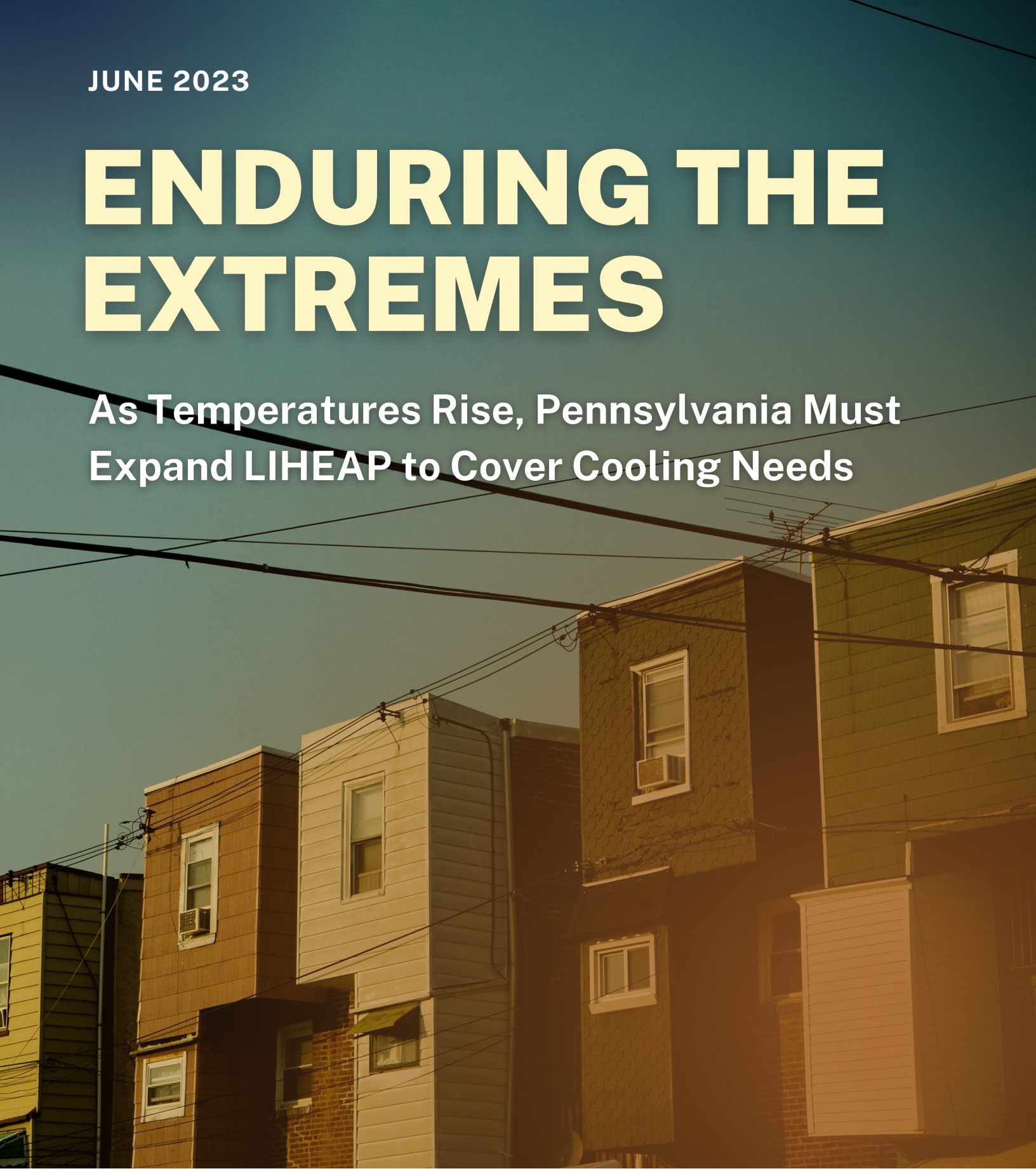
JUNE 2023

ENDURING THE EXTREMES

As Temperatures Rise, Pennsylvania Must Expand LIHEAP to Cover Cooling Needs



COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES OF PHILADELPHIA Est. 1966 CLS

Esperanza
Strengthening Our Hispanic Community

Enduring the Extremes

Executive Summary

Summer of 2022 was one of the hottest summers on record in Pennsylvania's history, and temperatures will only continue to rise. As a result, maintaining access to cooling is a critical public health priority across the commonwealth. However, Pennsylvania's only statewide utility grant assistance program, the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), is not available year-round, even though people struggle with keeping their utilities on all throughout the year. **Hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians depend on LIHEAP every year to afford heating costs between November and early April, but they have nowhere to turn for help with staying safe and cool during the summer's dangerously high temperatures.**

Low-income people in cities and rural areas are hit the hardest by rising temperatures and increasing costs. In cities like Philadelphia, urban "heat islands" create hotter conditions in neighborhoods with majority low-income residents and residents of color.

Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS) and Esperanza partnered to gather community input on cooling-related needs during the summer, as well as solicit feedback about Pennsylvania's LIHEAP in general.

Policy Recommendations

Based on community feedback, we recommend that Pennsylvania allocate permanent state supplemental funding to make LIHEAP a year-round program that provides both heating and cooling assistance, provides heater and cooling system repair/ replacement, and meets the needs of seniors and disabled people who may be just above income in the current structure.

We also recommend that DHS improve language access, outreach, and education to communities with limited English proficiency and streamline enrollment to LIHEAP so all eligible Pennsylvanians can access it.

Community Engagement

- Between November 2022 and April 2023, over 100 residents in low-income neighborhoods of Philadelphia completed surveys and participated in a community listening session.
- An overwhelming majority of participants said they struggle to afford energy bills in the summertime, and nearly half had risked having their electricity shut-off during the summer.
- Nearly all participants identified a need for year-round availability of LIHEAP as one of the top solutions to this affordability crisis.

About LIHEAP

LIHEAP is a federally-funded program that helps low-income households in every state pay for their home energy bills and resolve energy-related crises, such as a utility shut-off or a heating system failure. Eligibility thresholds and the LIHEAP application period vary by state.

In Pennsylvania, LIHEAP is administered by the PA Department of Human Services (DHS) and provides financial assistance to households at or below 150% of the federal poverty level. Each season, eligible households can apply to receive a one-time cash grant that is based on a variety of factors, such as household income, family size, and the type of heating fuel used. This past LIHEAP season, cash grant amounts ranged from $300 to $1,000.

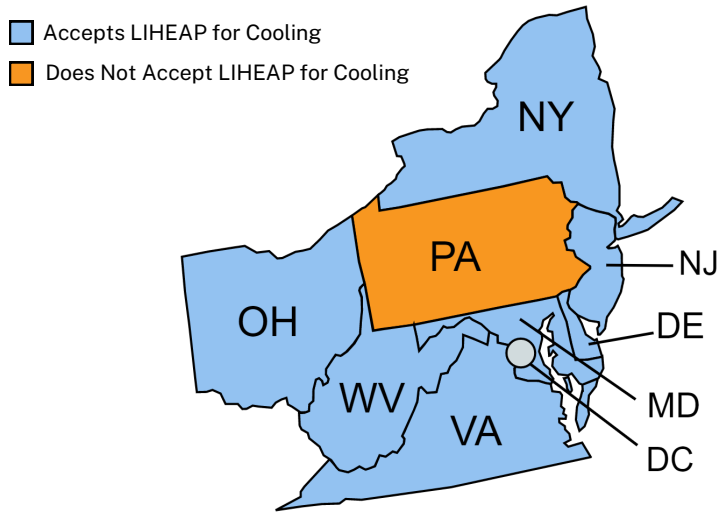
Eligible households can also receive emergency assistance through LIHEAP Crisis, which provided up to $2,000 this past season to cover emergencies, such as running out of fuel oil or a shut-off notice from a utility company. Households in immediate danger of being without heat may also qualify. In addition to the Crisis grants, LIHEAP runs a Crisis Interface program to fix or replace broken heating systems.

Pennsylvania is behind 30 states who accept LIHEAP applications in the summer.

Before the 2023 Fiscal Year, Pennsylvania funded LIHEAP entirely through the LIHEAP federal block grant. While neighboring states, such as New Jersey, New York, and Ohio, and many others provide state supplemental funding, Pennsylvania historically has not. Thankfully, the Pennsylvania Legislature allocated an additional $25 million toward the program for FY23, which allowed DHS to extend the LIHEAP season through May 12th, providing a much-needed lifeline for people facing utility shut-off notices in the spring.

