In Boston’s hottest neighborhood, heat waves exact a cost, in the wallet and on the nerves

By Kate Selig  Globe Correspondent, Updated July 23, 2022, 4:23 p.m.

On her way home through the swelter of Chinatown this past week, Laiying Yan carried...
She lugged the bucket up four flights of narrow stairs, the air hotter and more suffocating the further up she went, and down a cramped hallway. Her room is so narrow that two people can’t sit facing each other. There is no kitchen or bathroom. She set the bucket on the floor and immersed a blanket in the now melting ice. She hung it across the room’s only window so that it might cool whatever air made it in. She soaked a rag and ran it over her face and arms. If she woke during the night, she would eat from the watermelon next to the door, to try and cool herself.

Every year, the heat seems to get worse, she said through an interpreter, but what can she do? “That’s just how life is.”
This past week’s extreme heat — the latest of what experts say will become more common, more intense, and more prolonged as the planet warms in coming years — has been friendly to no one. But in Chinatown, with fewer trees than nearly any other Boston neighborhood and where a third of residents live below the poverty line, it is particularly unbearable. Studies have called it the city’s hottest neighborhood, with temperatures during heat waves as much as 10 degrees higher than other Boston neighborhoods.

For residents and business owners, the heat is something to plan around, a threat that gnaws at them. A restaurant owner surveys the empty tables and worries about the cooling bills to come. A teacher at a summer school searches for a shaded park where her children could play outside. An emergency doctor treats a lightheaded elderly woman who turned off her air conditioner due to the cost.

Kawa Fong, 53, sorted through bills at a table in the dining room of his restaurant, Asian Garden, with a pair of thin, red-rimmed glasses in his hand. Business was slow on Wednesday afternoon, with only three tables filled, and Fong blamed the heat. He said he walked out to his car the day before and saw the temperature registered as 104 degrees on the thermometer in his car.

“Two days of this might be OK,” he said through an interpreter. But the heat wave was expected to continue into Sunday.
Trying to attract more customers, Fong waged a battle against the heat. The central air conditioning wasn’t enough, so he placed three fans and two portable air conditioning units throughout the dining room, keeping the air moving and the dining room cool.

The kitchen, though, is a lost cause, he said. In the back, four cooks sweated through unbuttoned white uniforms, laboring over woks and other kitchenware. The heat escaping into the street through an open door was quickly backfilled with more from the jet engine rush of the burners.

Fong said his cooling efforts aren’t cheap, but he hopes they’ll be worth it.

“I haven’t gotten a bill yet, but we’ll see,” he said through an interpreter.
Not all business owners hoping to beat the heat were as successful as Fong. Wilson Chen, owner of A Salon, painted pink dye onto a customer’s hair and fretted about the heat, which he said is keeping people home. He said a customer told him that he had slept outside because it was so hot.

It doesn’t help that Chen’s salon lacks central air conditioning. Chen, in his late 50s, said a new landlord took over the building a few years ago and shut off the air conditioning, denying him the cold air that used to flow out the three vents above the chairs in the salon.

Chen paid $600 for a portable unit that he keeps in the back, but it’s not enough. The salon is a garden-level business, and there is no way for him to place an AC unit in the window. He set the portable unit to 64 degrees, but without a good way to remove stagnant air from the room, the salon is warm and muggy.
Later in the day, Chen left the empty salon to pick up a newspaper. There was not enough business.

“I feel like there’s nothing I can do,” Chen said.

Those feelings of helplessness are common in Chinatown when it comes to heat, said Karen Chen, the executive director of the Chinese Progressive Association.

“People just accept it,” she said.

She said it’s hard for residents to focus on longer-term solutions to improve the neighborhood’s ability to weather extreme heat when there are so many immediate, day-to-day concerns.

“There’s housing, child care, jobs, inflation,” she said. “You go to the grocery store, $100 is gone, and what did you buy.”
But if left ignored, heat can have serious consequences. Boston Emergency Medical Services usually sees a 15 to 20 percent increase in calls during heat waves, according to a spokesperson. On Thursday alone, they received 22 calls directly related to heat across the city, a higher-than-average amount.

At Tufts Medical Center in Chinatown, a man came to the emergency room, asking for a cup of water.

Kathryn Lupez, an emergency medicine physician, said the heat wave has made “every complaint a little bit worse.”
Lupez said she saw an older woman early in the week who was lightheaded. “This happens every summer because I often don’t use my AC because my AC is very expensive,” Lupez said the woman told her.

Despite the heat, the younger students at Kwong Kow Chinese School’s summer program
clamored to go outside. Elaine Lin, a 25-year-old instructor, would normally bring the students to Eliot Norton Park, their favorite, but the play area isn’t shaded.

Instead, she walked the group of rising first graders to Tai Tung Park, next to A Salon. It has shade: “Very rare in Chinatown,” Lin said.

When the class reached the park, the children ran and climbed and raced around in a game of tag. They stayed on the side of the park shaded by trees, shunning a bouncy lilypad in the sun.

This heat wave will pass. Lin’s students will again play at Eliot Norton Park. Customers will return to Chen’s A Salon and Fong’s Asian Garden. And Yan will not need to carry home a bucket of ice.

But it’s only a matter of time before the next heat wave hits, and Chinatown will again
endure temperatures higher than anywhere else in the city.

For now, Yan said she’s confident she can handle the heat, though she isn’t getting any younger. Below, at the ground floor of the building, a couple escaped the summer swelter in an air-conditioned cafe, laughing over a shaved ice dessert.

“When you come home, you’re supposed to relax,” Yan said. “You shouldn’t come home and suffer.”

*David Abel and Dharna Noor of the Globe Staff contributed to this story.*