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**2ND ANNUAL CHICAGO RIVER SWIM RETURNS SEPT. 20 FOLLOWING
HISTORIC FIRST YEAR, ESTABLISHING NEW CIVIC TRADITION**

**Presented by the City of Chicago and Mayor Brandon Johnson, the Swim celebrates the
river’s revival while supporting ALS research and youth swim education**

WHAT: Open-water swim through the Chicago River featuring hundreds of qualified swimmers
WHERE: Chicago River Main Stem — Begins at Dearborn St. Bridge, Ends at Clark St. Bridge
WHEN: Sunday, September 20, 2026 | 6:30 AM – 10:00 AM
Additional weekend programming and event details to be announced
WEBSITE: ChicagoRiverSwim.org

CHICAGO, IL — The Chicago River Swim presented by the City of Chicago and Mayor Brandon Johnson will return for its second annual event on Sunday, September 20, 2026, bringing swimmers back to the heart of downtown Chicago for another landmark civic moment.

The inaugural Swim in 2025 marked a historic milestone as the first organized open water swim in the Chicago River in 98 years, demonstrating that the river can safely support large-scale recreational use while serving as a platform for environmental stewardship, public health, and philanthropy. The event is the result of more than a decade of persistence led by founder Doug McConnell, working in partnership with City leaders, scientists, and environmental organizations to make the return of swimming to the river possible.

The City of Chicago and Mayor Brandon Johnson are serving as Presenting Partner, reflecting the City’s leadership in restoring the river and expanding safe public access to its waterways. Their support enabled an event of this scale to take place in the center of downtown, reinforcing the river’s transformation and establishing the Chicago River Swim as a growing civic tradition.

“The Chicago River Swim reflects my administration’s commitment to restoring and activating the river as a safe and accessible public asset,” said Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson. “This event celebrates decades of environmental progress and demonstrates what is possible when the City partners with community leaders to expand opportunity, promote public health, and bring Chicagoans together around our shared waterways.”

The event is produced by nonprofit A Long Swim and founded by marathon swimmer and ALS advocate Doug McConnell. “Year one proved that this swim could be done safely and responsibly, and that people were ready to embrace the river in a new way,” said McConnell. “The second annual Chicago

River Swim is about building on that momentum. It is deeply meaningful to see this become a lasting tradition that supports ALS research and helps ensure more young people have access to swim education and water safety.”

Beneficiaries

Proceeds from the 2026 Chicago River Swim will support ALS research as well as swim safety and swim education programs for youth in underserved communities.

Through A Long Swim, founder Doug McConnell has helped raise more than \$3 million for ALS research at the Ozdinler Lab of Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine, a cause that remains deeply personal following the loss of his sister and father to the disease.

The event will also support the Chicago Park District’s efforts to expand access to free swim lessons and water safety education for children across the city. Through the Chicago River Swim initiative, more than 4,000 children have already received water safety instruction, helping ensure they gain essential life saving skills.

The Chicago Park District offers a variety of aquatics programs for all ages, from toddlers to older adults. Last year, more than 27,000 residents registered for Learn to Swim and other aquatics programs that promote safety and water confidence. An additional 17,000 children enjoyed water safety instruction as part of day camp programming. The District also offers Lifeguard Explorers, a stipend-based program that provides participants, ages 14 to 19, with supervised instruction and practice to successfully pass the requirements to become a certified lifeguard.

“Learning to swim is about more than recreation, it’s a matter of safety and equity,” said Chicago Park District General Superintendent and CEO Carlos Ramirez-Rosa. “For generations, the Park District has remained committed to making this life skill accessible by providing quality and affordable instruction at park pools across the city. Partnerships like Chicago River Swim help further our efforts to remove financial and other barriers to ensure more young people gain life-saving skills and confidence in the water.”

This water safety education is being delivered in partnership with the USA Swimming Foundation, which shares the goal of expanding equitable access to swim education. Thanks to a generous contribution from the Swim, USA Swimming Foundation will support Chicago Parks and Learn to Swim providers and efforts in Chicago. This initiative will expand Learn to Swim opportunities throughout the city of Chicago, increase access to lifesaving swim instruction, and ensure more children have the opportunity to become safe and confident in the water.

The Swim and Where to Watch

On event day, qualified swimmers will take on one-mile and two-mile courses along the Chicago River’s main channel in downtown Chicago. The course, stretching from Wolf Point to State Street, will be marked by inflatable buoys and safeguarded by lifeguards, kayaks, and support boats. Spectators will be invited to gather along the Riverwalk and designated viewing areas to cheer on swimmers as they complete the course. More on the swim course can be found [here](#).

