



# CITY OF THUNDER BAY COVID-19 COLD WEATHER RESPONSE PLAN

January 2021

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## Preface

This response plan is published as an action plan under the Thunder Bay Municipal Emergency Response to COVID-19. The custodian of this plan shall be the Community Emergency Management Coordinator (CEMC), who will be responsible for amending the plan as required over the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Purpose

The goal of this Cold Weather Response Plan (Plan) is to aid in preventing negative health impacts of cold weather conditions on residents of Thunder Bay, during the COVID-19 pandemic response. The Plan includes a particular focus on preventing direct impacts of cold exposure on people experiencing homelessness. This plan will supplement external partners' plans, and be utilized to coordinate responses at each activation level.

The Plan provides a framework for implementing and co-ordinating cold weather preparedness and response activities. The Plan's main objectives are to:

- Alert those most vulnerable to cold weather conditions that are either expected or currently exist;
- Enable those most vulnerable to take appropriate precautions; and to
- Outline stages of response with pre-determined thresholds, for action by agencies who are in a position to provide or alter services and operations to protect the vulnerable population.

Under the Vulnerable Populations COVID-19 Planning Table, a task force (Task Force) will be established to monitor and evaluate the implementation of this plan.

## Background

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, formal (shelters) and informal (libraries, malls, and vestibules) day-time warming facilities that are typically locally available during winter weather for vulnerable populations have been limited. Through the Vulnerable Populations COVID-19 Planning Table, community partners providing services to local vulnerable populations have indicated that, while overnight shelter is strained, they believe the priority gaps are in daytime warming services, and the ability to respond to winter weather extremes. The partners have been collaborating to address related concerns, including overflow and isolation shelter, but are not able to address the daytime and extreme weather gaps with the resources currently available. It is anticipated that winter weather will create significant risks for residents experiencing homelessness or precarious shelter as a result of limitation to formal and informal service restrictions due to COVID-19. In addition to personal impacts of cold illness, affected residents seeking care could exacerbate capacity concerns of healthcare providers as the pandemic progresses. Given the community partners' limited capacity to address this gap, this

concern has been identified as requiring action under the City's COVID-19 emergency response, and may require allocation of City resources and facilities.

## Activation of Plan

The plan will be active for the duration of the COVID-19 municipal state of emergency. The transition between levels will be determined by the On Call Chief Fire Officer when the current or expected situation meets the various thresholds, including weather and COVID triggers.

The CEMC will inform self-identified stakeholders of a change in activation status, and request community partners to implement their response plans.

## Communication

Communication throughout the levels of the Plan is critical to promote a collaborative response by stakeholders and to help inform vulnerable people.

Emergency dispatch will monitor for weather alerts and inform the On Call Chief Fire Officer of conditions that may present a high risk of cold illness. This may be triggered through a winter weather alert or warning issued by Environment and Climate Change Canada. Subsequently, a decision to elevate the active level will be made. As levels elevate, the On Call Chief Fire Officer will alert the MECG of activation. The CEMC will inform stakeholders of activation and level. The Chair of the Vulnerable Populations Table will provide an update on the plan at MECG meetings.

Stakeholders are responsible to collectively distribute information to the Community with the goal of:

- Identifying that cold weather conditions are expected or currently exist;
- Providing guidance to vulnerable populations to take additional measures to protect their health (see appendix 2); and by
- Providing emergency shelter options available.

The City of Thunder Bay Corporate Communications Section will inform the Public of cold weather alerts utilizing media releases, social media outlets, and the City's website. Community Partners will utilize their own media outlets and outreach capabilities to further the chain of information.

## Activation Levels

The Plan is divided into four levels:

- **Level 0** is in effect when winter weather conditions are not expected, and is used to review the response, and modify as needed.
- **Level 1** is in effect during normal winter weather conditions that are not associated with winter weather alerts or warnings, but when elevated safety risks due to cold weather exposure (cold illness) or COVID-19 exposure are still present. This level stays in effect until the end of the winter season (March 31), until the end of the Municipal COVID-19 state of emergency, or until it is superseded by an elevated response level.
- **Level 2** is in effect when weather conditions present high risk of cold illness or COVID-19. It may be triggered when a winter weather alert or warning has been issued by Environment and Climate Change Canada; or at the determination of the On Call Chief Fire Officer, when current or forecast weather risks in combination with current COVID-19 risk would appropriately be addressed by the elevated response level. Level 2 stays in effect until the On Call Chief Fire Officer determines conditions have returned to normal winter conditions, or until it is superseded by an elevated response level.
- **Level 3** comes into effect when responding to emergent or exceptional winter risks, and is triggered at the determination of the On Call Chief Fire Officer when continuous emergency response coordination between stakeholders is required. This may be due to extreme weather conditions, high COVID-19 risk, and/or other emergent hazards.

