

Faith Communities & Cold Weather Hazards

Periods of extremely cold weather can pose a serious threat to houses of worship and their communities. As a religious leader, you can help your congregation and community prepare for the hazards of extreme cold by providing information on how to cope with the cold, by attending to the particular needs of vulnerable persons, and by offering your house of worship as a “warming center.”

TIP SHEET

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COLD WEATHER HAZARDS

Safety Risks

Extreme cold brings health and property risks to many regions across the country. As a religious leader, you should be aware of all weather-related hazards in your region, including the risks of extreme cold. Dropping temperatures are often accompanied by winter storms which make walking outside and driving much more dangerous due to snow and ice. Household facing financial hardships, the elderly, the infirm, and young children are particularly vulnerable to extreme cold. Furthermore winter storms may cause water-pipe and structural damage to buildings, as well as power outages. During times of extreme cold, people are more likely to use space heaters and fireplaces, or even candles or their kitchen stoves, to keep their houses warm, leading to increased risk of fires and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Cold-Induced Health Issues

Exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outside, can cause serious or life-threatening health problems, specifically frostbite and hypothermia. Infants and the elderly are particularly at risk, but the infirm or anyone else can also be affected. (See chart on page 2 for symptoms and first aid for each of these health risks.) As a congregation leader, be aware of which congregants are the most vulnerable as the temperature drops. In addition, encourage your congregants to check on their neighbors, especially the elderly and the infirm.

COLD WEATHER HAZARD MITIGATION AND PREPAREDNESS

To prepare for extreme cold, you and your congregation should:

- Ensure that all buildings are properly insulated, including storm windows and weather stripping on doors and windows.
- Insulate all water lines on the outside of buildings and other poorly-heated spaces to decrease their chance of freezing. Note: This is especially crucial for houses of worship that act as rest centers, heating stations or shelters. A frozen or burst pipe can hinder your distribution of water to needy individuals in addition to severely damaging your building or religious artworks or furnishings such as musical instruments.
- Service all snow-removal equipment and de-icing materials.
- Have furnace flues and water heaters inspected.
- Install easy-to-read outdoor thermometers and temperature alarms.

RESPONSE TO COLD WEATHER HAZARDS

In order to minimize health and safety risks:

- Use fireplace/wood stove/other combustion heater ONLY IF it is properly vented to the outside. (Applies to both homes and houses of worship.)
- Check on elderly members of your congregation to see if they are prepared, financially or with supplies, to endure extreme cold. Some may feel uncomfortable coming forward on their own to ask for help.
- Never leave lit candles or other open flames unattended.
- Maintain the temperature in home/house of worship during extreme cold.
- Leave all water taps slightly open to avoid frozen pipes.
- Encourage congregants to layer clothes, dress warmly and stay dry, even if they are just walking from the parking lot, to avoid hypothermia.
- During congregation activities, avoid frostbite by staying indoors and by bundling up when outside; wear a hat, scarf, and mittens.
- If you have to do heavy outdoor chores, dress warmly and work slowly.
- Salt heavily-trafficked walkways to and from your house of worship.
- Service any congregation-owned vehicles with anti-freeze and snow tires.
- Avoid traveling on ice-covered roads, overpasses, and bridges if possible.

Winter Storm Emergency Supply List

- an alternate way to heat your house of worship during a power failure
- dry firewood for a fireplace/wood stove, or kerosene for a kerosene heater
- furnace fuel (coal, propane, or oil)
- electric space heater with automatic shut-off switch and non-glowing elements
- blankets
- matches
- multipurpose, dry-chemical fire extinguisher
- first aid kit and instruction manual
- flashlight or battery-powered lantern
- battery-powered radio
- battery-powered clock or watch
- extra batteries
- non-electric can opener
- snow shovel
- rock salt
- special-needs items (diapers, hearing aid batteries, medications, etc.)

