

SHORT CHANGED?

The 2008 *Aquatics International* Salary Survey results are in. See if you're paying enough to attract new guards — and keep the ones you have. | by Kendra Kozen

When Tina Dittmar tries to recruit new lifeguards each season, she can get pretty frustrated.

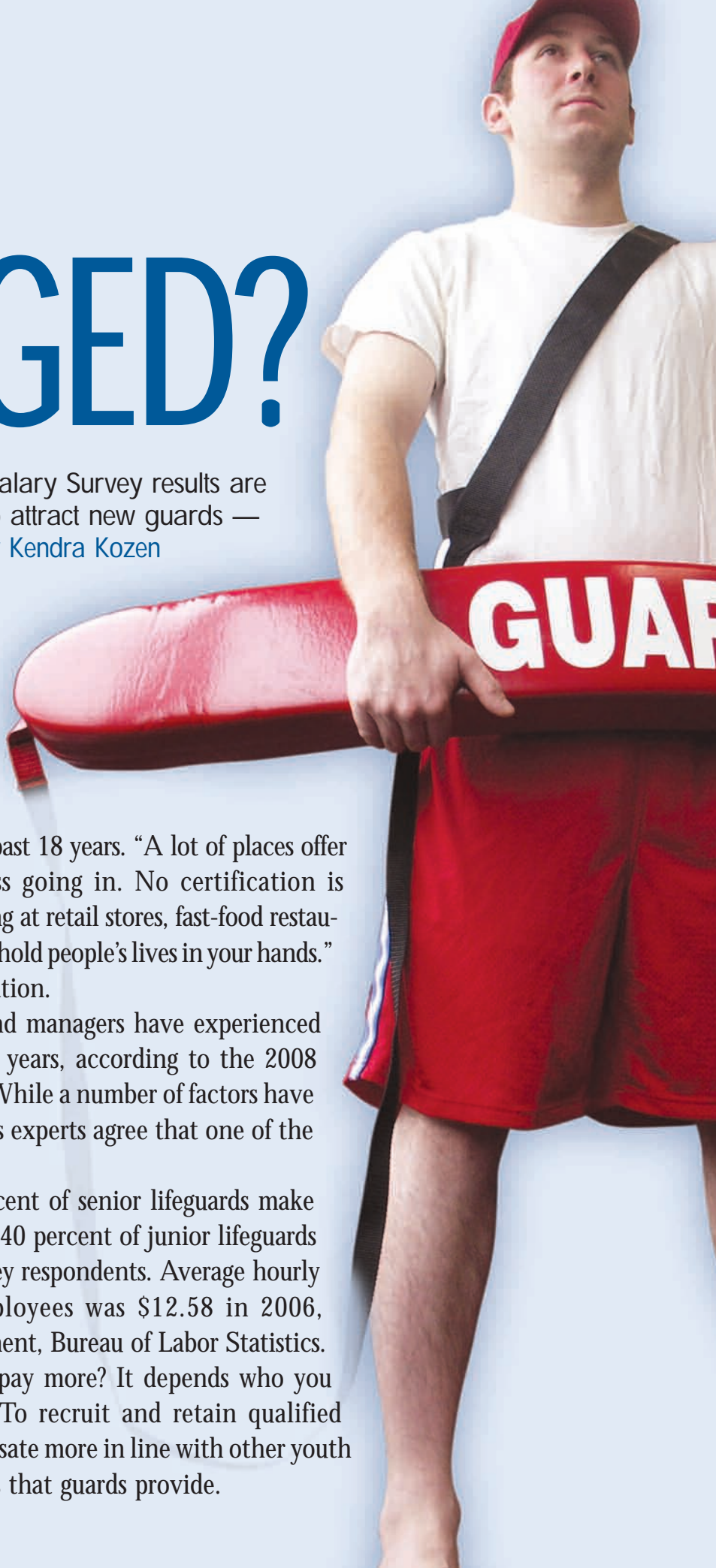
"I've had people interested in a job, but it just didn't offer enough pay," says Dittmar, aquatics supervisor at the city of Laguna Niguel, Calif., for the past 18 years. "A lot of places offer part-time work, and it requires less going in. No certification is required. On top of that, when working at retail stores, fast-food restaurants or other part-time jobs, you don't hold people's lives in your hands."