The On Call Chief Fire Officer is expected to communicate with Task Force members to identify when a return to a lower response level is appropriate.

Community organizations, health care agencies, or City of Thunder Bay Departments may decide to extend services that offer protection from the cold, regardless of weather conditions or activation level.

## Stakeholder Roles

Stakeholders involved in the Task Force will support the Plan by providing direct services to people experiencing homelessness, and/or providing specialized expertise on health and safety, weather, or funding to support the delivery of services to people experiencing homelessness. The Task Force will be comprised of internal and external stakeholders. Once established, a Task Force mandate will be developed and added to this document as an appendix. The CEMC will act as custodian of the Plan and convene Task Force meetings as required; the Chair of the

Vulnerable Populations COVID-19 Planning Table will assume the role of Chair for the Task Force meetings. Individual stakeholders have specific responsibilities during different stages of the Plan as outlined in Table 1. All stakeholders are responsible for, but not limited to:

- Subscribing to receiving weather warnings from the Environment and Climate Change Canada App through *EC Alert Me* or the *WeatherCAN App*;
- Creating and maintaining their own plans for responding to such warnings;
- Notifying the CEMC of changes in contact information or service delivery; and by
- Participating in Task Force meetings, consultations, evaluations, and communications.

While it is not required for every stakeholder representative to attend every meeting, it is important for every stakeholder to contribute to developing, implementing, and improving the Plan. It is also expected that stakeholders support communication with the public, sharing information on prevention and response actions for people experiencing homelessness and the community at large, using word of mouth, graphics, media relations, and social media.

Table 1: Stakeholder Roles During Activation Levels

Stakeholder	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>CEMC (As part of the MECG)</b>	<p>Convene stakeholder meetings</p> <p>Support communication with stakeholders</p> <p>Revise Cold Weather Plan</p>	<p>Email stakeholder reminders</p> <p>Convene stakeholder meetings</p> <p>Support communication with stakeholders on Cold Weather Response Plan</p>	<p>If needed, host debrief once activation level is deescalated</p>	<p>Host debrief once activation level is deescalated</p>
<b>On Call Chief Fire Officer (As part of the MECG)</b>	<p>Advise on revisions to plan</p> <p>Advise Municipal Emergency Control Group on the Cold Weather Response Plan</p>	<p>Notify Municipal Emergency Control Group of plan activation</p>	<p>Determine start and termination of Level 2 activation</p> <p>Communicate with or consult Task Force as needed to coordinate planned and emergent responses</p>	<p>Determine start and termination of Level 3 activation</p> <p>As needed, convene emergency meeting of Task Force to coordinate responses</p>
<b>City of Thunder Bay</b>	<p>Advise on revisions to plan</p> <p>Advise Municipal Emergency Control Group on the Cold Weather Response Plan</p>	<p>Make facilities available as warming spaces during business hours as needed</p> <p>Share cold weather preparedness</p>	<p>Make dedicated warming space available</p> <p>Make facilities available as warming spaces during business hours as needed; relax</p>	<p>If a local weather state of emergency is declared, display the emergency notification on the City of Thunder Bay website</p>

	Review City of Thunder Bay plans for winter weather hazards	information via news and social media  Monitor Service Delivery	loitering policies in facilities/on transit  Consult with Task Force to identify any need for increased capacity/warming space  Share prevention and response information via news and social media  Share weather safety information with residents  Monitor Service Delivery	Increase hours/access at warming facilities to provide warming spaces as needed. Add supports at non-dedicated facilities  Utilize emergency first responders to address urgent needs  Share response updates via news and social media  Share weather safety information with residents
<b>Emergency Shelters (Shelter House, Salvation Army, Grace Place-Out of the Cold, Isolation &amp; Overflow Shelter, PACE, Warming Shelter)</b>	Advise on revisions to plan  Review internal plans for winter, including staffing and supplies	Inform clients about risks and prevention of cold illness and COVID-19  Inform staff and volunteers about operating plans for winter	Activate winter weather response plans  Collaborate with other shelters and community organizations to redirect guests to any available beds Alert CEMC and other shelters of any capacity issues and collaborate	Collaborate with first responders, emergency shelters, and community organizations on any necessary interventions and responses  Share prevention and response information via available



