

## STARTING POINT NEWSLETTER

# Saving lives, one swim lesson at a time

City and state initiatives offer free lessons and safety tips for at-risk kids and adults

By **Ian Prasad Philbrick** Globe Staff, Updated September 2, 2025, 6:23 a.m.



Inyanna Adams, left, and Carter Dedier instructed 4- to 6-year-olds from the New Beginnings Academy during a swim lesson at the Menino YMCA in Hyde Park. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

*Good morning. Today we're exploring how Boston and Massachusetts are working to reduce accidental drownings, including by helping kids learn to swim.*

*But first, here's what else is going on:*

Union workers *protested President Trump's policies* during Boston's Labor Day parade alongside Mayor Michelle Wu, Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey, and the state's US senators. Some *held signs proclaiming "Workers Over Billionaires,"* part of hundreds of protests nationwide yesterday.

A Trump administration lawyer who argued in court that Harvard is indifferent to antisemitism wrote a paper while an undergraduate there *from the perspective of Adolf Hitler*. And Harvard students returning to campus praised the university *for rebuffing Trump's pressure*.

Fears of ICE raids *are a recurring topic in immigrant households* as Massachusetts students go back to school.

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## TODAY'S STARTING POINT

At the Thomas M. Menino YMCA in Hyde Park last Thursday, 10 preschoolers clad in colorful bathing suits and toting foam noodles practiced a skill that could one day save their life: They went for a swim.

The students, whose teacher had shepherded them down the street from New Beginnings Academy, were there as part of an eight-week course subsidized by a city program called [Swim Safe Boston](#). It's an effort to keep kids safe in pools and reduce accidental drownings. During the half-hour lesson, two instructors wearing blue YMCA shirts waded in the shallow end and took kids out from the wall, keeping them above water as they learned to glide, paddle, and kick.

Swim Safe Boston started awarding grants to support free swim lessons a few years ago. This summer, those grants helped the Menino Y teach 210 kids, according to Jessica

Colón, its executive director. Over the program's lifetime, the city says, it has helped more than 10,600 get lessons — many of whom might not otherwise have had the chance.

“For most of the kiddos that we get signed up, it's their first actual swim lesson,” Colón said. “Some of them, it's their first time in a pool.”

## Lowering barriers

Nationwide, drowning is the leading cause of death among children under 4 and the No. 2 cause for those aged 5 to 14, [according to the CDC](#). In Massachusetts, nine children and 48 adults [drowned in 2022](#), the last year for which complete data is available. This year, children have drowned in [a backyard pool in Brockton](#), at a [Framingham beach](#), and in multiple ponds in the state — tragic accidents that might have been avoided.

For reasons that go back decades, Bostonians of color are at particular risk. During segregation, nonwhite residents were effectively blocked from accessing public pools and beaches. “There's been instances of intentional gatekeeping,” said José Massó, the city official who oversees Swim Safe Boston. As a result, successive generations have missed out on what Massó called “a life skill that everybody should have.”

For other families, money is the bigger problem. City-subsidized lessons — to the tune of about \$900,000 in grants so far, according to Massó — help. Other Swim Safe grantees include the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston and Dorchester and various nonprofit and cultural organizations. Boston Centers for Youth and Families facilities also offer free lessons.

## A year-round solution

Most drownings in Massachusetts happen during the summer, when families flock to pools, lakes, and beaches. And while program signups spike during the warmer months, Swim Safe Boston supports lessons year round; it plans to open new grant applications



later this month. It's impossible to know how many drownings the program has prevented, but annual enrollment keeps rising. The program has also supported adult swim lessons, certified lifeguards, and prioritized pool maintenance.

Communities of color aren't the only ones at elevated risk. In July, Massachusetts launched a water safety public-awareness campaign [for children with autism](#), whose affinity for water and tendency to wander make them more vulnerable than their neurotypical peers. In January, a 6-year-old girl with autism [bolted toward a Norton pond](#) and drowned; an 8-year-old boy [did the same](#) in Clinton in June. So far, the program has distributed 10,000 brochures to family resource centers, autism support centers, and special education offices around the state.



