

Strategies for

Engaging American Indian/Alaska Native Participants in Swim Instructor and Lifeguarding Courses

2025





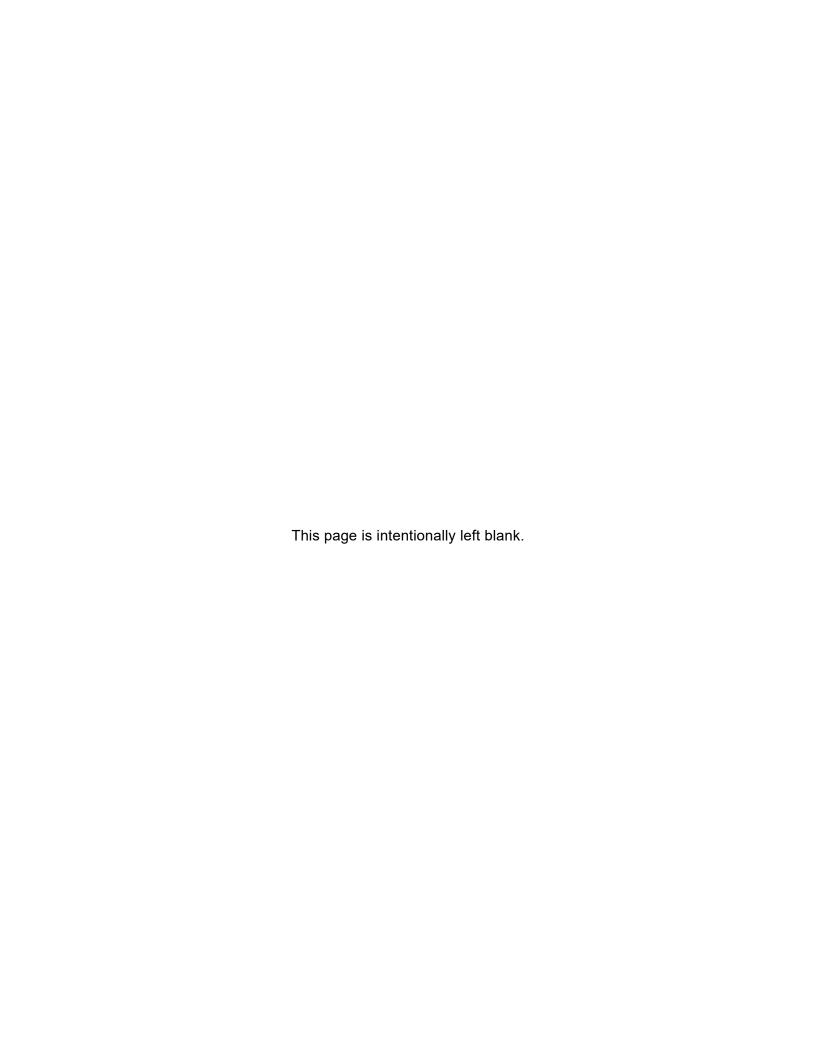


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Acknowledgments

This toolkit was developed by NORC at the University of Chicago with implementation support from the American Red Cross.

We would like to thank the following aquatic training providers for generously sharing their time, experiences, and insights through interviews. Their contributions helped inform the development of this toolkit.

- · Alaska Pacific University, Anchorage, AK
- HM Safety Certifications, Henderson, NV
- · Lake Havasu City Aquatic Center, Lake Havasu City, AZ
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Scottsdale, AZ
- YK Fitness, Bethel, AK
- Community partners

Thank you to Simon Bruty, Any Chance Productions, for capturing images for the toolkit, which were taken at one of the sites in June 2025. These photos add valuable visual context and enhance the overall impact of the toolkit.

The American Red Cross name and emblem is used with permission of the American National Red Cross.

This toolkit is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award of \$299,833 with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government.

About the Toolkit

This toolkit describes strategies that aquatic training providers can use to recruit, train, and retain American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) participants in swim instructor and lifeguarding courses. It was developed as part of a process evaluation conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago with implementation support from the American Red Cross. The purpose was to identify strategies to support AI/AN participation in swim instructor and lifeguarding courses. These efforts align with broader public health goals to reduce drowning disparities and increase water safety within AI/AN communities.

