



County of Fairfax, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 29, 2022

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Christopher A. Leonard 
Deputy County Executive

SUBJECT: Resources for Persons Experiencing Homelessness and Other Vulnerable Populations During Heat Emergencies

This memorandum is provided in response to recent requests from the Board of Supervisors for information concerning the County's response to the needs of unsheltered people and other vulnerable populations during heat emergencies.

Background: The effects of climate change in Fairfax County are clear: hotter summers and colder winters pose life threatening conditions for people without shelter as well as other vulnerable populations, such as older adults, people with disabilities, and young children. The recent heat advisory issued by the National Weather Service for the Washington DC region underscores the importance of the cooling resources and processes the County has in place.

During extreme heat, residents are encouraged to stay inside and out of the heat if possible. Public buildings, such as libraries, REC Centers, government centers, and community centers are open to the public during normal operating hours for the purposes of getting out of the heat. Residents are also encouraged to consider other public locations and indoor activities, such as shopping malls, where they can find respite. In the event of a mass emergency event, such as a sustained apartment building power outage during dangerous heat conditions, the Department of Emergency Management and Security maintains the option of activating the existing Mass Sheltering plan in partnership with the Department of Family Services and other County agencies and community organizations.

Specifically for people experiencing homelessness, Fairfax County has three low barrier emergency shelters that are open 24 hours a day to all individuals staying at the facility. Unsheltered individuals can come to the shelters on designated drop-in days for relief or visit any of the four full-time drop-in centers open throughout the County. In addition, on days when the National Weather Service issues a heat advisory, the three low barrier shelters activate "no turn away" overflow space so individuals who are unsheltered can come inside day and night.

Fairfax County also contracts with multiple organizations to provide homeless outreach services throughout the year. Outreach workers and shelters distribute water, sunscreen, and other essential items to unsheltered individuals.

Fairfax County's emergency information and social media avenues regularly share resources during heat advisories about places to stay cool, health information, cooling assistance, and

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guidance for people experiencing homelessness. Meanwhile, outreach workers play an important role in communicating with people who are unsheltered and may not have access to email, social media, and other news sources.

The most recent American Housing Survey (AHS) reports that for the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria metropolitan area, which includes Fairfax County, 98 percent of housing units contained either central air conditioning or a room air conditioning unit.¹ The data does not factor, however, frequency of use, working conditioning of equipment, or financial strains associated with utilization. For low-income families or individuals that are housed but still in need, the Department of Family Services (DFS) has two Cooling Assistance programs that are designed to help keep vulnerable residents cool during the summer months. DFS' Public Assistance and Employment Services division administers a program that helps eligible low-income households with the cost of energy expenses for cooling through the [Virginia Energy Assistance Program](#) (EAP). The program assists households in acquiring or repairing cooling equipment or paying the electric bills to operate cooling equipment. Eligible households must contain at least one vulnerable person (a person who is age 60 or older, under age 6, or has a disability).

In addition, DFS' Adult and Aging division administers the [Fan Care Assistance program](#), which provides fans, and in some instances, window AC units to eligible residents of Fairfax County and the cities of Falls Church and Fairfax who are age 60 or older, meet income eligibility, and are in need of cooling in the home due to health concerns.

Next Steps: In the immediate term, staff is working to identify options to enhance our efforts. This work includes addressing transportation access gaps, evaluating both the variety and coordination of supply disbursements (both direct provision and at our cooling sites), considering the use of hotel vouchers in the event overflow shelters are at capacity, and providing a more robust communications plan as well as additional opportunities to provide direct communication outreach to individuals in need. As possible, immediate action will be taken. Further, the County will be engaging our invaluable network of community partners in a dialogue to ensure our planning efforts are comprehensive, well-informed and inclusive of best practices. Helping people stay safe is of paramount importance and we remain committed to doing all we can in protection of our most vulnerable community members.

cc: Bryan J. Hill, County Executive
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1. ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Housing Survey. 2019 Washington DC - Heating, Air Conditioning, and Appliances - All Occupied Units Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV MSA (2013 OMB definition).