



Parks & Recreation



Aquatics Life Jacket Program

Research, Implementation and Recordings

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Introduction

Water is everywhere and it is important to respect it and remain vigilant when one is in or near any type. Did you know that every day, approximately ten (10) people die from unintentional drowning? Of these, two (2) are children aged 14 or younger. Drowning ranks fifth among the leading causes of unintentional injury/death in the United States.¹ There are several sites online that recommend tips for you to stay safe in the water. The top four (4) tips are as follows:

- ***Supervise when in and around water***
- ***Use the buddy system***
- ***Learn to swim***
- ***Weak swimmers should wear a Coast Guard approved life jacket***

Several cities across the nation have assisted in the effort to decrease the number of instances of drowning by having non-swimmers wear Coast Guard approved life jackets. As a result of this new trend, the City of Deer Park Parks and Recreation Department began investing in this effort by providing life jackets to all weak or non-swimmers at the aquatic facility in an effort to decrease the number of injuries/loss of life due to drowning. The City began its research for what became known as the life jacket program in the summer of 2017. The Aquatics division sought to see if by providing life jackets to all weak or non-swimmers at the City of Deer Park Dow Park Pool would decrease the number of accidental injuries and life-threatening emergencies.

What is the purpose of a life jacket? Life jackets are intended to keep persons floating safely in the event of accidental water immersion until they can be rescued. While life jackets do not prevent accidents, they are intended to prevent (or reduce the likelihood of) drowning fatalities resulting from accidents.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this research plan is to increase water safety knowledge for the community and to make the City of Deer Park Aquatic Complex a safer facility by providing life jackets to all weak or non-swimmers thereby reducing the number of aquatic emergencies.

How it began

In 2017, the Aquatics division of Parks and Recreation decided to invest in life jackets by purchasing 150 life jackets. The life jackets were red and made with a material-type of covering. The Aquatics Supervisor and Assistant Supervisor decided that the jackets would be available to anyone who wanted a life jacket so long as it was worn properly. We would not charge for the usage of the life jackets to provide them to as many people as necessary without the hindrance of needing to pay.

The Plan

The life jackets were for those individuals weighing under 50 pounds and all had a safety strap, which buckled between the legs to prevent the life jacket from sliding up in a dangerous manner. A problem that the Aquatics team termed, “turtling.” If a life jacket was to slide up, it was an indicator that it was too big and not worn as intended.

The team bought metal chair racks, which sat outside the main doors of the aquatic facility to store all of the life jackets. The life jackets were provided in a first-come, first-served manner and all lifeguards were instructed to verify that they worn properly while scanning their zones during the day. There was not a waiver of any kind involved nor was there a deposit of any kind charged. It was monitored that each person whom borrowed a jacket for the duration of their swim would return it. Each life jacket was labeled with a waterproof, florescent bracelet with The City of Deer Park on it so it could be seen if it should walk out the door.

The goal is to research and record the usage, issues and wear/tear of life jackets at the Dow Park Pool facility over the span of 6 years to prove that providing life jackets has increase knowledge and safety for all patrons.

Year 1, 2017

The first summer that life jackets were offered, virtually all 150 life jackets were used daily. The staff spent much of their day picking up life jackets off the pool deck, making sure, they were all worn appropriately and that all rules were followed while wearing them.

Findings:

One of the most important and long-standing rules of the aquatic’s facility has been that if one is wearing a life jacket, it is required that they be within arms reach of an adult at all times. While we saw that life jackets were accepted very positively, it didn’t come without its challenges because this rule was broken constantly. Another challenge we faced was the language barrier. Many patrons who wanted the life jackets spoke Spanish

and many of the aquatics members struggled to communicate the fact that if a child is in a life jacket, it is required that the adult be within arm's reach.

While the lifeguards and aquatics staff had fewer aquatic emergencies due to the possibility of drowning, the life jackets also created a constant need for attention for each patron who borrowed one. We also saw that many children who could not swim who were also shorter than 4ft tall still needed life jackets and we didn't have any to accommodate due to the weight limit.

By the end of the summer, most all of the life jackets were weatherworn, damaged by the sun, and mildewed in many cases. It was determined to throw away all life jackets beyond repair and store the rest in the pump house over the off-season.

