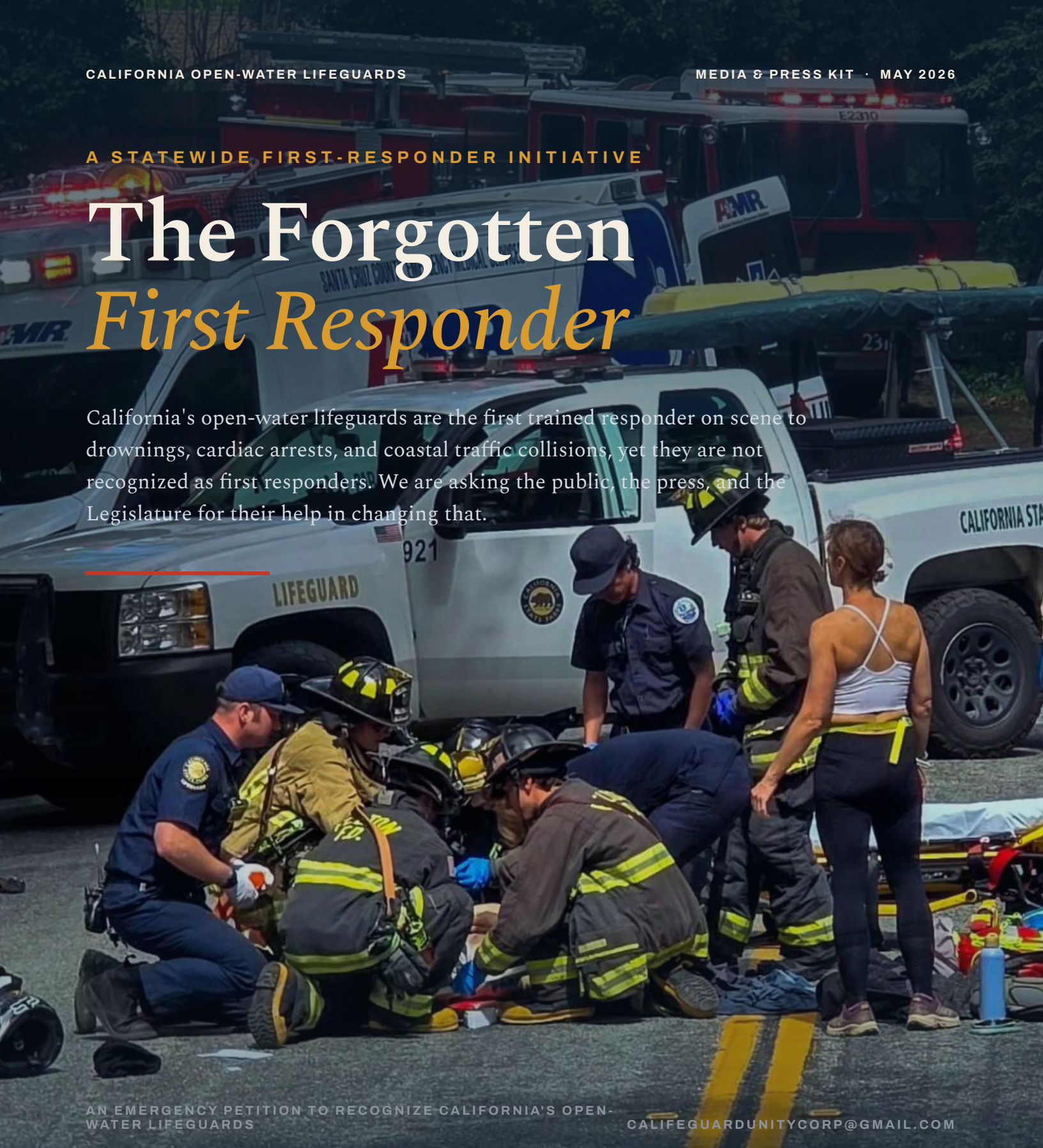


A STATEWIDE FIRST-RESPONDER INITIATIVE

The Forgotten *First Responder*

California's open-water lifeguards are the first trained responder on scene to drownings, cardiac arrests, and coastal traffic collisions, yet they are not recognized as first responders. We are asking the public, the press, and the Legislature for their help in changing that.