		Share information and monitor capacity to support guests redirected to another shelter	to establish additional warming spaces  Share prevention and response information via available communication channels	communication channels
<b>Community Organizations (TBDSSAB, NorWest CHC, St. Joseph's Care Group, Urban Abbey)</b>	Advise on revisions to plan  Review internal plans for winter weather responses	Inform clients about risks and prevention of cold illness and COVID-19  Prepare messages to inform staff and volunteers about winter weather responses  Share information and resources to support and monitor clients at higher risk of cold illness or COVID-19	Activate winter weather response plans  Reach out to clients experiencing or at risk of homelessness to identify and address needs  Circulate messages to inform staff and volunteers about winter weather responses  Share prevention and response information via available communication channels	Collaborate with first responders, emergency shelters, and community organizations on any necessary interventions and responses  Share prevention and response information via available communication channels  Allocate transit tickets to support transportation to warming facility

			Allocate transit tickets to support transportation to warming facility	
<b>Thunder Bay District Health Unit</b>	Advise on revisions to plan  Advise Task Force on health system changes and on health prevention and responses for cold illness and COVID 19	Advise Task Force on health system changes  Provide updated health communication resources to stakeholders	Advise Task Force of emergent health system pressures or changes  Provide updated health communication resources to stakeholders  Allocate transit tickets	Collaborate with first responders, emergency shelters, and community organizations on any necessary interventions and responses  Advise Task Force of emergent health system pressures or changes  Provide updated health communication resources to stakeholders  Allocate transit tickets
<b>External Funding Partners (United Way, TBDSSAB, LSPC, TBIFC)</b>	Inform Task Force of funding opportunities and changes. Collaborate with other funders on strategies for weather resilience	Gather and share funder stories of winter weather response and resilience	Consult with Task Force to identify emergent resourcing needs	Consult with Task Force to identify emergency resourcing needs

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Winter Weather Overview

Winter weather poses a significant risk to all individuals. The information below has been taken from Environment and Climate Change Canada.

#### Blizzards

A blizzard is characterized by reduced visibility from falling and/or blowing snow and strong winds, which may be accompanied by low temperatures and/or a severe wind chill. A blizzard may persist for a period of time on their own or be part of an intense winter storm.

#### Freezing Rain and Ice Pellets

Freezing rain is rain that freezes on impact and forms a coating of clear ice on the ground and exposed objects. Ice pellets are formed when raindrops freeze as they fall through air that is below the freezing point, before reaching the ground. Both can create unsafe walking and travelling conditions.

#### Snowfall Warning

A snowfall warning is issued when the expected snowfall may be heavy enough to cause significant inconvenience and hazardous conditions.

#### Snow Squall

A snow squall is moderate to heavy snow, driven by strong, gusty winds, with poor visibility. Snow accumulation and drifts may be significant during a snow squall. Heavy snowfall can create hazardous road conditions, knock down trees, and damage power lines. It can create unsafe walking conditions.

#### Wind Chill

Wind chill is a combination of wind speed and air temperature, expressed by the loss of body heat. A wind chill index is used to determine the relative discomfort and effect on the human body. Exposed skin can freeze very quickly during cold temperatures with wind chill leading to frostbite, and potentially fatal conditions such as hypothermia.

#### Winter Storms

Winter storms are characterized as a major snowfall or significant snowfall combined with freezing rain, strong winds, blowing snow, and/or extreme wind chill. The combination of these conditions pose a significant threat to the safety of the public and property.

## Appendix 2: Recognizing and Responding to Cold Illness

### Health Risks in Cold Weather

Exposure to cold weather can cause serious or life-threatening health problems. People experiencing homelessness are especially at risk due to increased exposure. In addition, COVID-19 restrictions mean that there are fewer locations open to the public to warm up and escape the elements. Wind burn, trench foot and frost nip are not uncommon during cold weather. In extreme cases, frostbite and mild or severe hypothermia may occur.

It is essential to also consider the COVID-19 prevention measures (see Appendix 3) when preventing cold exposure and deciding how to respond to various cold weather health problems. For example, a cold weather prevention recommendation is to go into a heated building. When doing so, it is also important to wear a face mask and ensure 2m physical distancing with others in the building to protect against COVID-19.

### *Wind Burn*

Wind burn occurs when exposure to wind or cold air removes the top layer of oil from the skin.

