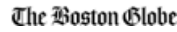


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Hazy, hot, and unhealthy

City workers check in on elderly and others in need of relief

By **Laura J. Nelson**
Globe Correspondent / July 22, 2011

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When Margaret Flynn, 85, answered the knock at her apartment door, she found a cluster of city employees looking at her with concern, some clutching paper fans and water bottles, others dabbing at beads of sweat on their upper lips.

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“Is there anything you need?” asked Emily K. Shea, commissioner of elderly affairs, as she peered from the stifling corridor into Flynn’s apartment in the North End’s Ausonia Apartments. “Are you staying cool in there? Do you want a bottle of water?”

Flynn assured them she was all right, then took the water.

“I’m just glad I got my air conditioner replaced,” she said as the cool air from her apartment wafted into the humid hallway. “It gets pretty hot up here.”

As temperatures and humidity in Boston rose past stifling and toward unbearable

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yesterday, Flynn and hundreds of other elderly residents received visits from representatives from the Elderly Commission and the Boston Housing Authority. The very old and very young are particularly at risk for

health problems in severe heat.

Temperatures are expected to be in the high 90s today, but throw in humidity, and it will feel more like 105 degrees, said Rebecca Gould, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service. Even if temperatures are lower than expected, Gould said, they will still be high enough to push Boston into the throes of an official heat wave, the third consecutive day of temperatures above 90.

Yesterday morning, at Jordan Hospital in Plymouth, the medical center closed its emergency department to trauma victims and postponed more than 30 surgeries after air conditioning in two key departments broke down, affecting eight operating rooms and the patient intake floor.

Ambulances that would have brought trauma victims to Jordan instead drove 20 to 25 miles to the nearest hospitals equipped to handle those patients, said hospital spokesman Christopher Smalley. Nontrauma patients were relocated to air-conditioned wings.

Replacement parts were expected to arrive late last night or early this morning, Smalley said, along with a temporary unit to cool the emergency department and operating rooms in the meantime.

“There’s this perception that this entire hospital is without air conditioning, and that is not the case,” Smalley said. “It’s pretty hot in that wing, but we did have portable AC units hooked up during the height of the heat, and this is one of several buildings.”

A heat advisory from Mayor Thomas M. Menino’s office reminded Boston residents about the vulnerability of children and the elderly and recommended drinking plenty of water, wearing light colors, and keeping physical activity to a minimum.

Even after temperatures break, hospitals expect an uptick in people complaining of nausea and dizziness, two key signs of dehydration.

“After the heat wave ends, there continue to be issues because people will be chronically dehydrated for a few days,” said Lori Shanks, a spokeswoman for Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Taking sleeping pills to get through a hot summer night will only make dehydration and discomfort worse, Shanks said. Sleeping pills suppress sweat, and without that function, the body cannot cool itself.

City employees and businesses continue to struggle with a huge volume of requests, ranging from making grocery trips to getting blocks of ice. No relief is in sight until things cool off tomorrow night and Sunday, when temperatures are expected to hover in the mid-80s.

Vilma Valentin, a community service advocate with the Elderly Commission, said she ran to the grocery store for a woman who had no food in her house but was afraid to go out into the heat.

“We’re not normally a grocery-shopping service, but we’ll do whatever it takes to keep people cool,” she said as she rested in the air-conditioned common area of the Ausonia complex. The mayor’s office placed 28,000 automated calls to older residents to reinforce safe heat practices, and the Boston



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Housing Authority knocked on every door yesterday in all 36 housing buildings with elderly-disabled designations.

Boston Emergency Medical Services has three extra ambulances, an additional supervisor, and an extra dispatcher working through tomorrow night, said spokeswoman Jennifer Mehigan.

The heat has stressed non-medical services, too, including a demand for ice that far exceeds the daily 50-ton capacity at a local company. Brookline Ice & Coal has been churning out ice and placing it in rented deep-freezer storage units since winter to prepare for the summer rush, spokeswoman Charlotte Ploss said.

"It's exactly the same as when a big snowstorm is predicted, and you get a run on batteries and milk and bread," Ploss said. "We sell a lot of panic."

The company expects three times the normal amount of orders today, many from grocery stores fearing power brown-outs and construction workers who need ice for their water.

"Construction sites?" Ploss said. "Can you imagine pouring concrete on a day like today?"

In Allston yesterday, near the intersection of Commonwealth and Harvard avenues, John Shaughnessy of South Boston watched his co-workers on the roof of an electrical substation.

"Roofers have the toughest job in the world during the summertime," Shaughnessy said, making sure they did not interfere with the mechanics inside the century-old facility. But, he said, the roofers are used to it.

At the Ausonia Apartments, the stifling heat brought one silver lining: In the afternoon, as the sweltering temperatures peaked, residents sat in the air-conditioned common room enjoying ice cream. "I really don't need the ice cream, but why not?" Flynn said. "It's not this hot every day."

Globe correspondents Matt Rocheleau and Amanda Cedrone contributed to this report. Laura J. Nelson can be reached at lnelson@globe.com. ■

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