PARKER RURAL HEAT LISTENING SESSION REPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
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Southwest Center on Resilience for Climate & Health

Key Takeaways

Local organizations and community partners are already playing an important role in supporting residents during extreme heat. Participants described active efforts including cooling centers, water distribution on Tribal lands, and wellness checks for Elders and other vulnerable residents during power outages.

Heat information is shared through several channels, but gaps remain in reaching all residents. Heat alerts and safety information are shared through radio, Facebook, flyers, and community networks. However, residents without smartphones or reliable internet access may miss updates, and there is no consistent, accessible alert system that reaches everyone.

Infrastructure and access challenges increase vulnerability during extreme heat events. Participants described barriers including transportation, aging power infrastructure prone to outages, and limited local capacity to repair electrical failures quickly during extreme heat conditions.

Participants described that Tribes feel protective and tend to operate independently, creating coordination gaps that can leave community members without support. Resources shared through Tribal channels are often assumed by non-Tribal community members to be unavailable to them, and there is a noted need for greater collaboration between Tribal and non-Tribal systems.

Participants expressed interest in stronger coordination and planning across organizations. Opportunities identified include establishing clearer heat response trigger points, improving communication between Tribal and non-Tribal systems, and convening partners before the start of the heat season.

Session Overview

The Parker Rural Heat Listening Session took place on Wednesday, August 20, 2025, at the Parker Walk-in Clinic. The session was conducted by the ***Southwest Center on Resilience for Climate and Health (SCORCH)****, in collaboration with the* ***Regional Center for Border Health, Inc.,*** *the* ***Arizona Center for Rural Health,*** *and the* ***Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS)****. The session included 12 participants across 3 discussion groups, each facilitated and documented by a SCORCH team member. Participants represented community health centers, an emergency management office, a hospital, local non-profits , and Tribal government/ health services. Unless otherwise noted, information in this summary reflects the perspectives of both Tribal and non-Tribal community members in and around Parker, Arizona, in La Paz County.*

Suggested citation: Chin S, Block Ngaybe M, Tucker K, Garn A, Arora M. Parker Rural Heat Listening Session Summary. (2026) University of Arizona Southwest Center on Resilience Climate and Health.

Opportunities

Participants identified several opportunities to strengthen heat preparedness and response:

Policy

- Strengthen regional coordination and leadership engagement by exploring Western Arizona Council of Governments (WACOG) town halls for regional conversations about heat and engaging Tribal councils, town councils, and county leadership to elevate heat as a priority issue.
- Address specific heat relief needs by allowing pets in cooling centers or providing collapsible crates, providing cooling vests or towels for athletes, and developing contingency plans and memoranda of understanding for moving people from hospitals, nursing homes, and schools during prolonged heat emergencies.

Infrastructure

- Expand access to cooling and hydration by establishing mobile cooling and hydration stations, expanding and better equipping cooling centers within town limits, exploring use of the high school gym as a cooling space, increasing distribution of water and electrolytes, and providing transportation through vouchers, free shuttles, and volunteer drivers.
- Improve infrastructure for extreme heat by updating the power grid, restoring hydration fountains and a community pool, reinstating water safety education and an aquatics program, and adding covered or solar-shaded parking, trees, and shaded public spaces.

Communication

- Improve heat alerts and communication by developing an accessible alert system modeled after fire risk radio broadcasts, including an amber alert-style system for heat risk. Use intermittent radio alerts and centrally located messaging boards to reach residents without internet or smartphones, and provide picture-based heat illness materials and door-to-door outreach.

Community Preparedness

- Strengthen heat preparedness before and during heat season through springtime AC maintenance reminders and education, pre-season partner meetings, formal temperature trigger points for activating heat response, and monitoring programs for elderly residents.

Community Context

Participants described that the non-Tribal population in La Paz County is concentrated along highway corridors within approximately one mile, while Tribal communities are more geographically scattered. They also described a large Elder population, with many residents living in mobile homes or trailers that do not cool effectively. Participants noted increases in emergency room visits and heat-related deaths over the past two years. Heat season was described as beginning as early as March or April and extending through the end of September, with temperatures reaching as high as 127°F or 130°F.

