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## Community Action for Severe Weather Preparedness

### Background and Research

Bennington Organizing and Action (BOA), the local organizing committee of Vermont Interfaith Action, has conducted extensive research over the past year on Bennington's readiness to provide public health and safety services in light of increasingly severe weather conditions. Members of BOA have met with representatives from the state health department, the Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC), Bennington town officials, and representatives of other municipalities to gather crucial information.

While Vermont is well-known for its cold winters, in recent years, severe heat and humidity in the summer months have also become a public health concern. Bennington currently lacks a drop-in warming and cooling shelter; therefore, any emergency shelter provision falls under the purview of the town's Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP).

The LEMP is a document every municipality in Vermont is required to create and update annually. The purpose of the plan is to identify locations and resources for emergency sheltering, as well as the individuals and organizations responsible for staffing and managing the emergency response.

The template for the plan is provided by the Bennington County Regional Commission. The Emergency Management Director (EMD) is responsible for filling in the required details of the plan. Bennington's EMD is the Chief of Police, Paul Doucette. The Select Board is responsible for adopting the Local Emergency Management Plan annually at a warned public meeting. The LEMP is presently on the agenda for the next Select Board meeting on April 22nd. We encourage the public to attend this meeting and share your thoughts on this issue with the board. After adoption by the Select Board, it will be submitted back to BCRC for approval and filing.



Citizens of Bennington have long expressed concern about the lack of a drop-in warming and cooling shelter and, while this goal is one which should still be pursued, our research led us to consider the broader concern of public health and safety related to extreme weather events.

There are a number of reasons why extreme weather preparedness should be a concern for the general public—with a particular focus on our most vulnerable populations such as the elderly, children, the unhoused, those with medical conditions, and those who may lack adequate heating or cooling due to financial constraints.

The weather in Bennington has changed significantly over the last several decades. Winter and summer weather has become sporadic and hard to predict; storms are stronger with high winds and heavy rain; days of extreme heat and sudden plunges or surges in temperatures are more common.

While our winters are trending warmer, this doesn't make them safer. Rain, snow, water, and wind can cause the skin to cool faster, which leads to frostbite. Wet skin and clothes draw heat from the body quickly. Warmer, wetter winters with sudden plunges into freezing temperatures are especially dangerous.

The dangers of extreme weather are not limited to the winter. The Vermont Department of Health reports that a similar number of Vermonters visit the emergency room or call 9-1-1 each year for heat and cold weather conditions. According to the Vermont Government website, [Vermont's summers are growing warmer, wetter, and more humid. Average temperatures in Vermont have already risen 3°F since 1901, resulting in more days each year when heat impacts health.](#) The Vermont Department of Health reports that [at the Burlington International Airport, hot days \(exceeding 90°F\) and warm nights \(above 70°F\) have occurred more than twice as often since 2010, as compared to the previous 60 years.](#) [Average temperatures in Vermont are projected to increase by an additional 3 to 12°F by 2100 leading to more frequent and harmful hot weather in the future.](#)

Humidity amplifies the “real feel” of heat and further inhibits the body’s ability to cool itself. It also increases the likelihood that temperatures will remain high overnight. Without the ability to get reprieve from the heat, the strain on vulnerable people’s bodies becomes extremely dangerous. Hot weather of this degree is new to Vermont, and our infrastructure is not designed to handle it. Many homes and public buildings do not have air conditioning.

Heat and sun exposure is dangerous for all of us, but for children, the elderly, and those with chronic health conditions it can be deadly. Their bodies are less capable of adjusting to extreme temperatures. Furthermore, children are out of school in the summer and often lack cool places to escape the heat.

The Vermont Health Department also reports that since 1965, annual precipitation in Vermont has increased by 7 inches, and the number of days per year with precipitation of 1 inch or more has nearly doubled. These trends are anticipated to continue and, combined with high winds, increase the likelihood of infrastructure damage and power outages—putting people at risk of losing the ability to heat and cool their homes.

While these extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and more severe, Bennington’s Local Emergency Management Plan hasn’t been activated since 2012 when it was activated in anticipation of hurricane Sandy (conditions were such that the plan was not implemented). Currently, the plan is focused on natural disasters like floods and hurricanes which threaten the entire town, county, or state. These are important events to be prepared for—but we need to be equally prepared for regularly occurring emergency weather conditions that impact our most vulnerable populations.

The current plan, as written, identifies some of the resources available to the town, emergency contacts, and shelter locations. However, our research meeting with Chief Doucette revealed that his knowledge and experience goes far beyond what is outlined in the plan. He identified additional resources, specific quantities of



resources, additional possible shelter locations, and additional partner organizations. This included learning that there is a Red Cross trailer parked behind the Bennington Fire Facility at all times that contains 50 cots, blankets, and pillows.

One of our concerns is that this expansive knowledge and experience is heavily centralized around our Police Chief—which allows for a strong response so long as he is available to manage the situation; but, as crises are by nature unpredictable, we are concerned about an event where circumstances could render him unable to perform these services.

We were informed that a second-in-command is already being sought out. In addition to training a second-in-command, detailing the additional information Chief Doucette has accumulated through years of experience is essential. Those are not easy shoes to fill, and we need a plan which anyone can pick up and promptly use in a crisis situation; more specifically, we need a detailed plan in document form that can be implemented in a crisis situation by community leaders. We must plan for resiliency, and resilience requires a community response to crisis.

