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Fairfax NAACP Survey of People Experiencing Homelessness in Summer 2023 Regarding Fairfax County Pilot Program for Heat Relief

Fairfax NAACP Housing Committee. Mary Paden (chair), George Moore (data analysis), Gladys Robinson, Cookie Blitz, Therese Chaplin, and Jerry Poje (organizers).

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Staff: Rising Hope Church: Rev. Kameron Wilds, Pastor of Rising Hope; Cynthia Jones, office manager. **Lamb Center:** Tara Ruskowski, executive director; Brenda Smallwood, director of operations and facilities. **Reston Wellness Center:** Michelle Hurrell, senior management director, Recovery Program Solutions of Virginia; staff members Mike Donaghy and Stacey Boston. **Reston Tent Camp,** Sarah Selvaraj-Dsouza, RestonStrong.

Volunteer interviewers: Alberta Barber, Carmen Pineiro, Cookie Blitz, Dee Dee Carter, Elizabeth “Liz” Mawhorter, Gladys Robinson, Jerry Poje, Jim Gillespie, Kathryn “Kate” Brady, Leah Tenorio, Mary Paden, Matthew Lofgren, Pamela Powers, Peter Galloway, Sidoux Mitchell, Sue Gaujot, Therese Chaplin,

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fairfax NAACP volunteers conducted a survey of people experiencing homelessness during July 2023 to assess the extent to which they were aware of new county offerings to alleviate extreme heat, whether they felt these measures were preventing adverse health effects, and what measures (existing or not) they thought would most likely reduce adverse health effects. Respondents were also asked to assess their overall health and describe heat-related symptoms. This survey focused on two private drop-in centers, one Wellness Center, and a tent camp in Reston.

This was a mid-term 2023 survey. Fairfax County’s Office to Prevent and End Homelessness intends to do another survey and evaluation in the fall at the end of this pilot program.

Health Effects: The most common adverse health effects reported were dehydration, confusion/dizziness, and difficulty breathing. These were closely followed by heat exhaustion. Often these needed professional health care, but many affected were only able to get care from shelters or friends/associates. Thus, better intervention is likely to significantly reduce health impacts, not just quality of life. Many homeless people were especially vulnerable because of their age (30% over age 65), overall health condition, or gender.

Most favored services: Cold water was by far the most popular item distributed, but it was reported to be in short supply at some centers. Second most popular was a cool place to stay indoors.

Awareness and Communication: The study found that while drop-in and wellness facilities did know about the new program and many unsheltered people were becoming aware, significant improvements

to simplify communications could be made both online and in materials sent to drop-in centers (see Appendix A).

Other suggestions from those surveyed: In the longer to medium term, those experiencing homelessness felt that key improvements to the county’s overall effort would be to:

- Supply more permanent affordable housing.
- Distribute more cooling kits with specific mentioned content.
- Provide enough shelter beds to meet needs year-round.
- Provide more locations for cooling with extended hours.

Key recommendations of the NAACP Housing Committee

Continue to improve awareness and communication.	Simplify online instructions and supply more communication materials to drop in shelters (see Appendix A).
Provide more cooling options (mainly ice water and AC) and transportation to cooling centers and shelters.	Offer more bus passes to drop-in and cooling centers and cold water and ice (only a token amount of water and no ice was supplied)
Provide beds at least for the most vulnerable during high heat days.	Beds for the most vulnerable during summer heat waves and storms (e.g., through motel vouchers, rented small shelters). These should be available at temperatures below the Heat Index of 105°.
Build or convert more affordable housing, especially permanent supportive housing.	Speed up production or conversion of buildings to permanent housing. The Department of Housing and Community Development estimates a need for 300 permanent supportive units. About 150 are in the pipeline but will take years to complete. Temporary housing should be sought in the meantime.
Consider lowering the heat emergency level to conform with neighboring jurisdictions.	This was not on the survey, but center directors and volunteers felt that a Heat Index of 105° was too high a level to trigger emergency services. Washington DC uses 95° and Arlington uses 90°.
Work in consultation with the Fairfax County Health Department	Engage with the County Health Department on various aspects of future heat relief programs for homeless people including the trigger Heat Index level, appropriate care for older individuals or those in poor health, and links between homeless centers and shelters and health care providers.