AN EMERGENCY PETITION TO RECOGNIZE CALIFORNIA'S OPEN-WATER LIFEGUARDS

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3B+

Visitors and patrons protected by CA lifeguards, 2000 to 2025

60.7M

Preventative actions taken over twenty-six years

1.13M

Aquatic rescues performed statewide, 2000 to 2025

0

First-responder status, the recognition they are denied

THE EMERGENCY ASK

First on scene. *Unrecognized* on paper.

California's open-water lifeguards are a professional public-safety workforce. They are routinely the first trained responder on scene to drownings, cardiac arrests, traffic collisions on the coast highway, spinal and trauma injuries, and technical and cliff rescues. The medical and emergency interventions a lifeguard performs are not aspirational add-ons to the job. They are the job.

And yet, across nearly every agency that employs them, California's open-water lifeguards have been denied recognition as first responders. In many districts they are classified and compensated as seasonal or recreational employees, while being held to the standard of, and expected to perform as, first responders. They carry the duty without the recognition, the legal protections, or the benefits.

This Is Not a New Category

We are not asking California to create a new kind of worker. We are asking the state to name what the work already is. A person who shows up first when someone is dying, and keeps them from dying, is by every ordinary definition a first responder.

The Only Thing Missing Is the Statute

Federal law already provides the definitions. Hawai'i has already adopted the recognition. California's own emergency-response systems already rely on lifeguards every day. What is missing is a statute that names them.

"We are by definition first responders. This is one of very few jobs in the world where a 16 year old can truly make a difference and possibly save a life. The skill set required to be a competent lifeguard is so broad, and there are some no other job in the world has."

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS LIFEGUARD, PAJARO COAST DISTRICT, 2-3 SEASONS

The peer-reviewed emergency-medicine literature has gone so far as to name this profession **the forgotten first responder**. Our goal is to change that, and we are humbly asking for your help.

MORE THAN A TITLE

What recognition *provides*

Open-water lifeguards have direct, hands-on physical contact with the patient. They are the first link in the chain of care, before the engine and before the ambulance. Formal recognition would align that reality with a series of statutory protections and supports that many of California's lifeguards are presently excluded from, despite performing the underlying duties.

Line-of-Duty Protections

Eligibility under the federal Public Safety Officers' Benefits Act for line-of-duty death or disability.

34 U.S.C. § 10281 et seq.

Injury Salary Continuation

Salary-continuation protection for industrial injury, currently limited to a narrow set of lifeguard classifications.

California Labor Code § 4850

Emergency-Planning Inclusion

Recognition within Cal OES and Cal EMSA mutual-aid and disaster-response staffing frameworks.

Cal OES / Cal EMSA protocols

Public-Health Priority

Vaccination and prophylaxis priority during public-health emergencies, a gap exposed during COVID-19.

Emergency public-health planning

The Statutory Definition

Inclusion in Government Code § 8562, California's definition of first responder, which currently omits lifeguards.

Gov. Code § 8562 (AB 1945, 2020)

Professional Standing

Formal acknowledgment of lifeguards as professional rescuers within California's emergency-response community.

Operational recognition

WHY RECOGNITION FITS

Federal law already defines the role. Under *6 U.S.C. § 101(6)*, emergency response providers include emergency public-safety and emergency medical personnel. Under *42 U.S.C. § 300ff-133(a)*, an emergency response employee is defined by four duties, to *respond, attend, treat, and transport*. California's open-water lifeguards discharge all four as standard practice, across every agency and every season.

THE STATEWIDE RECORD

The proof is in *the prevent*

The United States Lifesaving Association, the national governing body for open-water lifesaving, aggregates incident statistics from 46 reporting California lifeguard agencies. Over the twenty-six years from 2000 through 2025, California's open-water lifeguards protected more than three billion visitors and patrons.

60.7M

Preventative actions, approximately 54 for every rescue. The lifeguard's defining work is stopping an emergency before it begins.