Through interviews with staff at aquatic facilities that serve AI/AN participants, this project identified promising strategies to address common barriers that can limit AI/AN participation in aquatic courses.

By sharing these strategies, this toolkit aims to support aquatic facility leadership in expanding access to training opportunities for swim instructor and lifeguarding courses for communities at greater risk of drowning. These are groups who have historically faced access barriers to participation due to factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, language access, or disability.



Toolkit Areas of Focus



Recruitment Strategies

that center on trusted relationships, community partnerships, and clear pathways to employment.



Training Strategies

that prioritize in-person, supportive instruction tailored to cultural and logistical needs.



Retention Strategies

that help participants stay engaged, transition to employment, and see aquatics as a valuable, transferable skill.

Background

Every year, around 4,000 unintentional drowning deaths occur in the United States.¹ Drowning is a leading cause of unintentional injury death among persons aged 5-34.² Among American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) persons, the unintentional drowning rate was 2.5 per 100,000 individuals, higher than that of White persons (1.2 per 100,000).³ Factors that increase the risk of drowning include not being able to swim, a lack of adult supervision, particularly for young children, and not wearing life jackets, among other factors.⁴,⁵ Basic swimming and water safety skills training is an effective strategy for drowning prevention, making it an important part of a comprehensive strategy for reducing drowning deaths.⁶

Barriers related to the accessibility and convenience of swim lessons and water safety education among Al/AN persons include affordability, transportation, and pool access.⁷

Addressing such barriers may improve water competence and subsequently reduce drowning deaths. Facilitators of AI/AN community participation in swim lessons include offering flexible scheduling, affordable courses, and a welcoming environment.7 Compared to young adults and caregivers, teens report a greater interest in aquatic-related jobs, including serving as a lifeguard, swim instructor, coach, and aquatics director. Engaging AI/AN teens and young adults, as well as adults, to become swim instructors and lifeguards could address some of the identified facilitators by providing more scheduling options for programs, including swim lessons, and offering a more welcoming environment for AI/AN children to learn basic swimming and water safety skills.7

NORC worked in collaboration with the American Red Cross (also referred to as Red Cross) to understand the factors contributing to the





successes and challenges associated with recruiting, engaging, and retaining AI/AN participants in aquatic safety courses (Water Safety Instructor® (WSI®) course, Basic Swim Instructor (BSI) course, and Lifeguarding courses). These programs are available to teens (age 15+), young adults, adults, and seniors. NORC engaged leadership at aquatic facilities, some of which were located within tribal communities, while others served participants from nearby tribal communities.

The Red Cross WSI and BSI courses prepare and certify individuals to teach swimming and water safety courses. These courses are designed for those who want certification to become swim instructors and promote water safety in their communities. The Red Cross Lifeguarding program

consists of a range of lifeguarding courses that vary based on water depth and aquatic environment. For example, some courses prepare lifequards for shallow water settings (up to 5 feet). while others cover deep water environments (over 7 feet). Red Cross Lifeguarding courses teach individuals to prevent, protect, and respond to aquatic emergencies to provide a safer swimming environment. The WSI, BSI, and Lifeguarding courses are offered by Red Cross Licensed Training Providers (LTPs) at various locations throughout the United States, including schools, colleges and universities, state and local government agencies, municipal and county recreational departments, nonprofit organizations, private swim clubs, and commercial recreational facilities.

Purpose of the Toolkit

This toolkit shares strategies on how to recruit, train, and retain individuals participating in swim instructor and/or lifeguarding courses. It draws on the experiences of American Red Cross Licensed Training Providers that engaged in this project. While grounded in their insights, the recommendations can be adapted by other facilities providing swim instructor and lifeguarding courses to communities at higher risk of drowning. Recognizing that each community, program, and facility is unique, this toolkit provides flexible strategies that can be tailored to local needs and resources. It also supports more inclusive and accessible course design and delivery.

How to Use the Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help aquatics facility leadership and training providers strengthen the recruitment, training, and retention of swim instructors and lifeguards from communities with limited access to resources and opportunities in aquatic professions.

