



Suffolk County, New York Drowning Prevention Action Plan

JULY 2025 EDITION





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The Crisis of Drowning

Definition

Drowning is the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion or immersion in liquid. Drowning happens when a person's nose and mouth are under water for too long, making it impossible to breathe. Drowning is not always fatal.

Fatal drowning happens when the drowning results in death. Nonfatal drowning happens when a person survives a drowning incident. Nonfatal drowning has a range of outcomes or results, from no injuries to very serious injuries such as brain damage or permanent disability.

Statistics

According to the World Health Organization, there are around 300,000 annual drowning deaths worldwide. Drowning disproportionately impacts children and young people. Children aged under 5 years account for nearly a quarter of all drowning deaths.

According to the CDC, over 4,500 people drowned each year in the United States between 2020 and 2022. This is about 500 more drowning deaths per year compared to 2019. Groups already at higher risk saw the greatest increases in deaths, including young children and older adults of all races and ethnicities, and Black people of all ages.

Drowning is the number one cause of unintentional death for children ages 1-4 and the second leading cause of unintentional death for children ages 5-14.

In the last 10 years, through 2023, there have been 35,056 drownings in the United States:

5,147
Ages 0-5

2,831
Ages 5-12

4,076
Ages 13-19

23,011
Adults

Of these drownings, approximately 21% occurred in Pools, 26% in Lakes, 27% in Rivers, and 10% in Oceans.

New York State

In this period, New York is the 4th leading state in deaths due to drowning:

1. Florida (2,784)
2. Texas (2,705)
3. California (2,487)
4. New York (1,317)
5. Michigan (1,104)

In 2024 New York had 84 total drownings, 8 were children ages 1-4. In the U.S. there were 2,176 U.S. drownings – of which 278 were children ages 1-4. Nine out of ten child-related drownings happen in residential pools with a caregiver present.

Suffolk County

- There were 24 fatal drownings in Suffolk County, New York in 2024 compared to 15 fatal drownings in 2023.
- Since 2018, approximately 40% of fatal drownings in Suffolk County were in open water and 28% were in swimming pools.
- Since 2024, however, two-thirds of fatal drownings in Suffolk County were in swimming pools.
- Since 2024, Suffolk County accounts for 70% of all fatal drownings in swimming pools in New York State.



What's Driving the Crisis?

According to the CDC, the main factors that affect drowning risk are lack of swimming ability, lack of barriers to prevent unsupervised water access, lack of close supervision while swimming, failure to wear life jackets, alcohol use, and seizure disorders.



The CDC describes the risks as follows:

- **Not being able to swim:** Many adults and children report that they can't swim. Research has shown that participation in formal swimming lessons can reduce the risk of drowning among children and young adults.
- **Lack of close supervision:** Drowning can happen quickly and quietly anywhere there is water, especially to unsupervised children, and even in the presence of lifeguards.
- **Not wearing life jackets:** Life jackets can prevent drowning during water activities, especially boating and swimming. The U.S. Coast Guard reported 658 boating-related deaths in 2021—81% died by drowning, and 83% of these people were not wearing life jackets.
- **Drinking alcohol:** Among adolescents and adults, alcohol use is involved in up to 70% of deaths associated with water recreation, almost a quarter of ED visits for drowning, and about one in five reported boating deaths. Alcohol impairs balance, coordination, and judgment, and it increases risk-taking behavior.
- **Pools with missing or ineffective fences:** Proper pool fencing can prevent young children from gaining access to the pool area without caregivers' awareness. A four-sided isolation fence which separates the pool area from the house and yard reduces a child's risk of drowning by 83% compared to three-sided property-line fencing (which encloses the entire yard, but does not separate the pool from the house).

SECTION 2: WHAT'S DRIVING THE CRISIS?

- **Location:** The highest risk locations for drowning vary by age. Among infants under 1 year old, three quarters of all drownings occur in bathtubs. Most drownings happen in home swimming pools among children ages 1–4. Over 40% of drownings among children 5-14 occur in natural water, and over 35% occur in swimming pools. Almost half of fatal drownings among people 15 years and older occur in natural waters like lakes, rivers, or oceans.
- **Conditions that can increase risk:** People with seizure disorders such as epilepsy are at a higher risk of fatal and nonfatal drowning than the general population. Drowning is the most common cause of unintentional injury death, with the bathtub being the most common site of drowning, for people with seizure disorders. Heart conditions are also associated with a higher risk of drowning. Deaths among people with autism spectrum disorder are nearly 40x as likely to be caused by drowning as deaths in the general population.



