

Aquatic Staff Shortage – Addendum Report Fall 2026

Introduction

The Lifesaving Society has been examining aquatic staffing challenges in Ontario since 2015, when it convened an Aquatic Staffing Symposium to better understand the workforce shortages affecting aquatic facilities across the province. The findings from that symposium were published in the [2018 Aquatic Staffing Shortage Symposium Report](#), which identified the primary causes of staffing shortages and highlighted strategies affiliates were using to recruit and retain aquatic staff. The follow-up survey conducted as part of the [Aquatic Staffing Shortage Addendum Report 2024](#) reaffirmed that many of these challenges persisted and identified additional mitigation strategies to support affiliates as they adapted to a changing workforce.

To continue monitoring provincial workforce trends, the Lifesaving Society conducted another province-wide survey in fall 2025. Distributed by email to affiliates and promoted during Lifesaving Society sessions at the PRO EX Conference, the survey gathered information on recruitment, retention, staffing pressures, and emerging practices being used across Ontario. Responses included quantitative data, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended comments, providing valuable insight into the current state of the aquatic workforce. The findings were further validated through discussions with Area Chairs during the April 2026 Area Chair Conference.

This report consolidates those findings to identify emerging trends, highlight successful practices, and support evidence-informed planning by affiliates and the Lifesaving Society. By continuing to monitor staffing challenges over time, the Society aims to strengthen collaboration, inform future workforce initiatives, and help ensure Ontario's aquatic sector remains resilient and well-positioned to meet the needs of its communities.

Purpose of this Report

This report is intended to provide affiliates, aquatic leaders, and the Lifesaving Society with an evidence-informed overview of current aquatic workforce trends across Ontario. By identifying common staffing pressures, successful recruitment and retention strategies, and emerging workforce challenges, the report aims to support informed planning, encourage knowledge sharing between organizations, and help strengthen the long-term sustainability of aquatic services throughout the province.

Method

A province-wide survey was conducted in fall 2025 to assess the current state of aquatic workforce recruitment and retention across Ontario. The survey was distributed to Lifesaving Society affiliates through email and promoted during Lifesaving Society sessions at the PRO EX Conference to encourage participation from a broad range of aquatic organizations. Survey questions included multiple-choice, quantitative, and open-ended response formats designed to gather information on staffing challenges, recruitment and retention practices, scheduling trends, and strategies being used to address workforce shortages.

Responses were compiled and analyzed by a working group led by the Management Proficiency Chair of the Management Training Council, Jennifer Fruscella. Quantitative responses were summarized to identify provincial trends, while qualitative comments were reviewed using thematic analysis to identify recurring challenges, successful practices, and emerging issues affecting the aquatic workforce. To further validate the survey findings, preliminary results were presented to Area Chairs during the April 2026 Area Chair Conference, where participants provided additional perspectives and contextual information. These combined sources of information form the basis of the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

Who Responded

A total of 170 affiliates completed the survey, representing nearly eight times the participation achieved in the Society's 2023 survey. Responses were received from municipalities, private affiliates, camps, YMCAs/YWCAs, educational institutions, and other aquatic organizations representing communities of varying population sizes across Ontario. In total, 669 affiliates accessed the survey, resulting in an overall response rate of approximately 25%. This broad representation provides confidence that the findings reflect the diverse staffing experiences across Ontario's aquatic sector.

Results

Overall, the findings suggest Ontario's aquatic workforce is beginning to recover from the widespread staffing shortages experienced over the past several years. However, the survey indicates that the shortage has evolved rather than disappeared, with organizations increasingly facing challenges related to specialized roles, weekday daytime coverage, and long-term workforce development.

Although staffing pressures remain, the findings suggest the aquatic workforce has entered a period of gradual recovery following several years of significant shortages, with many organizations shifting their focus from recruitment alone toward long-term workforce development. Rather than a widespread inability to recruit staff, the survey indicates that organizations are increasingly facing targeted shortages in specific roles, particularly swim instructors, leadership instructors, supervisory staff, and weekday daytime coverage. Many affiliates reported adapting their operations by increasing wages, offering subsidized certification opportunities, implementing flexible scheduling practices, and expanding recruitment efforts to adults, retirees, and non-traditional candidate groups.

