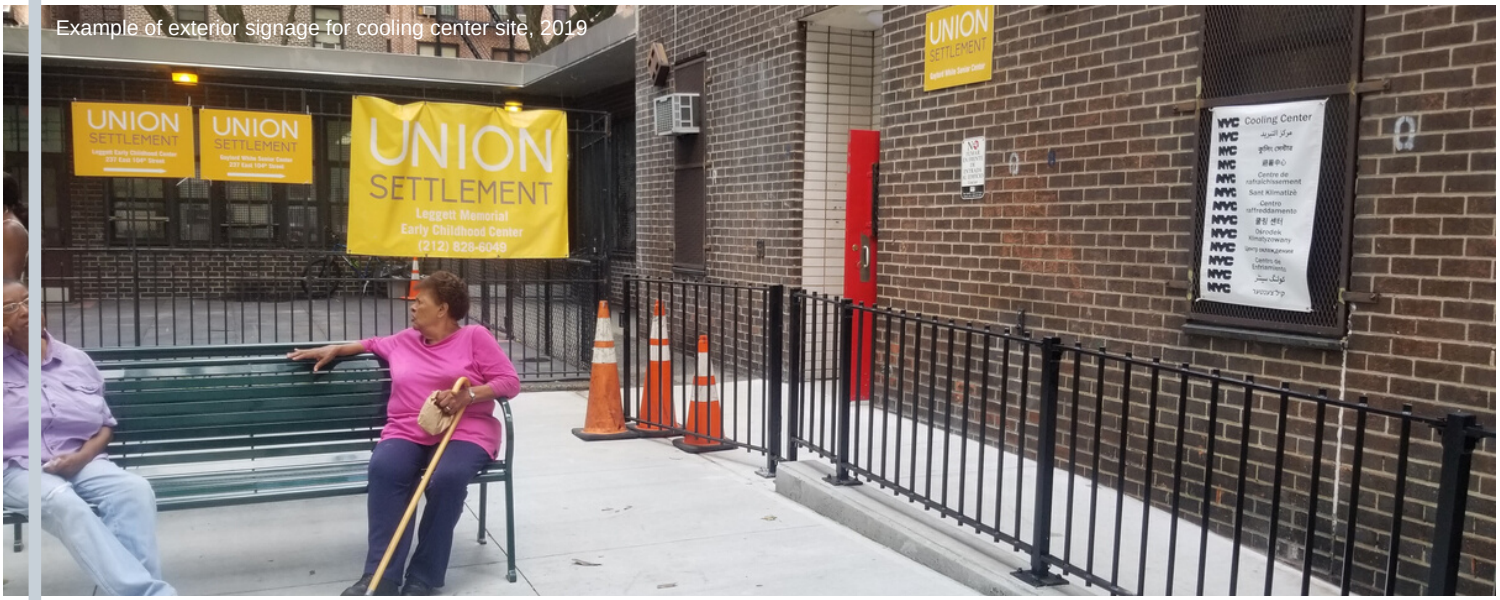
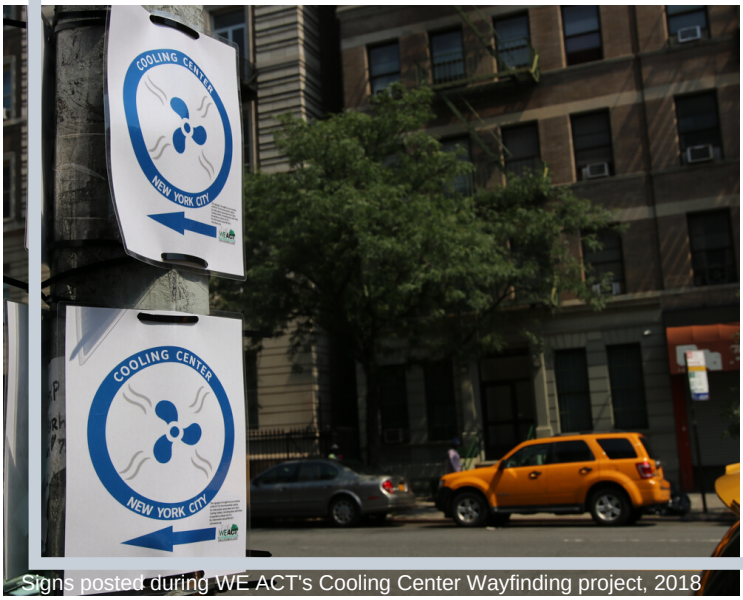
# A CALL FOR NYC COOLING CENTER IMPROVEMENTS:

