

Toronto Cold Weather Response Plan



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GOAL OF THE COLD WEATHER RESPONSE PLAN

The goal of the Cold Weather Response Plan is to outline the preparedness and response activities of the City that focus on reducing the negative health impacts of cold weather conditions experienced every year.

The Cold Weather Response Plan's main objectives are to:

- Enable Toronto residents, including those most vulnerable, to take appropriate precautions to avoid the harmful effects of cold weather; and,
- Outline response actions by City divisions and/or agencies that provide services or alter operations to protect vulnerable people from cold weather. Cold weather season for the purpose of this plan is from November 15 to April 15 each year.

BACKGROUND

Each year, winter weather brings cold temperatures and wet conditions to Toronto, which can adversely affect the health and well-being of many residents. Some impacts of cold weather include hypothermia, frostbite and frostnip. Hypothermia, when the body's core temperature drops below 35 degrees Celsius, can progress to a life-threatening condition. Untreated severe frostbite can lead to permanent nerve damage, blisters, and even to infection and loss of limbs. There is also some evidence that suggests that cold exposure increases the risk of hypertension, respiratory conditions including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, as well as risk of stroke.

A 2016 analysis from the [Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences](#) showed that in Ontario, each change in five degrees Celsius induced seven excess deaths per day in cold seasons, which was greater than in warm seasons when five degree changes induced four excess deaths per day. While the highest risks are associated with extremely cold days, exposure to moderate cold can also result in serious impacts on the health of both the general population and people experiencing homelessness. Health effects from cold weather can occur several days after exposure.

Any Toronto resident may experience adverse health impacts from cold weather; however, there are those that are especially vulnerable. Those experiencing homelessness are particularly at risk for cold-related injuries and illnesses, as they often spend long hours outdoors, increasing their exposure to the elements. Many also face additional challenges like chronic conditions (e.g., malnutrition or untreated infections) and lack adequate or dry clothing, all of which raise the risk of hypothermia and frostbite. Other groups that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of cold weather include the elderly and young children, individuals with pre-existing health conditions (especially heart disease), outdoor workers and enthusiasts, and those with cognitive impairment or certain mental health conditions. Additionally, the use of alcohol, drugs, or certain medications can also increase the risk of cold-related injuries.

A descriptive analysis of emergency department visits in Toronto from 2018-2022 published in the [Canadian Journal of Emergency Medicine](#) showed that between 13.6 and 17.6 visits per 100,000 overall visits were for cold-related injuries.

Additional details about the health impacts of exposure are available on the [City website](#).

AUTHORITY

Extreme Cold Weather Alerts were first implemented in Toronto during the winter of 1996/1997 and arose from a June 1996 report of the Homeless Emergency Action Task Force to respond to the increased number of homeless people who needed services.

Between 2004 and the winter of 2013/2014, Toronto's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (now Toronto Shelter and Support Services) division was responsible for issuing Extreme Cold Weather Alerts and coordinating the response to protect people experiencing homelessness from the adverse impacts of exposure to cold weather.

In July 2014, City Council approved the transfer of responsibility for coordinating Toronto's Extreme Cold Weather Alerts from Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to the Medical Officer of Health.

[Following direction from Council in 2023](#), changes to the City's Cold Weather Response have been made to better serve people experiencing homelessness. With a new process for opening Warming Centres at minus five degrees Celsius and/or when Environment & Climate Change Canada issues a winter weather event, criteria for opening them will no longer include Extreme Cold Weather Alerts as issued in the past by Toronto Public Health at minus 15 degrees Celsius or minus 20 windchill. Starting in the 2023 cold weather season, Toronto Public Health no longer issues Extreme Cold Weather Alerts and focuses on public health advice for the general population on [staying healthy in cold weather](#).

Residents can be notified of extreme cold alerts issued by Environment & Climate Change Canada by visiting their website for information on your [local forecast](#) and [weather alerts](#) or by downloading the [WeatherCAN mobile app](#). Please note that Environment & Climate Change Canada's cold alerts occur at colder conditions than historical Extreme Cold Weather Alerts issued by Toronto Public Health.

Each division involved in the Cold Weather Response Plan will continue to provide cold weather services, while monitoring temperatures from Environment & Climate Change Canada independently. This will allow for City divisions and external partners to activate cold weather services per their roles outlined below, and as they deem they are needed in the community, without the need for external messaging or direction from Toronto Public Health, improving the timeliness and specificity of the City's overall response to cold weather.

MAINTENANCE OF THE PLAN

The Cold Weather Response Plan is a living document, maintained and updated by Toronto Public Health in collaboration with various City divisions and partnering agencies. While the key components described below reflect the current understanding and expectations regarding the Plan, this document will be updated to reflect developments and enhancements over time.

