

Special Report

# Lifeguard Hiring Special Request

March 2023



The City's Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) operates and maintains 34 pools. To staff these facilities, they must hire hundreds of lifeguards every summer. PARC calculates they need about 860 lifeguards to staff all pools. In 2022, over 1,000 people applied to be lifeguards, PARC hired about 422, and over 200 lifeguards returned from earlier seasons.

Lifeguard hiring is a complex process with many steps. PARC manages this process with support from the City's corporate Human Resources Department. PARC hired all applicants who successfully completed all required hiring steps. On average, it took about 52 days from the time a candidate applied to the date that they could start working.

We found that 95% of lifeguard applicants received notices that they were not selected for the position. These notices were not usually an accurate reflection of the applicant's status. For example, 93% of the 422 lifeguards eventually hired by PARC received an inaccurate notice of non-selection.

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Cover: Barton Springs Pool, City of Austin Flickr.

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# Objective

The objective of this special request was to answer the following questions from City Council about the lifeguard hiring process in 2022:

1. How many total lifeguard positions were available for the 2022 season?
2. How many people applied to be lifeguards?
3. Please indicate by month when these applications were submitted.
4. How many applicants made it through the screening process? Of these, how many received offers, and of those, how many accepted?
5. What was the average length of time for review from the date of application submittal to the offer and start dates?
6. Were applicants who did not make it through the screening process notified of this decision, and if so, when?
7. What were the primary reasons that applicants were disqualified from consideration?
8. How many of the initial vacancies were still vacant at the end of the pool season?
9. Is there data for how many individuals began applications but either did not submit or submitted incomplete applications?
10. Is the lifeguard application the same application for all City job postings?
11. Which parts of these processes occurred through the Parks and Recreation Department versus through corporate Human Resources?

