

# U.S. CALL TO ACTION ON CLIMATE, HEALTH, AND EQUITY: A POLICY ACTION AGENDA

2019

**Climate change is one of the greatest threats to health America has ever faced—it is a true public health emergency.** The health, safety and wellbeing of millions of people in the U.S. have already been harmed by human-caused climate change, and health risks in the future are dire without urgent action to fight climate change. As former Surgeon Generals Richard Carmona and David Satcher said: “We’re all at risk and our leaders must lead on global warming. Now.” But the health crisis caused by climate change also presents a major health opportunity. Building healthy energy, transportation, land use, and agriculture systems now will deliver immediate and sustained health benefits to all and reduce future health risks from climate change.

Our organizations represent physicians, nurses, health and public health professionals and health workers, hospitals and health care systems, health education institutions, and public, environmental, mental, and community-based health agencies and organizations. We have dedicated our lives to improving the health of our patients and communities.

**Therefore, we call on government, business, and civil society leaders, elected officials, and candidates for office to recognize climate change as a health emergency and to work across government agencies and with communities and businesses to prioritize action on this Climate, Health and Equity Policy Action Agenda.**

**Climate change is the “greatest public health challenge of the 21st century.”** Extreme heat, powerful storms and floods, year-round wildfires, droughts, and other climate-related events have already caused thousands of deaths and displaced tens of thousands of people in the U.S. from their homes, with significant personal loss and mental health impacts especially for first responders and children. Air pollution, whose primary driver—fossil fuel combustion—is also the primary driver of climate change, causes hundreds of thousands of deaths in the U.S. annually. Mosquito and tick-borne diseases are spreading to new communities. The agricultural, food, and water systems we depend on for our survival are under threat. Without an urgent and effective response, these harms will greatly increase.

**Action to reduce climate change can dramatically improve health.** Many policies that move us towards safe climate goals have demonstrable and significant health benefits. Climate action in the energy, transportation, land use, housing, agricultural, and other sectors has the potential to avoid thousands of deaths in the U.S. and millions of deaths each year globally. A just transition to clean, safe renewable energy and energy efficiency, sustainable food production and diets, active transportation, and green cities will lower climate pollution while simultaneously reducing the incidence of communicable and non-communicable disease, improving mental health, and promising significant health care cost savings.

**Equity must be central to climate action.** Climate change threatens everyone in the U.S., but is a more immediate danger to some. Climate change exacerbates health inequities, disproportionately harming the most vulnerable among us—children and pregnant women, people with low income, the aged and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, some communities of color, indigenous people and tribal communities, immigrants, marginalized people of all races and ethnicities, and outdoor workers. Communities that have experienced systemic neglect and environmental racism have the least responsibility for climate pollution, but are the most affected. These communities have less access to the political, economic, social and environmental resources that enable them to cope with climate threats and

face potentially unmanageable pressures as the impacts of climate change mount.

Choices that we make now will determine the magnitude of climate impacts on our children and grandchildren, and whether future generations will have access to the natural resources and environments that will enable them to be healthy. If we fail to take urgent action now, options for limiting global warming and averting catastrophic impacts will no longer be available. U.S. climate policies and investments must serve to remedy existing inequities and address our moral responsibility to current and future generations.

Without transformational action, climate change will be increasingly severe, leading to more illness, injury, and death; mass migration and violent conflict; and worsening health inequities. By **mobilizing climate action for health and health action for climate**, the U.S. can reduce climate pollution and build healthy communities that are resilient in the face of climate risks.

This is a crucial moment. We need to ratchet-up commitments to climate action and accelerate action to protect our health and that of future generations. **With the right policies and investments today, we have the opportunity to realize our vision of healthy people in healthy places on a healthy planet.** The priority actions outlined below are urgent and essential steps to protect and promote health and advance the well-being of all people in the era of climate change.

## **CLIMATE ACTION FOR HEALTH**

Making health integral to climate policymaking at all levels and across all sectors offers a major opportunity to engender greater support for climate action, advance climate solutions, and achieve ambitious health targets through win-win strategies that promote climate justice, health and health equity, resilience, and a sustainable economy. We urge government leaders to advance the following priorities.

