

SOMERTON RURAL HEAT LISTENING SESSION REPORT



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**Southwest Center on
Resilience for Climate
& Health**

Key Takeaways

Local organizations are already responding to extreme heat, but resources are stretched thin and unsustainable. Cooling centers are 100% volunteer-driven with no dedicated funding, and organizations describe covering too much ground with too little support.

The alert system that tracks the most dangerous heat conditions is not accessible to the public. Black flag conditions, meaning it is too dangerous to be outdoors, occur approximately 90% of days by noon in Yuma. Emergency responders rely on the MCAS flag system to track this, but community members have no access to it.

The community lacks local data needed to make the case for resources and funding. Heat deaths and hospitalizations are not tracked at the local level, making it difficult to secure funding or demonstrate the scale of need.

Heat has never been the organizing focus that brings the community together, but participants are ready to change that. There are active, well-attended coalitions around homelessness, mental health, and substance use. Participants called for the same coordinated focus on heat, with earlier pre-season meetings, broader partner engagement, and dedicated funding.

Session Overview

*The Somerton Rural Heat Listening Session took place on Tuesday, August 19, 2025, at the **Regional Center for Border Health, Inc** conference room. 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 21 participants across 4 discussion groups, each facilitated and documented by a SCORCH team member. Participants included representatives from community health centers, local nonprofits, health departments, law enforcement and police departments, fire departments, education, a food bank, and other organizations.*



Opportunities

Participants proposed the following improvements to heat response:

Policy

- ▶ Explore how military heat guidelines could be adapted for community use.
- ▶ Develop stronger labor protections for outdoor workers, including H-2A agricultural workers.
- ▶ Improve data collection on hospitalizations, electricity costs, and heat-related health impacts at the local level.
- ▶ Engage county emergency management, elected officials, CBP, MCAS, BLM, the Sheriff's Office, and the Cocopah Reservation in heat planning.
- ▶ Pursue funding through ACF and other statewide sources for heat-related nonprofit projects.

Infrastructure

- ▶ Expand access to cooling options, including free community pool access and use of school gyms during summer months.
- ▶ Plant trees and add shade structures to address heat pockets and improve public spaces.
- ▶ Build or support an indoor recreational space for families to exercise safely during the heat season.

Communication

- ▶ Conduct more outreach within cooling centers to understand why people are there and connect them to relevant services, such as utility assistance if their AC is broken.
- ▶ Integrate heat awareness and safety information into the summer free school lunch program to reach families through an existing touchpoint.
- ▶ Improve public education through schools, laundromats, libraries, and community events.
- ▶ Re-establish Spanish-language public service announcements.

Community Preparedness

- ▶ Hold coordination meetings earlier in the year, before the heat season begins, to connect partners and identify available resources across cities and nonprofits.
- ▶ Develop a dedicated heat coalition with representation across sectors, or integrate heat into existing coalitions such as the homeless or mental health coalitions.
- ▶ Host a spring expo to bring community partners together and share information on available resources.
- ▶ Explore partnerships with large corporations such as Walmart and local distributors who have infrastructure to get resources to the community quickly.



Relief and Preparedness Efforts

The Yuma County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) serves as the coordination hub during emergencies such as power outages, bringing together law enforcement, hospitals, and the health department to coordinate a response. When a hot day is anticipated, the prehospital coordinator or fire department contacts the hospital in advance to prepare for incoming heat-related cases. For monsoon-related outages, the shelter activation process is systematic and works reasonably quickly, usually within an hour or so. The fire department proactively calls elderly residents during hot periods to remind them to stay hydrated and to offer support if needed.

At the community level, cooling centers operate at 24 locations across the region, though only three have water on site and all run entirely on donations and volunteers. Crossroads Mission conducts outreach year-round, delivering water, ice, masks, clothing, and basic necessities directly to people experiencing homelessness. Police officers join this effort during the heat season. When temperatures reach 110°F and above, Crossroads Mission increases water distribution, sometimes providing up to a full case of water. When heat exhaustion or heat stroke occurs, Crossroads Mission provides emergency response at its in-house detox center, with possible transfer to the hospital or a call to Rural Metro.

Police and fire departments provide transportation support, with police being more flexible in transporting individuals to desired locations. The health department has developed a map of water and cooling stations distributed via social media and in English and Spanish newspapers. Community health workers conduct home visits to discuss medication side effects and heat vulnerability. Law enforcement and fire departments stock water, Gatorade, and ice for emergency responders during heat season. During power outages, police set up cooling centers at the cultural center and other sites.