THE 2023 HEAT RELIEF PROGRAM

A heat relief pilot program was started in June 2023 following recommendations of a Task Force set up after NAACP asked the Board of Supervisors in the summer of 2022 to provide hyperthermia services during summer considering the increasing temperatures due to climate change.

The program consists of:

- Declaring Heat Emergency days when the Heat Index reaches 105°
- Sending text messages to people who sign up to alert them of the Heat Emergency
- Providing a link to a map of cooling centers and overnight shelters and to the bus scheduler
- Establishing a no-turn-away policy at the county's three homeless shelters for individuals where anyone is allowed to sleep overnight on floorspace
- Preparing staff at cooling centers (government buildings including libraries, Community centers, recreation centers, and human services office buildings) to welcome homeless people during business hours
- Supplying drinking water and a set of small heat relief items such as sunscreen, insect repellent, body wipes, cooling towels, hats, personal fans, plastic water bottle, through drop-in centers, cooling centers, and other places

METHODS

The Fairfax NAACP Housing committee organized 18 volunteers who surveyed 63 people experiencing homelessness at drop-in centers and a tent camp in three areas of the County: Reston, Fairfax City, and Route 1 during July to find out whether they were aware of a new county program on heat relief, what else they needed for heat relief, and whether high outdoor temperatures affected their health. The study used a grab sample. Volunteers interviewed respondents using a phone survey created in Google Forms. The committee chair also held discussions with several drop-in center heads and staff about the program.

AWARENESS of NEW COUNTY PROGRAM

In June 2023, Fairfax County began notifying unsheltered people about its new program directly through texts and through staff at shelters and drop-in centers. The text linked to a map of cooling centers and shelters in an area.

Texts went out to those who had signed up when a Heat Emergency was declared (105° Heat Index).

In mid-July, 42% of respondents said they were aware of the text alerts and 58% said they were not. Of those who were aware, 43% signed up for them and 57% did not. Of those who signed up, 89% said they received texts. Thus, of those who were able to sign up, most received the texts.

Of those who did not sign up, 64% said they did not understand how to sign up and 58% said they did not want to sign up.

The text announced the no-turn-away policy at overnight shelters and gave a link to a map of all cooling centers and overnight shelters in the county. It allows the user to enter their current location and find centers or shelters within a selected radius. A page of instructions included a link to the bus scheduler to find out how to get to the shelter. A video explained how to use the map.

Several NAACP volunteers found the instructions to sign up difficult and it took them several attempts. Even some center directors had trouble using the map feature, which provides excellent information. Appendix A offers suggestions on how to create an integrated, more user-friendly map feature.

Asked more broadly where they got information about services available during Heat Alert days, only 7 said they got information online. Most got information from a drop-in center (22) or an overnight shelter (21). Sixteen said they got information at a cooling center: 11 at a library, 5 at a community center, (none mentioned recreation centers, the third type of cooling center).

These findings indicate that it is still important to communicate to unsheltered people through the drop-in and homeless shelters. Appendix A offers suggestions.

Regarding their knowledge of services, 69% of those interviewed said they knew shelters had a no-turn-away policy during heat alerts and 69% knew that libraries, community centers, and rec centers were open as cooling centers during their normal hours. Some of these policies were in force before the summer of 2023.

Only 37% said they had received a bus pass to a cooling center, which was one of the services started this year.

About 10-15 of the people interviewed acknowledged receipt of the contents of a pack distributed to centers that included electrolyte drink powder, a cooling towel, a sun hat, a reusable/collapsible water bottle, a handheld fan, insect repellent, sunscreen, and bus passes.

