

Central Florida Commission on Homelessness (CFCH FL-507) Extreme Weather and Disaster Protocol

Updated August 2025



Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness – including homeless service providers, advocates, other community partners, and the media – with an overview of the protocols to be activated for a natural disaster or extreme weather affecting our region. This includes cold nights, dangerous heat, and hurricanes.

The Central Florida Commission on Homelessness (CFCH FL-507) serves Orange, Osceola, and Seminole counties, as well as the cities of Kissimmee, Orlando, and Sanford. The CFCH is made up of more than 100 member agencies that provide a wide range of services for people experiencing homelessness, including emergency shelter, food, clothing, health care, employment assistance, case management, and housing support.

The Homeless Services Network of Central Florida (HSN) serves as the administrative staff for the CFCH and carries out actions on its behalf, such as communicating the activation and coordination of the protocols outlined below.

For more information about the CFCH and homelessness in Central Florida, visit www.cfch.org.

Cold Night Protocol

Overview

While Central Florida is not typically known for extremely cold weather, the region can still experience occasional cold spells (often coupled with damp conditions) that pose significant dangers to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The human body acclimates to local temperatures, meaning that even moderate drops in temperature can lead to serious health risks for those unprotected from the elements. Individuals experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of hypothermia, frostbite, respiratory issues, and cardiovascular stress when exposed to extremely cold weather.

The Cold Night Protocol aims to coordinate the services of and provide information on warming centers for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness across Orange, Osceola, and Seminole Counties.

Cold Night Activation Temperature

“Cold nights” are called when the National Weather Service forecasts temperatures at or below 40 degrees for four or more hours on a given night.

Shelter Expansion

Several homeless emergency shelters have agreed to expand beyond their traditional capacity during a Cold Night:

Downtown Orlando Shelters:

- Salvation Army
- Orlando Union Rescue Mission
- Coalition for the Homeless

Sanford Shelter:

- Rescue Outreach Mission

Additional Warming Centers

Emergency Management departments in Orange, Osceola, and Seminole counties may open additional warming centers for cold nights as needed. Hours vary by location and by projected temperatures. Day service centers throughout the CoC often provide respite from the cold during these times as well. For the most up-to-date information on current Warming Centers, please refer to the HSN website at <https://www.hsnfl.org/weather-emergencies>.

Transportation

When a Cold Night is declared, Lynx (Central Florida’s public bus system) provides free transportation along regular routes for anyone traveling to a county-designated warming center or any homeless emergency shelter. When requested by HSN, Lynx will also provide shuttles between community providers and county warming centers to respond to homeless shelter overflow concerns and to accommodate people unwilling or unable to enter the traditional homeless shelters. Individuals are only permitted to bring pets on the bus if they are housed in a kennel and the individual is headed to a shelter that permits animals. Individuals are limited to two bags and not allowed to bring shopping carts on the bus.

Outreach workers can assist with transportation to warming centers subject to the individual agency's transportation policy.

Communications Plan:

HSN will inform community providers via their Cold Night email list that the temperature is forecast to reach the activation temperature of 40 degrees for four or more hours during the evening.

HSN will monitor information provided by the counties about anticipated warming center openings and will collect expanded capacity numbers from current homeless shelters. Information about available shelters and any restrictions or barriers to access as well as information about available transportation will be shared on the HSN website at <https://www.hsnconf.org/weather-emergencies> as soon as updates are received.

HSN will also share available, up-to-date resources via flyers and a live map to be distributed in the community. This information will also be accessible on the HSN website at <https://www.hsnconf.org/weather-emergencies>.

Street outreach and day service centers will be activated to provide information to people experiencing homelessness on how to access shelters and public transit and will distribute items that will help people stay warm and safe to those choosing to remain outdoors.

In addition to the above, the HSN Director of Communications and Public Affairs will send information regarding the Cold Night to the media. Press releases and public communications will include a call to action to the public to support local homeless service providers with cash or in-kind donations. Suggested donation items include blankets, coats, winter hats, gloves or mittens, scarves, hand warmers and foot warmers, shoes, socks, and other winter clothing and essentials.

Extreme Heat Protocol

Overview

Central Florida is known for its hot and humid climate, which can pose significant dangers to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness during extreme heat events. The human body can struggle to cool itself in high temperatures, leading to heat-related illnesses that can be life-threatening if not addressed promptly.

In extreme heat and humidity, individuals experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration, sunburn, skin damage, and exacerbation of chronic conditions.

The Extreme Heat Protocol aims to provide cooling centers for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness across the CoC. The protocol ensures that individuals have access to a cool place to stay when the heat index reaches dangerous levels.

Definitions

Extreme Heat Warning: issued when Heat Index values are expected to reach 113°F or higher.

Extreme Heat Watch: issued when Heat Index values could reach 113°F or higher

Heat Advisory: issued when Heat Index values are expected to reach 108° to 112°F

Extreme Heat Activation Temperature

Orange County Emergency Management: Issues a heat advisory when the heat index hits 108 degrees.

