Heat Safety Best Practice Guide for Congregate Residential Facilities

March 2026

Dangerously hot weather now occurs more frequently and with greater intensity than it did a few decades ago, and even hotter conditions are expected in the future. Hot days and warm nights can pose a significant risk to residents and staff of residential facilities without air conditioning. Power loss during hot weather can create an unexpected risk even for facilities that do have air conditioning.

You can use this guide to help everyone at your facility prepare for and respond to hot weather risks. This guide applies to a broad range of facility types, including long-term care, homeless and emergency shelters, therapeutic care, youth residential homes, independent living with on-site staff support and other similar residential care settings.

What's in this guide:

Part 1: Plan and Prepare for Upcoming Hot Weather

Part 2: Stay Aware and Support Heat Safety During Hot Weather

Resources and Infographics

Each section provides action-oriented strategies on topics such as planning, training and education, environmental modifications and communication.

Here are a few options for how to use this guide:

Start small: Focus on one or two key actions, from Part 1 to help kickstart your planning efforts, such as discussing heat risks during staff meetings. Use Part 2 for just-in-time guidance when hot weather is forecast.

Create a comprehensive heat-readiness program: Work through the guide from start to finish to develop a heat response plan, staff training and education, response protocols and building improvements.

Continuously improve: Use the guide as a checklist to strengthen, update and/or identify gaps in your existing heat preparedness and response efforts.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, contact: ClimateHealth@vermont.gov.

Plan and Prepare for Upcoming Hot Weather

Adopt or update heat emergency plans

- Develop and maintain a written heat response plan (either on its own or as part of a broader Emergency Operations Plan) with clearly defined roles and strategies. Use resources to help you develop your plan.
    - Note that some facility types have specific preparedness and planning requirements, for example long-term care facilities must follow CMS rules.
- Identify criteria for activating the plan and initiating emergency cooling measures. This could be based on forecasted heat, observed indoor temperatures, cooling system or power failure, observed impacts to residents or staff or other factors.
- Identify residents at highest risk of heat illness and develop personalized monitoring and action plans for each person. Consider needs for patients who use electricity-dependent durable medical equipment.
- Keep contact lists for emergency services, healthcare providers and families up to date.
- Include considerations for surge staffing, staff rotation and other staff safety considerations.
- Ask for and incorporate feedback from staff and residents to refine and improve plans.

Establish and maintain coordination with local partners

- Collaborate with local partners to support planning and preparedness for heat emergencies. Develop mutual aid, resource sharing, or other formal cooperation or service agreements as needed.
- Include your Local Health Office, municipal and regional emergency management staff, the Healthcare Coalition, other healthcare organizations, emergency service providers, transportation providers, utility providers or other local partners.
- Pre-establish communication channels with partners to share information across organizations during heat emergencies.
- Collaborate with local partners to coordinate heat-related emergency messaging as needed.

- Maintain relationships and readiness between incidents with cross-organizational training, exercises, and plan evaluation and revision.

Educate and train staff to implement the plan and support residents

- Train staff to understand the heat emergency plan, their role, and what they should do to support resident and staff safety.
- Educate staff and residents on signs of heat illness, prevention and response protocols and emergency procedures.
- Train staff to be prepared to recognize and treat heat stroke on site while EMS is on the way.
- Include scenario-based activities (e.g. role-plays, case studies).
- Make sure heat illness symptoms are included in annual staff drills and pre-summer briefings.
- Before the summer, do refresher trainings to make sure staff are ready and aware of any plan updates.

Exercise, evaluate and maintain the plan

- Conduct table-top exercises and/or practice drills to help prepare and test readiness.
- Debrief with staff and residents after an exercise or heat event to identify what went well and what could be improved.
- Modify the plan based on lessons learned from the exercises and/or drills to ensure the plan stays current.
- Review and update the plan at least annually (before the heat season) or anytime deficiencies are noted.

Ensure emergency supplies and resources are in place

- Stock and maintain hot weather emergency supplies, including bottled water, ice, fans, and cooling packs/vests.
- Stockpile essential medical supplies, food, fuel and water if supply chain disruptions are anticipated.
- Ensure transportation plans are in place to support travel to community cooling sites, other care facilities, or evacuation, if needed. Identify vehicles and drivers in advance and ensure fuel reserves for emergency use.

- In independent living situations or for when residents need to relocate or evacuate, have a plan to support creation of personal preparedness kits of critical supplies that can travel with residents.

Maintain and improve cooling infrastructure

- Inspect, clean and maintain HVAC and A/C systems before the summer and make sure they are working properly.
- Use portable A/C, fans and evaporative units in high-heat or poorly ventilated areas.
- Create designated spaces to cool off with A/C, fans, water, and other amenities that can be used if residential rooms get too hot.
- Make sure cooling spaces are accessible to residents with limited mobility.
- Install monitors to be sure all occupied spaces maintain a safe temperature.

Prepare for power outages

- Install or maintain backup generators to support A/C, fans and refrigeration.
- Know what to power first during outages, including essential systems like A/C, cooling fans, medical devices and refrigerators.
- Test your facility's generator and transfer switches each year before summer to make sure they work reliably.
    - Create a log to track these tests.
- Keep enough fuel or battery backups for at least 24 to 48 hours of operation during extended heat events.
- Have an emergency plan for power outages that disrupt cooling or other important equipment.

Modify buildings to reduce heat gain

- Seal air leaks and insulate walls, roofs and attics to maintain cool indoor temperatures.

- Plant trees and shrubs around your facility for shade and breeze.
- Switch to LED lighting and consider efficient cooling systems like heat pumps.