Dittmar isn't alone in her aggravation.

Nearly 70 percent of operators and managers have experienced a lifeguard shortage in the past five years, according to the 2008 *Aquatics International* Salary Survey. While a number of factors have contributed to that shortfall, aquatics experts agree that one of the biggest is pay.

How low is it? More than 50 percent of senior lifeguards make less than \$9 an hour, and more than 40 percent of junior lifeguards make less than \$8, according to survey respondents. Average hourly pay for nonsupervisory retail employees was \$12.58 in 2006, according to the U.S. Labor Department, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Why can't the aquatics industry pay more? It depends who you ask. But one thing seems certain: To recruit and retain qualified employees, operators need to compensate more in line with other youth jobs — and the value of the services that guards provide.



A kid's job?

"It's a dichotomy," says Michael Oostman, part of Ocoee, Fla.-based Jeff Ellis and Associates' accident investigations and litigation support team. "You have the belief that it's usually kids essentially getting paid to sit up in a chair, watch people swim and get a suntan. The public opinion is that they don't deserve a big salary for that. But as soon as an emergency happens, we expect them to be professionals and handle the situation. Right now, salaries don't correspond with that expectation."

Other experts agree. "People think of it as a kid's job until someone gets hurt. Then it's 'Why don't we have older people on the job?'" says Robert Ogoreuc, assistant professor in the Physical Education Department and aquatic director of physical education at Slippery Rock University. He's also the training officer for the Ocean City, N.J., Beach Patrol. "As an industry, we've raised the bar for what we expect from our guards. Unfortunately, salaries haven't increased concurrently."

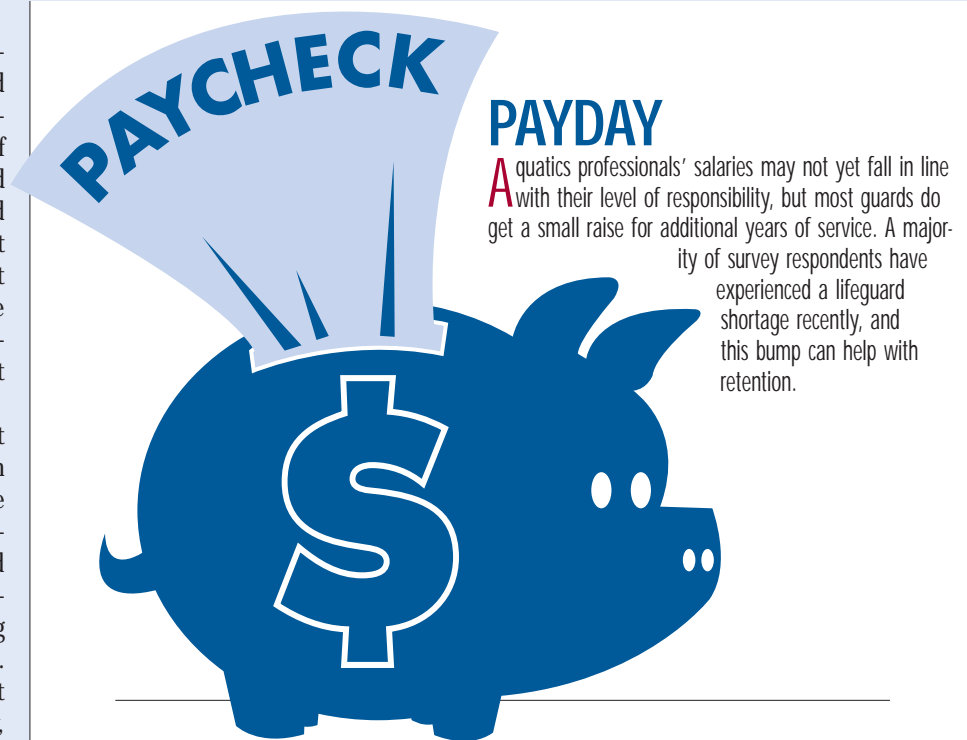
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The survey findings indicate that today's lifeguards do have a full plate: 66 percent of respondents say their lifeguards also are instructors, and 26 percent say lifeguards handle maintenance some or all of the time.