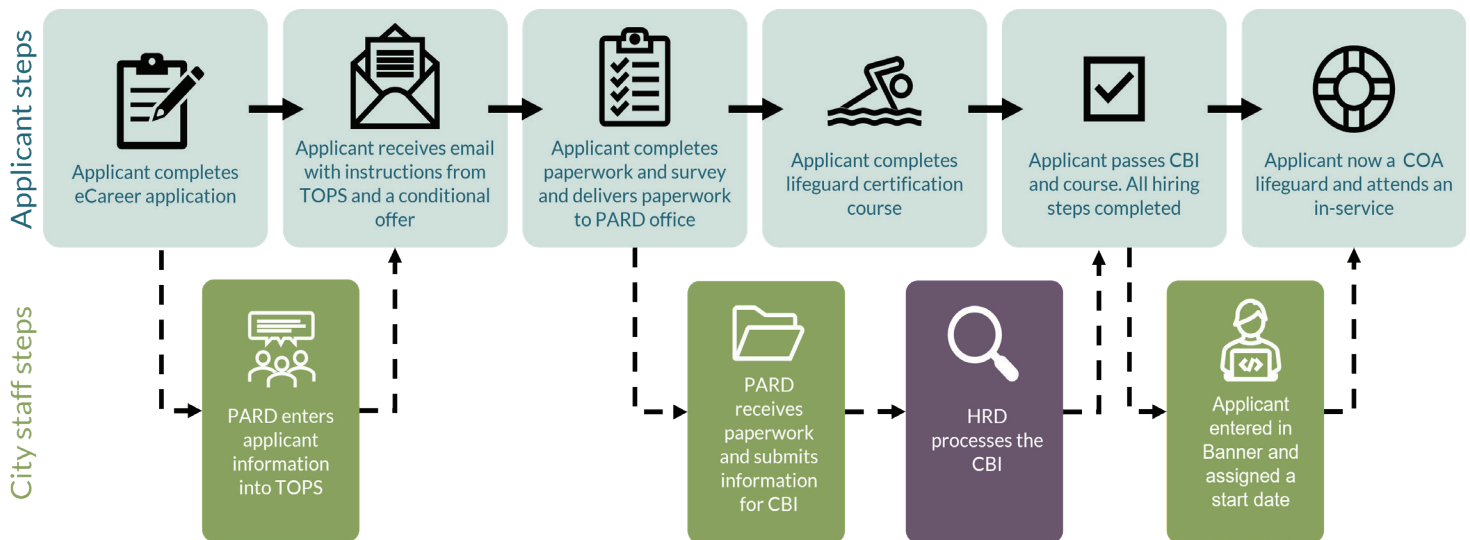
# Background

The City of Austin’s Parks and Recreation Department (PAR) is responsible for hiring lifeguards each year to staff 34 pools located throughout the city. To fully staff all aquatics facilities for the summer season, PAR needs about 860 lifeguards. PAR estimates that about 200 lifeguards usually return from prior seasons, meaning each spring PAR must recruit and on-board more than 600 new lifeguards. In previous years, PAR has limited the hours or not opened some pools due to lifeguard staffing shortages.

Seasonal pools are opened by the first weekend in June and begin closing in August, with some pools remaining open through Labor Day. The City employs some lifeguards year-round, but most only work during the summer months. Lifeguard hiring is a continuous process throughout the year, but PAR ramps up hiring efforts for the summer season in November of the prior year. To try to incentivize people to apply, PAR has raised the lifeguard wage and used bonuses.

Although the City’s corporate Human Resources Department (HRD) helps with the process, PAR’s Human Resources and the Aquatics divisions complete most of the tasks associated with recruiting, reviewing applications, and onboarding lifeguards.

**Exhibit 1: Lifeguard Hiring Process**



Source: Auditor analysis of interviews with PAR and HRD staff, January 2023

Prospective lifeguards apply via the City’s public job board, called “eCareer.” The application can be found at <https://www.austincityjobs.org/>. The application includes questions on work history, demographics, and contact information and is the same application as all other City job postings. PAR human resources staff download the names and information of each applicant from this portal daily. PAR staff then manually input applicant information into a system called TOPS (Temporary On/Off-boarding Process Simplified). PAR’s human resources staff developed and implemented this system in the spring of 2022. Once an applicant is

entered into TOPS, the system sends the applicant an automatic email informing them of next steps in the hiring process.

The email from TOPS provides a link to an online form that collects additional information from the applicant. At the end of this form is a conditional offer of employment. The email also explains what documents are needed to move forward with hiring, such as tax and employment paperwork, direct deposit authorization, and a criminal background investigation (CBI) authorization. The applicant must complete these documents on paper and bring them to the PARD offices. The applicant must also bring a form of identification and a social security card.

Once the applicant completes their paperwork, they may sign up for the lifeguard certification course. These courses are offered weekly from November to August and take four days to complete. During the course, applicants must complete assignments and pass skills tests to acquire the certification. They are also informally evaluated on their professionalism during this time. If they fail the course, PARD offers to let them take it again or they are offered a different position within the department that does not require lifeguard certification such as cashier or summer camp staff.

While the applicant completes the lifeguard certification course, PARD employees submit the applicant's criminal background paperwork to the City's corporate Human Resources Department (HRD). The criminal background process can take between a few days to several weeks.

Once the applicant has completed all the paperwork and certifications, they are considered "ready to work." At this point, they can be given a start date which is based on the City-wide new employee start dates set by HRD.

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# What We Learned

## Summary

We found that 1,120 people applied to be lifeguards in 2022. For the summer season, PARD hired about 422 lifeguards and had over 200 lifeguards return from prior seasons

Lifeguard candidates apply via the City job portal, eCareer. Once their application is received, the applicant automatically receives a conditional offer and instructions for next steps. If all steps are successfully completed and they pass the lifeguard certification course, the candidate is hired. The hiring process can take days to months, depending on various individual factors and involves numerous steps on the part of the applicant, the PARD Aquatics division, PARD's human resources staff, and the City's corporate Human Resources Department (HRD). On average in 2022, there were about 52 days between lifeguard's application date and start date.

