STAYING COOL

Experiences and Challenges Using Cooling Centres in Metro Vancouver

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Centre for Climate Justice

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STAYING COOL: EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES USING COOLING CENTRES IN METRO VANCOUVER

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The Centre for Climate Justice (CCJ) at the University of British Columbia advances the urgent social, political, and economic changes necessary to address the climate crisis. As a Centre operating on unceded ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), and Syilx Okanagan Nation and their peoples, this work takes place in the spirit of repair and transformation. That includes an ongoing attempt to repair the damage done to our collective knowledge by the systemic exclusion of Indigenous, Black and non-European experts and knowledge holders, often created by extractive, unaccountable research practices in frontline communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research took place on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and səlilwətaɬ Nations, as well as the Semiahmoo, q̓i¢əy̓, kʷikʷəƛ̓əm, Q'ʷa:n̓ ƛ̓ən̓, Qayqayt and sc̓əwaθən məsteyəxʷ First Nations.

We acknowledge and thank the participants who shared their stories with us. Your stories are the core of this work and one of our most important guides in figuring out how to keep community members safe during heat events.

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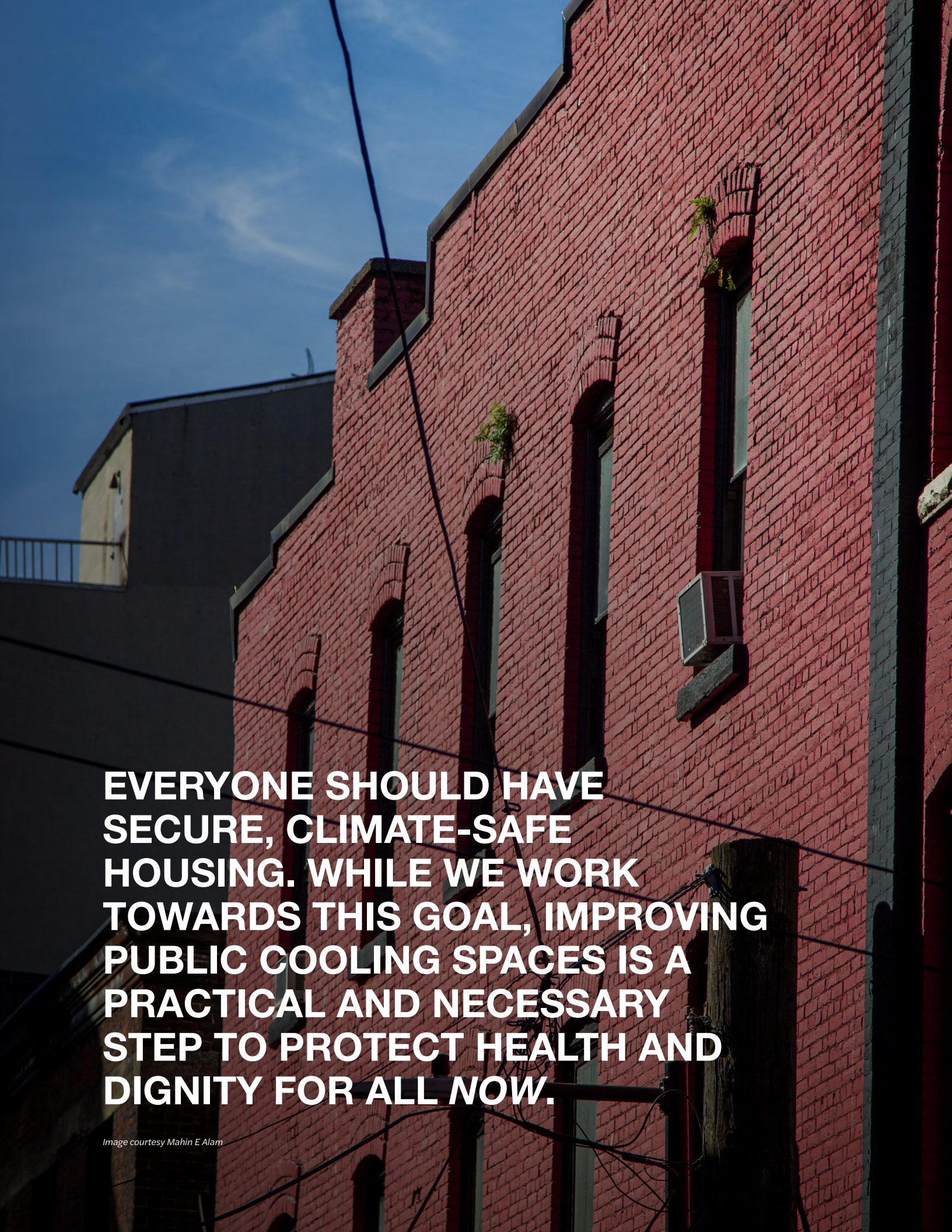


EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE SECURE, CLIMATE-SAFE HOUSING. WHILE WE WORK TOWARDS THIS GOAL, IMPROVING PUBLIC COOLING SPACES IS A PRACTICAL AND NECESSARY STEP TO PROTECT HEALTH AND DIGNITY FOR ALL *NOW*.

Image courtesy Mahin E Alam

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2021 heat dome, in which over 619 people in British Columbia (BC) died, the issue of summer heat has increased significantly for Metro Vancouver residents. During times of heat in Metro Vancouver, many residents rely on cooling centres and other cool spaces. Extreme weather shelters are operated by local governments and non-profits in order to keep residents cool, warm, and safe during extreme weather throughout the year. However, little information exists with regard to the usage of these spaces and the experiences of both people who use these spaces and people who help to run these spaces.

Our study asked: What are the barriers to using these spaces? What are the experiences of those who use them? What improvements could be made?

We interviewed 63 residents of Metro Vancouver and 11 service provider participants[1]. Most residents interviewed were housed, 7 out of 63 participants identified as unhoused. Interviews were mainly concentrated within the City of Vancouver, but also took place with residents and service providers in Surrey, Richmond, New Westminster, and White Rock. Service providers included those working for public libraries, city governments, and non-profit shelters.