Most guards are expected to carry a full range of certifications. Of those surveyed, 92 percent require CPR; 89 percent, first aid; and 30 percent, an oxygen administration (OA) certification. When it comes to supervisors, 75 percent say they require at least a high school diploma or equivalent.

"Typically, the more [operators] pay, the better candidates they'll get coming in and the better retention they'll have if they can continue to increase salaries," says Tom Griffiths, director of the Aquatics and Safety Office for Athletics at Penn State University in State College, Pa., and founder of the Aquatics Safety Research Group. He notes that since his program began paying guards more, he has seen better employees.

Aquatics has never been a particularly



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Aquatics professionals' salaries may not yet fall in line with their level of responsibility, but most guards do get a small raise for additional years of service. A majority of survey respondents have experienced a lifeguard shortage recently, and this bump can help with retention.

OPERATORS WHO EXPERIENCED A LIFE-GUARD SHORTAGE IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The 2008 Aquatics International Salary Survey reflects responses from an online survey of 393 aquatics professionals in November/December 2007.

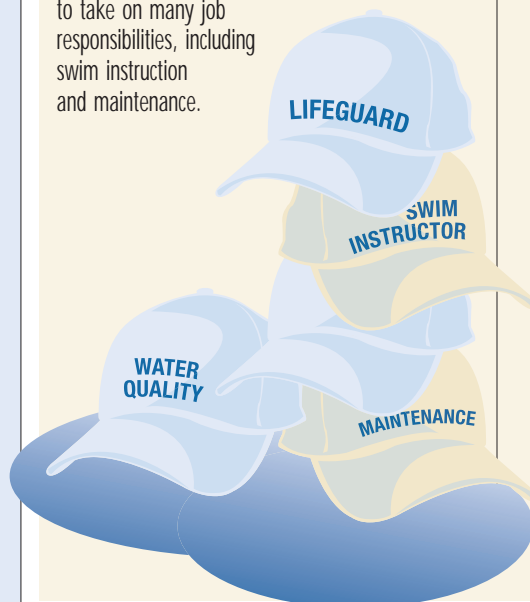
Shortage
66%

No shortage
31%

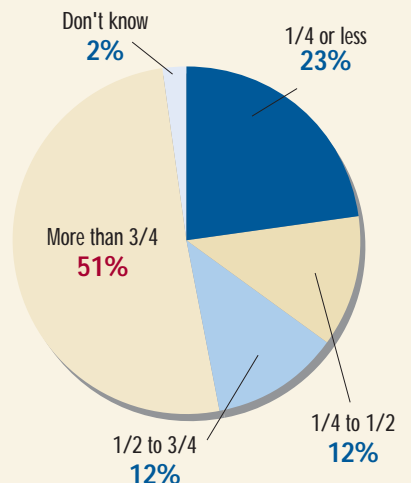
Maybe/
Don't know
3%

MANY HATS

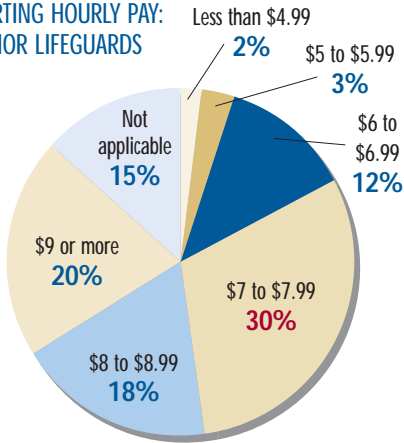
Most lifeguards are seasonal, part-time employees, but they are expected to take on many job responsibilities, including swim instruction and maintenance.