### **PRIORITY ACTIONS**

- 1** **Meet and strengthen U.S. commitments under the Paris agreement.** A large and rapid reduction in carbon emissions is essential for our health and the health of future generations. The U.S. must re-commit to the Paris Agreement and to aggressive emissions reductions sufficient to limit global temperature increases to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, and continue to engage with international and national leaders, business, and civil society to encourage and support others to develop multilateral, binding commitments to do the same. The US must ratify and implement the Kigali Amendment to reduce the use of hydrofluorocarbons.
- 2** **Transition rapidly away from the use of coal, oil and natural gas to clean, safe, and renewable energy and energy efficiency.** With the technology available today, we can dramatically change U.S. energy use and systems to meet growing energy needs affordably, while reducing climate and air pollution. Key policies include:
  - Establish ambitious goals and timelines for renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy conservation.
  - Support financing for the technologies and infrastructure needed to transition to zero carbon emissions, including development, adoption, and scale-up of renewable energy sources and investments in energy efficiency. Put a price on carbon that reflects its true social costs and phase out investments in and subsidies for fossil fuels for energy extraction and generation.
  - Ensure that climate policies support sustainable energy for all by promoting distributed renewable energy and zero emission transportation technologies, with a priority on disadvantaged communities.
  - Support a rapid reduction of petroleum and natural gas use in transportation through steady investment and regulations to increase fuel efficiency and transition to zero emission vehicle

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technologies as quickly as possible across the transportation sector.

- Establish ambitious goals for building efficiency and move toward a zero carbon future by reducing carbon impacts from new and existing buildings. Transition away from wood burning, oil, and natural gas use for home heating and cooking.
- Reduce conventional air pollutants alongside reductions in carbon and short-lived climate pollutants to maximize health benefits in communities impacted by pollution.
- Assess and address the health impacts of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) extraction, production, transport and infrastructure on urban and rural communities, for example through “setbacks” for sensitive populations and stronger protections against fossil fuel industry impacts on clean air and water.
- Develop a plan and timeline for reduction of fossil fuel extraction in the U.S.
- Support research on strategies to draw down climate pollution from the atmosphere and store it in the ground, and on the potential health and equity impacts of these strategies.

3

**Emphasize active transportation in the transition to zero-carbon transportation systems.** Shifting from driving to active modes of travel—walking, bicycling, and public transit—can substantially reduce rates of non-communicable diseases (e.g. obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis), and injuries. Key policies include:

- Make transportation carbon reductions central to the mission of transportation agencies and align transportation expenditures with the goals of reducing climate pollution and vehicle miles traveled and supporting healthier communities and travel choices for all.
- Significantly increase the percentage of transportation investments for infrastructure and programs to promote safe walking and cycling, and for affordable, accessible and convenient public transit infrastructure, maintenance, and operations, including in rural communities.
- Invest in affordable housing to avoid displacement and very long-distance commuting based on families’ ability to afford housing near jobs.

4

**Promote healthy, sustainable and resilient farms and food systems, forests, and natural lands.** By changing what we eat, and how we grow, harvest and transport our food, we can protect our health, reduce obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, and significantly reduce our carbon footprint. Properly managed and protected forests, farms, rangelands, and wetlands can serve as resilient carbon sinks and protect the communities that depend on them from climate impacts. Practices that reduce food waste, conserve and regenerate our soil, conserve and protect our water, sustain our fisheries, conserve productive agricultural land from urban sprawl, and protect those who grow our food are essential to safeguard our food supply and our safety in the face of climate impacts. Building resilient, ecologically sustainable, local food systems can support the livelihoods of agricultural communities and the people that grow and produce our food, expand access to healthy food, improve air and water quality and biodiversity, and reduce carbon emissions. Key policies include:

- Invest in programs and encourage practices that protect, manage, conserve, and expand natural and working lands to increase carbon sequestration and reduce catastrophic wildfires, floods, and mudslides.

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- Expand tree canopy, parks, green spaces, and green infrastructure to sequester carbon, increase cooling in urban areas and reduce the impacts of flooding.
- Use agricultural funding and programs to prioritize and enable a rapid shift to diversified and sustainable agro-ecological and regenerative practices that reduce reliance on chemical- and energy-intensive industrial monoculture and animal-based agriculture and environmentally damaging agricultural and fisheries practices. Support urban and peri-urban agriculture.
- Integrate urban and agricultural land use planning to maximize transit-oriented infill development while conserving productive agricultural lands on urban edges.
- Establish incentives and supports for reduction of food waste.
- Incentivize livestock manure management practices that reduce potent methane emissions and produce valuable compost for soil fertility.
- Encourage America's children to enjoy healthy plant-based diets and reduce consumption of red and processed meat by implementing a strategy to provide meat-free options in all school meals.