While cooling centres are an immediate fix to an urgent need for cool spaces, we need systemic changes and supports that help community members feel cared for and less alone.

Use of cooling centres and spaces are deeply connected to people's indoor environments. Why people seek out those spaces depends on bigger structural factors, such as housing insecurity, debates over use of public space, investment in transit, and ability and failure to provide funding to language and translation services.

The cooling spaces discussed included designated shelter spaces and public spaces temporarily serving as cooling centres (libraries, community centres, etc.) that activate as cooling centres.

> ***When people call me, I want to keep myself safe. Because if they tell me what to do, and if I don't do it, and if I die from the heat wave, I only have myself to blame. Because people care. And it's up to me to reciprocate the care by listening to people who give me very good advice (Community Member, 72, female, Vancouver-Killarney).***

These systemic changes to create a more caring, heat-resilient communities in Metro Vancouver should be driven by the stories that people tell about their experiences. These stories ground policy and action in lived experience and help those who are most vulnerable to heat to feel heard and respected in the planning process. One unhoused participant reflected:

> ***I am so thankful you are asking me these questions. People stop caring what I think when I am useless to the world, so to be asked is so nice and maybe that will help other people (Community Member, 71, male).***

We are deeply thankful to those who shared their experiences with us for this research, and hope that those in positions of action will take their words as starting points for urgent action.

This report is a short intervention from the findings of this project. Further information on the study, methodology, and findings can be found in the paper, "To cool or not to cool: understanding and improving cooling centre use in metro vancouver through community-based participatory action research", available open access from *Environmental Research: Health* here.

[1] Please note these numbers of interviewees differ slightly from the numbers reported in our 2025 paper, "To Cool or Not to Cool" in *Environmental Research: Health*. The interviews drawn on for this report include 8 service provider interviews with service providers at shelters and public cooling centres, whereas the 3 service provider interviews included for the paper only include those working at public library cooling centres. We also include information from an additional 3 interviews with unhoused shelter users.

BACKGROUND ON COOLING CENTRES

During extreme heat, community centres, public libraries, and other community spaces serve as cooling centres, spaces for anyone from the public to cool down. For example, in the City of Vancouver, these spaces are activated when Environment and Climate Change Canada issues a heat warning or declares an extreme heat emergency.[2]

- During a Level 1 heat response, the City of Vancouver activates cooling centres, monitors outdoor spaces for people suffering from heat-related illness, activates support plans for tenants in non-market housing, and provides heat safety information to local community partners.
- During a Level 2 heat response, additional hours are added at some cooling centres and additional outdoor cooling locations such as heavy water misters and irrigation systems are activated in 15 parks. These spaces are supposed to provide seating, water, and bathrooms, in addition to carrying on their activities as libraries or cooling centres. It proves difficult to monitor who is accessing these spaces for cooling and who may be accessing these spaces in a normal routine or for the other aspects of the space.

In addition, there are a number of non-profits that run emergency shelters for extreme weather throughout the year. These shelters are aimed at those who are unhoused or are seeking more traditional shelter services than cooling centres at community centres or libraries.

Updated maps of these spaces are provided online on the city websites.

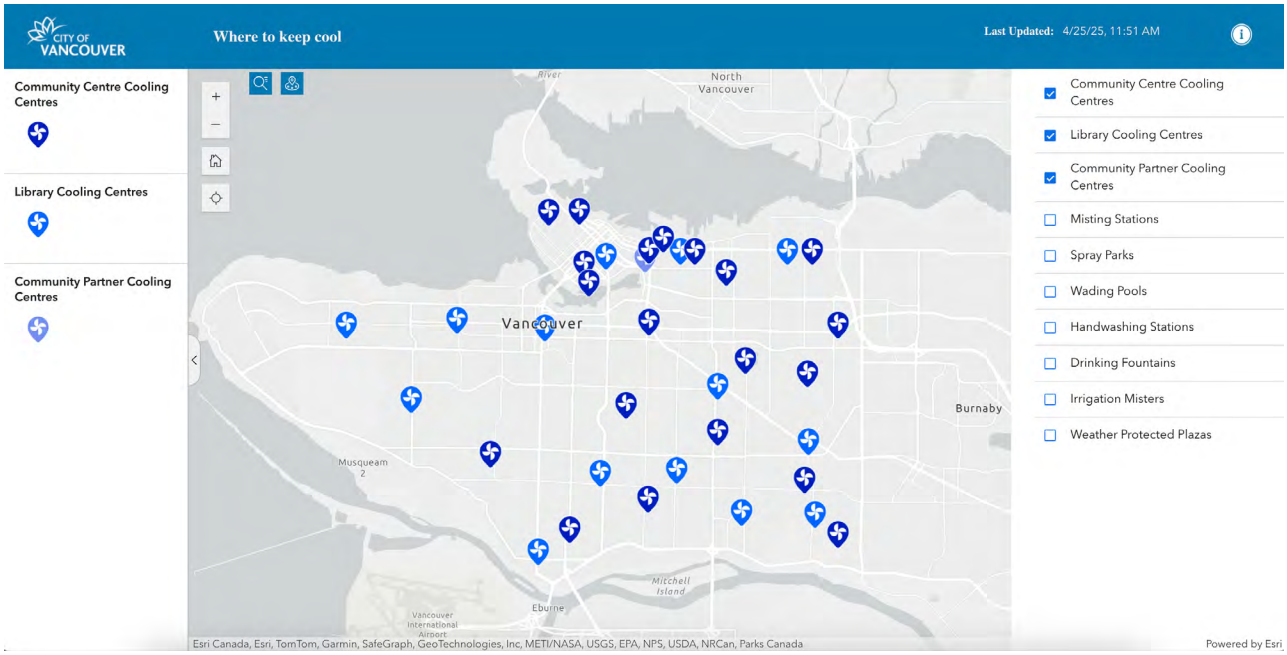


Figure 1. ArcGIS Map of Cooling Centres in Vancouver from the City of Vancouver.[3]

[2] City of Vancouver, "Stay safe in the summer heat", https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/hot-weather.aspx, accessed April 28, 2025.
[3] City of Vancouver, "Where to keep cool," https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/5e141c0d874745c09bb7fc69f0e819a0?_ga=2.186886760.1189852908.1745884485-1256829027.1744351174, Accessed April 28, 2025.

