

July 4, 2022

Dear Councillor Thompson, members of Economic and Community Development Committee

RE: EC31.7 Review of an Enhanced Emergency Cooling Centre System

I regret I cannot be present to depute, as I am in class, however if you are reading this thank you!

Prior to the reduction of council size, councillors and staff would be able to alert community organizations and community leaders that a report was coming to a committee and encourage them to depute with the intention of endorsing it or making recommendations for improvement.

However, council challenges and the impact of the pandemic have diminished city democracy, so I'll be surprised if you have many deputants on this pressing topic today.

Let me offer my perspective starting with some history.

Toronto's response to the early signs of climate change

Like cities around the world, in the late 1990s, early 2000s Toronto had to come to grips with the early signs of climate change that affected its vulnerable populations. Members of the Street Nurses Network brought to the city's attention, the need for water outreach, more shelter spaces, cooling centres and health care outreach for Toronto's growing homeless population. Similarly, the public outrage at the 1995 heatwave deaths of rooming house residents including Richard Howell and the inquest into the freezing deaths of three homeless men in 1996 brought these issues to focus.

In 1998 Toronto Disaster Relief Committee's (TDRC) also warned of the impact of incimate weather on unhoused people in its [State of Emergency Declaration](#):

"Prolonged homelessness permanently harms people; ultimately, it can kill them by exposure, illness, violence or suicide."

We also noted: "In 1982 there were 1,500 emergency hostel beds in (then) Metro."

Today, forty years later, there are 9,000 people in various forms of shelter in Toronto and hundreds without shelter.

The climate emergency, the homeless emergency, poverty, and food insecurity have all worsened since those early warning calls. Without adequate shelter, income and

housing all forms of inclement weather hit unhoused people and poor people the hardest.

In 2007 Tanya Gulliver, of TDRC did an important [deputation](#) to the City as part of her Maytree Public Policy fellowship. It included both timely research and urgent recommendations¹.

She pointed out that: “Following that deadly summer of 2005, Toronto revised the existing heat alert plan and created a detailed Hot Weather Response plan and an Urban Heat Island Mitigation Strategy. These plans, while well intentioned, are inadequate and have not been fully implemented.”

Most unhoused people and frontline workers would agree that the city has still not adequately provided prevention or protection in this climate emergency.

The need for shelter in extreme weather goes beyond the homeless population. It includes families, the elderly, people with health challenges or disabilities in non-airconditioned apartment buildings, rooming houses, and facilities such as long-term care and group homes.

Reality check: How has Toronto done responding to both extreme heat and cold?

- The City developed extremely rigid weather formulas that restrict operation of cooling/warming centres.
- The City provided minimal outreach, or funding of community agencies such as drop-ins or seniors centres.
- The City cancelled a pilot project in Parkdale that ensured peer workers would check on vulnerable members of the community.
- The City operated both cooling and warming centres with minimal standards, staffing, no healthcare onsite, and without any semblance of a welcoming reception centre such as food or programming.
- The City has been absent in leading innovations: air-conditioning/fan loan programs, reverse 911 calls, free transit. The only one I can think of is the provision of sunscreen in some parks.

Chronic neglect

In *A Knapsack Full of Dreams*. Memoirs of a Street Nurse I write:

“Over the years, I have witnessed rigidity and callousness in the decisions of Toronto city managers and public health officials who refuse to introduce an ounce of flexibility in the formula used to call heat or cold alerts that trigger the opening of warming or cooling centres.”

¹ For future researchers and students, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s work on extreme weather is now deposited in the Toronto Archives.

“Toronto never took kindly to the notion of running these centres and that was evident in their negligent operation. Over the years, many of us had to expose the fact that the warming or cooling centres were operated worse than jails. No cots, no mats, no blankets, no privacy barriers, no food, no activities to pass the time such as cards or a newspaper. In the summer of 2016, amidst repeated heat waves, the city was forced to open cooling centres on Day One of a heat wave instead of their usual Day Three. Yet they unbelievably opened them with no staff, no water, and no granola bars. It was Bonnie Briggs, the long-time homeless activist, who surveyed the scene and alerted me to this clearly intentional act of miserly service. In the winter of 2016-17, one of the warming centres operated without any public advertising of its location and with doors that remained locked all night. In the summer of 2018, only one cooling centre operated twenty-four hours a day.”



Photo image: Cooling centre in Metro Hall lobby (~2016), operating without staff or provisions. Credit: Cathy Crowe

In [Anatomy of a Heat Wave](#) in response to the Chicago heat wave catastrophe I wrote:

“In 2005, at least six Toronto residents who lived in scorching rooming and boarding houses died during a heat wave. Toronto Public Health research has demonstrated that mortality rates are twice as high on extreme heat days compared to comfortable days. In recent years, Toronto has reluctantly operated cooling centres triggered by a tight temperature criterion. Only one of the centres has been open 24 hours, and only with pressure did the city begin opening centres on the first of a heat wave, instead of the third day. Infamously, several years ago, the city was caught running its 24-hour centre in a hallway without staff or food — just a sign, tables and chairs and a jug of water. No activities to pass the time, no meals, no healthcare on site, no cots to sleep on unless you’re about to pass out. No appreciation of what vulnerability can mean.”

The social autopsy of the Chicago heat wave was an examination of the political and social fabric that attributed to the high death toll in certain populations.

“Lessons were learned. First, that accelerated death rates were linked to poverty, unaffordable housing, diminished social programs, and access to air conditioning. Second, that the most critical public health measures that can save life in a heat emergency are early warning systems, the immediate opening of neighbourhood-based cooling centres, outreach to seniors and vulnerable populations including vans to pick people up to take them to cooling centres, fan, and air conditioner installation programs, and reverse 911 calls, or automated calls to people who are vulnerable.”

Today’s city response to extreme heat and today’s report is an enormous failure in equity, protecting vulnerable populations and following the science.

In 2019, City officials chose to cancel the calling of extreme heat alerts and the opening of cooling centres. Instead, they chose to create a [Heat Relief Network](#) that includes existing agencies, libraries, community centres, indoor and outdoor pools/wading pools/splash pads, civic centres, drop-ins, and several private and non-profit organizations, including some shopping malls and YMCA locations.

Today’s report further entrenches the withdrawal of necessary social supports.

- The City does not acknowledge that libraries, shopping centres, even community centres may not have the health resources, refreshments, or respite services to care for people.
- The City creates a barrier through its reliance on a web-based map/app expecting people to learn where they can find a cooling site. The options are wildly impractical: a swimming pool or a splashpad for an 80-year-old or someone without a bathing suit, a library with hour restrictions, a shopping centre where security is unwelcoming and where there is no provision of water or food.

- The City has not ensured free transit on heat alert days to help people get to a cool site. One individual living in Parkdale reported to me the City website told her to go to the Toronto Island. (ticket price: Adult Return \$8.70, Senior Return \$5.60, Youth Return \$5.60, Junior Return \$4.10.) So, councillors imagine the cost to a family of 4 plus TTC to get to the ferry and home again.
- The City continues to be plagued with repeated seasonal delays in activating water taps in parks and is slow to convert to taps that include refillable water bottle taps.
- The City does not direct HTO Water trailers to parks with encampments.
- The City does not provide refillable water bottles to vulnerable communities.

The City could and must do more. Community based hubs, known and accessible to the community need to be funded and staffed properly during inclement weather. They should be welcoming centres of respite and support for all.

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