



Heat Gap Memo

PHILADELPHIA CLIMATE JUSTICE COLLECTIVE (PCJC)

FEBRUARY 2026

Executive Summary

The Philadelphia Climate Justice Collective (PCJC), facilitated by The Environmental Collaboratory at Drexel University, brings together Mantua Civic Association, SEAMAAC, Inc., Overbrook Environmental and Education Center, and Nueva Esperanza Inc. (Esperanza) to develop a community-driven environmental justice climate transition plan that centers local leadership, data sovereignty, and systemic change to address shared challenges such as heat, pollution, and historical inequities. The collective emphasizes equitable climate solutions, community accountability, and translating resident priorities into actionable policies to improve health and environmental outcomes in vulnerable neighborhoods.

Collaboratively, the PCJC identified priorities through each community based organization’s community engagement, which have been translated into actionable recommendations in the PCJC recommendations report. These recommendations are grounded in socioeconomic, environmental justice and the systemic circumstances of each community including gentrification, historical redlining, and elevated levels of heat and air pollution and their associated impacts on health. A deeper understanding of the Social Determinants of Health, caused by systemic disinvestment, poverty, and redlining, is critical to contextualizing these inequities and developing effective interventions. These determinants include factors such as income, housing quality, employment conditions, and neighborhood safety, all of which intersect with climate vulnerabilities.

PHILADELPHIA CLIMATE JUSTICE COLLECTIVE (PCJC)



Philadelphia’s extreme heat is a public health emergency that is exacerbated by systemic inequities. The health effects of extreme heat include heat stroke/stress, cardiovascular failure, premature births, cognitive decline, respiratory issues, and violence. Without urgent action, heat-related illness and death will disproportionately affect communities with preexisting health disparities, high levels of air pollution and inadequate housing/transportation infrastructure that is pronounced in low-income communities and communities of color. We appreciate the leadership of Mayor Parker’s Administration, led by the Department of Health and Office of Sustainability, in recognizing the extreme heat and its disproportionate impacts on lower income and historically marginalized communities who are more vulnerable¹. Our work builds on the City’s efforts, including the Philadelphia Heat Vulnerability Index² and heat guide, by calling for a comprehensive all-of-government approach that addresses extreme heat as a crisis with a focus on extending the reach of the Philadelphia government by partnering with community-based organizations.

This memo urges city and state policymakers to adopt a “Right to Cooling” framework, including: (1) expanded and inclusive cooling center access, (2) energy assistance reform, (3) heat-resilient housing retrofits, (4) healthcare and zoning interventions and (5) worker protections. While residents are generally aware of high heat conditions in their neighborhoods, many are unaware of the severity of the heat index and the resulting health risks from such heat exposure. Residents are seeking both immediate and long-term solutions that fit within their community in order to combat the issue. As one community leader said, “*We need to do ‘both, and’... It’s addressing the tree canopy while we address the lack of AC in homes.*” Solutions that focus solely on the long-term impacts may overlook the more immediate needs of residents who cannot wait years to fix the problems they face. Without serving both the emergent and immediate issues, programs risk creating a sense of being “out of touch” with communities who feel that long-range solutions are “not for them”. Solutions need to resonate with the community. The connection needs to be made between what an increase in degrees may mean to an individual’s health or the health of the community overall. Connecting the acute (e.g. heat stroke) and longer-term issues (e.g. asthma and cardiovascular disease), especially if there are comorbidities, is an important part of the work.

As one community leader shared:

“[The City says] stay inside and close your windows, and we don’t have AC. So the choice is breathe bad air or roast.”

