



Heat Emergencies for People Experiencing Homelessness

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UPDATED:

High temperatures kill. On average, heat emergencies produce the greatest number of fatalities of any weather event in the United States. People experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable to injury or death from high temperatures, due to higher rates of physical, mental, and substance use health conditions. Compounding this vulnerability, many have limited or non-existent safe options for sheltering from extreme heat.

As extreme heat events increase in frequency and intensity due to global warming, many communities are unexpectedly facing temperature emergencies. Regular monitoring, intentional preparation, and immediate action when temperatures rise can save the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

Preparation Before a Heat Emergency Begins

Assess: Conduct a risk assessment to determine whether emergency response systems can be easily deployed and if they are capable of meeting community needs during a heat-related event and establish partnerships as needed to address any gaps. Develop and maintain knowledge of populations that are at a heightened risk, including people who are pregnant, adults aged 65 years and older, and individuals with chronic medical conditions.

Map Resources: Identify potential cooling centers and make a list of indoor spaces where people would be safe spending the day. Map other resources that would be helpful in heat-related events, such drinking fountains, or places to acquire non-emergency medical care for heat-related illness. Pay particular attention to “urban heat islands”, where temperatures may be even higher than outlying areas due to man-made infrastructure.

Monitor: Develop a plan for monitoring the weather. The National Weather Service issues temperature-related warnings and advisories, often as early as 7 days before an expected heat event.

Prepare: Prepare a plan of action and develop any outreach or communication materials that may be needed using guidance designed by experts, like the Environmental Protection Agency’s Excessive Heat Events Guidebook, which is designed to help community officials, emergency managers, and others respond to excessive heat events. Take steps to prepare for a heat-related emergency, such as training staff to identify and react to warning signs of heat-related illnesses like Heat Cramps, Heat Exhaustion, and Heat Stroke.

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE HEAT ADVISORIES, WATCHES, AND WARNINGS (may vary by region)

EXCESSIVE HEAT OUTLOOKS

The potential exists for an excessive heat event in the next 3–7 days. Plan and prepare for the possibility of a heat event.

EXCESSIVE HEAT WATCHES

Conditions are favorable for an excessive heat event in the next 24–72 hours. Prepare for the possibility of a heat event.

EXCESSIVE HEAT WARNING

The maximum heat index temperature is expected to be 105° or higher for at least 2 days and nights. Prepare for a heat event.

HEAT ADVISORY

Issued within 12 hours of the onset of extremely dangerous heat conditions. Consider immediately deploying resources and/or seeking external assistance to respond to the heat event.

Action Steps During a Heat Emergency

Connect: Connect with local emergency, public, and environmental health experts who can provide evidence-based guidance in heat-related emergencies.

Act:

- Take action to provide temperature-controlled alternatives to the outdoors for people experiencing homelessness, such as cooling centers and shelters.
- When possible, provide transportation to decrease barriers to sheltering and limit physical activity outdoors.
- Deploy outreach teams to pass out useful resources like sunscreen and cold-water bottles and obtain immediate medical attention for anyone showing signs of distress.

Communicate:

- Employ multiple outreach methods to relay information to people experiencing homelessness and those who provide services to people experiencing homelessness.
- Provide information about available resources, as well as [strategies for managing heat](#) for people who prefer to stay outdoors.
- Use plain language and offer translations in all languages spoken with the community. Conduct targeted outreach to at-risk populations.

Improve Access:

- Encourage shelters and cooling centers to reduce barriers to entry, like curfews, [companion animal restrictions](#), and ID requirements.
- If possible, develop and implement temperature-related policies to temporarily allow people to stay at shelters during daytime hours.
- Take actions to communicate these reduced barriers to people experiencing homelessness.