

+ POOL

Swim Programs Report 2024

Swim Programs Report

Friends of + POOL (+ POOL) is a nonprofit water stewardship organization founded in 2015 to provide free and safe access to New York City's rivers for healthful recreation for all.

NYC has 520 miles of waterfront, more coastline than Boston, San Francisco, and Miami combined, but only 11 beaches spanning 14 miles for 8.5 million people located at the furthest ends of the city's boroughs. Furthermore, NYC has fewer public pools per capita than any other major U.S. city and 500 miles of untapped waterfront. After years of advocacy, we have established a partnership with the City and State of New York that

will enable us to build the world's first water-filtering floating swimming pool at Pier 35 on New York's East River! In doing so, + POOL is creating an innovative new public space for recreation. We've inspired new laws expanding access to swim lessons and ignited major policy changes to create a regulatory pathway to give New Yorkers back their rivers for the first time in a century.

However, access is irrelevant if everyone cannot get into the water safely. Central to our mission is providing free access to high-quality swim education, a necessary precondition to our vision for the future, where people who represent the full diversity of New York City are swimming safely in the rivers.

Nationally 79% of children from low-income households have little-to-no swimming ability, 69% of black, 58% of Hispanic, and 42% of white children do not know how to swim.¹ Locally, swim education is often prohibitively expensive for many. As a result, many New Yorkers do not know how to swim. The market rate for swimming lessons in NYC starts at \$59/half hour for small group classes, with semi-private lessons at \$118/class and private lessons at \$236/class, at a minimum.

Since our founding in 2015, + POOL has become a leader in advancing swim equity. In 2016 we launched our Bluefish

program that focuses on teaching young people who would not otherwise have access to swim lessons. At the time, Friends of + POOL was the only organization in NYC providing swim lessons specifically to low-income communities free of cost. In 2022, we began offering Adult Learn to Swim classes, inspired by feedback from our Bluefish parents that many also lacked swimming skills. In doing so, we began to fight against the generational loss of swimming skills mainly affecting low-income communities of color. This past year we also established a new Lifeguard Career Development program. To date, we have taught well over 1,000 children and adults how to swim, offering free programs to have fun in the water, while creating a pathway for training new lifeguards to advance water safety.



"My oldest learned how to swim and float. My youngest overcame his fear of getting into the pool and learned how to hold his breath to put his head in the water. He also learned how to blow bubbles to breathe underwater." -Summer Bluefish parent

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In 2024, drowning deaths claimed the lives of seven New Yorkers², the highest rate of swim-related deaths since 2019, underscoring the persistent dangers in and around the city's waterways. Unfortunately, despite frequent (and preventable) drownings, at present NYC doesn't generate publicly available comprehensive data on drowning outside sanctioned or city-run swim facilities, or what is published in the media, leaving the full scope of the problem unknown. This is why + POOL is working to shed light on this little-known issue while working with City Council members such as Park and Recreation Chair Shekar Krishnan, to raise awareness and advocate for making this information publicly available. While we have no reliable source of NYC-specific data, we do know that it is likely, given the lack of access to swimming facilities, that drowning statistics are worse in NYC than elsewhere. Combined with the expected increase in incidents of extreme heat each summer, we know that our swim programs are not just outlets for recreation and play, but provide a vital public service that helps save lives.



"I feel very confident, so happy I signed up, truly happy that this is here for the city so we can learn" -Adult Learn To Swim participant

Adult Learn to Swim (February-April 2024 & September-December 2024)

In the first quarter of 2024, we offered two six-week sessions of Adult Learn to Swim (ALTS) classes at two different locations: one at the Leman School in lower Manhattan and the other at John Jay College in Midtown. We use a curriculum adopted in 2023, which aligns with the latest US Masters Swimming (USMS) Adult Learn-to-Swim guidelines. Our Program Director maintains an Adult Learn to Swim and lifeguard certification to assist in leading instructors and teaching curriculum. The training for volunteers and other paid instructors begins with a virtual onboarding session and shadowing an experienced instructor. To support their teaching efforts, we provide water-safe, laminated copies of the curriculum as an on-deck pedagogical aid, which have consistently received positive feedback. Instructors have expressed appreciation for these materials, citing their usefulness during classes. We adhere to USMS best practice guidelines by maintaining a student-to-teacher ratio of

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3:1. We offered spots to 18 students at Lemam and 15 at John Jay in each Winter ALTS session, the maximum capacity for our rented pools, with a total of 65 students overall. Most students enrolled in the program had no prior formal swimming lessons, while others shared that they had previously attempted to learn but were unsuccessful.