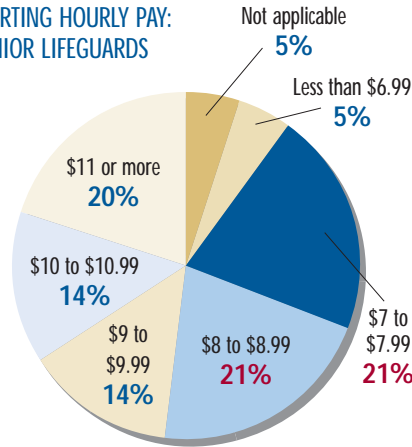
PORTION OF SEASONAL, PART-TIME EMPLOYEES



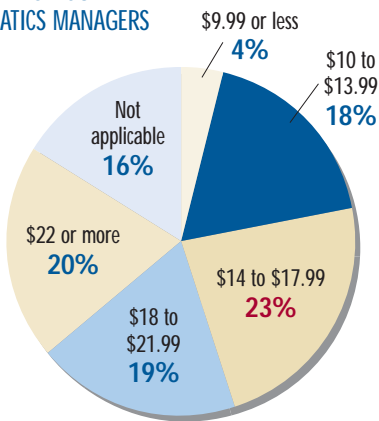
STARTING HOURLY PAY: JUNIOR LIFEGUARDS



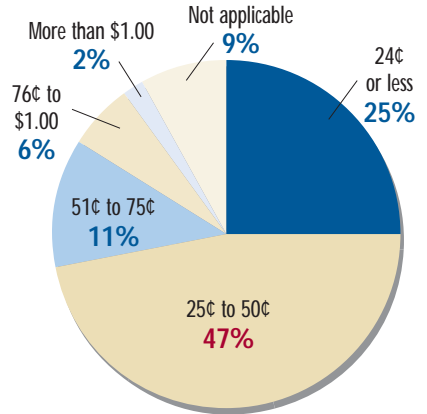
STARTING HOURLY PAY: SENIOR LIFEGUARDS



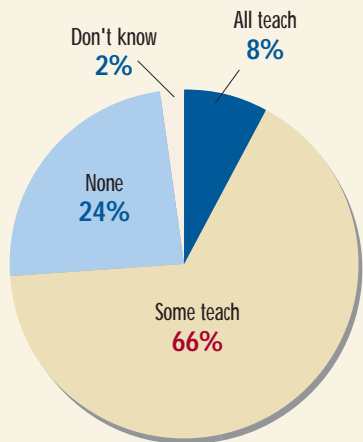
STARTING HOURLY PAY: AQUATICS MANAGERS



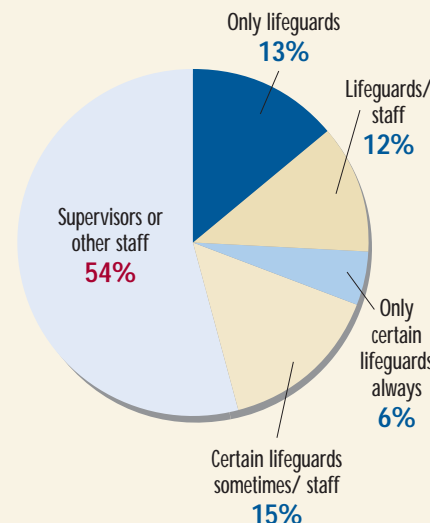
ANNUAL LIFEGUARD SALARY BUMP (PER HOUR)



FACILITIES WITH LIFEGUARDS WHO TEACH



STAFFER WHO HANDLES WATER-QUALITY MAINTENANCE



high-paying field, and that doesn't appear to be changing. "Historically, the pay schedule for lifeguards has followed the minimum wage curve," Oostman says, "and it looks like that's what it's going to continue to follow in the future."

Currently, federal minimum wage is \$5.85 per hour; effective July 24, it will increase to \$6.55. As of January 1, 2008, several areas, including the Northeast, West Coast, Florida, Alaska, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico had minimum wages higher than the federal minimum wage. Georgia, Wyoming and Kansas have set state minimum wage lower than the federal rate, and several Southeastern states have no minimum wage laws in place at all.

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Ogoreuc says many of the facilities in his area of western Pennsylvania had been paying lifeguards above minimum wage, but in the past few years the minimum wage has increased, catching up to the salaries.

Nonprofit, low pay

One reason for the low salaries may be that many aquatics facilities are municipal or nonprofit, and these business models do not traditionally have the large budgets one might expect at a for-profit operation.

"I don't think there's a lot of money out there in aquatics because it's in that social service world," Griffiths says.

In fact, the YMCA of the United States, based in Chicago, is the largest pool operator in the nation, and only 28 percent of respondents in the survey are at a private or homeowners association facility. The rest say they are either wholly or partially operated by a municipality or nonprofit.