1 **Heat Response: Creative Action for Philly’s Rising Temperatures:** <https://www.tpl.org/our-work/philadelphia-heat-response>

2 **Heat Vulnerability Index:** [Heat Vulnerability Index highlights City hot spots | Department of Public Health | City of Philadelphia](#)



**COOLING ACCESS MUST BE RECOGNIZED AS A
RIGHT ESSENTIAL TO HEALTH, SAFETY, AND DIGNITY.**

Endorsements

- Environmental Innovations Initiative
- Clean Air Council
- Hunting Park Neighborhood Advisory Committee
- Hunting Park Community Solar Initiative
- Young Chances Foundation
- Physicians for Social Responsibility in PA
- Pennsylvania Bipartisan Climate Initiative
- Philadelphia Horticultural Society

Key Policy Gaps to Advance Energy Sovereignty and the Right to Cooling as a Basic Human Right





ENERGY JUSTICE GAP 1 COOLING CENTERS

Cooling centers provide the most immediate relief for residents on high-heat days. However, current cooling centers are limited in their capacity and equitable access.

Residents in historically disinvested areas rely on cooling centers, as their homes become “heat traps” on high heat days. Residents whose homes are equipped for cooling often still depend on cooling centers due to high energy costs. However, residents complain that existing cooling centers are inadequate to meet community needs because they are frequently located far from the people most affected, with limited public transportation options to reach them. Many close in the evening despite extreme heat persisting overnight, leaving residents without relief during crucial hours. Additionally, city-run cooling centers operate under strict activation criteria and limited hours as they are typically opened only when the city declares a *Heat Health Emergency*, based on forecasts of sustained high heat and humidity. Nonprofit-run cooling centers — often more deeply embedded in the community — are likewise activated only once those government thresholds are met. This narrow trigger point leaves nonprofits unable to respond on dangerously hot days that fall below the official emergency level. Reevaluating this threshold could enable a more flexible, community-based response, expanding access to relief before conditions reach crisis levels. Addressing these needs requires a parallel approach: 1) emergency level cooling solutions and 2) a comprehensive solution to ensure adequate cooling in homes and surrounding communities. Additionally, cooling centers may feel unwelcoming to immigrants, or other marginalized groups due to stigma, restrictive security policies, or language barriers. The situation of unhoused people requires dedicated solutions.

SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS INCLUDE:

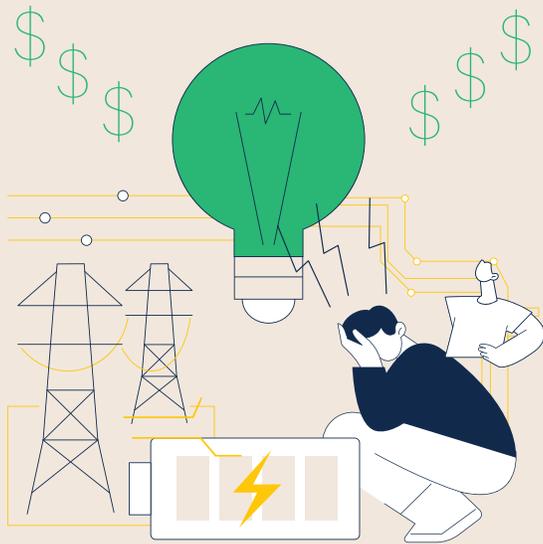
- Utilizing cooling buses that travel
- Extending hours for existing cooling centers
- Promoting inclusionary practices of cooling centers (welcoming/comfortable environment, basic accessibility improvements, safety, staff training)
- Education program for residents for actions during extreme heat periods and use of cooling centers (go-bags)
- In-home cooling initiatives that make an individual's residence cooler (air conditioners, weatherization, etc.)
- Guidance for protecting outdoor workers
- Dedicated centers for the unhoused
- Transportation to the cooling centers
- Guidance to public health professionals to diagnose and document extreme heat illness
- Accessible messaging on high heat days
- Reevaluate the activation thresholds for city-run and nonprofit cooling centers

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS COULD INCLUDE:

- Strengthening the capacity of cooling centers with resources earmarked for specific community needs
- Developing dedicated cooling centers, with human services and architectural design tailored to the needs of specific communities (unhoused individuals, people with disabilities)
- Establishing a right to cooling comparable to Philadelphia's right to heat policy.³ For example, NYC City Council has passed a resolution that requires tenant occupied dwellings to be provided with cooled and dehumidified air and New York City's Cool Neighborhoods Program provides targeted outreach by community health workers and city agencies to guide vulnerable residents to nearby cooling centers.⁴

3 **The Philadelphia Code** (City of Philadelphia, Pa., § PM-602 [2025]). Retrieved from https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/philadelphia/latest/philadelphia_pa/0-0-0-271944

4 **New York City Council**. (2024, July 18). Int 0994-2024: Requiring that tenant-occupied dwellings be provided with cooled and dehumidified air (Leg. Doc. No. Int 0994-2024). <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6788510&GUID=156F95BB-CA74-44F3-A07B-A0E54EA0C10F>



ENERGY JUSTICE GAP 2 HIGH ENERGY COSTS

High energy costs prevent low-income households from using cooling devices even when they are available.

Residents face disproportionately high energy burdens, forcing them to choose between paying for cooling, food, or medications. Philadelphia's poorest residents report going without food to afford high energy costs during the summer months.⁵ Moreover, the rapid growth of data centers threatens to strain local grids and drive up rates in already overburdened communities. These centers consume massive amounts of electricity and water for cooling, while their benefits are not equally dispersed. Their placement is not inevitable but rather a policy choice that should involve transparent review and the consent of affected residents.

Without affordable energy, cooling remains inaccessible, worsening health risks during heat waves. According to one study, Philadelphia experiences energy burdens 86% higher than the national average (3.1%), with Philadelphia households on average spending around 6.7% of their income on energy.⁶ This situation is exacerbated by the aged housing stock and high poverty rates in Philadelphia.

5 Gareis, C., Gottesfeld, L., Mariani, J., Ortiz-Siberón, Á., Price, J., & Rakhlina-Powsner, D. (2023, June). Enduring the extremes: CLS and Esperanza Report. https://clsphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Enduring-the-Extremes-CLS-and-Esperanza-Report_Final.pdf

6 Kenner, A., Rosenthal, A., Leone, B., Sarao, M., Adams, J., & Tzinberg, A. (2023). *Transitioning out of vulnerability using the Neighborhood Energy Center model*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003408536-20>



PHILADELPHIA EXPERIENCES ENERGY BURDENS

86% HIGHER THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE

Research shows that BIPOC households are disproportionately affected. In Philadelphia, 39% of Black households and 45% of Hispanic households have high energy burdens.⁷ The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), an important source of support for vulnerable households through the winter months, faces potential elimination in the President's Fiscal Year 2026 budget proposal.⁸ If enacted, this would remove vital cooling and heating assistance for millions of low-income families nationwide, disproportionately impacting communities of color and worsening energy insecurity and health risks during extreme heat and cold weather.⁹ There must be a focus on alternative mechanisms at the local or state level to abate high energy burdens.

SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS INCLUDE:

- State or local funding sources for funding to low-income households
- Agreements with utility providers to prevent energy shutoffs during extreme heat periods
- Incentives or alternative mechanisms at the local or state level to abate high energy burdens for low-income and vulnerable populations
- Funding for community-based organizations to conduct surveys identifying populations with special needs, vulnerability to extreme heat, lack of in-home cooling, and transportation needs for accessing cooling centers.

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS COULD INCLUDE:

- Protecting and expanding LIHEAP or alternative state programs to provide cooling and heating assistance
- Changes to utility rate structure to protect against high energy burden on low-income households
- Community impact report required for incoming data centers

⁷ **American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. (2020).** *Energy Burdens in Philadelphia* [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from https://www.aceee.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/aceee-01_energy_burden_-_philadelphia.pdf

⁸ **National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA). (2025).** *President's FY 2026 Budget Eliminates Federal Funding For LIHEAP*. Retrieved from <https://neada.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Presidents-FY-26-Budget-LIHEAP-1-1.pdf>

⁹ **American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. (2024, September).** *Data update: City energy burdens* [Policy brief]. https://www.aceee.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/data_update_-_city_energy_burdens_0.pdf



ENERGY JUSTICE GAP 3 HOUSING CONDITIONS

Inadequate housing stock and neighborhood conditions lead to residents facing extreme heat in their homes.