Year 2, 2018

In the second summer, the aquatics team realized that the type of life jackets that had been purchased in 2017 were not the best. The team bought new life jackets. This time, the bright yellow, foam life jackets were purchased. They were easier to see, easier to clean, and less likely to be damaged by the sun. The team did not replace every red jacket but bought enough yellow ones to get us back to the 150 plus 50 of a new size. Due to our findings from 2017 in which many children couldn't be accommodated due to size, we bought life jackets to do so. We had a new challenge to face though, these life jackets didn't come with a strap between the legs, which had also been a long-standing requirement of life jackets prior to this point. Due to this, we changed our rule for life jackets to be "coast-guard approved" and that was it. As long as it was stamped, we allowed patrons to wear it.

Findings

In 2018, the yellow life jackets were worn more often as they were softer on the skin and the patrons preferred the jacket without the strap between the legs. It became very evident that people wanted life jackets as a safety net and we quickly began to see that while more and more people were wearing the life jackets, many adults wanted to put their child in a life jacket and go be on their own, stay out of the water, put the non-swimmer, life jacket person in the care of another child, etc. We needed to find a way to help mitigate this.

There was still no charge for the life jacket and lifeguards and managers were still responsible for helping people get a life jacket if needed and to enforce the rules associated with wearing one.

In 2018, we also were presented with a situation where a parent put their child in a life jacket, it was fitted improperly, and the parent left the child with other children and went to slide in the deep end of the park. The child ended up having trouble in their life jacket and it became an instant where the lifeguard had to respond to the emergency. Video surveillance had to be researched as the parent placed negligence on the City stating that the City didn't respond to the aquatic emergency fast enough and that the life jacket

“caused the emergency.” This became a lesson to learn from in terms of how life jackets are given to patrons and how much communication is necessary before a patron takes a life jacket provided by the City.

At the conclusion of 2018, the life jackets were very well worn but the number of accidents/incidents due to water emergencies remained the same. It was no better or worse than the pilot summer. It was determined that life jackets should be kept inside and monitored closer so staff could have more intentional conversations about wearing one.

Year 3, 2019

The Aquatics team retired and donated all of the red life jackets and more of the yellow, foam life jackets were purchased. The red life jackets had officially not lasted near as long as hoped and new ones were needed. Since these were preferred by all, they became the favored life jacket to keep on hand. An additional size of life jacket was bought yet again to accommodate larger children and it had been determined to keep all life jackets inside the pump room to keep out of the weather and to keep from people taking them without information being shared.

We also made it mandatory for our managers to hand them out. The life jackets were available to all and were free to use but it was required for the patron to ask for it and the manager was required to go get what was needed out of the pump room.

Findings

As suspected, the lifeguards/managers spent many of their steps in a given day going to and from the pump room. This also led to any loose life jackets being stored on the inside of the aquatic facility on a bench inside the building.

As time went on, more patrons became more aware that life jackets were available, that they were encouraged for all weak or non-swimmers and that it was important for them to be worn properly. People continued to wear 90% of the life jackets that were on hand and the number of aquatic emergencies was steadily decreasing as more people were keeping their head above water. People naturally felt safer just by having their children in life jackets. A safer environment was achieved. More knowledge was getting out accordingly by the managers having more face-to-face time with all of the guests and kids were safer as a result.

At the end of 2019, it was determined that the life jackets should be kept in a more conducive place for usage. The life jackets, having been stored in the pump room, were still exposed to the elements. Many of the larger sizes that were not used as often were covered in mildew and hard to keep clean. We also had more life jackets than we had racks so many of them were kept on the floor, which was also not a good idea over time.

Year 4, 2020

Research was postponed in summer of 2020 due to Coronavirus. The pool operated limited hours and capacity. Life jackets were handed out by Managers and instantly sanitized after use.

Year 5, 2021

Additional life jacket racks were purchased and all life jackets were moved to the inside of the aquatic facility. This would keep them out of all elements, it would allow the manager at the front desk to talk to each person that needed one and it could be monitored as to how many were out at once. We posted signage all around the life jacket rack, which stated, “if you take a life jacket, it must be fitted properly, you must be within arm’s reach of an adult at all times, and the life jacket must be returned.”

Findings

Patrons were appreciative of the efforts being made. Many still had to be reminded of the rules that coincided with wearing one of the City’s life jackets, which many were opposed to. It made us aware of how many people regularly depend on lifeguards and life jackets for the safety of their children and inherently, do not take responsibility for their children at an aquatic facility. Communicating this is a constant work in progress.

