

**COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE**  
Inter-Office Communication

Date: November 12, 2021

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Guy Smith, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Parks

Subject: Recruitment and Efforts to Address Staff Shortages in 2022 (Response to File #21-782)

File Type: Informational

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**REQUEST**

In File #21-782 the Board of Supervisors requested an informational report outlining specific plans to proactively recruit lifeguards in 2022 as well as long term plans to ensure Milwaukee County's ability to operate its aquatic facilities and programs into the future. Additionally, the File requests specific plans to proactively address staffing shortages that led to event cancellations throughout 2021. This report is a response to both requests for information.

**POLICY**

Wisconsin State Statutes:	
Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	
Specific Adopted Budget:	
Specific Adopted Budget Amendment:	
Specific Adopted Capital Project:	

**BACKGROUND**

Related File No's:	21-415, 21-556, 21-782, 21-992,
Associated File No's (Including Transfer Packets):	
Previous Action Date(s):	

**Lifeguard Staffing**

The Milwaukee County Lifeguard Corps has served the Parks Aquatics program for 75 years and has in recent years seen a decline in ability to recruit new lifeguards. The trend began about 5 years ago and was felt acutely over the 2019 and 2021 seasons when pools were no longer able to be safely opened due to the lack of lifeguarding staff. In order to fully staff the existing pools and Bradford Beach Milwaukee County would need over 200 lifeguards, and

ideally 300 to be able to offer full coverage. Parks has only been able to recruit around 100 over the last few seasons which has resulted in only 4 outdoor pools opening in the summer of 2021, 2 indoor pools that have recently opened, and no lifeguards at Bradford Beach.

Milwaukee County Parks relies on hiring hundreds of seasonal staff every Spring, Summer and Fall to provide a multitude of services in positions such as Seasonal Park Workers, Seasonal Food Service Operators, and Seasonal Office Assistants. Hiring of seasonal employees has also become more difficult in recent years with the number of seasonal staff declining due to competition for other summer jobs increasing, challenges related to the pandemic, and other factors.

To address labor shortages of both seasonal lifeguards and seasonal park workers the Board of Supervisors took action this year to increase the wages of these positions. Increasing these wages should make the positions more attractive as compared to other similar positions in the local economy, but we know that the labor shortages currently being experienced in the local and national economies are caused by complex factors and additional effort is needed to ensure that we are able to meet adequate staffing levels in 2022. If, despite the increase in pay for our seasonal positions, Parks is unable to recruit and hire an adequate number of people for next season then we will be unable to open all facilities and service delivery will suffer.

Recruitment for vacant positions at Parks takes a constant effort throughout the calendar year. Parks does not have a dedicated recruiter, so it is incumbent on existing full-time staff working collaboratively with Human Resources staff to do the following -

- Conduct outreach to all previous staff from prior year (Lifeguard and Park workers)
- Email all high school guidance counselors, gym teachers, and athletic directors
- Recruit candidates through Handshake
- Design and deliver job posters to all schools in Greater Milwaukee Area (not MPS).
- Use Instagram posts to promote training classes
- Attend job fairs for MPS, Cudahy, MATC, Employ Milwaukee, and others
- Virtual Information Meetings- Set times for office hours-type information sessions for prospective candidates
- Request individualized meetings to talk with students.
- Set up virtual session with Gym classes
- Develop and manage a Facebook page to recruit lifeguards. Weekly posts to community pages and shared on job sites in colleges and schools. High schools and Colleges in greater Milwaukee area as well as all colleges in areas that lifeguards primarily have attended or high number of Milwaukee area students go (Twin Cities, Mankato, etc)
- Instagram post for general lifeguard training sessions
- Develop a Facebook ad and scheduled promotion

One of the key limitations in being able to recruit lifeguards is the lack of swim ability in our community. A lifeguard must be able to swim reasonably well in order to carry out their duties and respond to drownings. We have been able to recruit individuals into the program who we

find cannot swim when they are asked to complete a swim test. In the 2022 budget, Parks has proposed to form a collaborative effort with other stakeholders who are impacted by the lifeguard shortage in order to delve into the root causes of the declining swim ability in our community. The budget allocates \$40,000 in 2022 to support initiatives and recommendations from this task force which is intended to address the long-term pipeline of lifeguards but will likely not have an immediate impact on 2022 hiring.

## **Long Term Plan for Aquatics Operations**

In addition to requesting information related to recruitment, File #21-782 also request information related to “long term plans to ensure Milwaukee County’s ability to operate its aquatic facilities and programs into the future”. Operation of aquatic facilities resides primarily within the lifeguard program; however, this is a result of staffing cuts over time that as resulted in diminishing Park Operations and Trades staffing levels who in prior generations would have provided maintenance and operating support for our pool facilities. Parks currently employs one position that supports the facility operations for all deep well pools, indoor pools, and aquatic centers with assistance from the Trades division. As suggested in the Wisconsin Policy Forum report on Milwaukee County Parks as presented in October 2021, the Parks system and the aquatics division within Parks was meant to be operated by over 1,000 staff and we are currently at far less than half of that amount today with the same level of service expectations. Keeping up with operations of aquatics facilities has been a challenge due to lack of staff and maintenance funding to repair and replace what is needed to be fixed. This could range from minor daily maintenance to projects like boiler or pool gutter replacements which are capital projects.

In order to achieve sustainable operations of these aquatic facilities Parks must embark on a facility master planning process. This would enable public input into the process of determining what, where, and how aquatic facilities are provided in Milwaukee County Parks. As of the report submission date there is an outstanding request of the County Board for a fund transfer to support aquatic facility master planning.

## **Park Worker Staffing and Event Support**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic many special events that would otherwise have been held in Milwaukee County Parks were cancelled. Various factors contributed to this, ensuring public health and making sure that people could be physically distanced during events were primary considerations. There is only one major special event that is staffed by Milwaukee County Parks staff, which is the July 3<sup>rd</sup> fireworks. Every other major event is permitted by Parks and the logistics, operations, and ultimately staffing of these other events are carried out by the organizers. In most cases where a special event did not return in 2021 it is due to the organizers choice to do so in consideration of the limitations of the pandemic. For July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021 issues like capacity limitations, ability to maintain physical distancing, and other issues were a consideration in not holding the event for a second year in a row. While the July 4<sup>th</sup> firework events that are sponsored by the local municipalities may draw attendance of 100-500 people at each event, the lakefront fireworks routinely draw about 50,000 people each year. At the time, this would have been one of largest gatherings of people since the beginning of the

pandemic.

While these public health measures were under consideration when it was decided that July 3<sup>rd</sup> would not be held in 2021, ultimately it did come down to a lack of staff within Parks to be able to support the operations of the event. Park Workers would need to be recruited at least at pre-pandemic levels in order to be able to confidently support this fireworks event and, as we have seen in nearly every area, staffing shortages have negatively impacted our recruitment of seasonal park workers. Parks will explore temporary staffing options with Human Resources to potentially support short-term and one-off events like the July 3<sup>rd</sup> fireworks.

### **ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the [strategic plan](#):

1A: Reflect the full diversity of the County at every level of County government – prioritizing new staff recruitment with a focus on equity

3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities – address inequity in swim ability

### **FISCAL EFFECT**

This report has no fiscal effect

### **TERMS**

None


### **VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES**

None

### **PREPARED BY:**

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### **APPROVED BY:**

Guy Smith, Parks Executive Director 

### **ATTACHMENTS:**

None

cc: David Crowley, County Executive

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