Respondents also identified several emerging trends affecting the sector, including increased demands on experienced staff to mentor newer employees, continued challenges sustaining daytime programming such as Swim to Survive, and growing concern over the limited number of leadership instructors available to train the next generation of aquatic professionals. These findings provide valuable insight into how the aquatic workforce continues to evolve and form the basis for the discussion and recommendations presented throughout this report.

Key Findings at a Glance

- Weekday daytime shifts remain the most difficult to staff, while evenings and weekends are generally more stable.
- Swim instructors, leadership instructors, and supervisory staff continue to be the most difficult positions to recruit.
- Organizations are increasingly recruiting adults, retirees, and other non-traditional candidates in addition to students.
- Many affiliates are offering subsidized certifications, wage adjustments, and more flexible scheduling to improve recruitment and retention.
- Leadership instructor shortages are creating bottlenecks that limit future training opportunities and workforce growth.
- Increased mentoring and onboarding demands are placing additional pressure on experienced staff.
- Some organizations continue to reduce or modify programming in order to maintain safe staffing levels.

Hardest shifts to staff	Weekday daytime
Hardest positions to staff	Swim Instructors & Leadership Instructors
Greatest workforce need	Leadership pipeline
Recruitment trend	Is improving
Biggest operational challenge	Daytime shift coverage
Most successful strategy	Multiple layered recruitment and retention initiatives

Impacts on Programs and Service Quality

"We hire almost everyone who applies."

Although many organizations reported gradual improvements in staffing levels, workforce shortages continue to affect the delivery of aquatic programs and services across Ontario. Rather than eliminating programs entirely, many affiliates indicated they are adapting operations to maintain safety and service quality, often by reducing program capacity, limiting lesson offerings, postponing expansion, or selectively modifying schedules where staffing is most constrained.

Respondents also noted that maintaining service levels increasingly depends on experienced staff taking on additional responsibilities. Full-time employees and senior instructors are spending more time mentoring newly certified staff, providing on-deck coaching, and supporting program delivery. While these efforts help maintain program quality, they also place additional demands on experienced personnel and may contribute to increased workload and fatigue over time.

"Stronger candidates are becoming harder to find."

Several organizations observed that recruiting staff has become only one part of the challenge. Many reported hiring nearly all qualified applicants, while noting that stronger candidates are becoming more difficult to find and that newer staff often require additional training and support before they are fully independent. Collectively, these factors have the potential to affect lesson consistency, customer experience, and public confidence if staffing pressures continue over the long term.

Barriers to Staffing

"Finding staff for weekday daytime shifts continues to be our greatest challenge."

Survey respondents identified several recurring factors that continue to challenge the recruitment and retention of aquatic staff. While these barriers vary by organization and community, common themes emerged consistently across the province.

Certification costs remain a significant obstacle for many prospective staff. Respondents noted that the cumulative cost of progressing through aquatic leadership certifications can discourage participation, particularly when compared with the wages available upon entering the workforce.

A second major challenge is the limited availability of leadership instructors and trainers. Affiliates reported difficulty finding qualified Instructor Trainers and Examiners to deliver leadership courses, creating bottlenecks that restrict the number of future instructors and lifeguards entering the workforce. Many also observed that these positions require additional preparation, responsibility, and expertise without a corresponding increase in compensation.

Respondents also highlighted ongoing retention challenges, particularly among younger staff who are increasingly seeking greater flexibility, fewer weekly hours, and improved work-life balance. Competition from other employers, including private swim schools and neighbouring municipalities offering higher wages or different working conditions, continues to influence recruitment and retention in many communities.

Finally, weekday daytime staffing remains the most persistent workforce challenge. While evenings and weekends are generally easier to staff, daytime programming relies more heavily on adults seeking stable, career-oriented employment. Organizations identified wages, limited long-term career opportunities, and the physical demands of aquatic work as barriers to attracting and retaining employees for these critical daytime roles.

Recommendations

The survey findings demonstrate that while no single solution exists to address aquatic staffing shortages, organizations that implement a combination of recruitment, retention, and workforce development strategies are generally better positioned to meet their staffing needs. Based on the experiences shared by respondents, the following recommendations may assist affiliates in strengthening and sustaining their aquatic workforce.

No single strategy emerged as a universal solution. Organizations reporting the greatest success implemented multiple recruitment, retention, and workforce development initiatives.

