

**“I've had heat exhaustion or heat stroke, whatever you want to call it, several times. Yeah. First thing you notice is you stop sweating, and you get a headache. The headache is very severe, and you'll start vomiting. You'll feel cold. Goosebumps. When you're in that stage you need to get help.”**

**- Unhoused Vermonter, 2023**

## Key Action Steps: Unhoused Vermonters need extra assistance for heat safety

It is clear that unhoused Vermonters are impacted by extreme heat. We recognize systemic changes need to be made to aid unhoused Vermonters. In the short-term, however, providing temporary shelter, storage, and survival gear can meet immediate needs, such as:

- **Access to daytime relief** – cooling centers, libraries, other spaces with air conditioning, mobile cooling vans, shade/misting tents, pools, parks and beaches
- **Access to overnight shelters with air conditioning** – keeping shelters open year-round or opening emergency shelters during periods of extreme heat
- **Hydration resources** – access to drinking water, water purification supplies, electrolyte packets
- **Hygiene support** – access to shower and laundry facilities, wet wipes, cleaning wipes, wash cloths, hand sanitizer, no-rinse body soap, deodorant, first aid items
- **Sun and insect protection** – light-colored, breathable clothing, sun hats, sunscreen, umbrellas; bite and illness prevention info, repellent, tick tweezers, and guidance
- **Poor air quality protection (for example, wildfire smoke)** – indoor respite centers, N95 masks
- **Personal cooling equipment** – portable fans, ice packs, cooling towels
- **Secure storage facilities** – especially for heavy winter gear
- **Heat safety information** – safety tips, how to find cooling sites and other needed resources

## Background: Heat-related health risks in Vermont are increasing

While most Vermont residents and institutions are well-prepared for winter cold, many Vermonters suffer when summer heat arrives. Until our bodies adjust to hot weather, even temperatures in the 80s can cause heat-related illness and death. The National Weather Service declares a heat advisory when the heat index – the “what it feels like” temperature – reaches 95 °F, but Vermonters can experience heat-related illnesses below a heat index of 95 °F depending on factors like time of year, geographic location, underlying health conditions, and other risk factors.

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of hot weather in Vermont. In 2020 and 2021, there were 14 excessive heat days in Vermont compared to the normal number of 8 excessive heat days over the past three decades.

14

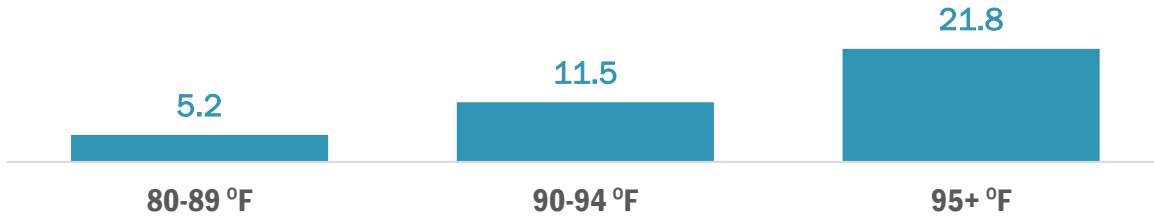
Excessive Heat Days  
(2020 and 2021)

8

Historic Normal Number of  
Excessive Heat Days  
(1991-2020)

# Heat & Houselessness: Health Impacts and Unmet Needs

The risk of experiencing a heat-related health emergency increases as the heat index increases.



Values show the rate of heat-related emergency department visits when the heat index exceeds 80°F compared to the rate when it is less than 80°F and the week before had average high temperatures less than 80°F.

## A Closer Look: Heat causes severe health and quality of life impacts

People who are unhoused are at especially high risk, but this is hard to validate with existing data – many unhoused people can't access medical treatment, housing status is often not recorded in medical records, and heat illnesses are underreported.

To help fill this data gap, the Health Department partnered with Middlebury College on a year-long project. Students interviewed 47 unhoused individuals and 12 shelter directors or service providers to learn more about the *lived experiences* of unhoused Vermonters during hot weather.

The students heard several emerging themes from unhoused Vermonters indicating they:

**Experience heat-related health impacts**, including dehydration, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, and asthma exacerbation. Limited access to clean water, strenuous outdoor work, and a lack of places to cool off.

**Need secure storage because, without it**, many unhoused individuals walk long distances carrying their possessions, including heavy winter clothing and bedding. Having storage reduces the burden of carrying items during extreme heat. [Listen to a voice from this project.](#)

**Feel unwelcome or are asked to leave** when using public facilities for cooling, hygiene, or other basic needs. Many unhoused individuals feel unwelcome due to the stigmas associated with being houseless, which is exacerbated by difficulty maintaining personal hygiene during hot weather. They have distrust and skepticism in accepting resources from institutions and organizations.

[Listen to a voice from this project.](#)

**Encounter difficulty accessing outdoor spaces** where they can cool off, find overnight shelter, and engage in “normal” activities like socializing. Unhoused individuals are often asked to leave public places that offer shelter (for example, bus stops and shaded areas next to public buildings). Many also expressed the desire for “third spaces” or community spaces. Providing welcoming spaces can prevent them from needing to access off-limit properties to cool off while also fostering community. [Listen to a voice from this project.](#)

“I believe we had somebody in our county last summer who has been unhoused for quite a while. And he, unfortunately, was trying to find shelter and shade in as many places as he could, and he was being kicked out of all the places...he passed away on a really hot summer July day. So that was a pretty, pretty tragic situation.”

-Vermont Shelter Director

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