Partnering with local US Masters adult swim club Team New York Aquatics (TNYA), the largest masters swimming club in New York, and a nonprofit founded and run by members of the LGBTQ community, provided + POOL with the opportunity to share pool time to reduce costs, recruit passionate volunteer instructors, and build community between TNYA and

our Adult learners. This also helped establish an immediate pathway for ALTS graduates to further enjoy swimming opportunities. This year, four of our students “graduated” into TNYA’s “Low-Pressure Zone” (LPZ) practices which are swim team workouts. This provides an outlet to help new Adult swimmers refine techniques, build endurance and confidence in the pool. A major goal of our Adult program is to ensure participants who are ready and able are also invited to join more advanced workouts with other entities; and Friends of + POOL helps build awareness of available city programs, such as those at TNYA.



*“Thank you for this program! May you have more programs like this in the future!”
-Summer Bluefish parent*

In Fall 2024, we offered an additional 12 weeks of our Adult Learn to Swim classes enabling us to serve an additional 40 adult learners, bringing the total number of adult students served in 2024 to 105. The Fall program was broken out into three separate sessions, with classes hosted again both in Midtown and Lower Manhattan. We continued to partner with Physique Swimming and Team New York Aquatic (TNYA), to recruit volunteers and diminish costs so that we can offer learning opportunities to more participants.

Lifeguard Workforce Development Pilot (April-May 2024)

In April, + POOL partnered with Henry Street Settlement, Lower East Side Employment Network (LESEN), and Splash Fit Swim Club to administer a new Lifeguard Training program,

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Our Lifeguard Training Program was the first of its kind to offer both certification and skills-based courses aimed towards helping students to become strong enough swimmers to pass a certification pre-test.

funded through generous support by Amazon. This pilot program provided free training and lifeguard certification to individuals who may not have access to swim facilities and instruction. A direct response to the national lifeguard shortage, which has closed pools and beaches in NYC, this exciting new program is creating a pipeline of talent as we prepare to operate our own facility.

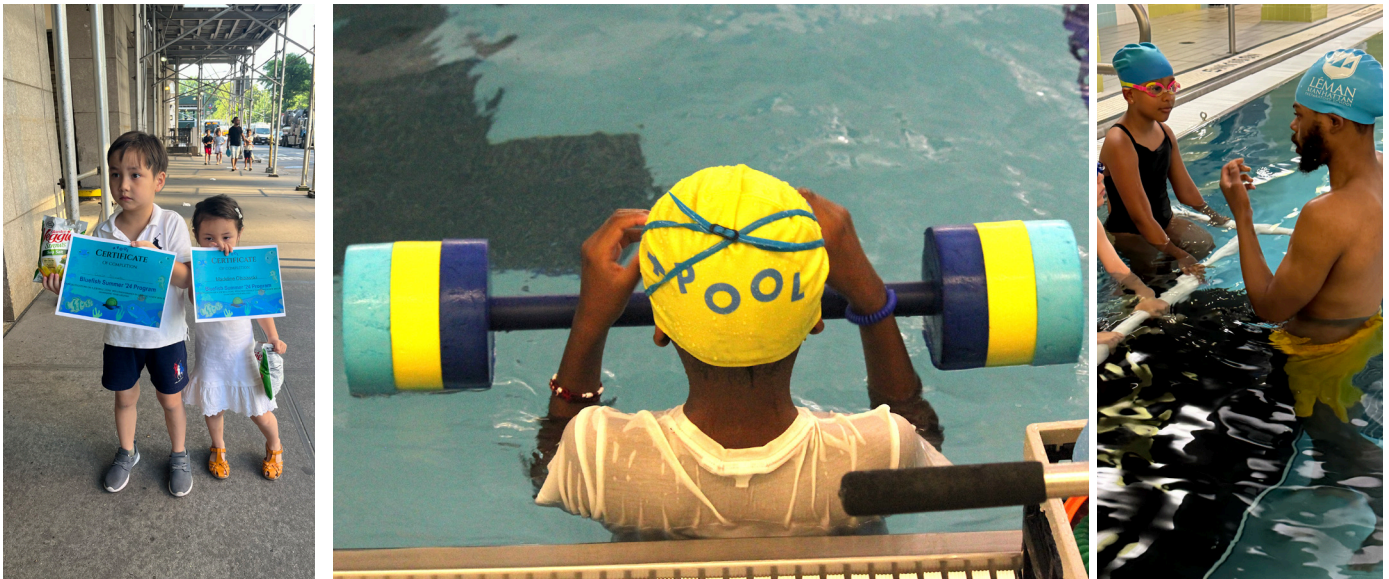
We know there is a massive need for lifeguards in New York City. In 2023, only one-third of 1,400 available positions at NYC’s pools and beaches were filled by Memorial Day. This summer, many NYC public pools were closed and beaches unattended because of the lifeguard shortage. We also know there is tremendous interest in serving as a lifeguard because of the response to our call for applications for this program, which attracted 635 complete applications. This implies that we do not have a shortage of people interested in becoming lifeguards, we have a shortage of opportunities for them to successfully qualify for and secure employment.



