to promote aquatic jobs.
- Branding, increase perceived status of lifeguards similar to a firefighter.
- Help to sell what lifeguards and instructors do, promote how good the job is.
- Create and disseminate marketing materials, outreach beyond 13-year-olds to take Bronze Medallion.

Outreach

- In schools through the guidance department, the Society's support behind this type of campaign would be greatly beneficial.
- Partnership with government jobs and retraining programs with the Ministry of Education; create a package for school board/unemployment center.

Psychological Readiness

- Involve more information within the program on what the expectations are for the responsibilities associated with this job.

Questionnaires for Swimming Students

- Survey participants on their intentions. What draws candidates to obtain the qualifications necessary to become a lifeguard and instructor but then choose not to work in aquatics? Where is the disconnect?

Reaching Out to Previously Certified Lifeguards

- Access to database, inviting lapsed lifeguards and instructors to return to aquatics and how they can go about getting recertified.

Rebrand What it Means to be a Lifeguard

- Change mentality, build status like firefighters.
- Lifeguard calendar.
- More to it than just part time hours while in school.
- Educating on what the job is "there's more to lifeguarding than standing on a deck with an aid".
- Advertise adult only aquatic courses on 'Find a Course' to encourage those who might be reluctant to take a course with 13-year-olds.

Conclusions

The results from the symposium on the aquatic staff shortage in Ontario highlighted some interesting results. Most notably, it appears that affiliates are currently engaged in a variety of strategies to help curb their shortages. But while a variety of strategies are being attempted, there is inconsistency across affiliates, and a combined approach of various strategies within a single affiliate may garner better results.

Of the barriers identified, relations with management and unions does seem to create some resistance to curbing the shortage by preventing some affiliates from having their staff work more than a limited number of hours.

It also seems that affiliates feel that the Society could take more of a proactive role in engaging with leadership candidates, as well as have a stronger social media presence and alumni (former lifeguard/ leadership participant) engagement system.

It is our hope that this document can serve as a resource for affiliates and other Lifesaving Society branches in helping reduce staffing shortages.