

# THE NEED FOR WARM WATER THERAPEUTIC RESOURCES ON THE PENINSULA



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Vital for our community

Warm Water Wellness Inc is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that advocates for aquatic therapy pools for healing, rehabilitation, and overall fitness for seniors and disabled individuals of all ages.

## Introduction

Owners, proponents, and users of aquatic facilities know the importance of their facilities and their role in the communities they serve. While these facilities have for many years met the needs of a wide variety of users, from swimming and water safety classes for children to training programs for athletes, some of the most important needs may arguably be for the many healing and health maintenance benefits provided in an aquatic setting.

General health and fitness may be met with a varied schedule of group fitness classes—but what of the specialized needs for physical therapy, mobility restoration, and chronic pain management? Warm water therapeutic resources for the disabled and senior populations are vitally necessary in our community today.

**Access to aquatic therapy resources allows elders to age in place and enables disabled individuals to maintain their health, independence, and dignity.**

### Advantages of Aquatic Therapy

- Provides buoyancy, a reduced gravity environment, and balanced resistance
- Promotes increased range of motion (ROM) and improved function
- Improves muscle tone, reduces stiffness and pain
- Offers a soothing effect and helps increase tolerance for exercise
- Enhances muscular strength and endurance
- Reduces stress on joints
- Heightens body awareness, enhances posture and motor control during walking
- Encourages social interaction and enjoyment, decreases feelings of isolation and depression, and creates an overall sense of well-being

*—adapted from the Parkinson's Aquatic Exercise booklet and ADA basic industry standards <sup>1,2</sup>*

These benefits represent just some of the recognized elements that a warm water therapy pool can provide for the well-being of those fortunate enough to have access to one.

Peninsula residents had access to beneficial warm water pools until the emergence of a disturbing trend of shutting down these facilities that had been available to the public for many years. Since then, many hundreds of people and thousands of their loved ones have been detrimentally affected by the former pool users' diminished physical, emotional, and mental health. It is no exaggeration to say that the decisions of "health" corporate executives have negatively impacted the quality of life of those whom they purport to serve.

**This document intends to show what is needed now and how local organizations can help.**

## The Problem

Sutter Health operated a fully accessible, community-built facility—The Mack E. Mickelson Arthritis and Rehabilitation Center at Mills Health Center in San Mateo—that was acquired from Mills-Peninsula Hospital more than twenty years ago. This pool is a unique facility designed specifically for therapeutic exercise. It is heated to 93 degrees Fahrenheit and is wheelchair accessible with a ramp descending into the water.

For decades, the pool had been open to community residents of all ages. Its healing, warm water provided an invaluable resource for chronic pain management and rehabilitation for seniors, disabled individuals, patients recovering from surgeries, children with special needs, and pregnant women. Patrons drove from all over—Half Moon Bay, San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose—to take advantage of this precious asset. It was not just a place for physical rehabilitation; it was also a social community that offered mental health benefits to disabled and elderly individuals many of whom rarely left home.

Citing the worldwide COVID pandemic, Sutter closed the Mickelson Center in March 2020. In January 2020—three months prior to the shelter-in-place county directive—therapy pool hours were significantly reduced for community use. Since that time, Sutter management has shown a lack of transparency offering shifting explanations for their decision to make the closure permanent. This led to the creation of Warm Water Wellness Inc (WWW Inc) and our advocacy for the reopening of this important, well-used and much beloved facility that was financed entirely by \$4 million in community donations.

Due to water temperature and accessibility issues, recreational pools do not meet the needs of mobility-impaired therapy pool users. The closest public therapy pools are the Janet Pomeroy Center in San Francisco (20 miles away) and the Timpany Center in San Jose (30 miles away). The Pomeroy Center is often crowded due to the closure of Sutter's other therapy pools in San Francisco. Additionally, the physical challenge of sitting in a vehicle for an excessive travel time and the very real problem of limited transportation options for seniors and the disabled make it nearly impossible for the Mickelson Center's warm water refugees to use these facilities.

