

PROTECTING ONTARIO'S VULNERABLE

Establishing Universal Cold-Weather Shelter Access

Demanding consistent, low-barrier Warming Centres opened at 0°C

1 The Reality of Cold Exposure and Health Risks

Human Rights and Vulnerable Populations

- Shelter is a basic prerequisite for health and a recognized human right.
- Unsheltered individuals—especially those turned away from overcrowded shelters—rely on Warming Centres for immediate, low-barrier respite.
- Without accessible indoor spaces, individuals are forced to take extreme and life-threatening risks to stay warm, as demonstrated by the tragic death of London resident Olivia in April 2023. Olivia had been burning hand sanitizer in an attempt to stay warm when an open butane flame tipped over, burning her and the tarp under which she was sleeping.

Physiological Effects of Cold Weather

- **Medical conditions:** Exposure causes conditions such as chilblains, trench foot, Raynaud's syndrome, frostbite, and hypothermia.
- **Hypothermia mechanics:** Hypothermia (<35°C) impairs brain function, leading to confusion, slurred speech, uncoordinated movement, and potentially fatal outcomes.
- **Mechanisms of heat loss:** Heat is rapidly drained through radiation, direct contact with cold surfaces, rain or snow, and wind chill. Wind chill alters the physiological effect: an air temperature of -5°C with wet clothing or wind can feel like -15°C on the human body.

The Danger of Moderate Cold: The 0°C Threshold and Prolonged Exposure

- Contrary to the assumption that hypothermia only occurs during extreme deep-freezes, research examining coroner records in Toronto shows:

72%of hypothermic deaths among unhoused Ontarians
occurred above -15°C**0°C**recommended activation threshold for low-barrier
Warming Centres

- Moderate cold (0°C to -5°C) causes physiological strain over the course of the winter, drastically exacerbating cold-related injuries, hospitalizations, emergency room visits, and deaths.

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Municipal Patchwork: Key Findings Across Ontario (2021–2023 Data)

An evaluation across nine diverse Ontario municipalities (ranging from Bancroft to Toronto) reveals a fractured and inequitable landscape:

- **Inconsistent triggers:** In establishing Warming Centres, many municipalities traditionally waited for Environment and Climate Change Canada’s Extreme Cold Weather Alerts (ECWAs)—which trigger as low as -35°C in parts of Ontario, or set arbitrary thresholds like -15°C or -20°C. These thresholds are calibrated for the general public and are inadequate to protect vulnerable individuals.
- **Toronto’s evidence-based shift:** In May 2023, the City of Toronto updated its trigger temperature to -5°C based on public health evidence, setting a precedent for lower-barrier thresholds across the province.
- **Disparity in small vs. large communities:** Small communities have proven capable of providing overnight Warming Centres (e.g., Bancroft operates one centre for ~4,000 residents throughout winter), whereas larger areas like Bracebridge (~17,000 residents) had no dedicated centres during the study period.

1 : ~4,000Bancroft — one overnight centre serving roughly
4,000 residents**0 : ~17,000**Bracebridge — no dedicated centre serving roughly
17,000 residents

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Strategic Action Plan and Recommendations for CFUW Clubs

“While Environment and Climate Change Canada’s alerts provide meteorological guidance, municipalities are encouraged to apply more protective thresholds (e.g. 0° Celsius or below, or during periods of freezing rain, ice pellets or heavy snow) in determining when to activate their cold-weather response plans.”

— Julie Dabrusin, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2025

CFUW members and Ontario Council are urged to engage local councils, Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs), and community partners using the following action steps:

- **Advocate for mandatory provincial standards:**
 - Meet with mayors, municipal councillors, and MPPs to demand consistent requirements across Ontario for low-barrier Warming Centres based on population and local need.
 - Pressure governments to override the use of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts (ECWAs) and adopt a standard policy mandating Warming Centres to open at 0°C, including wind chill, especially overnight.
- **Endorse human rights directives:**
 - Formally align local advocacy with the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) statement (February 2023), urging provincial and municipal authorities to adequately fund and provide indoor spaces around-the-clock for anyone seeking shelter.
- **Secure long-term municipal budgeting:**
 - Require municipal councils to include Warming Centres within annual budgets, integrate them into local Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) plans, and push the Ontario government for long-term operational funding formulas.
- **Community education and coalition building:**
 - Launch public education campaigns highlighting cold-exposure health risks, hypothermia prevention, and the systemic healthcare costs associated with cold-weather injuries.
 - Build partnerships with community foundations, local businesses, and health agencies to expand funding and operational capacity for local warming spaces.
 - Push for standardized tracking and reporting guidelines for homelessness-related deaths and hypothermia cases.