

It's the first year all three Charlottesville city pools will be open since the pandemic began — but a lifeguard shortage is likely to reduce open hours
written by Newspark Team | May 16, 2022



Megan Hicks never hesitates to bring her kids to the water.

Hicks' three children splashed around in their underwear in the umbrella-shaped fountain at Greenleaf Park. Workers from the Charlottesville Parks and Recreation opened the spray grounds on May 11 — when it got up to 79 degrees. Hicks says her children ran at the chance to play in the water right after workers finished their tests. Even when the water stopped spraying from the fountain, the young children continued to play tag, their feet battering against the small puddles on the blue pad.

Hicks relies on Charlottesville and Albemarle County's parks, pools and lakes to help keep her kids occupied — and cool — on blazing summer days.

"The pool is the only saving grace in Virginia," said Hicks. She watches as her kids run to the playground. "That's why we go. I kid you not, we go a couple of times a day."

Both the city and Albemarle County, though, have a lifeguard shortage for their public pools and lakes this summer.

Albemarle County will only open two of its three lakes this summer. Walnut Creek Lake will be closed for the season unless at least five more lifeguards are hired. On top of the closures, the two lakes will operate for four days of the week rather than seven.

The shortage could also result in limited capacity or shortened hours for Charlottesville's aquatic centers, but it is too early to say, said Vic Garber, deputy director of Parks and Recreation.

Three of the city's aquatic centers — Washington Park, Onesty Family and Smith Aquatic Centers — need 110 lifeguards in total to run efficiently. Only 70 are on staff as of early May.

Garber said the whole department is short-handed but the lifeguard positions are the most immediate need.

To get more applicants, Charlottesville is waiving the \$135 fee for the lifeguard certification course. They are offering a \$250 signing bonus and a supplemental \$250 if lifeguards stay on past the summer. Lifeguards in Charlottesville are paid \$15 an hour.

Strong swimmers are encouraged to apply. Applicants must be at least 15 years of age and be lifeguard certified. The lifeguard certification course, which takes about two weeks, is available at Crow Pool. Candidates who wish to have the fee waived are encouraged to contact the department.

Apply to be lifeguard at Charlottesville Parks and Recreation. You can also find Albemarle County positions for searching for "lifeguard" in their jobs portal.

Garber hasn't seen a staff shortage this severe in his 10 years at the department.

"We're looking for great employees with a great attitude and a good work ethic," Garber said.

Garber hopes their training program will entice people to apply. He also thinks that as summer gets closer, between now and Memorial Day, more people will apply.

The city is also in need of 22 camp counselors to help run its six day-camps. About 30 are on staff as of early May, said Garber.

This is the first year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that all three aquatic facilities will be open. Last year, only Washington Park was open for the summer.

Albemarle County is also scrambling for more lifeguards. The county needs 11 additional lifeguards in order to open all three of its lakes — at Walnut Creek Park, Mint Springs Valley Park and Chris Greene Lake Park — for swimming this summer, said Amy Smith, assistant director for Albemarle County Parks and Recreation.

"We hope between now and when school lets out we'll get a few more [applicants]," Smith said.

She said the county is struggling to compete with higher-paying jobs. The wages for the lowest paid lifeguard were raised from \$12 to \$15 in 2021.

Smith said the county is unable to offer bonuses like Charlottesville. Albemarle is promising to waive or reimburse fees for lifeguards to attain their certification at the county or elsewhere.

“We’ve talked to other parks and rec places across the state and everybody seems to be on the same board with lifeguards,” said Smith.

For some Charlottesville residents, the pools have a lot of significance. Rebekah Oliphant remembers frequenting her town’s public pool and local creeks growing up in Alabama. The admission prices were cheap, just quarters to play in the small pool. Often, she would play with her siblings at a nearby creek or river. Those were some of her best memories, she said.

Now, she looks forward to creating similar moments with her children in Charlottesville.

“It’s vital,” Oliphant said. Her own two kids joined in on the fun with Hick’s children at the Greenleaf Park splash pad. “They deserve to be out having fun.”

If public pools were to close or have tighter hours, Oliphant is willing to go to private pools, such as the YMCA or Fry’s Spring Beach Club.

But private pools can be expensive.

The Piedmont Family YMCA membership fees for families start at \$99 per month. Membership with private associations, like the Hollymead Citizens Association and the Fry’s Spring Beach Club, can cost families \$325 to over \$1,000 per year.

Last year, Albemarle County charged \$3 per adult and \$2 for children 3 to 12 years old for daily passes at its three lakes. Charlottesville charges \$4 to \$8 for city residents for daily admission to its pools. The city offers family memberships starting at \$53 per month.

The pandemic already took a toll on the access to outdoor, physical activities for her children, Oliphant said. She worries that reduced hours for public pools and lakes could make it even harder for families that can’t afford the extra expense of private clubs.

“What I want to see is kids out, doing this” — she gestures to the children running around the oversized fountain — “and not sitting in the house just because it’s hot.”