The U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan

The U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan is a national roadmap for collective action to reduce drowning. It provides a ten-year framework (2023-2032) and tools to support the development and implementation of data- and evidence-informed, context-specific water safety action plans in communities, counties, and states across the country. It also lays out national actions that support implementation and increase the likelihood that those state, county, and community plans will succeed.



Visit watersafetyplan.us to review or download the National Action Plan.

The National Action Plan includes 98 evidence-informed action recommendations that are grouped under 6 key areas of action:

- 1. Barriers, Entrapment, and Electrical Safety** – using pool fencing, alarms, and emerging technologies to reduce unsupervised access to water, and employing measures to reduce entrapment and electrocution.
- 2. Data and Public Health Surveillance** – developing comprehensive drowning data surveillance to inform prevention of fatal and nonfatal drownings, better identify risk groups, and develop and monitor data-driven prevention interventions.



SECTION 3: THE U.S. NATIONAL WATER SAFETY ACTION PLAN

3. Life Jackets, Personal Flotation Devices, and Other Flotation – increasing the use of U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets by boaters, as well as by those recreating in or near the water.

4. Rescue and CPR – promoting and improving rescue and resuscitation of the drowning victim by laypersons, lifeguards, and EMS personnel.

5. Lifeguards and Supervision – improving protection and supervision by parents, group leaders, and lifeguards of those in and near all types of open water, pools, and around the home.

6. Water Safety, Water Competency, and Swimming Lessons – enhancing water safety, water competency, and swimming lessons with a particular focus on reducing existing inequities.

State Water Safety Coalitions

Drowning rates vary by state. Each state has its own unique challenges—like the local climate, bodies of water, economic challenges, or even how people view swimming. State, county, and community water safety coalitions are especially effective because local experts understand their communities’ challenges better than anyone else. By working together as a coalition, local experts can assess the risks and develop a state water safety action plan, guided by USNWSAP recommendations, to prevent drownings and keep their state safe.

As of June 2025, several states have developed or are developing state-level water safety action plans that mirror some or all of the above areas of action. These include:

- California*, cawatersafety.org/strategy
- Florida*
- Hawaii, hiwatersafetycoalition.org/
- New Jersey*
- New York*, ny.gov/programs/temporary-commission-prevent-childhood-drowning
- Texas*

**The ZAC Foundation has provided or is providing organizational support.*

The ZAC Foundation, which serves on the Steering Committee for the U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan and the California Water Safety Coalition Board, is proud to work with safety officials and local leaders in states across the U.S. to create state and local water safety coalitions that address localized risks.

Additionally, The ZAC Foundation has worked or is working with local jurisdictions on community-level drowning prevention action plans. These include Chicago (IL), Greenwich (CT), Orange County (FL), City of Passaic (NJ), St. Louis (MO), and Suffolk County (NY), among others.

The Suffolk County Drowning Prevention Alliance

Determined to stop the crisis of drowning on Long Island, The ZAC Foundation helped to convene a group of highly engaged Suffolk County stakeholders who participated in several conversations around the crisis of drowning, the need for a “whole community” approach that is informed by and reflects the realities of Suffolk County, and how best to formulate a Suffolk County-specific response plan.

Participating organizations include:

- Airbnb
- American Red Cross
- Aquafinz Infant Aquatics Swim School
- Azureon
- Boys & Girls Club of the Bellport Area
- Chaikin Ultimate Group
- Chosen Foundation
- East Islip School District
- Imagine Swimming (NYC)
- Girl Scouts of Suffolk County
- Long Island Pool & Spa Association
- New York Temporary Commission to Prevent Childhood Drowning
- New York Water Safety Coalition
- Northeast Spa & Pool Association
- ReesSpecht Life
- Scouting America - Long Island Council
- Splish Splash Waterpark
- State of New York
- Stony Brook Medicine
- Stony Brook Children’s Pediatric Trauma Center
- Stop Drowning Now
- Suffolk County Division of EMS
- Suffolk County Fire Rescue & Emergency Services
- Suffolk County Police Department
- The ZAC Foundation
- Three Village Central School District
- Town of Babylon
- Town of Brookhaven
- Town of Southampton
- United States Swim School Asso
- William Floyd School District



SECTION 4: THE SUFFOLK COUNTY DROWNING PREVENTION ALLIANCE

These conversations successfully brought together community stakeholders, some of whom had not previously worked together. Participants shared deep expertise and quality insights. There was genuine enthusiasm for developing a Suffolk County Drowning Prevention Action Plan, and critical elements of the plan emerged from the conversations.