During our review, we found that 95% of lifeguard applicants received notices that they were not selected for the position. These notices were not always an accurate reflection of the applicant's status. For example, 93% of the 422 lifeguards hired by PARD received an inaccurate notice of non-selection. PARD and the City's corporate Human Resources Department (HRD) keep information on applicants and future employees across several systems that do not always communicate with each other. We found some inconsistencies when tracking applicants across these systems.

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## Question 1:

How many total lifeguard positions were available for the 2022 season?

PARD needs about 860 lifeguards to staff all City pools during the summer. This includes the positions of Lifeguard 1-3, Swim Instructor, Manager, and Open Water Lifeguard. It also assumes that each employee works at least three shifts per week. In 2022, they had 224 returning lifeguards. These were lifeguards who had worked for the City in a prior summer season and informed the Aquatics division that they intended to work for the 2022 summer. PARD needed to hire approximately an additional 636 lifeguards to fully staff every pool for the summer.

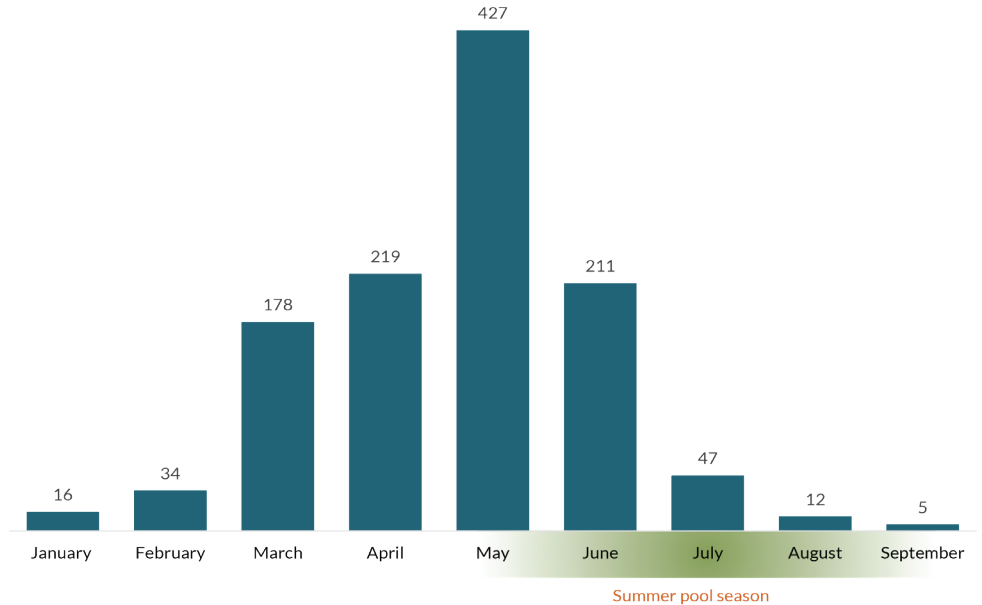
In general, we found that there was no firm target for exactly how many lifeguards PARD needed to hire due to the inconsistency of scheduling and retention throughout the summer. PARD explained that scheduling lifeguards for shifts can be challenging and sporadic because many lifeguards are in school. Many lifeguards work less than three shifts per week or are unavailable for large parts of the summer. PARD reported some instances in which an applicant completed the entire hiring process but chose to never work a shift. We found that as much as 10% of lifeguards hired in 2022 never worked any hours.

## Question 2 & 3:

How many people applied to be lifeguards? Please indicate by month when these applications were submitted.

We found that 1,149 applications were submitted via the City job portal (eCareer). However, some individuals applied more than once. In total, 1,120 individual people applied between November 2021 and September 2022. PARD received no applications in November and December 2021 and the most applications in April and May 2022.

**Exhibit 2: Lifeguard applications submitted per month in 2022**



Source: Auditor analysis of HRD eCareer data, December 2022

## Question 4:

How many applicants made it through the screening process? Of these, how many received offers, and of those, how many accepted?