However, the lack of state supplemental funding has limited Pennsylvania's LIHEAP in significant ways. The program fails to meet the need of low-income Pennsylvanians to afford both heating and cooling costs and creates administrative burdens in operating the program. In contrast, many states that supplement federal LIHEAP funds with a state appropriation operate both heating and cooling programs and keep the Crisis program open year-round. At least 30 states accept LIHEAP applications year-round to cover cooling costs in the warmer months.

Neighboring States that Accept LIHEAP for Cooling



PA's LIHEAP creates administrative burdens that prevent people from receiving help.

In a typical year, Pennsylvania receives just over $200 million in federal funds to operate the program. After factoring in carryover funds, administrative and other fixed costs, around $160 million is usually left to spend on LIHEAP grants issued to Pennsylvanians. As a result, DHS only operates the program for as long as the funding remains and must estimate how long the funding will last. It usually runs the program from November through early April, leaving Pennsylvanians without an option for a utility grant for most of the year.

The budget projection process cannot account for external factors such as rises in energy costs, weather changes, economic conditions, or administrative problems that may affect how many people are approved for LIHEAP. As a result, at the end of each season—usually right as utility shut-off notices spike following the end of the winter moratorium on terminations for regulated gas and electric utilities—DHS must assess how to spend the remaining funds. This means that **DHS must undertake a burdensome administrative process that could be avoided through the creation of a year-round program.**

Rising temperatures pose a serious health risk to low-income Pennsylvanians who cannot afford cooling.

Pennsylvania is already experiencing the impacts of global climate change. In fact, the summer of 2022 was considered one of the hottest summers on record in the state's history.[1] The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recognizes that the state's average temperatures are increasing over time and becoming a true climate risk, and according to the Pennsylvania Climate Impacts Assessment Report, the state's average temperature is projected to increase 5.9 degrees Fahrenheit by mid-century.

Heat waves and extreme weather events will have profound implications for the public's health across rural and urban areas of the state, each of which faces unique threats and challenges that shape individual and population-level health outcomes.[2] These effects on health can be traced to the social determinants of health, which are the conditions where people work, live, play, and age. These determinants originate from larger systems that determine conditions of daily life, such as social and economic policies and racism.[3]

Impact of Heat in Cities

In urban areas of the state, the "urban heat island effect" means that cities are hotter than suburban areas because they tend to have fewer trees and less parks and green spaces, which help to provide shade during hot days and combat climate change by lowering temperatures.[4] Within cities, temperatures can vary from one zip code to the next depending on the built environment and social determinants of health, such as income and race.[5]

[1] Anderson, Drew. "July 2022 Was Second-Hottest on Record, Data from the National Weather Service Shows." FOX 29 News Philadelphia, 1 Aug. 2022, https://www.fox29.com/news/july-2022-was-second-warmest-on-record-in-philadelphia-nws
[2] Pennsylvania Climate Impacts Assessment 2021. (2021). https://files.dep.state.pa.us/Energy/Office%20of%20Energy%20and%20Technology/OETDPortalFiles/Climate%20Change%20Advisory%20Committee/2021/2-23-21/2021_Impacts_Assessment_Final_2-09-21_clean.pdf
[3] Centers for Disease Control And Prevention. (2022). Social Determinants of Health at CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/about/sdoh/index.html
[4]Beat the Heat Hunting Park: Community Heat Relief Plan. (2019). https://www.phila.gov/media/20190719092954/HP_R8print-1.pdf
[5] United States Environmental Protection Agency. (2022). Heat Islands and Equity. https://www.epa.gov/heatislands/heat-islands-and-equity

In Philadelphia, several neighborhoods experience temperatures as much as 22 degrees higher than others.[6] Heat disparities across neighborhoods are compounded by rising temperatures overall. Philadelphia has seen an increase in numbers of days above 90 degrees; in 2017, there were only 26 days measured at above 90 degrees in Philadelphia, but that number has increased annually. In 2021, the city experienced 37 days where the temperature rose above 90 degrees.[7]

Impact of Heat in Rural Communities

Rural areas in PA experience the impact of rising temperatures in different ways. Farmers are struggling to adapt to changing weather patterns, which can lead to crop failure and financial loss.[8] As a result, climate change can spur a series of crises for rural families that jeopardize their mental health and economic ability to meet their basic needs, including health care.[9]

For example, residents in rural areas are less accustomed to higher temperatures compared to urban areas and are less likely to have air conditioning in their homes. They are also more likely to lack medical resources and social services due to their remote location.[10] Studies suggest that being socially isolated results in a delay in receiving help and care.[11] Pennsylvania's rural residents are vulnerable to severe heat waves, due to social determinants of health, including inequities in access.

