

Emergency Shelters for Dangerous Temperatures



Objective

The objective of this audit was to 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.

Background

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, the City of Austin established temperature thresholds and weather situations that trigger the need to activate cold weather shelters and heat emergency cooling centers. Multiple City departments and external partners have been involved in the City’s shelter and cooling center operations.

What We Found

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 shelter threshold of being at or below 32°F. As a result, vulnerable residents may have faced increased risks from freezing and subfreezing temperatures.

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 of forecasted and observed temperatures, September 2022.

Finding 2: City management is not providing sufficient oversight of the City’s shelters and 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 The City’s plans are outdated and do not reflect current shelter operations and responsibilities, there is no process in place to ensure shelters are adequately staffed and that staff are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, expenses for cold weather shelter operations are 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Outdated Plans: The City has not updated its cold weather and heat emergency plans, and the plans do not accurately reflect the City’s current operations, as shown in Exhibit 2 on the next page.

Insufficient Staffing: The City has used Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) facilities as its primary cold weather shelter locations since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Although the plan indicates that external

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What We Found, Continued

partners will provide staff for these shelters, the shelters have primary been staffed by PARD employees and volunteers from other City departments. However, it can be difficult to get enough volunteers, and the shelters often lack security and mental health professionals.

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 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

Inconsistent Training: There is no person or department responsible for training staff to work at the City's shelters. We surveyed staff who worked during a recent cold weather shelter event and found that 57% of respondents said they did not receive relevant training in advance and 46% said they did not receive information about shelter procedures.

Inconsistently Tracked Expenditures: Expenditures related to cold weather shelters are not consistently tracked by departments. As a result, the City may have difficulty budgeting for future efforts.

Extenuating Circumstances: Not all of the recreation centers used as overnight shelters have backup generators or showers. As such, they may not be suitable in the event of power outages or prolonged cold.

Additional Observation: The Fiscal Year 2023 budget included \$1.2 million for Austin Public Health to contract out the City's cold weather shelter operations. If a contractor is hired, the City's plans will need to be updated.

What We Recommend

1. The City Manager should assign responsibility for the oversight and monitoring of the City's cold weather sheltering 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, and implement a process to ensure cold weather shelters are consistently opened according to established plans.
2. The director of the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management should work with stakeholders to update the City's Cold Weather Shelter Operations plan and the Special Operations Plan for Heat Emergencies.
3. 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.