Seminole County Emergency Management: Issues a heat advisory when the heat index is above 108 degrees.

Osceola County Emergency Management: Issues a heat advisory when the heat index hits 108 degrees, at which time they activate their county cooling centers.

Many CoC providers activate their extreme heat mitigation strategies when temperatures start to rise. The CoC agreed upon temperature for CoC activation for extreme heat is a heat index of 103 degrees.

Cooling Centers

Cooling centers serve as a place for individuals to get a respite from the heat. They look different depending on the location – for example, it may be a shaded area with a fan, or access to a public building with air-conditioning. For the most up-to-date information about current cooling centers, please see the HSN website at <https://www.hsncl.org/weather-emergencies>.

The following CoC organizations have historically served as cooling centers:

1. Salvation Army
2. Orlando Union Rescue Mission
3. Coalition for the Homeless
4. Christian Service Center (downtown and Ocoee locations)

5. Samaritan Resource Center
6. Matthew's Hope
7. Hope Partnership
8. Rescue Outreach Mission
9. Transformation Village
10. SALT
11. Sharing Center

Transportation

During an extreme heat event, Lynx (Central Florida's public bus system) provides free public transit along regular routes for anyone traveling to a county-designated cooling center or any homeless emergency shelter. When requested by HSN, Lynx will provide shuttles between community providers and county cooling centers to respond to homeless shelter overflow concerns and to accommodate people unwilling or unable to enter the traditional homeless shelters. Individuals are only permitted to bring pets on the bus if they are housed in a kennel and the individual is headed to a shelter that permits animals. Individuals are limited to two bags and not allowed to bring shopping carts on the bus.

Outreach workers can assist with transportation to cooling centers subject to the individual agency's transportation policy.

Communications Plan:

HSN will inform community providers via their Extreme Heat email list that the temperature is forecast to reach the activation temperature.

HSN will be monitoring information provided from the counties about anticipated cooling center openings and will collect cooling center operations information from CoC organizations. Information about available cooling centers and any restrictions or barriers to access as well as information about available transportation will be shared on the HSN website at <https://www.hsnconf.org/weather-emergencies> as soon as updates are received.

HSN will share available, up-to-date resources via flyers and a live map to be distributed in the community. This information will also be accessible on the HSN website at <https://www.hsnconf.org/weather-emergencies>.

Street outreach and day service centers will be activated to provide information to people experiencing homelessness on how to access cooling centers and public transit and will distribute items that will help people stay cool to those managing hot temperatures outdoors.

In addition to the above, the HSN Director of Communications and Public Affairs will send out information regarding the extreme heat to the media. Press releases and public

communications will include a call to action for the public to support local homeless service providers with cash or in-kind donations. Suggested donation items include hats, water, umbrellas, salty snacks, sunscreen, electrolyte packets, sunglasses, wet wipes, cooling towels, lip balm, reusable insulated water bottles, flip-flops, moisture-wicking socks, fans, other items to assist with heat management.

Hurricane Protocol

Overview

While Central Florida is more frequently impacted by afternoon thunderstorms than major hurricanes, the region remains vulnerable to tropical storms and hurricanes during the Atlantic hurricane season, June 1 through November 30. These powerful weather events can bring intense winds, heavy rainfall, flooding, and dangerous debris, posing severe threats to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Without access to safe shelter, individuals are exposed to rapidly changing and life-threatening conditions, often with little time to prepare or relocate. The unpredictable nature of these storms makes timely access to emergency resources and shelter critical for survival.

The hurricane protocol is to establish clear guidance and coordinated processes for the Central Florida Continuum of Care (CoC) in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from hurricanes and other severe weather emergencies. This ensures that individuals and families experiencing homelessness, as well as the providers who serve them, receive timely, accurate, and coordinated support that prioritizes safety, continuity of services, and equitable access to resources. HSN will conduct a hurricane season kick-off call in May to update providers and advocates on any changes from the previous season.

Activation

The hurricane protocol is activated when the National Weather Center announces that a hurricane is anticipated to make landfall in five days and Central Florida is in the cone of uncertainty.

Leading up to a hurricane

Shelters

Opening of County Storm Shelters

County storm shelters will be opened based on declarations from the National Weather Service and local authorities. Specific shelter locations will be communicated to the public and service

providers by county communication departments. For current information about storm shelter locations, please visit the HSN website at <https://www.hsnfl.org/weather-emergencies>.

Extended Capacity at Homeless Shelters

Many of the local shelters will extend their capacity to accommodate additional guests when a hurricane is forecast to impact Central Florida. Each shelter handles extended capacity differently and is dependent on their operational and staffing capacity. Below is a list of shelters that have historically provided additional capacity during a storm and what that capacity has been.

