



Kim Janey and James Morton | November 1, 2021

Boston Launches Free Swim Lessons, Lifeguard Training Through A Partnership For Swim Safety



Jewel Singletary, 71, of Roxbury, Kimberly Battle, 68, of Hyde Park, and Beatriz Lites, 66, of Roxbury, float in the pool after attending a water aerobics class at the Roxbury YMCA, Wednesday, October 13, 2021

Boston has 47 miles of shoreline, defining our city as one of the most beautiful and vibrant coastal cities in the world. Decades ago, we went big and bold, investing billions of dollars in the historic cleanup of the pollution that plagued Boston Harbor, the Charles River and other bodies of water in our city. Our waterfront should be an inclusive and safe place for children and adults to find joy. That is why we are pleased to launch the Swim Safely Partnership, aimed to increase access to swimming lessons, especially for families who have faced historic racial and economic barriers.

Over the last several years, the realities of inequitable access to swimming lessons and water safety education have become abundantly clear. A 2017 report commissioned by USA swimming found that in families with an annual household income below \$50,000, 79 percent of children have little or no swimming ability. In swimming pools across the United States, Black children ages 10 to 14 are 7.6 times more likely to drown than white children of the same age. The Boston Herald reported that in 2020, there were 125 drowning deaths in Massachusetts, which was a significant increase from prior years. We are on pace to beat that number this year, which should be viewed as an urgent public health threat in the Commonwealth. Far too many of these heartbreaking cases involve young people recreating in the water.

These statistics follow a deep pattern in our national history of dissuading and preventing Black people from learning to swim and having access to pools and beaches. As "The Sum of Us" author Heather McGhee wrote: "In the 1950s and 1960s, white officials in communities across the country opted to drain their public swimming pools rather than integrate them. Generations later, America still hasn't recognized that racism has a cost for everyone. But our future can look different."

The future can look different. We know from the American Red Cross that swimming lessons reduce the risk of drowning by 88 percent. That indicates many drownings could be prevented if we scale up interventions to meet young people in their neighborhoods and at school.

To meet this moment through our Swim Safely Partnership, beginning Nov. 1, the mayor's Joy Agenda and Blue Cross Blue Shield of MA are jointly funding a new initiative that will offer free YMCA swim lessons for children and adults, free lifeguard training to expand the workforce, and develop plans for a pilot program that offers free swimming lessons for Boston Public Schools students. Additional partners who have joined this important initiative include the Boston Triathlon, which will develop more youth competition in the city and expose young athletes to the sport of swimming, and the Boston Harbor Women of Color Coalition, which will lead community conversations around cultural barriers to swim safety.

Our goal is to train at least 300 students and adults to swim, and hire and train 60 young people as new lifeguards at YMCA locations in Roxbury, Dorchester and Hyde Park before summer 2022. In addition, there are efforts underway to add swimming lessons to the Boston Public Schools curriculum for third-grade students in the coming years. Participants will also have access to culturally competent equipment, including Soul Caps, specially designed swim caps for people with natural hair.

Far too many young people in Boston have not had the opportunity to fully experience the city's coastline and riverbeds in-person, even among those who have made Boston their home since birth. A recent poll by the Coalition for a Resilient and Inclusive Waterfront (a diverse coalition that includes the YMCA) found that only 38 percent of Boston voters surveyed felt that waterfront activities reflect the racial diversity of the City of Boston.

We are committed to ensuring that all Bostonians, particularly Black and brown communities that have historically been left behind, feel welcome and uninhibited from enjoying all the water has to offer. The waterfront belongs to all of us. The power of the preserved natural environment on a young person's physical and emotional being is incredible, it is renewing and provides tremendous health benefits. Through this new partnership, we aim to turn this most unfortunate trend of drownings through proactive interventions that will save lives and open new opportunities for countless Bostonians in the future.

Kim Janey is Boston's acting mayor. James Morton is the president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Boston and a member of the Coalition for a Resilient and Inclusive Waterfront. For more information about the Swim Safely Partnership, email swim@boston.gov.