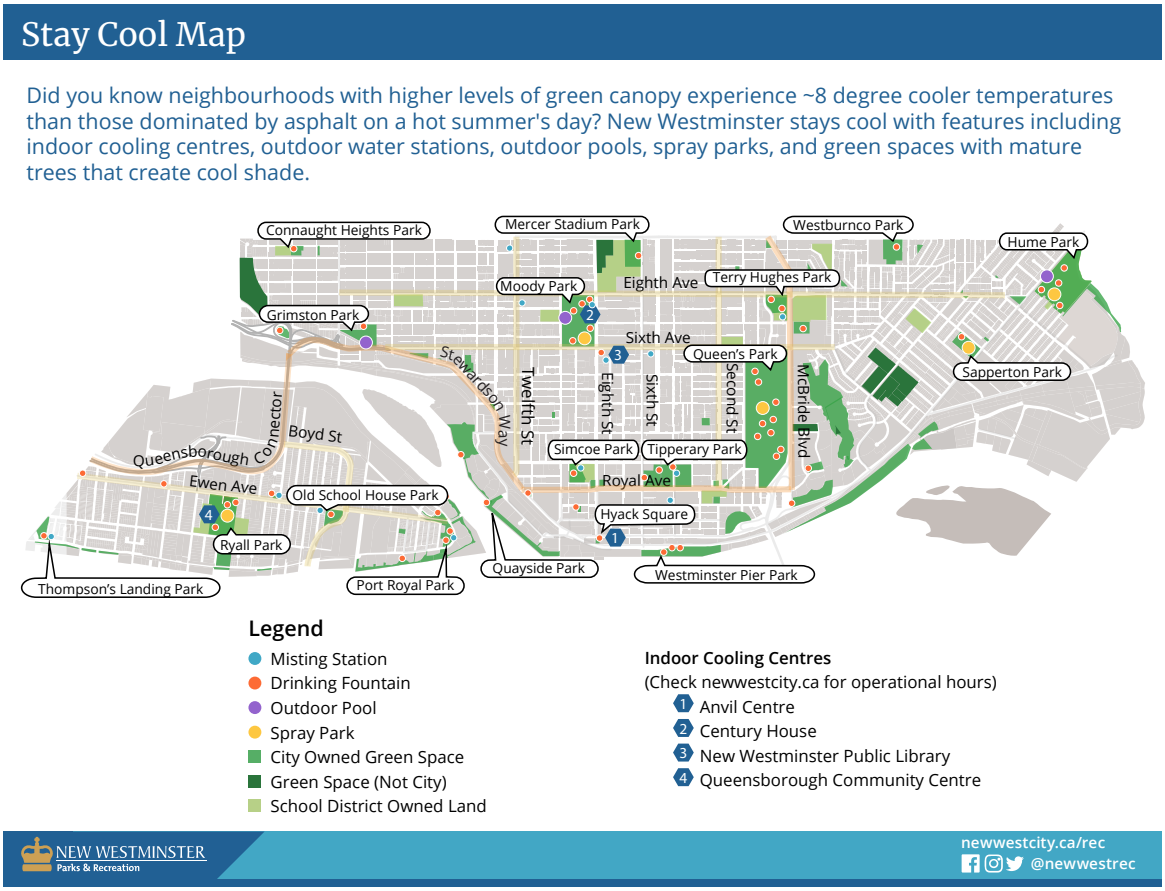


Figure 2. Stay Cool Map from the City of New Westminster.[4]

Activation Temperatures

It is important to note that what constitutes a heat warning *and a heat* emergency *differs based on the region in BC. Based on the coordinated systems created by BC Heat Alert and Response System (HARS), for Western Metro Vancouver (including the City of Vancouver, North and West Vancouver, Richmond, and most of Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast), a heat warning is issued under the following circumstances: "when two or more consecutive days of daytime maximum temperatures are expected to reach 29°C or warmer and nighttime minimum temperatures are expected to fall to 16°C or warmer".*

However, for regions of Metro Vancouver further inland such as Surrey, Coquitlam, and the Fraser Valley, a heat warning is only issued: "when two or more consecutive days of daytime maximum temperatures are expected to reach 33°C or warmer and nighttime minimum temperatures are expected to fall to 17°C or warmer".[5]

This difference is based on regional differences in normal temperatures.

The decision to designate an Extreme Heat Emergency is made when the forecast indicates that daily highs will substantively increase day-over-day for three or more consecutive days, in addition to meeting the Heat Warning criteria. The Extreme Heat Emergency will then be voted on by representatives from provincial health authorities and Environment and Climate Change Canada.

[4] City of New Westminster, "Stay Cool Map," map accessed on June 12, 2025 from https://www.newwestcity.ca/database/files/library/Stay_Cool_Map___8.5x11___website(2).pdf
[5] BC HARS, "BC Provincial Heat Alert and Response System (BC HARS): 2025", report accessed from http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/heat-event-response-planning

STUDY FINDINGS:
PUBLIC COOLING SPACES

Our guiding research questions were:

1. What are the experiences of people who access cooling centres?
2. Why do people choose to use or not use these spaces?
3. How could these spaces improve to better respond to these concerns and experiences?
4. Given the shortcomings of these models, what other supports (e.g. in people's homes or other social networks) could help residents to stay cool?

In answer to these questions, we found several key barriers to using cooling spaces, and reasons why people did not choose to use them:

1. COMMUNICATION AND TRANSLATION BARRIERS

Residents expressed a lack of communication and information on where the cooling centres were and when they were open. This included both communication to the general public in forms that people could easily access, such as flyers, as well as lack of direction when people reached the community centre on where the cooling centre was within the space. It was also expressed that many residents who didn't predominantly speak English felt excluded from the spaces that were overwhelmingly English-speaking.

