

Warming and Cooling Centres

! The following research profile provides an overview of the importance of warming and cooling centres for vulnerable persons and the need for a formal extreme weather response system in Guelph & Wellington.

Key Findings

- Cooling and warming centres are important in helping to reduce the risk of illness, injury or death in vulnerable groups of people that result from extreme temperatures and weather conditions.ⁱ
- Cooling and warming centres are often part of hot and cold weather response plans, designed specifically for a community and/or region. Most municipalities in Ontario do not have a plan or protocol developed for extreme weather conditions.ⁱⁱ
- There are no formal extreme weather response plans for vulnerable persons in Guelph & Wellington.

Background: Warming & Cooling Centres

During unusual and prolonged periods of extreme temperatures, such as heat waves and cold snaps, the general public's health and well-being are at great risk. Socially isolated and low income groups are even more vulnerable to the effects of extreme temperatures.ⁱⁱⁱ



In some urban areas, cooling and warming centres are established as a public health service to offer respite from extreme temperatures to the general public.

Cooling centres are typically:

- Air-conditioned, free of charge to the general public, and may also provide free drinking water.
- Civic buildings, such as public libraries and community centres, but can be public buildings, such as shopping malls.
- Offered at locations that are easily accessible for most patrons (e.g., on a subway or transit route).

Warming centres are typically:

- Heated space, with the potential for overnight stays.
- Overnight facilities (including sleeping quarters and warm meals) for individuals

with inadequate heating at home or for stranded motorists.

- Municipal-operated buildings, such as community centres and churches.

Research indicates that extreme weather response plans, which often include the provision of cooling and heating centres, have been successful in significantly reducing exposure and deaths related to heat waves and cold snaps.^{iv}

Guelph & Wellington

- There are no formal extreme weather response plans for vulnerable persons in Guelph & Wellington.
- In July and August 2010, the City of Guelph provided extended hours at wading pools and splash pads and opened the Sleeman Centre to help residents cool off during hot temperatures. In addition, residents were encouraged to use Community Centres and City Hall as a cooling centre.^v
- During cold weather snaps, people in our community turn to the Guelph Public Library, University of Guelph, 40 Baker, Welcome In Drop In, Youth Resource Centre, and various churches to stay warm.
- Many clients at the Youth Resource Centre choose to camp out at Guelph Lake during the summer so they can cool off in the water. This can be tricky as they do not have the money to pay for the over-night fees and run the risk of being asked to leave and, if repeated, being charged with trespassing.
- In the winter, the youth shelter does provide day-time programming at the Resource Centre and the adult shelter does the same with the Drop In on Gordon St. While this means that there is 24 hour coverage for weather 'relief,' it always involves travelling at some point of the day in the elements to go to the next place when the location they are at is closing. Biggest concern for the youth is that they do not own the appropriate clothing needed (boots, coats, hats etc.) for even brief exposure (such as when walking from day to evening locations).

Ontario

- Toronto and Oakville are the only cities in Ontario with a municipal hot weather

response plan, which include providing cooling centres for the general public.^{vi}

- Several regions (e.g., Halton, Peel) have regional hot weather response plans and/or cold weather response plans (e.g., Kingston, Frotenac, Lennox & Addington).
- Most Ontario cities/towns do not have a response plan for extreme weather conditions. Instead, they will develop emergency services when extreme weather conditions are already occurring.^{vii}
- Toronto, Ottawa, Sudbury, and Waterloo have formal municipal cold weather response plans, which include providing warming centres for the general public.^{viii}

Conclusion

Providing interventions and services, such as cooling and warming centres, when extreme temperatures occur for prolonged periods has many benefits to the general public. These benefits include the prevention of injuries, illnesses, and weather-related deaths. Warming and cooling centres are also effective in reducing the risks that extreme temperatures place on vulnerable groups of people, including the homeless and people who live in homes without adequate heating and/or cooling systems. Developing an extreme hot and cold weather response plan designed specifically for a community enhances the community's well-being by providing protection for individual and community health and safety needs.

Policy Recommendations

Municipal Policy Areas

1. Extreme Weather Response Plan

Municipalities in Wellington County, including the City of Guelph, need to develop formal extreme weather response plans to protect individual and community health and safety needs.

Response plans, including interventions and services provided, such as warming and cooling centres, should be evaluated and modified to maximize effectiveness for the

community/region. This includes considering factors such as accessibility and safety.

Though each municipal or regional response systems may differ from one another, it is important for plans to follow these criteria:

- Define extreme weather conditions
- Plan for different levels of weather thresholds
- Communicate core health messages
- Effectively implement required actions (e.g., open cooling or warming centres, notify response teams, support community agencies/partners)

Federal Policy Areas

1. Natural Resources Canada Climate Change Action Fund

The Federal Government, through a grant from Natural Resources Canada Climate Change Action Fund, provided the money to develop Toronto's synoptic heat watch-warning system as a pilot project.^{ix}

2. Develop a National Heat Alert System

In the past there have been calls for the Federal Government to develop a National Heat Alert System similar to those in France, Germany and the United States. In 2005, Dr. David McKeown, Toronto Medical Officer of Health, recommended that "The federal Minister of the Environment, in collaboration with the federal Minister of Health, develop a national heat-health warning system that would enable major urban centres to implement appropriate heat response protocols to protect vulnerable populations during extreme heat events."^x

Provincial Policy Areas

1. Develop a model Extreme Weather Response Protocol

A model Extreme Weather Response Protocol should be developed for municipalities as a guiding document to ensure a minimum standard of response across Ontario, while allowing municipalities flexibility in designing their own interventions.^{xi}

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ⁱⁱ GTA Clean Air Council. (2007). A Scan of Municipal Heat/Health Watch Warning Systems and Hot Weather Response Plans. Retrieved from Clean Air Partnership website: http://www.cleanairpartnership.org/pdf/heat_report.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Ministry of Ontario (2010). Public Information – Ministry Programs: Extreme heat. Retrieved from Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care website: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/emu/emerg_prep/et_heat.aspx

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^v (2010). Beat the heat at City facilities. *City of Guelph Newsroom*. Retrieved from City of Guelph newsroom: http://guelph.ca/newsroom_display.cfm?itemID=79037

^{vi} GTA Clean Air Council, 2007.

^{vii} <http://gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/WARMING-AND-COOLING-CENTRES.pdf>

^{viii} <http://gwpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/WARMING-AND-COOLING-CENTRES.pdf>

^{ix} GTA Clean Air Council, 2007.

^x GTA Clean Air Council, 2007.

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