



For Immediate Release

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Chicago Park District Lifeguards Call for Higher Pay, Better Staffing to Avoid Second Year of Pool Closures

CHICAGO, IL – Chicago Park District workers, represented by the Service Employees International Union Local 73, stated they are ready to fight for better pay and staffing to stop a second year of pool closures. In 2022, all but 37 pools remained closed throughout summer, resulting in uneven access for residents and staffing shortages that hampered the progress of other workers.

"Parents rely on having a pool accessible to them, and the Park District has taken away an opportunity for teaching people important life skills," said Adolfo Flores, Natatorium Instructor, Ping Tom Park. "Underpaying these workers is a slap in the face. They are essentially telling our staff that they are not valued and the work that they do doesn't matter, when it matters so much to the communities we serve. Workers are struggling to make ends meet, and increased workloads with fewer lifeguards means an impact on their personal lives."

With the Park District's summer program starting next month, workers are concerned they're in for another season of confusion, short staffing and more. Some workers have stated that they have already heard of plans to close pools at various parks, such as Independence Park on the city's northwest side. SEIU Local 73 believes the continued staffing shortages impacting pool closures are centered on the low pay workers receives, making it hard for the Park District to competitively vie for new talent.

"With the Park District refusing to offer a competitive wage, it's contributed to shortages that are negatively impacting workers," said Melissa Cotto, Lifeguard, and single parent of four children. "Day-to-day functions have decreased drastically, as we take on the workload of unfilled positions. A wage that reflects that hard work we do will allow for new talent to flow in

while also allowing us to not have to worry about a second job, focus on our families, and have overall less financial burdens."

While the Park District has offered a modest \$600 bonus for new lifeguards, it fails to address the long-term wage improvements workers seek and pales in comparison to other cities. The average hourly pay for lifeguards at the Chicago Park District \$16.19 for seasonal lifeguards and \$16.77 for year-round lifeguards. The city of Evanston recently announced a pay increase to \$18.50-20 an hour for lifeguards. Other major cities, like Buffalo, New York, pay lifeguards up to \$20 an hour, while New York City increased its hourly pay to \$21.26 for first and second-year lifeguards with an additional \$1,000 bonus.

Cyril Nichols, state representative for the 32nd District, sponsored a bill in the Illinois House that aims to increase the minimum wage for lifeguards. He believes the pay will help to improve staffing numbers and ensure that the Chicago Park District can maximize pool openings:

"For too long, our pools have been understaffed and under-resourced. The Chicago Park District has an opportunity to fix what is becoming a regular feature of summer: closed pools. Our residents need access to them, and our workers need jobs that pay them fairly."

Other local leaders are calling for the Park District to increase pay to attract new and retain existing staff, which will keep more pools open and give communities access to them.

"When our pools are opens, it gives young people in our communities the chance to be active and surrounded by their neighbors. But the Park District has taken that away from many of them," said Alderwoman Stephanie D. Coleman, 16th Ward. "Now, the nearest pool is sometimes in the next ward over; it's time we get serious about true equitable access to them."

The Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners held a meeting earlier today at Fosco Park. The Board did not respond to SEIU Local 73's comments.

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SEIU Local 73 represents more than 31,000 workers, primarily in public service and publicly funded positions in school districts, municipalities, social service agencies, and many other job classifications in Illinois and Indiana. We are dedicated to improving the lives of workers and their families.