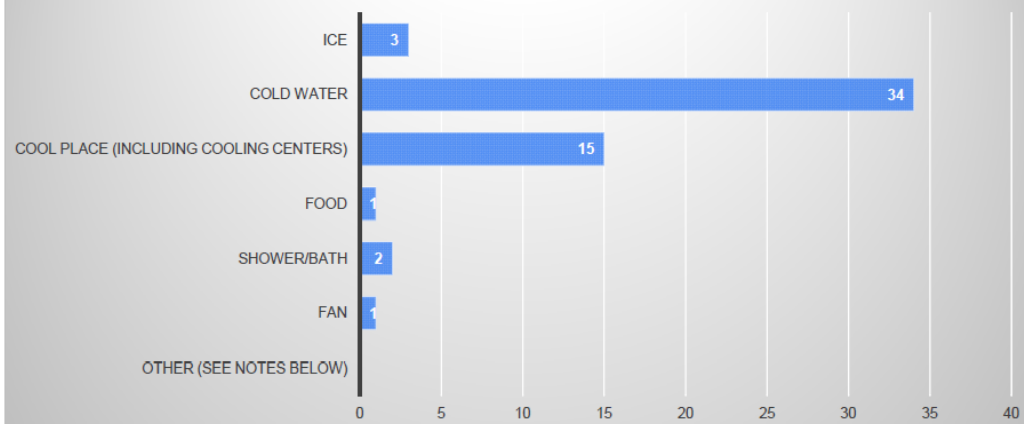
Because the bus passes were included in the kits, some center directors did not know about them at first. Extra bus passes could be given to shelter/center directors with instructions to distribute them to people who need to get to cooling centers.

Two Center directors reported that they each received about 24 kits, whereas their daily guests far outnumbered the packs.

Two drop-in centers leaders said they also received a large pack of bottled drinking water, which they thought was enough for a day or two.

By far, unsheltered people said the most useful things they received from centers were cold drinking water (34) and a cool place to stay for a while (15).

Q05b: Of the things offered, what has been the most helpful to you in avoiding discomfort from the heat?



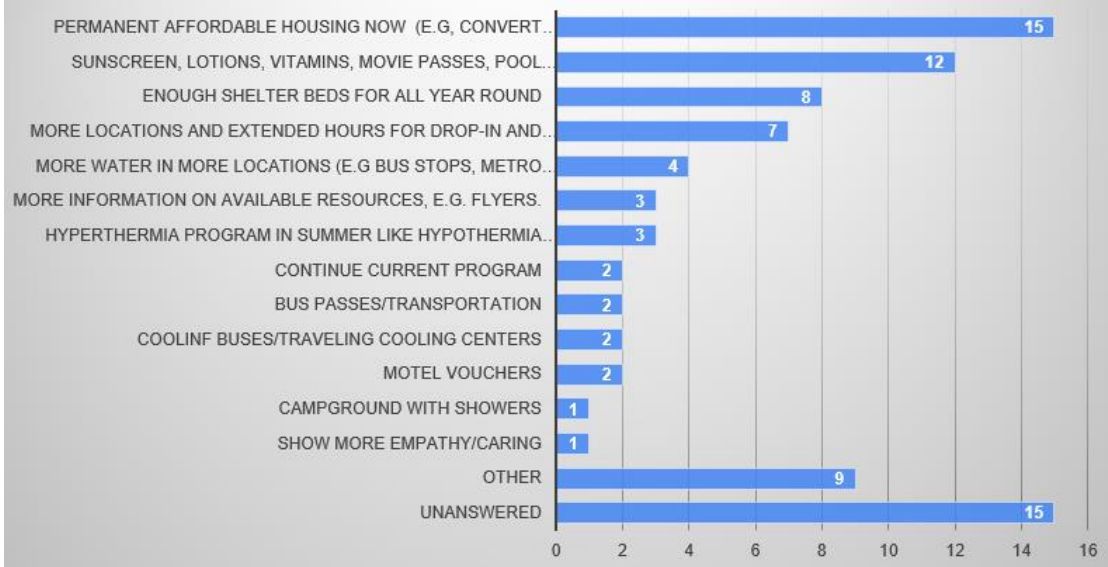
other responses (free form) N=44 who were asked

Comments (abstracted/interpreted)	Freq
[I go to] 7/11 or associates	1
Temporary Housing	1
Theft [at homeless facilities is] an Issue	1

WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?

Asked “What should the county do to relieve the effects of high heat, smoke, or flooding on homeless people” respondents gave four top recommendations: permanent housing, more of the items distributed in the kit plus pool or movie passes, enough shelter beds to house people year around, and more cooling locations and extended hours. See Q07.

