

Winter Weather Tip Sheet

November 2022

The Northwest Healthcare Response Network (NWHRN) continues to work with local response partners to prepare for potential winter weather impacts. This Winter Weather Tip Sheet is designed to support facilities and organizations in their planning efforts and to reference if winter weather impacts are anticipated. State and regional responses to climate-related hazards continues to prove that organizations are most resilient and effective when partners are pro-active in their planning efforts, share and learn from each other, and most importantly, work together.

Advanced Planning for Winter Weather Events

Winter weather events are an annual occurrence in the Pacific Northwest region. However, climate change may be shifting storm frequency, duration, and intensity, further raising risks to critical infrastructure. Winter weather is often accompanied by strong winds, extremely cold temperatures, snow, and ice. This can lead to significant challenges and disruptions for vulnerable individuals, communities, and healthcare facility operations, especially when events are particularly acute or long in duration. The NWHRN will share regional winter weather forecasts with coalition partners as they are available. In the meantime, individual facilities, health systems, and response agencies should incorporate winter weather into their planning efforts.

Healthcare organizations should consider the following facility-level strategies and hazard-specific challenges in their planning efforts:

- Regularly monitor [NOAA Climate Prediction Center](#) and the [National Weather Service](#) winter forecasts
- **Supplies**
 - Ensure your facility has critical supplies on hand, including food, water, and medications
 - Consider battery-operated lighting, phones, and radios in the event of extended power loss.
 - Consider stockpiling deicer, gravel/salt, and other supplies to reduce risks to staff, patients, and residents
- **Power disruption**
 - Consider topping off generators at the start of winter weather season
 - Ensure primary and secondary critical resource contracts are up to date.
 - Review critical systems that may be impacted by power outages.
- **Facility heating**
 - Review heating system vulnerabilities, schedule maintenance at the start of winter weather season.
 - If possible, alternate heat source should be connected to backup power.
 - Adding new heating sources can increase the risk of fire and carbon monoxide. Ensure fire/carbon monoxide alarms are working at the beginning of winter weather season.
 - Ensure your facility has adequate warm blankets and clothing to dress residents, patients, and staff in case of heating system failure.
- **Transportation**
 - Anticipate staff and patient challenges getting to and leaving the facility. Consider reaching out to local emergency management for transportation support.
 - Anticipate challenges receiving supplies and disposing of medical waste and trash. Consider stockpiling critical supplies.
 - Anticipate challenges receiving generator fuel during long duration events. Additionally, staff may struggle to get fuel for personal vehicles.

- Ensure your facility has equipment/contracts to plow ingress and egress routes, parking lots, etc. This should include snow shovels.
- Know your county and city priority plow routes and understand how these routes might impact your operations
- **Staff support**
 - Identify in advance which staff can work remotely. Ensure these staff have the equipment and IT support to work from home.
 - Ensure your facility can keep essential staff overnight. This may include staff families if there are widespread power outages/transportation disruptions.
 - Arrange carpools or weatherized vehicles to pick up and drop off staff.
 - Ensure internal communications for facility managers to reach staff.
 - Ensure food and water available for staff and families to shelter at your facility.
- **Operations**
 - Anticipate the need to cancel/reschedule outpatient procedures and appointments.
 - Identify indicators and triggers for the initiation of cold-related emergency measures, such as the disruption of heating systems or indoor temperature.
 - Develop assessment protocol for all residents to be implemented when trigger is reached. This could include resident/patient vital signs with focus on core temperatures and frequent comfort checks.
- **Patient support**
 - In advance, reach out to patients with time-sensitive medical needs to schedule treatment prior to the event. This could include patients requiring dialysis or additional supply of methadone.
 - Provided dialysis patients with copies of their dialysis records in case they have to go to other facilities to receive treatment.
 - Anticipate increased EMS wall times, and difficulty discharging patients during winter weather.
 - Hospitals should anticipate an increase in patients going to ED needing dialysis, oxygen, or other electricity-dependent support.
- **Cascading and concurrent hazards.** Most common during acute or long-duration winter weather events.
Prepare for:
 - Increased risk of transportation incidents – chemical spills, MCI, etc.
 - Difficulty flushing sewage systems and fire suppression due to burst pipes and low water pressure in municipal systems.
 - Increase in patients seeking care once transportation conditions have improved.
- **Long-term Care Facilities**
 - Evacuation protocols if power outages during dangerously cold conditions.
 - Coordinate with the NWHRN and local Fire Department/EMS to maintain continuity of operations plans if receiving hospitals or medical facilities facing power loss or transportation challenges.

During a Winter Weather Event

Healthcare organizations and response agencies experiencing or anticipating prolonged or acute winter weather conditions should take additional steps to prepare for direct and indirect impacts:

- **Maintain situational awareness** via participation in NWHRN coordination calls
- **Review facility preparations**
As early as possible:
 - Consult engineering/facility staff to understand heating system capabilities and limitations

- Review inventory of equipment/supplies
- Review facility winter weather procedures
- **Power and heating**
 - Keep gas/diesel powered generators outside and away from building air intakes.
 - Keep heating sources away from furniture and drapes. Never leave patients/residents near space heaters unattended.
 - Conserve as much heat as possible in your building by avoiding unnecessary opening of doors or windows. Close off unoccupied rooms and keep windows covered.
- **Preparing staff**
 - Ensure all staff are aware of weather conditions
 - Staff that can work remotely should take equipment home
 - Essential staff should plan to stay at the facility or have arranged transportation for anticipated conditions.
 - Review procedures, communicate with staff, and advise them on issues of personal and home preparedness
 - Take into consideration the possibility of staff having to evacuate their home
- **Monitor conditions**
 - Sign up for local emergency management and public health alerts and regularly review weather forecasts.
- **Share information**
 - Facilities in your area may be differently affected by winter weather conditions, making them more or less able to admit or care for patients.

Stress the risk to patients and families. The best way to manage a surge in patients is to prevent it. The Department of Health and local public health jurisdictions have information geared toward helping individuals and families avoid the dangers associated with winter weather. Reiterate these messages in all public- and patient-facing communication.

How to reach NWHRN

If you anticipate or are currently experiencing impacts from winter weather, do not hesitate to reach out to the NWHRN so we can support you.

Support from the NWHRN

- **24/7 Duty Officer line at 425-988-2897**
- Regular NWHRN Coalition coordination calls
- District coordination meetings. These are held generally every month and are a good opportunity to discuss plans and concerns outside an immediate response. [Check the calendar](#) for the next district meeting or [contact your NWHRN District Coordinator](#).