# BENSON RURAL HEAT LISTENING SESSION REPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MEL & ENID ZUCKERMAN COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Southwest Center on Resilience for Climate & Health

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## Key Takeaways

**Heat messaging is often inconsistent, reactive, and lacks clear, actionable information.** Participants emphasized the need for locally relevant messaging that helps community members and decision-makers understand what actions to take.

**Heat response capacity varies based on community size and available resources**. Limited funding, cooling center availability, and service hours affect the heat relief options available to communities.

**Community connectedness is an important part of heat response.** Family, friends, and neighbors can help connect community members with information and resources, particularly in under-resourced areas.

**Collaboration and coordination are essential to strengthening heat response.** Participants emphasized building on existing efforts, sharing resources, reducing duplication, and engaging partners across sectors.

**Heat resources and best practices need to be adapted to local conditions.** Participants emphasized that approaches should reflect the resources, environment, and realities of individual communities.



## Session Overview

*The Benson Rural Heat Listening Session took place on Thursday, August 21, 2025, at the Benson Hospital with 19 participants and 4 representatives from the SCORCH team. The session was conducted by the* ***Southwest Center on Resilience for Climate and Health (SCORCH)****, in collaboration with the* ***Arizona Center for Rural Health,*** *and the* ***Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS).*** *Participants were divided into three tables for discussion, each with a SCORCH staff member serving as both facilitator and note-taker. Participating agencies included Local non-profits, health departments, education institutions, food banks, emergency management offices, federal government, community health centers, and other (design of buildings and outdoor spaces). The listening session included participants from Pima, Santa Cruz, and Cochise Counties.*

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## Opportunities

Participants identified several opportunities to strengthen heat preparedness and response in Cochise and Santa Cruz counties:

### Policy

- Create clear heat thresholds and guidance for schools so staff, parents, and students know when action should be taken. Participants suggested simple, actionable guidance that reflects local conditions in communities.

### Infrastructure

- Increase cooling and shade in places where people already gather through options such as pop-up cooling tents with misters and additional shade in public spaces, including outdoor farmers markets.

### Communication

- Create clear heat thresholds and guidance for schools so staff, parents, and students know when action should be taken. Participants suggested simple, actionable guidance that reflects local conditions in communities.

### Community

- Improve coordination and resource sharing across counties and organizations by reducing silos between county agencies and supporting organizations already doing the work rather than duplicating efforts.
- Bring a wider range of partners into heat response, including law enforcement, businesses, utilities, and city planners.
- Strengthen community-level support for people at risk by exploring incentives for neighbors to check on one another and systems such as California's Snug Safe model that prompt individuals to check in and initiate follow-up when someone does not respond.

## Impacts of Extreme Heat

### Community Impact

Participants noted a wide variety of communities who bear the burden of extreme heat in Southern Arizona, including outdoor workers, agricultural workers, people with disabilities, older adults, unhoused individuals and individuals with substance use disorders. They also mentioned communities that may have specific or temporary vulnerabilities to extreme heat but who typically are not included in messaging efforts, including blood donors, students, athletes and people attending outdoor events such as farmer's markets.

## Heat Alerts and Messaging

Participants described a range of formal and informal ways that community members get information about heat alerts. These include: Weather Bug, National Weather Service, AlertNow, Cochise County email lists, social media, information from community organizations, chat groups, and school text alerts.

Despite the many avenues to receive information, participants noted that the messaging is inconsistent; it may not be tailored to individual communities, and it often lacks clear actionable information. This issue is exacerbated by the lack of clear and consistent guidelines for important decision makers. For example, the school districts noted that there is no clear and consistent metric that principals use to take action, such as canceling outdoor sports practices. A lack of policy for outdoor workers means that standards are different in each neighborhood or by each employer.

Participants also noted that the messaging was often more reactive than proactive. Local leaders may not consistently prepare for coming heat with messages that emphasize prevention.

On the other hand, a significant challenge with heat messaging is that community members don't take alerts seriously. Heat is often underestimated or not seen as an issue. When community members become inundated with heat-related information in the hottest months of the year, they may become annoyed or desensitized. A lack of clear actionable messages means that community members may struggle to interpret the messages.

> *"Drink water, stay cool. Those words have been told to us the entire time, they don't mean anything." --Listening Session Participant*





# Heat Relief Efforts

## Heat Response

The ability of the local community to respond to extreme heat varied according to their size and resources. Participants from Pima County noted efforts such as mobile "cooltainers" that can be deployed where needed. Participants from Santa Cruz and Cochise Counties discussed limited funding and hours for cooling centers. A participant from Benson noted that they have no official cooling centers, and residents rely on informal centers such as libraries.

## Community Connectedness

In under-resourced areas, community members rely on information from their family, friends, or neighbors to learn about resources such as cooling centers. Participants noted that an important opportunity in heat response is to foster social connectedness and bring community members into heat response. Participants discussed ideas such as providing incentives for people to check on neighbors who may be vulnerable or creating a system such as the Snug Safe app used in California that prompts people to check in and deploys support if they fail to do so.

> *"EMS often won't respond fastest anyways, want to foster communities that take care of each other." --Listening Session Participant*




## Community Resilience

### Prevention and Education

Participants noted that more emphasis needs to be placed on prevention and education. Including extreme heat safety and preparedness education in schools could be an effective way to disseminate information to the community.

### Clear, Consistent and Actionable Messaging

Participants emphasized the need for clear, consistent, and actionable messaging for extreme heat. Community members need to understand the issue and know what actions to take with their family and neighbors. Guidance for decision-makers such as school leaders should include consistent policies and metrics. Messaging should also avoid topics such as climate that could be perceived as political and focus on specific actionable steps.

## Collaboration

Participants noted the importance of bringing the 'right' partners to the table, supporting and leveraging organizations who already have effective multi-sectoral partnerships, and preventing competition and duplication of efforts. Participants mentioned the need to bring in sectors such as law enforcement, Border Patrol, business, and utilities to be a part of the conversation and identify shared solutions.

## Best practices, adapted locally

Participants stressed the need for local communities to have access to resources and best practices, as well as the importance of adapting those resources to the local community. Local leaders and agencies don't want to 'reinvent the wheel', but they do need to make sure that external materials are tailored to their local resources, environment and realities.

## Conclusion

Participants in the Benson listening session described a community that is motivated to address extreme heat but is seeking greater coordination, clearer communication, and stronger partnerships to support those efforts. While many organizations are already engaged in heat preparedness and response, participants emphasized that improving resilience will require building on existing collaborations, sharing resources across communities, and ensuring that heat messaging is locally relevant and actionable. Across discussions, collaboration consistently emerged as the foundation for strengthening community preparedness and reducing the impacts of extreme heat. As one participant reflected:

> *"Coordination/collaboration is harder than you think- heat is not important to a lot of people. Having the correct voices and shared messaging will be the most useful. Have to view it as an overall issue- has to be both focused and broad".*

