

07-09

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Climate Change

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) strongly urges all local health departments, in partnerships with state, tribal, territorial, and federal public health agencies, to collaborate with community members to equitably prepare for and respond to climate change and its impacts on human health. The increasing magnitude of global and local climate change poses significant threats to human health, including both physical and mental health. These threats disproportionately impact certain communities over others.

NACCHO urges local health departments to strongly lead in acting to identify, prevent, and respond to climate-related health impacts. Many of the root causes of climate-related health impacts and inequities are upstream factors that also cause other health and non-health inequities. This mandates that climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts are a coordinated multi-disciplinary, and multi-sectoral response that provides benefits beyond climate change. Scientists, healthcare workers, public health practitioners, community health workers, and others in the public health community must work across sectors to protect human health in an equitable manner. Local health departments need to promote health equity and social justice when undertaking these efforts to prioritize communities disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change because of systemic racism, historical disinvestments, discriminatory practices and policies, economic inequalities, and environmental injustices. These actions inherently fall under public health's mission to protect and promote health and equity for all people.

NACCHO urges public health departments to design, promote, and improve policies that protect communities from the impacts of climate change, which may include: (1) incorporating climate adaptation and mitigation into land use, housing, and transportation planning; (2) coordinating with stakeholders¹ (including both public and private sector organizations) on acute and chronic disaster planning to prepare communities for extreme and unusual environmental events; (3) coordinating with stakeholders to implement and support programs and policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. renewable energy, green building technology, green infrastructure, and alternative transportation modes); and (4) dismantling policies and investments perpetuating structural racism and discrimination that impact the ability of communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from climate disasters. NACCHO encourages tribal, federal, state, and non-governmental organizations to allocate adequate funding to support capacity development of local public health departments and the communities themselves. This funding can be used for activities that further increase capacity such as: (1) building on the increasing body of scientific evidence on the connections between climate change and health and the institutions and activities that contribute to the production of climate



change; and (2) immediately implementing and evaluating climate adaptation and mitigation interventions that address socioeconomic injustices in both health and non-health sectors as each sector impacts the other.

The impacts of climate change are likely to vary geographically and affect certain populations differently, especially communities of color and those with limited resources due to legacies of structural racism and class oppression. In equitably preparing communities to adapt to and prevent climate change, local health departments must fulfill their responsibility to provide the 10 Essential Public Health Services by engaging in the following activities that promote health equity.² By using this framework, local health departments can better understand why climate change is a public health issue, how to integrate climate change adaptation and mitigation into existing programs,³ and how to support cross-sector initiatives to build climate resilience and address the causes of climate change.

Essential Public Health Service #1: Assess and monitor population health status, factors that influence health, and community needs and assets.

- Conduct climate, health, equity, and vulnerability assessments in collaboration with community partners to identify climate-related risks, their health impacts, the people, and places most impacted by these risks, and conditions that create worse outcomes.
- Collect and report data on current and future physical threats of climate change; health impact projections; adaptive capacity (community resources that mitigate the negative impacts of climate change); health and social inequities and vulnerabilities; as well as factors that contribute to climate change.
- Incorporate the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of community stakeholders, including residents and community-based organizations, through all stages of the assessment process.

Essential Public Health Service #2: Investigate, diagnose, and address health problems and hazards affecting the population.

- Enhance current monitoring and surveillance protocols to detect emerging climate-related risks, track impacts on health outcomes, and assess effectiveness of public health interventions.
- Utilize cross-sector partnerships to share and access data to stay apprised of environmental changes (e.g., higher ambient and water temperatures, harmful algal blooms/toxins; disease vectors; and emissions of carbon dioxide and other hazardous material) and the systemic and institutional factors that contribute to these conditions

Essential Public Health Service #3: Communicate effectively to inform and educate people about health, factors that influence health, and how to improve health

- Institute continuous, science-based, and culturally appropriate education programs to inform the community, public health and healthcare professionals, and policymakers about climate change, its impact on health, and the relationship between equity and climate change.
- Convene climate, health, and equity public townhalls to inform policymakers, communities, public health, and healthcare professionals about the connections between climate change, health, and equity.

- Collaborate with other agencies to integrate the health impacts of climate change into routine public messaging (i.e., educational materials, and health promotions)
- Develop varied educational materials for diverse populations that focus on health impacts of climate change and opportunities for health co-benefits.

Essential Public Health Service #4: Strengthen, support, and mobilize communities and partnerships to improve health.

- Provide information, technical assistance, and support to increase community members' ability to access local data and analyze and address health and climate vulnerabilities and assets in the community using their own and external resources and to strengthen social cohesion.
- Encourage and support communities' involvement with institutional and political processes and decision-making, especially within subpopulations facing disproportionate risks of climate-related health impacts (i.e., communities of color, tribal communities, people with disabilities, pregnant people, children, and older adults).
- Partner and collaborate across multiple sectors and organizations – including governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as the private sector – to address complex systems and interrelated issues of health, equity, and sustainability.

Essential Public Health Service #5: Create, champion, and implement policies, plans, and laws that impact health.