> *If you can't speak English, you basically can't get into the [cooling centre]. The language spoken there is all English. You can't get in with any other language (Community Member, 77, female, Vancouver-Chinatown).*

> *I've seen a mother coming with a stroller and a baby less than two years old. The baby's face was all red, and I'm watching. So I'm just standing there watching, what is she going to do? She goes in, she went for a long walk, she comes around, she comes outside, she's standing there. And I went to her. (...) So I said, 'you were looking for a cooling place?' She said 'yes, but there's no sign' (Community Member, senior, female, Vancouver).*

2. PREFERENCE TO USE PRIVATELY-OWNED STORES, MALLS, AND OTHER COOL SPACES

Many residents who don't currently use public cooling centres opted to use cool spaces available in privately owned spaces, such as malls. Some of the elements that they liked were that these spaces had food, better WiFi, more seating, and more flexibility in how they interacted with those there.

> *But most commonly I see that is that seniors go to the mall ... Any mall but Metrotown is the biggest. Right? It's cold, there's food inside. I see a lot of old people go inside and sleep (Community Member, senior, Vancouver).*

Continued

Image courtesy 411 Seniors Centre Society

> *I live on the top floor, and my room is near a very large window. In the summer, it gets really sunny, as there's no adjacent building to block the sunlight... from late June to July, it gets extremely hot. During that time...it's always the most anxious period for me each year....I used to go to the food court in the International Village. There weren't many people there, so I brought my own food, iPad, and charger and spent the whole day there (Community Member, senior, female, Vancouver-Chinatown).*

> *I also go there for my ice cream, so that's an incentive to go to Metrotown for instance, you know, but I don't go too often to the Killarney Centre, because I don't have a place to sit (Community Member, 72, female, Vancouver-Killarney).*

3. LACK OF DIVERSITY WITHIN SPACES

While one of the benefits of cooling centres is that they are open to all, residents interviewed often noted that this "one-size-fits-all" approach didn't work for them due to cultural difference, worries about getting sick, and negative feelings towards different groups of people that may be using the space (e.g. towards unhoused residents from housed residents).

> *Every summer is filled with anxiety, so I dare not go to other community [centres]. There are many people, strangers, some of whom engage in activities like smoking weed. Therefore, I avoid those community centres. I can only go to places like the Food Court. I can sit there all day because they have air conditioning (Community Member, senior, female, Vancouver-Chinatown).*

> *People...are getting scared of the implications of COVID, heat, and autoimmune diseases because... you just can't herd people together in a room and say, 'There, we can cool you all down.' Sorry, but put me between two people who are coughing like mad and not wearing masks and I have an autoimmune disease. You haven't done me any favors (Community Member, 68, female, Vancouver-West End).*

Continued

4. DIFFICULT TO ACCESS DUE TO DISTANCE OR MOBILITY CHALLENGES

Residents shared that cooling centres were often too far away to access comfortably and as part of their daily summer routine. Transportation to and from cooling centres was a major barrier in access for elderly residents.

> *Before I head to a [cooling centre], I need to rest somewhere. If there is no place to rest and I have to walk for 15–20 min, I won't go (Community Member, senior, female, Vancouver-Chinatown).*

> *We'd have to wait for the bus to come, [but] we don't know when the bus will come, right? We also need to wait for the transfers and it's too hot (Community Member, 70, female, South Vancouver).*

5. LACK OF SPACE AND EXTENDED HOURS WITHIN COOLING CENTRES

Residents expressed that existing public cooling centres in community centres and libraries are already being used and therefore are often overcrowded. The residents we spoke to suggested that rather than being underutilized, community centres and libraries designated as cooling centres were often very busy and that capacity needed to better match demand. Additionally, residents often felt the heat most at night and said longer hours would help them to cope better.

> *The library, especially the one in Hastings, is always crowded. There are never any seats available (Community Member, senior, female, Vancouver-Chinatown).*

> *I would wish and I'm sure many people do. That they would be open 24 hours a day. And for not wait till it gets so unbearably hot, or unbearably cold, but be open to everyone. And that people who need them maybe people like myself, who have difficulty getting around, have more access to them that they can pick up the phone and say please, I need someone to drive me to these shelters. Maybe they have that. I don't know but I'm concerned that they just are not open 24/7 and that they are open only for small amounts of time or at the worst heat at the worst cold. But for people who are older like myself we cannot only not stand the worst he ignores cold, but even when its Lesser. So yes, I wish living hope that they will be open longer and longer times. Longer hours longer days (Community Member, 77, female, Vancouver-Knight).*

> *There's this centre that I go to, [because] that's the nearest to my house. I feel very, very safe there (...) except for the fact that I cannot be standing for two hours. That's the only problem. Sometimes I can even go to the washroom where they have seats, you know, but other than that, I think they are not too well equipped (for lots of) seniors at one go (Community Member, 72, female, Vancouver-Killarney).*

6. LACK OF ACTIVITIES

Residents shared that boredom and a lack of activities in cooling centres often made it hard to spend all day there to stay cool.

> *It was literally just, 'here's a cup of water, and you can sit here for a couple of hours'. And when you've still gotta be productive during the day or do something with your day, just having access to the space doesn't help (Community Member, 23, non-binary, Vancouver).*

STUDY FINDINGS:
SHELTER SPACES

We spoke to 7 community members who were unhoused and used overnight shelter services. We also interviewed 6 shelter space providers about their experiences providing shelter services, including non-profit-run extreme weather shelters.

Service **providers** reported that:

- Demand for shelter services often spiked during extreme weather events, whether extreme heat, extreme cold, or heavy rain or snow events.
- Due to tailored services such as a free shuttle, users felt more comfortable and experienced fewer barriers to access.
- Staffing and funding did not keep up with shelter demand.
- Spaces work best when users feel safe and can receive help with transportation, medical appointment access, food, translation services, and help with navigating housing structures.

Cooling centres that activate only upon specific heat criteria can learn from the holistic approach from some shelter providers. However, there are significant barriers as well within shelter spaces.

Service **users** of shelter spaces reported that:

- It is often too crowded in shelter spaces and service users found this as a barrier.
- There were also interpersonal reflections on staff-service user relationships that affected feelings of comfort and safety from people with many belongings.
- For more specific extreme weather centres, such as cooling centres, they lacked the transportation (specifically free buses) and knowledge of where they were.
    - Those who did know about them had learned through word of mouth from other unhoused folks or from shelter staff.
- Extreme cold was often a bigger issue than extreme heat, but some noted that the heat very much bothered them as well.
- For some, sleeping outside during the heat was cooler than inside.

