

## **PE7 Action: Cooling Centers**



### A. Why is this action important?

Over the last few decades (1980 to 2016), average temperatures in New York State have increased an average of 2°F. According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment, these increasing temperature trends will continue and by 2050, average annual temperatures in the Northeast are expected to increase by 4.0°F to 5.1°F (relative to 1975-2005). The northeast region is also expected to experience an increase in frequency, intensity and duration of extreme heat events occurring each year.

With these changes New York can expect to see an increase in heat-related illnesses and deaths. Spending a few hours in an air-conditioned environment can reduce the impact of heat on health, but many homes do not have air-conditioning. In addition, some residents who have air-conditioning may not use it because of costs associated with electricity and maintenance costs. The lack or under-utilization of air-conditioning at home can affect an individual's ability to avoid adverse health effects of heat, especially if they are already vulnerable to heat. For heat-vulnerable populations who lack access to or cannot afford air-conditioning, the availability of accessible cooling centers, which can be one adaptation for the impacts of extreme heat. Cooling centers are air-conditioned spaces where the public can cool down. Cooling centers are not the only component of heat adaptation but ensuring that a sufficient number of these facilities are available and accessible, via public transit, to the populations that need them most can reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with heat waves.

### **B.** How to implement this action

This Climate Smart Communities (CSC) action can be implemented by undertaking the following steps:

1. Identify and assess cooling centers.

Local governments should identify facilities in their jurisdictions that can function as cooling centers. Cooling centers can include air-conditioned places like libraries, schools, community and senior centers, movie theaters, malls, and other publicly available and accessible spaces in the community. Ensure that the location of cooling centers are not in close proximity to hazard-prone areas such as floodplains and, if necessary, take steps to mitigate associated risk during implementation.

The New York State (NYS) Department of Health (DOH) provides <u>a list of cooling centers</u> that have been reported by local emergency managers and local health departments. The list could be used to identify existing cooling centers and determine if they are willing to continue to serve or if there is a need for additional cooling centers.

Assess the adequacy of existing cooling centers based on attendance during previous years, and assess their accessibility, especially in terms of proximity to vulnerable populations. Certain populations are more vulnerable to heat than others, including those who are elderly, socio-economically disadvantaged, socially or linguistically isolated or have pre-existing medical conditions. Results from a climate vulnerability assessment or heat emergency plan or <u>DOH Heat Vulnerability Index Maps</u> could be used to identify the locations of heat-vulnerable populations in the community and determine if there are an adequate number cooling centers in those areas. Agencies can also conduct stakeholder meetings and outreach to organizations that work with or are located in vulnerable communities.

If a cooling center is expected to reach full capacity, assess the potential for opening additional cooling centers or

establishing partnerships with local and private businesses to increase cooling center capacity. The National Weather Service (NWS) hazardous weather outlooks for the region can be used to plan cooling center availability for forecasted heat events and activation during the heat event. Evaluate capacity on a regional level and follow the most up-to-date best practices for planning the opening of cooling centers in the region, where new centers are needed.

2. Implement new cooling centers or upgrade existing ones.

In the absence of cooling centers, new centers may be needed. Or if existing cooling centers are not adequate, upgrades may be needed. Setting up new or upgrading existing cooling centers may include the following steps:

- Evaluate whether the facility's infrastructure is sufficient to serve as a cooling center and implement facility upgrades where needed. For example, confirm the availability of potable water and the adequacy of restroom facilities.
  - If funds to complete upgrades are not available, develop a detailed proposal for improvements and make a plan to seek funding. For points under this CSC action, show that the initial steps of the plan have been implemented.
- Work with property owners and staff at the locations to determine if they are prepared to operate during a heat event. Conduct trainings to correct any gaps in staff capacity.
- Work with community members and organizations to formulate plans for activating new centers or for improving/expanding the use of existing cooling centers. For points under this CSC action, show that the initial steps of the plan have been implemented.
- 3. Promote awareness of cooling centers. Work with facility managers to promote awareness of cooling centers and improve the public's understanding of their availability and accessibility. Advertise the locations, contact information, and operating hours of cooling centers via social media networks, local news stations, and in partnership with other groups in the community (like churches, schools, summer camps, senior centers).
- 4. Implement additional services to encourage utilization of cooling centers. Four possible strategies are listed below.
  - Provide transportation options, including shuttle services and public transit, to cooling centers for populations that are not able to travel or have mobility issues. Establish mobile cooling centers that could also provide access to cooling if existing facilities are not available.
  - Encourage cooling centers to have extended hours, particularly in the evening past regular business hours. Facilities could use the issuance of a NWS heat advisory as a guideline for extending hours.
  - If a cooling center is limited to use by a certain population (e.g., senior centers), work with the facility to remove/relax restrictions during heat events to allow access to the general public and pets, where feasible.
    Provide the public with information on the cooling center's updated policy regarding access and allowance of pets.
  - Track use of cooling centers. Request that facilities have a plan to maintain a visitor log or head count of patrons who visit to access cooling. This information will be helpful to evaluate utilization of the cooling centers and assist in future planning.

### C. Timeframe, project costs, and resource needs

A local government should be able to complete this action within three to twelve months. Identifying and promoting awareness of new and existing cooling centers can be a relatively inexpensive and quick thing to accomplish if capitalizing on existing resources in the community. But higher costs may be incurred if a facility needs upgrades or infrastructure modifications in order to serve effectively as a cooling center. Local governments may be eligible to receive funding for cooling centers through the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation's <u>Climate Smart Communities</u> <u>Grant Program</u>.

# D. Which local governments implement this action? Which departments within the local government are most likely to have responsibility for this action?

This action is applicable to all types of local governments but is particularly important for communities with large proportions of vulnerable populations such as the elderly, low-income households, and communities of color. The department or person that coordinates public health efforts is most likely to be responsible for this action. In many cases, the local emergency management offices and county health department may assume leading roles for this action. Cross-department involvement and support are recommended, along with support and involvement from the CSC task force.

	POSSIBLE POINTS
Implement new cooling centers or upgrade existing cooling centers.	4
Promote awareness of cooling centers (e.g., via social media) within the last year.	1
Work with facility managers to improve utilization of cooling centers:	
- Extend hours of operation beyond regular business hours, for at least one cooling center.	1
- Provide transportation or mobile cooling centers for populations with limited mobility or travel access.	1
- Expand access to the general population (at minimum) and to patrons with pets, where possible.	1
- Track utilization of cooling centers on hot days.	1

### F. What to submit

As per the point tiers above, submit the following documentation:

- For four points, describe the existing and/or new cooling centers, including the name and type of facility, location (street address), hours during which it functions as a cooling center, and date when the facility was opened/ (or designated as a cooling center). For upgrades to an existing center, describe the improvements in detail (e.g., facility upgrades, staff trainings, copies of plans, and evidence of implementation of at least the initial steps).
- For one point, describe how and when the cooling centers have been promoted to the community within the last year.
- For one to four points for improving utilization, provide information on the implementation of at least one of the four strategies listed in Section E above.

All CSC action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submittals should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

#### G. Links to additional resources or examples

- Fourth National Climate Assessment. Chapter 18: Northeast
- <u>New York State Department of Health, Cooling Centers</u>
- <u>American Red Cross</u>
- <u>FEMA Extreme Heat</u>
- <u>CDC's Summary on Use of Cooling Centers</u>
- <u>NYS DOH Heat Vulnerability Index</u>
- National Weather Service Hazardous weather outlook for each region in New York State:
  - Albany, NY Forecast Office
  - Binghamton, NY Forecast Office
  - Buffalo, NY Forecast Office
  - Burlington, VT Forecast Office
  - New York, NY Forecast Office
- <u>NYC Emergency Management Cooling Center Finder</u>
- WEACT NYC Cooling Centers

## H. Recertification Requirements

The recertification requirements are the same as the initial certification requirements.