Health Risks in Low-Income Communities

More frequent heat waves and extreme weather events pose serious health risks to low-income communities in Philadelphia and across the state. Heat-related illnesses and deaths are often concentrated in low-income communities.[12] Many of these communities lack access to air conditioning, which makes it harder for households to cope with extreme heat.[13] Without sufficient and consistent access to cooling, individuals and their families can experience heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration, and other heat-related illnesses.[14]

Additionally, older adults, children, people who live alone, and other sensitive groups are at an increased risk of heat-related illnesses, and extreme heat can aggravate health conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease.[15] Hotter conditions tend to affect air quality.[16] Sunlight and air pollutants can interact to form more smog, which increases health risks for people with asthma, which disproportionately affects low income, communities of color.[17]

[6] See footnote 4
[7] See footnote 1
[8] United States Environmental Protection Agency. (2023). Agriculture and Climate. https://www.epa.gov/agriculture/agriculture-and-climate
[9] World Health Organization. (2011). Public Health Advice on Preventing Health Effects of Heat. https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1349813/retrieve
[10] Odame, E. A., Li, Y., Zheng, S., Vaidyanathan, A., & Silver, K. (2018). Assessing Heat-Related Mortality Risks among Rural Populations: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Epidemiological Evidence. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 15(8), 1597. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15081597
[11] See footnote 9
[12] See footnote 5
[13] See footnote 4
[14] Philadelphia Mayor's Office & City of Philadelphia Climate Adaptation Working Group. (2015). Growing Stronger: Toward a Climate-Ready Philadelphia. https://www.phila.gov/media/20160504162056/Growing-Stronger-Toward-a-Climate-Ready-Philadelphia.pdf
[15] United States Environmental Protection Agency. (2021). Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A focus on Six Impacts. https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-09/climate-vulnerability_september-2021_508.pdf
[16] See footnote 5
[17] See footnote 14

Perhaps not surprisingly, during extreme heat, visits to the emergency room due to heat exhaustion or heat stroke, as well as other health conditions exacerbated by heat increase sharply.[18] In many cases, prompt and proper medical care can reverse the effects of heat on the body. However, in some cases, medical care is not enough to prevent loss of life. Across the United States, an average of 702 people die as a result of heat-related illnesses each year.[19] Between 2006 and 2018, in Philadelphia alone, there were 137 heat-related deaths.[20]

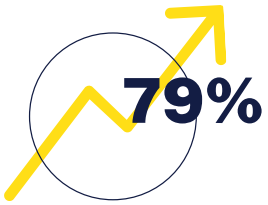
702
people die from heat-related illnesses in the United States each year.

During heat waves, the highest number of mortalities occurs among older adults (65+ years), who often suffer from acute and chronic health conditions and are vulnerable to multiple social determinants that negatively affect their health.[21] As temperatures rise, the impact of climate change will be reflected in worsened morbidity and mortality rates on the local and state level, as well as heightened adversity and suffering among marginalized communities who are struggling to stay cool and healthy.

[18] See footnote 15
[19] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). Heat & Health Tracker. https://ephtracking.cdc.gov/Applications/heatTracker/
[20] See footnote 4
[21] See footnote 9

High energy bills force Pennsylvanians to choose between paying for cooling and other needs.

As temperatures rise, so too will energy costs and the need for cooling. Skyrocketing electricity bills will burden households who already pay a significant amount of their income for home energy (also known as an energy burden). As a result, cooling is becoming even more inaccessible each year, and many of CLS's clients report going without food to pay their electric bills during the summer months. **Across the commonwealth, electric bills have increased an average of 79% between June 2020 and June 2023** with bills likely to continue to rise.[22]



Average electric bill increase since June 2020

Additionally, low-income households and people of color have a greater likelihood of living in neighborhoods that are hotter than others, which will lead to difficulties in affording the rising energy costs. In the City of Philadelphia's Office of Sustainability's Beat the Heat Report, published in 2019, 25% of participants that lived in Hunting Park stated that help with utility bills will help them stay cool during hot summer days. The lack of cooling assistance programs during the summer months puts low-income households at risk of termination of electric service and incentivizes households to avoid the use of air conditioners during extremely hot days.

