



Community Involvement Committee



Community Involvement Committee

To: Chair Deborah Kafoury and Board of County Commissioners 10 pages

From: Community Involvement Committee

Date: May 17, 2022

Subject: Extreme Weather Event Subcommittee Recommendations

Background and Process

As a result of climate change, Multnomah County has recently begun to experience more frequent and intense extreme weather and wildfire smoke events. In September 2020 smoke from several different wildfires contributed to hazardous air quality; in February 2021 more than 300,000 homes were without electricity for multiple days following an ice storm; and in June 2021 our region experienced a record-breaking heatwave that resulted in a mass casualty in which 107 residents of Multnomah County died.

The Community Involvement Committee (CIC) Extreme Weather Subcommittee began work in October 2021 to better understand how Multnomah County plans for and responds to weather-related hazards, and how inclusive and just the response is. We define an extreme weather event as any meteorological event that is potentially a threat to life and livelihoods at a large scale. This could include heat over 95°F, sustained heat that does not allow for night time heat-shedding, high pressure systems that trap wildfire smoke and lead to hazardous air quality, heavy snow and ice that can damage infrastructure or buildings and pose a severe

Community Involvement Committee

risk to our homeless population, or any other form of severe weather that poses a threat to Multnomah County.

To deepen our understanding of the County's role and response to extreme weather events, we read the [Multnomah County June 2021 Extreme Heat Event Preliminary Findings & Action Steps](#) report. We held 8 subcommittee meetings and met with the following County staff:

- Dave Lentzner, *Interim Division Chief of Planning* (Office of Emergency Management)
- Alice Busch, *Emergency Management Analyst Senior* (Office of Emergency Management)
- Brendon Haggerty, *Interim Supervisor of the Healthy Homes and Communities Program* (Health Department)
- John Wasiutynski, *Director* (Office of Sustainability)
- Julie Sullivan-Springhetti, *Director* (Communications Office)
- Celeste Duvall, *Unsheltered Emergency Program Specialist* (Joint Office of Homeless Services)
- Jenny Carver (Joint Office of Homeless Services)

The extreme weather events we have experienced over the last several years have been devastating and have disproportionately impacted BIPOC residents, low income communities, immigrants, refugees, people experiencing homelessness, elders, people with mental health conditions, and people with disabilities. Multnomah County has a large number of Urban Heat Islands where ambient air temperatures can be up to 7.1°C hotter on average than other neighborhoods with more tree canopy. The Urban Heat Islands in Multnomah County contain many vulnerable communities who have been directly and disproportionately impacted by our region's legacy of segregation and gentrification. They are highly correlated with formerly redlined and divested neighborhoods, which tend to also be

Community Involvement Committee

underserved by both public transportation networks and warming and cooling shelters. Additionally, people living in neighborhoods that border freeways are also more at risk of suffering from adverse health effects on hot days.

Extreme weather not only compounds the effects of segregation and gentrification, but is also felt more acutely by populations that are already experiencing considerably more strain as the result of having generations of their wealth systematically destroyed by oppressive labor practices and racist housing policies. This can leave them under-resourced and with less time and financial capacity to prepare for extreme weather at the household level.

We have heard that the unprecedented nature of these extreme weather events makes them difficult to plan for, and our regional governments are forced to take an approach to severe weather that is very triage-oriented. With that in mind, our recommendations are centered around ways that we can build capacity between events so that we are more prepared, and center the most vulnerable members of our community when it comes to relief. We also spent considerable time discussing more long-term, holistic strategies that we believe could increase community resilience if thoughtfully implemented. Additionally, we understand that triage is an important part of any emergency response, but we urge Multnomah County to adopt more cross-cutting and integrated planning across the built environment, which could potentially yield a kind of resilience dividend by lowering energy demands, allowing people to shelter in place, and ultimately could improve quality of life and prevent loss of life.

Recommendations

- 1. Resource the most vulnerable members of our community around severe weather events.**

Community Involvement Committee

Our subcommittee has focused on the most vulnerable members of our community who are marginalized, including people experiencing houselessness, communities of color, people who live in areas that have been affected by redlining and gentrification, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and older adults. In hearing from County staff over the last several months, we heard that some of the biggest challenges during extreme weather response is effectively reaching and resourcing our most vulnerable community members. Our recommendation is to prioritize outreach and strengthen relationships with immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and elders, — a population that especially suffered during the heat event.

