

Audit Report

Emergency Shelters for Dangerous Temperatures

December 2022



The City needs to update and consistently follow its plans for protecting residents from dangerously cold and hot temperatures. The City has not always opened cold weather shelters when the City's plan says it should. As a result, people may have suffered from freezing and subfreezing temperatures. The City's cold weather and heat emergency plans do not show operational changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor do the plans say what should happen in the event of power outages or during times of prolonged need. Without updated plans, the City has struggled to staff its overnight shelters with trained employees and may not be able to meet resident needs.

Contents

Objective.....	2
Background.....	2
What We Found.....	3
Recommendations and Management Response.....	10
Scope.....	11
Methodology.....	11

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Objective

Determine if the City is effectively providing emergency shelters to ensure its residents receive necessary services during cold weather and heat emergencies.

We limited the scope of this audit to the City’s cold weather shelters and heat emergency cooling centers. We did not consider other types of shelters including:

- Persistent shelter activities that exist outside of temporary emergency situations, such as homeless shelters
- Shelters for evacuees from outside the City of Austin and Travis County
- Shelters for declared emergencies like floods and wildfires
- Animal shelters

Background

The City defines overnight activities to protect residents from weather conditions as “shelters.” All of the cold weather shelter activities reviewed in this audit were overnight operations. In contrast, cooling center activities all occurred during normal business hours. The City does not refer to its cooling centers as “shelters.”

Exposure to extreme cold and excessive heat can result in life-threatening situations and death. The risk of hypothermia, heat exhaustion, and other weather-related issues is particularly high for vulnerable populations. According to staff who have been involved in the City’s shelter operations, people experiencing homelessness are the biggest users of the City’s shelters and cooling centers.

To protect residents, communities are advised to take several actions that include opening temporary shelters. In addition, the City has identified locations where the public can go to get out of the heat. The City established temperature thresholds and weather situations that trigger the need to activate cold weather shelters and heat emergency cooling centers.

City departments currently involved in the City’s shelter and cooling center activities include the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Parks and Recreation Department, Austin Public Health, Austin Public Library, Municipal Court, and Austin Police Department. External entities involved in these activities include Capital Metro Transportation Authority and the Travis County Office of Emergency Management.

What We Found

Summary

The City needs to update and consistently follow its plans for protecting residents from dangerously cold and hot temperatures. The City has not always opened cold weather shelters when the City’s plan says it should. As a result, people may have suffered from freezing and subfreezing temperatures. The City’s cold weather and heat emergency plans do not show operational changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor do the plans say what should happen in the event of power outages or during times of prolonged need. Without updated plans, the City has struggled to staff its overnight shelters with trained employees and may not be able to meet resident needs.

Finding 1

In early 2022, the City did not open cold weather shelters on 4 of the 21 days when the forecasted and observed temperatures met the City’s cold weather sheltering thresholds. As a result, vulnerable residents may have faced increased risks from freezing and subfreezing temperatures.

The City’s Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan says the City will open overnight shelters when the temperature is expected to be at or below 35°F with rain or high winds, or anytime the temperature is expected to be at or below 32°F. According to data provided to our office by the City’s Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, the City opened shelters on 17 nights from January through March 2022, sheltering a total of 2,469 people and 24 animals. However, we found there were at least four additional nights in which the City should have opened shelters, but did not. On two of these nights the forecasted and observed temperatures were in the 20s, well below the City’s cold weather triggers.

