



Suggestions:

Summer Plan for Persons Living in Homelessness in Delhi

April 2021

Introduction

In the absence of a safe and secure home, persons living in homelessness face severe challenges, which are further exacerbated by extreme climatic conditions. Adverse weather events, such as heat waves, heavy rain, floods, and drought, compound challenges faced by homeless persons, especially older persons, persons with disabilities, children, and women.

Delhi experiences intense heat, with very high temperatures, during the summer months, particularly from April to July. While the year 2020 was recorded as the eighth warmest year since 1901,¹ above normal maximum temperatures have been predicted in most of north India in 2021.² Heat waves, or periods of abnormally high temperatures, primarily affect those compelled to live or work outdoors, including informal workers, people living in homelessness, and those without adequate housing. Homeless people lack access to adequate potable and clean water, food and nutrition, and healthcare, all of which are necessary for the protection from the intense heat. High temperatures and mosquitoes also make it challenging for people to sleep outdoors and increases health risks from food spoilage and contamination. In the last few decades, the mortality rate as a direct result of heat waves in India has been nearly twice the mortality rate due to cold waves.³

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced additional challenges for vulnerable communities and compounded their risks from the rising heat.⁴ The second wave of the pandemic in India, along with restrictions on gatherings and movement, and night curfews, could further affect those living on the streets and limit the usual protections available to them to cope with extreme weather, including the heat.

Despite the severe impact of high temperatures on the health and lives of those living in homelessness, there is a lack of state intervention to protect vulnerable people from the extreme heat. The Delhi government, in particular the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB), undertakes significant measures to protect homeless persons during the winter, including setting up of temporary tents. However, these tents are usually removed by the end of March, leaving people without shelter and associated facilities, including water, meals, and toilets, for the rest of the year.

¹ 'Statement on Climate of India during 2020,' Press Release, India Meteorological Department, Ministry of Earth Sciences, 4 January 2021. Available at:

https://mausam.imd.gov.in/backend/assets/press_release_pdf/Statement_of_Climate_of_India-2020.pdf

² 'Seasonal Outlook for the Temperatures during April to June, 2021,' Press Release, India Meteorological Department, Ministry of Earth Sciences, 31 March 2021. Available at:

https://mausam.imd.gov.in/Forecast/marquee_data/April%20to%20June%2021%20Temp%20%20outlook.pdf

³ See Ray, K. et al., 'An assessment of long-term changes in mortalities due to extreme weather events in India: A study of 50 years' data,' 1970–2019, *Weather and Climate Extremes*, Volume 32, 2021. Available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S221209472100013X>

⁴ See Golechha, M. and R. K. Panigrahy, 'COVID-19 and heatwaves: a double whammy for Indian cities,' *The Lancet*, Volume 4, 2020. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanplh/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30170-4.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanplh/PIIS2542-5196(20)30170-4.pdf)

There is, thus, an urgent need to recognize heat waves as a major health risk and formulate and implement strategies for the protection of homeless persons during the summer months.

Given the serious threat posed by heat waves and high temperatures, exacerbated by the pandemic, and the urgent need to protect the health and lives of the city's most marginalized and vulnerable population, HLRN, in consultation with Delhi's homeless community, has prepared this human rights-based summer plan for immediate implementation.

This summer plan provides recommendations for homeless people in Delhi who are already living in shelters as well as those living on the streets who do not have access to shelters.

Recommendations from Homeless Persons and Housing and Land Rights Network

1. Urgent Need for New Permanent and Climate/Weather-resistant Shelters

- A **rapid assessment survey** of people living on the streets is required to assess the shortfall of existing shelters for people who need and want to move to shelters.
- Alternative arrangements for shelter should be made before removing the tents set up for the winter.
- **Consultations with land-owning agencies** should be held to ascertain availability of vacant land and buildings/spaces/structures for establishing homeless shelters. Short-term lease arrangements could be considered with land-owning agencies in light of the urgent situation.
- Based on the needs assessment and mapping, **vacant government buildings**, including community halls and other vacant spaces, near areas of concentration of homeless persons, should be converted into shelters with adequate facilities and safety norms.

For example, field research by HLRN indicates that the following vacant spaces could be converted into new shelters, on an immediate basis:

- Property Number 10788/89, Jhandewalan Road (ground floor is being used as a shelter; first and second floors are vacant);
 - Property Number 9386/87, Multani Dhanda, Paharganj (ground floor is being used as a shelter, but the first floor is vacant); and,
 - Property Number 10844, Community Hall, Jhandewalan Road (the building is vacant).
- All newly-created permanent shelters must ensure **adequate living conditions**, proper facilities and hygiene, and implementation of health and safety guidelines to prevent overcrowding and the spread of COVID-19. Each shelter should respect the right of all residents to live with dignity.
 - **Rental vouchers** should be provided to those who cannot be accommodated in existing shelters, so that they can afford rental housing.