What is Included

- Strategies organized by stages of implementation. The toolkit is organized into sections on recruitment, training, and retention. Each section includes practical strategies, illustrative quotes, and program spotlights.
- Real-world examples. Lessons from the field highlight how training providers have implemented these strategies.
- Culturally responsive approaches. Throughout the toolkit, strategies are grounded in culturally informed practices that acknowledge and address the needs of AI/AN participants.

Toolkit Tips

- Adapt strategies to the local context. Training providers are encouraged to adapt these strategies to meet their specific needs. Consider the barriers participants may face and identify strategies that align with available resources and community context.
- Engage partners. Share this toolkit with local schools, workforce development programs, and community organizations to strengthen partnerships and expand recruitment efforts.
- Revisit as needed. As programs evolve, these strategies can be revisited and refined to build on what is working.



This section outlines recruitment approaches used by training providers to engage individuals in swim instructor and lifeguarding courses. These strategies can be tailored to build a more representative aquatics workforce.

Partner with trusted community leaders to facilitate communication and recruitment

- Prioritize outreach led by trusted individuals with strong relationships in the community, such as community leaders, school personnel, or a familiar aquatics facility team member.
- If trust already exists, recruit participants through personal outreach methods, such as texting, calling, or visiting individuals and families.
- Leverage word-of-mouth by encouraging current participants, staff, and community members to share opportunities with their networks.
- Build familiarity and trust with staff to help prospective participants and families feel more comfortable.



"It's about having conversations and taking an interest in their lives and what they're doing.

These relationships often start with their children being in our swim programs. I go around [and talk] to the parents about what we're learning and how it's useful...It's that ongoing communication. I don't just say 'Thanks for registering, bye!', I keep it going. If I know a child still needs lessons, I'll reach out to that family and ask them to come back. I try to make it clear that they are important, and I want them as part of this program."

Assistant Program Director



Relationship-Based and Culturally Responsive Recruitment

When recruiting participants from communities with limited access to resources, relationship-building and cultural responsiveness are essential. These considerations can help strengthen recruitment efforts and build trust.

Tailor outreach materials and messages to reflect the language, values, and communication style of the community being served.

Avoid generic flyers. Instead, design materials with images, phrases, and tones that reflect the community.

Spotlight current or former participants from the community in outreach materials and classes to help prospective participants see themselves in these roles.

Respect community practices by working with tribal elders, councils, or other community leaders to build trust and codesign recruitment approaches that align with local norms.

Prioritize relationship-based outreach. Focus on building trust over time through personal connections, follow-up communication, and genuine engagement with the community.

Collaborate with schools, youth programs, and tribal departments

- Partner with school districts, tribal education and workforce programs, and youth-serving organizations to identify potential participants.
- Embed recruitment efforts into existing programs that already serve youth ages 14 and up, such as after-school activities or summer programs.
- Leverage school staff and tribal program leaders to share information, encourage sign-ups, and answer questions for youth and their families.

Address common barriers to participation

- Offer support with transportation, certification fees, swimming gear (e.g., swimsuits, uniforms), and registration paperwork to reduce logistical and financial barriers.
- Help prospective participants navigate pre-employment requirements by coordinating with tribal or city offices for paperwork, drug testing, or background checks.

"Word of mouth. Personal connections and contacts tend to be our best tool.

The kids I have in swimming classes, and the teenagers I interact with, if their friends are staff, they can convince them to come in. Word of mouth really is our best tool."

Highlight job opportunities early

- Communicate employment opportunities upfront to increase interest and commitment, especially when individuals know they can be hired immediately after training.
- Design programs so job placement is built into the training process, such as offering summer lifeguard jobs upon completion of certification.
- Collaborate with local workforce programs or career services to advertise open positions and connect participants.



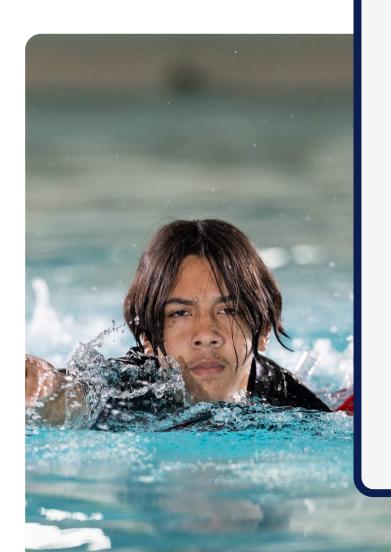
Building Swim Skills and Course Readiness Through Dedicated Preparatory Programs

Some providers recognize that prospective participants may need help learning how to swim or strengthening their foundational skills to meet the prerequisites required for swim instructor and lifeguarding courses. To address this, providers offer dedicated preparation programs or informal times and space focused specifically on building swimming ability before individuals enter formal training.