On July 1, 2025, **Stony Brook Medicine** and **Stony Brook Children's Pediatric Trauma Center** hosted an engaging, in-person roundtable of key water safety leaders and stakeholders from across Suffolk County to formally discuss the draft Drowning Prevention Action Plan. With media in attendance and expert voices at the forefront, the discussion helped identify how participating organizations can support and implement each of the plan's five key objectives and communicate helpful information to specific audiences. The event made special note of the upcoming July 4th holiday weekend and provided specific tips for families and communities to stay safe in and around the water.

Special thanks to **Stop Drowning Now**, which helped to coordinate these conversations and had valuable recommendations on participants and subject areas. Stop Drowning Now is a nationally recognized 501c3 nonprofit dedicated to providing drowning prevention strategies through education to parents, caregivers, children, communities, and governments. They are actively involved in lobbying for water safety legislation across the country, including working with the New York Water Safety Coalition on its legislative priorities.

Goal, Objectives, Actions, Tactics

The goal of the Suffolk County Drowning Prevention Action Plan is to **reduce the rate of drownings in Suffolk County and Long Island generally, particularly in its most at-risk settings and among its most at-risk populations.**

From this singular goal, objectives, actions, and tactics will be developed and synthesized to highlight commonalities and to prioritize the most important interventions for improving the prevention landscape. Listed below, and further elaborated in the following pages, the objectives, actions, and tactics outline a multilevel, diverse approach to drowning prevention.

Objectives	Actions
Objective 1: Better understanding of the data, other plans	1. Leverage available data sources 2. Explore data to better understand the drowning statistics and trends specific to Suffolk County 3. Use evidence to highlight issues, include additional insight to problem 4. Explore examples of successful drowning prevention action plans from other states/regions to inform the approach
Objective 2: Improve, expand education on drowning risks	1. Develop a more effective education program on water safety, targeted at children in school 2. Explore partnership opportunities with Scouting organizations, 4-H Programs, summer camp associations, Suffolk County Library System, municipalities' summer youth recreation programs 3. Implement waterless water safety education programs
Objective 3: Emphasize pool safety among residents	1. Promote barriers, e.g. isolation fencing, covers 2. Promote supervision, e.g. Water Watcher cards
Objective 4: Strengthen prevention workforce (lifeguards)	1. Ensure quality of workforce 2. Funding for workforce creation and development 3. Incentivize and professionalize lifeguard job/role
Objective 5: Enhance advocacy and public awareness	1. Create PSA content across multiple media/delivery platforms 2. Increase awareness of the drowning crisis among policymakers

Objective 1: Better understanding of the data, other plans

More and better data on Suffolk County are needed to target prevention programming where it is most needed, influence policy makers into action, and advocate within communities for more attention to the problem.

Action 1.1 Leverage available data sources Data collection, analysis and reporting is time consuming and resource intensive. Your local or state health department--even the CDC--has useful data that can point decision-makers in your community to priority drowning prevention interventions.	• Stony Brook Medicine to launch a 10-year data study with the goal of one database (incl. ER visit, ICU transfers, etc.) in the future • IRB submitted! • Stony Brook implementing novel drowning collection data process for all drownings • Stony Brook Medicine to conduct QI pilot project in outpatient clinics consisting of 2000 patients • Coordinate, seek data from New York State Department of Health, County Department of Health, police reports; sync on coding
Action 1.2 Explore data to better understand the drowning statistics and trends specific to Suffolk County Drowning data is not just mortality statistics, but encapsulates non-fatal and key demographic indices that can help decision-makers understand the full scope of the problem and where interventions will be the most effective. Data should highlight most-at-risk subsets of the community to help intervention targeting.	• Initiate a Quality Project to patients in Stony Brook University clinics to introduce a Drowning Prevention video and assess the data quarterly • Compel academic researchers and public health department analysts to disclose pertinent demographic details related to drowning incidents, so that the community and policymakers have greater awareness of the segments of the population most affected by drowning
Action 1.3 Use evidence to highlight issues, include additional insight to problem Data can help community members make decisions that ultimately contribute to their own and others safety. Without good information community members may hold incorrect beliefs about drowning and drowning prevention.	• Once above is collected, tailor resources for drowning prevention • Make sure community leaders, and educators are equipped with drowning prevention fact sheets for dispelling rumors and energizing community members to action.
Action 1.4 Explore examples of successful drowning prevention action plans from other states/regions to inform the approach Suffolk County has unique needs, gaps, and opportunities, but there are plenty of other strategies that can be applicable on Long Island. Consider the work of the New Jersey Water Safety Strategy, among others.	• Review other states' water safety strategies and action plans for commonalities with Suffolk County.