Across Pennsylvania, many low-income households lack air conditioning. Low-income residents are more likely to live in older housing stock that hasn't been updated. If these households have access to air conditioning at all, they are most likely using window air conditioning units, and likely older less energy efficient models. Unfortunately, window units, while cheaper up front and easier to retrofit into old housing, cost significantly more to run than central air, if being used to cool three or more rooms.[23]

To make matters worse, old housing stock is more likely to be poorly insulated, so the heat will impact the home even more. Households in heat island neighborhoods are likely to face a triple threat of heat hazards: hotter neighborhoods, warmer houses, and more expensive prices to cool those houses when compared to more modern homes. This creates an impossible situation for people already struggling to make ends meet.

[22] Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, "PUC Alerts Consumers of June 1 Electric Price Changes" https://www.puc.pa.gov/press-release/2023/puc-alerts-consumers-of-june-1-electric-price-changes-urges-exploring-shopping-conservation-options-to-saveinpa.; Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, "PUC Reminds Consumers of June 1 Changes for Utility Electric Energy Prices" https://www.puc.pa.gov/press-release/2020/puc-reminds-consumers-of-june-1-changes-for-utility-electric-energy-prices-notes-papowerswitch-enhancements-for-online-shoppers.
[23] Fay, Karie Lapham. "Is Running Cental Air Cheaper than Running Three Wall Air Conditioners?" SF Gate, 17 Nov. 2020, https://homeguides.sfgate.com/running-cental-air-cheaper-running-three-wall-air-conditioners-53417.html.

Redlined neighborhoods are hotter neighborhoods.

Studies show that beyond the already elevated temperatures in cities due to urban heat island effects, low-income communities and communities of color face disproportionate impacts from heat than wealthier, whiter communities, even within the same city.[24] As a result of systemic racism, many families in poor or minority neighborhoods also lack the resources to create more climate resilient neighborhoods.

In American cities, historically redlined neighborhoods are very often the same neighborhoods that experience extreme heat in the summer.[25] Although explicit redlining was outlawed in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act, previously redlined areas still suffer from debilitating disinvestment, and segregation in our cities persists in the same neighborhoods that were impacted by redlining in the 1940s and 1950s.

When comparing a map of redlined Philadelphia to a heat map of the city, the map is essentially the same. The hottest neighborhoods in the city are Hunting Park in North Philadelphia, Point Breeze in South Philadelphia, and Cobbs Creek in West Philadelphia.[26] These historically redlined neighborhoods are still almost exclusively inhabited by low income Black and Latino Philadelphians. Redlined areas are less likely to have parks and trees, which can help keep neighborhoods cool and are more likely to have dark, paved surfaces that attract heat. **As a result of systemic racism and disinvestment, temperatures between neighborhoods can vary by 22 degrees Fahrenheit.**[27]

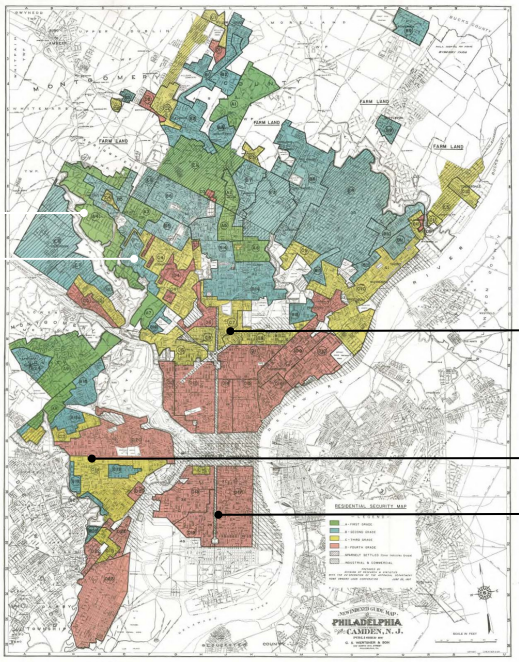
Homeowners Loan Corporation Redlining Map of Philadelphia (1937)

Chestnut Hill

Mount Airy

Chestnut Hill and Mount Airy neighborhoods are wealthier on average. They are also predominantly white.

Parts of these neighborhoods can be up to 14 degrees cooler than the city average on a hot summer day.



Historically redlined neighborhoods Hunting Park, Cobbs Creek, and Point Breeze are predominantly Black and Latino. With fewer trees and older infrastructure, these neighborhoods can run as much as 8 degrees hotter than the city average in the summer.

