

Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO)

2011 Hyperthermia Comments

To: Allen Lew, City Administrator
David A. Berns, Director, DHS
Patricia Handy, Homelessness Services, DHS
Chapman Todd, Chair, Operations & Logistics Committee,
DC Interagency Council on Homelessness
Councilmember Jim Graham, 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 coincide with the meteorological summer which runs 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 2011, that period (the Hyperthermia Season) began on May 26 and extended through August 26.

The accompanying Chart shows the official NOAA temperature and heat index and other weather conditions for Washington, D.C., for each day from May 20 through August 31, and the dates on which alerts were called. According to the weather data, alerts should have been called on 38 of the 104 days shown on the chart or 38% of the days in the Hyperthermia Season. This is consistent with last year in which there were 47 such days out of 125 (38%) on which alerts should have been called. In contrast,

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

there were only 9 such days in 2009 and 21 such days in 2008. Clearly, 2010 and 2011 were very hot summers.

Alerts were actually called on 38 days, but on 10² of those days neither the temperature nor the heat index reached 95°. In addition, on 10³ days on which the 95° mark was reached an alert was not called. This means on 26% 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 airconditioning. The City is required by statute to provide cooling centers and keep shelters open on such days.

It is important to note that May 26 and five days in August were the majority of the days on which required alerts were not called. 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.

In addition to the days on which Alerts were called, the emergency shelters, including an Overflow Women's shelter at DC General and a temporary Family shelter at the Kennedy Recreation Center, were open on a 24 hour basis during Hurricane Irene.

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 capacity on 19 nights, and exceeded capacity only on 4 nights during the last week of August. An individual men's shelter exceeded capacity only on those 4 nights. Daily usage ranged from a low of 824 on June 18 and 19 to a high of 909 on August 30.

On 55 nights (53%), women's shelters as a whole were at or exceeded capacity. On 34 additional nights (33%), there were only one or two empty beds in the women's shelter system. There was only one night recorded on the chart on which there were as many as 5 empty beds in the women's shelters, and only 4 nights when there were 4 empty beds. On the other hand, an individual women's shelter was overcapacity on only 10 nights, and the only two of these that exceeded one person overcapacity were during the hurricane..

² Alerts which, according to the weather data, were not required were called on 6/3, 6/4, 6/5, 6/6, 6/7, 7/4, 7/5, 7/6, 7/9, and 7/10. It is possible that some of these Alerts may have been called because of forecasts of extreme weather (which COHHO does not track, but which necessitate calling an Alert under the statute) which did not eventuate.

³ On 5/26, 6/22, 6/28, 7/28, 8/2, 8/6, 8/8, 8/18, 8/21, and 8/26. On three of these days both temperature and heat index exceeded 95°.

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.

Families at the beginning of the Hyperthermia Season were near their high of 296 family units, and slowly declined through the period covered by the chart to a low of 256 units, ending the period with 257 units. Capacity is 312 family units. Since the Winter Plan does not increase the shelter capacity for families, we are concerned where families will be housed during the upcoming Hypothermia Season which begins in a few weeks.

System wide, there were 2113 total persons in the emergency shelters on the first night covered by COHHO's chart and the total peaked at 2131 persons on June 6. The total number of persons served fell below 2000 on only five nights. There were 2036 total persons in the emergency shelters at the end of the Hyperthermia Season.

Respectfully Submitted,

Robert H. Swart *on behalf of the*
COHHO Executive Board
Cohho1@gmail.com

KEY TO Hyperthermia Chart

Shelter Symbols

A	Adams Place
K	New York Av
D	Open Door
P	Hermano Pedro
V	Women's Overflow @ DC General

R

Kennedy Recreation Center