Graduates of the 2024 Lifeguard Training Program at their May celebration.

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According to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, 74% of lifeguard candidates in 2023 could not pass the required swimming pre-test. It is clear that while there is a deep need for guards, and an interest in serving as a guard, the road to qualification ends before it even begins for students who were not exposed to opportunities to help them build the skills and endurance needed to pass a pre-test to take a certification course. The purpose of the vigorous pretest is to ensure that candidates have the necessary fitness to complete the lifeguard training. Therefore, we designed + POOL's program to incorporate ample skills development classes to allow participants to practice so that they could pass the pre-test and qualify for certification.



"The kids loved it and are very happy they took this class. My daughter was reluctant before she tried it and her instructor told her she is good enough to compete." -Summer Bluefish parent

Friends of + POOL's program focused on three elements: preparing candidates to qualify for certification, providing free Red Cross Lifeguard Certification, and helping certified individuals apply for and obtain open lifeguard positions in New York City. Funding from Amazon allowed + POOL to offer program spots to 169 of the 635 applications. 64 participants passed the Lifeguard Certification Pre-test and were enrolled in a certification course. The remaining 105 students were offered placement in courses to grow their skills to qualify or a certification course. Ultimately, 61 of the 64 participants enrolled in the certification course passed the Red Cross Certification exams, which provides both Lifeguarding and CPR for the Professional Rescuer Certification. These certifications are

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widely accepted at many aquatic facilities throughout the city. A Career Fair was hosted at Henry Street Settlement on May 15, 2024, and all graduates were connected with facilities looking to hire.

Summer Bluefish (July-August 2024)

Launched in 2016, the goals of the summer Bluefish Learn-to-Swim program are to provide quality swim education to New Yorkers who otherwise would not have the opportunity to learn to swim. The program teaches basic water safety and fosters a lifetime love of swimming while arming local youth with a new life-saving skill that will let kids safely have fun in and around water. To date, we have taught more than one thousand local youth,



We create an environment where kids have fun while learning.

who might otherwise not have the opportunity to learn to swim. This Summer, + POOL's free program served 155 students aged 5-17 years old. This was an expanded age bracket from past programs, based on interest garnered from older youth and teens expressing interest in lifeguard training, but lacking the necessary swimming skills. Over 70% of students registering for our program this year identify as BIPOC, a demographic that has a disproportionate amount of opportunities to learn to swim according to the USA Swimming Foundation.

During the month-long Bluefish program, students partake in eight 30-minute classes that teach how to be safe around all bodies of water alongside the basics of swimming. Our

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Our Adult Learn to Swim students say trust in their instructors is what helps them succeed in our program.

