

COVER STORY

Lifeguards

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nance – like flattening the sand with tractors, daily garbage pickup and bathroom cleaning, and for a shuttle bus that brings east-side residents to the beach. Moreover, Seyferth said, finding seasonal employees to work as lifeguards for the summer is challenging.

St. Joseph official: ‘We really got a lot of lifeguards stepping up’

Berrien County Parks Director Jill Adams, who oversees the \$70,000 lifeguard program at Silver Beach County Park in St. Joseph, knows this staffing challenge all too well. Still, she said, the county has managed to find lifeguards year after year.

“It’s a challenging question for sure,” Adams said, referring to the angst of finding lifeguards. “Every year, we’ve always wondered if we’re going to have enough. But for whatever reason this year, we really got a lot of lifeguards stepping up, and it’s worked out very well. We’ve always had a good team.”

Currently, Silver Beach County Park has 14 lifeguards who work seven days a week from 11 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., with a starting salary of \$14 an hour. On red flag days, the lifeguards are not in the towers, but walk the beach educating people about the dangers of currents and instructing those in the water to get out.

“The overall goal for the Silver County beach guards is to prevent adverse water incidents from happening,” Adams said. “It’s all about the prevention.”

Adams, too, also stressed the importance of personal responsibility.

“Lifeguards aren’t babysitters. Parents have to watch their children very closely,” said Adams, who also urges people to wear life jackets in Lake Michigan, to avoid swimming on high-risk days and to never swim alone.

“None of these things have to do with a lifeguard,” Adams said, noting lifeguards are an “additional tool” to keep people safe. “People still need to take responsibility for themselves.”

Seyferth agrees. He said Muskegon’s approach to keeping swimmers safe is making sure it’s keeping them informed about the dangers of the water. The lighted system does that, he said, adding personal responsibility also plays a role.

If the light is red, don’t go in. If it’s yellow, make sure you know what you’re up against, he said.

“Even going up just past your ankles and you’re feeling that pull behind your leg – that’s telling you there’s some kind of current there that could take you out,” said Seyferth, who offers these safety recommendations to visitors: Look at a YouTube video on how to get out of a strong current. Read up on rip currents. Use a life jacket. Be mindful of structures like a pier.

“The lake is beautiful. It’s a wonderful resource ... and we want people to come in and enjoy it,” Seyferth said. “But we want people to stay safe.”

So if you see big waves, he said, sit on the beach.

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National beach safety expert visits Michigan: Your beach flags are not acceptable

Brewster, a former lifeguard chief in San Diego who oversaw 6,000 rescues a year in California, now travels the country on behalf of the USLA helping cities deal with drowning issues, including towns in Florida, California, Puerto Rico and Costa Rica.

In April, he came to Michigan. It was at the request of the city of South Haven, which hired the USLA for \$10,000 to draft a lifeguard proposal. The association came back with a 37-page report that included a curious finding: When the city implemented beach parking in 1991, it said it did so primarily to pay for lifeguards and police. And when it increased parking fees in 1999, it said it was to help offset lifeguard costs. Yet, two years later, when it gutted the lifeguard program, it still kept the parking revenue.

“We went back and looked ... they cut the lifeguards but have kept the parking fees ever since,” said Brewster, who introduced the report to the South Haven City Council.

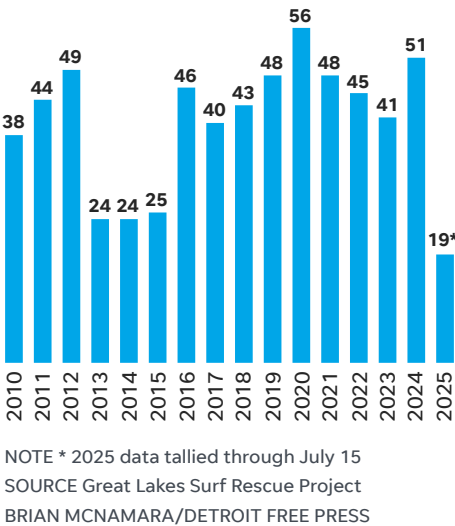
The report also delivered a poignant message to South Haven, reminding the city of its 12 fatal drownings since getting rid of lifeguards in 2001.

