## Problem Statement: Swim 4 Life program

*From Winning Grants Step by Step*

The need for programs like Swim 4 Life is enormous in the communities we serve. Swimming has not been a popular sport in African American or Latino communities in some measure as a result of various factors including access to safe pools. Historically speaking, African Americans were denied access to public pools. As a result, they turned to water holes, ponds, and other unsupervised alternatives, which led to rates of drowning among people of color that far exceed those of whites. For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s latest report in early 2012, the drowning rate for African Americans between the ages of five and fourteen was more than three times that for whites.

To this day, a deep-seated fear about swimming has discouraged African Americans and, to a lesser yet still significant degree, Latinos in the United States from participating in the activity. A story relayed to us by a previous program participant:

Our family is originally from Louisiana, though many of us moved to Any State after Hurricane Katrina. Those of my family who stayed in Louisiana were having a family picnic a few years ago by a waterway, and not one person at the picnic could swim. A few of the kids were playing at the water’s edge when the land gave way and all fell into the water. Nine of my family members died that day— seven kids and two adults who tried to help them. I promised myself that if I ever got the chance, not only would I learn to swim, but I would become a lifeguard.

According to our most recent survey of current and previous program participants, nearly 75 percent of those surveyed have family members who have drowned or experienced a traumatic water incident and are terrified of drowning themselves.

Arthur Schomburg Middle School, one of the program sites, is located in a part of South Spring that offers children and youth little in the way of public resources and facilities for sports, especially swimming. A county facility, Thurgood Marshall Park, 1.7 miles from the school, has a seasonal swim program, open only during the summer even though the pool is indoor and heated. Rosa Parks and Garfield Recreation Centers, twelve miles from the school, have indoor heated pools that open during the summer but are not accessible to young students after school; they would have to cross major thoroughfares to get there.

Most experts agree that children approaching adolescence are particularly vulnerable to peer influences, and for youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the lack of positive opportunities often puts them at risk for gang affiliation, substance abuse, and/ or low academic performance. A report issued by the Urban Institute in 2011 detailed the risks, obstacles, and positive strategies needed relative to middle school children from low-income families. According to the study, it is a prime time to introduce innovative and challenging youth sports programs— those not typically available in communities of color— as exciting alternatives to unhealthy risk-taking activities. The Swim 4 Life program in King County, Any State, is designed to take advantage of this age group’s interest in experimentation and exploration.

The city of Abington is served by the program site at the Rockmore Education Complex. It is the most densely populated city in the state, with 8,552 people occupying every square mile, compared with an overall average of 2,093 people per square mile in other cities. It has the highest crime rate in the state, and the poverty rate is 46 percent, nearly twice that of South Spring. Fifty-one percent of children under the age of 18 live in poverty, compared with 31 percent in South Spring, and less than 20 percent the rest of the state. Young people in this city— and South Spring— clearly live under stressful conditions and could benefit greatly from structured and supervised physical activity, as well as safe opportunities for fun and positive engagement. And for all of the reasons outlined, we have selected Cooperville Middle School, also located in Abington, to expand our program.

A swim program offers many advantages over other physical activities. Swimming is an excellent form of exercise because all the muscles of the body are used, and it requires a constant supply of oxygen to the muscles, making it a mainly aerobic exercise. It is also a gateway to all aquatic sports and is considered one of the important life-saving skills. Many studies such as the one conducted in 2012 by the Center for Research on Effective School for Disadvantaged Youth at the Johns Hopkins University have drawn a connection between participation in structured athletic programs and academic achievement. Yet today, students in local high schools, particularly in the eleventh and twelfth grades, have so many academic requirements that there is not enough time for physical education, even as an elective.