Exhibit 1: Days When an Overnight Cold Weather Shelter Should Have Been Opened but Was Not

Date	Forecasted Low Temperature (°F)	Observed Low Temperature (°F)
January 3, 2022	25	28
February 7, 2022	32	28
February 27, 2022	27	24
February 28, 2022	31	30

SOURCE: Office of the City Auditor Analysis, September 2022. Forecasted low temperatures came from the print edition of the Austin-American Statesman, and the observed low temperatures were observed at the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

Austin Public Health is responsible for determining whether a cold weather shelter should be opened. Staff in Austin Public Health explained that they discuss “close calls” and decide as a group whether to open a shelter, but they did not provide a clear explanation for why they decided not to open shelters on the four dates noted above. For example, on the morning of February 7, Austin Public Health sent an email saying they would not activate the City’s cold weather shelters that night. However, both the newspaper and the most up-to-date guidance from the National Weather

Service predicted low temperatures that should have triggered City shelters.

On each of the nights listed above, the City's decision not to open shelters meant that residents who might have sought shelter were left to the cold. Additionally, when the City chooses not to open its shelters despite forecasts that meet the City's shelter thresholds, residents may lose trust in the City and be less likely to seek shelter in the future.

We did not identify similar issues with the City's heat emergency cooling centers. The City has made many of its public libraries, recreation centers, and senior centers available for use as cooling centers during normal business hours, which tend to cover the hottest hours of the day. Throughout the summer, we found that the City regularly posted information about heat advisories, excessive heat warnings, cooling center locations, and other related information.

Finding 2

City management is not providing sufficient oversight of the City's cold weather shelters and heat emergency cooling centers. The City's plans are outdated and do not reflect current shelter operations and responsibilities, there is no process in place to ensure shelters are adequately staffed and that staff are properly trained, funding for cold weather shelter operations is not consistently tracked, and shelters are not equipped for extenuating circumstances. As a result, departments may not be able to efficiently operate shelters, and residents may not always get needed services.

Outdated Plans

The City's Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan does not reflect current shelter operations and responsibilities. The plan is supposed to be reviewed and updated annually, but it was last updated in November 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Staff noted many changes in the City's shelter operations since then. Notably, the plan relies on multiple external partners including the American Red Cross, local nonprofit organizations, and faith-based groups to provide shelter space, staff, and supplies. As a result of the pandemic, many of these partners have reassessed their commitments to the City's shelter activities. City departments and staff have changed their operations to fill gaps.

For example, the Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan indicates that nonprofit and faith-based organizations will serve as the primary providers of cold weather shelters. Since the pandemic, however, the City has assumed this role. The Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) is listed as a backup provider of shelters in the plan, but PARD is currently the first group the City turns to when it needs to open cold weather shelters. PARD was involved in all 17 cold weather shelter activations that have occurred in 2022.

According to the plan, when PARD facilities are used for cold weather sheltering, they will be staffed and managed by local nonprofits and the American Red Cross with assistance from City employees. However, since the pandemic began, these facilities have been staffed and managed entirely by PARD employees and volunteers from other City departments.

In addition to staffing the shelters, City employees have taken on other responsibilities that the plan assigned to external partners. For example, the plan indicates that a local nonprofit organization is responsible for registering shelterees and helping them get to the correct shelter location. That organization is no longer providing this service. Instead, this service is provided by the City's Downtown Austin Community Court (DACC) and their staff. Despite DACC's role, they are not mentioned in the City's Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan. Similarly, the plan does

not reference Austin Public Health’s Homeless Strategy Division. This division was created after the plan was last updated. They help coordinate the City’s shelter activities and communicate shelter openings to people experiencing homelessness.

Likewise, the Special Operations Plan for Heat Emergencies states that it should be reviewed annually, but it has not been updated since July 2020 and is out of date. While the plan appears to be more reflective of current roles and responsibilities than the Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan, it also assigns duties to the American Red Cross and local nonprofit organizations that are now being fulfilled by the City, and there is no mention of Austin Public Health’s Homeless Strategy Division.

Guidelines from the Federal Emergency Management Agency indicate that emergency operations plans should be updated whenever there is a change in policy, organizational structure, or process.

Although both plans call for annual updates, this has not been done. The Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management is responsible for coordinating these updates. However, it appears they have been occupied with addressing pandemic-related concerns and other priorities.

