



Suggestions:

Summer Plan for Persons Living in Homelessness in Delhi

Update - April 2022

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. In 2022, various parts of northwest India, including Delhi experienced the hottest March in 122 years¹, with temperatures reaching 40 degrees, around 4.5 degrees higher than the “normal” reported temperatures.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

Further, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, persons living in homelessness continue to be disproportionately affected by the resultant and ongoing public health, economic, and social crises. Given their meagre earnings and almost hand-to-mouth existence, the lack of savings and continued, limited access to livelihood opportunities, the homeless community continues to suffer gravely. Their inability to afford rental housing has been further compounded by new market-based causes for the increase in homelessness; as HLRN has been able to document that multiple families who had managed to work and secure a place to live in on rent, were forced to vacate them due to the economic crisis worsened by the pandemic.

While 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

¹ Heatwave to continue in Delhi as India records hottest March in 122 years,' *India Today*, 4 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/cities/delhi/story/india-witnesses-hottest-march-in-122-yrs-heatwave-to-continue-in-delhi-1933173-2022-04-04>

² 'India sees warmest March in 122 years, says IMD; What caused the heatwave to peak early this year?,' *India TV*, 2 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/warmest-march-122-years-delhi-mumbai-chennai-mp-up-rajasthan-imd-weather-updates-temperature-early-heatwave-2022-04-02-767251>

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>

of temporary tents. There is a lack of similar state intervention to protect vulnerable people from the extreme heat, despite its severe impact on the health and lives of those living in homelessness.

Given the serious threat posed by heat waves and high temperatures, particularly during 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. Need for Improved Facilities and Services in Existing Shelters

- Ensure that all shelters have functional water dispensers and coolers.
- 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.
- Continue the **provision of two daily free meals in all shelters**. 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.
- Ensure a distance of at least 2–3 metres between each person/bed in all shelters.

2. Essential Services for People Living on the Streets

- Identify high-risk areas where high concentrations of homeless persons live or work, and maybe 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 for Delhi Jal Board drinking water tankers. This is essential to prevent dehydration and deaths during the summer. Coordinate with Shelter Management Agencies (SMAs). These agencies can be delegated the responsibilities and maintaining these distribution points.
- Promote improve 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.
- Ensure **'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 made 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. To ensure that these facilities reach homeless communities, make oral announcements and use other means of information dissemination, in local languages, for those who are not literate. Sign boards in local languages should be displayed in front of all public toilets and all caretakers/workers should be sensitized to the needs of the homeless community.

- 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.
- Homeless families living on the streets should be allowed to set up makeshift dwelling units, made out of tarpaulin and sticks on the streets, as a means to provide **temporary and immediate respite from the heat**. Work with officials from the Municipal Corporations and the Delhi Police to **ensure that these dwelling units are not arbitrarily demolished or destroyed**.
- **Extend the ongoing provision of free meals** for homeless persons to include persons and families living on the streets. Expand the scope of collaboration with Akshaya Patra, work with SMAs to ensure that homeless persons on the streets are given meals twice a day, with the provision of milk for infants, children, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons. Families living on the streets should also be provided with ration cards to ensure their access to ration/food grains being distributed under the Public Distribution System (PDS).

3. 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.
- 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 of the urgent situation.
- Based on the needs assessments 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.
- 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 spread of COVID-19. Each shelter should respect the rights 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.

4. 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**—to prevent dehydration caused by extreme heat.
- Train shelter caretakers to identify heat strokes and exhaustion, and prepare contingency plans to deal with health emergencies.

5. COVID-19 Protection and Treatment

- **Ensure that homeless persons of all ages** are provided all doses of the vaccination, including the booster dose⁴, free of cost, with their prior and informed consent, and without the requirement of identity documents. In the absence of Aadhaar cards/proof of date of birth no one should be denied the vaccine. Conduct regular camps in collaboration with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and SMAs to follow-up with homeless persons who have received the first dose to ensure that they receive the second dose and the booster shot and are completely inoculated against the virus.
- Ensure **free testing and treatment** 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.
- In collaboration with the DCPCR, undertake efforts to map out and identify homeless children who have dropped out of school during the pandemic, **counsel and support them** to re-enrol in schools, with the consent of their parents/guardians.
- 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.
- The recent announcement of the Delhi government to set up hostels for homeless children should be formulated and implemented in **consultation, participation, and with informed consent** of the homeless community in the city.

7. Rights of Shelter Caretakers

- 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. Social Protection Measures for Persons Living in Homelessness

- Make all **welfare schemes** of the Delhi government accessible to homeless persons, irrespective of their documentation and proof of address/residence.
- Conduct **special camps** to provide all homeless persons with ration, election, and Aadhaar cards.

⁴ ‘Covid-19 booster dose for all above 18 years at private hospitals from April 10,’ *India Today*, 8 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/vaccine-updates/story/covid-booster-dose-for-all-private-centre-vaccination-programme-1935103-2022-04-08>

- 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.

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 implementing the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes scheme, 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.
- 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.
- 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 Even after two years since the onset of the pandemic, homeless persons continue to reel from its severe impact on their lives, particularly on their physical and mental health, nutrition, livelihood, income, security, and education, among others.

⁵ OHCHR, ‘COVID-19 Guidance Note: Prohibition of Evictions by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing’, 28 April 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ke8osS>

See also, OHCHR, ‘Ban evictions during COVID-19 pandemic, UN expert urges’, 18 August 2020. Available at: <http://bit.ly/3ldtbxT>

We greatly appreciate the efforts of the Delhi government towards homeless persons, including the decision to provide free meals to homeless persons living in shelters and streamlining access to vaccinations, among other measures. We would like to urge the Delhi government to continue to work on durable solutions to end homelessness and increase public investment in adequate housing for all, including the most marginalized and vulnerable communities.

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

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