Emerging evidence will continue to be used to assess whether future enhancements should be made to the City's Cold Weather Response Plan.

The Cold Weather Response Plan is a public document and is available on the [City website](#).

THE COLD WEATHER RESPONSE COMMITTEE

Members of the Cold Weather Response Committee consist mainly of key partners who provide direct services under the Cold Weather Response Plan. The Cold Weather Response Committee will provide a mechanism for regular review, evaluation and improvement of the City's cold weather response.

Committee members are responsible for ensuring that all those involved in the response are familiar with the Plan. In addition, all plan members are encouraged to provide information to their own staff about how to avoid cold-related health impacts while on the job.

THE PLAN: PARTNERS AND ROLES

Toronto Public Health

Overall Administration and Coordination

Toronto Public Health is responsible for the overall administration and coordination of the Cold Weather Response Plan. This involves:

- Coordinating, maintaining and chairing a Cold Weather Response Committee.
- Collaborating and engaging with organizations and individuals who play a role in education, planning, and responses to cold weather and climate change, and extreme weather more generally. This network of response partners is developed, maintained and available as a consultation resource for enhancing services each year.

Health Promotion

A key role for Toronto Public Health is to provide information about the health impacts of extreme cold weather and educating the public on strategies to prevent and treat cold weather injuries and illnesses. The advice may include steps to be taken on, or in advance of, cold days.

This information is available from toronto.ca/StayWarm and includes:

- Identification of people who are most at risk from cold weather.
- The types of health impacts that may arise from exposure to cold weather, both among homeless populations and in the general population.
- Tips on how to stay warm and dry to prevent health impacts of cold weather.
- Advice about how to help others.
- Advice for groups and organizations that provide services or care for vulnerable groups.
- Links to the City's Winter Services Plan for individuals experiencing homelessness, including Warming Centres activated during colder temperatures.
- Direction to contact 3-1-1 if there is a need to report people at risk. Toronto Public Health also provides enhanced outreach and communications to health care professionals in Toronto. This includes providing physicians with information that can be used to advise patients, such as elderly patients and those with pre-existing cardiovascular illnesses, who are at increased risk of developing cold-related injuries even at moderate winter temperatures. More information is available on the [City website](#).

Toronto Shelter and Support Services (TSSS)

Toronto Shelter and Support Services plays a significant role in supporting people experiencing homelessness during winter months and cold weather conditions by providing additional warm spaces for people who are otherwise vulnerable to cold and winter related events.

Starting November 15, TSSS will work with staff and funded partners to add spaces to the shelter system by expanding existing shelter programs and opening dedicated 24-hour winter respite sites that will be available throughout the winter months.

TSSS will activate Warming Centres when temperatures reach minus five degrees Celsius and/or when Environment & Climate Change Canada issues a winter weather event warning.

Members of the public and community organizations can [sign up to get email updates](#) about Warming Centres, including when they open and close.

Generally, Warming Centres open at 5 p.m. on the day that locations are activated. Once open, Warming Centres remain open 24 hours a day until it is determined that locations will close. Once a Warming Centre closes to new admissions, staff work to refer individuals who remain onsite to alternate spaces in the shelter system.

An additional Warming Centre and other surge capacity will be activated when temperatures hit minus 15 degrees Celsius. At this temperature, the City will also dispatch additional street outreach teams to perform wellness checks and encourage people to come indoors. Outreach staff will also hand out blankets, sleeping bags and warm winter clothing all winter long.

TSSS has worked with service providers to extend operating hours at several [daytime drop-in locations](#) throughout the winter months. Staff will also work to move people from the shelter system into new supportive and social housing units that will open throughout the winter season.

More information regarding the 2024/2025 Winter Services Plan for people experiencing homelessness can be found on the [City website](#).

Municipal Licensing & Standards (MLS)

Municipal Licensing & Standards enforces Municipal Code, Chapter 497 Article 1, which requires landlords to provide heating up to at least 21 degrees Celsius between September 15 and June 1 of each year. Municipal Licensing & Standards is responsible for investigating complaints from tenants of no heat or low heat. In the event of an Extreme Cold Alert, front line officers are prepared to respond to an increase in such calls.

Municipal Licensing and Standards - Toronto Animal Services (TAS)

Toronto Animal Services develops and disseminates cold weather safety messages for pet owners and attends to sick or injured stray dogs or cats if confined or immobile, and critically sick, injured or distressed wildlife if confined or immobile and attended by someone.

Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 349 prohibits allowing domestic animals to remain outdoors during extreme weather unless the animal has access to an enclosure that will adequately protect the animal from the elements. Toronto Animal Services responds to complaints about animals exposed to extreme weather on a priority basis.