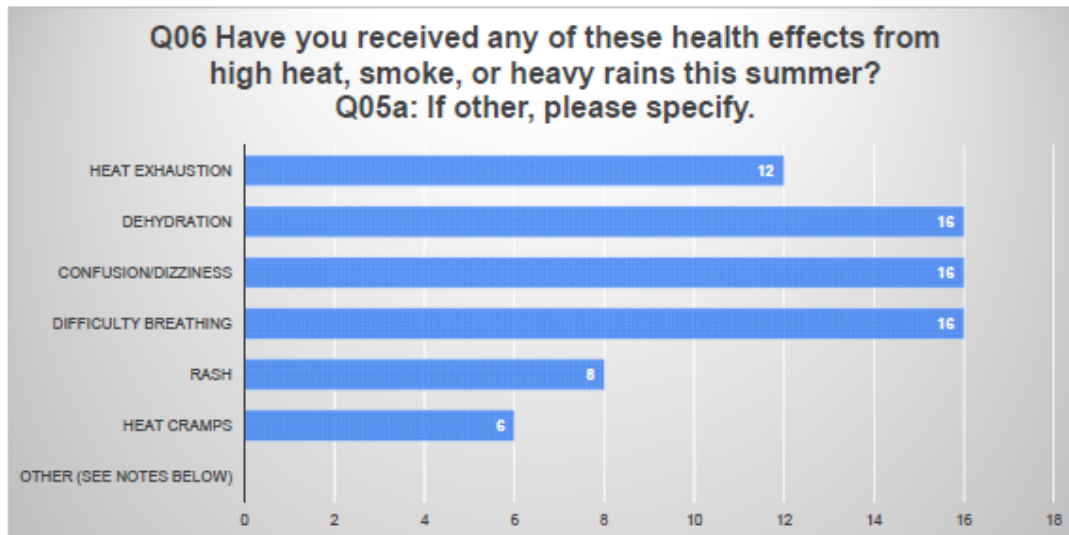
Q07: What should the county do to relieve the effects of high heat, smoke, flooding on homeless people?



Many respondents (12) appreciated the kit contents and advocated for other things like pool passes. There were 23 requests for overnight indoor shelter (permanent housing, more shelter beds, and hyperthermia overnight program). Seven wanted more time or more locations for cooling centers. A list of selected verbatim responses is in Box 1.

HEALTH EFFECTS OF HEAT

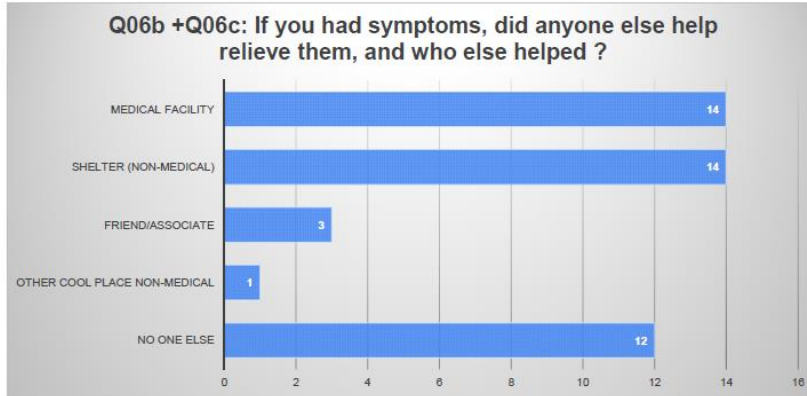
Unsheltered people suffer from the effects of extreme heat, heavy rains, and air pollution. Respondents described symptoms of dehydration, confusion, difficulty breathing, heat exhaustion, and others. See Q06.



