Climate Change, Health, and Equity: A Guide For Local Health Departments

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Preface

The health of Americans faces two great challenges: climate change and health inequities.

Climate change affects the health of every community. Beyond its direct health impacts (such as heat illness), climate change increases food insecurity, worsens air pollution, reduces our access to clean water, displaces people from their homes, and causes widespread social and economic disruption. Dr. Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank, said that climate change "threatens our fragile existence on this planet."

Health inequities and climate change are deeply interconnected. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating poverty, environmental degradation, and political instability. Like health inequities, climate change is a problem rooted in the structures, systems, and values of our society and economy. Eliminating health inequities and resolving climate change requires an intersectoral and transformational approach.

Many climate solutions offer huge health benefits. In fact, many strategies to reduce climate pollution are the same strategies that we must implement to reduce health inequities.

Climate change is a public health emergency: The health and well-being—and possibly the very survival—of the communities we serve is in danger, as witnessed by the increased occurrence of disastrous wildfires and extreme weather events. Our actions now (or lack thereof) will affect the magnitude of climate impacts and the extent to which our communities thrive in the face of climate change and recover in the aftermath of climate-related disasters.

Climate change is a global phenomenon, but people and communities at the local and regional level experience its consequences. Local public health departments have a critical role in addressing this urgent threat, just as they have done in facing other emergent threats to the health of the public, and a responsibility to expand public health practice to address climate change.

We can do what public health has done for so many other threats: educate and inform, develop and use the scientific evidence, partner with community organizations and sister agencies, advocate for policy and systems change, and take on the powerful interests that put profits over people and impede the transformational change needed to achieve equity and a healthy climate for all. We hope this Guide will be useful to every local health department striving to address climate change, health, and equity as joined and urgent issues.

Georges C. Benjamin, MD
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Introduction

Local public health departments (LHDs) across the United States are working proactively to address health inequities, an endeavor that requires intentional change in public health practice. While the services that public health provides to individuals in communities remain vitally important, local health departments are broadening their scope to support systems change across the many sectors that shape community environments (such as transportation and land use, agriculture and food, and criminal justice systems) and the economic, physical, and social conditions in which we live, work, learn, and play. LHDs are also beginning to address the historical and structural determinants of health (such as racism, power, and disenfranchisement) that have led to and reinforce persistent inequities.

Now, public health needs to apply this expanded scope to climate change. Our actions now will determine the magnitude of future impacts, how quickly they occur, and the extent to which our communities can thrive in the face of climate change.

Key Messages about Public Health and Climate Change

Climate change and health inequities are the defining public health issues of our time, and they are inextricably interconnected.

1. **Climate change disproportionately impacts the health of low-income communities and communities of color.** The same physical, social, economic, and services environments that are associated with poor health outcomes for low-income communities and communities of color also increase exposure and vulnerability to the health impacts of climate change. People in low-income communities and communities of color generally experience greater burdens from pre-existing health conditions which increase susceptibility to climate-related health threats. These communities are often historically disenfranchised, lacking the political and economic power and voice to ensure that decision makers take their perspectives, needs, and ideas fully into account. This lack of power contributes to health inequities and constrains the ability of low-income communities and communities of color from building climate resilience and to contributing fully to climate change solutions.
2. **Climate change and health inequities share the same root causes.** The same systems (e.g. transportation, food and agriculture, energy) that are major sources of climate pollution also shape the living conditions that comprise the social determinants of health. These systems are shaped by current and historical forces that include structural racism and the persistent lack of social, political, and economic power of low-income communities and communities of color.
3. **Addressing climate change and health inequities requires transformational change in our systems and communities.** Many climate solutions offer tremendous health benefits and opportunities to promote greater equity, which are vital to increasing climate resilience. But to assure that all Americans have opportunities for health requires that we preserve a healthy planet. We cannot have healthy people without healthy places, and we cannot have healthy places without a healthy planet.

1.1 Local Health Departments: Essential to Effective Response to Climate Change

Core public health values affirm that "*humans have a right to the resources necessary for health*," and that "*people and their physical environment are interdependent*."[1] Climate change threatens the fundamentals that sustain life and health—fresh water, food, clean air, shelter, and security. Everyone (and everywhere) is affected, although climate change exacerbates local and global inequities. We must address climate change to fulfill the very definition of public health: "what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions for people to be healthy."[2]

LHDs have a professional and ethical responsibility to address the climate crisis. The role of LHDs is to apply the same foundational public health tools and approaches that are used to address any emergent health crisis, grounded in core public health values such as equity, prevention, and preparedness.

Why Local Health Departments?

- There is ample evidence and scientific consensus that climate change is happening now, is largely due to human activities, and is amenable to action to slow its pace and reduce its impacts. Failure to act on climate change now risks catastrophic consequences for the health and well-being of people around the world and even more so for future generations.
- LHDs are on the front lines and see the impacts of climate change on communities as the changes are happening. A 2008 national survey found that nearly 70% of U.S. local health officials believed that their jurisdiction had already experienced climate change, and that number is surely higher today.[3]
- LHDs are the only local government entity with a duty to protect health and provide a trusted and credible voice. They can help policymakers and the public understand the breadth of climate health impacts, and the urgent need for climate action. By linking health equity and climate change, public health leaders can show how transformative changes can protect people and build healthy and equitable communities in the era of climate change.
- LHDs work in and have deep connections to the communities that are most impacted by climate change. LHDs can support genuine participation of community members in decisions about how local governments respond to climate change.
- While it's true that most LHDs currently have limited capacity, expertise, or funding to work on climate change, the magnitude of the public health threat requires engagement now. Public health has a long history of confronting emerging problems despite limited resources.
- LHDs have a proven track record of succeeding against powerful forces to protect health from complex threats (e.g. success in tobacco control and auto safety). These successes rest in part on public health's commitment to confront cultural, economic, political, structural, and corporate forces that shape the environments that determine health. With similar commitment and effort, LHDs can play a powerful role in addressing climate change and its impacts on health.

Every local health department is different in size, structure, geographic location, community and political context, and capacity, and there is no "one size fits all" approach to the integration of climate change into LHD practice.

This Guide connects what we know about climate impacts and climate solutions with the work of LHDs, and provides examples of how LHDs can put climate change into public health practice. The Guide is neither a step-by-step "how to" nor a comprehensive catalog of how to address climate change. It is intentionally redundant so that readers can access information from various entry points based on their roles and interests. We hope the Guide will help you integrate climate change into the public health practice of your LHD.

CLIMATE CHANGE, HEALTH, AND EQUITY:
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