PROVIDING “WARMING CENTER” CARE FOR THE PUBLIC

Best Practices for Using Your House of Worship as a “Warming Center”

During a period of extreme cold, your house of worship can provide hospitality, a safe place to rest and warm up, and critical information about current conditions. If you can provide safety and heating, in addition to meeting some basic safety requirements, you may be an appropriate facility to open as a “Warming Center” for the public during extremely cold weather. To properly use your house of worship as a “Warming Center,” you should provide necessities such as: bathrooms, water, basic first aid, and accurate information concerning unfolding conditions. First, in advance, ask your local emergency management agency or Red Cross chapter if your facility is needed as a warming center. Always maintain communication with local emergency management throughout this process. For more in-depth information about being trained to use your house of worship as a “Warming Center,” see the **NDIN Emergency Rest Center Training** link in the “Other Resources” section at the bottom of this page. Note: If you plan to shelter people overnight, you must contact the American Red Cross and become an “official” shelter. Sheltering is a much more specialized operation, which requires extensive planning and training.

FIRST AID FOR COLD-INDUCED ILLNESSES

As a religious leader, your staff and volunteers should familiarize yourself with these common, cold-induced health problems in case a member of your community is in danger of serious injury or death.

Condition	Symptoms	First Aid
Frostbite	White or grayish-yellow skin area, skin that feels unusually firm or waxy, numbness.	Seek medical care immediately. If medical care is not available, get the victim into a warm room as soon as possible. Unless absolutely necessary, the person should not walk on frostbitten feet or toes, to prevent further cell damage. Immerse the affected area in warm—not hot—water (the temperature should be comfortable to the touch for unaffected parts of the body.) Or, warm the affected area using body heat. For example, the heat of an armpit can be used for frostbitten fingers. Do not rub the frostbitten area with snow or massage it at all. This can cause more cell damage. Don’t use a heating pad, heat lamp, stove, fireplace, or radiator for warming.
Hypothermia	Shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech, drowsiness. Infants will be bright red, with cold skin and very low energy.	Take the person’s temperature. If it is below 95°, the situation is a life threatening emergency; call 911 and seek medical attention immediately. If medical care is not available, get the victim to a warm room or shelter. Remove any wet clothing. Warm the center of the body first (chest, neck, head, and groin) using warm blankets or skin-to-skin contact under loose, dry layers of blankets or clothing. Drinking warm beverages can also help increase the core body temperature. After the victim’s body temperature has increased, keep the person dry; wrap in warm blankets, including head and neck. Get medical attention as soon as possible.

COLD WEATHER RELATED TERMS AND INFORMATION FROM THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

- **Frostbite:** Frostbite is an injury to the body that is caused by freezing the body surface. Frostbite causes a loss of feeling and color in affected areas. It most often affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers, or toes. Frostbite can permanently damage the body, and severe cases may result in the need for amputation.
- **Hypothermia:** An abnormally low (below 95°) body temperature caused by an exposure to cold weather or cold water; saps the body’s stored energy. Its impairs the function of vital organs and the brain.
- **Wind Chill Index:** The temperature the body feels when the air temperature is combined with the wind speed. It is based on the rate of heat loss from exposed skin caused by the effects of wind and cold.
- **Winter Weather Advisory:** Winter weather conditions are expected to cause significant inconveniences and may be hazardous. When caution is used, these situations should not be life-threatening.
- **Winter Storm Watch:** A winter storm is possible in your area.
- **Winter Storm Warning:** A winter storm is occurring or will soon occur in your area.
- **Blizzard Warning:** Sustained winds or frequent gusts to 35 miles per hour or greater and considerable amounts of falling or blowing snow (reducing visibility to less than a quarter mile) are expected to prevail for a period of three hours or longer.

This adapted directly from sources made available by the Centers for Disease Control and FEMA; see links below.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control— http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/pdf/cold_guide.pdf
- FEMA— <http://www.ready.gov/winter-weather>
- New York City Office of Emergency Management — http://www.nyc.gov/html/oem/html/hazards/winter_prep.shtml
- NDIN:ERC Training Brochure — http://www.n-din.org/download/NDIN_Emergency_Rest_Center_Training_Course.pdf