



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

PRESENTED BY

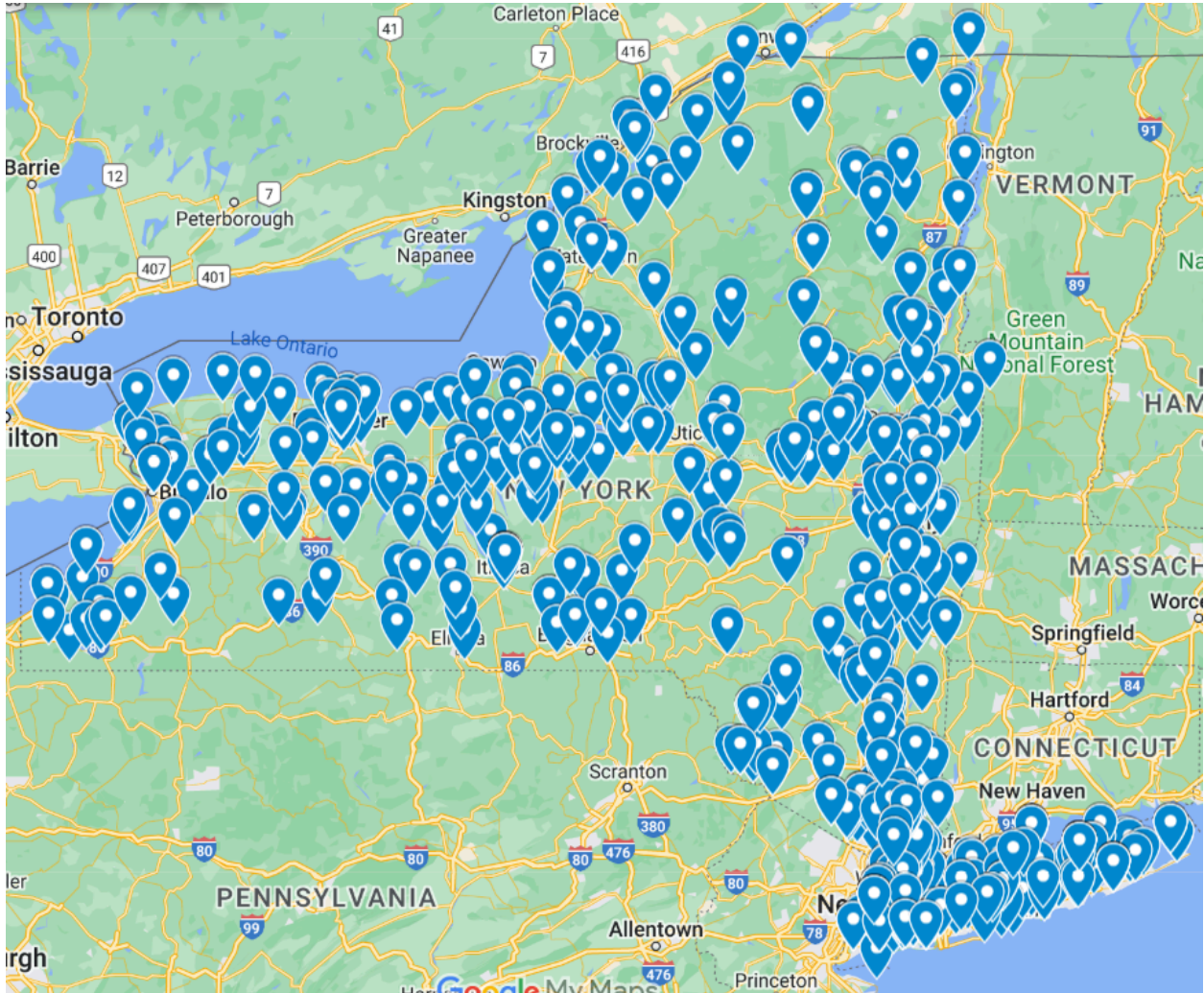
JIM “SWIMJIM” SPIERS

**TO THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING
ON HEALTH/MEDICAID**

FEBRUARY 11, 2025

Chairwoman Krueger, Chairman Pretlow, and distinguished members of the New York State Legislature. I am Jim Spiers, CEO of SwimJim, President of Stop Drowning Now, and an Executive Founding Member of the New York Water Safety Coalition. I present this testimony on behalf of the New York Water Safety Coalition, a group of aquatics organizations, private swim schools, and water safety advocates 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 budget initiatives 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 a 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 2024.¹ Each one of these pins represents a drowning, and as you can see from this startling image, drowning affects us all, geographically, demographically, and socioeconomically. If we removed all borders, highways, and cities from this image, you would still recognize the countless pins as a map of New York State. According to the CDC:

- drowning kills approximately 4,000 people in the U.S. annually.
- Another 8,000 nonfatal drownings occur each year.

¹ <https://sites.google.com/view/nywsc/resources>

- Drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1-4.
- It is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children ages 5-14 (after motor vehicle crashes).
- Drowning death rates for Black people under age 30 are 1.5 times higher than for white people, and disparities are highest among Black children:
 - Ages 5-9: 2.6 times higher drowning rate than white children.
 - Ages 10-14: 3.6 times higher drowning rate than white children.
 - In swimming pools, the drowning rate for Black children ages 10-14 is 7.6 times higher than for white children.
 - Black children and youth are more likely to drown in public pools while white children and youth are more likely to drown in residential pools.
- People with disabilities, special needs, and certain medical conditions are at even higher risk of drowning.

Drowning is omnipresent, yet it is not generally acknowledged as the crisis that it is. To challenge this status quo, 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 2023's hospital video law sponsored by Senator Webb and Assemblymember Pheffer Amato², 2024's law sponsored by now-Congressman Mannion and Assemblymember Reyes to authorize a DOH public awareness campaign³, and active legislation sponsored by Assemblymember Bichotte Hermelyn and Senator Cleare which would require schools to provide information on local options for age-appropriate swim instruction to parents

