

Review of an Enhanced Emergency Cooling Centre System

Date: May 13, 2022

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure and Development Services, Deputy City Manager, Community and Social Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

At its meeting on January 21, 2022 the Economic and Community Development Committee made a number of recommendations related to emergency cooling centres, including recommending that the City:

- consider operating emergency cooling centres once again in 2022
- use data to inform the geographic locations of cooling centres
- consider if emergency cooling centres could also be used to provide shelter during other types of weather events, such as heavy rainfall and flooding

Based on environmental and jurisdictional scans as well as data on emergency cooling attendance usage, the Toronto Heat Relief Network was implemented at the direction of City Council. The Heat Relief Network is comprised of over 300 locations across Toronto that provide residents with access to space to stay cool throughout the summer, including when Environment and Climate Change Canada issues a heat warning.

The City was not able to promote the Heat Relief Network in 2020 or 2021 due to the provincial direction to implement COVID-19 public health measures that resulted in many of the Heat Relief Network sites being closed and/or operating under reduced hours. Given that these protective measures have been lifted and are not anticipated to be enacted during this year's hot weather season (from May 15 - September 30), the City is able to resume promoting the Heat Relief Network in 2022.

This report provides additional information on the City's 2022 Heat Relief Strategy, which includes the resumption of promoting the Heat Relief Network. Further, the report does not recommend that the City develop an enhanced cooling centre system as it relates to other forms of inclement weather. This report also includes a Heat Relief Strategy process flow that identifies the various City divisions as co-owners of the Heat Relief Strategy, with the Heat Relief Strategy partner's coordination residing in the Office of Emergency Management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The DCM, Infrastructure and Development Services and DCM, Community and Social Services recommends that:

1. The Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

In response to provincially mandated facility closures associated with COVID-19, in 2020, the Office of Emergency Management added funding of \$0.375 million to the program's base budget to ensure there were appropriate respite services to residents during heat alerts. As many of the Heat Relief Network sites were closed and/or operating under reduced hours, the City opened cooling centres on an emergency basis for individuals in the City to access relief from the heat until provincially mandated community closures were lifted.

As provincial restrictions have now been lifted, this report recommends that the City return to programming as previously delivered prior to COVID-19. The Office of Emergency Management will continue to utilize the funding provided for the emergency cooling centres throughout 2022 to provide support to the community for COVID -19 related needs as well as other community emergencies that may emerge. The program will review its budgetary requirements throughout the year and will consider adjusting its budget for funding that may no longer be required as part of the 2023 Operating Budget review process.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on January 21, 2022 the Economic and Community Development Committee requested the City Manager, in consultation with the Office of Emergency Management and, as needed, Toronto Public Health consider operating emergency cooling centres in 2022 as part of the City of Toronto's Heat Relief Strategy, subject to current public health advice and guidance, and to review historical usage data to inform which locations are warranted.

At the same meeting, the Economic and Community Development Committee requested the Fire Chief and General Manager - Emergency Management, Toronto Fire Services, in consultation with the Medical Officer of Health and relevant City divisions, to report back to the Economic and Community Development Committee in the second quarter of 2022 on an enhanced Emergency Cooling Centres System, including the following:

- a. how cooling centres can address inclement weather, heavy rainfall and flooding; and
- b. clear guidelines for staff responsibility and implementation.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2022.EC27.8>

On November 9, 10 and 12, 2021, City Council adopted the 2022 Shelter Infrastructure Plan, Community Engagement Review and Amendments to Contracts and Purchase Orders to Support Shelter Services. This report provided an update on SSHA's Winter Services Plan to deliver enhanced services to protect people experiencing homelessness from colder weather, including activating warming centre locations to operate during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts to provide additional space for people to come indoors and keep warm and providing additional 24/7 mobile street outreach services for Extreme Cold Weather Alerts to connect with people living outside encouraging them to come indoors.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.EC25.6>

On October 1 and 4, 2021, City Council directed the City Manager, in consultation with the Office of Emergency Management and Toronto Public Health, to review the guidelines currently in place determining the opening of cooling centres across the City of Toronto.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.EC24.19>

