



Toronto Disaster Relief Committee

PO Box 662, 31 Adelaide St. East, Toronto, ON M5C 2J8

torontodisasterrelief@gmail.com www.tdrc.net

416-599-TDRC (8372)

Toronto Board of Health

CC: Dr. David McKeown, Medical Officer of Health and Councillor John Filion, Chair

July 25, 2011

Re: BOH Report HL6.3 – Protecting Vulnerable People From Health Impacts of Extreme Heat

Dear Members of the Board of Health:

As you are most likely aware, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee has monitored the situation of extreme heat in Toronto, and its impact on vulnerable populations, for a number of years. Our work with homeless and marginally housed individuals has shown us that heat is a significant factor for these populations, and others living in poverty.

To begin, we wish to commend the work done by Toronto Public Health in developing the report “Protecting Vulnerable People from Health Impacts of Extreme Heat.” The work that Stephanie Gower, Carol Mee and Monica Campbell have done in summarizing risk and vulnerability is excellent and synthesizes a great deal of the current heat-risk research.

Many areas of this research are connected with recommendations made by the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and adopted by the Board of Health at its April 16th, 2007 meeting.

We fully support all of the recommendations that are included in the report in front of the BOH.

However, we wish to emphasize a few key points that we feel are important. We are putting forth three recommendations that we feel enhance the MOH’s report.

TDRC Recommendation #1: We recommend that the Board of Health direct staff to include the Heat Manual tools in its hot weather response planning.

TDRC Recommendation #2: We further recommend that the Board of Health make the Heat Registry Manual available on-line on either Toronto Public Health’s website or that of Shelter, Housing and Support Administration Division (as indicated in the MOH’s March 2010 report on the Hot Weather Response Plan).

TDRC Recommendation #3: We recommend that the City of Toronto ask the Ministry of Community and Social Services to support and fund a provincial program of cooling supports for individuals with the highest vulnerability to extreme heat.

MOH Recommendation 1:

“Request that the Medical Office of Health work with the Toronto Environment Office, Office of Emergency Management, and Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration to integrate heat-specific emergency plans into City emergency plans, including identifying the risk of extended heat emergencies in Toronto, specifying protocols for a heat emergency to be identified and declared, ensuring broad access to heat-related resources and tools prepared by TPH and others, and increasing the capacity of local organizations during such an event.”

As referenced on page 22 of the full report by Gower et al., beginning in the fall of 2007, the City of Toronto, through Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division funded the development of North America’s first risk-based heat registry. With additional funding from York University’s Knowledge Mobilization internship program and Toronto Public Health, and in association with the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) and Sistering, a two-year model program was developed.

In the summer of 2008, the heat registry was implemented and evaluated. In the summer of 2009, the program was expanded to test the feasibility of both on and off-site heat registries, as well as an independent second site which tested the validity of the heat manual that had been prepared.

Toronto has long been recognized as a leader in hot weather response. **We feel that implementation and expansion of the work done through the heat registry pilot should play a key role in the overall hot weather response plan.**

The heat manual is significant because it developed a risk-based assessment tool particularly focused on vulnerable populations. The full questionnaire includes questions on an individual’s living environment, physical and emotional health, as well as their social environment.

Additionally, the Quick Heat Assessment tool (QHA Tool) provides front-line workers and service providers with a short technique for assessing a client’s risk, in cases where completing the longer assessment isn’t feasible.

The summary report states: *“Staff at TPH and in the City’s Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division have expressed concern that many individual facilities and organizations such as those that house vulnerable people do not have their own emergency plan in place, and would depend entirely on the City should a heat emergency arise.”*

We believe that the Heat Manual (2010) provides unique tools to assist these agencies in developing their own models for responding to heat emergencies. The manual is designed in such a way that organizations can create a program from a number of options, including the ability to pick and choose questions to create their own questionnaire relevant to their client base.

TDRC Recommendation #1: We recommend that the Board of Health direct staff to include the Heat Manual tools in its hot weather response planning.

TDRC Recommendation #2: We further recommend that the Board of Health make the Heat Registry Manual available on-line on either Toronto Public Health’s website or that of Shelter, Housing and Support Administration Division (as indicated in the MOH’s March 2010 report on the Hot Weather Response Plan).



MOH Recommendation 4a:

Request that the Ontario Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing take action as members of the Ontario Regional Adaptation Collaborative to enhance access to cooling for vulnerable people by:

- a) **exploring provincial legislation and municipal standards, codes, and other by-laws to identify feasible policy options to support sustainable access to cooling for vulnerable groups.”**

We want to remind members of the Board of Health that one of our recommendations you supported in April 2007 stated:

“That the Board of Health forward a letter to the Licensing and Standards Committee urging that:

- 1. a maximum temperature provision be developed as part of the proposed licensing system for multi-unit residential buildings; and*
- 2. every effort be made to develop this provision in 2007.”*

This initiative has seen a few iterations since 2007. In his March 2010 report to BOH on the Hot Weather Response plan, Dr. McKeown stated *“In addition, although a maximum heat standard might be desirable, there is still a need to determine the most appropriate authority for introducing this regulation.”*

We continue to urge the city to work towards implementing a maximum heat standard. Research has shown that only a few hours of cooling each day can mean the difference between life and death. As Gower et al.’s report states one of the major factors for individuals not using air conditioners is cost. This is echoed by research conducted by leading heat researchers including Scott Sheridan who found that *“More than a third of those [seniors] with air conditioning reported that economic conditions were a factor in determining home air conditioner usage (Sheridan, 2006).¹*

Therefore, we fully support recommendations 4 (a) and (b) of the report in front of you.



MOH Recommendation 4b:

“Request that the Ontario Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing take action as members of the Ontario Regional Adaptation Collaborative to enhance access to cooling for vulnerable people by

- b) **Exploring incentive and support programs for low-income people to access cooling.”**

¹ Sheridan, S. C. (2006). *Municipal response and public perception of heat-health watch-warning systems: An evaluation of effectiveness*. Kent: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Part of the work conducted of the Heat Registry pilot project, conducted by the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre in 2008 and 2009, and by Sistering in 2009, included a cooling supports program. This enabled applicants receiving funds from OW and ODSP to access an air conditioner. The program found that many people struggled with the ability to complete the paperwork and gather the necessary documentation to apply for the funds – assuming they were even aware that the option was available.

While the project tried multiple methods for conducting the cooling supports program, the most viable was a contract with a local hardware store to provide the air conditioners, and support from the Heat Registry Project staff to complete both the paperwork and installation of the AC unit.

TDRC Recommendation #3: We recommend that the City of Toronto ask the Ministry of Community and Social Services to support and fund a provincial program of cooling supports for individuals with the highest vulnerability to extreme heat.



In conclusion, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee is pleased with the direction of the City of Toronto, and the work of the various city agencies – especially Toronto Public Health – in the development of an effective Hot Weather Response Plan. Our concern, as always, remains with those populations most vulnerable to heat-related risk – homeless and marginally housed individuals, people living in poverty, people with mental illness, infants and seniors.

Respectfully,



Tanya Gulliver
Management Committee
Toronto Disaster Relief Committee