Relief and Preparedness Efforts

Participants described a range of active heat relief efforts in place. Cooling centers operate at
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casinos, libraries, fire departments, senior centers, community centers, and occasionally churches. CRIT Homeland Security provides water cases directly to Elders on the reservation, and the CRIT Senior Center and Community Health Representatives (CHRs) conduct wellness checks on Elders and vulnerable community members during power outages. The youth center extends its hours from 12 to 6pm during the summer. Additional efforts include a pre-heat season program to check air conditioning units, home assessments to fund AC repair or replacement for eligible Tribal Elders and vulnerable community members, and a portable cooler loan program. Participants noted that APS may prioritize residents with medical conditions for electricity restoration during outages, and the Red Cross has provided support for Elders during past outage events. These efforts are supplemented by community donations of AC units and water, partnerships with churches and food banks such as St. Mary's, and organizations like WACOG that provide limited utility assistance.

In terms of coordination and planning, organizations rely on the National Weather Service (NWS) and ADHS for official heat alerts, which are then communicated internally by a CEO or safety officer. Participants described that an Incident Command System may be activated during escalating conditions such as multi-day power outages, and Tribes have emergency plans in place, particularly for monsoon season when powerlines get knocked down. Social determinants of health assessments are conducted on patients to ensure they have the resources they need during heat season, and CHRs conduct biweekly telechecks for high-risk patients including elderly individuals, veterans, and people who live alone. Cooling stations are only activated under specific triggers such as power outages, with staffing challenges requiring coordination with the Red Cross in Yuma. Participants noted a need for more collaboration between Tribal and non-Tribal systems.

Trust

Participants noted that when information or resources are shared through Tribal channels, non-Tribal community members often assume those resources are not available to them. Participants described that Tribes feel protective and tend to operate independently, with the COVID-19 response in Parker

cited as an example of a deeply divided dynamic between Tribal and non-Tribal responses. Participants also noted that Tribes maintain a monthly-updated registry of vulnerable community members, while tracking of vulnerable non-Tribal residents is, as one participant described, “just a guess.”

Information Sharing and Alerts

Alert Systems

The alert system has notable gaps. Formal heat alerts originate from NWS and are broadcast through weather applications and Havasu FM radio stations, though radio alerts are issued only every three hours. For Tribal communities, a text messaging system exists but is reserved primarily for emergency situations. CRIT’s media department and the Town of Parker Arizona Facebook page post cooling center information. The NWS app was noted as working well for those with smartphones. Participants noted the absence of a consistent Tribal media director, and BIA Electric has no outage notification page and operates only Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm.

Information Sharing

Information on heat and resources is shared through Facebook, radio, printed flyers, a local newspaper, and direct phone calls. Outreach has focused primarily on Elders, with youth receiving comparatively little heat education. Participants noted that flyers often have too many words and that picture-based materials showing heat illness symptoms would be more effective. Door-to-door outreach was described as highly effective, particularly for reaching Elders. Online-only resource applications exclude people with disabilities, Elders, and those without internet access, and some residents rely only on landlines. Participants noted that the heat.az.gov cooling center map lists many locations in Phoenix and Tucson, with far fewer listed elsewhere in the state.

Participants identified the following communication gaps:

- No consistent, accessible alert system for residents not engaged with digital platforms.
- No consistent Tribal media director, making it difficult to reach Tribal members without internet access.
- Limited outreach to youth.
- No general repository of information to direct all community members to.
- A cultural tendency to underestimate heat risk, with participants noting that heat is "not a hot topic" and that community buy-in from leadership is lacking.

Heat Thresholds

Participants described varying perceptions of extreme heat. One participant stated, "110 is considered cool. 115–118 is when we start to feel the heat," while others noted, "High 90s is a beautiful day — 117 you can feel it on your skin. About 117 or 120 and above, it's hot. It's subjective. Above 110 is extreme." There is no fixed institutional temperature threshold that triggers heat relief services, which participants described as a significant gap. One participant stated the need for "formalizing a structure, set a trigger point temperature."

The most concrete threshold system described was the Parker Panthers youth football and cheerleading program (ages 4–12): at 118°F or higher, practice does not occur; at 116–117°F, athletes practice without protective equipment with water breaks; at 115°F, water breaks are required every 20 minutes minimum. Participants described 110°F as an informal activation point for heat alerts, with conditions worsening above 120°F when wind creates a convection oven effect.

Risk Factors and Impacts

Populations of Concern

Participants identified several populations at elevated risk during extreme heat. Older adults living in trailers that do not cool effectively are particularly vulnerable, and retirees and snowbirds who remain in the area year-round may account for higher mortality rates. Dialysis patients are especially vulnerable due to strict fluid and dietary restrictions; CHRs provide transportation for dialysis patients, but rides must be scheduled at least a week in advance. Patients on long-term medication whose bodies react differently as temperatures rise were also identified as a concern. Children often walk home from school in extreme heat and may not know the signs and symptoms of heat illness. Outdoor workers including utility and HVAC workers have limited flexibility to adjust work schedules during dangerous conditions, with some required to go on rooftops at 3pm during peak heat. People experiencing homelessness were noted as a visible presence in the community and a population of concern.