Older adults aged 55 and over are the fastest-growing demographic group in San Mateo County and represent a large percentage of the voting population. From 2010 to 2030, the number of people over 65 in the county will have increased 71% and those over 85 will increase by 148%.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this, San Mateo County statistics on its aging population point to an even greater future need for warm water therapy, as one in four people 65 and older will experience a disability.<sup>3</sup> As the State of California advises in its Master Plan For Aging, now is the time to be planning for the services that will be needed by this growing demographic group, not eliminating services such as The Mickelson Center.<sup>4</sup>

We must make healthcare for these growing populations a top public policy concern. This increase in the aging and disabled population plus a lack of appropriate health resources will likely result in an increased financial burden on county and local services to pay for their care. Additionally, decreased

productivity, reduced quality of life, and even premature death will result among populations suffering from physical, emotional, and mental decline.

The movement of cities in San Mateo County towards designation as “Age Friendly Cities” is welcome, but this lack of warm water therapy facilities is inconsistent with the goals of healthy aging.

### Measures taken to date

The current president of what is now WWW Inc began a petition on change.org in June 2020, which has over 4,800 signatures as of August 2022 (see [change.org/save-the-Mickelson-pool](https://change.org/save-the-Mickelson-pool)). Additionally, our non-profit organization and its supporters have had over 40 letters to the editor, op-eds, and articles published in local newspapers. We have met virtually and in person with more than a dozen local officials and several pro bono attorneys who have added their support. At our behest, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, the Sequoia Healthcare District, the San Mateo Central Labor Council, the cities of Burlingame, Colma, Foster City, Half Moon Bay, Hillsborough, Millbrae, and San Mateo have passed formal resolutions calling on Sutter to reverse its decision. In July 2022, over 100 activists and elected officials participated in an impassioned rally in front of the Mickelson Center.

Sutter executives continue to receive appeals to reopen the Mickelson pool, but to date they have refused to discuss potential solutions with WWW Inc and individual former pool users. They have been unwilling to cooperate, even with the Peninsula Health Care District, which generously offered to finance necessary upgrades and operating costs until a new facility becomes available.

**As former Mickelson therapy pool users have become ever more debilitated, we have grown even more determined to find a solution.**



## Solutions

We at Warm Water Wellness Inc believe that there is more than one solution to the problem facing us. For that reason, we have adopted a multi-layered approach to ensure that warm water therapy is available again, as quickly as possible, to all who have been affected by the loss of the Mack E. Mickelson Arthritis and Rehabilitation Center in San Mateo.

1. Convince Sutter Health of the absolute necessity and moral obligation to reopen the Mickelson Center. While Sutter keeps saying “no,” we are encouraging government representatives to bring to bear whatever efforts they can on behalf of their constituents.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, a private subcontractor, the health care district, or the county should be allowed to take over management of the facility, either on a permanent or temporary basis.
2. Work with other suitable aquatic facilities to make their indoor pools available for therapy use (see Appendix B).
3. Research locations throughout the Peninsula where adequate space might be suitable for a new private or civic-run warm water facility.
4. Encourage other cities to include therapy pools as they develop aquatic centers. Among these are South San Francisco (Orange Park), Millbrae, Burlingame (at the proposed Peninsula Wellness Community), San Bruno, and Belmont (Barrett).
5. Request local government officials recognize warm-water therapy facilities as vital to the growing populations of seniors and disabled persons of all ages on the Peninsula.

## Conclusion

Sutter’s unconscionable closure of the only therapy pool on the Peninsula has resulted in a crisis for the most vulnerable members of our community at a time when it is most needed by an aging population.

The most humane and common-sense solution would be for Sutter Health to reopen the existing facility—one that is centrally located and meets all accessibility requirements. The Mickelson Center is a precious resource that was built *by* the community *for* the community over 25 years ago. We need more rehabilitation pools, not fewer.

It is shameful that disabled individuals are now put in a position of expending their limited energy in fighting for a therapy pool rather than healing in one.

