

# Climate change is turning air conditioning into a matter of life and death. But government help is lacking

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If it were up to Jacques Wallace, no Chicagoan would find a loved one dead of heat stress, without air conditioning, ever again.

Wallace still remembers how hot it was a decade ago when he walked into the Near West Side building where his mother, Jacqueline, lived in a studio apartment. "It was over 100 degrees in there, in the building, period," he said. "It was steaming."

A senior with a disability, Jacqueline Wallace's sole income came from a monthly Social Security check that covered her rent and little else, her son said. Air conditioners rested on the window sills of some apartments in the four-story building, but hers wasn't one of them.

On the first Friday of July 2012, Jacques Wallace had just gotten paid and was planning to buy his mom an air conditioner, he said. Instead, he found her dead at 64, one of the casualties of a particularly brutal run of hot days that month.

Guilt over his mom's death lingered with him through the years, he said. But Wallace came out the other side resolute.

"Something needs to be done," he said of legislators. "They can pass a bill ... they can get some funding for ... basic necessities like air conditioning. Because if that was the case, my mom would still be here. Or at least she wouldn't have died from the heat."

As climate change brings hotter, longer and more frequent heat waves, the health risks residents face are growing. Yet access to air conditioning at home, the simplest way to prevent heat illness and death, remains inequitable.

Some renters who spoke to the Chicago Tribune this summer said their landlords didn't provide air conditioning. In Jacqueline Wallace's building, a "bring your own" AC policy remains in effect.

In Chicago, building owners must ensure that occupants don't freeze at

home in winter, but city ordinances don't similarly protect residents from unsafe temperatures during the summer. The City Council amended Chicago's heating and cooling ordinance in June after three deaths in an overheated building, but even the alderman who sponsored that effort acknowledged that the changes were only a first step.

Illinois offers [low-income residents](#) help with their heating and energy bills through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, funded by the state and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. But applications aren't taken from June through August, when heat waves and heat deaths tend to occur.

The state hasn't had a formal cooling assistance program since 2015, even though the administration of President Joe Biden has encouraged states to provide cooling assistance as part of the program, known as LIHEAP, since July 2021 and reiterated that guidance this year.

Nearly 30 states and U.S. territories and about 100 Native American tribal grantees do provide a formal cooling program, according to a spokesperson with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In Illinois, U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that upward of 330,000 households—a conservative estimate—meet the income criteria to receive LIHEAP aid, which are based on household size.

Patricia Briggs said she tried to apply to LIHEAP this summer but it was too late to qualify. "You can't get on for help until September," she said.

In the meantime, Briggs is skimping on using the air conditioning in her new Uptown apartment to limit costs. The rent at her prior longtime apartment included electricity, Briggs said, and she doesn't want to be surprised with a charge she can't afford.

"It's so warm in the apartment," she said.

A spokesperson for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity noted in a statement that before Illinois closed LIHEAP applications in May, Gov. J.B. Pritzker granted a \$200 "summer supplemental" benefit to more than 250,000 households already enrolled in the \$405 million program.

"With rising temperatures, the state remains committed to supporting those who need it the most and we are currently evaluating options to provide additional support to Illinoisians," Emily Bolton wrote. She did not address why the state didn't adopt federal guidance to reopen its cooling program in the current year.

In the heat waves of July 2012 that Jacqueline Wallace didn't survive, at least 30 additional lives were lost, according to a review of Cook County medical examiner data.

Ten years later, Chicago saw consecutive days of triple-digit temperatures for the first time since that deadly month. But in 2022 the extreme heat came sooner, arriving in June following record-setting high temperatures in May and prompting multiple safety warnings.

To Wallace, who works as a sales and marketing representative, it is time to change the norm where some people have a safe, cool environment and others do not.

"We get so used to not being taken care of, as far as not having the things we should have as citizens, as residents of the city, especially in Black and brown communities," he said.

"We're advertised as the land of the free and home of the brave," said Wallace, a military veteran, "and here you got people dying because they

don't have air conditioning."

## 'Air conditioning is a necessity'

In addition to help with utility costs, the Biden administration has encouraged states to cover the purchase of energy efficient [air conditioners](#) or heat pumps and to provide non-monetary aid in the form of "targeted outreach."

"For households that lack air conditioning altogether, have inadequate equipment, or cannot afford the energy costs of running their units, extreme heat conditions can pose severe risks of health impacts," the Biden administration wrote in September 2021.

But in Illinois, energy assistance is limited to direct payments from the state to utility companies to help people pay their energy bills, plus a home weatherization program that can cover replacement of an existing cooling system.

Residents whose LIHEAP applications were accepted before the summer cutoff date in May said the aid is a big help in making ends meet. But people who were unaware of the deadline to apply or who encountered issues with their applications said other forms of assistance—and availability in summer—would make it easier for them to get by.

