

PENNSYLVANIANS SUPPORT HEAT PROTECTIONS FOR WORKERS

Hundreds of Pennsylvania workers visit the emergency room or miss at least one day of work each year because of heat-related illness.¹ Construction, manufacturing, and solid waste workers have made up the greatest share of heat-related hospitalizations reported by Pennsylvania employers since 2015.² However, anyone who is regularly exposed to extreme heat on the job runs the risk of health problems, ranging from mild cramps to death.³

Commonsense safeguards could help protect the health of these workers and improve their productivity on the job.⁴ However, neither the commonwealth nor the federal government has a workplace heat standard that explicitly requires essential protections such as written heat illness prevention plans, heat training for workers and supervisors, or scheduled and paid

preventative cooldown breaks.⁵ The lack of a specific heat standard puts workers in danger of preventable harm every time the temperature soars, which is happening more frequently as Pennsylvania's climate heats up.⁶ In 2025, Allegheny County issued its first ever Code Red Heat advisory and the Philadelphia area experienced 10 more 90+ degree days than usual.⁷

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PENNSYLVANIA POLICYMAKERS SHOULD PROTECT WORKERS BY ADVANCING A STRONG, ENFORCEABLE WORKPLACE HEAT STANDARD FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

Pennsylvanians agree. In August 2024, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) proposed the first-ever national standard to protect workers from heat.⁸ People around the country then had five months to submit a public comment on the proposal. More than 1,000 workers, business owners, health professionals, and other residents of the commonwealth weighed in, with more than 9 in 10 broadly in favor of the proposal (see methods, below).

Here's just some of what they had to say.

“We are currently operating in an environment in which farms that undervalue worker well-being are better positioned to make a profit. We need to move toward a more level playing field for responsible employers where workplace safety is the norm for everyone.”

PASA SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, HARRISBURG

“I have worked at a bakery/cafe for the last four years. Each summer we ask the owner to address the non-functioning air conditioning, yet it is never resolved ... It's an open kitchen so the break area is in the same space and there is no escaping it. Several people work in front of 500+ degree ovens and stove tops all day. Other people work in a corner with little air flow and floor-to-ceiling windows that do not open with the sun beating down on them. A coworker working in this area nearly passed out last week in large part due to the heat. I often have to step into the walk-in [freezer] to get some relief.”

OLIVIA C., RESTAURANT WORKER, AMBLER

“I work in a high school building from 1960 that has no [air conditioning] and no proper ventilation—my room reaches 87 degrees with no air movement. We sit in the hallways to get some relief. It is impossible to concentrate.”

WENDI L., TEACHER, NATRONA HEIGHTS



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“My organization advises employers on how to protect workers from heat, and if they are following the same set of rules in every state, it makes things much easier. Many organizations have facilities in multiple states or countries, and it is difficult to track different requirements in different locations.”

COURTNEY M., PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONAL, READING

“I work in a state facility kitchen where we have no air conditioning during the summer. During summer's hours we have three 60-gallon kettles [boiling] with water, steamers, and running dish machines where temperatures reach over 100 degrees. The staff tried on numerous occasions to ask for help but because there are no regulations/laws to help, we have to suffer from heat exhaustion. We have had staff pass out or suffer from asthma, and yet no relief was given the staff.”

LAUANNA R., KITCHEN WORKER, CANADENSIS

“As a nurse who worked in occupational health for a major U.S. corporation, I believe this is an important issue and that companies need OSHA rules and guidance.”

DIANE K., NURSE, PHILADELPHIA

“I worked in a fast food restaurant with a very small kitchen where the working conditions were not pleasant. The air conditioning did not work in the restaurant. In the summer, the days were super hot and humid where the high temperatures reached 105 degrees Fahrenheit. I worked at the fryer station and fried potatoes all the time ... As much as I drank water it didn't help. The heat was oppressive. I was next to the grill and that made it worse. The only alternative I had was to go down to the basement to get potatoes or other things I was asked to get from the freezer, and that cooled me down, gave me a break. The managers didn't care. They said they would fix the air conditioner but that didn't happen, it was always broken. It didn't affect them either because they weren't working in the heat.”

