

How public health professionals can advance an energy just future



Climate change exacerbates health inequities. Political, economic, social and environmental resources enable people to cope with climate threats, such as extreme heat and natural disasters. But difficulty in accessing these can contribute to a potentially unmanageable energy burden as climate change worsens.

U.S. communities that lack accessible, affordable household energy services often have poorer health, fewer educational opportunities, limited political representation, fewer economic opportunities and inadequate access to health care.

In 2015, 31% of U.S. households reported hardships in paying energy bills or maintaining adequate heating and cooling in their homes. As climate change worsens, alternative energies such as solar or wind are becoming competitive at similar, or even lower, prices than fossil fuels like coal and natural gas.

Alongside community leaders, public health professionals have a role to play in monitoring, evaluating and supporting a transition to a healthier energy supply. A thoughtful energy transition provides opportunities for mitigating climate change and promoting health equity at the same time.

Note: The recommendations included in this factsheet emerged from APHA's Climate Changes Health Roundtable on energy justice at the 2019 APHA Annual Meeting and Expo in Philadelphia, PA.

What could an energy just future look like?

- The risks and benefits of energy production and consumption are more equitably distributed across place, people and time. Affordable energy is available continuously and resilient to climate threats.
- Power is distributed and controlled or owned by the community. Profits are reinvested locally with sustainability and equity in mind.
- Existing infrastructure is used for new renewable power, eliminating the dirtiest energy first. Communities experience the health benefits of improved environmental health conditions.
- Relevant sectors (e.g. building, agriculture, healthcare, community anchor institutions) are engaged with a just transition and energy is conserved.

How can public health professionals advance energy justice?

Strengthen community partnerships.

- Build partnerships with underrepresented frontline tribes and communities that are protecting land, which various energy interests see as available.
- Support the advancement of energy efficiency and affordable alternative forms of energy in historically marginalized communities, including low-income communities and communities of color.
- Partner with social service or community action agencies and serve as a voice of connection to local or county government.

SPOTLIGHT The Center for Story-Based Strategy conducts trainings on how to craft a compelling story in order to influence social change. This organization provides tools that empower groups to advocate for themselves in creative ways. The APHA Center for Climate, Health and Equity also offers story-telling resources for climate and health advocacy.

Support research and benchmarking.

- Quantify the health impacts and costs of energy injustice to support a culture change that prioritizes a just economy and human well-being.
- Promote energy efficiency in home and public operations through community and agency engagement.

SPOTLIGHT The Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program helps businesses and individuals save money and mitigate climate change through energy efficiency reporting.

Advocate for policy.

- Lobby for fuel efficiency standards and promote independence from fossil fuel resources.
- Include definitive statements on equity in energy, health and climate programs and policies.
- Support policies that promote a just transition for workers and communities adversely impacted by climate change and the transition to a low-carbon economy.

SPOTLIGHT Green & Healthy Homes Initiative's office in Memphis, TN, and Le Bonheur Children's Hospital's CHAMP (Changing High-Risk Asthma in Memphis through Partnership) asthma program coordinate home energy audits to address asthma.

Improve energy infrastructure.

- Prioritize localized power with microgrids of renewable energy, as an alternative to centralized public utility companies.
- Retrofit home energy systems to benefit tenants, such as with weatherization or alternative energy sources.
- Engage the building and housing sectors in partnership.
- Invest in affordable housing to avoid displacement and long-distance commuting.

SPOTLIGHT Community Choice Aggregation allows neighborhoods to purchase a greater percentage of renewable energy than would be available from a dominant electrical utility company.

Develop education and communication.

- Develop educational resources and templates for testimony or op-eds.
- Use national conferences as platforms to inspire action on energy justice.

SPOTLIGHT Practice Greenhealth and Health Care Without Harm provide educational materials for healthcare workers to improve the carbon footprint and environmental safety of their hospitals.

Reimagine transportation.

- Engage with transit agencies and transit-oriented development advocates to restructure public spending. Develop affordable public transportation systems and multi-modal streets that allow space for biking, walking, rolling, etc. with increased access in low-income communities and communities of color.
- Encourage transportation agencies to prioritize carbon reductions in their missions and budgets.

SPOTLIGHT Intercity Transit Municipal Corporation in Olympia, WA, stopped collecting fares and offers free bus transport throughout the city. The reduced financial burden allows greater mobility for city residents. And the increased public transport ridership can decrease the number of single-person cars on the road, cutting down on both air pollution and traffic.