A study by researchers at Drexel University found that homes in Philadelphia’s formerly redlined neighborhoods have less tree cover and darker, flatter roofs compared to other neighborhoods — making them significantly more vulnerable to heat.¹⁰ Residents live in older buildings built without cooling considerations, exacerbating indoor heat exposure and directly undermining health, thereby violating their right to safe and cool living environments and highlighting housing as a social determinant of health. Poor housing conditions are not incidental; they are the direct result of intentional and racialized policy decisions that have concentrated on disinvestment and environmental risk in particular neighborhoods. Addressing these conditions requires both short-term and long-term strategies, with immediate attention to the zip codes with the oldest housing stock. In the short term, incentives for landlords and support for renters are essential to ensure cooling measures reach tenant-occupied properties. In the long term, expanding Whole Homes Repair and Weatherization Assistance Programs should require summer heat mitigation measures such as cool roofs, reflective coatings, cross-ventilation, and AC installation.¹¹

10 Schinasi LH, Kanungo C, Christman Z, Barber S, Tabb L, Headen I. *Associations Between Historical Redlining and Present-Day Heat Vulnerability Housing and Land Cover Characteristics in Philadelphia, PA*. J Urban Health. 2022 Feb;99(1):134-145. doi: 10.1007/s11524-021-00602-6. Epub 2022 Jan 25. PMID: 35076872; PMCID: PMC8866576.

11 Burnley, M. (2025, June 12). Home Repairs 2.0 Hits Harrisburg. <https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/home-repairs-2-0-hits-harrisburg/>

In May of 2025, a bipartisan, bicameral group of legislators announced a legislative proposal for the PA Home Preservation Program.¹² The program, similar to the previous Whole Home Repairs program, provides for “critical health and safety repairs.” Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro had proposed \$50M in his budget for a statewide home repair program. The final budget did not include this program.

SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS INCLUDE:

- Resources for landlords and support for renters to ensure cooling measures reach tenant-occupied properties
- Immediate prioritization of the zip codes with the oldest housing stock

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS COULD INCLUDE:

- Expansion of Whole Homes Repair and Weatherization Assistance Programs to include summer heat mitigation measures (cool roofs, reflective coatings, cross-ventilation, AC installation)
- Adoption of the PA Home Preservation Program and statewide home repair investments

\$50M

**GOV. JOSH SHAPIRO’S PROPOSED BUDGET
FOR A STATEWIDE HOME REPAIR PROGRAM.**



¹² **Brown, C. (2025, May 29).** *State legislators announce PA Home Preservation Program in bipartisan effort to tackle Pennsylvania’s housing crisis.* Pennsylvania Senate Democrats. <https://pasenate.com/state-legislators-announce-pa-home-preservation-program-in-bipartisan-effort-to-tackle-pennsylvanias-housing-crisis/>

9%

RATE OF VIOLENT CRIMES IN CITY ON DAYS WHEN THE MEAN DAILY HEAT INDEX REACHED THE 99TH PERCENTILE



A deeper understanding of the Social Determinants of Health, shaped by systemic disinvestment, poverty, and redlining, is critical to contextualizing these inequities and developing effective interventions. These determinants include factors such as income, housing quality, employment conditions, and neighborhood safety.¹⁴ Increased access to primary care has been shown to mitigate heat-related mortality, yet such access is often unevenly distributed in at-risk communities.¹⁵ This is compounded by the disproportionately high cost of emergency level care versus prevention. Hospitals and health systems should not only treat heat-related illness but also seek prevention-focused funding streams to expand their capacity for heat resilience (it should be noted that nonprofit hospitals have an affirmative obligation based on their tax status to develop a community benefits program), while funders, internal, government, and philanthropic, should prioritize preventative measures. Additionally, prevention and education by hospital systems should leverage the capacity and trust of local community based organizations, department of health, and other city and state agencies. Hospitals that are Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) and clinics are deeply committed to their communities by providing comprehensive, culturally competent, and high-quality healthcare to medically underserved populations.