We also recommend placing a higher emphasis on hazard mitigation and building capacity before a severe weather event. It's vital that information is made accessible across all communities and that vulnerable communities are collaborated with and drive planning processes that include them. It was a big learning curve for the Communications Office to reach multicultural communities and support translation needs quickly enough to get the word out during the 2020 wildfires and smoke event. We recommend continuing to expand the translation of important County messages and alerts in more languages to help overcome the language gap. We'd also like to see the County prioritize supporting community engagement efforts outside of and in addition to working with community based organizations. This could help avoid overtaxing community based organizations and ensure that more community members are reached. Some other mitigation and capacity building strategies to consider include reaching out to community based organizations and culturally specific communities, as well as acquiring and warehousing supplies for distribution during an extreme weather event.

In prioritizing and resourcing our most vulnerable communities around extreme weather events, it's crucial that the County continues to gather community input to assess what different communities feel is needed for them to stay safe and

Community Involvement Committee

adequately resourced during extreme weather events. We feel that effective community engagement around extreme weather events prioritizes ‘rightsizing’ efforts to community member’s wants and needs. We advocate for community outreach to be prioritized in areas where the most vulnerable of our community frequent, including schools, libraries and County health clinics. Making sure these places are resourced flyers and informational pamphlets in multiple languages can aid in spreading extreme weather information to those who may not have easy access to a reliable device that accesses the internet. We’d also like to elevate County outreach and engagement efforts to network and reach people through block parties and faith based organizations that already do culturally-specific outreach, to raise awareness about available resources during extreme weather events.

2. Continue expanding and strengthening relationships with the community, including mutual aid organizations and school districts.

Schools tend to be hubs for many different communities, including immigrants and refugees. Continuing to maintain relationships with the different school districts in Multnomah County could be beneficial to getting the word out around severe weather or possibly using their space as a refuge during extreme weather events. We also see an opportunity for the County to build and strengthen partnerships with mutual aid organizations. Mutual aid efforts have been instrumental in directly reaching and resourcing community members during extreme weather, especially those who live unsheltered outside. Acknowledging the very legitimate distrust of government, there may be ways for the County to help bridge these relationships, especially with organizations that serve people who have had negative interactions with the government. One way to strengthen these relationships is to support and offer resources for mutual aid organizations to spread information and distribute supplies. The addition of a designated liaison to connect with mutual aid groups would help the County coordinate with existing community efforts during emergencies and extreme weather events.

Community Involvement Committee

3. Continue to assess the efficacy and accessibility of warming and cooling shelters for our most vulnerable community members.

We met with staff who lead the warming and cooling shelters in the Joint Office of Homeless Services and were happy to hear how they are improving their process for staff, volunteers and guests. As more warming and cooling shelters are identified, we would like to see the County prioritize opening emergency shelters located close to the people who need them most. We also feel it's crucial to, as much as possible, reopen emergency shelters in the same locations with consistent hours of operation. This is important for many people who may have limited access to communications and rely on memory.

One of the obstacles to declaring a state of emergency and activating emergency shelters is weather forecasting. Weather forecast models cannot accurately predict weather beyond 72 hours. This means that shelters can't be activated until a few days before an extreme weather event, because there are certain criteria for temperature/weather conditions that must be met in order for them to be activated. In general, people are less adapted to heat early in the season, making heat waves early in the year more deadly. We support the reassessment of temperature thresholds for opening heating and cooling shelters, and accounting for nightly temperatures in that threshold. It's crucial for the County to ensure the criteria for activating emergency shelters is not an additional barrier in helping our most vulnerable community members stay cool and access life saving resources.

Lastly, we'd like to see Multnomah County continue to explore partnerships with transportation providers to ensure a safe passage to cooling/warming stations and shelters. We recommend coordinating with Trimet to adopt fareless days when there is a state of emergency, as this is the most low-barrier transportation option that is currently available. As standard with post-emergency response evaluation, we recommend monitoring and auditing the efficacy of services provided by Trimet between events to ensure that access to public transportation is easily

Community Involvement Committee

accessible to community members.

4. Increase collaboration with other jurisdictions to support long term solutions for community resilience.

Unprecedented weather events exacerbated by the climate crisis have presented a steep learning curve for the County and other jurisdictions. We'd like the County to consider scenario planning for cascading hazards (such as flooding and landslides that occur after rain over wildfires). Hazardous events can quickly become cascading and planning now can help lessen the learning curve and help prevent future loss of life.