Bluefish learn how to get in and out of the water; how to float, kick, and tread water; breathing techniques; body positioning; and the physical components of swimming. Parents are encouraged to attend an orientation and provided at-home resources to reinforce learning with tips and tricks for how parents can support the learning process, as well as information on Adult Learn to Swim programs. Classes meet the standards established by USA Swimming for water safety, following a curriculum developed in consultation

with American Red Cross-certified Water Safety Instructors and Aquatic Directors from local swim schools. including our instructional partner Physique Swimming.

We target low-income New Yorkers because according to a previously cited USA Swimming Foundation Study, 79% of children in households with incomes less than \$50,000 have few to no swimming skills. To implement Bluefish, we partner with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), NYC's public housing agency, to promote the opportunity to learn to swim with + POOL for free during month-long swim camps. While we work with a range of community partners such as schools and mission-aligned nonprofits for other programs, we have found that working with NYCHA is one of the best ways to market the opportunity to learn to swim to our target population of low-income New Yorkers. Unfortunately, the demand vastly exceeds our capacity. Each time we open registration, all available slots for swim lessons are filled within hours or days, underscoring both the need for and reputation of our program. As of 2023, NYCHA is home to 1 in 17 New Yorkers, 528,105 people, with 25% of those residents being children.³

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Given our goal is to ensure low-income New Yorkers are water-safe, we offer our program free of charge to all Bluefish participants so that costs are not a barrier to participation. The average income of NYCHA families is \$24,531 a year, making private swim lessons (which average \$500 or more for a program of similar scope) out of reach for most if not all of these families.

Over 61% of Bluefish families registered this year live below the poverty threshold in NYC, which according to the New York State Comptroller is reporting an income of \$13,788 for an individual, or \$27,740 for a family of four. 22% of Bluefish families report only slightly higher family income of under \$50,000. More than 95% of the applicants to our Bluefish program live in family households reporting an income of under \$80,000, demonstrating the need for programming for low-income households. Our program is designed to eliminate barriers to participation for low-income communities, considering costs, resources, transportation limitations, scheduling conflicts, and other issues that might prevent community members from actively engaging in our programs. Our Bluefish youth participants are also provided resources to support their participation including swimming gear (bathing suits, caps, and goggles), towels, and support materials.



"Program was great overall and the gifts that were given out on the first day of class were very helpful and thoughtful because I didn't think it was needed." -Summer Bluefish parent

CitySplash! Artistic Swimming (June 2024)

In 2024, + POOL's CitySplash! initiative was a first-time recipient of a grant from the USA Artistic Swimming Foundation, whose work focuses on growing the sport of artistic swimming by offering intergenerational engagement in aquatic-related activities. This funding enabled + POOL to organize a new CitySplash! event on June 1, 2024, offering the opportunity to individuals who have never engaged with artistic swimming to learn the art form. In total, we had 75 registered participants for the event. The theme of the event was "The Barbie ShO" to capitalize on the current "Barbie" trend and engaged aquatic fitness specialist Erwin Gonzalez to lead an entry-point aqua fitness course to get participants

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"As a black male, I'm learning how to swim and I love it!" -Adult Learn To Swim participant

comfortable in standing water movement.

Immediately following, + POOL's Program Director, together with Marina Fernandez coached more challenging artistic swimming techniques where participants were taught propulsion and simple arm and leg movements, including sailboats and ballet legs. Participants from the program were invited to perform at + POOL's Summer Fundraiser Pool Party, showcasing Artistic Swimming for more than 350 guests.

Aqua Fitness (January-February & October 2024)

In 2024, seeing that there was a need for additional low-cost recreation options beyond swimming lessons, we partnered with Erwin R. Gonzalez, creator of the Aqua Fitness class H2ShO, a low-impact workout that combines music and movement in the pool. Each of the ten classes featured unique choreography set to music. We offer a limited number of spots in each class free of charge to community members at St. Bartholomew's Community Center in Midtown Manhattan in January and February, and in October at Leman Prep in lower Manhattan, helping to reach members of the community near the announced + POOL site at Pier 35. In 2024, we helped over 100 adults experience the joy of water exercise!

