

Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO)

2010 Hyperthermia Comments

To: Neil O. Albert, City Administrator
Clarence H. Carter, Director, DHS
Laura G. Zeilinger, Deputy Director, DHS
Patricia Handy, Homelessness Services, DHS
Chapman Todd, Chair, Operations & Logistics Committee,
DC Interagency Council on Homelessness
Councilmember Tommy Wells, Chair, Committee on Human Services

These comments are submitted on behalf of the Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO). COHHO is a diverse group of non-profit organizations and individuals in the District of Columbia who have a common goal of ending homelessness.

COHHO has been at the forefront of gathering data and monitoring information about cold and heat alerts during hypothermia and hyperthermia seasons.¹ Exposure to extreme cold or extreme heat can result in death, and for homeless persons the risk of exposure to such extreme temperatures is a daily reality. For this reason, COHHO and its members have developed a system for tracking the daily weather conditions, the alert status, and the nightly census in the city contracted emergency homeless shelters.

There is no statutory definition of the Hyperthermia Season. It is generally considered to run from June 1 through August 31. COHHO generally reports on the period from the first day on which the temperature or heat index reached or exceeded 95°F, the statutory standard for calling a hyperthermia alert, through the last such day. In 2010, that period (the Hyperthermia Season) began on May 27 and extended through September 24.

The accompanying Chart shows the official NOAA temperature and heat index and other weather conditions for Washington, D.C., for each day from May 25 through September 27, and the dates on which alerts were called. According to the weather data, alerts should have been called on 47 of the 125 days shown on the chart or 38% of the days in the Hyperthermia Season. This is in stark contrast to last year in which there were only 9 days on which alerts should have been

¹ COHHO or its member organizations have reported on extreme weather for more than eight years. COHHO's reports are intended to amplify, not replace, reports prepared by or for The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness.

called, and even two years ago when there were 21 such days. Clearly, 2010 was a very hot summer.

Alerts were actually called on 45 days, but on 9 of those days neither the temperature nor the heat index reached 95°. In contrast, on 11 days on which the 95° mark was reached an alert was not called. This means on 23% of the days on which there should have been an alert, no alert was called. This is an unacceptable error rate. Excess heat jeopardizes the life and health of homeless individuals and those without access to air conditioning. The City is required by statute to provide cooling centers and keep shelters open on such days.

It is important to note that May 27 and September 22, 23, and 24 (on which a record 99° temperature was recorded) were 4 of the days on which required alerts were not called. Five other missed alert days were in the first week of June or last week of August. This means that the City must be more diligent and conscious of the possibility of extreme temperatures at the beginning and end of the traditional Hyperthermia Season.

The attached chart also details the number of persons and families using the City's emergency shelters each night, broken down by gender. The chart shows under the column labeled "CAP" (for capacity) the days on which the system reached capacity for men, women, or families (represented by an initial), or exceeded capacity and by how many (initial followed by a number). The column labeled "SOC" (Shelter Over Capacity) details each night when there were 'overflow' persons in any men's or women's shelter (persons in excess of the number of beds in any given shelter), and the number of such persons.

The men's shelters as a whole were at or exceeded capacity on 8 nights, once by 20 persons. An individual men's shelter exceeded capacity on 19 nights.

On 40 nights, women's shelters as a whole were at or exceeded capacity. There were 102 of the 125 nights (82%) recorded on the chart on which there were 5 or fewer empty beds in the women's shelters. One or more women's shelters had an overflow on 87 nights (70%).

It is unclear if there is unmet demand for women. It has been documented that women do not seek shelter every night if their experience is that the shelters are full or overcrowded on nights that they seek it. It is COHHO's recommendation that the number of women's beds available every night be increased by at least 10.

On one night, families were at capacity. However, there were always at least 253 family units (95% of capacity) on every night during the period. Since the Winter Plan does not increase the shelter capacity for families, and DHS has promised not to exceed the 135 family unit capacity at DC General, we are concerned

where families will be housed during the upcoming Hypothermia Season which begins in a few weeks.

System-wide, there were 2163 total persons in the emergency shelters on the second night covered by COHHO's chart, and that total was not exceeded throughout the period. However, the total number of persons served fell below 2000 on only five nights. There were 2074 total persons in the emergency shelters at the end of the Hyperthermia Season compared with 1845 at the end of the 2009 Season. This gives COHHO concern that the capacities planned for the upcoming Hypothermia Season, even though expected increases were taken into account in planning, will be insufficient.

Respectfully Submitted,

Melvin Watkins
COHHO Chair

KEY TO Hyperthermia Chart

Shelter Symbols

A	New York Avenue
E	801 East
L	La Casa
D	Open Door
P	Hermano Pedro
T	Harriet Tubman