Hunting Park

Cobbs Creek

Point Breeze

[24] Hsu, Angel, et al. "Disproportionate Exposure to Urban Heat Island Intensity across Major US Cities." Nature News, Nature Publishing Group, 25 May 2021, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-021-22799-5.
[25] Hoffman, Jeremy S., et al. "The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas." MDPI, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 13 Jan. 2020, https://www.mdpi.com/2225-1154/8/1/12
[26] Kummer, Frank. "Weather Warning: These Philadelphia Neighborhoods Get the Hottest in a Heat Wave." The Philadelphia Inquirer, 29 June 2018, https://www.inquirer.com/science/climate/weather-philadelphia-temperature-summer-neighborhood-map-20180629.html.
[27] Phillips, Susan. "Redlined Philly Neighborhoods Feel Hotter, Study Says." WHYY, 16 Jan. 2020, https://whyy.org/articles/redlinings-ongoing-harm-intensifying-impact-of-climate-change-new-study-says/

- 113 Philadelphians responded to our survey between November 2022 and April 2023.
- Among respondents, 75% identified as women and 25% identified as men.
- Most respondents were African American (51%) followed by Hispanic/Latinx respondents, who made up 41% of the sample.
- The two top zip codes represented were 19140 (19%), which is in North Philadelphia and includes Hunting Park, and 19139 (11%), which is in West Philadelphia and includes Haddington. Both areas have above average heat indexes.
- Respondents were fairly evenly split between renters (46%) and homeowners (50%).
- Most respondents indicated they have a window unit (74%).
- 6% of the respondents indicated they do not have air conditioning in their homes.

Community Engagement

As a result of systemic inequity, low-income Pennsylvanians cannot afford rising temperatures, energy costs, and the demand for cooling. To better understand how this crisis impacts Philadelphians living in poverty, CLS and Esperanza needed to hear from community members directly. With Esperanza's expertise in equitable community engagement and CLS's policy expertise, our organizations collaboratively developed a survey and held a community listening session to capture insights about the cooling-related needs of community members and LIHEAP.

The teams conducted targeted outreach in low-income communities served by both organizations to identify people to fill out the survey. Surveys were distributed at resource fairs in these neighborhoods and on social media. Outreach teams worked closely with case managers and counselors at both organizations to distribute the survey among clients who have enrolled in LIHEAP or are likely to qualify.

We asked 113 Philadelphians to tell us about their cooling needs. 76% cannot afford their energy bills in the summer.

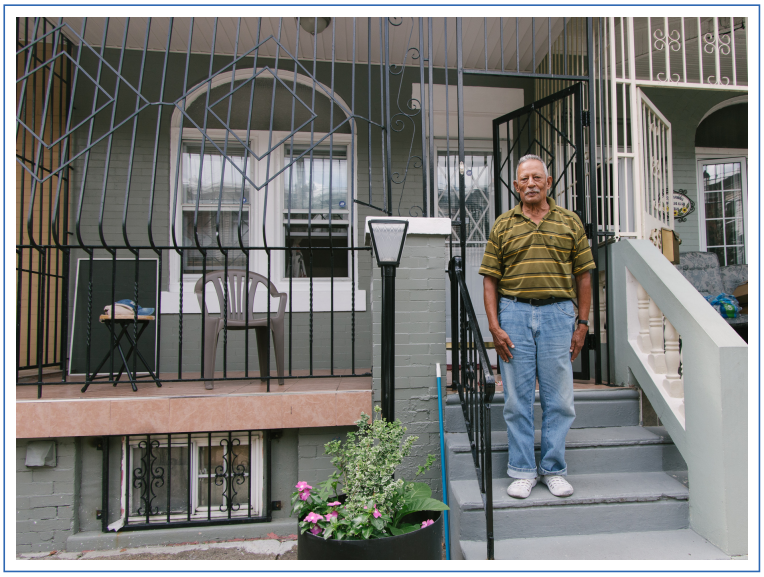
Close to half of the respondents had faced a shut-off notice in the last two summers. Challenges to afford electricity leads people to limit the use of electricity, as 89% of respondents indicated that they limit the use of air conditioning to keep costs down. While most residents are struggling to afford energy bills, 10% of respondents didn't know if they received LIHEAP or not, pointing to a lack of awareness about the program.

Most respondents identified a need for more financial assistance to help pay energy bills in the summer. When asked if the LIHEAP period should be expanded to cover cooling costs in the summer, 96% of respondents supported year-round LIHEAP. Other top priorities included protection from electric shut-offs and access to air conditioners.