> ***It's challenging to use shelters because they're often overcrowded, and sometimes I feel safer staying outside (Community Member, 45, male).***

> ***My experience at the extreme temperature shelter is so-so. Staff are kind of rude and they are always after me about my belongings. They expect me to leave it outside. Easy for them, they don't have their entire world to carry around (Community Member, 40, female).***

COOLING CENTRES ARE A *TEMPORARY* FIX.

ULTIMATELY, PEOPLE NEED TO BE COOL *IN THEIR OWN HOMES AND COMMUNITY*, AND HAVE *SAFE, AFFORDABLE, AND SECURE HOUSING.*

Image courtesy Mahin E Alam

HOUSING AND THE **RIGHT TO COOL**

In addition to these findings about public cooling spaces, we found that in many circumstances, people preferred to stay cool at home, even when their housing was, as they reported, very hot. Cooling within housing is especially important for those who have mobility challenges, underlying health conditions that cause them to avoid groups, and other reasons to avoid public cooling settings.

Housing came up in a number of ways in our interviews and focus groups:

1. Relationships with landlords and property managers often enabled or closed down opportunities for cooling. Some experienced a lack of care from their landlords or building managers.
2. Night-time heat is most often experienced indoors and cannot be alleviated through day-time public cooling centres.
3. Comfort at home is key as many will continue to stay at home because it is where they feel safe.

> ***Something like Vancouver, you gotta [have]..., especially in the summertime, not places that close at nine o'clock at night. That's when the heat hits you. You got to have places open till 11, 12 o'clock (Community Member, female, Vancouver).***

> ***In the summer time it's the same thing, I will go some place to feel cooler. So inside the room, it's just that you have no way to control it. It is only according to the landlord whether they control the temperature a lot (Community Member, 23, non-binary, Vancouver).***

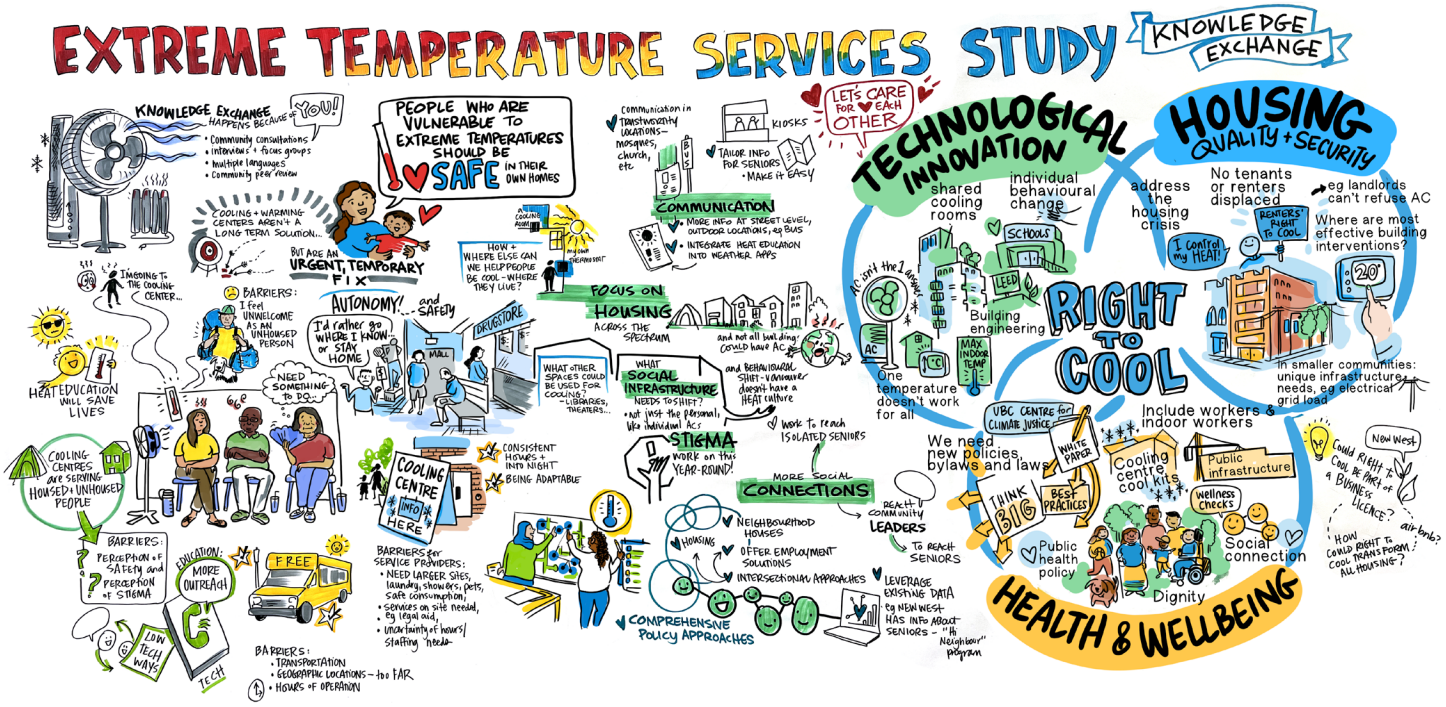
Image courtesy Mahin E Alam

RIGHT TO COOL:
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

In May 2024, researchers, project partners, community organizations, and residents who had participated in this research project convened to share learnings and think ahead together.

This workshop, *Extreme Temperature Services & 'Right to Cool' Knowledge Exchange* branched out from discussing cooling centre use explicitly to focus on a broader Right to Cool framework, bringing intersecting and overlapping domains that must cohere to ensure cooling for all.