What do these programs look like?

- Expanded swim instruction to help community members learn to swim and improve their skills to meet prerequisites.
- Lifeguard academy modeled after workforce development programs (e.g., firefighter academies) that gradually prepare prospective participants through swim conditioning and skill building.
- Dedicated prerequisite practice sessions
 (hour blocks) that focus specifically on helping prospective participants develop basic swimming skills and endurance.

In some communities where individuals have limited access to swim lessons or aquatic environments, these preparatory opportunities are important. They provide the time, space, and support needed to build basic swim skills so individuals can confidently transition into swim instructor and/or lifeguarding courses.





"Get out there and talk to them.

Relationships are major in Indian nations and tribal communities; they are key. If you don't build trust, as I learned in my first few years, you're going to miss more than you hit. Introduce yourself, speak with them, and learn the language. When you build trust, it raises eyebrows and sparks more interest in the programs. If you are coming from outside, adjust to American Native relationships first."

Program Coordinator

Lessons from the Field

Building Partnerships to Recruit Tribal Youth

One aquatic training provider offers year-round swimming and water safety programs to a community of more than 50,000 residents. Recently, staff have focused their recruitment efforts on building relationships with tribal communities in the broader region, including those located in remote areas, to create pathways into aquatic training and employment for American Indian youth.

This training provider's approach to recruiting participants from the nearby tribal community is grounded in personal relationships and trusted partnerships. Although the aquatic facility had not been historically utilized by the tribes, it is the most accessible option — whether by car or ferry. Rather than relying solely on conventional outreach strategies such as flyers, social media posts, or public announcements, the aquatic team took a proactive, relationship-based approach. They engaged directly with tribal leaders and local liaisons, who maintain close connections with youth and families in the tribal community. This relational approach helped bridge barriers and ensured outreach was both culturally appropriate and effective.

This training provider also works with tribal Head Start programs and schools to promote water safety from an early age. These partnerships build relationships and trust over time, leading to more opportunities to recruit teens and young adults into lifeguarding roles.

The recruitment strategies of this training provider demonstrate how facilities can expand by collaborating directly with community partners, rather than relying on conventional recruitment strategies alone.



Strategies

This training provider's approach includes the following strategies:

- Direct calls, text messages, and flyers to families shared through trusted tribal contacts.
- Collaboration with the Tribal Employment Rights Office* and community partners which identified potential candidates and provided logistical support like transportation and paperwork assistance.
- Word-of-mouth recruitment within existing community relationships and informal networks.

^{*}The Tribal Employment Rights Office (TERO) is the unit within a Tribal government structure that monitors and enforces Tribal employment rights ordinances and facilitates employment. TERO Ordinance ensures that tribal members have access to employment, training, and contracting opportunities on and near tribal lands. https://cter-tero.org/tero-faq/#1

Strategies to Train Participants

This section shares strategies used by aquatic training providers to train swim instructor and lifeguarding participants, particularly those from communities with fewer resources or limited access to aquatic training opportunities. These strategies focus on helping participants feel confident, supported, and prepared to succeed.

Use in-person, relationship-based instructional learning to build trust and confidence

- Offer training in person whenever possible to create space for real-time feedback, peer bonding, and more interactive learning.
- Demonstrate patience and encouragement during instruction. Avoid rushing or setting inflexible schedules; instead, build rapport, ensure understanding, and take time to respond to participant training needs (i.e., adequate practice time).

Set training schedules and expectations to meet community needs

- Provide flexible scheduling (e.g., adjusting class start times, offering weekend sessions) to accommodate potential logistical challenges like transportation, academic calendars, and caretaker responsibilities (while still meeting minimum requirements set by the training agency).
- Offer flexibility when an attendance issue arises by allowing make-up sessions or one-on-one catch-up opportunities instead of requiring the participant to retake the full course.
- Clearly explain the schedule, requirements, and certification steps at the start, so participants know what to expect.



