# Massachusetts Department of Public Health

# Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health

# WARMING CENTER GUIDANCE

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# The following resource provides recommendations for municipalities in their operation of warming centers and outlines actions municipalities may take to help prevent health impacts caused by winter weather, including extreme cold.

# Extreme Cold

The Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health (BCEH) protects the public from environmental exposures that cause illness and disease by identifying and evaluating hazards in the natural and built environment, including extreme cold. Staying out in the cold for a prolonged period can cause hypothermia and frostbite, which can be dangerous and even life-threatening if proper precautions are not taken.

# Community Warming Centers

# Cold-related illnesses such as hypothermia and frostbite are more likely at very cold temperatures. Community warming centers can provide temporary relief from extreme winter weather, including extreme cold. A warming center is not an overnight emergency shelter; it is a place for the community to gather during the day. A warming center will not typically provide medical, behavioral health, or social services.

# Warming centers should be located in heated buildings that are open to the public. These buildings should have adequate bathroom facilities, be readily accessible and have generator backup in the event of a power failure. Examples of these types of buildings are libraries, town halls, and senior centers. If you plan to open a warming center in your community, please ensure that the Emergency Management Director (or designee) for that community updates the shelter status in [WebEOC](https://mema.webeocasp.com/mema/default.aspx) ([WebEOC 9.15  Login (webeocasp.com)](https://mema.webeocasp.com/mema/default.aspx). In addition, please reference the [Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency’s](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-emergency-management-agency) [website](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-emergency-management-agency) for up-to-date information on winter weather emergencies.

Recommendations on Setting up Warming Centers

Please refer to the checklist below for recommendations on implementing a warming center in your community:

* The Emergency Management Director (or municipal designee) determines a need exists
  + Is there a likelihood of power outage for several days?
  + Are notifications about approaching winter storms, warnings, wind chill advisories being sent through MEMA and National Weather Service?
  + Will the temperature be extremely cold?
  + Are the residents likely to use a warming center?
  + How will information about this warming center be shared?
    - Robocalls
    - Text messages
    - Local TV banner
    - Community based organizations that work with vulnerable populations, including houses of worship
* Coordinate with local board of health in implementation plans
  + What is the available budget and staff?
  + Are there volunteer organizations, such as [medical reserve corps](https://www.mamedicalreservecorps.org/find-an-mrc-unit), that are already included in planning efforts or that could assist?
* Identify other government agencies, non-profit partners, and other key stakeholders that should be involved such as senior community centers, libraries, and city/town halls
  + Check agency policies, local laws, and ordinances
  + Coordinate [transportation](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-transportation-coordination) for those who need it
* Consider basic supplies to help meet the needs of guests, including, but not limited to, access to face masks, hand sanitizer, drinking water, warm drinks like coffee or tea, pre-packaged snacks, activities/entertainment, and indoor and outdoor signage. Phone and computer charging stations are especially helpful during power outages.
* Create a plan with a health equity focus which reflects the diverse needs of individuals, populations, and communities, particularly those who are more vulnerable and those who are currently or historically underserved.
  + Work with residents and organizations within these vulnerable communities to identify all the necessary ways to inform residents of such resources in a timely manner.
  + Utilize the [Community Health Data Tool](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-health-data-tool) to build a report to identify communities of focus.
* Identify relevant materials and utilize existing guidance.
* Widely advertise the warming center throughout the community in multiple languages via robocalls, text messages, web postings, reverse 911 calls, social media, and other such methods.

Municipalities should consider these recommendations and best practices to establish a warming center:

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| **Recommended** | **Best Practices** |
| Choose a space that is adequately heated and has adequate bathrooms | Choose a space that provides a back-up generator in case of power outage |
| Ensure space is publicly accessible with clear signs displaying operating hours | Choose a space that is American Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant |
| Plan and provide activities and resources | Choose a space that has:   * Access to clean drinking water * Power stations for charging phones and computers * Activities such as TV and games * Pre-packaged snacks, warming drinks like coffee or tea * Blankets, seating, private space for nursing mothers and families * Staff to assist guests from vehicles into the facilities during storms and icy conditions |
| Conduct wide outreach in the community about warming center locations | * Use of robocalls, text messages, community radio and local TV channels, multiple language channels to communicate and advertise availability * Utilize trusted community-based organizations that work with vulnerable populations, including houses of worship |

**Preventing Cold-Related Illnesses—Additional Resources**

Check the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency’s (MEMA) [extreme cold safety tips](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/extreme-cold-safety-tips) for more information on preventing cold-related illnesses. Communities can take additional steps, including:

* Communicate cold safety tips to the community in multiple languages, including recommendations for staying safe in homes and outdoors [during and after winter storms](https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/duringstorm/indoorsafety.html).
* Partner with community health centers and other organizations to perform wellness checks on vulnerable populations or known locations where unhoused people go to get warm, e.g. ATM lobbies, near heat vents of large buildings or malls, in parking garages.

For the long term, communities can adopt the following strategies:

* Develop winter weather emergency preparedness checklists and response plans

Visit the DPH/BCEH [Climate and Health Website](https://www.mass.gov/climate-and-health) for more information, including:

* How climate change harms health
* Climate change and health equity
* [Community Profiles](https://mass.gov/dph/community-profile) in EPHT including climate profiles for all 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts.

**Questions?** Specialists at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health, are available to answer your questions. Contact us at (617) 624-5757 (TTY: (617) 624-5286) or visit our website.

**Learn more:** [mass.gov/bceh](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/bureau-of-climate-and-environmental-health)

References:

<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/index.html>