

ILLINOISIANS SUPPORT HEAT PROTECTIONS FOR WORKERS

Hundreds of Illinois workers visit the emergency room or miss at least one day of work each year because of heat-related illness or injury.¹ Since 2015, manufacturing workers and construction workers have made up the greatest share of heat-related hospitalizations and deaths reported by Illinois employers.² However, anyone who is regularly exposed to extreme heat on the job runs the risk of health problems, ranging from mild cramps to chronic kidney disease to death.³

Commonsense safeguards could help protect the health of these workers and improve their productivity on the job.⁴ However, neither the state 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 Illinois's climate heats up.⁶ For example, some parts of the state had an unusually high number of 90+ degree days in September 2025.⁷ That month, 23 Illinois counties had high rates of heat-related emergency medical service activations—at least three times higher than the national average.⁸



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ILLINOIS POLICYMAKERS SHOULD PROTECT WORKERS BY ADVANCING A STRONG, ENFORCEABLE WORKPLACE HEAT STANDARD FOR THE STATE

Illinoisians agree. In August 2024, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) proposed the first-ever national standard to protect workers from heat, opening a five-month public comment period on the proposal.⁹ More than 1,000 service sector workers, health professionals, educators, faith leaders, and other Illinois residents weighed in, with more than 9 in 10 broadly in favor of heat protections for workers (see methods, below).

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

"As someone who used to work outdoors, I know how hard it is to work in hot weather. You need water, breaks, and shade just to keep going. And since I now work as a produce buyer, I want people who are currently doing this work to be safe. I do not want people's lives to be at risk when doing farm work. This work is hard. It's hard when the weather is nice, it's worse when the weather isn't ... No one should be at risk of dying simply so others can eat."

ANNE B., PRODUCE BUYER, URBANA

"As a landscaper who has had a close friend who died from heat stroke, I would really like to see regulations in place."

KIRSTEN C., LANDSCAPER, SEYMOUR

"The brewing industry **DESPERATELY** needs these sorts of regulations. I've been to brewhouses that get easily get over 100 [degrees] F for hours at a time and management refuses to do anything about it."

JACOB H., BREWER, TINLEY PARK

"As a teacher who worked in a school that didn't have air conditioning until three years before I retired in 2019, I had to deal with no [air conditioning] in the classrooms, gym, cafeteria, etc. for 33 years and it was awful for the students as well as the teachers and staff. Everyone dreaded setting up [their] classrooms and starting the school year in sauna-like conditions."

ANN R., RETIRED EDUCATOR, TOWER LAKES

"I work at a restaurant that does most of its summer business on a patio and contains a pizza oven. This summer I have worked 8-hour shifts with no break on 95+ degree days. I have seen my coworkers pass out working these shifts ... It's a miracle no one has seriously injured themselves while enduring heat exhaustion. Yet."

EVANGELINE H., RESTAURANT WORKER, CHICAGO

"I'm grateful that I work for a firm that recognizes the dangers of heat, but not everyone is so fortunate. I work in an office with occasional trips to the field. Believe me, walking around in Nomex coveralls in summer heat is no picnic, and I'm not doing manual labor at the same time to boot."

RUTH F., ENGINEER, WHEATON

"When I was still teaching, students who were feeling a bit faint or weak were sent to the nurse's office. When that was filled, they were sent to the library and eventually to the dean's office, rooms that had air conditioning. Meanwhile other students and their teachers were required to tough it out. When I was in my 50s, I would get breathless with the 90+ temperatures in the classroom."

SHARON K., FORMER EDUCATOR, WESTMONT

The future of OSHA's proposed heat standard is currently unclear, particularly since the current U.S. Department of Labor appears more focused on repealing existing labor standards and worker protections than creating new ones.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

Given the lack of urgent action at the federal level, Illinois'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.¹² 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.¹³ 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 Illinois 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 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Biennial Nonfatal Case and Demographic Numbers and Rates: Illinois, DAFW Cases, All Ownerships, All Industry, Exposure to Environmental Heat, 2021-2022," accessed September 26, 2025, <https://data.bls.gov/multi-screen?survey=cb>; Brett Shannon, Chibuzor Abasilim, and Lee S. Friedman, "Emergent Occupational Injuries Presenting to Hospital During Increasing and Extreme Heat Days In Illinois (USA)," *International Journal of Biometeorology* 69 (2025): 975-987, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00484-025-02871-1>.
- 2 NRDC calculations from Occupational Safety and Health Administration (hereafter OSHA), "Severe Injury Reports: Illinois, 2015-2025," accessed September 11, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/severe-injury-reports>; OSHA, "Investigation Summaries: Illinois Offices, 2015-2025," accessed September 11, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/ords/imis/accidentsearch.html>. 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 Barrak Alahmad et al., "A Nationwide Analysis of Heat and Workplace Injuries in the United States," *Environmental Health* 24 (2025): 65, <https://ehjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12940-025-01231-1>; Donald Wuebbles, James Angel, and Karen Petersen (eds.), *An Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change in Illinois*, The Nature Conservancy, Illinois, 2021, https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/IL_Climate_Assessment_2020_Executive_Summary.pdf.
- 7 Trent Ford, "Fall Begins with a Warm and Very Dry September," Illinois State Climatologist, October 6, 2025, <https://stateclimatologist.web.illinois.edu/2025/10/06/fall-begins-with-a-warm-and-very-dry-september/>; Iowa Environmental Mesonet, "Automated Data Plotter: Illinois Long Term Climate Sites," Iowa State University, accessed October 10, 2025, https://mesonet.agron.iastate.edu/plotting/auto/?_wait=no&q=3&network=ILCLIMATE&station=ILC009&month=9&type=days-high-above&threshold=90&year=1850&year=2025&decadal=no&r=t&dpi=100&fmt=js.
- 8 National EMS Information System (NEMSIS), "Heat-Related EMS Activation Surveillance Dashboard: September 20, 2025-October 3, 2025," accessed October 10, 2025, <https://nemsis.org/heat-related-ems-activation-surveillance-dashboard/>.
- 9 OSHA, "Heat Injury and Illness Prevention in Outdoor and Indoor Work Settings Rulemaking," accessed August 11, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/heat-exposure/rulemaking>.
- 10 OSHA, "Deregulatory Rulemaking," accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.osha.gov/deregulatory-rulemaking>; David Kopf, "At the Crossroads: OSHA's New Rules and Deregulation," *Occupational Health and Safety*, November 20, 2025, <https://ohsonline.com/articles/2025/11/20/print-pub-kopf.aspx>.
- 11 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>.
- 12 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>.
- 13 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>.