Immediate Priorities

Reduce Barriers to Certification

Affiliates should continue exploring opportunities to reduce the financial barriers associated with aquatic leadership certifications. This may include subsidizing courses and recertifications for staff and volunteers, identifying grant opportunities, partnering with local libraries to provide access to course materials, and promoting financial assistance programs such as the Lifesaving Society Hilary M. Weston Award. Providing mentorship and practical coaching throughout the certification process may also improve candidate confidence and completion rates.

Strengthen Daytime Staffing

Given that weekday daytime coverage remains the greatest staffing challenge, organizations should consider targeted recruitment strategies for adults seeking long-term employment rather than relying primarily on student staff. Respondents identified several successful approaches, including creating full-time career-oriented positions, providing guaranteed daytime schedules, offering wage premiums for difficult-to-fill shifts, and expanding recruitment to retirees, post-secondary students, fitness professionals, and other non-traditional candidate groups.

Build the Leadership Pipeline

Developing and retaining leadership instructors should be a priority across the sector. Organizations should invest in succession planning by identifying future Instructor Trainers, Supervisors, and leadership staff early, providing mentorship opportunities, supporting professional development, and recognizing the additional preparation and responsibilities associated with these roles. Expanding the leadership pipeline will help ensure a sustainable supply of instructors capable of training future aquatic professionals.

Longer-Term Strategies

Increase Workforce Flexibility

Respondents reported success with scheduling practices that better align with today's workforce expectations. Affiliates should consider implementing minimum availability requirements where appropriate, offering flexible scheduling, utilizing technology to simplify shift management, maintaining ongoing recruitment throughout the year, and creating opportunities for job sharing or multi-site employment. Tailoring schedules to both organizational needs and employee availability may improve staff retention while maintaining operational stability.

Strengthen Partnerships and Collaboration

Many organizations emphasized the value of working collaboratively with neighbouring affiliates, school boards, post-secondary institutions, and community partners. Regional coordination of leadership courses, shared Instructor Trainers, partnerships with employment centres, and collaboration on recruitment initiatives can improve access to training while reducing duplication of effort. Continued support from Area Chairs and the Lifesaving Society can further strengthen these collaborative approaches.

Continue Monitoring Workforce Trends

The aquatic workforce continues to evolve, and staffing challenges vary across communities and organization types. Continued data collection, regular engagement with affiliates, and ongoing evaluation of recruitment and retention strategies will help identify emerging trends and support evidence-informed decision-making. Sharing successful practices across the province will enable affiliates to learn from one another and continue adapting to Ontario's changing workforce landscape.

Key Takeaway: Organizations are adapting rather than waiting.

Discussion and Conclusion

Survey responses suggest that the nature of Ontario's aquatic staffing shortage continues to evolve. While many organizations reported gradual improvements in recruitment, respondents consistently identified emerging pressures related to retaining experienced staff, filling specialized leadership positions, and maintaining weekday daytime programming. There is also growing recognition that newer employees require additional mentorship and professional development, increasing demands on senior staff. These findings indicate that workforce development, rather than recruitment alone, will be an increasingly important focus in the coming years.

The findings from the 2025 Aquatic Staffing Survey suggest that Ontario's aquatic workforce is gradually stabilizing; however, staffing shortages continue to affect many organizations in different ways than previously observed. While recruitment appears to be improving in many regions, the challenge has shifted toward filling specialized positions, maintaining daytime coverage, and developing experienced staff capable of training and mentoring the next generation of aquatic professionals. These findings indicate that the issue is no longer solely about the number of staff entering the workforce, but also about sustaining a healthy leadership pipeline and retaining experienced personnel.

The survey also demonstrates that affiliates are increasingly adapting their recruitment and retention strategies. Organizations are expanding recruitment beyond traditional student populations, offering more competitive wages and incentives, introducing greater scheduling flexibility, investing in mentorship and professional development, and collaborating with neighbouring affiliates and educational institutions. While no single strategy emerged as a universal solution, respondents consistently reported that a combination of approaches tailored to local needs was the most effective way to strengthen staffing levels.