PARD extends conditional offers to applicants before the applicant moves through the screening process. For PARD, the screening process is completing all required hiring paperwork and passing the lifeguard certification course. The City job portal (eCareer) automatically disqualifies a small number of applicants for not meeting minimum application requirements such as age. Every applicant that is not automatically disqualified is moved forward in the hiring process. PARD hires applicants if they complete all required hiring paperwork, pass a criminal background investigation, and pass the lifeguard certification course.

When someone applies through the City job portal, PARD employees download the application and manually enter the applicant's information into PARD's internal system for tracking temporary employees, called TOPS. TOPS then automatically sends an email with next steps and asks the applicant to complete an online form to collect additional demographic information and work location preferences. At the end of the form is a conditional offer of employment. Anyone who is entered into TOPS and receives the email is issued a conditional offer of employment.

We found 1,100 people received an email from the TOPS system with the instructions and the conditional offer of employment. However, 62% of people who received the conditional offer of employment did not complete the hiring steps and were not hired. About 422 people completed all steps

in the hiring process and were officially hired. Ultimately, about 376 people worked at least 1 hour during the summer. This means about 13% of hired lifeguards never actually worked any hours.

We found that 52 applicants who submitted an application on the City job portal (eCareer) were never entered into the TOPS system and never received the conditional offer of employment or instructions for next steps. These 52 candidates were never hired. From the data provided, we cannot be certain why these people were not hired, but if they weren't entered into the TOPS system, they may not have received any follow-up communication on how to continue with the hiring process. PARD employees said that these applicants may not have been entered because they were disqualified by a PARD employee before entering them into TOPS, the applicant may have applied before PARD implemented TOPS, or they were not entered possibly due to manual data entry errors.

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## Question 5:

What was the average length of time for review from the date of application submittal to the offer and start dates?

The average length of time between when someone applied and when they received an email from PARD with a conditional offer and next steps was approximately 4 days.

The average length of time between when an applicant received a conditional offer to the applicant's start date was about 48 days. On average, it took about 52 days from the time someone applied to their start date. We found some outliers in these timeframes. It took one applicant more than 120 days to begin working after applying.

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## Question 6:

Were applicants who did not make it through the screening process notified of this decision, and if so, when?

PARD employees said that they notify applicants who are disqualified due to failing to complete the lifeguard certification course, failing the criminal background investigation, or having incomplete paperwork via email or phone.

However, we found that most applicants received a generic notice from the City job portal (eCareer) that they were not selected for a lifeguard position. Of the 1,149 lifeguard applications received, 1,095 (or 95%) automatically received an email from the City job portal notifying them that they had not been selected. These notices were not always an accurate reflection of the applicant's status. Applicants could have been in various stages of the hiring process when they received this email. For example, 393 (or 93%) of the 422 lifeguards eventually hired by PARD received an inaccurate notice of non-selection. According to HRD, City job portal postings cannot be left open for more than 45 days. Last year, HRD made an exception for lifeguard hiring to allow postings to stay open for as many as 90 days. Since PARD is actively hiring from November through August, this still means the lifeguard position is opened and closed multiple times per year. When PARD changes the status of the posting to "top candidate selected," any applicant not designated as a "top candidate" in the City job system is automatically sent the non-selection email. The process for changing applicants' statuses in the City job portal is manual. PARD

reported that they did not have the staffing capacity to update the status of all applicants moving forward in the process to “top candidate.”

PARD hiring managers give applicants a warning that they may get this email, and PARD hiring managers will field questions about it as necessary. Applicants are told that they should disregard the notice if they are already in the process of being hired.

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## Question 7:

What were the primary reasons that applicants were disqualified from consideration?