Linda Jackson, who is on a fixed disability income, said her LIHEAP application was deemed illegible. She tried to figure out how to fix it but couldn't find help, she said.

"I kept emailing. I kept calling ... nothing," said Jackson, who lives in senior housing in Uptown. "That's the one thing that raises the electricity—the air conditioning. ... It would be beneficial to at least

have (aid) in the summer."

Armando Valdovinos, of Berwyn, applied for LIHEAP assistance in April, hoping for help with his electricity and gas bills.

But two weeks before the end-of-May cutoff, Valdovinos got a rejection letter, written in English. "I don't know why," he said in Spanish.

A DCEO partner organization helped Valdovinos submit his application. He provided the Tribune a copy of the letter, citing a missing document as the reason his request for gas bill assistance was denied. Help with his mounting electricity bill didn't come either, he said.

A retired single father of two boys ages 15 and 22, Valdovinos said getting aid would mean he'd have some extra money to buy his sons clothes and food.

The family has AC in their two-bedroom apartment, but Valdovinos limits how often they turn it on.

His Social Security income leaves him with \$250 each month after paying rent. Valdovinos sometimes finds ways to make a little money to help pay bills. His oldest son also works and helps buy necessities.

"We have to struggle and do what we can," he said.

Cities and towns are often slow to adapt policies based on past weather to the new realities of [climate change](#), said environmental epidemiologist Gregory Wellenius, director of the Center for Climate and Health at Boston University.

"We acknowledge that everybody needs heat in the winter, at least in the northern climates. But there's not widespread recognition amongst the

public or even amongst many policymakers that air conditioning is a necessity rather than a luxury good," said Wellenius, who analyzed a decade of deaths across nearly 300 U.S. counties as part of a study published in the journal *Environmental Epidemiology* in 2020.

## **'How do we adapt?'**

In Chicago, Ald. Maria Hadden did take action after a trio of elderly Black women died in May in an overheated building in the Rogers Park ward she represents.

The amended ordinance she championed requires new day care, school and residential construction projects to include cooling systems and obligates owners of senior housing, high-rises and 100-plus-unit buildings to provide a communal cooling area if the heat index exceeds 80.

The vast majority of Chicagoans, however, live in buildings with fewer than 20 units, according to estimates from the Census Bureau's 2020 American Community Survey.

Hadden's chief of staff, Leslie Perkins, described the June amendment as an incremental but critical first step. Swift action was needed, but more needs to be done, said Perkins.

"How do we adapt our building code and our municipal code and city for very real changes that are here at our doorstep and prevent more deaths?" she said.

There is an air-conditioned communal room in the Lakeview high-rise where Sharron Melendez lives in senior housing. But since there's no place in that cooled space to sleep at night, she questions its usefulness.

In her own unit, the motorized scooter she needs to get around is often plugged in to charge while an air conditioner sits unused in her closet. "If I put my air conditioner on ... it blows fuses. I'm not doing that," she said. If that happens, she said, "You gotta wait three or four hours for the maintenance to come in."

Instead, she relies on fans and prayers to stay safe in the heat. A drawer next to her bed overflows with the bottles of prescription medications Melendez takes to treat multiple [chronic conditions](#).

"If he could put air conditioning downstairs, how come he can't put it through the whole building?" Melendez said of building management.

East Lake Management, which manages the building where Melendez lives, "takes the safety and comfort of our residents very seriously," said Eileen Rhodes, company president.

While some buildings the company manages have central air, Rhodes said, older buildings like Melendez's high-rise do not. Rhodes pledged company maintenance would "find a permanent solution" for residents whose air conditioning shorts out.

Meanwhile, Chicago's new cooling requirements don't apply to the building in Little Village where Joe Rio rents an apartment. Rio worked two jobs in elder care until a recent stroke left him with no income in a home without air conditioning.

"I'm at that point now where I need help myself," he said.

Members of the grassroots community organization Únete La Villita recently gave Rio an air conditioner. But he needs help installing it and is afraid to ask the landlord, given recent difficulties with his lease. So he's still relying on a single fan to get through the rest of summer.

One of the city's six cooling centers is 2 miles from Rio's home. But the stroke impaired his mobility, and during recent heat advisories Rio bided his time at home.

"I just laid in the bed," he said.

Chicago's cooling centers are operated by the Department of Family and Support Services. Data obtained from the agency through a public records request shows that during heat advisories in 2020 and 2021, no more than 10 people were recorded as using the cooling centers in any given hour.

Wellenius, the environmental epidemiologist, said research indicates that cooling centers alone aren't an effective way to save lives, noting that data from multiple cities show few people use them. (An exception, he said, was Seattle.) Possible obstacles include transportation, work, lack of mobility and discomfort in cooling center settings, sometimes located in police stations.

"Cooling centers cannot possibly be the only solution or even the most important solution to protecting people," he said. "We should try to figure out who is highest risk and how to get them help."