Compared with the Society's previous reports in 2018 and 2024, this survey reflects both continuity and change. Many longstanding barriers, including certification costs, competition for staff, and perceptions of aquatics as temporary employment, remain relevant. At the same time, new challenges have emerged, particularly around leadership instructor capacity, mentorship demands, and sustaining weekday programming. These evolving trends reinforce the importance of ongoing monitoring to ensure strategies continue to reflect the changing workforce landscape.

The Lifesaving Society remains committed to supporting affiliates through continued workforce research, knowledge sharing, and collaboration across the province. By monitoring staffing trends, promoting successful practices, and fostering partnerships between affiliates, educational institutions, and community organizations, the Society can help strengthen Ontario's aquatic workforce.

Although challenges remain, the increased participation in this survey and the innovative practices being implemented across the province demonstrate a sector that is actively adapting and working together to build a resilient, sustainable aquatic workforce for the future. Sustained collaboration, ongoing evaluation, and a continued commitment to workforce development will be essential to ensuring aquatic services remain accessible, safe, and sustainable for communities across Ontario.

Key Takeaway: The aquatic staffing shortage is no longer solely about the number of staff entering the workforce. Increasingly, the challenge is sustaining a healthy leadership pipeline and retaining experienced personnel.

Next Steps

The Lifesaving Society will continue to monitor aquatic workforce trends through ongoing engagement with affiliates, Area Chairs, and sector partners. Future work will focus on identifying emerging workforce issues, evaluating the effectiveness of recruitment and retention strategies, and sharing successful practices across Ontario. Continued collaboration between affiliates, educational institutions, and the Society will be essential to strengthening the leadership pipeline and ensuring Ontario's aquatic workforce remains resilient in the years ahead.

Appendix A

Summary of Recruitment and Retention Strategies Identified Through the 2015 Symposium, 2023 Survey, and 2025 Survey

The following strategies were identified by Lifesaving Society affiliates through the 2015 Aquatic Staffing Symposium, the 2023 Aquatic Staffing Survey, and the 2025 Aquatic Staffing Survey. While no single strategy was identified as a universal solution, respondents consistently indicated that implementing multiple complementary approaches produced the greatest success in recruiting, developing, and retaining aquatic staff.

Focus Area	Strategies Identified
Reducing Certification Barriers	• Subsidize leadership courses and recertifications for staff and volunteers. • Promote financial assistance programs such as the Hilary M. Weston Award. • Loan course materials through local libraries where available. • Seek grants and community funding to offset certification costs. • Provide mentorship and practice opportunities to improve candidate success.
Recruitment	• Recruit directly from leadership courses. • Attend school career fairs and community events. • Expand recruitment beyond youth by targeting adults, retirees, post-secondary students, Masters swimmers, and lane swimmers. • Maintain year-round recruitment campaigns. • Promote aquatic careers through social media and community outreach.
Leadership Pipeline	• Develop succession plans for Instructor Trainers and Supervisors. • Offer paid apprenticeships or mentoring opportunities. • Provide professional development for experienced instructors. • Recognize leadership responsibilities through increased compensation or incentives. • Share Instructor Trainers regionally to maximize course availability.
Scheduling and Retention	• Offer flexible scheduling while maintaining minimum availability expectations. • Introduce guaranteed daytime schedules where possible. • Utilize scheduling software and mobile applications. • Consider job-sharing and multi-site employment. • Offer referral incentives and recognition programs.
Daytime Staffing	• Develop career-oriented daytime positions. • Recruit adults seeking long-term employment. • Offer wage premiums for difficult-to-fill daytime shifts. • Coordinate staffing across multiple facilities. • Explore supports that reduce barriers to daytime employment, such as childcare partnerships.
Training and Workforce Development	• Increase onboarding and mentorship for new staff. • Provide regular in-house training and refreshers. • Offer adult-only leadership courses where appropriate. • Build leadership confidence through practical coaching and professional development.
Regional Collaboration	• Coordinate leadership courses with neighbouring affiliates. • Share Instructor Trainers and Examiner resources. • Partner with school boards, colleges, and employment centres. • Exchange successful recruitment and retention practices through Area Chairs and

	Society initiatives.
<i>Recognition and Workplace Culture</i>	• Recognize staff achievements publicly. • Promote aquatics as a meaningful profession with transferable skills. • Foster positive workplace culture through mentorship, team-building, and staff appreciation initiatives. • Highlight career pathways within aquatics to improve long-term retention.