Multnomah County's Health Department works through community based organizations to help distribute fans and filters in the summer to help with heat and air quality. We heard from staff that logistically, it's been hard to stockpile items in advance of extreme weather events, especially items related to air filtration. Despite this, we recommend dedicating more resources to purchase air conditioning units, fans, heaters and air filters/purifiers for community members in need. This would be especially helpful for many communities of color, including immigrants and refugees. As more resources become available for Multnomah County residents to weatherize their homes, we would like to see the County partner with other local jurisdictions to develop a strategy to both increase access and inform the community about what cooling subsidies/programs are available and how to apply for them.

We also support the Office of Sustainability's partnership with and support of the City of Gresham to plant trees and increase the tree canopy. We recommend elevating tree planting as a long term solution for adapting infrastructure to be more resilient with increasingly hot temperatures, especially in East County. Additional stewardship is needed to help protect and care for newly planted trees. There may be an opportunity for the County to form an ongoing partnership with

Community Involvement Committee

other jurisdictions to support stewardship efforts.

5. Increase collaboration with other jurisdictions to resource community members to shelter in place during an extreme weather event.

As the climate changes and extreme weather events happen more regularly, sustainability gains will be greatest if homes are more energy efficient and heating/cooling efficient. With this in mind, the County should actively support expansion of and access to weatherization programs that will assist people to shelter in place. This could help reduce emissions, prevent loss of life, reduce utility costs, help residents be more self-sufficient and lower peak energy demand during extreme temps, which could prevent future grid failures.

Most buildings in Multnomah County were not built to adapt with the warming climate and going to a cooling center during an extreme weather event is not accessible or preferred for many people. We believe that resourcing community members to cool on their own and shelter in place is a priority. Building codes are controlled by the state, but there may be additional support, collaboration or advocacy the County can provide. During the 2022 Oregon legislative session, lawmakers passed SB 1536 Access to Cooling, which will allow for renters to install air conditioning units. SB 1518 also passed, which establishes a task force to assess building codes in relation to sustainability and decarbonization. These bills are crucial to helping people stay safe and shelter in place during extreme heat. We also support the City of Portland's on HEART standards for rentals and apartment buildings. We recommend the County continue working with other jurisdictions to take a deeper look at affordable housing and what would be needed to upgrade HVAC services and infrastructure.

Community Involvement Committee

A note on the backgrounds and life experiences of subcommittee members:

Sasha Burchuk (she/her) is a Graduate student in Geography at Portland State University with a focus on Natural Disasters and Community Resilience. She has also volunteered with Multnomah County's Emergency Operations Center and various Mutual Aid organizations in Portland.

Desiree' DuBoise (she/they) is a Graduate Student working in the area of Community Psychology. Desiree' identifies as a Queer, genderqueer Black woman, and is concerned with issues of housing and houselessness, equity, police brutality, and the LGBTQ+ community. Desiree' was born and raised in Portland, Oregon.

Malcolm Hoover (he/him) works with Portland Parks and Recreation as a Community Engagement Coordinator and is also the co-founder/co-director of Black Futures Farm, a community farm that centers the Black and African community. He has previously worked with the Oregon Food Bank and volunteers as an advocate and resource advisor with various community groups.

Patrick Nolen (he/him) is a volunteer with the Portland Peace Team and the Mental Health Association of Portland. He has previously worked, served on the board and organized with Sisters of the Road.

Kimberléa Ruffu (she/ella) works in the Oregon State Legislature with a focus on communications, housing, and transportation. She is a co-founder of Brooklyn Bloom Club, a queer and BIPOC led mutual aid gardening project seeking to cultivate joy, food access, and community at the intersections of racial, climate, and disability justice.

Community Involvement Committee

Pau Thang (he/him) came as a refugee in 2009 and belongs to the Zomi and Burmese community. He worked as an Asian Pacific Islander Youth Advocate at Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), connecting refugee families with resources for two years. Currently, he worked as the INSPIRE coordinator. He is also serving as the International City/County Management Association Student Chapter President at Portland State University.

This recommendation from the Extreme Weather Event Subcommittee has been approved by the Community Involvement Committee on May 17, 2022.