Agency	Location	Extended Capacity and date updated
The Coalition for the Homeless	18 N. Terry Ave, Orlando, FL 32801	60 (5/30/2025)
Salvation Army	624 Lexington Ave., Orlando, FL 32801	35 (5/30/2025)
Orlando Union Rescue Mission (Men’s Home)	3300 W. Colonial Drive, Orlando, FL, 32808	50 (5/30/2025)
Orlando Union Rescue Mission (Family Home)	1525 W. Washington St., Orlando, FL 32805	50 (5/30/2025)
Matthew’s Hope Ministries	611 Business Park Blvd., Ste. 101, Winter Garden, FL 34787	65 (6/11/2025)
Rescue Outreach Mission	1701 W. 13th St, Sanford, FL 32771	20 (5/30/2025)

Shelters for Special Populations

Individuals with Sex Offense Records

Individuals with sex offense records can shelter at the County Sherriff Department, as they are unable to access the traditional county shelters or homeless shelters due to their record. For current information on the location of the shelter, please refer to the HSN website at <https://www.hsnfl.org/weather-emergencies>.

Individuals with Pets

Certain shelters are designated as “pet friendly.” Current information about what shelters allow animals and any additional requirements (such as vaccine record, bringing a crate, etc.) can be found at the HSN website at <https://www.hsnfl.org/weather-emergencies>.

Individuals with Medical Needs

Each county operates their own “special needs shelters” for individuals who require support beyond what general shelters offer – for example, individuals with limited physical mobility. To stay at a special needs shelter, individuals must pre-register in advance through the Florida

Special Needs Registry at <https://snr.flhealthresponse.com/>.

Transportation

Orange and Osceola County

Once a hurricane warning is issued, Lynx buses will provide free transportation to storm shelters and emergency homeless shelters along regular routes. Bus services will cease operation when winds reach 35 mph. Individuals are only permitted to bring pets on the bus if they are housed in a kennel and the individual is headed to a shelter that permits animals. Individuals are limited to two bags and not allowed to bring shopping carts on the bus.

Outreach workers can assist with transportation to shelters subject to the individual agency's transportation policy.

Seminole County

School buses will be utilized by the county for transportation to storm shelters and emergency homeless shelters.

Communication

When the triggering forecast is met, HSN will inform community members via HSN's Constant Contact email list that a hurricane is forecast to impact Central Florida and that HSN is closely tracking the weather. It will direct community members to check the HSN website at <https://www.hsnconf.org/weather-emergencies> for the most up-to-date information about shelter operations.

If the hurricane is still forecast to hit Central Florida three days out, HSN will host two meetings the following day (two days out from projected hurricane arrival) with community members. The first meeting will be with operations providers at CFCH organizations to get updated information about operations. The second meeting will be with outreach providers across the Continuum to plan for targeted outreach to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

HSN will be continuously monitoring information provided from the counties about anticipated shelter openings and will collect expanded capacity numbers from current homeless shelters. Information about available shelters and any restrictions or barriers to access as well as information about available transportation will be shared via the HSN website at <https://www.hsnconf.org/weather-emergencies> as soon as updates are received.

HSN will share available, up-to-date resources via flyers and a live map to be distributed to the community.

HSN will also distribute information via its website (www.hsnconf.org) and press releases to

jurisdictions and local media to inform unsheltered individuals about shelter locations and timing.

Street Outreach teams and volunteers will distribute information about the storm directly to unsheltered persons in streets, parks, and encampments.

HSN will issue a press release that includes a call to action for the public to support local homeless service providers with cash or in-kind donations. Suggested donation items are as follows: flashlights; first aid kits; water; nonperishable foods; and other items as specified by providers at the time.

During a hurricane

HSN has established a dedicated GroupMe chat to support communication among key partners during hurricanes and other declared emergencies. There are several subgroups within GroupMe to ensure all the appropriate parties are included in real-time coordination without inundating parties with unneeded information. The separate GroupMe chats are as follows: shelter leadership; drop-in centers; jurisdiction representatives; outreach teams; and a general updates group. GroupMe is being used to ensure that timely, verified information can be shared quickly and consistently across providers, even in the event of internet disruptions.

The “general updates” group will be a group that any community member within the homeless response system can join. Posts will be limited to administrators and moderators to keep messaging clear, urgent, and free of unnecessary chatter.

After a hurricane

After a hurricane passes, HSN will check in with community providers to see how they fared during the storm and whether they are facing any operational challenges (e.g., building destruction, continued loss of power, etc.) that will impact their ability to resume operations. HSN will also help coordinate the connection of newly identified homeless individuals referred by the county hurricane shelters to service providers. Lynx will provide transportation from the county shelter(s) back to origination sites, as requested.

Questions and Contact Information

For questions about any of the above protocols, please contact Jackie Ebert, Director of CoC Planning, at jackie.ebert@hsncfl.org.

For media requests, please contact Kate Santich, HSN Director of Communications and Public Affairs, at kate.santich@hsncfl.org.