Exhibit 2: Plan Requirements Compared to Current Practice

Plan	Plan Requirements	In Practice
Cold Weather Shelter Operations	Reviewed and updated annually	Last updated 2019
	Nonprofit and faith-based organizations are the primary shelter providers	The City is the primary shelter provider
	When City facilities are used for cold weather shelters, they are staffed by local nonprofits and the American Red Cross	Staffed by City employees
	Local nonprofit runs the embarkation site	The City’s Downtown Austin Community Court runs the embarkation site
Special Operations Plan for Heat Emergencies	Reviewed annually	Last updated July 2020
	Assigns duties to the American Red Cross and other nonprofits	The City provides all staff and performs all duties

Source: Office of the City Auditor Analysis, September 2022

Without current plans, the City’s shelter operations rely on staff to remember what needs to be done and how to do it. This could result in service gaps and other inefficiencies. Additionally, City management may have difficulty holding departments accountable for issues when the department’s responsibilities are not clearly documented.

Insufficient Staffing

As discussed above, the City has used Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) facilities as its primary cold weather shelter locations since the COVID-19 pandemic began. According to the Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan, when PARD facilities are used for sheltering, the minimum staffing requirements include one shelter manager, two law enforcement officers, and “one or two Parks staff.” The plan indicates that staff from local nonprofits or the American Red Cross will also be provided. However, since the pandemic began, these shelters have been primarily staffed by the PARD employees who work at the recreation centers. Volunteers from other City departments sometimes help staff the City’s shelters, but staff told us that it can be difficult to get enough volunteers from other departments.

The City does not have a clear process to request volunteers from other departments. Typically, when volunteers are needed, the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management and the Human Resources Department reach out to people who have volunteered at cold weather shelters in the past and ask if they are able to volunteer again. These requests are generally made when there is a critical need for staff, as opposed to several days in advance when it is easier to plan and prepare.

Even when enough staff are present, the City’s cold weather shelters do not always have people who are trained for needed roles. In particular, the City’s shelters often lack staff who are experienced in providing security and mental health services. The Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan asks the Austin Police Department to provide two officers to each City shelter but gives the police department the discretion to change this staffing level. According to staff, there are times when City shelters operate without any trained security present. The plan also indicates that local nonprofit organizations are responsible for providing staff, including shelter managers, to City shelters. However, since the pandemic began, these organizations stopped providing these workers.

Exhibit 3: The City struggles to adequately staff its shelters



Source: Office of the City Auditor Analysis, September 2022

Without trained security and mental health professionals, there are times when PARD employees and other City volunteers must deescalate issues at cold weather shelters. These employees may not always be equipped to handle the complexities of working with shelter guests, including people

experiencing homelessness. The lack of staff training may pose a safety risk for shelter guests and staff.

We conducted a survey of City employees who worked at one of the City's cold weather shelters during Winter Storm Landon in February 2022 and received 38 responses. These employees shared similar concerns about staffing. One respondent said it was unfair that the staff who work in the recreation centers during normal business hours always seem to staff the cold weather shelters. Another respondent said that working at cold weather shelters is not in their job description and is not what they were hired to do. PARD staff we spoke with shared these concerns and noted that recreation center employees are trained to run activities like children's summer camps, not to run overnight shelters.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends that incoming staff are briefed on shelter policies and procedures in addition to on-the-job training.

The City's Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan does not indicate who is responsible for staffing the City's shelters. As such, even though the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, PARD, and Austin Public Health play key roles in the City's shelter efforts, none of them have the authority to make employees in other departments help with these efforts.

Inconsistent Training

There is no clear City staff or department responsible for training staff to work at the City's cold weather shelters. In our survey of City employees who worked at a City cold weather shelter during Winter Storm Landon, 57% of respondents said they did not receive relevant training in advance. 46% of respondents said they did not receive information about shelter procedures or how to perform their role.