2. Need for Improved Facilities and Services in Existing Shelters

- Ensure **adequate and regular supply of potable water for drinking**, and clean water for bathing, washing clothes, and for other personal needs in all shelters.
- Ensure that all shelters have functional water dispensers and coolers.
- **Continue the provision of two daily free meals in all shelters.** The economic crisis and related loss of livelihoods has made it very difficult for homeless people to buy food. The distribution of free meals is necessary to prevent a severe hunger crisis in the city.

- Provide **functional air coolers and fans** in all shelters, including in porta cabins and the reinforced concrete cement buildings. Ensure that non-functioning fans and air coolers in shelters are repaired or replaced immediately.
- Take urgent steps to **manage the extreme heat in porta cabins** caused by metal sheets used as roofs, as this often renders them unusable during the peak summer months.
- Ensure **regular pest and vector-control measures** in all shelters. Provide mosquito nets and mosquito repellents in all shelters. Where devices to check against mosquitoes/other pests in shelters are installed, ensure that they are functional and well-maintained. Install them in shelters where they are missing.
- In order to **improve ventilation** and protect against mosquitoes, install additional doors with netting (*jaali*) in all shelters. Also ensure that windows have netting to prevent mosquitoes from entering.
- Consider, on a short-term and urgent basis, agreements with the Power Department and Electricity Boards to **provide electricity at subsidized rates** to all shelters across the city.
- Ensure a distance of at least 2–3 metres between each person/bed in all shelters.

3. Health Services and Medical Facilities for Residents of Shelters and those Living on the Streets

- **Recognize and declare heat waves as an ‘emergency’** and ensure adequate response mechanisms.
- Establish **emergency medical services** and ambulances for people suffering from heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion, heat strokes, dehydration, and heat cramps.
- Ensure that **mobile medical vans visit all shelters** on a regular basis. Organize **monthly health camps** in all areas to provide medical check-ups and health-related information to people.
- Distribute **Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) packets and refillable water bottles** free of cost—to persons living in shelters and on the streets—to prevent dehydration caused by extreme heat.
- Train shelter caretakers to identify signs of heat stroke and exhaustion, and prepare contingency plans to deal with health emergencies.

4. Essential Services for People Living on the Streets

- **Identify high-risk areas** where high concentrations of homeless persons live or work, and may be more prone to heat strokes and other heat related illnesses.
- **Create water distribution points across the city** where homeless people live – either through the installation of new municipal taps or Delhi Jal Board drinking water tankers. This is essential to prevent dehydration and deaths during the summer.
- Promote improved coordination between the Delhi Jal Board and municipal corporations to ensure that all public water taps are functional, as persons living on the streets are heavily dependent on them.
- Establish **‘cooling areas’** in high-risk areas with provision of water, food, toilets, and first-aid to counter the impact of the heat.
- Ensure that **all public toilets/‘Sulabh Shauchalayas’ are made free** and user-charges are not mandatory to use the facilities. The economic stress aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic has gravely affected the ability of homeless persons to pay and use municipal sanitation facilities. Lack of access to sanitation facilities most severely impacts women, increasing incidents of gender-based violence against them.

- Ensure regular **pest and vector-control measures** across the city, especially in areas with high concentrations of people living in homelessness. Regular fumigation is required to control the menace of mosquitoes.
- Create sufficient **community kitchens across the city to provide subsidized nutritious meals to homeless persons living on the streets and to others in need**. With renewed restrictions related to the surge in COVID-19 cases, people are reporting loss of livelihoods and income. Ensuring their access to food is an immediate and urgent concern in order to avert a serious hunger crisis.

5. COVID-19 Protection and Treatment

- **Prioritize homeless persons of all ages in the COVID-19 vaccination drive** and provide free vaccination with their prior and informed consent, without the requirement of identity documents. In the absence of Aadhaar cards/proof of date of birth, no one should be denied the vaccine. Adequate information on vaccination centres and side-effects of vaccines should be provided to all homeless persons in the appropriate medium and language that they understand.
- Ensure **free testing and treatment** for COVID-19.
- Create **adequate quarantine centres and care and recovery facilities** for homeless persons who test positive for COVID-19.