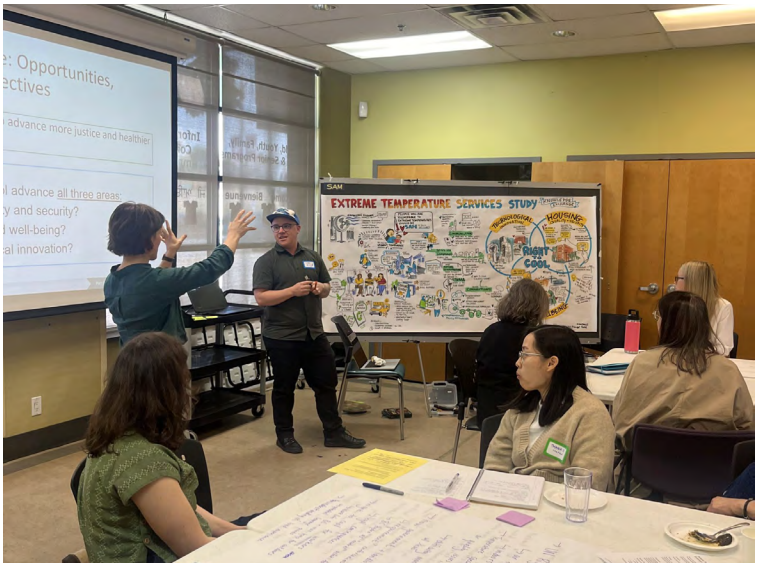
Since then, the UBC Centre for Climate Justice has launched the report **'Too Hot to Think Small: The Case for a Right to Cool in British Columbia'** as an expansive vision forward. **Please find the report here.**



Knowledge Exchange: Extreme Temperature Services Study and Right to Cool May 31st, 2024

LIVE GRAPHIC RECORDING SAM BRADD | Drawing Change

Figure 3. Graphic Recording from Workshop by Sam Bradd. You can access the full HD version here: https://climatejustice.ubc.ca/news/recap-extreme-temperature-services-%e2%80%8b-right-to-cool-knowledge-exchange/



"Extreme Temperature Services & 'Right to Cool' Knowledge Exchange" workshop on May 31st, 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, we provide recommendations for how to improve existing public cooling spaces and address some of the barriers to accessing cooling centres.

Second, we provide recommendations for how to go beyond existing public cooling centres to improve community members' thermal safety, specifically in people's homes where they experience thermal insecurity.

FOR EXISTING PUBLIC COOLING SPACES

1. **Invest in multiple forms of translated information sharing.**

   This could include:

   - Investing in analogue methods such as peer-to-peer communication, sandwich boards, flyers and radio.
   - Providing translation services of cooling centre information and noting of culturally-specific cool spaces, as well as hiring staff that speak multiple languages.
   - Growing and funding volunteer check-in programs such as 411 Seniors Centre Society Extreme Heat Emergency Check-in plan, as well as programs that target people who are socially isolated such as South Vancouver Neighborhood House's Better at Home program.
   - Developing clear communication about thresholds and when cooling centres will be open later, as well as linking local information to weather apps. One of the barriers to using analogue methods is that they cannot be updated as quickly, but seniors don't always have access to the technology that would allow them to see last-minute cooling centre activation information.

> *I watch the weather network, I also have weather apps on my phone. I keep an eye out. And then when I hear or get any kind of weather warnings or advance warnings, I have a little small network of people that I send that information out to... some of them just..refuse to put the TV on, they won't watch news. So they miss a lot of those things. So **I'm their early warning system**, because they'll read their email (Community Member, 68, female, Vancouver-West End).*

> ***I think the centres themselves should also have maps of other centres nearby.** So that when someone is kind of like, done using a space, they can still walk away knowing where... if they need to go, like, cool off or warm up in another space-here's the new restaurant space that they can go (Community Member, 23, non-binary, Vancouver).*

Image courtesy Mahin E Alam

> *In the first period following that heat dome when we activated our cooling centre, it was sort of slow to pick up. But then **we actually...found that we were getting calls when we weren't officially in cooling centre mode saying, 'Hey, I came by because I was trying to get you know, just get cool. You weren't open. Is there a reason why you're not open?'** So then we're having to explain, 'Oh, we actually weren't officially in cooling centre mode. But hey, it sounds like you were feeling the heat.' So that's good for us to know. We can maybe revisit our hours (Service Provider, New Westminster).*

> *I got a call from 411 Senior Centre ... they asked if I need anything, or whether they could send me something ... **when people call me, I feel that someone out there loves me, you know, I'm not, I'm not just just some, some old person that's in the neighbourhood, and nobody cares.** Honestly, people do care. And I love that. Because that when people call me, I want to keep myself safe (Community Member, 72, female, Vancouver-Killarney).*

2. Create cool spaces that feel safe for all.

Working to remove stigma is very important, but may be a longer-term undertaking through embedded community engagement programs.

This could include:

- Cooling supervised drug use sites and other sites for drug users who are often more at risk from heat.
- Cultivating a participatory approach to cooling through workshops where residents rank and vote on the sites where they would like to see cooling in their neighborhoods, with small grants administered to local business cool spaces that could provide increased seating, water/snacks, access to washrooms, and be documented in a community map.
- Developing mask-required spaces for those who are immunocompromised to more safely access cooling centres.
- Cooling spaces with specific cultural activities and language-specific activities, specifically for Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking seniors in Chinatown and the Downtown East Side areas, which get very hot.

> *If somebody hasn't bathed for three days, while somebody who bathes regularly ... those two folks might have difficulty coexisting side by side. So, I think for us, it's really about the fact that because we [the library] are sort of the last third place that doesn't have any financial barriers for people, that everyone is welcome, but it means that* ***everyone is welcome****. And with that comes some issues around coexistence, and just being able to be comfortable with people from all walks of life (Service Provider, New Westminster).*

3. **Improved training for library and community centre staff to be on the frontlines of the climate crisis, as well as improved staffing for these locations.**

   This could include:

   - In the City of Vancouver, the Resilient Vancouver Framework[6] highlights the need to "train and support staff at community centres and libraries to participate in community disaster resilience." The framework notes the Park Board, Vancouver Public Library, and the City as collaborative partners in training staff. This type of training can further support staff that are being expected to take on frontline health and community service roles during a heatwave.
   - For unhoused users of the spaces, further sensitivity training with staff is important, especially for engaging with users who may be bringing their belongings or their "entire world" (Community member, full quote pg. 7) with them.