Kay Smiley, YMCA's specialty consultant for aquatics and scuba, says most YMCA lifeguards are paid between \$7 and \$10 an hour. She adds that salaries make up a large percentage of an individual facility's budget.

Another factor that affects salaries is the

SHORTCHANGED

seasonal, part-time nature of many aquatics-related opportunities. More than half of the survey respondents report over 76 percent of their employees are seasonal, part-time workers.

Chris Brewster, president of the United States Lifesaving Association, says full-time beach lifeguards are generally paid at a rate similar to that of local police and fire agencies. "Open-water facilities don't tend to have the salary problem with salary as pools/aquatics facilities," he notes.

If what I want to do is run a pool at the lowest possible cost but an adequate level of safety, then I have to set the salaries at the lowest possible level.

The experts offer some rational explanations as to why aquatics industry salaries trend low, but when it comes down to it, they all agree that the overriding force driving salaries is plain and simple economics.

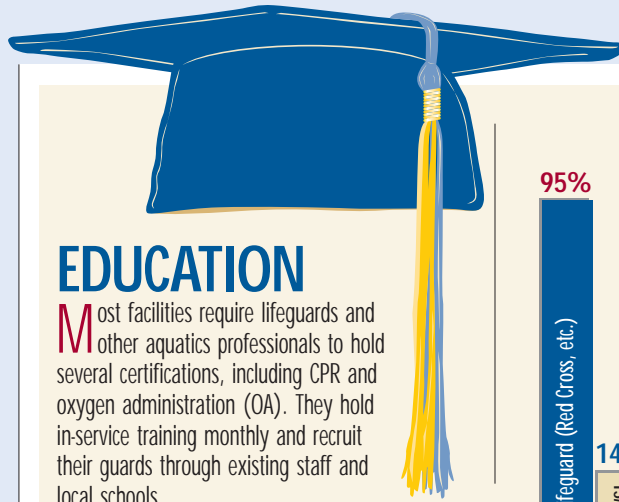
"Lifeguard employment is affected by all of the normal aspects of supply and demand," Brewster says. "If what I want to do is run a pool at the lowest possible cost but an adequate level of safety, then I have to set the salaries at the lowest possible level to attract the right quality of employee."

Following the money

Traditionally, operators have relied on a love of aquatics to attract those employees. "I work in an environment where people want to be and want to go," Dittmar says. "We're in a place that's about health and fitness and enthusiasm and excitement. People want to spend valuable free time here. That sets off passion for what you're doing."

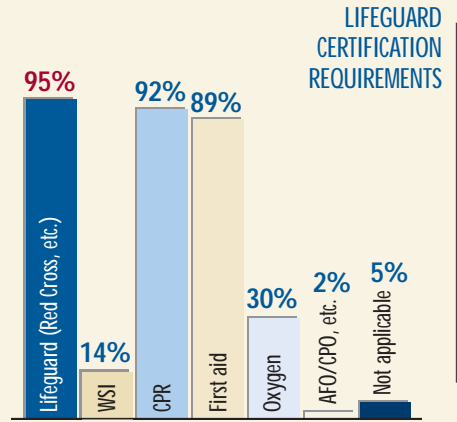
But in today's world, salaries play a bigger role in an operator's ability to recruit and retain good employees. Jeanne Wunderle, recreation administrator for the city of Dublin, Ohio, says that she's never had to actively recruit guards before. This year, however, she had to produce a recruitment brochure and raise salaries a dollar an hour across the board to attract new guards.

Aquatics professionals agree that low salaries make it hard to recruit, and it may