Key Takeaways

Drowning remains a silent and deadly epidemic and one of the leading causes of death among children in the United States. A lack of swimming ability—closely tied to systemic inequities—puts low-income, special needs, and BIPOC children and adults at greater risk.

In NYC, this issue is exacerbated by high costs, entrenched disparities, and limited access to both swim education and facilities. Formal swimming lessons have been shown to reduce the likelihood of drowning by 88%, yet far too many New Yorkers remain unable to swim, with preventable drownings claiming lives each year.

Although the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation offers free learn-to-swim programs via a lottery system each summer, this initiative was on hiatus from 2020 to 2022. Even after resuming at limited capacity in 2023 and continuing into 2024, the program's reach has not kept pace with demand, leaving thousands without access. While NYC Parks programs have not been made publicly available, we know that the pandemic-induced hiatus further compounded the pre-existing gaps in swim education, leaving many who want to learn unable to do so, while disrupting the pipeline of swimmers to lifeguards compounding the negative effects.

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Members of the Team New York Aquatics Artistic Swimming team with the Harlem Honeys and Bears at our Summer Pool Party in June.

This is why we are deeply committed to addressing these challenges by expanding opportunities for New Yorkers with the least access to opportunities to learn life-saving and rewarding swimming skills. Our efforts aim to bridge the gap with high-quality programming that not only teaches swimming but also builds confidence and safety in and around water.

While we are proud of the impact we've made, we recognize there is much more to do. Through ongoing program evaluations and continued advocacy, we are determined to confront swim inequities by expanding access and championing meaningful change. As 2024 comes to a close, implementing these laws has already begun, marking a significant step forward in addressing swim safety and equity across the city. As active members of the NYC Water Safety Coalition,

we continue to advocate for change in public policies, systems, and services to fight the drowning epidemic. In 2024, the coalition advocated for the Five Point Plan for Water Safety with the New York City Council to fight the drowning epidemic. This plan was promulgated by City Council Parks and Recreation Chair Shekar Krishnan, and called for expanded hours and seasons for pools and beaches, the creation of an atlas of all aquatics programs in the city, the establishment of a junior lifeguard corps, expanded free swim lessons and more public pools. On July 28, 2024, in an Op-ed published in the *NY Daily News*, + POOL Program Director Nora Cronin co-authored an op-ed with Council Member Krishnan that also advocated for changes to the NYC Lifeguard Municipal Training Program to help fill more lifeguard positions within the city and solve the "lifeguard crisis" that has left many public pools not fully staffed each summer since



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pools were reopened following the pandemic.⁴

+ POOL's advocacy also helped ignite Governor Hochul's NY SWIMS initiative, New York Statewide Investment in More Swimming. This historic advance in swim education included an investment in capital construction for more public pools across the state, including our own floating river pool, which will allow us to expand our swim program offerings significantly.

Now that our facility is under construction, we are currently exploring ways in which Friends of + POOL might be able to establish a fund to ensure that our free swim programs can be offered at our new facility indefinitely for communities that need it most. None of this important work would be possible without the generous support of individuals and organizations

committed to expanding swim equity and education. Contributions from individual donors are by far the largest source of contributed income enabling us to continue and scale our programs and capacity so that we can grow our impact and provide life-changing swim opportunities for underserved communities. Generous support for + POOL's swim programs in 2024 has been provided by Jeff Barany, Janine Luke, Marian Klein-Fledt, Sharon Davis, Robert and Linda Meyer, Claire Weisz, Ginger Groeber, Laurie David, Fontas Advisors, the New York City Council, the USA Swimming Foundation, and the over 100 individuals who contribute to crowdfunding campaigns and believe in the transformative power of swimming and education. Together, we are making a difference in building a safer and more equitable future.

Endnotes:

- 1- USA Swimming Foundation Study 2017.
- 2- "7 drowned at NYC beaches this summer. Most grew up in the city without access to pools." Gothamist, September 8, 2024.
- 3- NYCHA 2023 Fact Sheet
- 4- Nora Cronin and Shekar Krishnan. "More Lifeguards for NYC Waters: How to Solve our Swim Safety Crisis." *NY Daily News*, July 28, 2024