> *A lot of those emergency weather shelters [pause] that's not what they are primarily. They're actually a community centre or a neighborhood house or something. They just happen to be an emergency weather shelter, which I don't fault the spaces for because, you know, they're doing their own thing.* ***But I think if the city or whoever were to kind of station support staff, in addition, at these locations offering additional support for these emergency weather situations would be beneficial*** *(Community Member, 23, non-binary, Vancouver).*

> *Yeah, it really depends on who's been scheduled...we have people, working evenings, who are not working a full day, it's usually been easier for them to extend their shifts. But on occasion, we've brought in folks just to, hey, can you work a four hour shift today? That'll take us to 9 or 10 pm?...As long as we can safely keep the place open with a with a safe number of staff to help properly run the facility and manage it.... the extra funding sometimes does come in for security...if they can extend as well...the staff are very giving and altruistic in many ways, but at the same time that you know, they are on contract, and you have to abide by the terms of a collective agreement that, you know, rightly requires that they get paid for their work as well (Service Provider, New Westminster).*

4. **Increase reliability of cooling centres and activation plans by setting the thresholds for activation lower by 1 or 2 degrees, and standardizing the plans across the Metro Vancouver region. (Currently, there are different activation temperatures between Western Metro Vancouver and Eastern Metro Vancouver).**
   - This would mean that cooling centres could begin to operate around 27 °C, but would offer a buffer so those who experience negative impacts of heat at a lower temperature can have relief even when it's cooler than activation temperatures.
   - Standardizing these temperatures could help to reduce confusion around whether a centre is activated, especially for those who refer to non-digital forms of information and don't have access to rapidly changing activation information.

5. **Improve transit to cooling centres.**

   This could include:

   - At a provincial level, advocate for more frequent buses that can cut the amount of time people are waiting for the bus and make buses less crowded. Especially at a time when significant cuts to existing transit are being discussed, advocacy for more investment in transit is key to keep people safe and able to seek cooler spaces during heat events.

[6] City of Vancouver, Resilient Vancouver Strategy, 2019, Objective 1.2.C, p. 56, accessed June 13, 2025 from https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/resilient-vancouver-strategy.pdf.

- Add extra transit services, such as ride services and improve communication in multiple languages about the availability of these services.
- Add cooling on older bus lines, such as trolley bus lines, so that residents without cars can stay cool as they travel to cooling centres and cooler spaces. These older bus lines are also often the local bus lines that make more stops and may be relied upon to provide home-to-cooling centre/space transit.
- Offer free transportation on hot days through bus vouchers.

Example

In 2024, the City of Hamilton[7] offered free fares on their transit system during heat warnings. This operated through 2000 first-come, first-serve tickets offered at community centres and distributed through community organizations that serve people who are heat vulnerable. Metro Vancouver municipalities could similarly pilot free transit tickets to be distributed to community organizations for access to cooling centres when heat emergencies are activated.

> ***And then last year as well, they offered a ride service. So, if somebody couldn't get to the library or couldn't get home, then there was a number that we could call to help them with that. But this service wasn't frequently used by residents...I don't know, if [the ride service] was actually used very much...it might not have been at all. But they essentially had a driver who was ready and waiting. And somebody could call from home to get picked up and brought here or we could call for them like to take them back to where they were going (Service Provider, White Rock).***

> ***Because I use the bus, so I understand the issue of moving around in Vancouver, especially in transit. In the hot season, if the government can do it, they should have more routes and more buses going so that the buses can avoid the overloaded situation. Too many people. In the hot weather, people stand and it's chaotic, especially in rush hour it exacerbates the heat-wave. Plus there are also buses that don't have air-con. So if there were more buses going and more routes, there would be fewer people on each bus (Community Member, senior, female, South Vancouver).***

[7] Justin Chandler, "Hamilton providing free transit tickets to help people get to places to cool down", CBC News, July 4, 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/free-transit-tickets-during-heat-warnings-1.7253529.

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Image courtesy Mahin E Alam

RECOMMENDATIONS BEYOND PUBLIC COOLING SPACES FOR IMPROVING HOLISTIC EXPERIENCES WITH HEAT

1. Explore right to cool for residents in exisiting buildings.

There has been progress on mandating cooling within buildings. The BC Building Code was changed in 2024 to ensure that there is at least one cool space that doesn't exceed 26°C in new buildings[8], and the City of Vancouver is mandating mechanical cooling in all new buildings from 2025 onwards[9]. However, the existing unaffordable housing market means that these new buildings with cooling are unaffordable for many residents who have been in their homes for a long time, as well as many newcomers to Vancouver. To ensure heat exposure does not become even more inequitably distributed, the next step must be to explore an expansion to the 2024 British Columbia Building Code, which could mandate shifts in guidelines and standards of maintenance for existing rental buildings. See here for more on what a Right to Cool would look like that includes improving existing buildings.

2. Use health as a way into regulating living spaces and increase inter-agency cooperation.

Heat is a health issue. Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health Authority have issued information on the risks of indoor heat to encourage stratas, property managers, and landlords to allow air conditioning, but none of this information is legally binding[10]. Lobbying on behalf of provincial health authorities for maximum temperature requirements in buildings (through changes in by-laws) could support and add legitimacy to existing activism for maximum temperature requirements.

3. Create opportunities for renters and those with low incomes to access retrofits.

Currently, retrofits for renters must be at the will of their landlords or property managers and there are financial barriers for low-income homeowners to access retrofits because they operate through rebates. There is also the danger that requiring retrofits for climate and heat without additional protections for renters will result in increased rents and displacement. Large-scale retrofits must be paired with stipulations that these retrofits cannot be passed onto tenants in the form of rent increases.

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[8] British Columbia Building and Safety Standards Branch, "Protection from Overheating in Dwelling Units, Information Bulletin, April 19, 2024, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/construction-industry/building-codes-and-standards/bulletins/2024-code/b24-08_overheating.pdf.

[9] David Carrigg, "Five things to know about air conditioning in Metro Vancouver", Vancouver Sun, May 17, 2023, https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/things-to-know-about-air-conditioning-in-metro-vancouver.

