

Saving Lives

A Blueprint for a Statewide
Code Red Response for New Jersey

Executive Summary

Over the July 4, 2026 holiday weekend, **at least nine unhoused New Jersey residents died during an historic four-day heat wave. At least three other people are believed to have died inside overheated vehicles that had become their only shelter because they had nowhere else to go.**

Those deaths were not isolated tragedies. These were policy failures. They exposed a gap in New Jersey's emergency response system.

The heat wave killed nearly five times as many New Jersey residents from July 2-6 as all reported heat-related deaths in the state during 2025. More than 350 people sought emergency medical treatment for heat-related illnesses during those five days.ⁱ

Extreme heat is now the deadliest weather hazard in the United States, causing more deaths each year than floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, or extreme cold. For people living on the streets, in encampments, or in vehicles, the danger is exponentially greater. Global weather changes will only exacerbate this deadly trend.

At the same time, New Jersey is facing a growing homelessness crisis. Between the 2021 and 2025 Point in Time counts, homelessness increased by 70 percent. Shelters across the state are operating at or beyond capacity, leaving little room to respond when temperatures become life-threatening.

Earlier this year, the Legislature created a five-county Code Red Pilot Program through P.L.2025, c.297 (S2346). The pilot acknowledges a simple reality: extreme heat and air quality events are a public health emergency.

The deaths this summer make something else clear. **A limited pilot cannot be the state's only response when lives are at stake across all 21 counties.**

New Jersey's extreme weather emergencies are neither rare nor isolated events, but increasingly routine realities. **From 2021-2025, the average county experienced around 110 days that met the criteria for either Code Blue or Code Red each year, meaning life-threatening weather conditions exist nearly one-third of the year.ⁱⁱ**

New Jersey needs a coordinated, permanent statewide Code Red system now—one that treats people experiencing homelessness as a priority population during heat emergencies and

other life-threatening weather emergencies to ensure access to cooling, transportation, shelter, and outreach wherever and whenever dangerous temperatures occur.

The following blueprint recommends immediate executive actions that can be implemented within the next 60 days (Part I), followed by longer-term administrative and legislative reforms to establish a permanent statewide Code Red system (Parts II and III).

Part I. Save Lives This Summer: Executive Actions that can be Implemented Quickly

- A. Issue an Executive Order declaring a state of emergency when extreme heat and/or other life-threatening weather conditions occur, and designate people experiencing homelessness as a priority population during weather emergencies.**
- B. Pass an Executive Order declaring a state of emergency due to homelessness, modeled after Oregon's Executive Order 23-02.**
- C. Designate a lead State Agency with responsibility and resources for Code Red and Blue coordination and compliance.**
- D. Allow emergency shelters to expand their daytime capacity and exceed their licensed capacity up to 25% during Code Red, with reimbursement for this expanded emergency capacity.**
- E. Authorize Class II, overnight-only emergency shelters to stay open during the day during Code Red emergencies, with state reimbursement for extended hours.**
- F. Designate funds for increased street outreach during extreme weather conditions.**
- G. Provide flexible funding for emergency hotel and motel placements.**
- H. Require designated cooling centers to remain open during holidays and extended-hour emergencies.**
- I. Develop a plan to remove transportation barriers to cooling centers.**

Part II. The Roadmap: Building A Statewide Code Red Response in the Upcoming Year

- A. Expand Code Red statewide and establish a permanent funding mechanism for Code Red and Blue events.**
- B. Support the transition to seasonal warming and cooling centers.**
- C. Create an Emergency Heat Response Fund.**
- D. Establish a Chief Extreme Weather Officer.**
- E. Establish annual public reporting requirements for Code Blue and Code Red responses.**
- F. Develop statewide guidance and realistic regulations for warming and cooling centers.**
- G. Review the Code Red Pilot Program and eliminate the Point-in-Time threshold.**
- H. Provide 2-1-1 with greater resources to meet its role as an extreme weather hotline for unhoused residents.**
- I. Expand statewide shelter capacity to respond to life-threatening weather emergencies, while maintaining cooling and warming centers as a low-barrier option.**

