

Competition for summer camp spots is heating up, despite many uncertainties

By [Andy Rosen](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 9, 2021, 7 minutes ago



Valentina Eckerle participated in the winter camp program at the Hale Reservation in Westwood. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

After nearly a year of living in close quarters, families are snapping up scarce spots at Massachusetts summer camps, anxious for their children to be able to spend time in the fresh air with peers — away from home.

Operators of day and overnight programs say they are doing all they can to restore camp activities that last year were canceled or severely curtailed in an effort to prevent spread of the COVID-19 virus. But the planning comes with a huge asterisk. State public health authorities have not yet released rules for how programs can be run safely — nor have they said whether overnight camps can open at all.

Many camp operators say they have no choice but to move forward as though the season will take place,

hoping to avoid another year of lost revenue.

“The risk here is great,” said Matthew Scholl, president of the Massachusetts Camping Association. Scholl, who also runs the Becket-Chimney Corners YMCA camps in Western Massachusetts, said camps must start preparing now for the upcoming season. He said he has had productive conversations with state public health officials, but camps are still awaiting authoritative information on how many children they’ll be able to accommodate, what the rules will be, and what kinds of programs are acceptable.

The state Department of Public Health did not respond to requests for comment.

Camps in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont are feeling more confident about overnight programs, because those states allowed such programs last year, according to Michele Rowcliffe, executive director of the New England branch of the American Camp Association, an industry accrediting organization. Last year, it took state and federal officials so long to develop safety guidelines that many camp operators decided there wasn’t time to implement them, and remained closed. Massachusetts and Connecticut last year enforced outright bans on overnight camps.

Camp operators say its too soon to guess how the total capacity for campers in Massachusetts will compare with previous years. Some camps and summer programs are waiting for the state to act before opening up registration. Those that are going ahead with sign-ups are keeping their programs small for now, hoping that they can offer additional spaces once they find out about mandated restrictions. That’s made summer camp slots almost as precious as a pre-pandemic ticket to a Taylor Swift concert.

“We had nothing last summer, and we cannot repeat that again this summer,” said Dr. Nicole Christian-Brathwaite, a psychiatrist who lives in Hyde Park and is trying to find a camp for her boys, ages 4 and 6. The best guaranteed options she can find cost the family a total upward of \$8,000 for the season. She is getting used to the idea that she may have to pay more than anticipated, but recognizes that some other families don’t have that option.

“I just worry about the ongoing disparities that kids of color and kids from low income environments are going to experience,” Christian-Brathwaite said. “If it’s difficult for us – how much harder is it going to be for parents who haven’t been employed?”

Camp operators say they are optimistic that the outlook will improve as the season draws nearer.

“Hang tight, because we’re hopeful that there’s going to be some adjustments,” said Eric Arnold, executive director of Hale, which runs day sessions and overnight camping at its 1,137-acre property in

Westwood.

Beyond the questions surrounding state regulations, Arnold said, the organization is still waiting to hear from groups it partners with on free or reduced-price programs — such as school systems and community centers — that have not yet decided whether they will offer such assistance this year. He said the organization is holding back many slots in its camp programs for people who don't have the ability to pay.

At the YMCA of Greater Boston, demand for summer camp programs is on the rise. James Morton, chief executive of the organization, said registration for overnight camp is 31 percent higher than it was last year at this time — when the threat of COVID-19 was still not fully known. Day camps also are reporting higher interest than last year.

The Boston YMCA runs overnight camps in New Hampshire, but is eagerly awaiting details on what it must do to operate its day camps closer to home. The nonprofit enrolled about 1,500 children in 2020 and wants to double that number this summer. It also plans to add additional summer learning opportunities for students who may have fallen behind at school.

“This summer is probably the most important summer that we've ever experienced in our 170-year history,” said Morton, who believes camp can help children overcome the isolation they may have felt at home. “Here's an opportunity for us to mitigate some of that by providing young people with every opportunity to interact with other young people so that we can help them recover some of the social-emotional skills they might have lost.”

Boston Centers for Youth & Families, run by the city, typically begins registration in March for its summer day programs, but it is still waiting to see how many of its programs it will be able to restore for this summer. Last year, it served about 3,000 kids through online and in-person programs, the department said. In a normal summer, about 4,600 young people participate in in-person day offerings.

Last year, many camps said they struggled to attract families because of concerns about COVID-19.

Crossroads, a nonprofit that offers overnight and day camps in Duxbury and Brewster, last year scrapped those programs in favor of a partnership with BYCF to offer day programs at sites in the city. Only about 400 people signed up for 1,000 spaces.

This year, parents seem to be more comfortable with the pandemic safety protocols that camps have put in place, said Simon Hess, president of Crossroads. It surveyed families of high school-age

participants about whether they were interested in attending camp this summer. Only two of 63 said they wouldn't come under any circumstances.

But when the Duxbury and Brewster camps open as expected this year, he said, they will only be able to serve about 320 people — down from 1,000 in a normal year — because of the need for social distancing and other protocols.

Delicia Stephens, a South Boston educator whose two children have been involved with Crossroads for years, said her 11-year-old daughter, Sanyrah Andrews, is eager to participate this summer after taking part in the BCYF collaboration last year. But Stephens said she's not planning to shop around for a different camp if her daughter does not get a spot at Crossroads.

“If that happens, then she won't go anywhere,” Stephens said. “I'm only willing to send her to the Crossroads program. Because I trust them. I know them.”

Andy Rosen can be reached at andrew.rosen@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@andyrosen](https://twitter.com/andyrosen).

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