



MIDDLESEX-LONDON

Leveraging the networks of various partners to ensure residents' safety

By Sophie Guilbault

THE SCIENCE

During extreme weather events, the success of a community's response depends highly on the ability to exchange information and coordinate response activities between emergency responders and residents. When an extreme heat event happens, the coordination between health authorities, medical services and various community groups is instrumental to the success of operations. Similarly, social networks and relationships among residents have proven to be extremely useful to ensure everyone is looked after within a community during heat waves.

Regional health units in Canada tend to cover broad geographical areas, which can be challenging when the time comes to respond to an extreme heat event. Creating and maintaining good relationships with various community partners such as day cares, school boards, and community health clinics can significantly facilitate the work of the health unit.

THE TRIGGER

In June 2005, the City of Toronto experienced an extremely warm summer with 18 days of extreme heat alerts. Following this particularly hot summer, the Government of Ontario requested that regional health units and municipalities across the province work towards establishing response plans for extremely hot days. This request led to the development of the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) Extreme Temperature Alert Protocol. Since its initial development, the plan has been reviewed and edited on multiple occasions following its activation during extreme heat events. The MLHU has also expanded its network of partners through the county in order to better respond to heat waves.

THE APPROACH

The MLHU is responsible for identifying and addressing heat-health risk for Middlesex County. When heat alerts are issued within the MLHU jurisdiction, the health unit is responsible for providing heat risk information to specific groups. Other responsibilities of the health unit include ensuring cooling centres, shelters, and other related services are open to provide residents with a place to stay cool during an extreme heat event.

The geographical area covered by the MLHU encompasses both urban and rural regions. As such, when a heat alert is declared, the health unit needs to plan its operations based on different levels of resources available in different parts of the county. For instance, the City of London offers many options for cooling stations and can rely on various sources to ensure the communication of heat warnings. The city has the responsibility to open a number of community centres, swimming pools and splash pads, and provide access to several libraries within the city that can be



Figure 9: *Networks of various local partners have proven to be very successful for the MLHU, leading to arrangements such as carpooling between neighbours.*
(Source: Adobe Stock Photo)

transformed into cooling centres. During extreme heat events, the city can count on the support of many groups such as the Salvation Army/Men's Mission to increase shelter capacities for homeless people and other vulnerable groups.

In smaller rural parts of the county, the MLHU relies on the assistance of its community partners to ensure heat warnings are properly communicated. For instance, it works closely with local day cares, seniors facilities, schools, local churches, various religious groups, and community health clinics that act as a point of relay for the information coming from the MLHU. These groups also play an important role in communicating with the individual residents and making sure they are taken care of.

THE OUTCOME

Over several years, the MLHU has noticed that leveraging the networks of various local partners has proven to be very successful. It has also noted that informal arrangements between neighbours in rural parts of the county tend to happen frequently because of existing networks. For instance, it is common to see neighbours carpooling together to cooling stations if one does not have access to a vehicle, or to see local churches picking up parishioners to bring them to a cooler location. In addition, the nature of the communication messages sent by the MLHU to rural areas emphasizes the need for these types of behaviours by highlighting the importance

of protecting family, friends and neighbours. The MLHU is currently reviewing how it could make some of their partnerships with local groups more formal to ensure an even stronger communication with rural areas during heat alerts.

The MLHU is also currently working on the development of a survey that will be shared with every partner involved in responding during heat waves to gather their impressions and comments on the operations following an extreme heat event.

A WORD FROM MIDDLESEX-LONDON

When asked for their thoughts on the MLHU Extreme Temperature Alert Protocol's success, David Pavletic, Manager of Food Safety & Healthy Environments and Randy Walker, Public Health Inspector for the MLHU, mentioned that its success was directly linked to the strong sense of collaboration and community present in Middlesex County and within MLHU. "We were able to leverage several of our relationships to make this plan successful by engaging many community groups," said Mr. Walker.