ANONYMOUS, RESTAURANT WORKER, PHILADELPHIA

The future of OSHA's proposed heat standard is currently unclear, particularly given the current U.S. Department of Labor's priority of repealing existing labor standards and worker protections.⁹ But regardless, it takes OSHA an average of seven years to move a rule from introduction to implementation, and workers can't wait for federal policymakers to finish the job they started.¹⁰

Given the lack of urgent action at the federal level, Pennsylvania's leaders should show workers they're ready to protect them from preventable harm by moving immediately to develop a statewide heat standard.

Methods: We downloaded all publicly available comments for Document OSHA-2021-0009-4761 using the bulk download tool on Regulations.gov.¹¹ OSHA restricted access to thousands of comments due to the inclusion of personal information, including more than 13,000 comments from NRDC members and supporters.¹² We combined the unpublished NRDC data with the 20,674 public records, and then removed duplicate commenters from the combined database. Finally, we reviewed the unique comments from Pennsylvania and coded each one as “in support,” “in opposition,” or “mixed/unclear.” For more methodological detail or a copy of the underlying dataset, please contact NRDC at workers&heat@nrdc.org.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Pennsylvania Department of Health, “Extreme Heat in Pennsylvania,” accessed August 11, 2025, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0a826ae90dff4a05bb0c49e29b3aa5ab>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Biennial Nonfatal Case and Demographic Numbers and Rates: Pennsylvania, DAFW Cases, All Ownerships, All Industry, Exposure to Environmental Heat, 2021–2022,” accessed July 31, 2025, <https://data.bls.gov/multi-screen?survey=cb>.
- 2 NRDC calculations from Occupational Safety and Health Administration (hereafter OSHA), “Severe Injury Reports: Pennsylvania, 2015–2025,” accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/severe-injury-reports>. We did not include postal workers or other heat-exposed federal workers because they would not be protected by state-level heat standards.
- 3 Juanita Constible et al., *On the Frontlines: Climate Change Threatens the Health of America's Workers*, NRDC, June 2020, <https://www.nrdc.org/resources/frontlines-climate-change-threatens-health-americas-workers>.
- 4 BlueGreen Alliance and NRDC, “Economic Benefits of Workplace Heat Standards,” March 2025, <https://www.bluegreenalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Economic-Benefits-of-Workplace-Heat-Safeguards.pdf>.
- 5 BlueGreen Alliance, “Checklist for a Model Heat Illness Prevention Rule,” April 2025, <https://www.bluegreenalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/BGA-Checklist-for-a-Model-Heat-Illness-Prevention-Rule.pdf>.
- 6 Pennsylvania Department of Health, “Extreme Heat in Pennsylvania.”
- 7 Rachel McDevitt, “Heat Wave Prompts First-Ever ‘Code Red’ In Allegheny County, Could Break Records,” 90.5 WESA (Pittsburgh), updated June 23, 2025, <https://www.wesa.fm/environment-energy/2025-06-20/heat-wave-code-red-allegheny-county>; Iowa Environmental Mesonet, “Automated Data Plotter,” Iowa State University, accessed September 18, 2025, https://mesonet.agron.iastate.edu/plotting/auto/?_wait=no&q=3&network=PACLIMATE&station=PATPHL&month=summer&type=days-high-above&threshold=90&year=1850&year=2025&decadal=no&r=t&dpi=100&fmt=js.
- 8 OSHA, “Heat Injury and Illness Prevention in Outdoor and Indoor Work Settings Rulemaking,” accessed August 11, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/heat-exposure/rulemaking>.
- 9 Frida Garza, “A Long-Awaited Rule to Protect Workers From Heat Stress Moves Forward, Even Under Trump,” *Grist*, July 28, 2025, <https://grist.org/labor/federal-workplace-heat-protections-osha-temperature-regulation-trump-farmworkers/>.
- 10 U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Workplace Safety and Health: Multiple Challenges Lengthen OSHA's Standard Setting,” April 2, 2012, GAO-12-330, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-12-330>.
- 11 OSHA, “Proposed Rule: Heat Injury and Illness Prevention in Outdoor and Indoor Work Settings,” August 30, 2024, <https://www.regulations.gov/document/OSHA-2021-0009-4761>; Regulations.gov, “Bulk Data Download,” accessed July 21, 2025, <https://www.regulations.gov/bulkdownload>.
- 12 Margaret Tran Ramadhar, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), “Public Comment: Document OSHA-2021-009-4761, (13.421 Individual Comments),” OSHA, posted January 16, 2025, <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/OSHA-2021-0009-22508>.