For Tribal communities specifically, participants noted that even during power outages, some residents resist leaving their homes due to a cultural mindset that heat is normal and manageable. Recreational river use presents additional risk, particularly for people consuming alcohol, who may be more likely to overheat due to dehydration. The annual Parker Tube Float in June consistently results in several heat-related hospitalizations.

Documented Impacts

La Paz County has seen increasing emergency room visits and heat-related deaths over the past two years. Desert rescues are high in La Paz County, particularly among transients and visitors who underestimate the heat. The Department of Economic Security's reduction of office days to twice per week created long lines in extreme heat for residents seeking assistance. Participants described a case of a baby with a recent liver transplant spending an entire night without air conditioning due to a power outage and communication failures between agencies. River drownings among children were also noted, with dehydrated children being carried away by currents.

Resilience

Participants described how community members cope with extreme heat. One participant noted, "Everyone is just 'used to it,'" describing how people respond by going inside, going to the river, or going to the casino. Older practices such as being more nocturnal and building double-roof structures for shade have been largely lost as air conditioning became standard. The Colorado River is a primary natural cooling resource, with many residents going to the river or sitting on the beach to cope with heat. The community has a small splash pad, and parks including Western Park and City Park have shaded structures. Trees have recently been planted in town, including at Western Park.

Youth-serving programs demonstrated strategies to support resilience. Schools relocate students to classrooms or the cafeteria when AC is unavailable, and the Parker Panthers youth football and cheerleading program uses a tiered temperature-based practice protocol to protect young athletes. The youth center extends hours after May and provides a structured cooling and activity environment for children. One participant described it as offering "a hang out spot — get out of the house, escape the heat."

Community Needs

Barriers to Accessing Existing Resources

accessing existing heat resources. Taxi costs of $40–$50 one way are prohibitive, transportation services are limited, most cooling centers require a car to access, and the cost to park at the river is approximately $20. CRIT services are limited to Tribal members, meaning non-Tribal Elders and families must seek assistance from separate organizations such as the Salvation Army for hotel rooms during emergencies. Assistance programs more broadly have strict eligibility criteria and very limited funding, and even when AC units are installed, some residents cannot afford the electricity to run them. Participants also noted that the exclusion of pets from cooling centers discourages Elders and people with mental health conditions from seeking help, and suggested allowing pets or providing collapsible crates so residents do not have to choose between their safety and their animals.

Outdated transformers and power grids are vulnerable to failure during extreme heat and monsoon events, and there is no local capacity to address outages without contractors from Yuma or Lake Havasu. The former Parker community pool was replaced by a splash pad that participants described as small and insufficient. An aquatics program with swimming lessons was discontinued when the program coordinator retired and the town stopped supporting it. Water hydration fountains are unreliable or absent in key park locations.

Missing Stakeholders and Collaboration Gaps

Participants identified several organizations and sectors absent from current heat response coordination, including utility companies, transportation services, the Red Cross, the Sheriff's Department, police, EMS, library representatives, casino representatives who could open banquet rooms for cooling, domestic violence shelters including St. Vincent's, and city and town council members. Participants noted that lower-level partners are willing to work together but that upper-level political leadership has not engaged. Leadership at the Tribal council level and the La Paz County Superintendent level is essential for moving coordination forward.

Funding and Data Gaps

Services are often inconsistent or limited depending on available funds and resources. Participants noted a need for increased, sustained funding and partnerships with local and state health departments for both technical and financial support. There is a need for up-to-date, comprehensive lists of available resources including eligibility criteria, as well as localized heat-related illness data that reflects rural realities. Participants noted the importance of using mortality data to make the case to Tribal councils, town councils, and La Paz County Superintendents that heat is a growing emergency.

Conclusion

Participants came to this session with deep knowledge of their community and were clear about what is and isn't working. The organizations in the room are already doing the work stretching limited resources and filling gaps that no formal system has been designed to fill. What came through just as clearly is that heat has never been the focus that brings everyone together, and that the increasing deaths and emergency room visits over the past two years are a signal the community is ready to act on. As one participant put it:

> *"Sounds like we need more collaboration and trigger points ... seeing more people from the ER and dying from it in the last two years. Maybe this is silent, but could help to make more efforts to counteract."*