1.13M

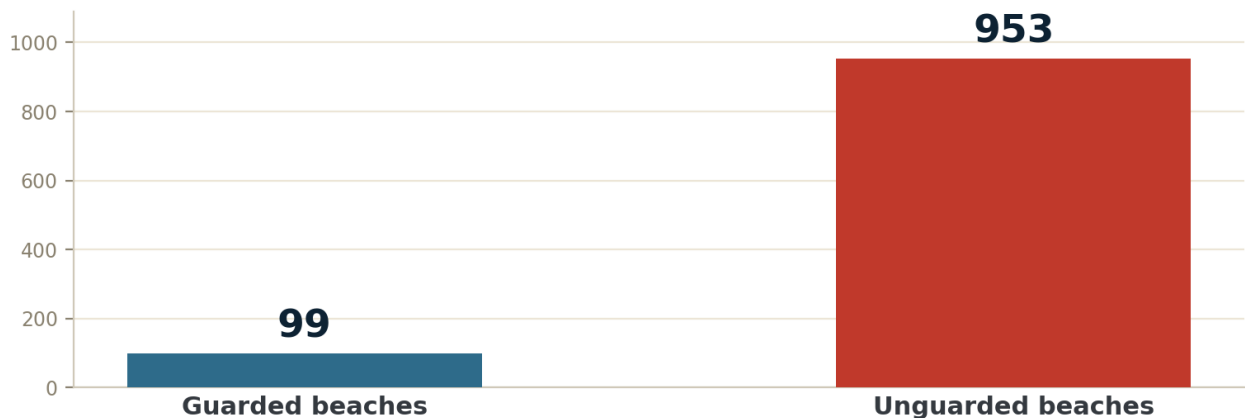
Aquatic **rescues**, people who would not otherwise have made it to safety on their own.

2.5M+

Documented **medical aids**, direct hands-on patient care across the period.

953

Drownings on **unguarded beaches**, against 99 on guarded beaches. The lifeguard is the variable.

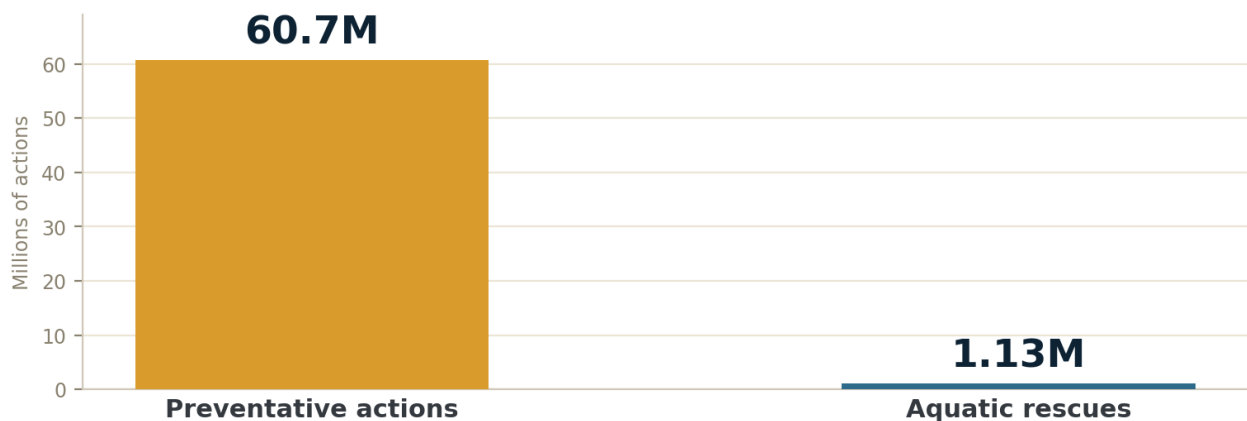


Drowning deaths on guarded versus unguarded California beaches, 2000 to 2025. A differential of roughly ten to one. In 2025 alone, the figures were 1 against 61. Source: USLA California statewide statistics.

THE WORK THAT IS INVISIBLE

The emergency that *never happens*

A lifeguard's central task, every second of every shift, is to see the rescue before it happens, and to intervene before a hazard becomes an emergency. That intervention is called a preventative action, or a prevent. Over twenty-six years, California's lifeguards performed more than sixty million of them.



Preventative actions versus rescues, California 2000 to 2025. 60.7 million emergencies quietly prevented against 1.13 million answered. The state compensates lifeguards as if the job is to wait for emergencies. The data shows the core function is to prevent them. Source: USLA California statewide statistics.