"We work with [participants'] schedules.

We modified the times because of transportation issues. If classes start at 8 AM, they will not arrive [until] 8:15 AM or 8:30 AM, so we will adapt the class for that. The whole class will move to 8:30 AM."

Program Director

Explain the certification process and provide ongoing support

- Explain each step of the certification process in advance, including evaluation criteria and testing logistics. Guide participants through what to expect for testing, how skills will be assessed, and how to best prepare.
- Use training agency-approved testing accommodations when appropriate. For participants with disabilities, limited literacy, or other barriers that may affect certification, training agencies typically permit approved accommodations to ensure access to certification. These may include oral testing in place of written exams or hands-on demonstration assessment.

Tailor teaching methods to the communities served

- Incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies to reflect the lived experiences and communication and learning preferences of the community.
- Use clear, accessible language, reinforce key concepts through repetition, and include culturally familiar examples to support understanding and engagement.
- Incorporate tribal or community language where possible to make content more accessible and inclusive.
- Pace instructions to meet participants' needs, especially for younger participants or those newer to aquatics.
- Prioritize hands-on demonstrations and allow space for questions.

Provide resources and support during the training to reduce participation barriers

- Supply required gear such as swimsuits, uniforms, or goggles to reduce financial burden.
- Cover or offset training costs by providing stipends or waving certification fees when funding is available. Explore funding sources to provide stipends to cover fees.
- Provide extra practice opportunities or study time for participants who need additional support before certification.

"We helped them find their voice by being loud.

Most lifeguards are introverts, especially in marginalized communities, where voices aren't always as vocal as in other communities. We work with them on projecting, being loud, and enforcing the rules in an authoritative way to help [participants] become more vocal overall. They have to be comfortable and confident."

Program Staff

Fostering a Respectful Learning Environment and Honoring Cultural Identity

In addition to providing practical support, all programs emphasize the importance of creating a culturally safe environment, especially when working with AI/AN youth or youth from communities with limited resources. A culturally safe environment allows participants to show up as themselves, ask questions without judgment, and fully engage in the training process. Below are some of the ways aquatic training providers can do this.

Culturally Safe Environments for Aquatics



Hire patient, curious, and respectful instructors who reflect the community and are open to different learning styles.

Staff who are welcoming, build rapport, and create supportive learning environments help build trust and increase retention. Interpersonal style matters as much as qualifications.



Adapt the dress code to support participant comfort.

Some programs allow modification to standard uniforms to reflect cultural norms, such as modesty or personal needs, ensuring participants are comfortable.



Respect cultural observances and familial and community responsibilities.

Accommodate scheduling around cultural events, ceremonies, or practices. Additionally, during hunting, fishing, and foraging season(s), where adults are occupied with gathering resources, young adults and teens have additional familial obligations tending to young children. Respectful adjustment signals that participants' identities and obligations are honored.



Use youth-preferred communication methods.

Instead of phone calls, which may go unanswered, text messaging can be more effective for reaching youth. Programs that communicate through text messages may see better attendance and follow-through.







Foster reciprocal learning between staff and participants.

Instructors build trust by recognizing that participants and their communities bring valuable knowledge and experiences. Reciprocal learning means creating spaces for mutual exchange, where staff listen, ask questions with respect, and learn from the lived experiences of the participants, while also sharing their own expertise in aquatic safety. Reciprocal learning is critical for staff who are learning about the communities they serve. Demonstrating curiosity about where participants come from and a willingness to learn shows respect and helps build credibility.



Cultivate an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome.

Swimming is for everyone, regardless of race, gender, income, or age. Creating an environment where this is clearly communicated can encourage participation from all communities.



Recognize and respect nonverbal communication.

In some communities, youth may communicate using gestures (e.g., eyebrow raises, shrugging) rather than direct verbal responses. Trainers can learn to understand and respect these forms of communication rather than interpret them as disinterest.



One mobile aquatic training provider offers courses in lifeguarding, swim instructor, and other aquatic and safety training courses in major cities and remote regions throughout the Southwest. They offer training in major metropolitan areas as well as to underserved communities where access to certification opportunities is limited.

