

HEAT WAVE LEFT A DEADLY TOLL

‘There will be a next time’

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The Oregonian

It had never been hotter in Portland's recorded history when Nathan Williams found the man dressed in black, lying on his back in the searing afternoon sun.

Williams, 40, a northeast Portland resident staying at a Lloyd Center-area hotel to escape the heat, gave the man a cold Gatorade and helped him find shade across Northeast Sixth Avenue. One of Multnomah County's three cooling centers, the Oregon Convention Center, was less than half a mile away. But the man's sleeping bag had snagged on his shopping cart, Williams said, and he was apprehensive about walking in the scorching heat.

It was a Sunday afternoon, the second day of the unprecedented late June heat dome, and the temperature was breaking records at that very moment: 112 degrees.

For days, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, Gov. Kate Brown and Multnomah County leaders had been telling Oregonians that a ride to cooling centers was a phone call away. But when Williams tried to help the man and called 211, a nonemergency line, the promised ride didn't show up. After 90 minutes of waiting, the man stayed on the street and Williams left to help others. Williams saw the man a day later still in the neighborhood.

"It was just heartbreaking," Williams said. The extreme heat that enveloped the Pacific Northwest for three days in June was unprecedented for the region, and escaping without any lives lost, in a state of 4.2 million residents, would have been a miracle. But the record-setting temperatures delivered a mounting death count — at least 95 Oregonians had been identified as suspected victims as of Sunday.

That toll, according to people who study heat waves, could have been far lower.

"Nobody needs to die in a heat wave," said Kristie Ebi, a professor at the Center for Health and the Global Environment at the University of Washington. "It's important for people to understand that these deaths are preventable."

Despite having days of warning about the incoming heat — and years of warning that extreme weather events are becoming more likely — neither Portland nor Oregon was completely ready for the mother of all heat waves,

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preparation and lacked collective urgency in communications with the public.

The review found:

- Hundreds of callers gave up when they couldn't get through to people staffing 211, leaving ailing Oregonians stranded in the heat or forcing them to call 911, another strain on a health system that was quickly overwhelmed. The 211 system wasn't fully operational in Multnomah County or statewide until the afternoon of the second day of record-breaking heat because of bureaucratic and technical missteps.

- While state and city leaders brought attention to the coming heat wave, they stopped short of delivering clear messages about how deadly the event could be. Wheeler, Brown and Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury did not hold a unified press conference to warn people in the state's most populous region about the heat wave, and the state played a largely hands-off operational role in what will go down as one of Oregon's deadliest tragedies.

- Multnomah County health officials sounded a clear alarm, telling residents the heat could be life-threatening. But no heat-related deaths were announced in the metro area until after cool weather had returned Wednesday,



Mark Graves/The Oregonian

While Portland reached record temperatures in June, people gathered at Keller Fountain Park to take a dip and cool off.

'DEATHS ARE OFTEN ... THE RESULT OF GOVERNMENT FAILURE. GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEEN ENTIRELY TOO PASSIVE.'

Michael Oppenheimer | Princeton University professor and climate scientist who has spent decades studying heat events

day, missing an opportunity to reinforce the confirmed lethal dangers of the heat before the worst of it arrived.

- Oregon's state emergency planners are years behind in getting ready for extreme heat events. The state does not have a plan for handling extreme heat, treating it as any other major weather event, and it completed a separate risk assessment only last year acknowledging the looming potential for heat disasters amid climate change.

A full accounting of the tragedy will likely take months. And because details are still emerging, it's difficult to draw meaningful comparisons to Washington state, which has reported far fewer heat-related deaths amid lower temperatures, and British Columbia, which reported hundreds more unexpected deaths that have not yet been conclusively linked to heat.

'Governments have been entirely too passive'

Michael Oppenheimer, a Princeton University professor and climate scientist who has spent decades studying heat events, said the government response to extreme heat should be no different than the frenzy prompted by forecasts of incoming hurricanes.

