



# INFORMATION REPORT

<b>TO:</b>	Mayor and Members Public Health Committee
<b>COMMITTEE DATE:</b>	June 3, 2024
<b>SUBJECT/REPORT NO:</b>	Expansion of Subsidy for Air-Conditioning to Low-Income Households (BOH24010(a)) (City Wide) <b>(Outstanding Business List Item)</b>
<b>WARD(S) AFFECTED:</b>	City Wide
<b>PREPARED BY:</b>	Erica Brimley (905) 546-2424 Ext. 4815 Matt Lawson (905) 546-2424 Ext. 5823
<b>SUBMITTED BY:</b>	Kevin McDonald Director, Healthy Environments Division Public Health Services
<b>SIGNATURE:</b>	Stuart Beumer Director, Ontario Works Healthy and Safe Communities Department

## COUNCIL DIRECTION

At its meeting on May 8, 2024 Council approved the following motion:

- (a) That the Heat Response Strategy attached as Appendix “A” to Report BOH24010, with the exception of Action Numbers 6, 7, 9 and 10 be approved, as amended by including the following actions with proposed timelines for implementation.

That the consideration of sub-section (a)(i) of the amendment to Item 1 of the Public Health Committee Report 24-004, respecting Heat Response Strategy (BOH24010) (City Wide) (below), be deferred, in order for staff to review and report back to the Public Health Committee:

- (i) To expand and align the eligibility of the existing Ontario Works air conditioner subsidy of \$350 available to Social Assistance households, to include all low-income households who are most vulnerable to heat

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because of a severe medical condition, toward the purchase of an energy efficient air conditioner; and that this expansion be funded through the Climate Change Reserve #108062 at and upset limit, including contingency, not to exceed \$52,500.

This Information Report satisfies the requirements for the Item related to the “Expansion of Subsidy for Air-Conditioning to Low-Income Households” and can be removed from the Public Health Committee Outstanding Business List.

## **INFORMATION**

Interventions that seek to prevent, mitigate, or respond to heat-related harms (i.e., heat-related illness, stress, and mortality) include long-term primary interventions like heat education and awareness interventions, as well as immediate and short-term interventions, such as cooling strategies (i.e., cooler clothing, cooling centres for the public, or cooling apparatuses for personal use like air conditioning). While much focus is often placed on reviewing and assessing immediate, or short-term interventions, it does not negate the crucial need for additional work to investigate and address systems, policies and other societal structures that contribute to inequities which place certain populations at disproportionate risk of harm from heat events and climate change.<sup>1</sup>

### **Air Conditioning and Health Impacts**

According to a report to the Chief Coroner of British Columbia (2022), high indoor temperature was the primary cause of injury and death during the extreme heat event in Summer of 2021. During this time, hot air became trapped indoors and continued to rise over time. Although outdoor temperatures decreased overnight, residences did not cool off, exposing people to harmful high temperatures for extended periods of time.<sup>2</sup>

Based on information collected by Coroners during their investigations, 414 (66.9%) decedents had no air conditioning present in their residence, 46 decedents (7.4%) did have air conditioning in their residence, while for the remaining 159 (25.7%) decedents, it was unknown if they had air conditioning in their residence, or they died not near their home.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Rapid review: addressing heat-related harms among vulnerable populations. Toronto, ON: King’s Printer for Ontario; 2023

<sup>2</sup> Extreme Heat and Human Mortality: A Review of Heat-related Deaths in B.C. in Summer 2021. [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/extreme\\_heat\\_death\\_review\\_panel\\_report.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/extreme_heat_death_review_panel_report.pdf)

### **Ontario Works Special Supports Program**

The current air-conditioner benefit available to Social Assistance recipients is funded provincially under the discretionary health related benefits program, which is capped through a Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services funding envelope for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program recipients who are medically vulnerable.

The intent of the program is to assist eligible individuals who have a severe medical condition and where, without an air-conditioner, the symptoms of the medical condition are likely to deteriorate, increase, become episodic or cause hospitalization. Eligible applicants receive a one-time \$350 financial subsidy to purchase an air conditioner per household to assist with cooling an area within their residence. The assumption is that this one-time benefit is used for the medically intended purpose of purchasing an air-conditioner, as supported through the benefit application and medical documentation submitted; follow-up confirmation of purchase and installation is not required. The \$350 amount is based on approximate cost of 5,000-8,000 British Thermal Unit (BTU) window air conditioner units available at retail outlets.

The assistance provided is based on the cost of the air-conditioner, however, it does not allow for additional related costs such as hydro, installation and storage. The current benefit is not available to other low-income residents, including seniors, who are not recipients of Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program.

The 2023 program data indicates that 94 unique households requested the air-conditioning benefit, and 58 air-conditioning benefits were approved and provided to eligible individuals on Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program. The majority of eligible households, approximately 84%, were in the lower city (Wards 1 to 5) and approximately 16% were in upper city (Wards 6 to 8 and Ward 14).

A scan of the medical information provided on approved applications in 2023 identified the following:

- Approximately 70% of applications identified respiratory illnesses such as asthma, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease or emphysema; and,
- Approximately 30% of applications identified other illnesses, including; heart disease, mental health conditions and associated medications, skin inflammation conditions, cancer, etc.

### **Estimated Demand and Required Funding**

The proposed, temporary expansion of the current provincial Social Assistance program to eligible low-income residents would require households to meet the Statistics Canada Low Income Measure (LIM-AT) threshold, and provide documentation of a severe medical condition where, without an air-conditioner, the symptoms of the medical

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OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

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condition are likely to deteriorate, increase, become episodic or cause hospitalization. It would be based on a first come, first served basis until additionally allocated funding is exhausted. This one-time benefit could be available as early as June 10, 2024 with an aligned end-date to the current Social Assistance benefit of September 30, 2024.

The existing staffing resources within Ontario Works can support an additional volume of 150 one-time air-conditioning benefits to low-income households. However, there may not be adequate time or resources available to support an expansion to the air-conditioning benefit if it does not align with the application processes, eligibility criteria and benefit administration requirements of the current benefit.

It is difficult to predict the increased application volume of an expanded low-income benefit as it would depend on the number of persons meeting the eligibility criteria, awareness of the new benefit, and the weather conditions during this summer. The expansion could help to inform the need and demand of medically vulnerable, low-income residents related to air-conditioning should Council consider funding this benefit or similar supports on a more permanent basis through the budget process.

Staff are also prepared to work with City's Office of Climate Change Initiatives to develop resources for approved clients to educate, assist and encourage them to use their benefit towards the purchase of an energy efficient unit.

**APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED**

Not Applicable.