

## Extreme heat complicates homeless outreach



With temperatures rising over 100 degrees last week, heat-related illness among the city's street homeless became a serious concern for outreach workers toiling under the same conditions.

People living unsheltered are at particular risk of exposure-related illness in the extreme heat, which adds urgency to the work of a myriad of city outreach teams, which generally provide medical care, respite and connection to brick-and-mortar services. The

disorienting heat poses other obstacles and makes navigating the line between voluntary assistance and involuntary removal more complicated.

During heatwaves, teams can't adapt the same way as they do in the [cold months](#) by bundling up or taking breaks in the medical van, said Andy Cooke, director of New York City Health + Hospital's Street Homeless Outreach + Wellness, a mobile medicine unit run by the public hospital system. That changes the calculus of the work; the team can't roam as far and has to take more breaks, forcing them to prioritize areas with known clientele, he said. The work itself shifts, too, from continuity care to more urgent welfare checks, providing water and connecting people to the hospital if needed.

Last week was the first heatwave for a new type of mobile unit called the Partnership Assistance for Transit Homelessness program, or PATH, a so-called co-response team that pairs two police officers with a Department of Homeless Services clinician to patrol subway stations and platforms. Mayor Eric Adams rolled out the teams in August as part of a larger plan to move people with untreated mental illness out of the subway and into hospitals.

The teams provide medical care, clothing and snacks and make referrals to other city services. They are also designed to employ one of two types of involuntary removal, a controversial approach that gives police or, in this case, clinicians, the power to take a person to a hospital for psychiatric evaluation against their will.

From Saturday to Wednesday, PATH teams, which operate overnight in three locations in Manhattan, encountered 187 homeless people in the subway system and transported six people to the hospital, two voluntarily and four involuntarily, according to data provided by City Hall. Thirty-nine others agreed to go to a shelter or cooling center. While the program has not been in operation long enough to compare it to past heatwaves, teams [involuntarily removed 144 homeless individuals](#) from subway



stations in their first six months in operation, out of 11,000 interactions.

The biggest risk to people living on the street during the heatwave, with few avenues to escape conditions outside, is heatstroke and dehydration, said Cooke of the public hospital teams, which may call emergency services but do not initiate removals. The most dire situations are for people using drugs or with a mental illness who may lose consciousness or acuity in the sun and fail to

protect themselves, he added.

SHOW units connect patients to hospitals in the H+H system with safety net clinics that provide primary care to homeless residents with chronic illnesses. On Monday and Tuesday, Cooke said he noticed the rate of people making their scheduled appointment had gone up. “I think people want to get inside,” he said. The current average no-show rate is 41% though monthly data does not indicate a clear seasonal impact, according to Health + Hospitals.

Lisa Singh, a psychiatric nurse at the Department of Homeless Services who works in a PATH team, noticed that many of the people she would normally see underground had left for more ventilated or cooler locations, either aboveground or on subway cars. The ones who remained were often in the worst shape, she said.

One of the biggest challenges is telling the difference between heat stroke, which can cause confusion, and an underlying mental illness.

“It’s really important that a nurse is out there [because] we have to make that distinction,” Singh said.

Homeless residents weren’t the only New Yorkers at risk during the heatwave. Health Department data show more than 350 people went to the emergency department for a heat-related injury citywide from Saturday to Wednesday, including 141 people in a single day on Wednesday, when temperatures reached 102°F, according to the National Weather Services.