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Hamilton

July 7, 2006

Dear Community Partner,

I am writing to you to update you on the matter of heat alerts issued by City of Hamilton Public Health Services (PHS). As you may know, some local public health units in Southern Ontario have issued or continue to issue heat alerts when temperatures are expected to be high for some number of consecutive days. In Hamilton, we have reviewed our heat alert program to determine whether or not we are providing a service that effectively protects the health and well-being of our residents.

Based on this review, we have confirmed that local weather patterns are such that alerts may be so frequent as to lack credibility. The evidence also tells us that the population at risk from sustained extreme heat is persons living in multiple unit residences with poor air circulation and no air conditioning. Hamilton is fortunate in that evening cooling provides relief from extreme temperatures for people who can open the windows of the spaces where they live.

By contrast, extreme cold primarily affects people who are outdoors, particularly those living on the street and public inebriates. The important outreach activities provided during periods of extreme cold remain vital to the health of Hamilton's population. Going forward, we will be developing an inventory of residential premises whose occupants may be at high risk in the event of extreme heat so that relevant responses can be developed that are tailored to the populations at risk.

Many of your organizations have provided drinking water to program participants or residents and we would encourage you to continue this work. Open windows in sleeping quarters and CSA-approved electric fans for cooling places where clients sleep or wait indoors may also be valuable in reducing discomfort and health risks of extreme heat.

Although heat alerts will no longer be provided by PHS, we are focusing our efforts on effective communication about air quality. Poor air quality is a significant public health issue in our community and air quality typically deteriorates with increasing temperature, meaning that a combined approach to poor air quality and extreme temperature is likely more effective. Should you have any questions about the effects of heat or air quality and measures you or your organization can take to reduce these health risks, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Matthew Hodge MDCM, PhD, FRCPC
Associate Medical Officer of Health
City of Hamilton
mahodge@hamilton.ca



SHAC
Solutions for Housing Action
Committee
210 Napier Street, Hamilton, Ontario L8R 1S7

Roomers and Boarders
Committee of Hamilton
c/o McQuesten Legal & Community Services
1440 Main Street East Hamilton, L8K 6M3

July 20, 2006

Dr. Matthew Hodge
Associate Medical Officer of Health
City of Hamilton
City Hall, 71 Main Street West
Hamilton, Ontario L8P 4Y5

An Open Letter Regarding the City's Decision to cancel the 'Heat Alert System'.

Dear Dr. Hodge:

It was with concern and some puzzlement that the Solutions for Housing Action Committee and the Roomers and Boarders Committee learned of your recent letter dated July 7, 2006 that indicated that heat alerts "...will no longer be provided by Public Health Services". As you are aware, many communities in North America have instituted heat alert systems – a mechanism designed to inform people of the dangers of extreme heat and to initiate certain measures to help vulnerable people cope with the conditions. In Toronto for example 'cooling centres' are made available for people to get relief from stifling conditions. Last year, Toronto initiated an inspection blitz during the heat wave visiting 370 Toronto rooming houses; City staff made an effort to talk to property owners and tenants about the dangers of heat exposure.

Our committees take issue with some of the premises in your letter. Your contention that evening cooling in Hamilton will remedy the oppressive heat that some vulnerable tenants may experience in multi-unit residences – whether in low-income rental housing, rooming houses or even accessory apartments is contrary to the experiences of many of the tenants from whom we hear. In Hamilton, the summer of 2006 has thus far, been more comfortable than the extreme temperatures that were endured during the summer of 2005; but last year the city experienced 16 days in a one-month period in which the temperature rose above 30 degrees Celsius. In those conditions, many people – especially vulnerable populations - found their apartments very hot and unbearable – even at night.

The high poverty rate in Hamilton means that many people cannot afford the hydro costs to run air conditioning systems (or even fans). Most landlords who cover hydro expenses in rent charge tenants additional fees (usually between \$25 and \$50/month extra) for using window air conditioners. For tenants on social assistance or fixed incomes these

energy costs can be overwhelming and so many tenants go without and live in unhealthy and unsafe conditions.

We also have concerns with the letter's opinion that 'people who are outdoors' may be less at risk in the summer than in the winter. If individuals are outside in the heat for many hours at a time, as people who are experiencing homelessness tend to be, exposure to the elements could possibly lead to sunburn, dehydration and heat stroke. While malls and libraries may remain viable refuges for some individuals, there have been instances in recent years in which security personnel at malls have forced homeless individuals outside for loitering during very hot days.