5

**Ensure that everyone in the U.S. has access to safe and affordable drinking water and a sustainable water supply.** There is nothing more fundamental to human existence than water. Key policies include:

- Enhance regulations to prevent water contamination from agricultural, mining, industrial, and energy production sources.
- Invest in programs for water conservation and efficiency, water resources management, infrastructure maintenance, protection from flooding and salt-water inundation, and in research on sustainable and ecologically safe alternative water resources such as desalination and reuse.

6

**Invest in policies that support a just transition for workers and communities adversely impacted by climate change and the transition to a low-carbon economy.** A sustainable and equitable low-carbon economy requires shared prosperity including fair employment and economic opportunities for workers and communities that are affected by climate change and climate-related policies and programs. Investment in green jobs builds community economic well-being and improves health. Key policies include:

- Assess and alleviate impacts on workers and communities affected by job or economic losses related to climate change and climate policy, using inclusive engagement with stakeholders
- Advance a just transition through greater investments in workforce training and development, local hiring programs, and community-driven infrastructure.

### HEALTH ACTION FOR CLIMATE

Proactive support is required to expand health sector efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in health facilities; build resilience through the integration of climate considerations in health systems, policies, programs, and investments; and effectively communicate the health threats of climate change together with the health benefits of climate action.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

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**Engage the health sector voice in the call for climate action.** Proactive health sector leadership in climate communications can significantly increase public support for transformative climate action. Key policies include:

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- Implement local and national campaigns, using lessons from public health campaigns such as tobacco control, to inform about the health impacts of climate change and the health benefits of climate action.

8

**Incorporate climate solutions into all health care and public health systems.** Public health agencies must address climate change as a health emergency to protect and promote the health of communities. Hospitals and health care systems must implement climate-smart health care, build facility resilience, and leverage their economic power to decarbonize the supply chain and promote equitable local economic development. Key policies include:

- Proactively support integration of climate change into all relevant federal, state, and local public health programs.
- Establish a public-private task force to assess the current state of the nation's health care system resilience to extreme weather and recommend strategies and investments to improve it.
- Support policies to advance implementation of climate-smart energy, water, transportation, food, anesthetic gas and waste management practices in U.S. health care facilities, including clinics and provider offices.

Develop low-carbon health care delivery models, utilizing community-based care sites, telemedicine and mobile technologies.

- Support redesign of all health professional curricula to better prepare the health workforce to lead in climate change mitigation and adaptation.

9

**Build resilient communities in the face of climate change.** Climate change is a global phenomenon, but it is people and communities at the local level that experience its consequences. Climate and health action will be most effective when those most impacted have the voice, power, and capacity to be full partners in building a healthy, equitable, and climate resilient future. Key policies include:

- Deeply engage communities most impacted by climate change and poor health outcomes in planning, policy development and budgeting, offering meaningful roles and power in decision-making processes, and respecting history, traditional ecological knowledge and community-directed solutions.
- Support adequate planning and funding to protect all communities from the adverse health impacts of climate change, including robust heat island mitigation; expansion of tree canopy, green space, and green infrastructure; cool roofs and cool pavements; rainwater and gray water capture; strategies to reduce the occurrence and impacts of catastrophic wildfires and floods; community preparedness and resilience training; and increased availability of climate-adapted housing.
- Integrate and provide guidance on assessment of the health and health equity benefits (or risks) of proposed climate solutions and investments.

### FINANCING CLIMATE ACTION FOR HEALTH AND HEALTH ACTION FOR CLIMATE

Achieving goals for climate, health, and equity will require that climate investments consider health impacts and benefits, and that investments in health take climate change considerations into account. Investing in the health of people and our communities saves money over time and makes the nation stronger. Current investments fall far short.

**PRIORITY ACTION**

**10**

**Invest in climate and health.**

- Allocate resources to enable the health sector to effectively protect health in the face of climate change, starting with support for local and state health departments and a resilient hospital infrastructure.
- Fund and implement national, state and local climate-health risk assessments, expanded disease surveillance systems, early warning systems, and research on climate and health that enable an effective health response to climate threats. Make all data publicly available.

Together, these ten policy recommendations provide a roadmap to develop coordinated strategies for simultaneously tackling climate change, health, and equity.

**Climate change is a health emergency. We call on local, state, and national leaders to act now to stop climate pollution, promote resilient communities, and support healthy people in healthy places on a healthy planet.**

**ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS**

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