Training for frontline providers to ask the right questions about heat exposure and related risks is also integral. Partnerships with hospitals to track heat-related health incidents in real time can strengthen local surveillance and inform rapid interventions. A few interventions that are being tested in other parts of the country include: screening tools in electronic health records to identify patients vulnerable to heat (e.g., older adults, people with cardiovascular or respiratory disease), mobile clinics to provide hydration, health checks, and heat illness education. The CDC Climate and Health Program has developed training modules for health professionals to identify and respond to heat stroke and heat exhaustion. Maricopa County, Arizona, uses real-time emergency department data to monitor heat-related illness trends and deploy public health interventions.¹⁶

14 **Ndugga, N., & Artiga, S. (2023, August 24).** *Continued rises in extreme heat and implications for health disparities.* Kaiser Family Foundation <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/continued-rises-in-extreme-heat-and-implications-for-health-disparities/>

15 **Mullins, J. T., & White, C. (2020).** *Can access to health care mitigate the effects of temperature on mortality?* *Journal of Public Economics*, 191, 104257. [https://people.umass.edu/jmullins/pdfs/Mullins%20&%20White%20\(2020\)%20Can%20access%20to%20health%20care%20mitigate%20the%20effects%20of%20temperature%20on%20mortality.pdf](https://people.umass.edu/jmullins/pdfs/Mullins%20&%20White%20(2020)%20Can%20access%20to%20health%20care%20mitigate%20the%20effects%20of%20temperature%20on%20mortality.pdf)

16 **Maricopa County Department of Public Health. (2024, May 30).** *Public Health launches new data dashboard to help visualize effects of heat on health.* Maricopa County. https://www.maricopa.gov/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=2936&utm_

SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS INCLUDE:

- Partnerships with hospitals to track heat-related health incidents in real time
- Training for doctors and frontline providers to ask the right questions about heat exposure
- Mobile clinics to provide hydration, health checks, and heat illness education
- Screening tools in electronic health records to identify vulnerable patients

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS COULD INCLUDE:

- Expansion of prevention-focused funding streams for hospitals and health systems to build heat resilience capacity, including commitments in community benefits needs assessment
- Integration of heat exposure into healthcare infrastructure, including surveillance systems and electronic health records
- Broader recognition and funding of cooling as a preventive health measure



ENERGY JUSTICE GAP 5

URBAN PLANNING, ZONING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Urban planning, zoning, and infrastructure policies must comprehensively address extreme heat and the protection of the most vulnerable by integrating heat resilience into land use decisions, building codes, transportation planning, and public space design.

Neighborhoods with historic disinvestment often suffer from outdated infrastructure, inadequate building standards, limited cooling resources, and insufficient green spaces, reflecting urban planning and zoning decisions that have failed to prioritize heat resilience and left residents highly exposed to extreme heat.



