

Testimony from Mayor Denise Bowden

Town of Chincoteague

Safe Beaches, Safe Swimmers Act

HR 5063 (Rep Kiggans)

Assateague Island, VA is such a valuable resource for recreation to not only to our locals but also to our 1.0 million plus visitors each year. Between the golden sands of sunbathing, the rich fishing areas, to the swimmers and surfers to even the beachcombers and bird watchers, the area is populated heavily during peak summer season.

There have always been lifeguards on Assateague Island, VA for as far back as I can remember to my childhood. They play such a vital role in the safety of those people mentioned above and this past summer it was difficult not having them in place for the whole part of the summer season. They have saved countless lives and have provided first aid in many situations. The nearest rescue squad is on neighboring Chincoteague Island which, while not far away, traffic getting to Assateague Island can make it exceedingly difficult in getting to a patient or drowning victim in a timely manner.

We had people reach out to the town this past summer to let us know that they were rethinking their trip to Chincoteague Island due to the lack of a safe experience at the beach itself. As you know, Chincoteague Island is dependent on tourist dollars along with the surrounding Eastern Shore. We do not want to lose revenue in any circumstances. The National Park Service ended up funding the majority lifeguard services this past summer with the Town of Chincoteague and Accomack County picking up the rest of the tab for contracted services out of Va Beach, Va to which the town nor the county has been reimbursed. However, an agreement could not be reached until well into the summer season, cutting lifeguard coverage short for most of the summer. We cannot afford to do this again, nor should we have to.

Funding lifeguards is critical; it is paramount and should take precedence for the summer seasons on this federal land. Saving dollars is one thing; saving lives is a whole different story. You cannot put a price tag on someone's life. Especially if they are just trying to enjoy that life sitting on a beautiful beach with their family and friends.

