



Ministerial Statement
by
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Minister of Public Works

Lifeguard Protection on Public Beaches

Friday, May 17th, 2024

Mr. Speaker, Bermuda Day is next week Friday and as all in this Honourable House know - the festivities are the unofficial start of the summer season. Vacations, Family Reunions, Picnics and Beach days all begin after next Friday for locals.

But, the vacation season starts sooner for some...mainly tourists who arrive to our shores in March and April. They travel by both air and sea.

Recently, attention has been given to the lifeguard coverage at our beaches because of the tragic event in April of this year where a man lost his life in an effort to save a drowning girl on Horseshoe Bay. **Mr. Speaker**, might I take a moment to pause in honour Mr. Hyon Duk Shin who paid the ultimate sacrifice, while helping to successfully rescue a young person. His actions should be considered heroic. While there are no words to ease his family's immeasurable loss, his actions demonstrate the willingness of one human being helping another in times of crisis.

Mr. Speaker, The Lifeguard Service – under the remit of the Department of Parks – continues to face significant challenges in maintaining adequate beach coverage due to staffing shortages.

Mr. Speaker, I invite honourable colleagues to recall during this year's Budget debate where I asserted that and I quote –

“Mr. Chairman, as the Government is expecting continued high visitation – especially in cruise line calls – and the expansion of the season into November, the Department anticipates an increased influx of visitors to the beaches and, commensurately, an increased need for lifeguard services. The budget allocation of seven hundred and two thousand dollars (\$702,000) for 2024/2025 takes this into consideration and is in line with the 2023/2024 budget primarily to meet the staffing demands of the season.”

In actuality, **Mr. Speaker** for the 2023/24 fiscal year, this Government increased the budget allocation for lifeguards by two hundred and forty-six thousand dollar (\$246,000) from the

year prior to meet the peak season demands. Then this fiscal year, the Government matched the same amount. **Mr. Speaker** while it is acknowledged that the Lifeguard Service is experiencing shortages, the issues are fundamentally deeper than just financial figures – it is about attracting personnel.

Mr. Speaker, in 2009 and 2010 the Lifeguard Service had **37 and 36 trained lifeguards** respectively. Some Bermudian, some non-Bermudian – which is normal for this specialised service as I am sure all can agree that we need to ensure that lifeguards are trained and experienced enough to undertake the vital task of saving the lives of beach patrons.

Fast forward to the year 2022, the Department of Parks received only 28 applications, 10 of which were withdrawn subsequently leaving a total of **18 trained lifeguards**.

In 2023, again the Department received only 28 applications of which **21** were approved as trained lifeguards.

This year, again only 28 applications have been received so far, with a total of **8 persons** being approved and currently serving as lifeguards (3 full-time, 5 reserve).

Some may ponder as to why there is a stagnation in application numbers, well there are a plethora of reasons similar to any other Public Officer post – including the length of time of the hiring process; the length of time for work permit approvals and of course compensation levels.

Mr. Speaker, despite having to pass an initial 9-day intense training course, pass monthly physical assessments and pass annual 24 hour training courses, our starting Lifeguards currently take home 18% (\$197.26) less weekly than the lowest paid worker within the Department of Parks.

Mr. Speaker, Senior Lifeguards – those who are accountable for facilitating junior staff with developing newly acquired skills in lifesaving and maintaining a safe environment for both beach patrons and staff. This position takes home 15% (\$193.20) less weekly than the lowest paid Foreman at the Department of Parks, these first line managers still take home less weekly than the lowest paid worker with the Department of Parks.

Mr. Speaker, yes in fact the Government increased the budget to hire more staff and to take into consideration for the expanded cruise ship season, it is not enough to attract interested persons to either leave their current lifeguarding employment or begin the process of becoming a new lifeguard.

Just for edification purposes, we are not the only jurisdiction experiencing these issues with attracting lifeguards. In the United States alone places like New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Los Angeles all share this similar situation.

Mr. Speaker as I have said previously, the Department has 8 persons currently serving as lifeguards (3 full time and 5 part time) and hopes to have an additional 5 new full-time Seasonal Lifeguards on the beaches by 15th June – assuming that all of the remaining 17 applicants pass their respective assessments.

However, **Mr. Speaker**, what is the Government doing now to alleviate the current situation?

Currently, the Department of Parks is advertising again in hopes of bringing to attention open positions for those potential Lifeguards that may have missed the opportunity initially. Also, continue to research for more aggressive advertising methods to attract local talent. In the interim, the Department has begun the process to increase the number of water safety signage at our National Parks including drafting designs for updated water signage that is intended to be more eye-catching.

At the Ministry level, efforts are being undertaken to raise the wages for lifeguards. While this may be unpopular to increase the cost to the Government, this needs to be done to ensure we are attracting talent, **Mr. Speaker**.

Exploring Increasing the starting pay

- At the very least, consider matching the lowest paid worker (heavy labourer) for our starting Lifeguard wages.
- Consider starting Senior Lifeguard pay at lowest Foreman rate equivalent.
- Reinstigate Training Bonuses/Incentives
 - Currently, new recruits do not get paid for their 9-day (72hours) training session. Reinstigate with more parameters (I.e. training bonus for those that complete a minimum of 3 months of service. This could mean Lifeguards having to return for a second year in order to qualify and obtain the monetary incentive.
- Consider Fast Tracking of Work Permits

The Department of Parks' Lifeguard Service annually applies for short term work permits. Decreasing time barriers and/or Department of Immigration requirements for receiving approved short term work permits may lead to faster recruitment and ultimately getting Lifeguards on the beaches faster

Mr. Speaker the Ministry and the Department of Parks is committed to strengthening and expanding the Life Guard service to better mirror the cruise ship season. This will ensure that sufficient lifeguard coverage is provided for the most used beaches this summer and beyond and that the health and safety of patrons is a priority.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker**.