



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

April 23, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Commissioner Steve Banks
Human Resources Administration
150 Greenwich St.
New York, NY 10007

Re: Urgent Need to Expand Cooling Assistance Benefit Amid COVID-19

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks:

As warm weather approaches, I am writing to urge the City to immediately expand the successful [Cooling Assistance Benefit program](#), which provides air conditioners on a limited basis to residents who meet specified income requirements and are at proven medical risk for heat-related illnesses. A long, hot summer, combined with the prospect of shelter at home orders being extended indefinitely as a result of COVID-19, could effectively strand many low income New Yorkers in sweltering apartments and pose a real risk to those vulnerable to the heat, such as seniors or those with pre-existing conditions. While I fully appreciate the challenging fiscal environment now confronting the City, I would urge the City to supplement existing federal funding with the aim of ensuring that the potentially life-saving benefits of the Colling Assistance Benefit can reach more New Yorkers, including undocumented residents. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has clearly underscored the vital importance of stockpiling critical equipment before it is needed, and as such I urge the City to start proactively purchasing fans and air conditioner units that can be distributed to New Yorkers in anticipation of any potential failure of the supply chain.

As the City's own Department of Health makes clear on its website,ⁱ more Americans die from heat waves than all other natural disasters combined. In New York City, more than 80% of heat stroke deaths in recent years involved victims who were exposed to heat in homes without air conditioning. Those most vulnerable to extreme heat include those who are also at high risk of negative health outcomes stemming from COVID-19 – namely older adults, people with chronic medical conditions or mental health conditions, and the socially isolated. Approximately, 11 percent of New York City households lack functional air conditioning. In several neighborhoods

– including Brownsville, Mott Haven, Melrose, Hunts Point, and Longwood – more than 25% of homes lack air-conditioning.

For years, the City’s core approach to protecting these and other populations during heat waves has been to open Cooling Centers at select neighborhood locations, typically senior centers or local public libraries.ⁱⁱ But the social distancing requirements that will very likely remain in effect this summer make such congregant settings not just inappropriate, but dangerous. We need to help seniors and others at high risk of exposure to COVID-19 stay cool in their homes, and that means providing air conditioners as soon as possible. The threat is real -- last year in New York City, there were 15 summer days when the [mercury topped 90 degrees](#). In three out of the four prior years, there were 20 or more days when temperatures exceeded 90 degrees in New York City. The time to act is now.

Fortunately, there is a proven program operating within the city that helps those who need air conditioners or fans to access them. The [Cooling Assistance Benefit](#), which is part of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LI-HEAP), provides -- in addition to heating oil in winter months -- up to \$800 to qualified, low-income applicants to buy and install one air conditioner or fan per household, provided applicants also submit a written letter from a health care provider documenting an increased risk for heat-related illness. The program is funded by federal dollars and administered by the city’s Human Resources Administration. Research by my office indicates that there is roughly \$4 million in LI-HEAP funds that remain uncommitted in the current fiscal year, out of a total of \$27.3 million, and that there is another \$22 million budgeted for next fiscal year. However, the benefit is dispersed on a limited first-come, first-serve basis until federal funds for the program run out. Given this unprecedented health crisis, I believe the City must commit to backstopping the benefit with City dollars to ensure that more applicants in need can be helped during these extraordinary times.

Devoting City resources to the program will also allow the City to readjust misguided federal eligibility criteria which preclude undocumented residents from accessing this common-sense, public health resource. At a time when venturing outdoors remains a health risk to so many, the City should be making air conditioners as widely available as possible to all those in need, regardless of immigration status. If a few hundred dollars is all it takes to keep someone safe and in their home, as opposed to possibly sick and in the hospital, the choice is clear.

I also urge the City to begin now to stockpile air conditioners for use in the program. Handing New Yorkers a check to buy an air conditioner will not do any good if supply chain issues mean that local stores cannot stock them. By proactively purchasing air conditioners, the City can seek out the most energy efficient options that will help relieve strain on our electricity grid.

Finally, I urge the City to work with the State’s Public Service Commission and Con Edison to organize some measure of relief for those facing higher utility bills resulting from their confinement in their homes. Leaving New Yorkers on the hook for onerous electricity charges may compromise the benefit of the original purchase of the air conditioner and leave many New Yorkers reluctant to turn their unit on.

I know these are uniquely challenging times, and I commend your efforts and those of the rest of

your team to protect the City from the devastating impacts of COVID-19. The challenges are immense, but if we have learned anything it is that planning and preparation today can yield enormous benefits later. Thank for you time and attention to this urgent matter and I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott M. Stringer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Scott" being more prominent.

Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller

Cc Dr. Oxiris Barbot, Commissioner, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

ⁱ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/emergency-preparedness/emergencies-extreme-weather-heat.page>

ⁱⁱ <https://maps.nyc.gov/oem/cc/inactive.html>