

Submitted to the Economic and Community
Development Committee on July 5, 2022

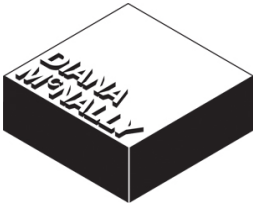
To members of the Economic and Community Development Committee.

In 2019, the City of Toronto discontinued the use of dedicated, fixed-site cooling centres in favour of what is currently in place: the Heat Relief Network. The Network, a map of which is accessible via the City of Toronto website, relies on existing infrastructure to direct residents to ‘cool spaces’, both private and public. The adoption of this Network represents a reduction in dedicated city infrastructure to mitigate Toronto’s increasingly extreme weather as a result of climate change. As well, the ‘cool spaces’ included in the Network are not universally appropriate, or adequately funded to provide additional services, such as on-site health care for those suffering from heatstroke. It is wholly inadequate to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable to extreme weather.

When deliberating on any strategy for heat relief, the City must prioritize people who are unhoused, as well as low-income renters who are living in apartment buildings that lack air-conditioning – especially those who are elderly, and/or living with health challenges or disability. People living in rooming houses, long-term care, and group homes are also particularly vulnerable and must be considered. The City of Toronto should be proactive in designing services and supports tailored to these groups to safeguard their health and welfare, and to ensure equity in the time of climate change.

As it stands, the Heat Relief Network includes shopping malls, which are private, surveilled spaces that may be unsafe for unhoused people. It also includes children’s splash pads, which no adult would be welcome to use, and swimming pools, which are time-limited and require a bathing suit. Spaces which are more accessible, safe, and inviting for low-income and unhoused people, such as drop-in centres, community centres, and libraries, are not provided with additional funding or resources to support people during the heat, including on-site health care, nutritious food, or cool drinks. It is deeply problematic to rely on these overstretched and underfunded services to bear the burden of the city’s failure without any additional funding or resource support.

For years, the City of Toronto not only had dedicated, fixed-site, and in some cases 24/7 cooling centres available, they also provided shelters and drop-ins with allocations of TTC tokens for people to get to a centre. This is to say that Toronto has since placed the burden of getting to a cool space on people who may not be able to afford TTC fare. As well, because the Heat Relief Network is only accessible via the Internet, this necessitates that an individual have a computer, or else a functioning smartphone with data or the ability to access WiFi. This is profoundly high-barrier, particularly for unhoused people, when in the past a drop-in worker could give someone two tokens and a printed map of where they could always go during an extreme heat alert.



While City staff would suggest that people sleeping rough can retrieve bottled water and support to access indoor shelter from a Streets to Homes outreach worker, this is only a partial strategy. Not everyone will want to access shelter, and the City must accommodate them where they are. As well, this strategy makes an unhoused person beholden to the schedule of an outreach worker, let alone chance: there is no guarantee that they will necessarily find and interact with a worker on a hot day. Asking someone at risk in the heat to wait for an outreach worker to potentially drop by is not enough to keep them safe and well – especially since Toronto has been unable to reliably open and maintain water fountains and public washrooms in parks over the past three years.

Heat-related death and injury are a real and rising concern for people who do not have air-conditioned housing or shelter. **Planning for climate change should be a top priority in the design of any services and supports by the City, which should include:**

- Dedicated, fixed-site, resourced, 24/7 cooling centres; AND/OR
- An increase in funding and resources for drop-ins, community centres, and libraries to provide on-site health care, food and drink provisions, TTC fare, and potentially expanded hours during extreme heat;
- Expedited access to running water in public parks, including the deployment of the HTO to Go water trailers to encampments (as was voted upon by Council in 2021), in tandem with the distribution of refillable water bottles and the expansion of year-round public washroom facilities;
- Innovative air-conditioning and/or fan loan or subsidy programs for low-income tenants.

Many thanks for your time and consideration,

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