This training provider responds to the unique needs of the communities it serves. After recognizing that reliable access to the internet and computers can be a barrier in many homes or community centers, they shifted from blended learning (online and in-person) to fully in-person training. They also allot time prior to courses so participants get extra support for improving skills and build endurance to help them to successfully complete the course. Then, during training, the

provider uses the compressed intensive outline provided by the national training agency, which occurs over consecutive days, which helps their participants maintain focus. They reinforce voice projection in their sessions, acknowledging that cultural norms in some communities may not emphasize assertiveness in public roles. The provider also incorporates community values through use of cultural terminology, history, community support and competition into scenarios designed to help participants build comfort and confidence in a supportive environment.

The training provider believes that a culturally sensitive and community-centered approach helps build participant confidence and supports engagement throughout the training process.



Strategies to Retain and Employ Participants Post-Training

This section shares strategies that aquatic leadership use to retain and support participants after completing swim instructor and lifeguarding courses. The strategies help participants stay engaged, and transition into employment, especially participants from communities with fewer resources or limited access to aquatic training opportunities.

Provide year-round or off-season opportunities

- Engage participants during the off-season by involving them in related community-based roles or programs.
- Create dual-status positions that allow participants to shift into other duties when aquatic programs slow down (e.g., mentoring, program support, or non-aquatic roles).

Frame lifeguarding as a portable, career-building skill

- Emphasize that lifeguarding is a valuable, transferable skill, not just a summer job.
- Frame lifeguarding as a pathway to future employment.
- Help participants explore how certifications can support college applications, internships, or broader workforce development goals.



We want to offer them the opportunity to become swim instructors, which comes with a raise. We tell them it makes them extremely employable. They also have internal opportunities within our water department, admin department, public works. They get first dibs as internal candidates at those job opportunities."

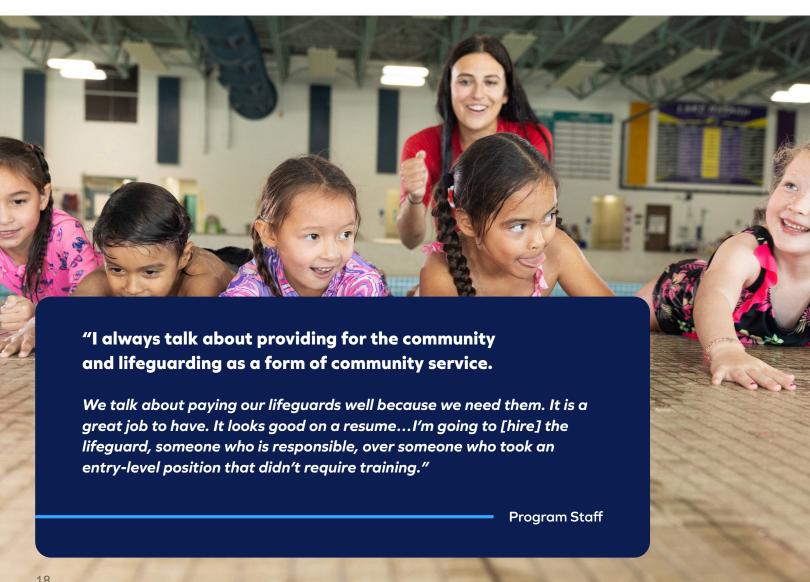
Program Director

Offer employment opportunities after certification

- Communicate employment opportunities early in the registration and training process, so participants know there is a pathway to a job.
- Hire participants directly into lifeguard or swim instructor positions upon certification to keep them engaged and reinforce the value of completing the program.
- Support employees' opportunities for advancement into other internal roles (e.g., in parks, recreation, or water services) as they gain experience, expanding long-term employment potential.

Build community connections to support job retention

- · Engage school staff, tribal education and workforce programs, or other trusted community liaisons to support participants after training ends. These partners help bridge the gap into employment and keep participants connected to these opportunities.
- · Identify a key point of contact in the community to support follow-up, encourage retention, and assist participants with any issues that may arise post-hire.