At our community listening sessions, Philadelphians called on state lawmakers to strengthen and expand LIHEAP.

In March 2023, CLS and Esperanza held a Community Listening Session at Esperanza's offices in Hunting Park to gather deeper insights from 14 community members on cooling related needs, LIHEAP, its strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for change. Nine participants were women, and five participants were men.

After analyzing the transcript, key themes emerged from the conversation.



Heating and Cooling-Related Needs

When asked about the need for cooling in the summer, participants pointed to an increase in temperature that has both health and environmental impacts. All participants noted an increase in temperature resulting in warmer summers. One participant said, **"Each summer is getting hotter. It burns my skin. It feels different. If I am outside, I can feel it."** Some participants linked rising temperatures with worsening health conditions, particularly breathing. Participants also noticed that a decrease in green spaces may be contributing to hotter summers. "I have been in Philadelphia my entire life. Most neighborhoods had trees. They have taken the trees away," one participant said.

Participants pointed to a need for cooling appliances, such as air conditioners. "Some things that I need to stay cool during the summer are air conditioning, a fan, and a lot of water." For some, a fan isn't enough, as it doesn't provide cool air. This leaves many with no other option but an air conditioner for cooling. Air conditioning results in a cost burden to many, and as highlighted in the survey findings, some people reduce their use of air conditioning due to energy costs in the summer. The burden is much higher for low-income residents living in areas with above average temperatures. This is one of the reasons why participants concluded additional economic support is needed for the summertime.

LIHEAP's Strengths and Weaknesses

Many participants highlighted the positive aspects of LIHEAP but also recognized a need to expand the program year-round. In the words of one participant, "LIHEAP helped me get enough oil to carry me through the whole season and if they could extend it through the summer for cooling it would be a godsend." Most participants flagged key challenges with the current structure of the program. For instance, a senior who participated in the listening session stated the lack of support for the elderly who are just above the income limit. **"For seniors, if they are a dollar over, they get nothing. It is so unfair. They need help, but no one seems to care. There has to be something for them."**

Participants also expressed concern over delays in receiving the energy bill via mail. When the mail is delayed and they don't pay on time, their electricity is shut off. Moreover, participants concluded it's more difficult to afford for people who work less during these months. If residents face a shut-off in the summer, they have less support to pay off bills, given that most LIHEAP support is limited to the winter. "Sometimes the mail will come late and if I get behind, I get a shut-off notice. Then there is nothing I can do because there is no LIHEAP in the summer."

Solutions to Barriers to Accessing LIHEAP

Participants called for greater access to materials in Spanish. They also specified a need for bilingual education and outreach on LIHEAP to ensure greater awareness and participation in the program. Some participants knew of neighbors that were likely eligible but did not know about the program or lacked key information about it. One person said "They should educate people as to what LIHEAP is. People think LIHEAP is a monthly bill, but it is just a one-time payment. They need to increase education."

> **Everything is expensive and increasing. It is ridiculous how the bills jump. My bill is high all year. I have asthma and anemia. They should have LIHEAP all year round for everyone.**

Similarly, all participants agreed that the LIHEAP period should be extended and that the state should aim for a year-round program. The phrase "LIHEAP should be all year round" was repeated throughout the meeting by multiple participants. The main reason cited was financial-related, how to afford the bill and avoid shut-offs. For instance, "LIHEAP should definitely be all year round because in the summertime I am worried about lowering my energy costs, but that also creates health and mental health concerns for me. I am worried about money and shut-offs." Some participants not only saw this as an economic relief but as a buffer against worsening health conditions.

Policy Solutions and Recommendations

Based on our community survey, listening session, and experience working with Pennsylvanians facing energy insecurity every day, Esperanza and CLS have three main recommendations to improve LIHEAP to address the cost of heating and cooling in Pennsylvania:

Approve Permanent State Supplemental Program for LIHEAP to Expand the Program

Pennsylvania can address rising temperatures, higher energy costs, and the inequitable impact these compounding forces have on communities of color and low-income people by expanding LIHEAP. Pennsylvania must invest in expanded LIHEAP to ensure that low-income communities in rural and urban areas, who are often hit the hardest by changing environmental conditions stay connected to life-sustaining utility service. Pennsylvania must provide state supplemental funding for LIHEAP to expand the program in three primary ways:

- **Make LIHEAP a year-round program and available for cooling.** We propose LIHEAP be made a year-round program where applicants can access grants for both heating and cooling. Many of our neighboring states, including Delaware, New York, and New Jersey, provide LIHEAP for summer cooling costs. Expanding LIHEAP to cover cooling costs is an important step in addressing rising temperatures in Pennsylvania and the inequitable impact of heat.