Toronto Paramedic Services

Toronto Paramedic Services Community Paramedicine program provides winter preparedness training to Streets to Homes outreach workers in addition to offering a wellness clinic at Elizabeth Street Warming Centre on Wednesdays when operational. Toronto Paramedic Services maintains the ability to activate a Divisional Operations Centre in the event of a severe and prolonged cold event.

Toronto Emergency Management

Toronto Emergency Management maintains the City's Emergency Operations Centre in a state of operational readiness in order to support any required action to address an emergency situation. Additional details about the potential role of Toronto Emergency Management in a cold weather emergency are described under the "Extreme Cold Weather Emergencies" section of this Plan.

Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation

During extreme cold weather events, the Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation division makes community centres available as places for people to warm up during operating hours. As well, Park Ambassador staff connect with potentially vulnerable individuals in City parks and public green spaces and may notify Streets to Homes staff who provide and coordinate mobile street outreach services.

Toronto Police Service

The Toronto Police Service ensures that its members pay special attention to areas where vulnerable citizens at risk of cold-related illness are found and encourages them to go to a safe place.

3-1-1 Toronto

The 3-1-1 Contact Centre offers a 24/7 telephone service to provide information about City services and programs, including cold weather response. A service request for Municipal Licensing & Standards or Toronto Animal Services can be initiated via the 3-1-1 Contact Centre, or by using their online portal or 3-1-1 mobile app to alert staff of no heat or low-heat situations, sick or injured stray dogs or cats, and critically sick, injured or distressed wildlife.

Toronto Transit Commission (TTC)

From November 15 to April 15, at a threshold of -15 or below, the TTC will provide transportation from Spadina and Union Stations to Warming Centres upon request by the City of Toronto.

Ontario Health atHome

Ontario Health atHome Toronto Central office delivers home and community health care and connects people to other services in our community. It integrates consideration of indoor temperatures into regular in-home assessments conducted for vulnerable clients. In the case where a home environment is flagged as "too cold," a follow-up is made with the client's family to address concerns. Ontario Health atHome advises Cold Weather Response Plan partners who encounter individuals in the community and may require additional support to refer that person to the Toronto Central office for a home risk assessment and case management and/or referral to other community services that may better meet their needs. For cold weather events, care coordinators review their caseload for patients at risk and within one day activate pre-determined plans including more intensive follow-up during a prolonged wave.

RELATED PLANS, PROTOCOLS & PROGRAMS

Extreme Cold Weather Emergencies

It is possible that extreme cold weather conditions could be sufficiently severe and/or prolonged that their effects would require action beyond what is outlined by this Cold Weather Response Plan.

For example, extreme cold in combination with power or water shortages, or of extended duration, could strain the capacity of the health and social services sectors to respond. As the magnitude of the response may escalate more rapidly than response organizations can manage, so may the requirement for additional support from within the City.

When extreme winter weather demonstrates the potential to exhaust existing plans, procedures and resources, or dictates a need for enhanced coordination and communication among multiple divisions, Toronto Emergency Management will provide strategic coordination and support.

Toronto Emergency Management may activate an Incident Management Team in response to extreme cold winter weather scenarios based on a number of risk factors, or at the request of the Medical Officer of Health or any member of the Toronto Emergency Management Program Committee, as per the City's Emergency Plan.

The Incident Management Team will be staffed to manage the strategic response to the emergency and to support the coordination of emergency operations. In the event of an emergency, whether declared or not, Toronto Emergency Management Program Committee is authorized to undertake activities they consider necessary for the purposes of responding to and recovering from an emergency. The Incident Management Team provides an established and recognized point of authority to coordinate response resources, personnel and incident information.

More details about the City's Emergency Plan are available from the [City website](#).

Winter Preparedness and Power Outages

The City of Toronto offers information about how to prepare for winter and the possibility of winter storms in combination with power outages. For more information, please visit the [City website](#).

Occupational Health and Safety

The City is committed to providing and maintaining safe and healthy working conditions for all employees. Staff safety during cold weather and in particular during Extreme Cold Alerts (issued by Environment and Climate Change Canada) is a priority. City employees – both management and staff – have access to further information on how to avoid harmful impacts of cold weather, which is posted on the City's website by Human Resources Occupational Health and Safety. Read the City's [Cold Stress Policy and Guidelines](#).

Climate Change and Severe Weather

Toronto is expected to experience more severe and unpredictable weather in the coming years as a result of climate change. Additional information about the health impacts of climate change are available on the [City website](#). Learn more about the City's [plans and progress on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and on preparing for a changed climate](#).