“(T)he chance of drowning in an area under the protection of lifeguards affiliated with USLA is 1 in 18 million beach visits. To place this in context of South Haven ... were lifeguards to be provided ... South Haven could reasonably expect



A site on North Beach at South Haven offers life jackets to borrow to swim in Lake Michigan. Lake Michigan has claimed more than 640 lives over the last 15 years. Yet there are no lifeguards at 99% of Michigan’s public beaches. MANDI WRIGHT/DFP

Lake Michigan fatal drownings this year



to have an average of one drowning death in a lifeguard-protected area every 50 or more years.”

The report also recommended South Haven hire at least a dozen lifeguards and equip its two beaches with a lifeguard tower, two-way radios and an ATV. It also said warning flags should be attached to the lifeguard towers so that lifeguards can change them when swimming conditions change.

The report also took issue with South Haven’s approach to beach safety.

“When South Haven elected to terminate lifeguard services in 2001, it left a gap not only in the drowning prevention and medical aid lifeguards provide, but also the time it takes to respond to people in distress,” the USLA report states, stressing: “in the absence of lifeguards, a number of people have died or nearly died attempting to rescue family members or others.”

The report also stresses: “Flags alone are of limited value. ... Flags are not an acceptable substitute for properly trained and equipped rescuers, but rather a tool for their use.”

For Benjamin, the USLA report provided a much-needed boost.

“We’ve been telling the city of South Haven this for 12 years – that the beach flag is a tool, not a replacement for lifeguards,” said Benjamin, of the surf rescue project, who believes the USLA’s recommendation to South Haven will have far-reaching impact.

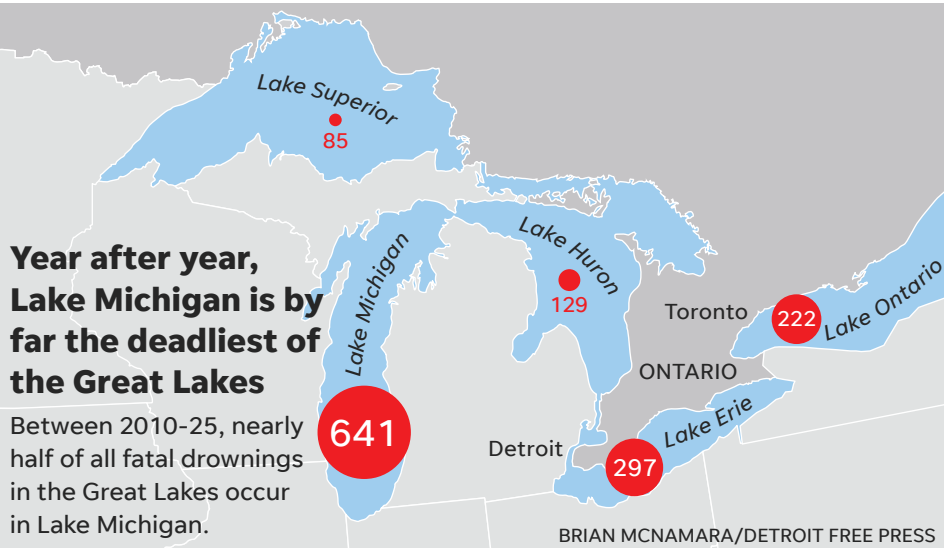
“This has a statewide implication,” Benjamin said. “They’re not just telling South Haven, ‘You’re doing this wrong.’ This applies to all Michigan beaches: You should not be having a beach system without lifeguards.”

The city council meeting ended that April night with the council rejecting the USLA’s recommended lifeguard plan in a 3-3 tie vote.