6. Special Needs of Homeless Children

- Collaborate with the Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) and use their data to address the specific challenges of children in street situations, including access to adequate shelter, food, water, healthcare, and education.
- Create crèches and childcare centres with adequate facilities in vacant buildings and *anganwadi* centres, to protect homeless children who are highly susceptible to heat.
- Provide universal coverage for all homeless children under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme and ensure that they are able to access *anganwadis* and related facilities, including for nutrition and healthcare.
- Distribute free milk and meals to children living on the streets to ensure their access to adequate and nutritious food. As long as schools are closed, ensure that mid-day meals are provided to school-enrolled homeless children as well.
- Uphold the Fundamental Right of all children to education. Facilitate the provision of ‘smart’ devices, including smartphones and tablets, and free data cards to all homeless children to enable their participation in online classes as long as schools remain closed.

7. Rights of Shelter Caretakers

- Ensure that all shelter caretakers are considered as ‘frontline workers’ and are prioritized in the COVID-19 vaccination drive. Provide health insurance to all caretakers under the Delhi government’s scheme.
- Uphold the right to work of shelter caretakers, including fixing work hours, paying adequate wages, and providing them with a weekly day off. Ensure that ‘relievers’ are appointed so that regular caretakers can take a break.

8. Other Social Protection Measures

- Make all welfare schemes of the Delhi government accessible to homeless persons, irrespective of their documentation and proof of address/residence.
- **Any pandemic-related lockdowns, including weekend lockdowns and night curfews, should include protection measures for informal workers, including provisions for food and cash allowances to protect people against livelihood loss and forced migration.** [*The just-announced weekend lockdown will have severe impacts on daily-wage earners, including people who live on the streets. With loss of daily wages and closure of gurudwaras/temples/dhabas/other places where they get food, there is a huge threat of an impending hunger crisis for such people. There is thus an urgent need to initiate measures to distribute free meals to people living on the streets during pandemic-induced lockdowns/curfews.*]
- Conduct **special camps** to provide all homeless persons with ration, election, and Aadhaar cards.
- Introduce the provision of **unemployment allowances** in Delhi for all those who have lost their livelihoods, including as a result of the pandemic.
- Provide all residents of DUSIB shelters with ‘Shelter User Identity Cards.’ These should be recognized as a valid form of official identification. Any directives given to create and maintain databases of homeless persons, including those in shelters and temporary buildings, should not result in the violation of the right to privacy.
- Provide **disability pension and insurance** to persons with disabilities.
- Conduct **skill-training workshops** for homeless persons in shelters and take measures to link them with job portals and other livelihood opportunities.
- As recommended earlier by HLRN, the Delhi government should consider initiating a pilot project to provide a **Universal Basic Income** for marginalized communities/economically weaker sections in the city, including homeless persons. This would greatly help in preventing hunger, ill health, and destitution during these difficult times. It would also set a positive precedent for the rest of the country.

9. Investment in Adequate Housing Options along a Continuum

- While shelters are required to meet the emergency needs of certain vulnerable groups, they are not a permanent solution for the majority of the working homeless population. The government, thus, should develop housing options along a **‘continuum of housing’** – including hostels for single working men and women; short-stay homes for survivors of domestic violence; recovery homes for those with health issues, including chemical dependency; collective/group housing for persons with disabilities, older persons, single mothers, and others who do not want to live by themselves; and, access to subsidized rental and ownership housing with access to adequate finance.
- While welcoming the Delhi government’s announcement to focus on increasing low-cost housing in the city, we would like to recommend that housing is provided **close to people’s places of work and study**; that it is developed with their active participation; and that it is subsidized/free and based on their ability to pay. Furthermore, **no one should be denied housing for not meeting the government’s ‘eligibility criteria.’**
- The policy of **‘Housing First’** that prioritizes homeless people for housing in all government schemes should be adopted in Delhi, with the aim of ending homelessness by 2030, as per commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals.

- The Delhi government should also introduce a **moratorium on all forced evictions**, including for the inability of low-income groups to pay rent, as these contribute to an increase in homelessness.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of housing as a key determinant of health and life. The absence of safe and secure housing can result in the loss of life. This has also been emphasized by United Nations experts on the right to housing.⁵

We greatly appreciate the efforts of the Delhi government to respond to the crisis and to improve services in shelters, including through the recent provision of beds and curtains as well as the increased number of tents with improved facilities during the winter. In order to end homelessness in the city, we would now like to urge the Delhi government to focus on developing a comprehensive long-term plan that would enable everyone living on the streets and in shelters to move into secure housing.

Housing and Land Rights Network is committed to working for the human rights of all those living in homelessness and also to working with the Delhi government in this endeavour. We thank the Delhi government for its consideration, efforts, and support.⁶

⁵ 'COVID-19 Guidance Note: Protecting Those Living in Homelessness,' UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, April 2020. Available at:

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_homeless.pdf

⁶ For more information, please write to us at: contact@hlrn.org.in