Part III. Structural Reforms to Strengthen New Jersey's Homeless Response:

- A. Create an Ombudsperson on Homelessness, reporting directly to the Governor.**
- B. Activate the New Jersey Interagency Council on Homelessness.**

Part I. What New Jersey Can Do Right Now to Save Lives This Summer: Executive Actions that Can Be Implemented Quickly *Next 60 Days*

A. Issue an Executive Order Establishing a Statewide Heat and Other Extreme Weather Emergency Response

The Governor should issue an Executive Order declaring extreme heat as a public health emergency and create a statewide Extreme Heat Response Protocol for Vulnerable Populations, designating people experiencing homelessness as a priority population during heat emergencies.

B. Declare Homelessness as a Statewide Emergency

New Jersey should pass an Executive Order recognizing homelessness as a statewide emergency, similar to the approach used in Oregon with Executive Order 23-02. Such a declaration would acknowledge the scale of the crisis and help align state agencies around a common strategy.

C. Designate a Lead State Agency with Responsibility and Resources for Code Red and Blue Coordination and Compliance

The state must clearly assign and authorize one state agency to coordinate statewide implementation of Code Red and Code Blue, oversee county and municipal compliance with their Code Red and Blue plans, resolve operational gaps, and ensure accountability during weather emergencies.

D. Allow Emergency Shelters to Exceed Licensed Capacity Up to 25% during Code Red with Reimbursement for Increased Capacity

During extreme cold events, shelters are permitted to expand capacity temporarily under Code Blue procedures. The same flexibility should exist during extreme heat and air quality events.

When shelters accept people beyond their normal capacity, the state should reimburse them and provide emergency funding to support additional beds, overflow shelter space, additional staffing, and security and operational expenses.

E. Authorize Class II, Overnight-Only Emergency Shelters to Stay Open During the Day During Code Red Emergencies, with State Reimbursement for Extended Hours

The state should authorize Class II overnight emergency shelters to remain open during daytime hours whenever Code Red conditions are activated and provide reimbursement for the additional staffing and operating costs associated with extended hours.

F. Designate Funds for Increased Street Outreach During Extreme Weather Conditions

New Jersey must provide emergency funding to expand homeless outreach staffing and operations during extreme weather events, including conducting wellness checks, distributing water and cooling supplies, providing transportation to shelters and cooling centers, and connecting people to housing and support services.

G. Provide Flexible Funding for Emergency Hotel and Motel Placements

New Jersey must provide flexible, emergency funding to outreach teams, sheltering organizations, and other programs for temporary hotel and motel placements when shelter beds are unavailable.

H. Keep Cooling Centers Open During Holidays and Extended-Hour Emergencies

One of the most troubling lessons from the July heat emergency was that **some communities directed residents to cooling centers that were closed because of the holiday weekend. A cooling center that is closed during a heat emergency is not an emergency resource.**

When Code Red conditions are activated, counties should verify that there are cooling centers available in their Code Red execution plans that will remain open on weekends and holidays. They should also identify cooling centers that are prepared to extend operations into evenings when temperatures remain dangerous.

Counties must also ensure there are cooling centers in their Code Red execution plans that meet ADA accessibility standards and accommodate medically vulnerable residents.

I. Develop a Plan to Remove Transportation Barriers to Cooling Centers

The state should partner with NJ Transit, county transportation programs, community providers, and emergency transportation contractors to address and remove transportation barriers to cooling centers. Transportation planning should become a required element of every county Code Red plan.

Part II. The Roadmap: Building a Statewide Code Red Response System

Next 6–24 Months

The actions above (Part I) can save lives immediately. However, preventing future deaths requires more than emergency measures; it requires a permanent statewide Code Red system with dedicated resources, clear standards and accountability, and coordinated leadership.

The Legislature took an important first step when it created a five-county Code Red Pilot Program. However, this summer’s historic death toll makes clear that we cannot afford to wait for the results of the Pilot Program before expanding Code Red to every county statewide.