Signs of wind burn include:

- Skin that is excessively dry, red, sore or itchy
- Skin may peel as it starts to heal

Response:

- Try not to not scratch or rub the affected area(s)
- Apply a protective skin care product (e.g. therapeutic moisturizer) to the affected area(s) as needed to help relieve symptoms
- Use a protective lip balm to treat lips

### *Trench Foot*

Trench foot results from prolonged exposure of the feet to a damp and/or cold environment. People that are outside with inadequate footwear (quality boots and dry socks) are especially at risk for developing trench foot. Although no freezing occurs, there can be permanent damage.

Signs of trench foot include:

- Tingling or itchiness that can progress to numbness or pain
- Feet that are reddish or bluish in colour
- Smell of decay
- Swelling of feet
- Advanced trench foot may involve blisters or open sores

Response:

- Take off shoes/socks
- Clean the feet and dry thoroughly
- Apply heat packs or immerse feet in warm (not hot) water for up to five minutes
- If symptoms of trench foot fail to improve, see a health care provider.

### *Frostnip*

Frostnip is an early stage of frostbite, where only the skin (and not the inner tissue) freezes. Toes, fingers, ears and nose are at the greatest risk for getting frostnip.

Signs of frostnip include:

- Irritation, tingling or burning sensation in the affected area
- Yellowish, reddish or white skin for those with fair skin
- Skin that is soft to the touch (unlike frostbite where skin becomes hard)

Response:

- Passive warming: move to a warming room, remove wet clothing and wrap in dry blankets or clothing
- If there is no further risk for refreezing, consider warming the affected area(s) by immersing in warm (not hot) water
- Do not:
  - Thaw skin if there is a risk that it can refreeze (e.g. further risk of exposure)
  - Apply direct heat or place near a heat source.
  - Rub, massage or shake injured skin as this can cause more damage
  - Walk on frost-nipped feet

### *Frostbite*

Frostbite is a severe injury that occurs when skin and body tissues freeze due to prolonged exposure. The combination of poor circulation and extreme cold can lead to frostbite.

Frostbite can cause permanent damage to the affected areas.

Signs of frostbite include:

- Numbness or loss of feeling in affected area
- Skin that is hard or waxy to the touch
- Fair skin may appear white or grayish-yellow; frostbitten skin is discoloured and black
- Blistering after thawing

Response:

- Severe frostbite requires immediate medical attention. Call 911.

- While waiting for help to arrive, begin treating with passive warming: move to a warm room, remove wet clothing and wrap in dry blankets or clothing
- If moving to a warmer space, try to pad or splint affected areas to minimize further damage
- Do not rub, massage or shake injured skin as this may cause more damage

### *Hypothermia*

Hypothermia is a life-threatening condition that requires immediate medical attention. It occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it, causing a dangerously low body temperature. Normal body temperature averages 37 °C. Hypothermia occurs when the body temperature drops below 35°C.

Signs of mild hypothermia include:

- Uncontrollable shivering, drowsiness or exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech
- Lips, ears, fingers and toes may turn blue

Signs of severe hypothermia include:

- Shivering stops
- Unconsciousness
- Decreased pulse or breathing; cardiac arrest

Response:

- Mild and severe hypothermia require immediate medical attention. Call 911.
- While waiting for help to arrive:
  - Find shelter
  - Keep muscles moving, if possible
  - Dry and gradually warm the body, especially the centre of the body. Wrap in blankets or dry clothing or warm by skin-to-skin contact with another person (preferably a close contact).
  - Drink warm, sweet liquids (e.g. honey)
  - Don't fight shivering, as this is one way the body increases its core temperature.
  - If the person is unconscious, lay them down and avoid shaking them or handling them roughly as this can affect the heart and create an irregular heartbeat.

### *Preventing Health Problems Related to Cold Exposure*

- Wear appropriate clothing for the weather
  - Dress in layers of loose-fitting clothing and cover all exposed skin in extreme temperatures
  - Keep feet warm, clean and dry with proper socks and footwear

- If you get wet, change into dry clothing as soon as possible
- Know the weather conditions and forecast
  - Check weather forecasts often and stay alert for weather watches and warnings
  - Plan ahead for extreme weather conditions as much as possible
- Stay in heated buildings as much as possible
  - Be aware of safe places you and others can go to warm up. Ask an emergency shelter or outreach worker about possible warming locations
  - If you are caught outside in extreme cold weather conditions, look for shelter. Even if you find shelter, keep moving to maintain your body heat
- Keep moving, but avoid strenuous exercise (sweating) while out in the cold as much as possible
- Eat warm meals and drink warm beverages when possible
  - Avoid consuming alcohol before going out in the cold as it increases blood flow to the body's extremities and can increase the risk of hypothermia
- Be aware of the signs of frostbite and hypothermia, and who to call if you need help