Adams spots Brycen, who paddles to retrieve a rubber ducky he threw into the pool. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

For the preschoolers at the Menino Y last week, the goals varied. Sanai, 6, didn't want to worry about accidentally falling into a pool. One of her classmates enjoys hot tubbing with an auntie and talked about learning to float on her back in a bigger body of water.

And Zanne, 5, had been swimming in Florida and described watching someone perform a cartwheel in a pool — though doing one herself still seemed a little too scary.

The kids' example may also have ripple effects. Rosetta Thompson, who has taught at New Beginnings for 17 years and sat on the pool deck behind her students on Thursday, had a confession to make: "I'm embarrassed. I can't swim." But now she's thinking about learning through the Y's adult swim program. "It's something I should be able to do," she said. "They have inspired me."

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🧩 4 Down: [Fellows](#) | ☀️ 74° [Still dry](#)

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## POINTS OF INTEREST



Longtime Celtics PR executive Jeff Twiss, pictured at the team's Auerbach Center practice facility, will receive an award from the Basketball Hall of Fame. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

**Mayoral race:** The New England Revolution suggested that Mayor Wu's requests for more information amid negotiations over a new soccer stadium near the city [are politically motivated](#). The family of Josh Kraft, Wu's chief rival, owns the team.

**Brandeis crash:** Weeks before a 2022 university shuttle bus crash that killed an undergraduate, a student told campus police that the operator's erratic driving [left the student "fearing for my life."](#)

**New normal?** Downtown Boston foot traffic remains down compared to pre-pandemic. But as companies stick to hybrid return-to-office policies, [this could be as good as it gets](#) for cafes and other businesses that rely on office workers.

**Twisting in the wind:** After the Trump administration canceled another \$670 million for offshore wind farms, Governor Healey and her counterparts in four other coastal states called on it to [let the projects proceed](#).

**Striking on:** The Teamsters' strike against waste management company Republic Services that began just before July 4 shows no sign of stopping even as trash continues to pile up across Greater Boston. Both sides returned to the bargaining table last week, [but left without an agreement.](#)

**Rainer Weiss:** The MIT physics professor won a Nobel Prize for helping create a device that detects gravitational waves, unlocking secrets of the universe. [He died at 92.](#)

**Lifelong fan:** Jeff Twiss, the Celtics' longtime public relations director, started with the team as an intern in 1976 and [has mostly been there ever since.](#) He'll soon receive the Basketball Hall of Fame's John Bunn Award, among its highest honors.

**Rudy Giuliani:** The former New York City mayor left the hospital after a car crash in New Hampshire injured him over the weekend. Trump said he plans to give Giuliani, a longtime ally, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. ([NYT](#) 🎁)

**RFK Jr.:** As Kennedy reshapes America's public health bureaucracy, the big-money group that helped propel his political rise — now called MAHA PAC — is paying social media influencers to [defend his tenure and advance his policy goals.](#)

**Afghanistan earthquake:** Rescuers searched through rubble for survivors after a strong quake on Sunday killed at least 900 people and injured thousands more. ([AP](#))


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## BESIDE THE POINT


By Teresa Hanafin


🍁 **Fall foliage:** It's almost here, folks: That time of year when New Englanders start to follow the color creep as it moves south from Maine to Connecticut. (Wait, is Connecticut still [part of New England?](#)) [We have maps.](#)




 **Sleepytime:** US adults, on average, go to bed at 11:37 p.m. and get just 6 hours and 40 minutes of sleep, according to an Apple Watch study. Those who don't wear smartwatches sleep as long as they want. ([Axios](#))

 **'Grandmother Moon':** A New England author is [preserving Indigenous storytelling](#) in a new children's picture book.

 **King Richard's Faire:** It's back, and in a new location in Carver. Here's a guide to the renaissance fair, its immersive medieval experience, and its 2-pound turkey legs. ([WBUR](#))

 **Miss Conduct Classic:** She wants to learn more about her boyfriend's parents, but doesn't want to appear nosy. Robin's advice: Ask, [but avoid certain topics](#).

 **God and guns:** A bewildering marriage of faith and firearms caused this writer to leave the evangelical Christian church. Now he wonders [when the church will leave guns](#).

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*Thanks for reading Starting Point.*

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