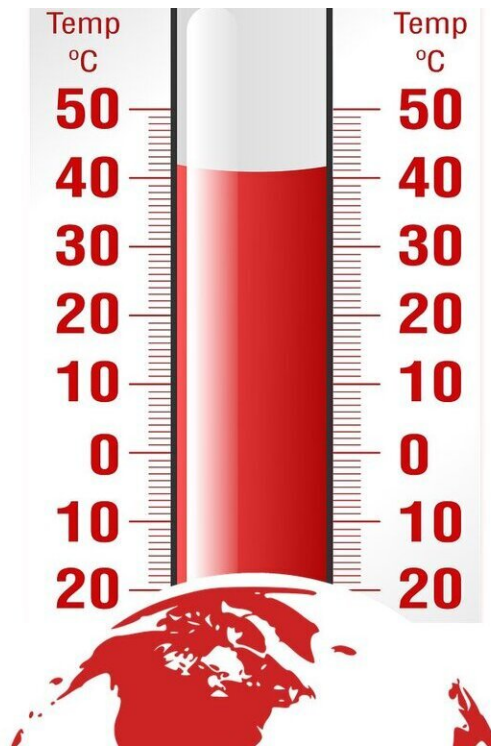


Cooler states now forced to grapple with extreme heat

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As temperatures soared into the 90s, the heat and humidity hit the concrete in Astoria, Queens, and bounced into the air. People moved along the scorched sidewalk slowly, their clothes drenched with sweat.

Elianne Alvarado, 44, who was raised in New York City and has lived

here for most of her life, ascended the steps to the elevated Astoria Boulevard subway station, fanning herself with a sheet of paper. She was looking forward to escaping the heat in an air-conditioned train.

"I don't ever remember it being this hot," Alvarado told Stateline. "I remember other summers being nice, not that hot. But this week has been crazy."

The [heat wave](#) that pummeled New York state and much of the East Coast and Midwest last week and into the weekend broke daily records in several cities. On June 19, Boston (98 degrees); Hartford, Connecticut (97); and Providence, Rhode Island (91), all set new highs for that date. In New York City, temperatures reached the low 90s—not a record, but plenty hot enough to cause misery, especially with humidity and the radiant heat from concrete and asphalt.

The Northeast is not the hottest part of the country, but several states in the region are among those where average temperatures have increased the most over the past two decades.

In recent years, [climate change](#) has forced states such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York to take [extreme heat](#) more seriously. In preparing for a hotter future, some of them are copying the policies of states that are used to sizzling temperatures, such as Arizona, Florida and Louisiana.

Public health officials in Connecticut and New York, for example, are partnering with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to ensure that their most vulnerable residents—older and [lower-income people](#)—are better prepared for extreme heat and other aspects of climate change. And in April, New Jersey published a draft Extreme Heat Resilience Action Plan, recognizing that, "while the state remains committed to reducing emissions, New Jersey is past the point of

avoiding all climate change impacts and needs to enact measures to adapt."

"New Jersey is a northern state, and it is not necessarily the folks that are hardest hit by this phenomenon of extreme heat compared to, for example, the desert Southwest," said Nathaly Agosto Filión, deputy chief climate resilience officer for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

"But for that reason, much of our built environment is maybe not as well designed to withstand the impacts, and much of our population sort of undervalues the extent to which it is a problem for our communities."

New Jersey's draft plan includes 133 action items, but the first priority is helping New Jerseyans cope with the heat. The state aims to do that by beefing up [emergency preparedness](#) and response; providing public cooling centers; planting more trees; and adopting workplace safety rules, among many other steps. It also plans a public information campaign to make people—especially vulnerable populations such as older and homeless people—aware of the risks of extreme heat.

"We're also talking about [outdoor workers](#), we're also talking about athletes, we're also talking about folks that are pregnant or breastfeeding—these are all subpopulations that are really important to engage," Agosto Filión said.