[10] Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health. (2023, July 20). *New Public Health guidance for landlords and stratas encourages removal of rules against air conditioning*, https://www.vch.ca/en/press-release/new-public-health-guidance-landlords-and-stratas-encourages-removal-rules-against-air., accessed June 30, 2025.

Example

In Portland, Oregon, which experienced the same heat dome in 2021 as British Columbia, the Portland Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund (PCEF), established in 2018, has provided access for low-income people, people of color, and those living with disabilities to heat pumps, solar panels, and greener infrastructure.[11] PCEF is funded through a 1% surcharge on revenue of retail corporations that make over $1 billion annually nationally and over $500,000 in Portland annually. PCEF gives renewable grants of up to $5000 quarterly to non-profit organizations to implement projects, and their work is focused on creating clean energy futures while supporting affordable housing and anti-displacement projects. One of their programs Clean Energy in Unregulated Multifamily Housing will provide energy upgrades in 2500 existing naturally occurring affordable rental units.[12] Metro Vancouver municipalities could explore the feasibility of a similar program as a way to fund larger-scale retrofits of existing buildings.

4. **Explore the feasibility of new heat pump technologies, such as window heat pumps that may work in buildings that cannot easily be retrofitted.**

Example

In summer 2023 and 2024, New York City's NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) piloted a program with electric window heat pumps (similar to window air conditioners) in a few of their buildings. These heat pumps can be installed in two hours with minimal disruption and are a third of the cost of typical heat pump systems.[13] Metro Vancouver could explore similar technologies that can be made more affordable and require less onerous and disruptive retrofits.

5. **Create safer and more affordable housing.**

Experiences of extreme heat are intrinsically linked to the environments in which people experience them, often at home or on the street (if people are unhoused). Housing policies aimed at regulating rents such as vacancy control and the creation of community-controlled housing such as community land trusts and co-operative housing can in the long term help people to have more say in their living space and how to stay cool during heat.

6. **Increase accessibility of existing programs, such as the BC Hydro's Free Portable Air Conditioners program.** The BC Hydro air conditioner program, which launched in summer 2023, aimed at income-qualified and/or those with underlying health conditions has helped people to get free, portable air conditioners to keep them cool at home. However, barriers noted by community partners were landlords refusing to sign the forms (since they are not required to), lack of information about how to apply for the program, and translation barriers for the application forms and process (e.g. follow-up calls, installation). As of April 2025, the BC Hydro program has been closed to income-qualifying residents, and only residents who receive recommendation letters from their regional health authority's Home Care Program or Mental Health and Substance Use Program are eligible.[14]

> ***For example, if you say where you can apply to install an air conditioner, you just need to have a Chinese-speaking person at these places, and you can handle anything (Community Member, 77, female, Vancouver-Chinatown).***

> ***The small and portable AC doesn't work that strong. Yeah. So from my experience, they're still seniors that I've heard who, are...hesitant about applying for one, as there are multiple barriers, one, still, of course, the language barrier, even to like ask for help, it still takes time to process their application, not just for us, the community service providers, we need time to process their cases, but also for the organizations who provide those same machines also need time to process those applications (Service Provider, Vancouver).***

Cool space is about more than just temperature. A cool space is a holistic space that feels safe, provides a way to continue living with dignity during heat events, and attempts to accommodate the diverse needs of those in the community. These recommendations are designed to engage with both the practical and larger structural aspects of providing cool spaces during heat.

[11] Portland.gov, "Portland Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund", https://www.portland.gov/bps/cleanenergy, accessed April 28, 2025.
[12] Portland.gov, "PCEF now accepting proposals for our Clean Energy in Unregulated Multifamily Housing program", https://www.portland.gov/bps/cleanenergy/news/2025/3/10/pcef-now-accepting-proposals-our-clean-energy-unregulated, accessed on April 28, 2025.
[13] Samantha Maldonado, "Electric Heat Pumps Get Warm Reviews at Queens Public Housing Development", The City, February 27, 2025, https://www.thecity.nyc/2025/02/27/nycha-electric-heat-pumps-housing-energy-queens/.
[14] BC Hydro, "Free portable air conditioners", https://www.bchydro.com/powersmart/residential/rebates-programs/savings-based-on-income/free-air-conditioner.html, accessed April 28, 2025.

EXISTING AND ONGOING WORK AROUND EQUITY- AND JUSTICE-ORIENTED PLANNING AROUND EXTREME HEAT

Please find below a non-exhaustive list of relevant recent reports that cover other aspects of extreme heat planning and justice in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada more broadly:

- Acorn Canada: Crumbling Apartments in a Warming World: Tenants in an Energy Cost Crisis (2025)
- UBC Centre for Climate Justice: Too Hot to Think Small: The Case for a Right to Cool in British Columbia (2025)
- UBC Centre for Climate Justice and Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture: Migrant Agricultural Workers in BC Face Compounding Crises: Housing and Climate (2024)
- Ecotrust Canada: Advancing Tenants' Rights to Retrofits and Energy Efficiency (2024)
- Low Income Energy Network: Municipal Advocacy around Extreme Heat and Rental Housing: A Toolkit for Activists (2024)
- City of Vancouver: Resilient Neighbourhoods Program: 2022 Community-Led Extreme Heat Resilience (2023)
- Statistics Canada: The prevalence of household air conditioning in Canada (2023)
- Worker Solidarity Network: Can't Stand the Heat? Get Out of the Kitchen! (2023)
- UBC Sustainability Scholars with Union Gospel Mission: DIY Passive Cooling Techniques for residents of Vancouver Downtown Eastside (2023)
- Vancouver Coastal Health: Policy Tools to Create and Support Cooler, Safer Indoor Living Spaces (2023)
- Vancouver Coastal Health: Protecting Population Health in a Climate Emergency (2023)
- DTES SRO Collaborative: Extreme Heat Preparedness and Response Initiative (2022)
- UBC Climate Hub: Tenant Rights and Extreme Weather Events: An Analysis of Indoor Temperature Requirements in US and Canadian Landlord-Tenant Law (2022)

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