- Put up solar shades, low-emissivity windows or use reflective window films to reduce heat from the sun.
- Install exterior window shades, such as awnings or automated solar screens to block the sun.
- Put downfacing reflective foil insulation under roofing to limit heat gain and make sure roof space is ventilated properly.
- Consider using solar panels and battery storage wherever possible.

Stay Aware and Support Heat Safety During Hot Weather

Stay aware of forecasted and ongoing heat risks

- Monitor forecasts and alerts from the National Weather Service (NWS) to be aware of upcoming hot weather.
- Subscribe to VT Alert for push notifications by app, text, phone or email when NWS issues a heat-related weather alert. Also consider subscribing to Department of Public Safety weather alerts by email.
- Monitor indoor conditions like temperature, humidity and air quality. Establish thresholds for each, and have processes in place for reporting and activating response if they exceed them.

  The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) require certified long-term care facilities to maintain indoor temperatures between 71°F and 81°F in all resident areas.

- Make sure a hard copy of your current emergency management plan is easily available for staff, with contact information for key emergency response personnel.
- Share alerts with your staff, activate your plan and ask for help as needed through the start and end of the hot weather event.
- Have a process for pushing alert communications to all staff and residents (e.g., intercom, bulletin, text/email).

Take actions to reduce heat gain

- Use light-colored or reflective window coverings to block sunlight.

- Close doors and windows in cooled areas and use shades to reduce strain on A/C systems.
- Limit the use of stoves, ovens and other heat-producing appliances during peak hours.
- Open windows during cooler parts of the day (early morning or evening) unless outdoor air quality or humidity is bad.
- Manage humidity by using portable dehumidifiers.

Reinforce heat safety training and engagement for staff

- Conduct coaching check-ins and reinforce safety messages during hot months.
- Incorporate short just-in-time trainings into existing staff meetings and huddles.
- Identify a "Heat Safety Champion" on each shift to promote best practices.
- Assign staff to monitor high-risk residents during hot weather.
- Display heat safety posters or signage in common areas and entrances.
- Provide quick reference cards with heat illness symptoms and response actions for staff and residents to use during summer months (for example, you may use the sample resources below as print outs to provide to staff and residents).

Support staff well-being during hot weather

- Establish a culture of recognizing the personal challenges staff may experience and support their needs during a heat emergency.
- Make sure staff that work outdoors or in hot indoor areas have procedures in place to adapt to heat.
- Set staff expectations for their role during a heat emergency.
- Encourage staff to follow heat safety practices and look out for their colleagues.
- Make sure that all staff who are responding to a heat emergency have the support they need to work well, including frequent breaks, access to showers, food and hydration, a place to sleep, routine medication and wellness services.
- Be aware of staff who may be especially vulnerable to heat and identify any extra support they may need during a heat emergency.
- Provide staff support after a heat emergency.

Monitor residents and support their heat safety

- Share heat alerts and safety tips with residents and their families, including guidance about hydration, things they can do to stay cool, how to recognize heat illness symptoms and when and how to ask for help.
    - Develop templates ahead of time to support the rapid dissemination of information when necessary.
- Discourage and monitor outdoor activities during the hottest parts of the day.
- Prioritize wellness checks for residents with chronic illnesses, mobility issues, who live alone or other heat illness risk factors.
- Use temperature, humidity, and air quality monitors to help guide decisions such as when to open or close windows, when it is safe (or even beneficial) for residents to be outside, and when to relocate or evacuate residents to a cooler environment.
- Help residents and caregivers with space and personal cooling strategies. Educate residents about other resources and services that are available and how to request them.
- Consider providing water bottles, portable fans, chilled or wet towels, cooling vests, cold/ice baths or showers, cool drinks and food, high-water content food, etc.
- Consider how certain medications could increase risk for dehydration and heat-related illnesses and advise a consult with the primary care provider to suggest modifications if appropriate.
- Encourage and assist residents to relocate to a cooler space if needed.
- Before discharging a patient, consider and discuss if they can stay safe from the heat at their destination.

Resources and Infographics

Preparedness Resources:

- Health Facilities Preparation for Extreme Heat: Recommendations for Retirement and Care Facility Managers and Community Care During Extreme Heat: Prevention and Preliminary Care (Health Canada) – 2 page summaries of recommended actions
- Climate Resilient Health Clinics (Americares) – Toolkits for heat and other climate hazards, including resources for patients, providers, and administrators
- Stay Ahead of the Storm: How Affordable Housing Organizations Can Prepare for Summer Weather (HAI Group)

- Preparing for Heat Emergencies (Red Cross) – Best practices for preparing for heat events
- Heat Safety and Heat Safety Tips (Ready.gov) - Best practices for preparing for hot weather

Response Resources:

- Heat Safety Guidance & Action Plan for Caregivers (Vermont Department of Health, VDH)
- Heat Safety (VDH) – Cooling sites map, heat safety tips, translated information and videos
- Clinical Guidance for Heat Health (CDC) – risk factors, medication considerations, assessment tools, and other resources
- Safety tips (VDH) - Hot weather safety tips
- Heat Response Checklist (Americares) – checklist for heat response activities

Recovery Resources:

- Heat Recovery Checklist (Americares) –checklist for administrators to support recovering from a heat event

Infographic Resources

- CDC Symptoms and First Aid Information – infographics and first aid information for staff, residents, community members and caregivers
- Older Adults Infographic (Ready.gov)
- Hydration Infographic (AHA)
- Heat Actions and Activities Infographic Series (National Weather Service)
- Prevent Heat Illness at Work Infographic (OSHA)