Q06a. other responses (free form) N=44 who were asked

Comment	freq
depression over my inability to function in a normal way	1
Dry Skin	1
Felt sick	1
Heat Stroke	1
Nausea	1
Sunstroke	1
swelling of both legs (edema), head aches	1
Tiredness	1
My physical health is good, mental health not so good. As a whole person I'm better than before.	1
Respondent stated "C.O.P.D. is bad" under health status question. Need camping equipment.	1

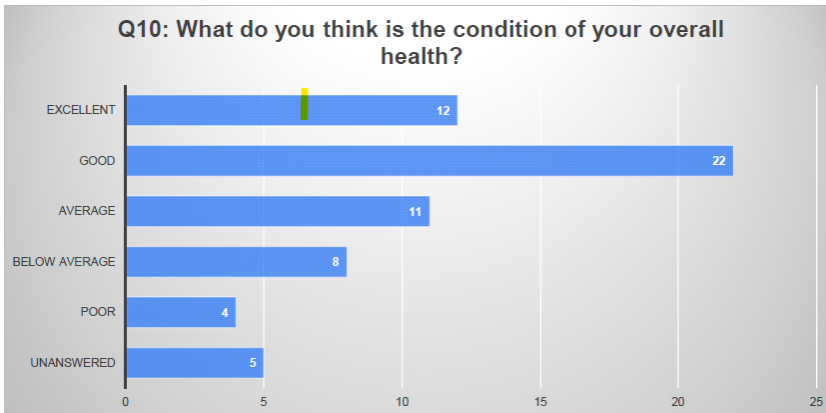
Some were treated at a medical facility, some by center/shelter staff or a friend, and others had no help.



HEALTH AND AGE OF RESPONDENTS

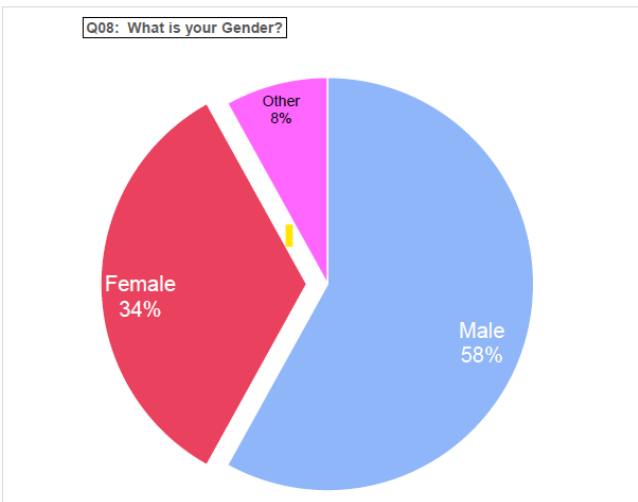
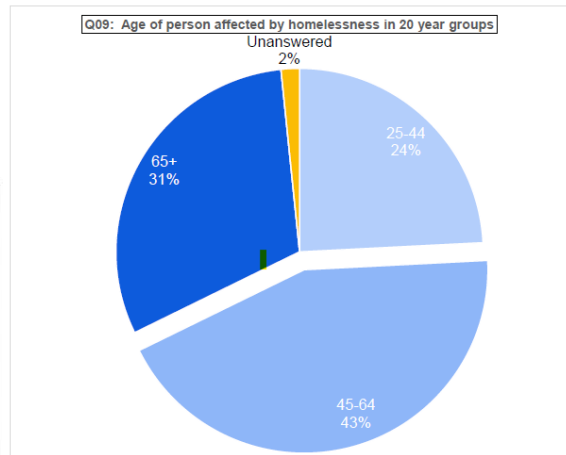
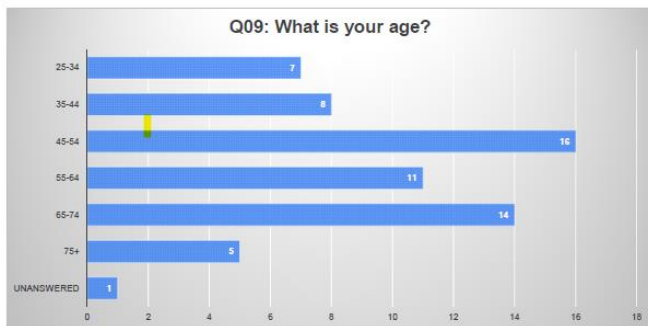
To get an idea of how vulnerable the unsheltered population might be to the health effects of extreme heat, we asked how they perceived the state of their overall health. Thirty-four said their health was excellent or good, 11 said it was average, and 12 said it was below average or poor.

