



**TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF  
NEW YORK WATER SAFETY COALITION**

**PRESENTED BY**

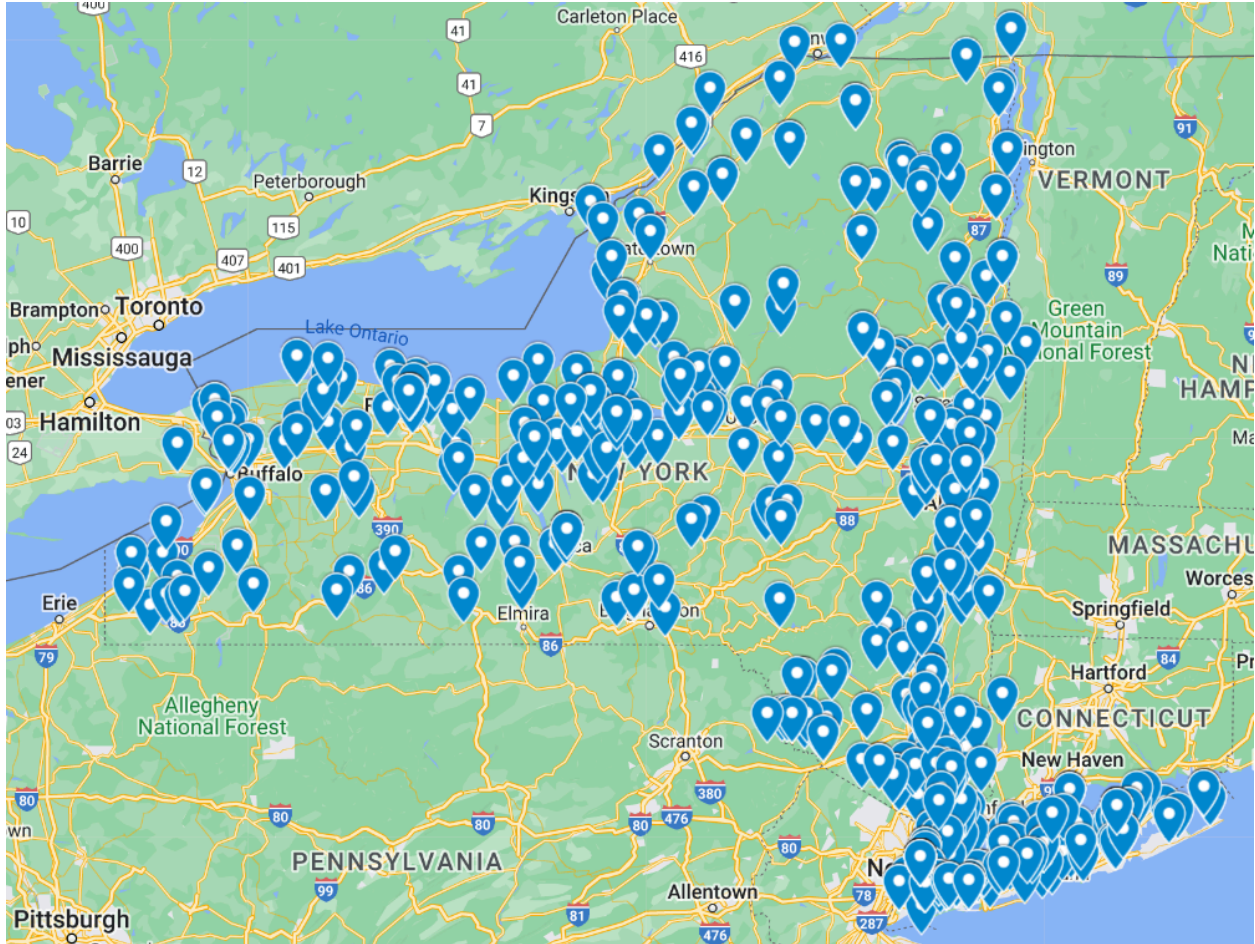
**HEIDI REISS  
AQUA BEBA SWIM**

**TO THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING  
ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION**

**FEBRUARY 7, 2024**

Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and distinguished members of the New York State Legislature. I am Heidi Reiss, owner of Aqua Beba Swim in Brooklyn and a founding member of the New York Water Safety Coalition. In addition, I am Vice Chairman of the New York State Temporary Commission to Prevent Childhood Drowning. I present this testimony today on behalf of the New York Water Safety Coalition, a group of aquatics organizations, swim schools, water safety advocates, and local businesses united around a common mission: to reduce the rates of drowning in New York State. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony to describe our support for the Governor's proposed NY SWIMS initiative and to provide additional steps we can take to reduce drowning.