By the end of the summer, the system was working well. The challenges that we faced were the typical ones in terms of those wearing life jackets needed to be kept within arms reach of an adult and it is imperative that the life jacket fit properly. It was not uncommon for managers to ask a patron to switch out a life jacket for a smaller one that fit better.

Year 6, 2022

The bright yellow, foam life jackets that were purchased in 2018 were replaced in summer 2022. We noticed that because of increased usage, the lining around the arms and we were having to replace the strap on the smallest life jackets. We also started offering a more variety of sizes – Children’s XS to Adult Small.

This year, we started swim testing children who wanted to go down the slide but didn’t meet the required height limit. Children who passed their swim test received a wrist band to notify the lifeguard that they passed and are able to go down the slide.

Findings

New patrons coming to our facility are always pleasantly surprised that our life jackets are free to borrow.

We strictly enforce that a parent must be within arms reach of children in life jackets at all times at our facility. When enforcing this rule, some parents opted to take the life jacket off of the child so they wouldn’t have to get in the water with them. We also saw

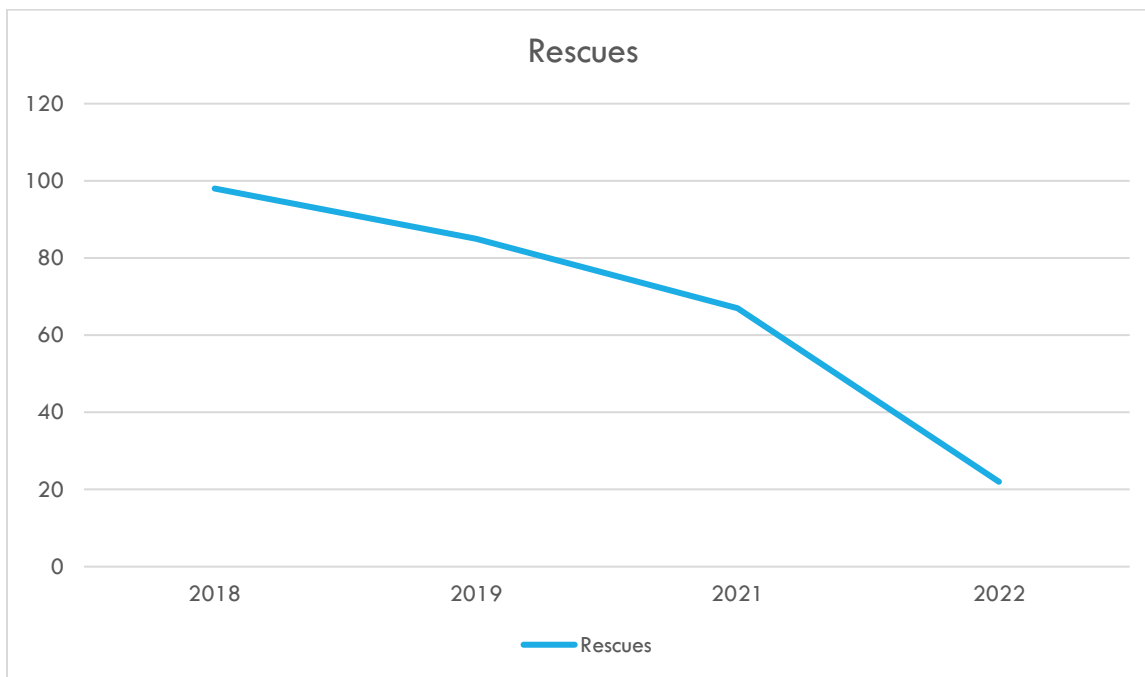
the flip side of this – some children knew how to swim but wanted a life jacket to float in regardless if it fit them or not. This led to educating the patron on how to properly use a life jacket and why we have rules for them.

Conclusion

The life jacket program for the City of Deer Park has proven to have met a need. It has allowed the City to facilitate a safer environment by non-swimmers or weak swimmers to have the freedoms of those who are stronger. They're free to move around, use all four limbs if desired, jump, play, etc. without the fear of an accident.

It is a program/initiative that the City will continue to offer and will continue to modify as needs arise.

As we continue to progress through this program, we will have issues that we will constantly address and correct for safety progress.



ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [online]. [cited 2012 May 3]. Available from: URL: <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>.