Air Quality Emergencies for People Experiencing Homelessness

People experiencing homelessness, particularly those living in unsheltered situations, are more frequently exposed to air pollution and low air quality from a variety of sources. Wildfires, a persistent source of air pollution throughout the United States, are expected to increase in both frequency and severity. Communities throughout the country have already begun to face air quality emergencies that threaten public health.

People experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk of danger due to higher rates of respiratory and cardiac conditions that increase their vulnerability. Several actions, taken both before and during poor air quality events, may reduce risks for people experiencing homelessness.

Before an Air Quality Emergency

Assess: Connect with your local emergency management entity to determine if your response systems are capable of meeting community needs during an air quality-related event. Identify potential clean air respite centers and determine whether existing air filtration methods will be sufficient. Determine the impact that degrading air quality will have on vulnerable members of your community.

Monitor: Develop a plan for regularly monitoring air quality by following a rating system like the U.S. Air Quality Index from AirNow. Use available resources for public health officials to establish air quality thresholds for taking action.

Prepare: Prepare a plan of action and develop any outreach or communication materials that may be needed. Train staff in health mitigation activities such as the correct way to use a P100 or N95 respirator to provide to people who choose not to enter clean air respite or shelter. Develop and maintain knowledge of at-risk populations who may be especially vulnerable to air quality emergencies. Include poor air quality in the inclement weather activations for your jurisdiction's safe spaces.

During an Air Quality Emergency

Activate

- Active your plan of action and implement emergency procedures.
- Connect with your local emergency, public, and environmental health experts who can provide ad hoc guidance for heat-related emergencies.

Act:

- Take action to provide indoor clean air options for people experiencing homelessness.

U.S. AIR QUALITY INDEX FROM AIRNOW

SOME CONCERN 101–150
This air quality level is unhealthy for sensitive groups. Consider implementing harm mitigation policies and activites for vulnerable populations in your community.

MEDIUM CONCERN 151–200
This air quality level is unhealthy for everyone. Take action to reduce exposure.

HIGH CONCERN 201–300
This air quality level is very unhealthy for everyone. Take action to reduce exposure.

EMERGENCY 301–500
This air quality level is immediately hazardous to everyone. Direct exposure or proximity may lead to inhalation injury. Immediately take action.

- Provide transportation, when possible, to decrease barriers to sheltering and limit outdoor physical activity. Obtain immediate medical attention for anyone showing signs of distress.
- Distribute items that may be useful for people who prefer to stay outdoors, like N95 respirators.

Communicate:

- Pre-plan locations where staff and guests can check information about inclement weather.
- Employ multiple outreach methods to relay information to people experiencing homelessness and those providing services to people experiencing homelessness including the use of SMS and other electronic messaging protocols.
- Use plain language and provide resources in all languages spoken within the community. Conduct targeted outreach to at-risk populations.

Improve access:

- Encourage shelters to reduce or remove any barriers to entry such as curfews, companion animal restrictions, or ID requirements.
- If possible, develop and implement temporary policies for air-quality emergencies that allow people to stay at shelters during daytime hours.
- Work with individuals who may have been barred from shelters or other public spaces to identify alternative shelter options.