Guideline for Opening a Cooling Center

California Area Indian Health Service

Heat-related illness and death is caused by prolonged exposure to extreme heat. More Americans die from heat waves each year than any other extreme weather event.1 Extreme heat can be life threatening to elders, children, pregnant women and individual with heart, kidney and lung diseases. Low-income populations may be disproportionately affected by extreme heat due to reduced access to home air conditioning.2

Historically, California averages 4 extreme heat days per year where the daily maximum temperature is above 103.9°F. By mid-century it is projected that California will average 18 extreme heat days per year.3 The 2021 Pacific Northwest heat dome claimed an estimated 1,200 lives in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia.4 The 2022 California heat wave caused a 5% increase in deaths in the state. This translates into 395 more deaths than what would normally be expected during that timeframe.5

Cooling centers are an effective strategy to help reduce vulnerable populations from exposure to excess heat and prevent heat-related illness such as heat stroke or heat exhaustion. A cooling center is a location with air conditioning, cooling resources, water, food and support services that operates during the hottest part of the day only. They are an important option for people who do not have air conditioning in their homes or may have lost power in their homes.2

The following is a guide to help you develop and implement a cooling center in your community.

# Preparing for Extreme Heat

* Develop a heat alert or extreme heat response plan for the Tribe.
* Develop a heat communication plan.
* Incorporate extreme heat education into the Tribe’s health clinic’s home visiting program where providers educate vulnerable community members on heat health risks and prevention measures.
* Incorporate screening into Tribe’s health clinic’s home visiting programs to facilitate a connection between vulnerable community members with community resources for home cooling (e.g. LIHEAP funding, home weatherization and/or transportation to cooling centers).
* Consider community distribution of fans and AC units to vulnerable members.
* Consider issuing motel vouchers to vulnerable community members during extreme heat events.
* Consider an extreme heat tabletop exercise involving all the Tribe’s Incident Command Structure (emergency management, healthcare, social services, schools, daycare, Head Start, maintenance, etc.).
* Distribute extreme heat factsheets through the community center, health clinic and social media.

# Determining When to Open a Cooling Center

* Monitor the National Weather Service [Heat Index Tool](https://www.wpc.ncep.noaa.gov/heatrisk/#:~:text=The%20NWS%20HeatRisk%20is%20an,both%20daytime%20and%20nighttime%20temperatures). When the National Weather Service issues a heat advisory or warning, activate the Tribe’s heat alert/extreme heat response and extreme heat communication plan.
* Prepare to open the Tribe’s cooling center and increase public health messaging when the National Weather Service issues a Heat Watch or Excessive Heat Warning for your area.
  + Release announcements regarding the opening of the cooling center on social media and other outlets in accordance with the heat communication plan. Include information on when and where the cooling “center” will be open and what transportation options will be provided by the Tribe.

# Location Considerations

* Potential community facilities could be suitable to serve as a community cooling center:
  + Library
  + Community Center
  + Senior Center
  + Recreational Center
  + Public Swimming Pool
* Key Attributes of a Suitable Location:
  + Proximity to vulnerable populations which includes:
    - Adults over 65
    - Children under 5
    - Pregnant persons
    - People with pre-existing conditions such as cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, diabetes, asthma
    - Homeless Populations
    - Lower income families (less access to home air conditioning/transportation)
  + Arrange transportation options for vulnerable individuals.
  + Accessibility (ADA compliant)
  + Enough space for estimated usage (based on max building occupancy for life safety)
* Air conditioning with MERV 11 or higher filter installed (especially important if wildfire smoke is present)
* Specific space designed for use by children and teens.
* Adequate number of toilets and hand washing sinks6 
  + 1 toilet for every 20 people
  + 1 handwashing sink for every 15 people
* Adequate number solid waste receptacles and collection services
* Potable water
* Kitchen amenities
* Adequate tables and chairs
* Back-Up Generator
* Consider for outdoor areas: Fans and Misters

# Amenities

* Adequate number of electrical outlets
* Water, snacks, meals
* Activities for guests (Wi-Fi access, board games, video games, movies, books, art and craft supplies, art and cultural events/classes, skill building workshops, access to laundry and recreational facilities, etc.)

# Equipment/Supplies

* Indoor/Outdoor Signage at the facility indicating:
  + It is operating as a cooling center
  + Operational hours
  + Rules of conduct
  + Marking designated areas (sitting area, registration desk, child/play area, pet area, etc.)
* Visitor sign in/sign out sheet
* Adequate building cleaning supplies
* Adequate personal hygiene supplies such as toilet paper, paper towels for hand drying, hand washing soap, and consider feminine hygiene products
* Adequate supply of drinking water
* Adequate number of solid waste receptacles
* Refrigerated storage for medications (dedicated refrigerator, dedicated shelf in refrigerator)
* First Aid Kit
* AED
* Power strips so visitors can charge phones, electronic devices and medical equipment
* Weather radio
* Battery powered radio
* Fire extinguisher
* Flashlights
* Television
* Consider providing prepackaged sandwiches and snacks. If food is cooked and served in an on-site or off-site commercial kitchen, follow the FDA Food Code to maintain food safety.
  + Reach out to your local Indian Health Service Environmental Health Specialist to perform a food safety survey if cooking is performed (contact information can be found following the link below).
  + If food is cooked and transported from an offsite commercial kitchen, there should be monitoring in place to ensure that the food does not sit in the temperature danger zone (41-135 degrees Fahrenheit) for more than 4 hours.
    - Temperatures logs should be maintained if using time as a control for food safety.
  + If there is no commercial kitchen on site and time and temperature control for safety food (TCS food) is not being transported from an offsite kitchen, then it is recommended to only serve pre-packaged, ready-to-eat food that does not need time and temperature control to maintain food safety.
    - Foods like bagged chips, packaged granola/protein bars, whole uncut fruit, etc.

# Staff Training

* CPR/AED
* First Aid
* Recognizing the signs/symptoms of heat exhaustion/stroke
* Security considerations

# Additional Considerations

* Designated Space and supplies for pets (Water/food dishes, pet food, kennels, and leashes)
* Cots and pillows for people to rest
* Transportation options for vulnerable individuals

# Indian Health Service

# Office of Environmental Health and Engineering Links

OEHE Services:

[CA AREA OEHS Services Brochure](https://www.ihs.gov/california/index.cfm/about-us/oehe/oehe-services-brochure-pdf/)

CA AREA DEHS Services and Contact Information:

[CA Area DEHS Services Page](https://www.ihs.gov/california/index.cfm/about-us/oehe/ehs/)

# References

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