

# HAMILTON

Engaging landlords to protect health  
from extreme heat

*By Anastasia Rogaeva*

## THE SCIENCE

Effective communication of heat alerts and measures to reduce health risks is a fundamental requirement for a successful Heat Alert and Response System. Heat-health communication campaigns aim to increase knowledge of the dangers from extreme heat and to influence individuals to adopt protective behaviours. Targeted communication needs to be delivered before and during the heat season, and especially during extreme heat events. To increase the effectiveness of heat-health communication campaigns, collaboration is needed among different communities and stakeholders, as well as public health, emergency management, and municipal officials in order to deliver consistent, audience-appropriate and easily understood messages.

Many people are unaware of the risks that extreme heat poses and are dependent on other people for support that would reduce their health risks from extreme heat events. Landlords and caregivers are often in a good position to be first responders and provide needed assistance. They can also play a central role in building awareness with their tenants about heat-health risks and the importance of staying cool and hydrated during an extreme heat event to protect health.

## THE TRIGGER

A number of at-risk groups (older adults, people with chronic illnesses, the physically impaired, the socially disadvantaged, and newcomers to Canada) live in apartment buildings and residential care facilities with no air conditioning. Residential care facilities provide care for individuals who need assistance with managing their lives. In an effort to address the possible impacts that extreme heat could have on residents in these buildings, the City of Hamilton identified the need to build awareness among landlords and operators of residential care facilities about extreme heat impacts on health and to provide information about feasible actions that they could take to protect vulnerable populations.

## THE APPROACH

Recognizing that property owners and managers are in an ideal position to educate their residents about the dangers of extreme heat and to implement measures to foster heat-resiliency, the city developed targeted messaging for landlords. To ensure the uptake of the messages and the feasibility of recommended actions, these messages were vetted through an advisory committee that included the target audience.

Posters with information about staying cool are now distributed annually in the month of May to landlords. The communication materials encourage them to take a variety of measures to reduce risks faced by vulnerable residents, such as:



**Figure 8:** Recommendations to landlords and property managers include keeping windows slightly open in hallways to allow air to circulate. (Source: Emilie Roy)

- Provide residents access to a cooler area in the building during a heat event for several hours at a time (e.g. a common room with air conditioning or a basement area);
- Keep windows in hallways slightly open to allow air to circulate;
- Provide heat safety information to residents or post the information in common areas (e.g. by the elevator, in the lobby);
- Have building staff check on vulnerable residents every few hours during extreme heat events.

The communication materials are reviewed annually. The content and marketing strategies are updated when necessary.

## THE OUTCOME

A number of tailored materials have been developed to build heat-health awareness among landlords. These resources provide targeted training and engagement on the issue for landlords. Through these efforts, landlords:

- Are becoming more aware of the health impacts of extreme heat and vulnerable populations that are in their care;

- Have access to key information that can be used to foster heat-resilience among these populations;
- Are more aware of possible actions that they could take to assist their residents to manage heat risks;
- Can recognize signs and symptoms of heat-related illnesses;
- Know what first aid to administer as well as when to call 9-1-1.

The impacts of these outreach efforts are increasingly evident as many landlords are taking actions to set up cool spaces, check in on vulnerable residents, and work collaboratively to provide needed respite from the heat for their residents. For example, two landlords that own adjacent buildings worked together to develop a common area in one of the buildings to provide a cool space where residents of both buildings can comfortably escape the heat. Working with landlords can be a cost-effective mechanism to reduce heat-vulnerability in the community and build awareness about the issue.

## **A WORD FROM HAMILTON**

When asked what advice he would provide to other communities that would like to engage landlords on heat and health issues, Matthew Lawson, Manager of the Health Hazards Program at the City of Hamilton recommended “engaging landlords with taking simple actions, like offering a common room in the building that has air conditioning or checking in on residents that may be known as high-risk, and focusing on reducing risks to some of the most vulnerable residents within the community. We are aware of areas in Hamilton that have populations with increased vulnerability to the effects of heat, so buildings in these areas were targeted for communicating with landlords regarding steps they can take to help residents within their buildings avoid adverse health impacts from hot weather.”