On November 26 and 27, 2019, City Council directed the Medical Officer of Health, the Deputy City Manager, Corporate Services, and the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure & Development Services, to collaborate on continued implementation of the City-wide Heat Relief Strategy through the Resilience Strategy and the Heat Relief Working Group. In addition, City Council directed all City Divisions to continue to incorporate hot weather response activities as part of their divisional mandates.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.HL10.4>

On January 30 and 31, 2019, City Council approved the development of an interdivisional working group to coordinate the implementation of heat relief strategies for summer 2019, and to consider specific initiatives, including neighbour checking, signage, shade structures, and cool rooms. This was directed to the Deputy City Manager, Corporate Services, the Deputy City Manager, Community and Social Services, and Toronto Public Health. City Council also requested the Deputy City Manager, Corporate Services, in collaboration with Toronto Public Health, to lead an interim work group to coordinate the implementation of heat relief strategies for 2019.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.OM2.1>

On March 5, 2018, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to report back on the Heat Relief Network, including the review of the Cooling Centres and assess how best people who are experiencing homelessness or are under-housed can access cool space.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2018.HL25.3>

On May 17, 2017, the Board of Health adopted a report focused on the feasibility of a maximum indoor temperature standard for apartment buildings without air conditioning and opportunities to increase access to cooling by promoting existing City facilities such as libraries and community centres as heat relief facilities for the public and to

encourage landlords to create a cool space in their lobbies or common rooms for tenants. In addition, the report recommended creating better community-level supports for vulnerable people experiencing extreme heat

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2017.HL19.5>

On February 15 and 16, 2017, City Council approved an increase from the Tax Stabilization Reserve to Toronto Public Health's 2017 Operating Budget of \$70,000 gross and \$17,500 net to fund and operate seven City-run Cooling Centres during the 2017 warm season and to conduct a review of the program in time for the 2018 budget process.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2017.EX22.2>

On September 30, 2016, the Board of Health requested the Acting Medical Officer of Health, in collaboration with City Divisions and community agencies represented on the Hot Weather Response Committee, to review the Hot Weather Response Plan and to report back in the fall of 2017.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2016.HL14.5>

COMMENTS

This report has been prepared jointly by the Office of Emergency Management, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and in consultation Toronto Public Health.

Overview of the Heat Relief Strategy

The City's Heat Relief Strategy outlines the hot weather response efforts coordinated by multiple City divisions with a focus on reducing the negative health impacts of extreme heat. The City's approach to managing hot weather responses has evolved over time based on evidence that demonstrates that heat is growing in intensity and heat waves are more frequent and longer in duration due to climate change. In 2019, the City of Toronto Board of Health recommended that the City transition its hot weather response activities to an all-summer approach. An all-summer approach will promote the City's resilience to heat and climate change in the long term.

The Heat Relief Strategy currently includes the following efforts:

- the Heat Relief Network, which includes over 300 cool spaces that the public can access across the City;
- a proactive outreach program focusing on those experiencing homelessness; and
- a communication strategy to educate landlords and residents on the City's Heat By-law.

Heat Relief Network

A key component of the Heat Relief Strategy is an all-summer approach to heat by providing expanded access to hundreds of cool spaces in the City, including during the declaration of a heat warning by Environment and Climate Change Canada. These cool

spaces make up the City's Heat Relief Network, including libraries, community centres, pools, splash pads, shelters, drop-ins, 24-hour respite sites, and some malls and YMCA locations. Everyone is at risk of developing heat-related illnesses, but some people may be more at risk than others. Vulnerable people may include: older adults; infants, and young children; individuals with chronic illness or those who are physically impaired; socially disadvantaged individuals and communities; occupational groups with increased exposure to heat in the workplace; and those who are physically active in the heat as well those experiencing homelessness.

Starting in 2019, the operation of dedicated cooling centres was discontinued by the City in favour of the broader Heat Relief Network, as it significantly enhanced the number and availability of cool spaces all summer ([HL10.4](#)). The City's decision to transition to a Heat Relief Network was based on evidence that dedicated cooling centres were not an effective means to provide heat relief as they did not often reach those most in need. The evidence also indicated the frequency and duration of hot weather days are expected to increase in Toronto due to climate change, and a Heat Relief Network maximizes the use of existing air-conditioned spaces in the City throughout the summer, not only on days when a heat warning has been declared.