In order to save lives, governments must take extreme heat seriously and, just as importantly, clearly explain to residents the deadly dangers of staying inside without air conditioning in prolonged triple-digit weather, he said. That's especially true in Oregon, where a typically temperate climate and lack of air conditioning and experience with extreme heat left many residents vulnerable.

"Deaths are often ... the result of government failure," Oppenheimer said, emphasizing the importance of strong official warnings about heat events. "Governments have been entirely too passive."

More than 60% of the 95 suspected heat deaths in Oregon occurred in Multnomah County, dwarfing the numbers from neighboring Washington and Clackamas counties. Local officials say they discovered many bodies in homes without fans or air conditioning.

Dr. Jennifer Vines, the lead health officer for the tricity region, said she went into the weekend with "a generic sense of dread," knowing the heat wave had the makings of a disaster.

"I used the words 'life-threatening' on purpose last week to point out the full threat," she said of a warning issued June 23, three days before the first day of record-setting temperatures. "But as it went on, into Monday, there was a very, very heavy feeling that it was bad."

Multnomah County spokeswoman Julie Sullivan-Springhetti said no heat-related deaths were reported Saturday, and that there were less than five Sunday, below the threshold that the county would typically announce publicly. That represented the first opportunity to alert the public about known fatalities that could have helped underscore the threat to those still inside sweltering homes.

Vines said the mounting toll quickly became evident Monday, the third and hottest day, when the official temperature at Portland International Airport hit 116 degrees. She was informed early that calls to the county medical examiner had tripled, and by evening it was clear emergency departments and hospitals were very near capacity. The county two days later announced 45 deaths related to the heat, a number that has since grown to 64 as of Sunday.

Officials on Saturday said 30 of the fatalities have been officially ruled as death by excessive heat. The majority of suspected victims died in homes. Officials are working to determine how many were houseless.

Vines said it's not clear to her that stronger messaging from elected officials would have changed the outcome. Vines was interviewed dozens of times by local and national media outlets, and frequently stressed the deadly threat of the heat wave.

Vines said a deeper analysis of the timing and circumstances of the deaths will be important. Among her questions: where and how people were found, was there a demographic pattern or geographic clusters, had outreach workers already contacted them but been rebuffed, and what were the circumstances that

may have prevented them from getting to a cooling center?

"None of those things was immediately clear as this disaster unfolded, but I hope there's something there that will clue us in so we can do things differently next time," she said. "I have to assume there will be a next time."

'Elderly people are invisible'

Mary Rita Hurley, chairwoman for the state's Commission on Senior Services, was alarmed by the numbers. She said the share of deaths among the elderly is unsurprising because they are more susceptible to heat and less likely to have transportation or online access to information.

The average age of victims in Multnomah County: 68 years old.

"Elderly people are invisible," she said. "We're in a city, and unfortunately, there are people who fall through these cracks."

Triple-digit heat waves that last three days or more are rare in Portland's recorded history — it's happened only eight times in the past 83 years, the last in 2009. Usually, the temperature reaches no more than 103 degrees.

June's heat wave hit historic highs for Portland for three consecutive days, starting Saturday at 108 and rising by four degrees each day until Monday, when the city's official temperature — a blazing 116 — fell just one degree below Las Vegas' record. Compounding the problem, overnight lows remained extremely high, not dropping below 80 one night in some parts of the city.

Initial summer heat waves are always the deadliest because people aren't acclimated to the temperatures, said Jennifer Vanos, an assistant professor in the School of Sustainability at Arizona State University. And the greatest number of deaths in a heat wave occur, on average, two to three days after it begins because of the cumulative effects on those who cannot escape the heat, she said.

"If you don't know that people are dying or you don't know the number in the hospital in real time, it's very out of sight, out of mind for people," she said, adding: "It might never occur to someone that they're vulnerable until it's too late."

That appears to be what happened in Oregon.

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