'Hot box' apartments

Extreme heat is the leading cause of weather-related deaths in the United States—and those deaths are increasing as [average temperatures](#) rise, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Approximately 2,302 people died from heat-related causes last year, up from 1,722 in 2022 and 1,602 in 2021.

Those totals are likely an underestimate, because heat waves make death more likely from other causes as well. A New York City analysis in 2022, for example, found an annual average of 360 heat-exacerbated deaths in the city compared with 10 caused directly by heat.

Ladd Keith, an associate professor of planning at the University of Arizona who focuses on climate change, said cities and states should have different plans to cope with extreme heat, because housing and development differ so dramatically among communities.

One challenge, Keith explained, is that many homes were designed for climates that have changed dramatically. Many "hot box" apartments in New York don't have air conditioning because decades ago it was rarely needed. In the Pacific Northwest, many homes have large windows to let in light, but they let in too much heat during the now-warmer summers. Homes designed to rely on air conditioning, like those in Arizona, quickly become miserable if the power goes out.

Keith said that for the most part, the rising temperatures haven't been enough to convince most Americans that heat is a serious threat—yet.

"Even though the awareness is growing, we really haven't had this watershed moment, or what I call a 'heatshed' moment, where we've said, 'We really need to take this seriously as a climate risk,'" Keith told Stateline.

Southern experience

But public officials in some states are focused on the threat.

The New York State Department of Health is one of 13 recipients, mostly state and local agencies across the country, of a CDC climate resilience grant. Neil Muscatiello, who heads the department's bureau of

environmental health, said the goal is "to identify how we think climate change is going to be impacting New Yorkers, particularly vulnerable populations, and then work on adaptations or interventions to help reduce those risks."

The agency, noting that people can fall ill at lower temperatures, recently changed New York's heat alert threshold from 100 degrees to 95 degrees. Last week, it was tracking emergency room visits and coordinating with other state and local agencies on getting vulnerable people to cooling centers.

Muscatiello said the department is also learning from other jurisdictions that have dealt with heat for years.

"It is a really collaborative process, not only with CDC, but also with other state partners. We're always interested to hear what they're doing."

Southern cities and states have long integrated heat resilience into their public health programs and have lessons to share.

In 2021, Miami-Dade County, Florida, became the first jurisdiction in the world with a chief heat officer. Since then, Phoenix and other cities have followed suit.

One policy change Jane Gilbert, Miami-Dade's heat officer, made was to lower the thresholds for heat advisories and warnings. The county now issues advisories when the heat index— what the temperature feels like to the human body when relative humidity is combined with the air temperature—reaches 105 degrees, down from the previous 108 degrees. The new standard for a heat warning is a heat index of 110 degrees, down from 113 degrees. She made the changes because heat-related illness can happen at the lower temperatures.

Gilbert also created an outreach strategy to help homeless people cope with extreme heat, including placing cooling centers in areas where there are many people living on the streets.

"We are doing a lot of great services to people who are unsheltered. That doesn't mean we don't miss people. We are doing a lot of messaging to employers with employees doing work, but that doesn't mean we won't miss people," Gilbert said. "We know there are gaps. There is definitely more work to be done. That's what we are focused on."

Like Florida, Louisiana has long experience with extreme heat. But the state's public health response still has to evolve with the warming planet, said Michelle Lackovic, who is the project lead for Louisiana's Occupational Heat-Related Illness Prevention Program at the Louisiana Department of Health. Last year, she said, the state had more heat-related emergency department visits and fatalities than ever before.

Last summer the Louisiana Department of Health created a public, online dashboard for heat-related illness and daily counts of [emergency room visits](#) that it updates weekly during the hot months. The data is also broken down by sex, age, race and geography, so that the public can be aware of who may be most susceptible to the rising temperatures.

The state experienced over three weeks of temperatures above 95 degrees last year, Sundee Winder, an executive director at the health department, told Stateline.

"Drought, wildfires, saltwater intrusion, all of those things were a result of that extensive heat last year that was unprecedented for our state," Winder told Stateline. "So, we continue to improve our dashboard, make it more user-friendly, and share the times of day that we see [people should] avoid."

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