A Revived River

The Chicago River is now at its cleanest levels on record, supporting almost 80 species of fish and a

growing diversity of wildlife. This transformation reflects decades of environmental progress, including: stronger federal and local regulations, advanced wastewater treatment by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD), the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan to reduce overflows, four+ decades of environmental advocacy and restoration projects led by Friends of the Chicago River and documented by Current's H2NOW Chicago real-time monitoring program, and research and restoration led by the Shedd Aquarium. Together, these partners have helped reclaim the river as a living ecosystem and made it possible for swimmers to safely return for the first time in nearly a century. The City of Chicago's long term environmental leadership, infrastructure investment, and stewardship have played a central role in making the return of open water swimming possible.

"The return of open water swimming in the Chicago River positions Chicago as a world leader in embracing its river as a resilient natural wonder, reflecting decades of investment, innovation, and collective commitment," said Margaret Frisbie, executive director of Friends of the Chicago River. "The fact that people can once again safely enter and enjoy the river demonstrates how far we've come in restoring water quality, strengthening habitat, and recognizing the river as a living ecosystem, teeming with life, at the heart of our city."

More on the history of the river can be found [here](#).

Water Quality and Safety

Water quality will be rigorously monitored through a layered testing approach using data from MWRD and real time analysis conducted by the University of Illinois Chicago. UIC will perform frequent DNA-based testing for microbial pollutants, applying the same recreational water quality criteria used at Chicago's beaches to ensure compliance with the USEPA standards. The Chicago River Swim will take place only if all testing confirms that river conditions meet strict safety requirements for swimming.

On event day, swimmer safety will be the top priority. More than 100 trained personnel will monitor the course from kayaks, paddleboards, and boats, with additional support from autonomous buoys, GPS tracking, and in-water timing systems. Each swimmer will also be equipped with an RFID chip, brightly colored swim caps, and a personal swim buoy for added visibility and protection. The swim course will be fully closed to vessel traffic under the authority of the U.S. Coast Guard, with Riverwalk access managed for both safety and spectator experience. More [here](#).

Registration

Applications for the 2026 Chicago River Swim will open on March 31 and will close on April 27. All applicants will undergo an eligibility review to ensure they meet established safety and experience requirements. Five hundred qualified swimmers will be selected, with participants announced the week of May 4. Additional event details, including the full weekend schedule, safety protocols, and registration information, will be announced in the coming months. More information is available [here](#).

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ABOUT THE CHICAGO RIVER SWIM

The Chicago River Swim is an annual charitable open-water event that brings together swimmers, advocates, civic leaders, environmental partners, and community members to celebrate the Chicago River and its extraordinary transformation. Launched in 2025, the Swim marked a historic moment as the first organized open-water swim in the Chicago River in 98 years. The event celebrates decades of environmental

investment, policy leadership, and community effort that have made the river safe for human contact and renewed public use. Created by A Long Swim, the Chicago River Swim raises critical funds for ALS research and expands access to swim education and water safety for youth in underserved communities, while positioning the Chicago River as a shared civic asset and a symbol of Chicago's environmental progress.

ABOUT A LONG SWIM

A Long Swim is a nonprofit that designs and manages open-water swimming events to raise funds for ALS research. Founded by siblings Doug McConnell and Ellen McConnell Blakeman after their father passed away from ALS, and Ellen was later diagnosed with the disease, the organization has raised more than \$3 million for ALS research at Ozdinler Lab of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. Doug, a world-class marathon swimmer, has conquered some of the most challenging waters in the world, including the English Channel, Manhattan Island, the Catalina Channel, and the Molokai Channel, using his skills to fundraise for the fight against ALS.

ABOUT THE CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

The Chicago Park District is the Gold Medal Award winner, recognized for excellence in park and recreation management across the nation. For more information about the Chicago Park District's more than 8,800 acres of parkland, more than 600 parks, 26 miles of lakefront, 11 museums, two world-class conservatories, 16 historic lagoons, nearly 50 nature areas, thousands of special events, sports and entertaining programs, please visit www.chicagoparkdistrict.com or contact the Chicago Park District at 312/742.PLAY or 312/747.2001 (TTY). Want to share your talent? Volunteer in the parks by calling, 312/742.PLAY.

ABOUT USA SWIMMING FOUNDATION

The USA Swimming Foundation serves as the philanthropic arm of USA Swimming. Established in 2004, the Foundation works to strengthen the sport by *Saving Lives, Building Champions and Impacting Communities*. Whether equipping children and adults with the life-saving skill of learn-to-swim, providing financial support to our heroes on the U.S. National Team, or broadening community access to the sport, the USA Swimming Foundation aims to provide the rewarding experience of swimming to all, regardless of their ability to pay. For more information, visit www.usaswimming.org/foundation.