For those of you following along with my written remarks, I want you to look at the map presented on page two:



This is an unofficial map the New York Water Safety Coalition created by flagging every drowning incident in New York as reported by *Total Aquatic Programming* from 2015 through 2022.<sup>1</sup> As you can see from this startling image, drowning affects us all, geographically, demographically, and socioeconomically. If we removed all borders, roads, and localities from this image, you would still recognize the countless drowning flags as representing a corner-to-corner map of New York State.

According to the CDC, drowning kills approximately 4,000 people across the country annually, with another 8,000 nonfatal drownings each year. Drowning is *the* leading cause of death for children ages 1-4, and the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1H9BQVxEyBRZLaaWoWOvT3ZSTna2icc&usp=sharing>

children ages 5-14 (after motor vehicle crashes). Drowning death rates for Black people are 1.5 times higher than the rates for white people. Disparities are highest among Black children ages 5-9 (rates 2.6 times higher) and ages 10-14 (rates 3.6 times higher). In swimming pools, Black children ages 10-14 years drown at rates 7.6 times higher than White children. Black children and youth are more likely to drown in public pools, and white children and youth are more likely to drown in residential pools. And people with disabilities, special needs, and certain medical conditions are at an even higher risk of drowning.<sup>2</sup>

Drowning is omnipresent, yet it does not rise to the public consciousness as the crisis that it is. Our mission has been to work with the Governor and the Legislature to address drowning. We have and will continue to work with you all on legislation to elevate awareness, including last year's hospital video law sponsored by Senator Webb and Assemblymember Pheffer Amato<sup>3</sup> and active legislation sponsored by Senator Mannion and Assemblymember Reyes to authorize a DOH public awareness campaign.<sup>4</sup> Today, the New York Water Safety Coalition applauds the Governor for shining a spotlight on this issue with the proposed NY SWIMS initiative in her Executive Budget.

We support the Governor's investments towards swim access, instruction, and safety. In her budget, \$150 million in capital funding will be dedicated to construct, renovate, or install new swimming facilities in underserved communities. Given the importance of safe supervision, another \$5 million will be available for the reimbursement of expenses related to lifeguards and other operating costs. As access to the water is dangerous without sufficient skills, another \$2 million will be allocated through SUNY towards learn-to-swim courses and lifeguard training. Finally, the Governor's budget opens up the \$3 million "Connect Kids" transportation program

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<sup>2</sup> CDC Drowning Statistics: <https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/facts/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 588 of the Laws of 2023

<sup>4</sup> S.5815-A/A.6205-A

to include the transportation costs to swim instruction at certain facilities. This package is a great beginning, and we hope you support the Governor's NY SWIMS initiative. However, we also urge you to expand the "Connect Kids" transportation allocation to incorporate transportation to all venues that provide formal swim instruction, including private operators.

I will use my remaining time to discuss next steps. First, the state needs to continue raising public awareness of the risks of drowning, as we did with the hospital video bill and as we seek to do with the public awareness campaign legislation. We need to work with schools, healthcare providers, and others to ensure that parents understand the risks of drowning and that children are taught "dry land" water safety. A simple video in the maternity ward or a classroom assembly could make the difference between life and death, and we need as many of these "touch points" as possible until water safety is an inherent part of our culture.

Second, we need an "all hands on deck" approach to formal swim instruction. Formal lessons are associated with a drastic 88% reduction in the risk of drowning in children ages 1-4. There are resources out there spanning the full spectrum: public facilities, local and national non-profits, private operators, and private philanthropy. We need a real public-private partnership that can maximize the amount of available instruction while also filling those slots. And there are existing resources out there, such as the "Every Child a Swimmer" database<sup>5</sup>, that can be built out to locate available swim instruction in our local areas.

Finally, we need to ensure that children and adults alike have access to swim instruction regardless of their socioeconomic status. We need to ensure that all families have the means to afford swim instruction, and that even children in "swim deserts" can travel to swim lessons.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://everychildaswimmer.org/find-a-lesson/>

Likewise, we plan to work with Senator Ramos and Assemblymember Otis, who introduced the original legislation to provide transportation subsidy for swim instruction.<sup>6</sup>

These are just a few of the many ways in which we can reduce drowning. So much is at stake, and we must all work together because each of us – whether we are public, private, or non-profit – is part of the solution. I thank the members of the Committee for your consideration and support, and I look forward to answering any questions the panel may have.

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<sup>6</sup> S.6104