² Chapter 588 of the Laws of 2023

³ Chapter 294 of the Laws of 2024

enrolling their children.⁴ Today, the New York Water Safety Coalition applauds the Governor for continuing to shine a spotlight on this issue with the proposed initiatives in her Executive Budget.

We support the Governor's investments towards swim access, instruction, and safety. In her budget, the Governor proposes \$5 million to create a new voucher program to provide tens of thousands of free swim lessons for children under the age of four. In addition, \$50 million in capital funding will be dedicated towards a second round of NY SWIMS grant money to construct, renovate, or install new swimming facilities in underserved communities. The Governor's budget also increases funding to the "Connect Kids" transportation program, which funds transportation to swim instruction at state, municipal, and non-for-profit facilities, to \$3.5 million.

These are important investments that will save lives. To this end, we need an "all hands on deck" approach to formal swim instruction to ensure that children have access to swim instruction regardless of their socioeconomic status. Formal lessons are associated with a drastic 88% reduction in the risk of drowning in children ages one through four. **No other intervention or measure is as effective at drowning prevention as formal swim lessons that result in swimming abilities.** There are resources out there spanning the full spectrum: public facilities, local and national non-profits, private operators, and private philanthropy. And there are existing resources out there, such as the "Every Child a Swimmer" database⁵, that can be built out to locate available swim instruction in our local areas.

The Governor's proposed voucher program has the potential to be a great tool to reduce drowning. By reducing the cost of lessons for families, it makes swim instruction more

⁴ S.1349 Cleare/A.3515 Bichotte

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

accessible. To this end, the NYWSC **strongly urges** the legislature to expand this proposed program to cover all providers – whether we are public, private, or non-profit – in a real public-private partnership that maximizes opportunities for kids to receive swim lessons. So much is at stake, and we must all work together because each of us 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.