Lessons from the Field

Supporting Successful Training and Employment

One tribal community operates a year-round aquatic program that creates a local pipeline of lifeguards and other aquatic staff from within the community. Their lifeguard academy model was intentionally designed to create clear employment pathways for youth while addressing barriers to participation, like low swimming ability, lack of transportation, and stigma around aquatics.

Their approach emphasizes a training-to-hire model. Participants who successfully complete the lifeguard academy are offered immediate employment as lifeguards within the community's aquatic facilities. From day one, the program makes clear to participants that certification is tied to paid employment, with wages starting at \$16/hour for certified lifeguards compared to \$14/hour for pool attendants. This helps sustain interest and commitment throughout the training process. While the focus is on lifeguarding, staff emphasize the transferability of aquatics training as a foundational job skill. In addition to the lifeguarding course, within the lifeguard academy, they share informal financial literacy guidance with participants as part of their work, covering topics like saving and managing money.

By connecting training directly to guaranteed employment for those who successfully achieve certification, providing comprehensive support, and respecting cultural practices, this training provider has created a model for retaining youth in aquatic roles within the community.

Strategies

The program accommodates cultural and practical needs to promote retention through the academy. For example:

- Transportation is provided through community vans to ensure participants can attend sessions.
- **Scheduling** is adjusted through fall and spring academy offerings to work around conflicts and prioritizes community events, such as basketball tournaments (a key activity for youth in the community).
- Support measures are in place to assist with literacy and testing challenges, such as reading tests aloud when needed.
- Modest swim attire options are permitted – and even encouraged.
- Staff demonstrate awareness of community practices, cultural values, and familial and community responsibilities that may affect participation.

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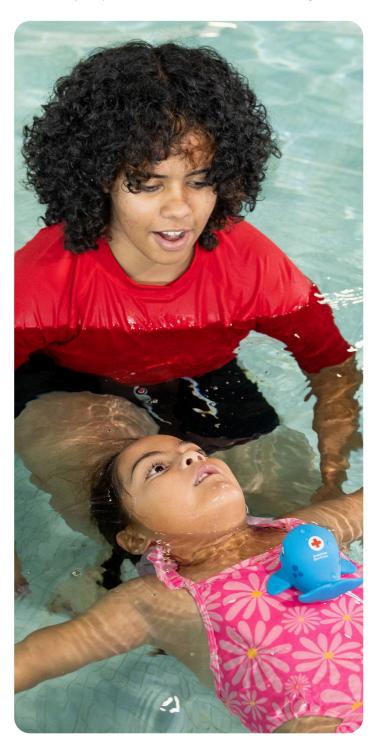
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More About Our Approach

This study used a mixed-methods design, leveraging interviews and a survey to collect information on strategies that aquatics facilities used to recruit, train, and retain participants in the Red Cross WSI, BSI, and Lifeguarding courses.

NORC conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews with organizational leaders at each of the aquatic facilities (n=5) in June 2025. One to three organizational leaders participated in each interview. The interviews



captured their experiences with the WSI, BSI, and Lifeguarding courses. NORC developed an interview guide informed by discussions with Red Cross, a targeted review of the literature, and the research questions. The interviews focused on organizational leaders' insights on training experiences and recruitment and retention strategies. After piloting the interview guide during the first interview, NORC made minor adjustments to clarify questions. NORC inductively coded and analyzed responses from the qualitative interviews to identify and interpret themes related to the recruitment, training, and retention of AI/AN trainings in the WSI, BSI, and/or Lifeguarding courses.

Informed by discussions with the Red Cross, literature, and the research questions, NORC developed and fielded a survey via Qualtrics, an online survey platform, during June and July 2025 to Al/AN participants enrolled in the WSI, BSI, and Lifeguarding courses at the five participating aquatic facilities. The survey included closed-ended, open-ended, and multiple-response questions assessing barriers, facilitators, engagement, and the retention of Al/AN participants in the WSI, BSI, and Lifeguarding courses. NORC piloted the survey with a limited number of participants and conducted a rapid thematic analysis of participant feedback.

While both interviews and a pilot survey were part of the evaluation, this toolkit is based solely on insights from the interviews with aquatic facilities. The survey responses were limited and not used to inform the recommendations, though they were reviewed for consistency with interview themes.