**We have the solutions.**  
**All we need now is the will of the community to make them happen.**

## References:

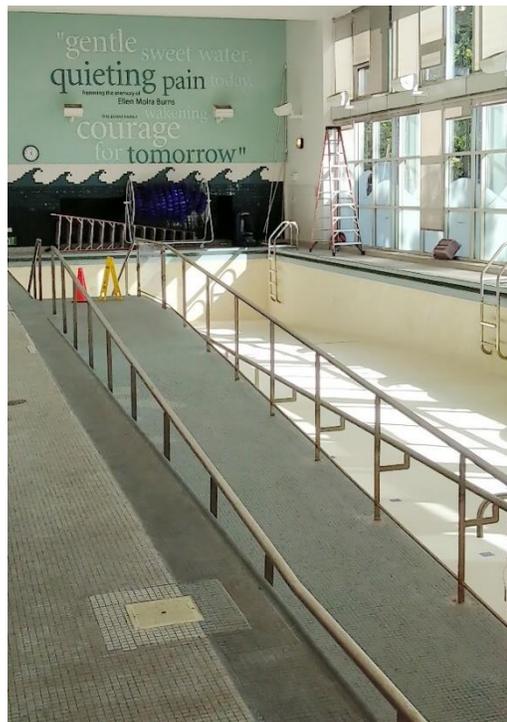
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- <sup>2</sup> ADA Requirements for Accessible Pools, [ADA Requirements: Accessible Pools Means of Entry and Exit](#)
- <sup>3</sup> San Mateo County Area Agency on Aging: Area Plan Update [https://www.smchealth.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/area\\_plan\\_update\\_smc\\_final\\_07\\_06\\_2021.pdf?1625614023](https://www.smchealth.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/area_plan_update_smc_final_07_06_2021.pdf?1625614023)
- <sup>4</sup> California Master Plan for Aging. <https://mpa.aging.ca.gov>
- <sup>5</sup> Peninsula Health Care District Board of Directors meeting transcript (4/10/22)

## Other reference material:

- Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020-2060. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf>
- San Mateo County Aging Model: Better Planning for Tomorrow <http://www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/housingdepartment/PDFS/Aging%202020%20Model%20Overview.pdf>
- Sustainable San Mateo County. [http://www.sustainablesanmateo.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/SeniorHealthReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.sustainablesanmateo.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/SeniorHealthReport_FINAL.pdf)
- 2020 Census data. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sanmateocountycalifornia>

## Acknowledgements:

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## Appendix A

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN AQUATIC THERAPY PROGRAM

Aquatic therapy is traditionally defined as a client working on a one-on-one basis with a physical therapist. This is usually very short term and sometimes reimbursed by third party payers (insurance). Independent exercise in a therapy pool is self-guided, often based on a routine first developed by a professional therapist but sometimes created by the patient.

Aquatic therapy is a part of physical and rehabilitative medicine. The term refers to various therapeutic techniques performed by licensed practitioners or by the independent user occurring in an aquatic environment.

In a program including Aquatic Fitness/Exercise (group or individual), the intent is to improve muscular and cardio-respiratory health, flexibility, strength, and joint range of motion. A nationally certified Aquatic Fitness Professional is trained to work with apparently healthy individuals and/or special populations/post-rehab individuals that have been given medical clearance to participate in an exercise program.

*—adapted from the Parkinson’s Aquatic Exercise booklet*

## Appendix B

### PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS FOR A WARM WATER THERAPY POOL:

- Therapeutic water temperature between 92 to 95 degrees
- Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Unisex dressing rooms with shower areas available to allow caregivers to aid with dressing and undressing
- Non-skid floor surfaces in dressing rooms, restrooms, showers, and therapy pool deck areas
- Decking immediately around the therapy pool wide enough for walker/wheelchair bound users or those on crutches to pass each other safely
- Therapy pool access via steps with handrails, ramp with handrail and/or pool chair lift/Hoyer lift for safe entry and exit
- Square bottom or nearly square bottom edge where the floor meets the therapy pool side walls to allow for proper balance while performing supported standing exercises
- Grab rails along the therapy pool edge at or just below water level for safety and balance in entry and shallow areas, as well as on all ramps and stairs into the pool
- Appropriate depths for prescribed needs, ranging from 3.5 to 6 feet
- Licensed therapy pool operator/manager with the appropriate credentials as designated by the state or national codes should be on staff
- Air temperature maintained as warm enough for patrons to not become chilled when leaving the therapy pool and to or from locker rooms; temperature, humidity and turn over/refresh rates of air are likely covered by specific engineering specs for indoor pools
- Easily accessible shower for rinsing off prior to entering the therapy pool. (Most facilities require patrons to shower before entering the pool to remove body oils, perspiration, and any skin care products to maintain the water quality.)
- Poolside seating available for the use of caregivers and/or family
- Certified lifeguards on duty at the therapy pool during exercise or therapy program hours
- Convenient facility parking near the therapy pool area with a path wide enough for walker/wheelchair-bound clients or any person with special needs to easily access the facility