For more information on cold weather health risks and prevention, please visit the following websites:

- Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/healthy-living/your-health/environment/extreme-cold.html>
- Ontario Ministry of Health: [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/emu/emerg\\_prep/et\\_cold.aspx](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/emu/emerg_prep/et_cold.aspx)

### Appendix 3: Recognizing and Responding to COVID-19

COVID-19 is a respiratory virus caused by a newly discovered (novel) coronavirus. The virus was first discovered at the end of 2019 and in March 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. The risk of COVID-19, like the cold and flu, increases in the winter months. Additionally, people experiencing homelessness or people that are under-housed are at a greater risk for COVID-19 as it may be challenging to follow all infection prevention and control measures.

Symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- A new or worsening cough
- Difficulty breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty swallowing
- Sore throat
- Runny nose / nasal congestion
- Chills
- Unexplained fatigue / muscle aches
- Headache
- Nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain
- Loss or decrease of sense of taste or smell
- Pink eye (conjunctivitis)

Response:

- Screen for symptoms and possible exposure to COVID-19. Use the TBDHU shelter client screening tool (see Appendix 4).
- People with symptoms of COVID-19 should self-isolate immediately
  - Individuals experiencing homelessness who are symptomatic can be referred to the isolation shelter through the Emergency Shelter System, the Emergency Department, or the Street Nursing Program.
  - Testing for COVID-19 will be completed upon entry to the isolation shelter
- Anyone with extreme symptoms should be immediately transported to the hospital via EMS

Prevention:

- Maintain a physical distance of at least 2 metres between others
  - Avoid crowded, indoor locations
  - When physical distancing is not possible or when indoors, wear a face mask



- Avoid close contacts with anyone outside of your household or social circle. Limit your close contacts to a maximum of 10 people
- Wash your hand frequently and thoroughly with soap and water, or with alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water is not available
- Cover coughs and sneezes with your elbow or sleeve
- Know the symptoms of COVID-19. If you have any of the symptoms, immediately self-isolate and get tested for COVID-19

For more information on COVID-19, please visit the following pages:

- Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>
- Ontario Ministry of Health: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/index.html>
- Thunder Bay District Health Unit: <https://www.tbdhu.com/coronavirus>

## Appendix 4: Shelter Client Screening Tool for COVID

To access a PDF copy, please visit [www.tbdhu.com/resource/shelter-client-screening-tool](http://www.tbdhu.com/resource/shelter-client-screening-tool).

Version current as of January 19, 2021

# STOP

## SHELTER CLIENT SCREENING FOR COVID-19

**Use the questions below to screen shelter clients.**

Use infection prevention and control measures (hand washing, physical distancing, PPE, etc.) when screening clients.

If someone has severe symptoms, call EMS (807) 625-3259 for transfer to hospital.

SCREENING QUESTIONS	YES	NO
Do you have a fever (37.8 C or higher)? (get a no-touch temperature reading if possible)		
Are you experiencing ONE or more of the following symptoms, NOT related to an underlying medical condition? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A new or worsening cough</li> <li>• Difficulty breathing</li> <li>• Shortness of breath</li> <li>• Difficulty swallowing</li> <li>• Sore throat</li> <li>• Runny nose / nasal congestion</li> <li>• Chills</li> <li>• Unexplained fatigue / muscle aches</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain</li> <li>• Loss or decrease of sense of taste or smell</li> <li>• Pink eye (conjunctivitis)</li> </ul>		
In the last 14 days have you had a positive COVID-19 test, or have been in close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19?		
Have you travelled outside of Canada in the last 14 days?		
Have you travelled outside of Northwestern Ontario in the last 14 days? (E.g. Travel West of Kenora or East of Marathon)		
Have you been in the District Jail or Corrections Centre in the past 14 days?***		

Note to screeners: A recent swab for COVID-19 does *not* on its own lead to a positive screen / referral to isolation. Individuals who do not have symptoms who have been tested for COVID-19 and are awaiting results, and have no known exposure risk should self-monitor for symptoms.

\*\*\*Clients that answer "yes" to this question *may* be cleared to stay at emergency shelters if they have already been assessed as *low risk* by a public health nurse.

**If you checked "yes" to ONE or more of the above,  
follow procedures for a positive screen.**

2021/01/19