Answer	Freq	%
Unanswered	5	8.1%
Poor	4	6.5%
Below Average	8	12.9%
Average	11	17.7%
Good	22	35.5%
Excellent	12	19.4%
Number of Respondents	62	100.0%



The latest Metro DC Point-in-Time count noted that the homeless population was ageing. About 30% of our respondents were at least age 65 and 5 were over age 75. Most (43%) were age 45-64 and 24% were age 25-44. Fifty-eight percent were male, 34% female, and 8% identified as other.

The most vulnerable unsheltered people are likely those in below average or poor health and those who are over age 65. In addition, unsheltered females are vulnerable because they are more likely to encounter harassment and intimidation, and nonbinary people are likely to encounter discrimination and violence.



Box 1: Suggestions from unsheltered people for more heat relief help

These responses were recorded by volunteers in one-on-one interviews.

- Simple information—flyers
- Provide housing!
- More public housing
- Provide more homeless shelter beds.
- Shelters throughout the year
- Abandoned buildings should be reused for housing.
- Set up heat relief program in the summer like the Hypothermia program.
- Do a better job with supportive housing, streamline the process.
- The County should provide housing. She works but cannot afford \$1,700 for a studio apartment.
- More motel vouchers especially for elderly with Social Security.
- Campgrounds near food and showers
- Continue current community standards and protocols.
- Continue current efforts. The no-turn-away policy is important.
- Not sure, it doesn't seem like they care.
- Water and a hot lunch to eat.
- Extend drop-in center and shelter hours.
- Libraries should stay open till 9 pm every day.
- Provide more centers and make people aware of it.
- More cooling places, AC
- Cooling buses
- Cold water, ice, icy drinks
- Supply enough water so guests don't have to wait hours to get two bottles of warm water (happened at Lamb Center)
- Offer water at more places (bus stops/stations, etc.)
- Provide an adequate number of bus tokens and connector passes. Some guests have to use 4-6 passes just to get to an appointment.
- The county is starting to do more to help. They're not rushing to put people in jail for petty things.
- Offer better help to people with a criminal record.
- Send staff out to check on homeless.
- Pool passes.
- Perhaps ice cream or tickets to cooling movie theaters.
- Deliver stuff we need, camping.
- Provide more fruit.
- Raingear, umbrellas
- Give batteries for personal fans.
- Vitamins, sunscreen, lotions

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Simplify the instructions** on how to use the map to find cooling centers and homeless shelters. Include a link for bus travel information.
2. Include more **bus passes**.
3. **Supply more cold water and ice** to drop-in centers. Only a token amount was provided.
4. **Provide beds for the most vulnerable during most of the summer** through motel vouchers or a string of rented small shelters.
5. **Change the level of Heat Emergency Days**. Ideally, the metro region should have a common trigger. Washington DC declares a heat emergency day for homeless people when the heat and /or the heat index reaches **95°**. **Consult the Fairfax County Health Department on a number. Consult with the Metro DC Council of Governments on setting a regional number.**
6. **Speed up production or conversions of commercial property to permanent supportive housing**. The Department of Housing and Community Development estimates the need at 300 units. The County should make this a priority.
7. **Consult with the Count Public Health Department**. Exposure to excessive heat has wide ranging physiological impacts for everyone, often amplifying existing conditions and resulting in premature death and disability. The health risks posed by extreme heat constitute a public health emergency, but well-planned and effective interventions can save lives. Therefore, professional **public health staff in the County Health Department should play a major role in all aspects of the Heat Relief program—planning, development, implementation, and evaluation.**

Appendix A: Proposal to make Fairfax County’s “extreme heat resources” online tool more accessible to users

Existing on-line tools: Fairfax County maintains a web-page on “[Extreme Heat Resources](#)” for all residents. It contains the following information:

- Resting for two hours indoors can significantly reduce heat-related illness.
- In addition to shopping malls, stores, or movie theaters, you may consider cooling off at one of our county facilities designated as “Cooling Centers.”
 - You are encouraged to first [check that locations are open](#) before you arrive.
 - Consider using the [Fairfax Connector BusTracker](#) to plan your visit.
- Link to a cooling center map.

When you open the cooling center map this “flash screen” repeats most of the same information, adding the WMATA Trip Planner as a resource.