Some PARD staff we spoke with said they received a training from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but it was a high-level training and did not cover the specifics of how to operate the City's cold weather shelters. Staff also said they did not receive specific training on how to work with people experiencing mental health issues or how to perform various shelter tasks like administering COVID-19 tests or cleaning up human waste. Staff who have helped coordinate the City's cold weather shelter efforts have received feedback that shelter managers are not comfortable or trained to handle the complexity of working with people experiencing homelessness.

In our survey of staff who worked during Winter Storm Landon, 26% of respondents indicated that they did not feel safe working at the shelter. Respondents noted drug and alcohol use, fights or near-violence, and insufficient police or security presence as safety issues to both the people staffing the shelter and shelter guests.

Additionally, because there is no dedicated staff or training to ensure continuity across the City's cold weather sheltering efforts, it is more difficult for the City to implement lessons learned from one sheltering event to another

Because the City's cooling centers are generally open during normal business hours, they do not appear to have staffing issues. We compared

our operations to those of Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio, and they appear to staff their cooling centers in the same way. However, Austin's Heat Emergencies Special Operations Plan indicates that the City may one day need to open an overnight cooling shelter. The plan does not provide details on who would staff those overnight cooling shelters or how those staff would be trained. In the event an overnight cooling shelter was opened, the City would likely face the same staffing issues.

Inconsistently Tracked Expenditures

We found that the expenditures for the City's cold weather shelters are not consistently tracked between key departments. Specifically, we looked at expenditures by the Parks and Recreation Department (PARC), Austin Public Health, Municipal Court, and Austin Police Department. Of those, only PARC and Austin Public Health had a specific budget code that allowed us to see their cold weather shelter expenditures. Austin Police Department tracks their shelter-related expenditures, but they do not appear to differentiate between cold weather shelters and other shelter activities provided by the City. The Municipal Court, which houses the Downtown Austin Community Court, tracks some but not all of their shelter-related expenditures. We also considered the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, but they said their role is to provide coordination between various City departments and external groups and therefore do not have shelter-related expenses to track.

In addition to the discrepancies noted above, only PARC and Austin Police Department appear to receive extra funding in their budgets to cover these expenses. Since Fiscal Year 2016, PARC has received an additional \$16,000 per year for shelter-related expenses, and Austin Police Department's expenditures are paid out of a \$1.9 million overtime budget for special events that includes shelter-related activities.

By inconsistently tracking these expenditures, the City does not know how much its cold weather shelter efforts cost, and the City may have difficulty budgeting for future shelter efforts.

The City's cooling centers are generally open during normal business hours and do not require many additional resources. As such, we did not find any department that tracked expenses related to the City's cooling centers.

Unable to Meet Residents' Needs During Extenuating Circumstances

According to staff we spoke with from the American Red Cross, shelters must provide, at a minimum, a safe and secure location, food, and emergency supplies like cots, blankets, and basic hygiene products. The City's cold weather shelters appear to meet these needs, although, as previously noted, security is not always present at City shelters. Staff from Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio indicated that they provide similar services in their cold weather shelters, though Dallas also said they provide some mental health services.

While the City appears to meet shelter guests' basic needs, not all of the City's recreation centers typically used for overnight shelter activities have backup generators or showers. As such, they may not be suitable shelter sites in the event of power outages or prolonged cold. The City's Cold

Weather Shelter Operations plan does not say what should happen in the event of a power failure or in the event a shelter is needed for multiple days in a row.

The City's heat emergency cooling centers do not generally face the same challenges since they operate during normal business hours and are not intended to provide services beyond what is typically available at the City's libraries, recreation centers, and senior centers. However, the Special Operations Plan for Heat Emergencies states that City facilities may be used as overnight shelters during heat emergencies. The plan does not specify the conditions that would trigger an overnight cooling shelter or the process for setting one up and running it. As such, it is not clear how the City would be able to efficiently set up an overnight cooling shelter if one was needed.