PARD disqualified applicants from consideration if they failed to provide the required paperwork and identification, did not pass a criminal background investigation, or failed to complete the lifeguard certification course. An applicant may have also been disqualified if they displayed unprofessional behavior during the certification course. If the applicant did not successfully pass the lifeguard certification course, PARD routed some into alternate positions like Cashier or gave them opportunity to take the course again.

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## Question 8:

How many of the initial vacancies were still vacant at the end of the pool season?

There were about 214 open lifeguard positions at the end of the 2022 summer season. Of the 860 total lifeguards needed to fully staff all pools, 646 lifeguards were working at the end of the summer 2022 season.

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## Question 9:

Is there data for how many individuals began applications but either did not submit or submitted incomplete applications?

The City job portal (eCareer) keeps a record of incomplete applications, but it does not distinguish between incomplete applications that were unsubmitted and applications that were submitted but incomplete. There were 420 incomplete applications.

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## Question 10:

Is the lifeguard application the same application for all City job postings?

Yes. Anyone interested in being a lifeguard applies for the position on the eCareer site, which is the City’s public job board. The lifeguard application can be found at <https://www.austincityjobs.org/>.

The lifeguard application is the same basic application all potential City employees complete. PARD employees described this application as cumbersome and overwhelming for applicants who are most often teenagers. Younger applicants may not know essential information like social security numbers and likely do not have work histories to report.

Once the applicant applies through the City job portal, they are manually entered into the TOPS system which automatically sends an email with next steps to complete the hiring process. This email contains a link to an online form that must be completed. This form collects demographic information



on the applicant, preferences on work locations, and additional information like how the applicant heard about the position.

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## Question 11:

Which parts of these processes occurred through the Parks and Recreation Department versus corporate Human Resources?

The PARD Aquatics and PARD Human Resources divisions are primarily responsible for the lifeguard hiring process. PARD employees coordinate recruitment efforts, manage the job posting, communicate with applicants, and collect and process the necessary paperwork. The City's corporate Human Resources Department (HRD) reviews and ensures the quality of the job posting on the City job portal (eCareer) and processes the criminal background investigations.

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## Additional Observation

We identified some issues with data reliability. Three different systems are used to collect applicant and employee data: the City job portal (eCareer), PARD's internal system to manage temporary employees (TOPS), and the City's payroll system (Banner). Each system collects different data at different points in the hiring and onboarding process and do not interact with each other automatically. We were able to track most applicants across all three systems, but we found a few cases where applicant data was missing from one or more systems. For example, some applicants could be found in the City job portal data and not in the TOPS data, or were in the list of hired lifeguards, but not in the original list of applicants. PARD staff said that possible reasons for these data management errors could be due to the volume of applications, errors on the part of applicants or PARD staff, or process errors.

Challenges or inconsistencies could also be due to TOPS being a relatively new system. It was created in the Spring of 2022 by PARD Human Resources to manage the volume of applications and processes necessary to hire this number of temporary employees. Prior to TOPS, the entire process was managed via emails and physical paperwork.

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## Why We Did This Report

This report responds to a request sponsored by former Council member Kathie Tovo and co-sponsored by Council member Leslie Pool. The request aimed to understand the hiring process for lifeguards.

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## Scope

This project included lifeguard hiring processes that occurred from November 2021 - September 2022, including all lifeguard applications submitted during this period.

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## Methodology

To complete this special request, we performed the following steps:

- interviewed Human Resources Department (HRD) and Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) staff
- reviewed policies, procedures, application materials, and other documentation related to lifeguard hiring
- analyzed lifeguard application data from the Human Resources Department's eCareer system (the City job portal)
- analyzed lifeguard hiring data from the Parks and Recreation Department's Temporary On/Off-boarding Process Simplified (TOPS) system
- analyzed lifeguard employee data from Banner, the City's payroll system

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## Project Type

Special request projects conducted by the Office of the City Auditor are considered non-audit projects under Government Auditing Standards and are conducted in accordance with the ethics and general standards.

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. Special requests are designed to answer specific questions to assist Council in decision-making. We do not draw conclusions or make recommendations in these reports.

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