We believe the City of Hamilton has an important leadership role to play in helping to inform and educate vulnerable populations about the dangers of extreme heat. We applaud the exceptional job of local agencies in responding to hot temperatures, but we also believe the City needs to ensure resources and staff are in place to deal with extreme heat when it occurs. Just as an example: men's homelessness shelters, which currently require homeless men to leave the shelter during the day, could waive this rule to allow them to stay in cool facilities on days when it becomes very hot. We also believe the City should open recreation centres or other public buildings when conditions warrant. This would allow people to access cool spaces if their residences were intolerable. Further, our committees are extremely concerned about conditions in low-income rental housing and rooming houses. We would hope the City would develop a system to pro-actively inspect properties to ensure vulnerable tenants, senior citizens, new comers to Canada and tenants with mental illnesses are made aware of the dangers of extreme heat.

We would appreciate your re-consideration of this policy and would value the opportunity to discuss the matter further at your convenience. I can be contacted by email at coopert@lao.on.ca or by phone at 905-545-0442

Sincerely,



Tom Cooper,
Community Development Coordinator, McQuesten Legal & Community Services;
On behalf of the Solutions for Housing Action Committee & the Roomers and Boarders
Committee of Hamilton

c.c.: Mayor Larry DiIanni
Members of Hamilton City Council
Joe-Anne Priel, General Manager Social Services and Public Health
Dr. Elizabeth Richardson, Medical Officer of Health
Canon Wendy Roy, Chair, Food, Shelter and Housing Advisory Committee



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Tom Cooper
Community Development Coordinator, McQuesten Legal & Community Services
1440 Main Street East
Hamilton, ON L8K 6M3

25 July 2006

Dear Mr Cooper,

I have been forwarded a copy of your letter sent July 20, 2006, addressed to me but apparently sent to members of Council regarding heat alerts in the City of Hamilton. Thanks for taking the time to share your concerns on this issue.

As you can appreciate, one of the challenges in public health is ensuring that limited resources, provided by taxpayers, are used for maximum benefit. In seeking to exercise responsible stewardship, Public Health Services relies on evidence. Evidence relevant to heat alerts includes meteorological information from Environment Canada, evidence of burden of disease or ill-health from heat in our community, and lessons learned from other communities.

Our consultations with Environment Canada and scientific evidence about the health effects of heat do not point to significant, measurable health effects of heat in the City of Hamilton. While local weather may include isolated days of extreme heat, nighttime cooling and the presence of the lake as a moderating influence combine to reduce risks to human health significantly.

In several American cities, such as Chicago, deaths during heat waves have occurred overwhelmingly among elderly residents of multiple unit residential buildings in high crime areas where residents were unable/unwilling to open windows or leave their homes due to safety considerations. By contrast, the City of Hamilton, although facing many challenges, does not have the same weather patterns as cities such as Chicago and does not have the same pattern of housing and safety considerations that would put large numbers of people at risk for death.

While not facing major health risks from heat, people may still find moderate heat such as days with daytime temperatures over 30 degrees uncomfortable. In our discussions with the City of Toronto regarding their cooling centres, they kindly shared their data from last year – the hottest summer on record. In 2005, there were 24 heat alerts (8 heat alerts and 16 extreme heat alerts), and 12000 people attended one of 4 'cooling centres', an average of 500 people per alert. Applying a 20% rule of thumb to reflect the differences in population, that would amount to roughly 100 people spread across

Hamilton. Note that this assumes weather in Hamilton as extreme as in Toronto, which was not the case in 2005.

As you will note in our letter to community partners informing them of this change, PHS will be 'developing an inventory of residential premises whose occupants may be at high risk in the event of extreme heat so that relevant responses can be developed that are tailored to the populations at risk'. PHS is of the view that resources are best used to address the identified needs of vulnerable people rather than for gestures and look forward to your client organizations' input to that effort so that together we can minimize health risks from housing in Hamilton.

Should your client organizations wish to be kept informed of PHS' efforts in this area, please ask them to forward us the names of contact individuals. Thanks for your interests and efforts on behalf of those both our organizations seek to assist.

Sincerely,

Sent by email

Matthew Hodge MDCM, PhD, FRCPC
Associate Medical Officer of Health
City of Hamilton
mahodge@hamilton.ca