Objective 2: Improve, expand education on drowning risks

There are many educational and learning opportunities to be leveraged in order to maximize the contributions that each community member can make to address this collective challenge. We can all improve our understanding of and develop skills towards drowning prevention.

Action 2.1 Leverage existing curricula (<i>Examples: Stop Drowning Now's storyboards, curriculum; ReesSpecht the Water fun, interactive assembly; The ZAC Foundation classroom curriculum</i>). The school is a natural setting to engage and educate youth with varying degrees of water safety education. The benefits afforded by consistent attendance and social setting help ensure that programming is delivered equally across large numbers of students.	• Advocate with school administrators and enlist parent champions during months leading up to warm weather to deliver prevention programming in classrooms as part of learning modules. • Facilitate fun events where EMS/Police/Fire visit local schools to demonstrate best practices for drowning prevention and response. Leverage the excitement of having emergency responders at a school to drive prevention messaging with younger children. • Go to at least one school to propose dryland curriculum; training for teachers would be available in a packet • Incorporate water safety messaging in schools' social media platforms; critical to reaching parents • Partner with school districts (in partnership with BOCES) to pursue swim lessons as part of school • Expand, grow high school clubs (Stop Drowning Now model) • Utilize Every Child a Swimmer or PHTA's "Step into Swim" to get info home to parents, guardians, caregivers on how & where to find swim lessons ◦ The ZAC Foundation Classroom Curriculum ◦ American Red Cross W.H.A.L.E.S Tales (Water Habits Are Learned Early) ◦ Colin's Hope ◦ Swim Strong Foundation ◦ Stop Drowning Now Storyboards and or curriculum • Stony Brook reaching all school contacts in database to push out drowning messaging to parent platforms (over 150 school contacts) • Three Village Schools sent out drowning prevention messaging from Roundtable reaching 7,800 families (7/3/25)
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Objective 2: Improve, expand education on drowning risks

There are many educational and learning opportunities to be leveraged in order to maximize the contributions that each community member can make to address this collective challenge. We can all improve our understanding of and develop skills towards drowning prevention.

Action 2.2 Explore partnership opportunities With Scouting organizations, summer camp associations, pool builders and pool service companies, Suffolk County Library System, pediatricians, faith-based non-profits	• Identify partners, make outreach • Work with Scouting organizations to use camps to provide swim instruction, tie in to relevant water safety / swimming badges • Collaborate with pediatricians, OB/GYNs, and healthcare providers to distribute water safety information during well-child visits and prenatal care for focus on children 1-4 • Develop partnerships with faith-based organizations, civic associations, and cultural groups to integrate drowning prevention messaging into their regular programming and events. • Leverage competitive swimmers from high schools as “ambassadors” • SBC to leverage relationships with school districts to act as both a facilitator and liaison for drowning prevention education by way of IP, Medical Student Ambassadors, Nursing Students, Clinical volunteers etc
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SPOTLIGHT Water Safety Education: Stop Drowning Now “ReesSpecht the Water”

This program, developed by certified educators, is designed to engage students directly with all the aspects of water safety in an engaging and entertaining way. Interactive animation and music are used to help reinforce the key aspects of water safety to help teach students and staff S.P.L.A.S.H. and how to “ReesSpecht the Water”. The program is approximately 30 minutes long. In addition to the live in-person presentation, there is also a virtual assembly program. The virtual assembly includes everything from the in-person presentation and can be delivered through multiple platforms including Zoom, Youtube, Streamyard, Twitch etc.

Objective 3: Emphasize pool safety among residents

Most fatal drownings in Suffolk County happen in private pools. This setting requires special attention.

Action 3.1 Promote barriers Proper pool fencing can prevent young children from gaining access to the pool area without caregivers' awareness. According to the CDC, a four-sided isolation fence which separates the pool area from the house and yard reduces a child's risk of drowning by 83% compared to three-sided property-line fencing (which encloses the entire yard, but does not separate the pool from the house).	• Suffolk County requires fencing around yards, but not the pool. Explore local ordinance/legislation on isolation fencing. • Pull the number, names of new pool permits in Suffolk County; distribute information to homeowners with new pools. • Improve resident education on code compliance. • Suggest other options such as Cameras and A.I. systems • Partnership with Airbnb to host informational sessions with Hosts in the County who have pools as part of their listings, as well as provide materials, water safety tip sheets to be made available to guests.
Action 3.2 Promote supervision One of the primary factors leading to drowning incidents in both open water and swimming pools is the absence of adequate supervision. The risk is exceptionally high for children and non-swimmers. Even a momentary lapse can lead to a tragic outcome without someone to monitor and intervene in emergencies. Supervision should be active and continuous, with adults keeping children within arm's reach and avoiding distractions such as mobile phones or socializing.	• Distribute and educate on the proper use of Water Watcher cards. • Many HOA pools are not lifeguarded. Explore local ordinance/legislation. • Identify an association for vacation rentals; each municipality has different rules around short-term rentals (AirBnb)

Objective 4: Strengthen prevention workforce

There is no substitute for well-trained, competent lifeguards. A qualified and adequately resourced lifeguard workforce is an integral part of the community, serving as educators, first responders, and advocates for public water safety.