In addition to Chicago's six cooling centers, Family and Support Services also runs six senior centers and 15 satellite locations where seniors can go during the day, said Joseph Dutra, the agency's public affairs director.

"These locations serve as safe spaces for residents seeking refuge and relief from the weather," Dutra said.

The department's efforts to help high-risk residents during extreme heat include robocalls to seniors who use agency programs and working with service providers to connect older adults to air conditioning units or fans,

Dutra said.

If the air conditioning in a senior building isn't functioning, Dutra said, the department will conduct well-being checks and, in extreme circumstances, coordinate with other city agencies to provide an air-conditioned bus on site or transportation to a cooling center.

Transportation to cooling centers is provided to residents experiencing homelessness, he said.

## **'Unnecessary suffering'**

When Hafiz Bey-Shabazz arrives home after regular 13-hour days delivering packages, the heat inside the Austin apartment Bey-Shabazz shares with his fiancée matches the heat outside, he said.

They have a window unit that cools their place down eventually, he said. But that isn't true for all of the renters in the building of around 30 units, owned by Pangea Properties. The company, which describes itself as one of the largest landlords of market-rate housing in low-income Chicago neighborhoods, is the subject of a class-action lawsuit in which tenants allege a range of issues, including regular electricity outages.

"You only got a handful of people that actually got ACs in their window," Bey-Shabazz said. The lack of central air is a safety issue that doesn't sit right with him, he said. A building resident died of [heat stress](#) in 2015, according to Cook County medical examiner records.

"If you are in a position to help, you should. If you're in the business of renting people apartments," Bey-Shabazz said, "provide ... the necessities to live."

Pangea is "committed to providing quality, attainably priced housing" and gives back to the communities it serves by way of charitable

donations and volunteering, a company spokesperson said in an email. Chicago landlords aren't required to provide air conditioning in apartments, he noted. Regarding the electricity outages alleged in the tenants' lawsuit, he said: "While we take all resident concerns seriously, we strongly deny the allegations made in the complaint, which run counter to (Pangea's) high service standards."

Broader air conditioning protection could come in the form of legislation. Local jurisdictions that already enforce minimum residential cooling requirements include Dallas, Phoenix and Tucson in Arizona and Montgomery County, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C. The state of California is studying the possibility as part of its extreme heat action plan.

Perkins, chief of staff to Ald. Hadden, said her office is continuing talks "with the Department of Buildings and environmental agencies on how we can build off of this legislation and work toward broader protections."

Michael Mini, executive vice president of the Chicagoland Apartment Association, said the organization of landlords, property managers and developers is committed to playing a constructive role in addressing heat-related health impacts.

"The safety of all residents is our top priority. We support the principle of the recent ordinance and look forward to working with officials to ensure proper implementation," Mini wrote in an email. "Many apartment owners have already made required changes, or are working diligently to make the proper infrastructure adjustments."

He didn't comment on the association's position on the prospect of minimum cooling requirements in residential units. But, he added: "We will continue to work in partnership with public officials, residents and

community members on these vital issues."

Washington Park renter Santresa Harris said the stakes are too high for a cooling requirement not to exist.

A malfunctioning window unit made home temperatures in the 80s a "miserable" new norm for her family, said Harris, who works at a nonprofit supporting survivors of domestic violence and lives with two of her four kids.

"People pass away due to overheating," said Harris. "You would think those adjustments would have been made due to those facts, especially (for) elderly, and physically challenged people."

The company that manages the Chicago Housing Authority row home Harris rents wouldn't replace the air conditioner that's built into her wall, she said. "It's kind of the energy of: 'You better shut up and just be grateful for what you have,'" said Harris.

"It just felt like suffering, like unnecessary suffering."

East Lake Management also manages Harris' building. Rhodes, the company president, said East Lake will provide a portable air conditioner if a renter with central air is awaiting a repair and a substitute unit when a window unit malfunctions.

"It is our goal to address all [air conditioning](#) issues as quickly as possible to maintain tenants' comfort," Rhodes said.

Harris never received a substitute, though, and replaced the unit herself, with the help of the East Lake Tenants Union, in July.

In the absence of further action at City Hall, other residents have

similarly turned to community organizations for assistance.

Robin Semer, a volunteer with Únete La Villita, said the group has distributed a few used air conditioners that were donated this summer. But the need in South Lawndale outpaces what the group can supply.

"It's a Band-Aid while we're wishing that things would change," said Semer.

Her experiences helping to enroll Little Village families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a rental assistance program in 2021 sparked Semer's fear that "a real tragedy" is underway, she said.

"Lots of tenants, while they were trying to apply for money for utilities, for rent and stuff, were in the process of getting utilities shut off—during the summertime, when it was super hot. And a lot of people didn't have air conditioners, but they at least had fans. So then they didn't have fans that would work," Semer said of the disconnected families she helped.

"Things are only getting worse and are only going to keep getting worse, with the climate."

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