Extreme weather is no longer an occasional emergency in New Jersey. With the average county experiencing approximately 110 days each year that meet either Code Red or Code Blue criteria, New Jersey should support counties in transitioning to a seasonal warming and cooling center model that provides reliable access to refuge throughout the summer and winter months, utilizing the Hudson County Warming Center model as a best practice.

New Jersey must begin now to build an extreme weather response system that protects and keeps every vulnerable resident alive, regardless of where they live.

A. Expand Code Red Statewide and Establish Permanent Funding Mechanism for Code Red and Blue Responses

Every county must be required to participate in a statewide Code Red system with consistent activation standards, clearly designated lead agencies, and uniform public communication protocols. Counties must submit comprehensive Code Red execution plans to a designated state agency and update these plans annually.

To expand Code Red statewide and support strong Code Blue and Code Red responses in every county, New Jersey must establish a dedicated funding mechanism for both Code Red and Code Blue responses. The Code Blue statute did not include attached dedicated funding, which has proven to be a major, persistent limitation in its implementation. While the Code Red Pilot rightfully recognized the need for funding and the NJ Department of Human Services has since begun allocating \$2.5 million annually for Code Blue implementation, current funding levels should be reviewed to ensure they are sufficient. Burlington County, for example, declined to participate in the pilot because the available funding of \$500,000 for the three-year period did not cover the anticipated implementation costs.

B. Support the Transition to Seasonal Warming and Cooling Centers

When nearly a third of the days each year in the average county meet either the Code Blue or Code Red standards, a system that relies on activations whenever temperatures rise above or dip below a certain threshold is an increasingly reactive and less effective approach that proves difficult for vulnerable residents to navigate.

The state should support a transition to seasonal warming and cooling centers that provide predictable, reliable access throughout the summer and winter months. Hudson County's CSPNJ-operated Warming Center demonstrates that this approach is feasible and easier for residents and service providers to navigate. New Jersey should provide funding, technical assistance, and operational support to help counties transition to and adopt this best practice.

C. Create an Emergency Heat Response Fund

Extreme weather emergencies require immediate resources, and emergency managers should not have to search for funding in the middle of a crisis. New Jersey should establish a dedicated Emergency Heat Response Fund to allow rapid deployment of funding for cooling center operations, expanded emergency shelter capacity, outreach efforts, transportation assistance, water and hydration supplies, and temporary hotel/motel placements.

D. Establish a State Chief Extreme Weather Officer

Recognizing that extreme heat demands year-round planning rather than short-term responses, Arizona became the first state to create a Chief Heat Officer. New Jersey should create a similar position to coordinate statewide extreme weather preparedness, interagency planning, data collection, and public education campaigns.

E. Develop Statewide Guidance and Regulations for Cooling and Warming Centers

New Jersey should establish uniform statewide guidance and operating standards for warming and cooling centers. Current practices vary widely; many cooling centers are public buildings not staffed or resourced for Code Red that are open only during business hours.

Some warming centers impose restrictions like prohibiting the use of cots and requiring people to remain seated upright throughout the entire night that discourage their use — with some people choosing to sleep in abandoned buildings because they can at least lie down. These practices, in part, appear to reflect uncertainty and the lack of clear guidance about what warming and cooling

centers are permitted to provide before they are considered shelters and must meet shelter licensing, health, safety, and staffing requirements.

The Department of Community Affairs should issue statewide standards for cooling and warming centers that clarify operations, clearly allow the use of cots, and provide staff training on connecting visitors to housing and supportive services.

F. Establish Annual Public Reporting Requirements and Improve Transparency for Code Red and Blue Responses

New Jersey cannot improve its extreme weather response without consistent statewide data. Counties should be required to annually update their Code Red and Code Blue plans and report activations, service utilization, capacity limitations, turn-aways from cooling and warming centers, and weather-related illnesses and deaths to a designated state agency. The state should publish this information through a real-time public dashboard and require every county to maintain a standardized, multilingual webpage with its current activation procedures, directory of shelter, cooling, and warming center resources, and the county's operation plan for that year.