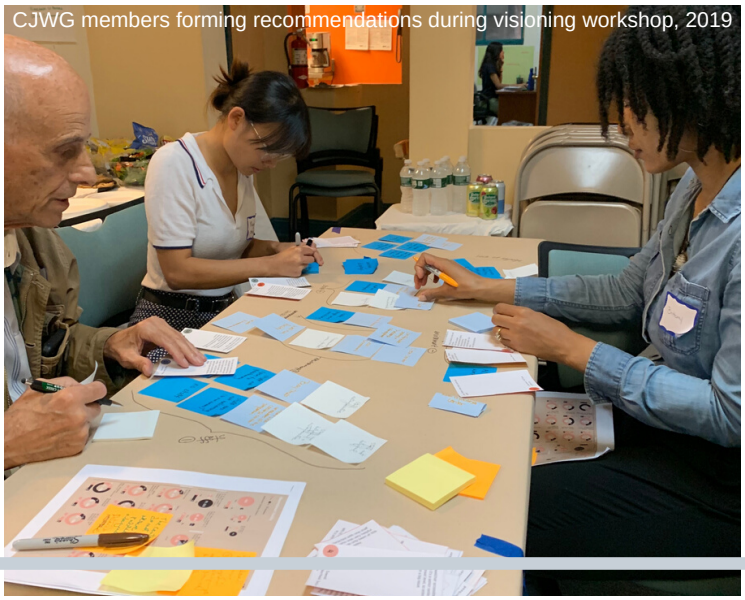
## RESULTS FROM WE ACT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE'S COOLING CENTER AUDIT PROJECT



Example of exterior signage for cooling center site, 2019



Signs posted during WE ACT's Cooling Center Wayfinding project, 2018


CJWG members forming recommendations during visioning workshop, 2019

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## INTRODUCTION

Extreme heat events are increasing in frequency, severity, and duration in New York City. Cities such as New York are seeing more severe extreme heat events than surrounding areas not only due to climate change, but because of the contribution of the urban heat island effect, in which cities experience much higher temperatures than surrounding suburban and rural areas due to the prominence of closely placed buildings that radiate heat, high vehicle traffic, concentrated building emissions, and less heat-absorbing vegetation. The New York City Panel on Climate Change (NPCC) 2019 Report found that the number of hot days has, and will continue to increase in frequency, duration, and severity (1).

There are a number of negative health impacts from extreme heat such as heat stress, dehydration, dizziness, and fainting. These impacts can lead to hospitalization, worsening of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and can even lead to death. Vulnerable populations such as older adults are most at risk of heat-related death. Beyond the physiological, there are other dimensions of health impacts such as mental health effects of having to cope with extreme heat. Extreme heat is the number one weather-related killer in New York City as of a 2013 analysis by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (2).

## THE ISSUE

The burden of extreme heat events is disparately borne by low income and neighborhoods of color. The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) uses the Heat Vulnerability Index (HVI) to measure a neighborhood's risk during an extreme heat event, and has found that three of the four neighborhoods in Northern Manhattan (Harlem, Washington Heights, and Inwood) have an extremely high HVI. The high risk for the impacts of extreme heat due to environmental and socioeconomic reasons. Housing and energy insecurity disproportionately burden low-income communities and communities of color due to historic racism and segregation. Hospitalizations and mortality from extreme heat is higher for low-income people and people of color.

One program that NYC has implemented for adapting to extreme heat events is the Cooling Center Program. On declared heat emergency days, the city will open spaces for the public to seek air conditioning that is accessible and free to all. Sites include public libraries, community centers, senior centers, and more. The cooling center program is important for advancing equity around those who bear the burden of extremely hot days. WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) members were expressing concern about the functioning about the Cooling Center Program, citing that there was ample room for improvement to provide better cooling spaces for low-income populations in NYC.

