

To: Public Safety and Welfare Committee

From: Carol Quest Watertown Department of Public Health/Tanya Reynen Emergency Manager

Date: August 6th, 2025

Subject: City of Watertown Warming/Cooling Center/Shelter Plan

Background

For many years City departments have been updating and developing emergency plans to assure the City was prepared for a variety of different emergencies. In July 2023, there was a discussion to develop a Warming/Cooling Center/Shelter plan to prepare for extreme temperatures events. There was a need for clearly defined protocols for activating and managing population-based warming/cooling centers/shelters to protect those without access to adequate heating or cooling during extreme temperature events occurring in the City of Watertown.

Health department staff worked with the Fire Chief/Emergency Manager to discuss locations, triggers and protocols for a warming/cooling center/shelter. Information from National Weather Services and plans from Red Cross and other areas were reviewed and incorporated when developing the Warming/Cooling Center/Shelter plan. A plan was developed as the first part of Chapter 6 in the City of Watertown Policy Manual. After several revisions, the plan was sent to City Leadership for edits in April 2024 and the plan was finalized in June 2024.

With extreme temperature events posing a significant risk to public safety, the City opened a cooling center with extended hours on August 26 and August 27, 2024, in response to a period of extreme heat and intermittent power outage. The operation demonstrated both the need for such services and the importance of having a clearly established policy in place.

A tabletop emergency preparedness exercise was completed with City leadership in September 2024, focusing on coordination, communication, and logistics involved in activating a warming/cooling center/shelter during extreme weather events. An after-action report was conducted; an improvement plan was developed and updates to the plan were made.

With another extreme temperature events posing a significant risk to public safety, the City opened a warming center with extended hours on January 20, January 21, and January 22, 2025, in response to a period of extreme cold and intermittent power outage.

With each exercise and real-life event where the Warm/Cooling Center/Shelter plan is activated, the Health Department, Emergency Management, and City Leadership are provided with insight to updates, improvements, and changes needed to ensure efficient activation of the plan to protect the residents of the City of Watertown during extreme weather events.

Following a recent review of the Warming/Cooling Center/Shelter Plan, it was determined that updates are needed in Chapter 6 of the City of Watertown Policy Manual. In addition, it was recommended that the policies and procedures be separated into distinct documents.

The policy document will serve as a public-facing resource, outlining the overall plans and providing important information to educate and inform residents. The procedure document will be intended for internal use only, as it may include sensitive content—such as building layouts—that could pose a security risk if made publicly accessible.

Separating policies from procedures will also provide greater flexibility, allowing for more efficient updates as new practices are implemented or existing protocols are revised.

Budget Goal

Maintains a safe and healthy community, with an eye toward future needs and trends

Financial Impact

N/A

Recommendation

We recommend the Public Safety and Welfare Committee review and support the updating of the Warming/Cooling Center/Shelter plan in Chapter 6 of the City of Watertown Policy Manual and review and support the separation of the policy and procedure documents. This will allow us to move forward with making updates and edits to additional sections of Chapter 6 of the City of Watertown Policy Manual.