

More than splashing around: a day in a lifeguard's life

Written by Chris Lee



□ Lifeguards at the pool in Holyoke carry two main pieces of equipment

while keeping an eye on people in the pool. The first is a whistle and the

other is this flotation device. □ □ —Enterprise photo

A day in the life of...

A Holyoke pool lifeguard

That person in the red shirt with a whistle in their mouth doesn't do a dang thing. They just sit there, yell at me and talk with friends all day.

Not true.

Believe it or not, that “mean person” in the red shirt is there to save lives, but that isn't all a

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lifeguard does. Actually their day begins before anyone even shows up for a swim.

Once clocked in, lifeguards go to work getting ready for the day. Rocks (small washcloths) are placed over each drain around the pool. These help dampen a sucking noise at each drain, according to lifeguard LeAnne McWilliams. Next, ropes are placed in the correct position depending on the day and event. The baby pool also needs to be set up and includes getting the chairs out and umbrella set up. Toys are also set out for kids to enjoy.

Pool manager Karla Pargas checks the pH level of the water twice a day to make sure everything looks good.

There are two different shifts for lifeguards at the pool in Holyoke. Lifeguards split their time between a morning and afternoon/night shift. There are 18 lifeguards and two swim instructors employed by the city.

Hours for swimming changes with the seasons. Midway through August, the times change to winter hours.

When it is time for pool visitors to go home each day, lifeguards have another checklist to take care of before they get to leave. Pretty much everything they did in the morning has to be undone at night. Both the women's and men's locker rooms get cleaned each night. This task usually begins about an hour before closing, McWilliams said.

Other end of the day tasks include sweeping the decks, organizing chairs, turning off all the showers, pulling the rocks and putting away all the toys and equipment.

During the winter, a large tarp is pulled over the pool when it closes at night. McWilliams said this is quite the chore as the tarp is rather large and heavy.

Throughout the day, lifeguards make sure everyone enjoys their time at the pool but also make

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sure everyone does it safely.

Every hour there is a 10-minute rest break when everyone is required to get out of the pool and either go outside or sit on the bleachers. During this time, lifeguards often take the time to swim.



□□ Rules are important for all ages swimming at the pool in Holyoke.

Lifeguards spend most of their time keeping an eye on everyone to

make sure the rules are being obeyed.□□ —Enterprise photo

There are many rules to remember not only as a swimmer but also as a lifeguard. They include such things as no running, one person on the diving board at a time, jump in feet first from the edges, no chicken fights, no hanging on the basketball rim, no pushing people into the pool and most importantly—always listen to the lifeguards.

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Another big rule is earning the right to swim in the deep end and jump off the diving board. To be eligible, one must swim from one side of the pool to the other and back successfully.

Whistles are another important piece of the puzzle. One short whistle is used to get people's attention, two short whistles is to get a lifeguard's attention, three times means the lifeguard is jumping into the water and alerts all the other lifeguards. Finally, one long whistle means everyone needs to get out of the water either for an emergency or rest break.

There are also rules for the number of lifeguards that need to be stationed around the pool at different times. If there are less than 25 people in the water, only one guard is required to be in a chair. When the number jumps above 25, there are two guards in chairs and three are needed when there are more than 50 people in the pool.

A few weeks ago, McWilliams said they had over 100 people in the pool at one time and used all four guards.

There are usually four lifeguards on duty. For the night shift there are three and one for lap swim and water exercises.

For lifeguard McKenna Heldenbrand, her favorite part of the job is playing with the kids in the baby pool.

Some of the more common questions lifeguards receive are "Can I get a ball or some rings." McWilliams said the younger kids always ask if they can jump off the diving board.

On really hot days, McWilliams said they ask people to jump in the water next to the lifeguard stands to see who can make the biggest splash. This technique helps keep the guards cool. They also find themselves talking with kids a lot during the day.

In order to become a lifeguard, one must complete a 30-hour class through NJC in Sterling. The

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class is usually held the last week of May, according to Pargas.

Once testing has been completed, lifeguards then need to be hired by the City of Holyoke. Once selected, a new lifeguard must shadow a veteran lifeguard through two open swim times to get a feel of how everything runs.

Winter hours will soon be put into place. Times and types of swimming are as follows:

Parent/tot classes, Monday 10-11 a.m.; open swim times, Tuesday and Thursday, 7-8:30 p.m.; and Saturday, 2-4 p.m.

Water exercise, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 8:30-9:30 a.m. and Tuesday and Thursday, 5:30-6:30 p.m.; lap swim, Monday-Thursday, 5-7 p.m. and Sunday, 4-5 p.m.

The next time an order is barked down from the person in the red shirt, remember if not for them, swimming in the pool wouldn't be available.