The Cooling Center Finder application is a searchable, interactive mapping application to locate public facilities available for anyone to visit. Enter an address in the search box to the left, click the  button to use your current location (must enable geolocation on your device), or click the , then click a location on the map. Cooling Center locations near that location will be displayed in the search window, and clicking on the results will display more information, including the address, phone number and/or website link. Note: the search automatically searches within a 2-mile buffer of the location, but this may be adjusted up to 10 miles.

You are encouraged to first [check that locations are open](#) before you arrive. Consider using the [FairfaxConnector BusTracker](#) and/or [WMATA Trip Planner](#) for assistance with transportation. Visit the [Fairfax County Extreme Heat Resources webpage](#) for more information.

This [short video](#) outlines how to use this application to find cooling centers within Fairfax County.

Do not show this splash screen again.

OK

This screen of instructions disappears when you click OK, so it’s not accessible as you use the map itself.

The “short video” link is to a You Tube video which repeats this information and how to use the cooling center map. Its YouTube page has this description:

“This short video outlines how to find cooling centers within Fairfax County during extremely hot days. The map application allows individuals to type in a specific address to locate the nearest cooling center locations within a specific radius. Once a specific location is selected, detailed information including address, phone number and operating hours for each location is available.”

One click on a cooling center icon gives the address, a second click takes one to a list of all centers in its class (e.g., libraries, community centers) where all facilities in that class are listed with their operating hours and phone numbers.

Findings on communications:

Finding 1: Overall, the County is to be commended for supplying these communications resources, as they show the county recognizes that people need assistance finding shelter in extreme heat. The county has also demonstrated a commitment to improvement of its response.

Recommendation 1: Continue existing communication efforts, including finding ways to better meet needs.

Finding 2: The online resources are difficult to use because they offer unintegrated and partial information that is hard to navigate on-line (especially on a mobile phone).

- a) Unintegrated because the map is not directly linked to the resources that identify hours of facility operation, and/or transit or walking options to reach the centers.
- b) Partial because it doesn't include homeless shelters, or the "malls, stores and movie theatres" mentioned in the written suggestions.
- c) Partial because it doesn't mention that supplies are offered, including bus passes to facilitate transportation.

Recommendation 2: In addition to (or instead of the existing map), offer a custom map-overlay the county cooling facilities on common mapping/navigation software (e.g., Google Maps).

An advantage of this approach is that the same method to find and navigate to other places (if the person uses them) could be used to navigate to the county excess-heat resources.

Additionally, it puts the county cooling facilities (and other resources) in the context of

- county (and private) shelters,
- excess heat supply and bus pass distribution points and hours (if added and updated as needed),
- non-county facilities such as malls, stores, and movie theaters,
- health facilities, which are obviously important (based on this survey),
- information on hours of operations of county and non-county facilities, the overall transportation system, and

integrated navigation options by car, transit (especially WMATA, CUE and FairfaxConnector), and by walking.

A model of how this could work is available on request.

Recommendation 2.1: User test the current and/or any future models with users (people who are homeless) by asking them to locate the closest cooling center and watching how they manage with only the existing instructions. Ask questions about what they find confusing. Modify and simplify the model until it works for them.

Finding 3: Because many people affected by homelessness don't use on-line resources, the on-line heat emergency resources need to be supplemented by other means of communication such as print and instructions to drop-in center staff.

Recommendation 3: Provide print materials to help affected people find resources.

Provide printed posters for each county facility serving people experiencing homelessness, with the main driving, transit, and walking routes to that facility out to a reasonable distance (in time or space).

Distribute these posters where most needed, including

- All facilities that serve affected people within the scope of each map
- Contact points between outreach workers and the people affected by homelessness and/or excess heat.

Recommendation 3.1: Provide drop-in centers, shelters, wellness centers, cooling centers, and other facilities with a set of color flyers/posters that can be posted on their door noting that a heat emergency is in effect and the overnight shelters are open on a no-turn-away policy.

The poster should have a blank area in which staff can post the date(s) of the heat emergency. It can also include a QR code or links to maps and other information on heat relief.

The sign below posted by staff at the front door to Rising Hope Church, where lunch is served, resulted in everyone inside knowing that the shelters were open that night.

