

Overnight camps in Berkshires pin hopes on ability to open this Summer

- By [Larry Parnass, The Berkshire Eagle](#), Feb 6, 2021



Summer facilities across the Berkshires are waiting for guidance from the state on whether they can open this summer. Last year, because of the coronavirus pandemic, overnight camps were not allowed to bring in young campers.
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PITTSFIELD — Overnight summer camps in the Berkshires want a signal from Boston that they can operate this summer, after seeing last year’s season [halted at the last minute](#).

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— William Hoch, president, Western Massachusetts Camp Directors Association

“We’re at a critical time,” said William Hoch, president of the Western Massachusetts Camp Directors Association. Hoch said talks are underway between the camps and the Baker administration. Last July, [an eleventh-hour decision](#) banned overnight camps from opening in Massachusetts, which kept 4,000 to 4,500 young people from visiting the Berkshires.

“It’s a delicate situation. We’re hopeful,” Hoch said of the talks. “There’s no reason why they shouldn’t be able to operate.”

If they can't open, overnight camps that previously hosted young people in August 2019 face the prospect of going more than 30 months without these traditional customers. That long revenue gap could force more camps out of business.

Last fall, a survey by the American Camp Association, New England, found that more than half of 347 member camps — 54 percent — didn't open in 2020. While barred from operating in Massachusetts, overnight camps were able to open in other New England states. About 40 percent of day camps opened in 2020, but with reduced enrollment.

Together, the New England camps polled by the trade group report losing \$300 million in revenue, with 85 percent saying they cut staff hours and pay or instituted furloughs or layoffs. Michele Rowcliffe, the association's executive director, said 2020 delivered a “body blow” to the trade.

“Frankly this is the most challenging year that the camping industry in Massachusetts has ever faced,” she said in a statement.

Twelve percent said the coronavirus pandemic summer of 2020 forced them out of business. One of the [most notable losses](#) was the century-old Cape Cod Sea Camps in Brewster. In a message to families, the camp blamed “the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

As of October, 88 percent of camps in the association survey said they hoped to open this coming season. Since then, camps have scrambled to shape and institute safety protocols.



Owners of residential summer camps in the Berkshires are waiting for word on whether 2021 will allow them to return to hosting young people overnight. Here, canoeists go on an outing at Meeting Waters' Lewis Day Camp in 2019.

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With overnight camps poised to open last summer, even as the pandemic's first wave crested in New England, the Baker administration abruptly moved the industry to Phase Four of the state's reopening plan, pushing it tentatively to this coming summer. Even so, conditions of what officials term the "new normal" depend on a wide rollout of COVID-19 vaccines. Camp officials want to pin down whether they will be able to get back in business this summer or not.

Matt Scholl, executive director of the Becket Day Camp and the Berkshire Outdoor Center for Becket-Chimney Corners YMCA, said in a statement provided by the association that families are expecting restrictions to be lifted. He and others point to evidence that overnight camps can host young people without spreading COVID-19.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [studied four overnight camps in Maine](#) that operated in 2020 without seeing any new virus cases among 1,000 staff members and campers. The CDC's review found that the camps did three things right: They gathered arriving campers and staff into "cohorts" for the first two weeks; they retested everyone five to six days after arriving; and they delayed the arrival of potentially infectious campers.

The CDC's abstract on its Maine study reads: "During the 2020 summer camp season, four Maine overnight camps with 1,022 attendees from 41 states and international locations implemented a multilayered prevention and mitigation strategy that was successful in identifying and isolating three asymptomatic COVID-19 cases and preventing secondary transmission."

Hoch, of the Western Massachusetts Camp Directors Association, says the study demonstrates the ability of residential camps to operate safely.

"The data is out there that shows, with the right procedures and protocols, it's safe to have camp," Hoch said. "They can't sit just stuck in neutral. The industry cannot withstand another summer without camps."