

# In-person camps prepare for a socially distant summer

**Eva Herscowitz, Assistant City Editor**

For Evanston children, summer dreams have been ripped at the seams.

Say goodbye to summer days spent tie-dyeing T-shirts and coasting down Slip 'N Slides: Gov. J.B. Pritzker's stay-at-home orders and social distancing protocols have shifted local summer camps online or canceled camps altogether. For children, it's a disappointing summer trailing a disappointing school year. For owners, it's a financial blow dealt at camp's most profitable season. And for parents, it's another spell of juggling working from home with parenting demands.

Evanston/Skokie School District 65 canceled the first session of its School Age Child Care summer camp, which was scheduled to begin June 8. The program, held at Lincoln Elementary School, offers children outdoor games, field trips and beach days. While refunds will be processed for families who already paid, the district still hopes to hold the second session, which is set to begin July 6.

City summer camp programs are anticipated to open in a "significantly reduced" capacity July 6, the city announced Friday. To determine how to safely operate camps, the Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department is following Illinois Department of Public Health guidelines. The department will reach out to families with updates regarding specific programs, and families should prepare to make "alternate arrangements" in the event of camp cancellations or capacity reductions.

Private camps, too, are facing unprecedented summer months ahead. Eitan Schechtman-Drayman, a postdoctoral researcher at Northwestern, signed his daughter up for a five-week session at Camp Galileo, a California-based program with North Shore locations. The camp has been canceled, and the Schechtman-Draymans are one of 10,000 families who won't receive a refund. Camp Galileo filed for bankruptcy May 6, after refusing to refund a combined \$11 million in tuition.

Other camps, however, are brainstorming strategies to keep programs packed and campers socially distant. Coronavirus concerns have altered Mudlark Theater on "every imaginable level," education director Dru Smith said.



Illustration by Emma Ruck

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For the month of June, all 32 summer programs are moving to Zoom, and holding July and August camps in-person is “up in the air.”

At Mudlark Theater, registration for virtual programming has taken off. Smith reported around half of the company’s programs have already filled up. Shifting performing arts online will present new modes of instruction, especially given the physicality of theater.

He added that effective remote programming hinges on replicating the best parts of in-person theater, online.

“How can we bring Mudlark into their homes?” Smith said. “How can we bring the thing we do really well — that joy and collaborativeness that is Mudlark — into their living rooms and bedrooms?”

For camps operating in person, programming will look different. Evanston’s Roycemore School has already developed a COVID-19 task force, where officials weigh parent feedback and safety guidelines to develop programming, according to Tanise Robnett, Roycemore’s systems and operations coordinator.

“We aren’t just doing this on the fly,” Robnett said. “There’s been a lot of blood, sweat and tears.”

Temperature checks as campers arrive, bagged lunches as opposed to hot ones and routine decontamination may define Roycemore camps this summer, communications and enrollment director Elizabeth Latimer said. Roycemore will also offer a virtual camp option.

Hi-Five Summer Camp director Danny Tuchman is planning several variations of sports programming, including a modified in-person experience following CDC guidelines. Hi-Five has partnered with Platinum Sanitation to decontaminate equipment and surfaces.

When COVID-19 cases began to surge, Hi-Five canceled programs serving hundreds of families and around 80 birthday parties. Tuchman added it’s been “tough” to watch families unenroll as camp nears.

“You put a lot of work and finances into getting camp ready,” he said. “That’s something you do all year round, so no matter what we’re going to take a big hit there.”

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