The Heat Relief Network is similar to approaches used in other jurisdictions in North America. For example, New York City promotes a network of cooling centres (i.e., cool spaces) that include indoor air-conditioned facilities such as libraries, community and senior centres, schools, malls, outdoor recreational areas such as beaches, splash pads/spray parks and community pools. A recent scan of literature in 2022 by Public Health Ontario, as requested by Toronto Public Health, on the use of cooling centres as a form of heat relief is consistent with the evidence-informed decision from 2019, which identified that emergency cooling centres are not an effective approach as compared to over 300 publically accessible facilities including City facilities (pools, community centres, libraries, shelters, etc.) plus other publically accessible locations that provide access to cool space all summer.

Given that COVID-19 safety measures, including provincial restrictions and regulations, have been lifted and are not anticipated to be enacted in 2022 during the hot weather season (from May 15 - September 30), the City is transitioning back to the Heat Relief Network. Therefore, this summer, the City will not operate dedicated fixed-site emergency cooling centres. The City established cooling centres in 2020 and 2021 as a temporary measure based on an emergency response-specific need, but they weren't intended to be a long-term strategy. In preparation for summer 2022, the City reviews the cool spaces that make up the Network to ensure continued operation. Currently, the City has identified over 300 facilities that will be promoted as part of the Network this summer, including shelters and 24-hour respite centres for individuals experiencing homelessness. A Heat Relief Network flow chart is attached to this report (Attachment 1).

Enhanced Cooling Centre System for Inclement Weather and Enhanced Outreach for people experiencing homelessness during Heat Warnings and Inclement Weather

Inclement weather typically refers to the existence of abnormal climate conditions. Delivering an enhanced cooling centre system for inclement weather would require discounting previous policy decisions approved by City Council. These previous decisions have informed the evolution of the heat strategy and the current 2022 heat relief strategy. Reverting to a discontinued approach where dedicated fixed-site emergency cooling centres are opened for heat alerts is not recommended. This approach for cooling was reviewed in 2018 and was determined not to be an appropriate response measure to hot weather. The emergency cooling centre model was therefore discontinued in favour of the evidence-informed Heat Relief Network approach.

Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) is the City lead for services available to people experiencing homelessness. Shelter, Support and Housing Administration has services available to support people experiencing homelessness, including those sleeping outdoors, during inclement weather, including heat warnings, heavy rainfall and flooding. Streets to Homes and partners provide 24/7 street outreach to assist people experiencing homelessness and sleeping outdoors throughout the city.

In the event that Environment Canada issues a Heat Warning for southern Ontario (including Toronto), Shelter, Support and Housing Administration's Duty Office releases a system-wide alert via the Shelter Management Information System. In instances of other forms of inclement weather, Streets to Homes increases the number of available Outreach across all shifts in a 24-hour cycle. Streets to Homes also works with Outreach partners to provide additional teams during extreme weather.

During Heat Warnings, clients are told where the nearest cool space is in relation to their current location; even if they decline at the time, they will have the information should they change their minds.

When Streets to Homes is informed of flooding or high water in areas with known encampments or clients, teams do outreach along the Don River and Humber River and inform any person onsite of the risks of flooding or high water. Outreach teams will assess the safety of themselves and their team during their response to areas of high water or flooding. In the event that an Outreach team deems that accessing an area is a significant hazard to their health and safety, they will exit the hazardous area and inform the relevant City of Toronto partners (Encampment Office, Paramedic Services, Transportation Services, Parks, Forestry and Recreation) of the need for service in this area.

In addition to the outreach services described above, as part of the implementation of the Heat Relief Network, Fred Victor Centre is contracted by SSHA to provide additional targeted outreach initiatives for people experiencing homelessness during the hot weather season.

Fred Victor will operate the targeted outreach initiative during the hot weather season this summer, between May 15 and September 30, 2022, as part of SSHA's approved 2022 budget.

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ATTACHMENTS

1. Heat Relief Strategy Flow Chart