- Advocate for policies, plans, programs, and resources to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and strengthen community resilience to equitably protect people from the health impacts of climate change.
- Develop climate change mitigation plans to prevent climate change impacts and shift attention to primary prevention and social determinants of health.
- Collaborate with agencies, intersectoral partners, and community groups to advance policy and programs that address the underlying social determinants of health and inequities in access to resources and infrastructure in historically neglected communities.
- Work with policymakers to introduce a public health perspective into public policy developed around climate change.
- Implement programs and policies to address specific climate-related health risks/impacts such as vector control programs, extreme temperature/weather response plans, etc.

Essential Public Health Service #6: Utilize legal and regulatory actions designed to improve and protect the public's health.

- Advocate for actions and policies from environmental health regulatory agencies that prevent further harm to environmental justice or other communities and redress the impacts of historical injustices that increase vulnerability to adverse climate change health impacts.
- Collaborate with environmental justice and other community groups to develop emergency and early warning systems in multiple languages for communities at high risk for health impacts of climate change (i.e., air pollution, extreme temperatures, allergens, and pollen).
- Ensure that state regulatory agencies address the policies and practices that contribute to disproportionate pollution in low-income communities and communities of color.

- Use environmental health data to outline the health co-benefits of reducing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change (e.g., reduction or elimination of extraction and consumption of fossil fuels).

Essential Public Health Service #7: Assure an effective system that enables equitable access to the individual services and care needed to be healthy.

- Ensure that people have access to healthcare services during and after climate disasters.
- Ensure that healthcare providers integrate information about relevant climate risks into patient education and care management plans.
- Provide information to the public on family emergency plans, local disaster shelters, and cooling centers.
- Connect low-income community members to resources for financial and other support, such as the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Programs (LIHEAP).

Essential Public Health Service #8: Build and support a diverse and skilled public health workforce.

- Ensure public health departmental leadership and senior management are committed to working on climate and health equity
- Identify mechanisms in the health department that support learning and engagement in the Health in All Policies approach or other collaborative work with agencies and other sectors (e.g., transportation, housing, agriculture, planning, parks, and public works) to address climate and health equity issues.
- Identify climate champions or resources to help health department staff to learn about climate impacts in their jurisdiction, as well as opportunities for climate solutions.

Essential Public Health Service #9: Improve and innovate public health functions through ongoing evaluation, research, and continuous quality improvement.

- Contribute to the evidence base by evaluating mitigation and adaptation interventions.
- Identify and promote health co-benefits of programs and policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Essential Public Health Service #10: Build and maintain a strong organizational infrastructure for public health.

- Participate in scientifically based research programs related to climate change that readily translate to the practice of public health.
- Support research on emerging health impacts related to climate change and public health best practice standards.

Justification

Greenhouse gas emissions continue to cause global and local climate change that threatens human health. In the absence of meaningful action, an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, droughts, and fires will result in more disease, injury, and death to people across the world.⁴ Climate change may cause social disruption, economic decline, and displacement of populations, further harming health.^{5,6}

This suffering is not shared equally. In the United States, low-income communities or Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities are disproportionately impacted by these direct and indirect health risks from climate change further exacerbating social and environmental injustices.^{7,8} Indigenous people are uniquely affected by climate change, as health in tribal communities is based on interconnected social and ecological systems. Climate change threatens access to traditional foods, as well as culturally significant sites and practices.⁹ Many of the root causes of climate health inequities are the same causes of other health inequities. Upstream climate health strategies and policies can provide significant health and economic co-benefits when implemented with both an immediate and long-term application of an equity lens.

As public health practitioners, scientists, healthcare workers, and community advocates, it is our mission to work across sectors to equitably protect human health from both the direct and indirect consequences of climate change. An example of a direct health impact is the exacerbation of respiratory conditions and allergies due to greenhouse gas emissions. Poor air quality increases ground-level ozone, which exacerbates asthma and leads to increased incidence of “asthma-related hospital visits and premature deaths.”⁴ This compounds existing inequities as asthma prevalence is higher in BIPOC individuals.⁸ The impacts can also be indirect, such as in the increasing risk for vector-borne infectious disease in the United States.¹⁰ Climate change is already expanding the distribution of ticks, which can carry illnesses like Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.⁴ Low-income “individuals within any population owing to poorer environmental and social conditions (e.g. lower-quality housing situated closer to vector-breeding sites), and lack of access to preventive and curative health interventions and services” face greater risks for vector-borne infectious diseases.

Local public health systems must prepare to prevent or reduce these and other consequences of climate change particularly among communities that will feel those impacts inequitably. Unfortunately, many local health departments are not adequately resourced or prepared to meet these challenges.¹¹ NACCHO recognizes that sustainable funding is needed to train public health professionals, engage communities, and otherwise improve local health department capacity to mitigate climate change. The first step towards building capacity for local health departments is to reinforce that climate change is happening now, it is a public health emergency, and its impacts are being felt locally. A second step is to apply lessons learned from other public health emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, to climate change.¹² Local health departments will better position themselves to support and/or lead efforts to slow or stop climate change and its inequitable health consequences, if they are able to strengthen their capacity, enlist public support, develop partnerships across a broad range of stakeholders, and apply a public health perspective.

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Record of Action

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