Trust

Not everyone feels comfortable seeking help, and trust plays a central role in who does. Some community members distrust certain agencies, particularly Border Patrol, and may refuse services from them. Many spaces advertise themselves as "safe spaces" but are not always experienced as welcoming, and the comfort level of cooling center patrons can depend on who is running the space. This extends to information as well; people are more likely to trust data they contributed to.

Despite these challenges, personal relationships are at the heart of outreach in these communities. Police and fire departments know many individuals experiencing homelessness by name and conduct regular patrols to check on them. Crossroads Mission staff do the same — in one instance, a staff member found a man walking in extreme heat in Wellton, gave him water, food, and a bus ticket, and helped him reach his family. Where formal systems fall short, these personal connections fill the gap.

Information Sharing and Alerts

Information Sharing

Public service announcements via social media, radio, and television are key outreach tools, covering signs and symptoms of heat stroke and guidance on what to do during extreme heat. One participant noted that heat education has become normalized over time, "like wearing your seatbelt." Printed flyers and maps of cooling and water stations are distributed in English and Spanish through newspapers and direct outreach. For providers, in-person meetings work best. For the general community, Spanish radio, newspapers, and local media are more effective.



Heat awareness has begun to be integrated into existing coalitions, for example, substance abuse programs have started incorporating heat education. Yuma Town Hall events and webinars have been effective for raising awareness among organizations. Despite these efforts, significant communication gaps remain. Social media does not reach people experiencing homelessness or elderly residents who are not online. County television Channel 77 carries many public service announcements but requires a cable subscription of approximately \$100 per month, a barrier for low-income residents. Printed flyers are sometimes discarded immediately. Yuma has discontinued Spanish-language public service announcements, a gap that participants said needs to be addressed. One participant stated: "Yuma is no longer doing them in Spanish and need to start again."

Alert Systems

The MCAS (Marine Corps Air Station) flag system is the primary formal alert mechanism used by police and emergency responders. It designates yellow, green, red, and black flag days based on heat risk. A black flag indicates that no physical activity should take place outdoors, and black flag conditions occur approximately 90% of days by noon in Yuma. Red flag notifications trigger mass email alerts and SMS messages to dispatchers and emergency personnel. The system is not accessible to the general public; it is designed for military personnel and select emergency responders. Schools use a separate flag system to indicate heat risk. Other alert mechanisms include weather news and social media.



Heat Thresholds

There is no single formal temperature threshold that triggers heat response. Instead, responses are flexible and adapt to observed community needs and activity patterns, with different temperatures prompting different actions. For example, one participant identified 111°F and above as the start of the heat season; at 110°F, water distribution at Crossroads Mission intensifies; at 115°F or higher, workers and trainees shift all physical activity to cooler hours and avoid midday exertion. Many consider 100°F tolerable "as long as there is a bit of a breeze," and under 110°F, "it's not a big deal." Football games are played even when temperatures exceed 100°F. Heat season is cyclical, with cooling centers typically opening around June through October, though heat extends well beyond those months. November temperatures can still reach 100°F, and the first heat call in a recent year came as early as January.

Risk Factors and Impacts

Populations of Concern

Several populations face elevated risk during extreme heat. People experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable. They are often unable to escape the heat even with shade, must walk or wait at unshaded bus stops, and many will not access shelters because pets are not allowed. Elderly residents are highly vulnerable due to medications, mobility issues, and fixed incomes, and their bodies cannot regulate temperature as effectively. Residents in housing without functional air conditioning are at risk, as wall units are expensive to run and insufficient for multi-room homes. Mobile homes and trailers reach dangerously high interior temperatures, and many have small or broken refrigerators that limit safe food and medication storage. Farmworkers, particularly younger H-2A workers (foreign temporary agricultural workers), often do not recognize early heat illness symptoms and feel pressure to finish the workday. Older farmworkers tend to use protective clothing such as long sleeves and wide-brimmed hats. Beyond farmworkers, people with substance use disorder and those on psychiatric or blood pressure medications also face increased heat sensitivity. Across community members, a prevailing cultural attitude that heat is not a serious issue also shapes the community's response. As one participant put it: "If you grow up here, you never think about it, it's just hot, it's not a big deal." This attitude makes it harder to mobilize community action around heat.