COMMUNITIES WITH MINIMAL PARKS,
STREET TREES, OR SHADED AREAS
CAN BE UP TO

22°F HOTTER THAN OTHER
NEIGHBORHOODS

Many communities have minimal parks, street trees, or shaded areas, creating environments where temperatures can reach dangerously high levels, up to 22°F hotter than other neighborhoods¹⁷, and opportunities for cooling, recreation, and community connection are scarce. Lower income communities adjacent to industrial zones face higher pollution exposure and stressors. Programs that aim to increase green spaces often have participation barriers that exclude many residents, such as trees requiring clear property titles, limited planting locations due to utilities, or maintenance needs that exceed residents' capacity. As one community leader said, "There is a 'Free tree program' but it requires clear titles [which is an] issue for our neighborhood." Without equitable greening initiatives, residents remain exposed to extreme heat with no environmental cooling. As one community leader said, "We [need] a policy to intervene on [the] heat crisis but also a longer-term solution to lower temperatures. Look at both parts." Additionally, greening, green water infrastructure, and cooling interventions can inadvertently accelerate gentrification, undermining equity goals. Without anti-displacement protections, cooling solutions benefit incoming residents rather than those most impacted by heat injustice.

Greening policies should be redesigned to eliminate these barriers, prioritize high heat index neighborhoods, and integrate community-led planting and maintenance models. Anti-displacement policies should be integrated into all climate adaptation investments, including affordable housing protections linked to greening initiatives. Additionally, urban greening policies should include community education around trees, green stormwater infrastructure, partnerships with the city to support funding for maintenance, accountability measures, and sustainability, and advocacy for the city to share what programs are already underway to prevent duplication. To strengthen accountability and sustainability, policies should also include annual heat audits conducted by city health or environment departments, community reporting tools, and transparent tracking of cooling-related hospitalizations.

17 Schmidt, S. (2023, July 27). *Some Philly neighborhoods can be up to 12 degrees hotter due to the built environment, new study shows*. WHYY. <https://whyy.org/articles/philadelphia-built-environment-temperature-increase-12-degrees/>

SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS INCLUDE:

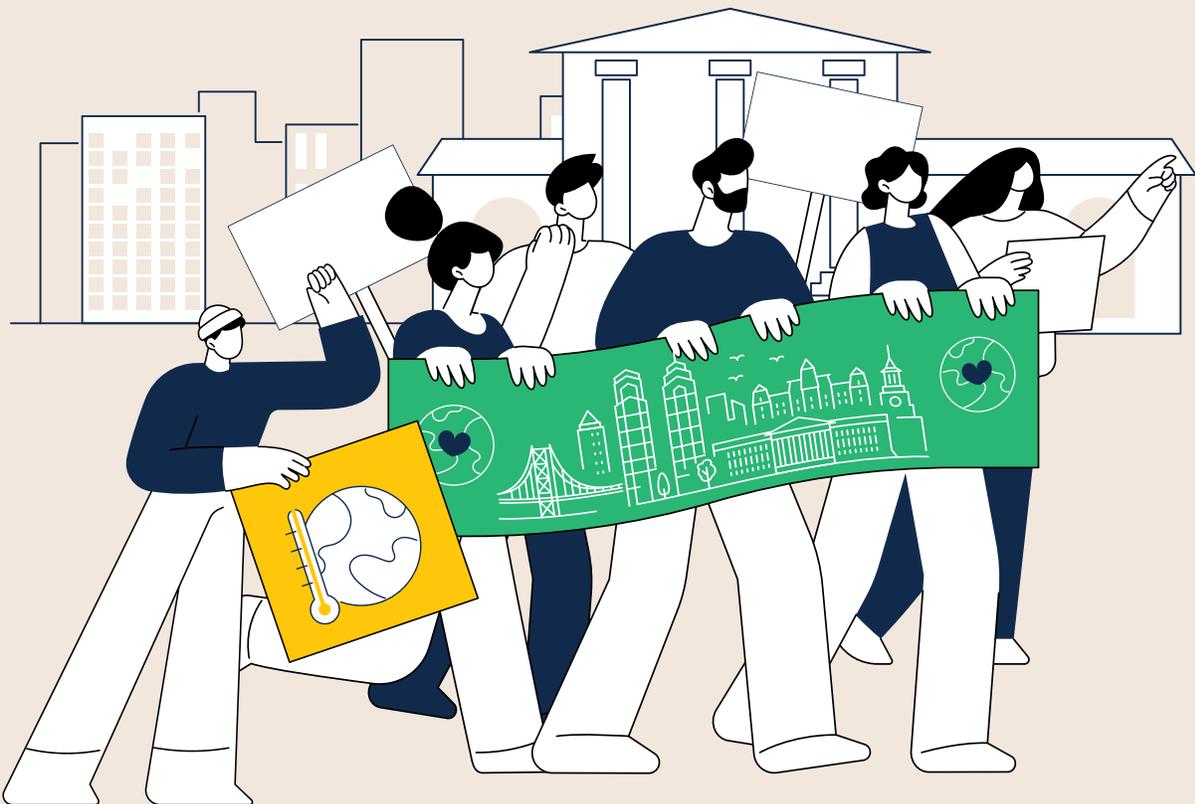
- Community education around trees
- Partnerships with the city to support funding for maintenance
- Advocacy for the city to share what programs are already underway to prevent duplication
- Annual heat audits conducted by city health or environment departments
- Community reporting tools
- Transparent tracking of cooling-related hospitalizations

