

September 29, 2005

Mr. Robert C. Bobb
Deputy Mayor/City Administrator
Government of the District of Columbia
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Ms. Barbara Childs-Pair
Director
Emergency Management Agency
Government of the District of Columbia
Frank D. Reeves Municipal Center
2000 14th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009

Dear Mr. Bobb and Ms. Childs-Pair:

The Coalition of Homeless and Housing Organizations (COHHO) appreciates the efforts that the City has made to address the needs of the public during extremely hot weather (hyperthermia) in summer months. However, we have several recommendations for improving the City's response.

The current procedure is for DC EMA to determine when to declare a heat advisory alert, based upon information provided by the National Weather Service. If an alert is called, EMA notifies 15 agencies, including The Community Partnership and United Planning Organization. UPO is responsible for calling the publicly funded shelters, and UPO staffs the Hotline by which citizens find out whether an Alert has been called and can ask for help.

The current Heat Alert threshold in the District of Columbia is a Heat Index (*i.e.*, actual temperature or heat-humidity combination) of 95 degrees Fahrenheit.

The current policy is that when the Heat Index is 95 degrees Fahrenheit, the City does the following:

- Provides cooling centers
- Sends a van to pick up homeless persons and other persons at risk, to provide cold beverages and to transport persons to cooling centers
- Keeps the District-funded 12-hour shelters open.

- The cooling centers are required to be open 24 hours a day for as long as the temperature or heat index remains at or above 95 degrees.

- The cooling centers are at:
 - Reeves Center (lobby), 2000 14th St., NW
 - King Office Building (lobby), 3720 Martin Luther King Ave., SE
 - Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (lobby), 25 M St., SW
 - One Judiciary Square, 441 4th St., NW
 - Chevy Chase Recreation Center, 5601 Connecticut Ave., NW.

The District has also committed to:

- Open street showers at 14 sites, with cool beverages provided
- Extend hours of operation at 5 indoor pools and 19 outdoor pools
- Open 2 spray parks at Girard St. Park and Fort David Recreation Center.

Our recommendations:

(1) Issue a written policy in advance of the summer. Hold policy meetings early enough for that policy to be agreed upon, written, and distributed by e-mail and Internet *before* June 1 annually.¹

(2) Make sure all published versions of the policy are consistent (*e.g.*, the DC EMA's web page and The Community Partnership's e-mailed version should be identical).

(3) Make sure that all information in the published policy is factually and literally accurate. For example, do not state that five cooling centers will be opened on a hyperthermia day when only three may actually be open on any given day.

(4) Revisit the question of which agency is responsible for calling a hyperthermia alert. We suggest two alternatives:

¹ The Hyperthermia Policy Planning Meeting took place on June 10, 2005. The first reported on-street death of a homeless person in the District that seemed to be heat-connected or heat-exacerbated occurred on May 15. Two other homeless persons died on the street from what appeared to be heat-connected or heat-exacerbated causes, on June 6 and June 9.

(a) Considering the demands placed on DC EMA and the fact that hyperthermia is a health issue, assign this decision and management of the alert to the DC Department of Health; or

(b) Considering that the DC Department of Human Services is the lead agency for the winter hypothermia alert, make DHS the lead agency for declaring and managing the summer hyperthermia alert.

(5) Clarify the “telephone tree,” *i.e.*, which agencies call which other agencies, and in what sequence. We can report that there has been confusion among the agencies during summer 2005. There has been significant delay and even failure to notify UPO altogether whether an Alert has been called.

(6) Clarify how outreach workers (who work directly with homeless citizens) are notified about the Heat Alert.

(7) Expand the notification process so that non-public shelters and non-profit agencies which provide services to the homeless are also informed when there is a Heat Alert in the District.

(8) Considering that as a matter of fact the National Weather Service often predicts Heat Alerts days in advance and that City shelters need to know before 6 a.m. whether or not to keep shelters open, the City should declare a Heat Alert before 6 a.m. whenever the National Weather Service predicts a Heat Alert for that date. The City should end its frequent practice of waiting until mid-afternoon before declaring a Heat Alert.

(9) If the National Weather Service actually declares a Heat Alert in DC-- at whatever time of day that occurs-- the City should accept that declaration and implement its hyperthermia policy immediately. There have been days when NWS has declared a Heat Alert but the City has not done so, or has done so hours later.

(10) Change the threshold at which a Heat Alert is called. The current Heat Alert threshold in the District of Columbia is a Heat Index of 95 degrees Fahrenheit. This threshold is too high.

(a) The District is in a former swamp area, and it experiences commensurate humidity; (b) urban areas retain heat more than rural areas, city streets reflect heat upward and urban buildings reflect heat outward in the direction of human beings on the street; and (c) people who are in direct sunlight experience heat at up to 15 degrees more

than others.

In the District of Columbia, Heat Indices of 90 and above are exceptionally debilitating even to people who walk from air-conditioned cars and Metro to air-conditioned offices. Those heat conditions are even more unbearable to people who do not have such amenities.²

Therefore, COHHO strongly recommends that the policy be modulated and that a Heat Index of 90 degrees Fahrenheit be the threshold for declaration of a Heat (Hyperthermia) Alert in the District of Columbia.

(11) The City should and must call a Heat Alert every day on which the threshold Heat Index is met—*without exception*. On at least two occasions in summer 2005, the City failed to call a Heat Alert when the Heat Index was met. This is unacceptable, considering that the purpose of the policy is to avert heat-related illness, hospitalizations and death.

(12) Ensure that bottled water is available in every cooling center at all times. Place supplies in place *before* June 1 annually. Review the process for relying on donated water supplies.

(13) Review the system for “staffing” cooling centers exclusively with volunteers; the result has been that cooling centers are not open if volunteers cannot be found in a timely manner.

(14) Review whether shelters have been opened or re-opened in a timely manner on Heat Alert days in summer 2005.

² See, e.g., “Heat-Related Mortality --- Arizona, 1993--2002, and United States, 1979—2002,” Centers for Disease Control 54 *MMWR Weekly* 628, July 1, 2005:

To prevent heat-related illness and death, public health agencies should identify susceptible populations and risk behaviors. Children, elderly persons, and persons without access to air conditioning are at increased risk for heat-related illness and death. In addition, persons with chronic mental disorders or cardiopulmonary disease and those receiving medications that interfere with salt and water balance, such as diuretics, anticholinergic agents, and tranquilizers that impair sweating, are at greater risk for heat-related illness and death. Drinking alcoholic beverages, ingesting illicit drugs (e.g., cocaine or amphetamines), and participating in strenuous outdoor physical activities (e.g., sports or manual labor) in hot weather also are risk behaviors associated with heat-related illness

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(15) Explore, as a matter of health policy, whether the current list of City-supplied responses on Heat Alert days is sufficient to meet the health and safety needs of citizens in the District of Columbia. Even better, revisit the policy *de novo*, as if no protocol were currently in place. What would best practices for this particular geographical area look like?

(16) Examine, as a matter of health policy, whether the environment within publicly funded shelters is sufficient to prevent heat-related illnesses. We can report that individuals are frequently removed from non-air-conditioned shelters to hospital emergency rooms.

(17) Repair air-conditioning systems no later than May.

We look forward to discussing these life-and-death matters with you, and we look forward to learning the results of the District's examination of the issues that call for research and review. We appreciate the efforts made to date and encourage the District to build upon those efforts.

Very truly yours,

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