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Overcoming Lifeguard Shortages: Strategies to Effectively Recruit and Retain Lifeguard Candidates

Brook MacMillan

A day at the pool or beach can be unpredictable, yet aquatic environments continue to be a major recreation attraction. While most families experience a fun-filled adventure and participate in activities such as swimming, sun bathing, and boating, others can experience tragedy. Lifeguards are essential to maintaining safety at public pools. They protect lives and provide first response in emergencies. In recent years, many organizations have faced a shortage of lifeguards available for hire. This article explores the component steps of a comprehensive lifeguard recruitment and retention strategy that organizations can use to overcome their staffing shortages.

A day at the pool or beach can be unpredictable, yet aquatic environments continue to be major recreation attractions. While most families who go to an aquatic venue experience a fun-filled adventure and participate in activities such as swimming, sun bathing, and boating, others experience tragedy. According to the National Safety Council, drowning is the second leading cause of death for children ages 1–14 (Kelley, 2006). In addition, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that approximately 4,000 people drown every year and that most of the drownings are preventable (US Center for Disease Control, n.d.). As a result, municipal organizations with aquatic programs have sought to find ways to improve pool safety at the same time as they ensure a fun and carefree environment for their patrons to enjoy.

Lifeguards are essential to maintaining safety at public pools. They protect lives and provide first response in fatal and nonfatal emergencies. As such, they are perhaps the most critical component to any effective aquatics program. Many municipal agencies have been faced with the issue of recruiting and retaining lifeguards. Hays and Kearney (2003, p. 1) commented, “there are great challenges associated with the staffing process in the public sector.” An exploration of the components of an effective lifeguard recruitment and retention strategy reveals a number of measures that organizations can implement to overcome their lifeguard staffing shortages.

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Step 1: Identify Agency Lifeguard Needs

Scheder (2004) discussed several considerations that managers should make when hiring aquatic staff, including lifeguards. First and foremost, hiring managers should determine the appropriate certifications required for different staff positions. This component is essential to the establishment of a purposeful lifeguard recruitment and retention program. In addition, the human resources department or equivalent within an organization should conduct a job analysis of agency lifeguard needs (Romine, 2000). Condrey explained that “job analysis is often thought of as the backbone of the human resource function” (2005, p. 42).

Step 2: Design an Effective Lifeguard In-Service Training Program

Agencies must seek to design an effective lifeguard training program for their potential candidates. A lifeguard, by definition, is an emergency service worker who is responsible for overseeing the safety of patrons at aquatic facilities. A key part of any lifeguard’s job is the prevention of in-water incidents through anticipation of potential accidents and proactively enforcing rules.

In addition to the reduction or absence of drownings, accidents, and other medical emergencies, one of the most useful measures for determining the effectiveness of a lifeguard is the rapidity with which that guard can respond to an emergency as indicated by rescue time (i.e., the point from identification of the incident to the point of reaching the victim; American Red Cross, 2001). An article by Griffy, Rogers, and Patel (2007) described the drowning of a seven-year-old boy who was swimming with his sister in a wave pool. The boy showed signs of struggling and at least two, possibly three, lifeguards jumped into the water after him. By the time the lifeguards reached the boy, he was already unconscious. The lifeguards pulled him out of the water and tried unsuccessfully to revive him (Griffy, Rogers, & Patel, 2007).

This anecdote illustrates the need for identifying valid performance tests that can help organizations to identify the skill sets of their lifeguards. As Hays and Kearney (2003, p. 156) described, “performance tests directly measure applicant performance on actual or simulated job components.” Managers should always determine the expiration dates of applicants’ certifications as well as verify the skills of all potential staff.

It is important to mention that lifeguard training programs can be expensive for potential candidates. Because of the expense, another strategy that municipal agencies can employ is to offer free lifeguard training courses (or to reimburse the training costs) to potential applicants who agree to work for the organization for an established period of time (New York Amsterdam News, 1996). Yet one more strategy many agencies have begun to implement is an internship process for potential lifeguards. Internship programs are designed at eventually providing job placements for potential lifeguards (Dowie, 2001). In an internship program, lifeguard candidates are trained free of charge via a standardized, agency-accepted training program. Following the training, candidates then spend a specified time “job shadowing” a more senior lifeguard. In doing this, they are able to hone their skills as well as acclimate to the environment in which they eventually will work.

Step 3: Develop an Effective Marketing Plan

Another component essential to effective lifeguard recruitment is a sound marketing plan. As Romine (2000, p. 58) explained, “a marketing plan is essential to attracting ideal employees.” Municipal agencies should take note of what other aquatic agencies in the area are doing to market their own agencies, taking into consideration what wages, incentives and professional development opportunities that they offer. For example, the City of New York is an agency that had to run a marketing campaign to respond to their lifeguard shortage. Widdicombe (2007, p. 31) noted that “Judging from the scale of this year’s recruitment campaign, it would seem that the city’s lifeguard shortage —always a problem—has reached crisis levels.” The City of New York decided to be strategic in its efforts, holding a kickoff party in Union Square, filled with Beach Boys songs, and put out a call to recruit lifeguard candidates from abroad (Widdicombe, 2007).

Step 4: Implement an Employee Benefits Program

As Condrey (2005) described, employee motivation is central to long term program success. Motivation can be either monetary or nonmonetary in nature. The National Recreation and Park Association, for example, emphasized the benefits of human resources departments who design a benefits package for prospective lifeguards (Romine, 2000). The benefit of paid time off often is attractive to many potential lifeguard candidates. According to Hays and Kearney (2003, p. 171), “many employers, including half of state and local governments, now have paid time off leave policies.” Offering free training can only go so far if the lifeguards take that training to another facility that offers a more attractive benefits program. Therefore, it may be best for municipal agencies to consider benefits programs that offer significant salary increases and bonuses to attract and retain the guards.

Conclusion

As the literature revealed, there is no single solution to the lifeguard staffing shortage. The market trends are going to continue to be in a downward direction when it comes to attempting to recruit, train, and retain lifeguard candidates. In this article, I identified several strategies as part of an overall recruitment, hiring, and retention plan that can be implemented to maximize success in hiring a qualified lifeguard staff. The steps include identifying agency lifeguard needs, designing effective lifeguard in-service training, developing an effective agency marketing plan, and implementing an employee benefits program. Among these steps, several specific creative strategies for initially attracting and retaining lifeguard candidates include reimbursing credentialing costs or creating an internship program. After recruiting well qualified lifeguards, agencies need to keep those guards by carefully developing a retention program that involves ensuring a high quality work environment and administering a creative benefits program. Regardless of the specific strategies selected and how they are implemented, it is important that any aquatic agency seeking to attract and recruit high quality lifeguard candidates take proactive actions to improve so that they can provide a safe and fun environment in which their patrons can swim and recreate.

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