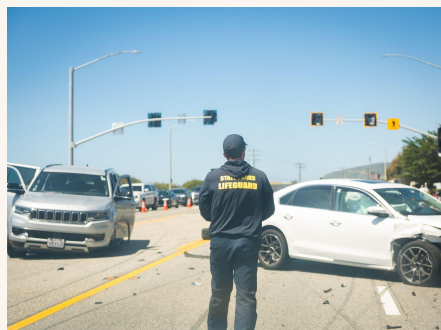
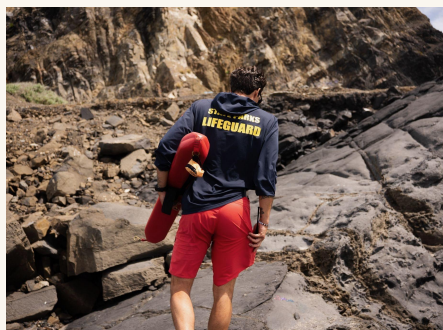
Prevents are easy to undervalue because they are invisible in conventional public-safety statistics. The drowning that did not occur generates no headline and no incident report. On one hand, nothing happens. On the other hand, everything happens. Every prevent is a person who goes home to their family.

“We are the best trained guards who work the most dangerous California beaches, yet we are consistently the most underpaid. We risk our lives daily for pennies. Despite being the first and last line of defense against coastal drownings, despite being first on-scene to car, motorcycle, and atv accidents, despite many of us being practicing EMTs, we are not considered first responders. We do not get the legal and financial benefits from that distinction. We risk our own health daily for little more than a pat on the shoulder.”

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS OCEAN LIFEGUARD, MONTEREY DISTRICT, 10+ SEASONS

WHAT WE ARE ASKING FOR

A concurrent *resolution*



THE RESOLUTION

We are asking the California Legislature to pass a concurrent resolution recognizing open-water lifeguards as first responders, professional rescuers, and emergency response providers.

The resolution mirrors the language, form, and intent of Hawai'i Senate Resolution 54 and SCR 56, and of U.S. House Resolution 1188 recognizing the work of open-water and ocean lifeguards as first responders and emergency response providers. It is statewide in scope and not specific to any single employer. It urges that Government Code § 8562 be amended to include open-water lifeguards in California's statutory definition of first responder. This is not a request to write new law. It is a request that California name what the work already is.

PRECEDENT, STATE

Hawai'i Senate Resolution 54

Adopted April 8, 2026 with zero dissenting committee votes, recognizing open-water lifeguards as first responders.

PRECEDENT, FEDERAL

U.S. H. Res. 1188

Recognizes the work of open-water and ocean lifeguards as first responders and emergency response providers.

PRECEDENT, CALIFORNIA

AB 489, the Medal of Valor

California already recognizes ocean lifeguards as public safety officers eligible for its highest valor award.

“USLA has calculated the chance that a person will fatally drown while attending a beach protected by USLA-affiliated lifeguards at 1 in 18 million. This is based on the last ten years of reports from USLA-affiliated lifeguard agencies, comparing estimated beach attendance to the number of drowning deaths in areas under lifeguard protection.”



IN CLOSING

“The goal of this petition is clear. We are advocating on behalf of a workforce that saves and serves millions of lives every year, yet is continuously underserved and overlooked.”

THE FORGOTTEN FIRST RESPONDER, EMERGENCY PETITION

For interviews, data, and the full petition

We are humbly asking the public, the press, and the California Legislature for their help. Reporters and legislative staff are welcome to request any of the following, or an interview with open-water lifeguards from across the state.

AVAILABLE, 01

The full emergency petition and the model concurrent resolution language.

AVAILABLE, 02

USLA statewide statistical data and lifeguard testimony from across California.

AVAILABLE, 03

Interviews with open-water lifeguards on what recognition would mean for the profession.

SUBMITTED BY

Gisele Halualani & Caleb Howard

On behalf of all open-water lifeguards, lifeguarding agencies, and entities in California, and on behalf of the California Lifeguard Unity Corps.

PRESS & INQUIRIES

califeguardunitycorp@gmail.com

Modeled on Hawai'i SR 54 / SCR 56 and U.S. H. Res. 1188.

LIFEGUARDS AS FIRST RESPONDERS
Statewide Resolution Campaign · May 2026