- **Provide air conditioners through expanded LIHEAP.** With additional funding for LIHEAP and a year-round program, we recommend that the PA Department of Community & Economic Development make its LIHEAP Crisis Interface air conditioner pilot program permanent and provide much needed infrastructure so that Pennsylvanians can access cooling.

- **Examine pathways to increase income limits with a focus on seniors and people with disabilities.** We heard from community members that residents just above the income limits are struggling to pay utility bills and often have no options to prevent shut off. The current income limit can be particularly hard for seniors and disabled people living on fixed incomes. We urge DHS to consider ways to either increase the income limit or make these residents categorically eligible for LIHEAP.

Permanent state supplemental funding would enable LIHEAP to cover critical and rising cooling costs and create a more stable program that efficiently and effectively serves the eligible populations who already benefit from the program. This kind of stability would improve the ability of DHS to administer the program and provide the important cooling assistance that Pennsylvanians need.

We recommend that the state legislature work with DHS to determine an adequate funding allocation to supplement federal funds and provide for year-round LIHEAP. The state should provide an initial allocation of at least $50 million to extend LIHEAP next year while it assesses the amount of a full and ongoing allocation to support a year-round program.

Improve Language Access, Outreach, and Education to Limited English Proficient (LEP) Communities

Throughout the survey and listening session, community members called attention to a lack of information about LIHEAP and how it operates, particularly in LEP communities. We urge DHS to address and engage with LEP communities to ensure they have equal access to LIHEAP. In Philadelphia alone, a quarter of households do not speak English at home. DHS must take the following steps to engage with these households:

- Ensure that County Assistance Offices are regularly and adequately using interpreters to communicate with LEP applicants
- Create outreach and education materials in multiple languages
- Partner with community organizations to ensure bicultural/bilingual community access points
- Review data to ensure that LEP communities are effectively accessing the program

Make LIHEAP More Accessible by Streamlining Enrollment and Implementing Categorical Eligibility

DHS should take measures that make it easier for people to apply for LIHEAP and also increase the administrative efficiency of the program. To avoid duplicative procedures during the LIHEAP application process, DHS should streamline the process for applicants who already receive other public benefits. Specifically, DHS should allow applicants for SNAP, TANF, and Medical Assistance (MA) to also apply for LIHEAP through a single application, instead of two separate applications.

DHS should also institute categorical eligibility for recipients of other public benefits. People who are eligible for public benefits and who pay for their home energy costs are almost always eligible for LIHEAP. A separate LIHEAP application for these families is not only unnecessary, but also inefficient. Federal law permits categorical eligibility of recipients of other public benefits programs including Medicaid, SNAP, and cash assistance and encourages it as a tool to improve administrative efficiency. Eighteen states, including our neighboring states of New Jersey and New York, allow for automatic or expedited eligibility of at least some recipients of other public benefits.

Much of the information that applicants must verify during the LIHEAP application process, such as household size and income, has been verified already when applicants applied for other public benefits. Categorical eligibility reduces the number of times that applicants must verify the same information and reduces processing time and expenses for DHS.

Further, creating categorical eligibility would enable seniors and people with disabilities whose income is just above the current LIHEAP income limits to become eligible, addressing the need for a higher income limit for those populations.

Enduring the Extremes

Conclusion

None of us can afford climate change, but the costs are even higher for Black and Brown people, rural and urban communities, and low-income families. As temperatures and energy costs continue to rise in Pennsylvania, policymakers must ensure that people can afford to keep their homes comfortable.

Expanding Pennsylvania's LIHEAP to provide cooling assistance and air conditioners is a critical solution to protect public health and mitigate climate risks in the commonwealth. Moreover, Pennsylvanians eligible for LIHEAP deserve an accessible utility grant assistance program that does not impose unnecessary eligibility requirements and ensures language access. Throughout our survey and community listening sessions, CLS clients and community members who cannot possibly keep up with rising energy costs called on lawmakers to make LIHEAP available year-round.

Pennsylvania must respond to the growing need for access to cooling by allocating permanent state supplemental funding to LIHEAP, so that low-income families can stay safe and cool as Pennsylvania gets hotter.

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