

OPEN LETTER as of July 13, 2020

Dear City Leaders of Chicago,

The first 6 months of 2020 have left communities reeling. While few could have predicted the very specific shock and horror of COVID-19, there are some cyclical events that can be expected; extreme summer heat is one of them.

On the 25th anniversary of the deadly 1995 heat wave in Chicago - a tragedy that is all the more resonant in this time of COVID-19 -- we are writing to share some concerns and raise the alarm for action, as summer 2020 is predicted to reach record-setting temperatures.

The 1995 heat disaster was not a one-off. It was a harbinger that tragically revealed what happens when the climate crisis, or for that matter any public health crisis, collides head-on with extreme structural racism.

As a group of concerned residents, community leaders, and allies, we are extremely familiar with the decades of [maps](#) that show the disparities in our city. Health disparities, environmental burden, unemployment, poor housing quality, school closures, and most recently, COVID-19 deaths are all concentrated in the same communities. July is upon us, and we know more days of extreme heat are coming. We invite you to reflect upon how the City can use this moment and the abundance of research to move forward an intersectional health equity strategy to prevent further harm to Chicago's South and West Side communities.

We are worried. And we're here to help.

We are extremely worried about the summer's grueling heat.

We are extremely worried about our communities that need relief from dangerously hot homes and apartments and who won't have adequate access to cooling centers, libraries, and houses of worship during this time of physical distancing. What will we do during the time of COVID-19?

We are extremely worried about its deadly impact across communities that are overburdened by compounding socio-economic and environmental issues.

We are extremely worried about prioritization of hazardous economic development, such as dredging the Calumet River, and allowing General Iron to move to the Southeast Side, which threaten air and water quality, continue to expose certain communities to environmental toxins, and further weaken community health.

In this moment of intense vulnerability, we ought to prioritize the expertise within communities. As the architects of a wide range of community-based emergency response strategies, we can, if appropriately resourced, scale the strategies known to work in our communities, which are at greater risk of impact. We can do that, no matter the weather or public health crisis, while we address the long-term impacts of structural racism and health inequity.

We suggest:

- A clear multilingual and decisive update on how the City has modified the Extreme Heat Preparedness Plan to reflect the necessary modifications under COVID-19 safety protocol
- A public commitment and implementation strategy to restore water in all homes in the city to protect communities from the compounding public health impacts of COVID-19 and extreme heat
- A neighborhood-based communication strategy co-designed and executed with community based partners to ensure that residents--especially those in areas most impacted by COVID-19, furthest from cooling centers, and suffering from lack of running water-- are reached quickly, proactively, and by trusted voices with critical information about upcoming extreme weather, the location of nearest cooling centers, and other existing support services
- Maximize and empower neighborhood cohesion by supporting local programs and anchor institutions that often serve as front-line responders for residents during a crisis, such as a pandemic or heatwave, in lieu of law-enforcement and emergency management, unless required.
- An update on the CARES Act monies that the city received and how that may be used to reduce impact of extreme heat
- Clear coordination with the new team of community health workers hired to help address COVID-19 to also support residents around extreme heat and the lack of water in homes
- Participation in creating a heat emergency plan in collaboration with the city to avoid the perils of the 1995 heat wave

Ultimately, we request a seat at the table where the decisions will be made, and a say in how the dollars will be spent on reinvestment and rebuilding healthy communities post-COVID.

We know that the best short-term disaster preparedness strategy is investing in the community-based organizations that are part of a trusted social network, those who are active every day, building connections and relationships, strengthening the local economy, supporting cultural creativity and addressing food and energy insecurity. Long-term, the most effective way to address “vulnerability” is to decrease income disparity, create better housing and health care policies, and invest in our public schools, libraries, and local main streets.

We hope and believe that we can do both at once.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely

Elevate Energy

People for Community Recovery

Sierra Club Illinois Chapter

Sinai Urban Health Institute

West Side United

Additional signatories pending ...