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS COULD INCLUDE:

- Redesign of greening policies to eliminate barriers and prioritize high heat index neighborhoods
- Integration of community-led planting and maintenance models
- Anti-displacement policies, including affordable housing protections linked to greening initiatives.
- Embedding accountability and sustainability measures into climate adaptation investments to ensure prioritization of lowest income neighborhoods and addressing the underlying conditions of historic infrastructure disinvestments.

Call to Action

We appreciate the leadership of Mayor Parker's Administration, led by the Department of Health and Office of Sustainability, in recognizing the extreme heat and its disproportionate impacts on lower income and historically marginalized communities. Our work builds on the City's efforts, including the Philadelphia Heat Vulnerability Index and heat guide, by calling for a comprehensive all-of-government approach that addresses extreme heat as a crisis with a focus on extending the reach of the Philadelphia government by partnering with community-based organizations. Ensuring the right to cooling requires urgent, coordinated action across energy, utility, housing, health, and infrastructure systems. Philadelphia's residents cannot wait for long-term solutions alone; immediate interventions must complement strategic, systemic change. Short-term actions include expanding and modernizing cooling centers, extending hours and inclusionary practices, deploying mobile cooling units, providing in-home cooling support, and prioritizing energy assistance for low-income households. Long-term strategies must address structural inequities: investing in heat-resilient housing retrofits, strengthening community-led greening and tree canopy programs, integrating heat considerations into zoning and healthcare systems, and establishing citywide accountability and sustainability measures.



Building on the City's leadership to date on actions that recognize extreme heat's disproportionate impacts on lower income and historically marginalized communities, we are calling on state and local officials, the Mayor's Office, and City Council, to work with us to take immediate action to establish policies to improve health and environmental outcomes in vulnerable neighborhoods to extreme heat. With the Mayor's establishment of the Mayor's Office of Clean and Green Initiatives, we now have an equitable climate solutions model for pursuing sustainable funding, advances legal authority, and community engagement.

THESE POLICIES ARE LIFE-SAVING INTERVENTIONS, ESPECIALLY FOR THE ELDERLY, CHILDREN, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, AND IMMIGRANTS, WHO LACK CRITICAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST HEAT-RELATED ILLNESS AND DEATH. THE NEXT STEPS MUST BE IMMEDIATE, ACTIONABLE, AND COMMUNITY-CENTERED: PRIORITIZE NEIGHBORHOODS WITH THE HIGHEST HEAT EXPOSURE, HEALTH DISPARITIES, AIR POLLUTION LEVELS AND POOREST HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE, PROVIDE ACCESSIBLE RESOURCES FOR RESIDENTS TODAY, AND BUILD THE SYSTEMIC CAPACITY TO PROTECT HEALTH AND DIGNITY IN THE LONG TERM.



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