Additional Observation

The Fiscal Year 2023 budget included \$1.2 million for Austin Public Health to contract out the operation and management of the City's cold weather shelters. Examples of expected services to be provided by the contractor include providing shelter space, staffing the shelters, training shelter staff, providing outreach to the residents of Austin, running the shelters' registration site, providing security services, coordinating transportation services, and providing guest services. If the City successfully hires a contractor to provide these services, the City's Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan would need to be updated to reflect this change.

The contractor would not be responsible for cooling centers or overnight cooling shelters.

Recommendations and Management Response

1

To ensure the City's cold weather shelter operations are effectively managed, the City Manager should at a minimum:

- Assign the overall ownership of the City's cold weather shelter activities.
- Clarify and communicate the roles and responsibilities of each group/entity involved in the City's cold weather shelter activities.
- Ensure City-operated shelters are adequately staffed and that staff are properly trained.
- Ensure the City's shelter-related expenses are tracked.
- Implement a monitoring and accountability process to ensure that cold weather shelters are consistently opened according to established weather conditions and events and that each group/entity fulfills their assigned roles and responsibilities.

Management Response: Concur

Proposed Implementation Plan:

a. Assign Ownership: Cold Weather Shelters primarily serve unhoused individuals and are considered planned activities that have set parameters to determine when they are opened. The City Manager has assigned overall ownership of Cold Weather Shelters (CWS) activities to Austin Public Health (APH) because CWSs have the primary purpose of protecting the unsheltered homeless and are primarily used by people experiencing homelessness during extreme cold weather conditions. APH will provide best practices from similar programs, and the City will convene a workgroup to assess implementation of those best practices in Austin as it relates to training and employee incentive programs.

To ensure an appropriate resource allocation and coordination of the updated CWS plan is in place, the City Manager has assigned Rolando Fernandez to serve as Project Manager. Mr. Fernandez will report to Assistant City Manager Veronica Briseño and, with guidance from the City Manager's Office, will work across departments to implement recommendations from this audit.

Proposed Implementation Date: December 2022

b. Clarify roles and responsibilities. With an assigned Project Manager, CWS roles and responsibilities will be established, defined, and assigned with clear triggers and activation information. The Cold Weather Shelter (CWS) plan will include the City staff required to activate and run a CWS, as well as options for community partners/contractors to supplement a CWS to ensure a clear and transparent process.

The FY2023 Approved Budget included \$1.2 million towards contracting with a vendor to operate CWSs. Austin Public Health issued a solicitation and Council authorized the department to negotiate and execute an agreement for services during the November 3rd council meeting. Through the transition period, the City will rely on PARD facilities with hybrid City staff and contract vendor support to operate CWSs during the early part of 2023. Once the vendor contract begins, additional evaluation will be needed to determine if the funding and contract scope are properly aligned with programmatic goals. In future years, the goal is to fully outsource these essential services to a turn-key vendor.

Proposed Implementation Date: February 2023

c. Ensure staffing levels and proper training. Currently, employees primarily from Austin Public Health, Austin Municipal Court, and Parks and Recreation staff CWSs. Staff from other departments volunteer to work at the sites when asked. Since CWSs are designed to support unhoused populations, staff at the CWS should be individuals who have training or experience working with vulnerable populations, including people experiencing homelessness. The Project Manager will work across departments to identify staff that meet minimum requirements as well as staff who are interested in supporting CWSs when the need arises, but who require additional training. The Project Manager will work with appropriate departments to facilitate training for those interested staff.

Processes are currently underway for a vendor to conduct operations. Training standards will be included in the contract. Working with the assigned Project Manager, the CWS Plan will be revised for clarity and remain in place for the FY2023 season to allow for proper transition. The vendor selected by the procurement process will be required to comply with the plan, including staffing and training standards. Proposed Implementation Date: December 2022

d. Implement monitoring and accountability measures. A reporting code has been established to help track staff time and other expenses when CWSs are activated.