Documented Impacts

Participants described a range of health and financial impacts tied to extreme heat. Reduced access to exercise due to extreme heat compounds chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, which have high prevalence in Yuma County. Higher temperatures directly increase electricity bills, forcing some households to choose between paying for electricity, water, food, or medicine. This financial strain has broader consequences; participants identified it as a primary driver of domestic violence and child abuse, and some families conceal overcrowding during home visits out of fear of losing housing. Heat also has an impact on children. They are restricted from outdoor recess and experience burns from metal playground equipment. Sports schedules are shifting due to rising temperatures. Schools currently play only basketball indoors in August and start other sports later in the season. One participant noted: "When I was a kid, I had recess, but not anymore."

Infrastructure

The river and local canals serve as informal cooling destinations, particularly for people experiencing homelessness, though many lack the mobility or means to get there and instead shelter under tarps, tents, or trees. Centennial Park's fountain and park restrooms serve as informal gathering spots.



Libraries and Crossroads Mission attract more consistent traffic than designated cooling centers and are described as "natural places to gather."

Built infrastructure gaps are also significant. Playgrounds have no shade structures, preventing children from going outside safely during school hours. School buildings are old with inadequate or non-functional air conditioning and ventilation. Participants called for a "weather day" so that AC systems can be serviced and made functional during the summer. Bus stops lack shade, trees, or drinking water stations. Public transportation is infrequent, available only during early mornings or late at night with limited route connectivity. The YMCA has closed, and throughout South Yuma County participants said they "cannot name one place" for families to exercise together indoors. One participant raised a question about development priorities: "How many parks are being put in compared to new subdivisions?"

Resilience

Community members have developed a range of ways to cope with extreme heat. Scheduling outdoor activity during early morning or evening hours is common among residents and workers, and older farmworkers use long sleeves and wide-brimmed hats for protection. One early morning running group, organized through social media, grew through word of mouth into a large group and was featured on local news. Over time, heat education has become normalized in some respects, with one participant describing it as "like wearing your seatbelt." As one participant put it: "The best part about living in Yuma County is that we are all very self-reliant. We can sustain ourselves for a limited amount of time, but then need assistance."

Community Needs

Barriers to Accessing Existing Resources

Transportation is a significant barrier. Transit-dependent residents face infrequent bus service, limited route connectivity, and long waits at unshaded stops. People experiencing homelessness often cannot get to cooling centers because it is "so hot they don't want to move." Shelters do not accept pets, including emotional support animals, and elderly individuals experiencing homelessness will not leave their animals behind and therefore do not access shelter services. Utility assistance programs have restrictive eligibility criteria, limiting who can access financial support. Local businesses that could serve as cooling centers are willing to offer water but cannot afford to purchase it on their own, and would do so if it were delivered to them.

Missing Stakeholders and Collaboration Gaps

There is no dedicated heat coalition, even though there are well-attended coalitions focused on homelessness, mental health, and substance use. Participants questioned why extreme heat does not receive the same coordinated focus. The county emergency services manager and elected officials are absent from current heat conversations, and participants stated clearly that "politicians need to get involved." Several federal and military entities are also missing from heat planning, including Customs and Border Protection (CBP), MCAS, the Sheriff's Office, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Park Rangers, Yuma Proving Grounds, and the Cocopah Reservation.

Funding and Data Gaps

Cooling centers are 100% volunteer-driven with no dedicated funding. When funding was available, initiatives moved forward; when it ended, they stopped. Organizations are stretched thin across both Yuma proper and rural communities, and existing funding criteria are often too restrictive for the



grassroots work being done locally. Participants called for flexible funding without restrictive criteria. The Arizona Community Foundation (ACF) offers statewide funding that nonprofits can apply for to support heat-related projects, and some residents may qualify for programs to help pay electricity bills, AC units, or rent, though eligibility and availability vary.

Data gaps are a central obstacle to securing funding. Medical examiner death certificates do not accurately reflect heat-related causes, and autopsies go to Pinal County. Local hospitalization data on heat-related illness is absent. Data broken down by community, Yuma versus Somerton versus San Luis, would be "helpful for grants, sharing with partners, convincing people to come in for screenings and prevention." One participant stated: "If we have better data, that would inform better funding opportunities, driving force to continue to get the work done."

Conclusion

Participants came to this session with deep knowledge of their communities and were clear about what is and isn't working. The organizations in the room are already doing the work, showing up during extreme heat, knowing residents by name, and stretching limited resources across a large area. What came through just as clearly is that this work is not sustainable without dedicated funding, better local data, and broader partner engagement. As one participant put it: "Yuma is able to come together and be a good strong community, but heat has never been the focus of this coming together."