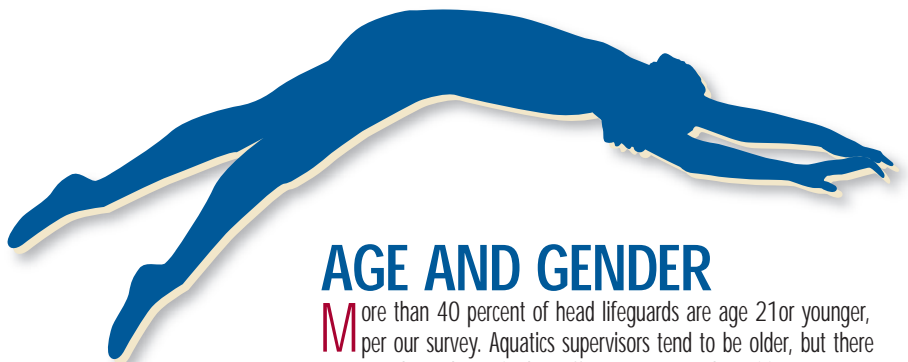
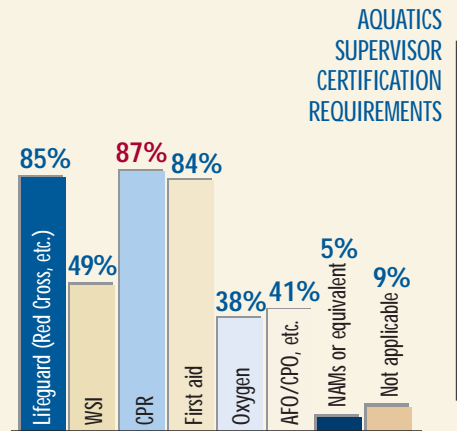
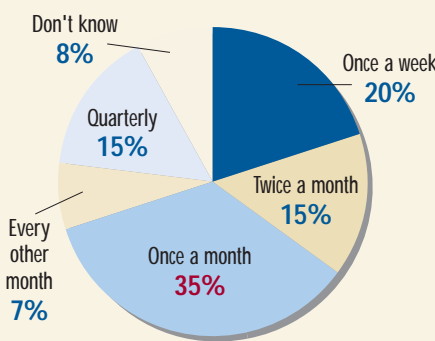


EDUCATION

Most facilities require lifeguards and other aquatics professionals to hold several certifications, including CPR and oxygen administration (OA). They hold in-service training monthly and recruit their guards through existing staff and local schools.



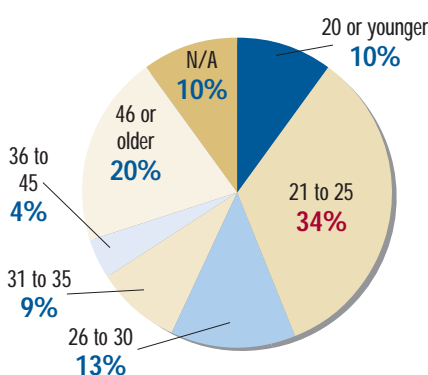
FREQUENCY OF LIFEGUARD IN-SERVICE TRAINING



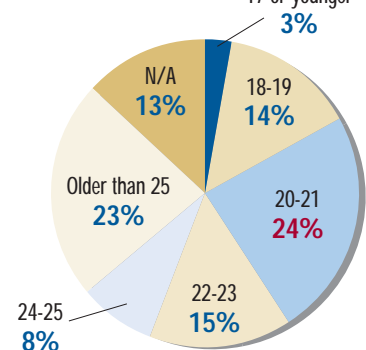
AGE AND GENDER

More than 40 percent of head lifeguards are age 21 or younger, per our survey. Aquatics supervisors tend to be older, but there seems to be a dramatic drop-off at age 30. Both positions appear to attract almost equal numbers of men and women.