Another area of concern is that most of our aid and support comes from outside the town and county, leaving us vulnerable in circumstances which might isolate Bennington from the rest of the state. We should work towards building local resilience so that we can address a crisis even without outside aid. The template for the LEMP provided by BCRC encourages the creation of annexes with detailed plans of action for specific situations such as this.

The current primary shelter location identified is the middle school. This space can house 200 people, though only 50 cots, blankets, and pillows are locally available. While this site may be suitable for major disasters like hurricanes and severe flooding, it is not practical or feasible to use this space during more frequent instances of extreme heat and cold. We were also informed that research is being done to identify and confirm secondary shelter locations throughout the town. It is essential that at least one secondary location identified is capable of being activated

for recurring acute weather events. This location must also be suitable for overnight use, when hot and cold temperatures are often most dangerous. A plan for staffing a location in such an event must be created (i.e. forming a local Volunteer Medical Corps which could be called upon to man an emergency shelter).

The Vermont Health Department has communicated with towns and municipalities, encouraging them to create plans and designate locations for extreme heat events. Identified cooling sites have been added to a map available online. Currently, Bennington's only designated locations for relief from heat include: the downtown splash pad, Bennington Free Library, John G. McCullough Free Library, and Lake Paran. Hours of operation for at least three of the four sites are limited; and none are open in the evenings. Two of these locations are not open seven days a week. Furthermore, access to Lake Paran requires a) transportation; and b) a paid annual membership fee or a daily admission fee of \$3.50 for adults and \$1.00 for kids. Actions such as arranging transportation with Green Mountain Transit and free entry on days of extreme heat could be included in the new plan.

The annexes recommended in the template provided by BCRC for completion by the town provides the opportunity to address these specific types of emergency situations. Creating annexes detailing plans for extreme heat and extreme cold would help Bennington establish better local resilience in the face of climate change.

Another issue identified during our research was activation of the LEMP. Currently, the LEMP is only activated at the discretion of the Police Chief, who serves as Bennington's Emergency Management Director. There are no written guidelines, protocols, or criteria for implementation in the current plan. Our research revealed that very specific parameters are given by the state health department for determining "adverse weather conditions." These parameters include calculations of temperature, humidity, precipitation, and wind chill. When the parameters are met or projected, it is the responsibility of the state to alert local municipalities of these conditions.

Using these parameters and notification by the state of adverse weather conditions as an automatic activation mechanism would clarify and systematize LEMP activation/implementation, and provide us with objective criteria for implementing the plan.

### **Solutions**

BOA recognizes that there have been efforts, like the distribution of motel vouchers, to assist Bennington residents, during the coldest months of the year. These actions do not constitute long-term solutions nor do they adequately address the diversity of severe weather events and vulnerable populations. We would like Bennington to take a more expansive and comprehensive approach to emergency planning. Here is our list of proposed actions and solutions for making Bennington a safer place for all of us.

1. Create definitions and criteria for severe hot and cold weather conditions (based on but not limited to those used by the state for defining adverse weather conditions) that necessitate implementation of the emergency plan.
2. Revisit and rewrite the Town of Bennington LEMP to include specific plans for addressing extreme heat and cold weather conditions through additional annexes.

The full guidance for severe hot and cold weather plans is found at:

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ENV-CH-hot-weather-planning-guidance.pdf>.

3. Prepare a detailed written plan for implementing the LEMP and conduct training sessions for all key town personnel and community leaders with emergency responsibilities. While the responsibility for announcing a severe weather emergency rests with the Emergency Management Director, there should be an identified second-in-command who can make a timely decision if the director is unavailable.

4. Identify at least one shelter site in downtown Bennington for use during severe weather conditions, recognizing that the public sites currently identified for heat and cold relief are not open at night when weather conditions can be most threatening. The availability of a centrally located overnight shelter provides for Bennington’s residents who may not have home conditions sufficient to keep them healthy and safe when it is very cold or very hot and/or humid. Especially vulnerable residents include older adults, families with young children, unhoused people, unaccompanied teens, and people with vulnerable medical conditions.
  
5. Establish a community-wide approach to addressing severe weather conditions and engage local individuals and organizations in responding to weather emergencies. This might include instituting systems to distribute heating and cooling devices, the creation and training of a Community Volunteer Severe Weather/Medical Corp, and fostering local, state, and federal partnerships to secure funds to address increasing public health and safety needs in our Town.

### **Conclusion**

BOA is asking officials of the Town of Bennington to follow the advice of the Vermont Health Department and “adopt Local Hazard Mitigation Plans, Local Emergency Operations Plans, and other plans to help reduce vulnerabilities.” While we recognize that the Town has an Emergency Management Plan in place, we feel that it is incomplete, as it does not address extreme weather.

In the past, officials responsible for emergency planning have not identified severe weather conditions as a health and safety threat that requires activation of the existing Emergency Management Plan. We are encouraging town officials to recognize the urgent need to redefine our approach to local resiliency and emergency response planning. The space for creating more targeted responses is well within the scope of what the LEMP is designed for and many of the necessary resources are already available, we simply need to identify, organize, and utilize them. With a commitment to take these actions, town officials – working with community members – will make Bennington a safer, healthier place to live.