## FINDINGS SNAPSHOT

**% COOLING CENTERS OPEN & FUNCTIONING IN NORTHERN MANHATTAN (N=50)**

# 88%

**% COOLING CENTERS WITH SIGNAGE TO DIRECT PEOPLE (N=44)**

# 27%

**% COOLING CENTERS WITH BOOKS, GAMES, NEWSPAPERS, AND/OR MAGAZINES (N=44)**

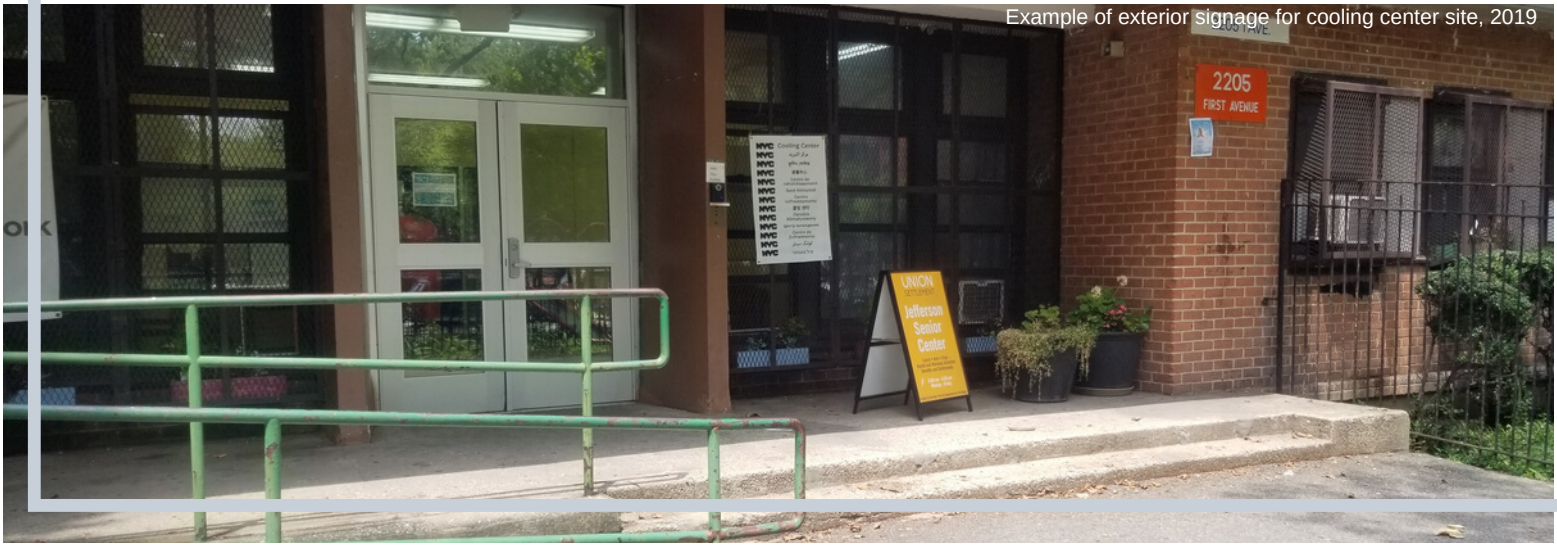
# 68%

## THE PROJECT

As a result of members' observations, WE ACT's Climate Justice Working Group (CJWG), a voluntary group of members interested in climate justice-related advocacy, ran an audit of the Cooling Centers in Northern Manhattan during the summer of 2019 (June through August) to assess the efficacy of the program. The audits found most of the centers were open and functioning.

However, the Cooling Center audit project resulted in identification of some chronic malfunctions and inadequacies among the sites, which are mentioned in the *Recommendations* section below.

The CJWG identified many levers for improvement that would make the program more impactful. Recommendations in this report were created by WE ACT's CJWG members through a series of planning and visioning workshops led by Masters students at the School of Visual Arts.



Example of exterior signage for cooling center site, 2019

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Increased consistency** across Cooling Center sites, establishing a more comprehensive criteria that all sites have to meet in order to become Cooling Centers, and the criteria must be evaluated by a set date.
2. **More signage and availability of information** is needed because it was chronically lacking across sites. Spreading information about the site location and features to the public is key for utilization, so there should be strict guidelines about wayfinding and communications across the city.
3. **Staff communication and training** is key. Staff members must be informed that their site is a Cooling Center. And, they must be able to identify signs of heat stress in site visitors.
4. **Quality and conditions of sites** must be improved. Sites should have extended hours of operation, create welcoming atmosphere with programming, utilize more spaces as Cooling Centers, and surveys should be conducted with the public to assess which spaces are preferred.

CJWG members forming recommendations during visioning workshop, 2019

## CONCLUSION

WE ACT and its members envision a program that is more comprehensive than what is currently offered, by utilizing an opportunity in which members of the public are gathered for education, program outreach, and a space for fostering community. Key needs for achieving program expansion through these recommendations include increased funding, data monitoring and evaluation, community input, and increased oversight. It is imperative to expand resources for improving the program for changes such as extending hours. Oversight is another important key for ensuring changes are implemented. Lastly and most importantly, community collaboration in the cooling center program planning should be constant. With the important ideas outlined in the recommendations section, the Cooling Center program can become a significant tool for building community power and promoting equity in the face of rising extreme heat events in New York City.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Cooling Center Audit Project received assistance from Andrea Miranda Salas and Lorena Estrella, graduate students at the School of Visual Arts, in creating the survey tool, planning the workshops, and assisting in creating data displays. The Climate Justice Working Group members were key in creating the idea for this project, contributing ideas for survey questions, conducting the surveys, and creating recommendations for improvement. WE ACT Staff members and interns kept the project running through busy months, provided resources, education for planning workshops, and led development of the report.

## REFERENCES

1. Rosenzweig, C. and Solecki, W. (2019), New York City Panel on Climate Change 2019 Report Chapter 1: Introduction. Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci., 1439: 22-29. doi:10.1111/nyas.14004
2. NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (2014), Epi Data Brief: Heat-Related Deaths in New York City, 2013. N.Y. access at: https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief47.pdf

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