For the upcoming cold weather season, CWS activations shall be determined primarily by APH, relying on data conveyed by HSEM from the National Weather Service. The National Weather Service shall be the official weather resource, and the Camp Mabry weather station will be the official location used to determine CWS activations for people experiencing homelessness. In future years, the CWS vendor may be charged with tracking the weather forecast and activating CWS.

APH, in coordination with HSEM and other partner departments, have already updated the CWS activation criteria to include considerations for wind chill factor. CWSs serving people experiencing homelessness are activated when the following overnight temperature thresholds are met:

- 32 degrees or below and dry
- 35 degrees or below and wet
- 35 degrees with a wind chill factor that drops the temperature to 32 degrees or lower

APH, in collaboration with HSEM, will maintain a record of when CWSs are operated.

Proposed Implementation Date: January 2023

2

In order to ensure that the City's Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan and the Special Operations Plan for Heat Emergencies reflect current expectations, operational resources, and roles and responsibilities; the director of the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management should work with applicable stakeholders to update the plans. At the minimum, the plans should:

- Reflect the various entities currently involved in the City's cold weather emergency shelter and heat emergencies operations and define their respective roles and responsibilities.
- Reflect the potential shelter facilities including their activation hierarchy.

Management Response: Concur

Proposed Implementation Plan:

a. HSEM conducts annual reviews of the Cold Weather Shelter Plan by November and the Special Operations Plan for Heat Emergencies by May. The reviews occur annually, and HSEM recognizes improvements can be made to document that the review has been conducted. Using the assigned Project Manager, the Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan will be updated by October 2023 with clear roles and responsibilities for partner departments and supporting agencies, and factoring in the new vendor selected to provide CWS services.

b. The CWS plan will be updated with locations for potential shelter facilities to include an activation hierarchy that explains how and when each facility is activated. HSEM will maintain the plan and will collaborate with APH and other involved departments to conduct annual reviews. HSEM will update procedures to incorporate proper documentation of plan reviews and updates once the third-party vendor contractor is onboarded.

Proposed Implementation Date: October 2023

3

To ensure that the City effectively provides necessary services in the cold weather shelters, the City Manager should determine which services will be provided to shelterees and have provisions for extenuating circumstances like power failures or extended lengths of stay.

Management Response: Concur

Proposed Implementation Plan:

The CWS Plan will identify the services provided in cold weather shelters and include provisions for circumstances that might extend the expected length of stays.

Currently, CWSs are designed to provide basic services overnight – a place to sleep, access to toilets/sinks (not showers), limited meals, and access to charge electronic devices, including certain medical equipment. These services could expand over time based on the vendor's future capabilities.

The City will convene a workgroup to establish protocols between stakeholder departments and community partners for scenarios involving extended lengths of stay and overflow contingencies. The City will assess the additional resources needed for such an event, including using emergency contracts to expand staffing capabilities. The City will also continue exploring the ability of non-City resources, such as staffing agencies, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations to supplement what the City can provide.

All City facilities have continuity plans in the event of an emergency, like power failure, at their facility. However, those plans may not factor in the impact on CWS programming or the population being served. For City facilities that may serve as a CWS, a gap analysis will be performed and a report provided on recommendations to protect those facilities from power loss. The Project Manager will build from the gap analysis and work across departments to identify potential mitigation projects that will further harden City facilities.

In addition, the Project Manager will incorporate the City's Climate Resilience and Adaptation Plan for City Assets and Operations and the City's Resilience Strategy, currently in development, to increase resilience in City-owned facilities and improve our ability to respond in an emergency.

Proposed Implementation Date: Mitigation planning requests can be submitted in future budget requests. The Cold Weather Sheltering Plan is being reviewed now and will be completed by October 2023. The long-term Mass Care Annex C Plan is updated every five years. The last update occurred in 2020.


