

Inclusion at heart of female-only swim time program

Need grew from county's Muslim community

By [Jessica Anderson](#), The Baltimore Sun

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At the Columbia Swim Center pool in Wilde Lake, members of People Acting Together in Howard, from left: Amy Lamke; her daughter Katlin Lamke; Anne Gould of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia; Safiyah Blake of the Dar Al Taqwa mosque; Cynthia Marshall, lead organizer; Shehlla Khan and her daughter, Zaineb Khan, 3, of the Dar Al Taqwa mosque. They advocated for the Columbia Association to offer private swim times for women twice a week. Women's swim time will be offered during a trial period at this pool through the first week of January. (Kim Hairston / The Baltimore Sun / November 11, 2011)

When Shehlla Khan's husband became ill, it fell on her to take their three children to the pool. But for Khan, who is Muslim, the task was difficult.

The Columbia resident said she was concerned about people watching her swim in the conservative, cover-all dress required by Islamic dress codes, and thinking: "What's wrong? Why can't you take it off?"

So Khan, 39, brought the issue up with members of her Dar Al-Taqwa mosque in Ellicott City. The mosque, along with members of a faith-based county group, People Acting Together in Howard, met with the Columbia Association to create a twice-weekly, women-only swim time, a trial that is scheduled to be announced Tuesday.

The Columbia Association, which operates 23 pools in Howard, will join other communities that have made similar accommodations to create a more welcoming atmosphere for Muslims and other female swimmers.

New York City's recreation and parks department offers a women-only swim time at the Metropolitan Recreation Center. Pools around Toronto and other cities have also offered similar options, according to news reports. And at a swimming pool in Seattle, Muslim women have used brown paper to cover glass windows, providing privacy from the lobby.

Several private universities, including Harvard and George Washington, also have provided female-only swim times, with several hours a week set aside. But occasionally, such programs have run into opponents who suggest they unfairly cater to one group. At George Washington some complained, citing concerns over the program infringing on American liberties.

"It's a positive thing," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "Not everyone has the same needs. It's just expanding the level of interaction with the local community and recognizing that people are different. You're bringing people into your system who would otherwise be uncomfortable."

Hooper said such programs are beneficial to communities attempting to reach out to an otherwise isolated minority. The reserved times usually are scheduled when facilities might be under-utilized, he said.

He said he's heard of many instances where the issue grows from women in the Muslim community, but turns out to be a need felt by others.

That has been true in Columbia, as well.

For Katlin Lamke, 18, it was not a matter of religion, but of personal comfort.

"During puberty, my body was changing. I was getting made fun of or hit on," she said. "It was very embarrassing." She stopped going.

"She was really uncomfortable," said her mother, Amy Lamke, 46. "We both love the water, but the experience changed. When this came up ..., I thought, 'What a great idea.'"

"Just for serenity, to have mother-daughter experience," she said, adding, "a pool isn't a bar. It isn't for singles."

Anne Gould, a 59-year-old Columbia resident who also supports the women-only swimming times, said, "There are times you want to be with just women."

But she added that the new policy will help include her Muslim neighbors. "This is just the right thing to do."

Raghid Shourbaji, president of the Howard County Muslim Council, said the need is growing because the county's Muslim population is growing. He said another indoor pool in Jessup has a similar program, but he hopes the one in Columbia will be more convenient.

His organization, which has been in existence for about 10 years, and the county's only mosque, Dar Al-Taqwa, are the only Muslim outlets in the county. They serve about 1,800 residents, based on mailing lists.

Safiyah Blake, a Columbia resident who is Muslim, has some practical reasons for using the women-only swim times.

"I want to take lessons to learn to put my head in the water," she said. "I never learned how to breathe."

But she agreed the pool experience can often drive Islamic women away.

"You can see people looking at you," Blake said. The women-only pool times will "bridge the gap. My sisters and I can jump in."

She plans to get out her burqini — a bathing suit that covers her arms and legs, and has a hood. The modest, cover-all swimsuit is often worn by Muslim women.

"It dries quicker than any other suit," Blake said.

Jessie Newburn, a spokeswoman with the Columbia Association, said "CA was founded on inclusion," and the organization jumped at the chance to establish the women-only pool times. "We were created for this."

The Columbia Swim Center in the Wilde Lake Village Center was chosen because it was the most-enclosed, with tinted windows to provide added privacy.

The women-only swim times will be held from 12:30 p.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays at the swim center; the trial period will run through the end of January.

Depending on the success at the indoor pools, Cynthia Marshall of PATH said the group might try to extend the program to outdoor pools, which might take some additional consideration.

jkanderson@baltsun.com