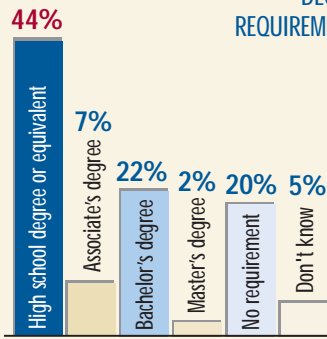
AGE OF HEAD LIFEGUARD SUPERVISOR



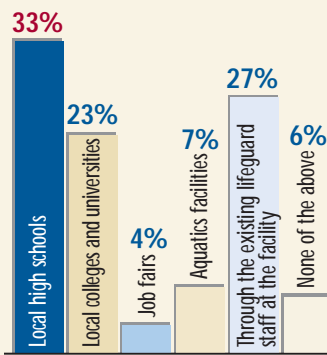
AGE OF HEAD LIFEGUARD



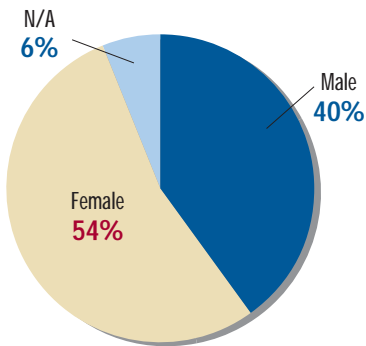
AQUATICS SUPERVISOR DEGREE REQUIREMENTS



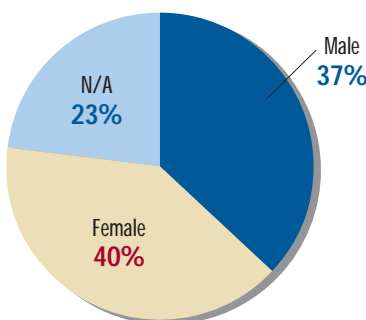
WHERE OPERATORS RECRUIT THEIR GUARDS



GENDER OF HEAD OF AQUATICS



GENDER OF HEAD LIFEGUARD

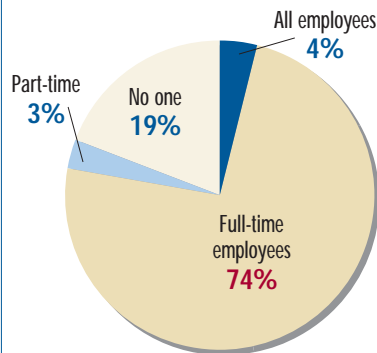


EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

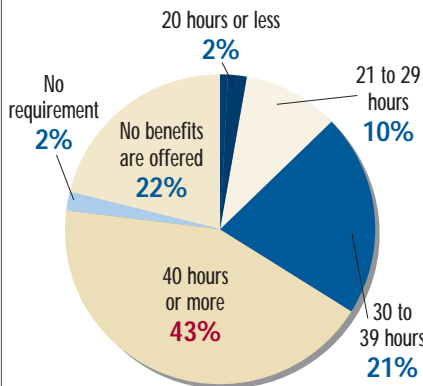
Nearly three-quarters of full-time employees receive some benefits, most typically, paid vacation and health insurance.



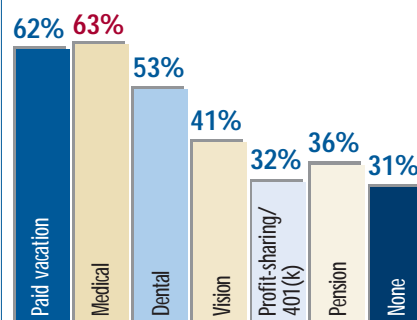
EMPLOYEES ELIGIBLE FOR BENEFITS



REQUIRED WORK HOURS FOR BENEFITS



BENEFITS OFFERED



only be getting harder with the increasing number of waterparks and the expansion of many older conventional aquatics facilities.

Considering that a large number of guards and other professionals are young — according to the survey, 60 percent of head guards are under the age of 25 — it's important to understand how salary motivates Generation Y.

"We're a victim of our own success in getting people to work for minimum wage," Griffiths says. "Now things have changed. It's harder to get younger people to work for that."

Generation Y expert Eric Chester of Generationwhy.com in Lakewood, Colo., says salary is "an important piece of the puzzle" when it comes to recruiting. "The idea is to have your young employees realize they have a good job that pays close to what their friends are making," he says. "If they are making peanuts in comparison, it's hard to keep them motivated." No one likes being paid the minimum, he adds, and employers who pay even a quarter more will find it makes a big difference.

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Lee Yarger, coordinator of aquatic degree programs at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., agrees. Smiley takes it a step further and says that retaining employees saves money. "Local YMCAs have found that it is often cheaper to pay lifeguards more to come back than pay to recruit and train a new person," she says.

The survey shows that 47 percent of respondents do reward employees for years of service with a pay raise between 25 cents and 50 cents an hour.

There may not be a hard and fast solution for finding more money for salaries, but the experts agree: Collecting that chunk of change is a battle worth fighting.

"As aquatics professionals, we've got to sell it both ways," Yarger says, "first to our staff, by letting them know that what they do is important, and then up the chain, by explaining that lifeguards are the first barrier between the facility and a lawsuit." ■