DRAFT

Management Response



MEMORANDUM

TO: Corrie Stokes, City Auditor

FROM: Spencer Cronk, City Manager 

DATE: December 8, 2022

SUBJECT: Management Response – Emergency Shelters for Dangerous Temperatures

The purpose of this memo is to provide a comprehensive response to the *Emergency Shelters for Dangerous Temperatures* Audit Report.

The audit report aims to address sheltering activities during conditions of “dangerous temperatures.” However, the report does not adequately explain the differences between two primary shelter types that exist currently: Cold Weather Shelters (CWS) and Emergency Disaster Shelters (EDS). CWSs primarily serve unhoused individuals and are considered planned activities that have set parameters to determine when they are opened. Similarly, a Cooling Center is a hot weather respite, not an overnight shelter, generally open during the hottest times of the day at Austin Public Libraries or Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) recreation centers. Emergency Disaster Shelters serve those who are unable to return to their homes due to unplanned, widespread emergency situations. The report does not provide a clear distinction between the two and alludes to expecting that either type of shelter is sufficient to address the temporary emergency needs of residents who might be displaced from their homes.

BACKGROUND

To understand the distinction between Emergency Disaster Shelters and CWSs/Cooling Centers as well as the City’s role in opening such facilities, it is important to understand how they evolved within the City’s operational and emergency response portfolio.

Emergency Disaster Shelters. These facilities are standard activities in Homeland Security and Emergency Management’s (HSEM) emergency response portfolio, and they are managed consistent with shelter plans. An EDS, for example, could be activated for widespread displacement of a population such as wildfire evacuations, or large-scale degradation of services or infrastructure such as prolonged power outages, hurricane evacuations from coastal communities, or any number of unplanned emergency events. Because of the requirements to stand up Emergency Disaster Shelters, the key drivers to determine activation are:

Management Response

1. Widespread impact of the emergency event; **and**
2. Duration of emergency conditions.

Cold Weather Shelters. CWSs are designed to support unhoused populations. Before the pandemic, CWSs were largely operated at individual places of worship with support from volunteers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Front Steps (which previously operated the ARCH). PARD facilities infrequently opened to serve as overflow shelters only after all other private facilities were full.

During the pandemic, health risks led most previously participating places of worship to discontinue their provision of space and volunteers for cold weather shelter support. As a result, the City had little choice but to adapt and fill in the gaps in cold weather sheltering resources by leaning on City facilities and employees. City PARD facilities transitioned from serving as a supplemental, occasional resource to serving as the primary CWS locations. Additionally, multiple departments and agencies including Austin Public Health, Animal Services, Municipal Court, Austin Police Department, CapMetro, and others continued to provide essential services despite a lack of formal funding and dedicated resources.

Today, we continue adapting to our ever-changing public health conditions. While NGOs seem to be reestablishing themselves, they have not yet returned to their pre-pandemic support levels. The City has recognized the complexity of compounded emergencies (natural disasters, health emergencies, etc) which have strained City resources and limited the ability to provide services to the most vulnerable communities, including Austin's unhoused population. To streamline services and leverage City resources, Council approved funding to contract with a third-party vendor for CWS services in the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY2023) Budget. The Health Equity and Community Engagement Division within Austin Public Health (APH) issued a solicitation, and on November 3, Council authorized APH to negotiate and execute an agreement with the Austin Area Urban League to provide shelter operations during cold weather activation periods. It is expected that the agreement will be executed mid-month. However, as the cold weather season is already well underway, for the 2022/2023 season, the City will rely on PARD facilities operated by City staff with contract vendor support. Once the vendor contract begins, additional evaluation will be needed to determine if the funding and contract scope are properly aligned with programmatic goals. In future years, the goal is to fully outsource these essential services to a turn-key vendor.

