



**RNAO Speaking Notes:  
Strengthening Heat Resilience  
in the City of Toronto**

To the City of Toronto – Board of Health

Oct. 28, 2019



Good afternoon. My name is Joy Dawkins. I am a registered nurse and Nursing Policy Analyst at the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, or RNAO.

Thank you for the opportunity to share RNAO's feedback on the City of Toronto's Heat Relief Strategy. RNAO has a long-standing commitment and history of action on the environmental and social determinants of health. Our goal in this work is to improve and protect the health of all Ontarians, and to decrease health inequities among marginalized people who bear an increased burden of avoidable sickness and premature death.

As is well established, climate change is a risk to health, and Canada is warming at twice the global rate. Those who are most marginalized, in Toronto as in the rest of the world, are most at risk from the rapidly changing effects of climate change. This includes but is not limited to extreme heat and cold. Heat and cold impair physiological processes in many ways. Extreme heat can exacerbate pre-existing health conditions, interact poorly with medications, and lead to heat stroke and heat exhaustion. Those living without safe, affordable housing or even adequate shelter are particularly vulnerable and their numbers are growing. From June 2017 to June 2019, there was a nearly 44 per cent increase in the average nightly number of people served in Toronto's shelter system – from 4,884 people to 7,019 people.

Toronto's First Resilience Strategy that was released in June of this year acknowledged the interlinked challenges of climate change and the fact that those who face systemic barriers already are especially vulnerable. Despite this compelling evidence, the city's current response through its Heat Relief Strategy is not adequately providing the services and resources needed by Toronto's most vulnerable.

The heat relief response this past summer involved the end of issuing heat alerts and the cancellation of the cooling centre program. In its place, a web-based interactive map of a heat relief network that listed organizations and locations people could go. Front-line RNAO members who work with people experiencing marginalization in Toronto expressed their concerns throughout the summer that this new approach of providing information in place of dedicated services was not enough. Not only did the locations listed on the map lack signage and resources, but many locations were inappropriate and inaccessible – some where people reported being met with active hostility. During extreme heat, people need 24 hour access to air-conditioned spaces, not

a swimming pool or splash pad. They also need to feel welcome in those spaces and be met with the appropriate resources which include water, food, trained staff, and, when necessary, access to health care.

RNAO shares with you the common objective of a healthy city where all people can live with dignity. To this end, the City of Toronto has a role and responsibility to provide services and resources to all its citizens, including and especially the most vulnerable. RNAO urges the Board of Health to make recommendations to City Council to ensure the city is meeting its obligation to all Torontonians of providing adequate and accessible services and resources during extreme weather. This includes:

1. Toronto Public Health re-start the practice of issuing heat alerts.
2. City of Toronto operate and fund 24/7 cooling centres with properly trained staff and resources on site, including water, food and program activities.
3. City of Toronto enhance funding of drop-ins to operate expanded hours during heat alerts.
4. City of Toronto offer free public transportation on heat alert days to remove barriers to accessing heat relief locations.

RNAO's written submission contains more detailed rationales and references for your consideration – including research on mortality and temperature and the health effects of heat and cold. Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer questions.