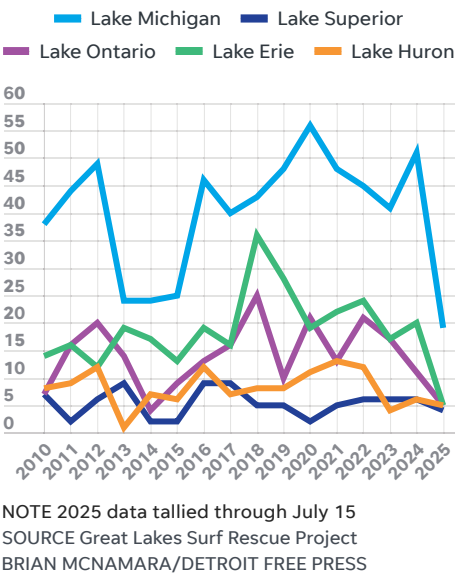
South Haven official: ‘TV shows like ‘Baywatch’ have given us inaccurate impressions of the role lifeguards play’

South Haven City Manager Kate Hosier says a lifeguard plan is in the works in her city, stressing the city council “has made beach safety a top priority this year.”

“The City Council has indicated its desire to move forward with the development of a lifeguard program, and staff is following their direction to develop an effective program,” Hosier wrote in an email to the Free Press. “South Haven



Great lakes drownings since 2010



has invested significant time and resources in this matter, perhaps more than any other Lake Michigan community in recent years – even though all our beaches face similar safety issues.”

The Free Press reached out to Hosier for an interview. She opted to respond by email.

“Television shows like ‘Baywatch’ have given us inaccurate impressions of the role lifeguards play,” Hosier wrote in a June email, adding lifeguards are on duty “primarily to prevent dangerous behaviors.”

For example, Hosier says, lifeguards might move people who are swimming too close to the pier away from that location, or intervene when children are playing too roughly. Rescue operations, she says, are a secondary function.

“Some community advocates seem to think that lifeguards are a silver bullet,” Hosier states, “but they are only one among many options for improving beach safety.”

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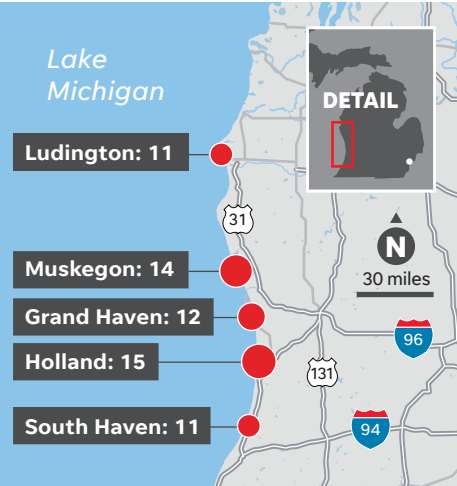
‘We regularly see risky behavior’ from out-of-town visitors

In addressing swimmer safety, Hosier says beachgoers need to do their part, too, including: Follow the local beach rules, be aware of lake conditions and the flag system, and listen to and follow the instructions of code enforcement officers.

“We recognize people may travel from Detroit or other parts of Michigan, specifically to enjoy a beach weekend in South Haven,” Hosier states, noting the weather and lake may not always cooperate. Still, the out-of-towners are

Top 5 Michigan cities for fatal drownings in Lake Michigan from 2010-25

At least 40 other Michigan towns saw at least one fatal drowning during the same time period.



tempted.

“We regularly see risky behavior where out-of-town visitors decide to ignore flags, code enforcement officers and common sense – and go into the water in unsafe conditions because they’ve ‘driven all this way for the beach and are going to enjoy their time,’” Hosier says.

Lifeguard programs involve a lot more than ‘sunblock and a whistle’

According to Hosier, South Haven eliminated its lifeguard program more than two decades ago due to “rising expenses, liability concerns, and the difficulty of staffing.” She said “it was becoming impossible for the city of South Haven to find anyone willing to be a lifeguard for our Lake Michigan beaches.”

And while the city is committed to restarting the program, she says, doing so isn’t as simple as people may think.

“It’s been suggested that the process is simple to restart the program: Buy some sunblock and a whistle, and you’ve got your lifeguard program,” Hosier says. “However, it is far from simple. We can’t simply restart a program that hasn’t existed for 20 years – particularly at a time (when) it’s so difficult to find qualified employees for any position, much less one with the many risks that would be inherent in this role.”

As Hosier notes, lifeguarding a massive lake is much different than watching over a community pool.

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