



Suggestions: Summer Plan for Persons Living in Homelessness in Delhi

Update: April 2024

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, which is commonly known as one of India's hottest cities, stands highly susceptible to heat waves, primarily due to its dense population and significant presence of lower-income groups. The summer months, notably from April to July, witness intense heat with soaring temperatures, exacerbating the city's heat-related challenges. The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), on 1 April 2024, has already declared that the country will experience several 'above normal heatwave days' from April to June.¹

Heat waves, or periods of abnormally high temperatures, primarily affect those compelled to live or work outdoors, including informal workers, persons living in homelessness, and those without adequate housing. The intensification of extreme heat events presents a formidable challenge, particularly for the homeless. Homeless people lack access to adequate potable and clean water, food and nutrition, and healthcare, all of which are necessary for protection from the intense heat. High temperatures and mosquitoes also make it challenging for people to sleep outdoors and increase 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.²

Despite the severe impact of high temperatures on the health and lives of those living in homelessness, there is a lack of adequate 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 temporary tents. However, these tents are usually removed by the

¹ 'Updated Seasonal outlook for hot weather season (April to June) 2024 and Monthly Outlook for April 2024 for the Rainfall and Temperature', India Meteorological Department, Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India, 1 April 2024. Available at: https://internal.imd.gov.in/press_release/20240401_pr_2911.pdf

² The citation is already here: See Ray, K. et al, 'An Assessment of Long-term Changes in Mortalities Due to Extreme Weather Events in 4 'Delhi sees surge in COVID-19 cases with 430% jump in active cases in just under 3 weeks: Data,' The Economic Times, 18 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S221209472100013X>

end of March, leaving people without shelter and associated facilities, including water, meals, and toilets, for the rest of the year.

In May and June 2023, HLRN conducted an extensive survey and study to assess the impact of extreme heat on homeless individuals. The study revealed that homeless people, including those in shelters, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of extreme heat due to limited access to shelter and unstable incomes. This vulnerability manifests in various health issues such as heatstroke, weakness, vector-borne diseases, eye problems, diarrhoea, skin irritations, restlessness, breathing difficulties, nausea, vomiting, dehydration, elevated blood pressure, headaches, fever, coughing, cholera, nosebleeds, loss of appetite, stomach-aches, and infections.

Additionally, elevated temperatures and increased vectors exacerbate the challenges of finding suitable outdoor sleeping spaces, leading to heightened health risks from food contamination and spoilage. The lack of drinking water, accessible sanitation facilities, cooling options, healthcare, and medications further compounds the difficulties faced by homeless individuals.

Given the serious threat posed by heat waves and high temperatures 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.
- Provide functional air coolers and fans in all shelters, including in porta cabins and 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.
- To improve ventilation and protect against mosquitoes, install additional doors with netting (*jaali*) in all shelters. Ensure that windows have netting to prevent the entry of mosquitoes.
- Ensure a distance of at least 2–3 meters between each person/bed in all shelters.
- Continue the provision of two daily free meals in all shelters. The distribution of free meals has been very helpful in preventing a hunger crisis among the homeless community in Delhi.

2. 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. Coordinate with Shelter Management Agencies (SMAs). These agencies can be delegated the responsibilities and maintaining these distribution points.
- 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 heavily depend on them.
- Establish ‘cooling stations’ in high-risk areas, with the provision of water, food, electrolytes 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.
- 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 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 the 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.
- All newly-created permanent shelters must ensure adequate living conditions, proper facilities and hygiene, and implementation of health and safety guidelines. 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.

- Existing shelters, including porta cabins, should be covered with ‘cool roofs’ as part of the ‘cool roof program’ outlined in Delhi’s Heat Action Plan of 2023³.

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.
- Develop a communication strategy to disseminate heat alerts to shelter homes, involving the shelter management authorities.
- 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 Health Vans visit all shelters regularly. 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—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.

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 can access anganwadi centers and related facilities, including nutrition and healthcare.
- Distribute free milk and meals to children living on the streets to ensure their access to adequate and nutritious food.

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. Other Social Protection Measures for Persons Living in Homelessness

³ ‘Delhi Heat Wave Action Plan 2023’, Delhi Disaster Management Authority, Government of NCT of Delhi. Available at: https://ddma.delhi.gov.in/sites/default/files/ddma/generic_multiple_files/nidm-heat_wave_action_plan_05.07.2023_1.pdf

- 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 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.

8. Policy-level Interventions

- In 2023, Delhi implemented a Heat Action Plan (HAP)⁴; however, it did not explicitly categorize the homeless as a distinct vulnerable group. Moreover, while the plan includes strategies to mitigate heat wave impacts, it overlooks the specific needs of homeless individuals. Heat Action Plans are not only vital for preventing heat-related illnesses and fatalities but also for enhancing the readiness of government agencies to mitigate the exacerbation of heat wave impacts. Therefore, the plan must integrate and address the needs of the homeless population with them being explicitly recognised as a separate category of vulnerable people.

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.

⁴ Refer to footnote 3

- 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

People living without housing constitute one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in the country. Without the protection of a 'home', the community faces innumerable challenges which are worsened by extreme weather events. Particularly, during the summer, children, women, older persons, and others, who live and work outdoors face grave risks to their lives from heat waves. We greatly appreciate the initiatives of the Delhi government for homeless persons during winter. However, we urge the government to also formulate a focused plan to protect people living without housing from the intense heat.

Towards the long-term goal of reducing homelessness in the city, we also 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 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 to working with the Delhi government in this endeavour. We thank the Delhi government for its consideration, efforts, and support.