G. Review Lessons Learned from the Code Red Pilot Program and Eliminate the Point-in-Time Threshold

New Jersey should evaluate lessons learned from the Code Red Pilot Program, including feedback from providers and people with lived experience, while addressing barriers that limit participation. The current Code Blue law and the Code Red Pilot require municipalities to have at least ten documented people experiencing homelessness based on the annual Point-in-Time count before they are required to participate in Code Blue or Code Red coordination. Because the Point-in-Time count is a known undercount, eligibility for lifesaving protections should not depend on this threshold. The state should eliminate the requirement or alternatively utilize the more accurate HMIS data.

H. Provide 2-1-1 with Greater Resources to Meet its Role as an Extreme Weather Hotline for Unhoused Residents

During Code Red and Code Blue emergencies, timely information about shelter, transportation, and cooling or warming centers saves lives. While New Jersey's 2-1-1 system plays a role in connecting unhoused residents to services during extreme weather events, it currently manages a broad range of responsibilities with insufficient resources. The state should provide 2-1-1 with the resources necessary to fulfill its role effectively as the dedicated emergency hotline for people experiencing homelessness during Code Red and Code Blue events.

I. Expand Statewide Shelter Capacity to Respond to Life-Threatening Weather Emergencies, while Maintaining Cooling and Warming Centers as a Low-Barrier Option

Our state must create a statewide emergency response system that ensures no person is forced to endure life-threatening weather conditions without access to safety. New Jersey should provide sufficient shelter capacity for the vast majority of unhoused residents who seek emergency shelter. Every person who enters the shelter system should be rapidly connected to potentially life-saving long-term supports—including housing, health care, behavioral health treatment, income assistance, and employment services—transforming an emergency intervention into an opportunity for lasting recovery and stability.

At the same time, we must guarantee that every county offers low-barrier-to-entry warming and cooling centers for those who need protection but choose not to enter traditional shelter programs.

Part III. Structural Reforms to Strengthen New Jersey’s Homeless Response

A. Create an Ombudsperson for Homelessness, Reporting Directly to the Governor

An independent Homelessness Ombudsperson would investigate complaints, identify service gaps and review barriers to assistance, and report findings directly to the Governor. Independent oversight would bring greater transparency and accountability to the state's homeless response, especially related to extreme weather events.

B. Activate the New Jersey Interagency Council on Homelessness

The state already has a mechanism for cross-agency coordination, but our understanding is that there is still one remaining appointment from the Senate President that needs to be made before the Council can fully convene. The Council should be activated as soon as possible to coordinate statewide planning and response to homelessness during extreme weather events.

Conclusion

The question before New Jersey is not whether extreme heat poses a threat. This summer has already answered that.

The question is whether the state will respond with the urgency the moment demands.

The Legislature acknowledged the danger when it created a Code Red Pilot Program. The events of July 2026 showed that the challenge extends far beyond five counties.

The people who died during the July heat wave were not victims of the weather alone. They were also victims of a system that left them without safe places to go when temperatures became dangerous.

New Jersey has the opportunity to act before the next crisis arrives. By expanding Code Red statewide, strengthening emergency coordination, increasing shelter and cooling capacity, and treating people experiencing homelessness as a priority population during extreme weather, the state can build a permanent response that saves lives.

The measure of success is simple: when the next heat emergency comes, no one should die because they have nowhere safe to go.

ⁱ Stainton, Lilo H. “Holiday Weekend Heat-Deaths Labeled ‘Mass Casualty Event’ by Advocates.” *New Jersey Monitor*, 10 July 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/njmonitorheatdeaths>. This article cites from [the NJ Department of Health Heat-Related Illness Dashboard](#).

ⁱⁱ NJ Coalition to End Homelessness internal data examining the number of days that met Code Blue or Code Red conditions across all 21 counties from 2021-2025, pulling from the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\) Climate Data Online](#), [Iowa Environmental Mesonet’s Archive of National Weather Service heat advisories](#), and [the Environmental Protection Agency’s daily air quality index by county](#). Air quality index data was not available for all counties in all years, so when unavailable, we relied on heat advisory information to determine Code Red days. Gloucester county data was unavailable for Code Blue days.