Action 4.1 Ensure quality of workforce Professional standards, qualifying exams, and clearly defined roles will help to solidify the role of lifeguards in society and will virtuously impact levels of compensation, job security and ultimately the ability of lifeguards to affect change. Certified training and retraining opportunities must be planned to ensure long-term quality is maintained.	• Advocate for the inclusion of lifeguards as a distinct and recognized cadre of first responders, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities which can be assessed according to national or international standards. • Earmark portion of public pool recreational funds for workforce wages and professional development (recertification, advanced training, etc.) • Recruit lifeguards from beyond traditional audiences (high school, college students); expand to teachers and retirees looking for side job. • Review and consider efforts to strengthen lifeguard training standards for pool lifeguards specifically. • Develop and utilize a Lifeguard Preparation Learn-To-Swim course, which teaches prospective lifeguards the skills to be successful in a lifeguard pre-course
Action 4.2 Funding for workforce creation and development Without sustainable resources, no cadre of public-serving workers can reasonably be expected to function well. Monies must be found from the public or a mix of sources to create and maintain high quality prevention and rescue workers.	• Cultivate community foundation, corporate, and public donors to create a fund to supply • Propose and shepherd legislation that will secure funding for lifeguard workforce at the state level. • Develop policies for preventing beach access/use when lifeguards are not present (a persistent problem on South Shore)
Action 4.3 Incentivize and professionalize lifeguard job/role The role of lifeguard is not just a temporary summer job for teenagers. It is a key position that should garner more respect and attention as a true career and core job within a healthy community. Individuals and communities must recognize and acknowledge the importance of lifeguards, whether through changing social norms or creating policy.	• Work with YMCA, BGC, emergency responders to host a safety professional career fair. Sync with timing of seasonal hiring for beaches or pool facilities. • Pitch human interest stories with local papers during the summer months that highlight/profile lifeguards, their roles and responsibilities, and their motivation for becoming a water safety expert.

Objective 5: Enhance advocacy and public awareness

The progress that has been made in drowning prevention and the work that remains require vigilant and persistent advocacy and attention to ensure that officials remain accountable, and the public aware of the task at hand.

Action 5.1 Create PSA content across multiple media/delivery platforms (<i>Governor Hochul signed amendment to Public Health Law in 2024 to add and incorporate drowning prevention PSAs into its rotation</i>). Consumers access and obtain information in a wide array of formats. In order to reach all segments of Suffolk County, information must be available in the most common channels and formats.	• Initiate campaign to show how drowning prevention involves everyone in a community. Similar to “If you see something, say something” in the NYC area. Create catchy slogans that implies that drowning prevention is everyone’s responsibility. <i>NY Water Safety Coalition is working to make PSAs part of Dept. of Health rotation.</i> • Consult data to identify which groups (and where) suffer the largest burden of drowning incidents or high-risk context. Reach out to County and community leaders to start dialogue around specific needs. Use experience of outreach with each group to learn from and optimize for future engagement with others. • Ensure all educational materials and PSAs are translated into the most common non-English languages spoken in Suffolk County (e.g., Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin) and use Culturally Competent messaging • Consider a social media account for this coalition; social posts are a better way to reach people than TV; consider a plan to geolocate water safety messaging on social platforms • Develop “canned” infographics for public use and sharing. • Partner with Suffolk County and NY State to share uniform public safety announcements (unified messaging is key).
Action 5.2 Increase awareness of the drowning crisis among policymakers As part of the early stages of advocacy, define the problem by sharing information on the crisis of drowning with local and state-level policymakers.	• Launch effort around a drowning prevention flash point, to call stakeholders to action and to ensure visibility. Be aware of opportunities for exposure that propel the advocacy to the center of political discourse. • Request and hold meetings with County Executive and each member of the Suffolk County legislature and state legislators who represent Suffolk County in Albany. • Engage families impacted by drowning incidents to participate in public storytelling efforts, advocacy days, and community forums.

Thank you for your valued support!

Suffolk County Drowning Prevention Alliance



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July 2025 Edition