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Not enough night shelters in Chennai

Street dwellers unaware of facilities

With peak summer around the corner, the already blazing heat is taking a toll on the homeless in the city.

Take, for instance, a flower-seller on Marina Beach, who usually sleeps on nearby pavements. Her seven-year-old son has developed boils and blisters. “Water is a huge problem for us now. There is also no shade on the pavements. We try and go to residential colonies or near office buildings where it is a little cooler,” she said.

“In summer, heat exhaustion, cramps and dehydration can occur,” warns T. Ravindran, professor of medicine, Madha Medical College. “Also, dermatological problems such as prickly skin are likely.”

Chennai Corporation runs 43 night shelters in the city. Six of

them were opened at government hospitals recently. Another four are also set to be opened in these hospitals. However, street dwellers plead ignorance about the location of these shelters or how to get there.

Sukumari (name changed), a pavement dweller in Chepauk, suffers heat migraines. While she has heard of the shelters, she has no further information about them.

Going by a Supreme Court order that mandates one shelter for every one lakh people, Chennai should have around 70 shelters. But it has just a little over half the number. The Corporation has asked NGOs running shelters to increase the number of inmates from the present 30 to 50 if space permits, said an official. “Only a few shelters are running completely full now. We have also asked the NGOs to undertake construction if there is space,” he said.

A needs assessment will also be made in June to estimate the additional number of shelters required. “We have planned sites already — unused Corporation buildings that have been registered and kept ready. They can be converted into night shelters when needed,” he said.

Experts say around 80% of the homeless population in the city comprises families. “Most of these families have been residing on the streets for generations and need reasonable housing. Right now, they have nothing — neither shelters nor houses,” said R. Geetha, adviser to the Unorganised Workers Federation.

The Corporation can place boards outside zonal offices with a list of shelters, she pointed out. It can also conduct periodic surveys of pavement dwellers to keep them informed.

In the last three years, 1,464 urban homeless have been reintegrated with their families.