Cooling Centers. Cooling Centers are formally established in response to triggers from an Extreme Heat Advisory by the National Weather Service (NWS) and are activated as part of the Heat Plan. In summer 2022, NWS issued 20 Heat Advisories or Excessive Heat Warnings. Over the course of the summer, 45 PARD and Library locations served as Cooling Centers during normal business hours, and when an Excessive Heat Warning was issued on a weekend, we extended hours to provide services during the hottest times. Cooling Center surveys were created and distributed to the locations in multiple languages to better understand usage and needs.

Management Response

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In evaluating the City's preparedness for emergency conditions, the audit did not clearly articulate an important consideration that staff is working through: supporting residents who may become displaced from their homes and need temporary sheltering when conditions do not otherwise warrant opening an Emergency Disaster Shelter. The City's current process is to open an Emergency Disaster Shelter when the city is experiencing a widespread emergency event for an extended duration. This means that if a limited number of residents are experiencing a hyper-localized situation, such as a power outage, City shelters may not always be the most appropriate response to meet the need. If there is a hyper-local situation, HSEM assesses the situation to determine if alternative solutions can be provided by an NGO. FEMA data suggests that people experiencing an emergency often first lean on resources or support from their community, neighbors, family, or friends. Unfortunately, not all residents have access to the resources needed in such situations. In the future, resilience hubs may be able to serve effectively in this role.

Resilience hubs are intended to complement emergency response and operations, enhance community preparedness, and serve as trusted neighborhood spaces that strengthen community ties and provide basic needs. While these hubs may tap into support from NGOs that have traditionally participated in the City's emergency response, they may also be able to expand the City's reach to bring new NGOs to the table to avoid overwhelming existing resources. To date, six sites have been identified to serve as pilot Resilience Hubs. In their first year, these pilot sites will serve largely as a place of gathering for community engagement and information sharing on community resilience. The pilot program will test potential emergency activation protocols, the locations' space and resource capabilities, and inform us on future steps needed to build community-led resilience. Beyond the current pilot, the City will assess developing a broader network of hubs consisting of not just City-owned sites, but also through partnerships with places of worship and other community-owned facilities.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO AUDIT

The attached management response aims to address the Auditor's recommendations regarding CWSs which are aimed primarily at protecting the unhoused.

If you have any questions, please contact Rolando Fernandez, Project Manager, at rolando.fernandez@austintexas.gov.

cc: CMO Executive Team
Juan Ortiz, Director, HSEM
Adrienne Sturup, Director, APH
Laura Patiño, Chief Resiliency Officer
Rolando Fernandez, Project Manager, CMO/FSD

Attachment: Management Response to Audit Recommendation

Scope

The scope of this audit focused on cold weather sheltering and extreme heat cooling centers. We did not include shelters for any emergency that is not related to heat or cold weather in our scope.

Methodology

To complete this audit, we performed the following steps:

- Interviewed staff from the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Austin Public Health, Austin Public Library, the Parks and Recreation Department, Municipal Court, and American Red Cross
- Reviewed Citywide plans, and City policies related to cold weather sheltering and heat emergency activities
- Reviewed emergency management guidelines and best practices provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, American Red Cross, and other federal and nongovernmental agencies
- Surveyed shelter volunteers who participated in the City's Winter Storm Landon shelter operations
- Surveyed a sample of other Texas cities and compared the City's cold weather shelter and heat emergency operations to those of the sampled cities
- Analyzed communication and outreach information during past cold weather and heat emergency incidents
- Analyzed cold weather shelter openings from January – March 2022 to determine whether shelters were opened when they should have been
- Analyzed cold weather shelter and heat emergency funding information
- Evaluated roles and responsibilities for the City's cold weather shelter and heat emergency activities
- Evaluated internal controls related to the City's cold weather shelters and heat emergency operations
- Evaluated the risk of fraud, waste, and abuse for the City's cold weather shelter and heat emergency operations

Audit Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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