Climate and Community Health

The Critical Role of Infrastructure in Building Resilience

What once seemed like separate issues—climate and health—are now recognized as inseparable: climate resilience is an urgent public health priority that determines which communities thrive and which suffer. From increased respiratory illnesses because of pollution and wildfires, to premature deaths due to extreme heat, and even harmful impacts on mental health, climate is impacting community health and healthcare costs. Social and environmental factors such as access to affordable housing, poverty, and racism can all exacerbate a community's exposure to the negative health consequences of climate change. Historically redlined communities, for example, experience higher rates of heat-related illness due to decades-long disinvestments in housing, green spaces, transportation, and other critical infrastructure that contributes to cooling.

As extreme weather events intensify, strategic community infrastructure investments today can prevent health crises tomorrow. The speed and scale needed for success make a compelling case for new health and community development multi-sector partnerships to drive our response.

When community developers and health partners join forces, they don't just build resilient infrastructure, they create healthier communities. As extreme weather becomes the norm, these partnerships represent a powerful approach for protecting health and wellbeing across the country.

The Health Consequences of Climate Change

- The Vital Conditions for Health and Wellbeing framework highlights how factors like housing, jobs, and the environment shape community health. Socioeconomic factors, including land-use policies, both contribute to and are affected by climate change.

- These impacts are not felt equally across communities. Due to structural racism and disinvestment, racial and ethnic minorities face higher illness and death rates, living in areas hardest hit by climate-driven heat and pollution.

- People experiencing homelessness are profoundly affected by increasing weather temperatures. In the state of California, unhoused residents represented 13% of heat-related hospitalizations between 2017 and 2021.

- Climate change is a public health crisis that also drives up healthcare costs. According to the World Economic Forum, healthcare systems are predicted to incur $1.1 trillion in additional costs due to climate-related events, including increased deaths due to flooding, droughts and heat waves.

- In the US alone, a study of 10 climate-sensitive events across 11 U.S. states resulted in an estimated $10 billion in health-related expenditures due to deaths, emergency room visits and hospitalizations, and other medical costs.

- Extreme weather events cause both immediate health impacts (injuries and deaths during hurricanes or floods) and longer-term consequences including mental health effects and disrupted access to essential healthcare services that worsen chronic disease conditions.

Evidence Bites

How Community Development is Counteracting Climate Change

- **Affordable and Sustainable Housing:** Housing construction, location, and energy use can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and community development is well positioned to expand this by retrofitting existing homes for climate resilience. The National Housing Trust will upgrade 785 affordable units in Washington, D.C., improving air quality and reducing emissions.

- **Job Creation:** As climate-related health risks impact the workforce, community development finance institutions (CDFIs) can funnel funds into green jobs. The Center for Rural Affairs, a CDFI, was awarded a $62 million federal grant that provides technical and financial support for disinvested communities in Nebraska that can benefit from residential solar. The program will help create jobs by training workers to set up and maintain the new installations.

- **Community Green Spaces:** Green spaces combat climate change by providing shade, absorbing carbon dioxide, and promoting walking or biking over fuel-burning vehicles. Sankofa Community Development Corporation transformed 40 acres of wetlands in New Orleans into a natural trail and park, helping prevent flooding and offering residents environmental education and recreation.

- **Meaningful Engagement and Trustworthiness:** Racial and ethnic minorities experience a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards. Sustainable solutions should therefore account for historical injustices and the lived experiences of residents by building trust and incorporating community decision making. Reimagine Middle Branch is a community-led partnership that includes a resident driven effort to restore more than 50 acres of habitat and 11 miles of shoreline in South Baltimore, Maryland. The initiative ensures communities are more resilient to eroding shorelines and rising sea levels while creating recreational spaces and better water quality.

Evidence in Action

Casa Familiar–Developing workforce
San Ysidro, CA

Casa Familiar, a community development organization in San Ysidro, CA, champions environmental justice as part of its 40+ programs and services. Through the Casa Verde Initiative, it provides workforce development, training residents in community organizing climate change impacts, and environmental advocacy. The initiative also provides hands-on experience and pathways to green jobs, empowering underrepresented communities.

Enterprise Community Partners–Driving creation of green and healthy housing
Columbia, MD

Enterprise Community Partners (Enterprise) is a nonprofit committed to racial equity, mobility, housing expansion, and resilience. Through its Green Communities initiative, Enterprise has spent over 20 years reducing housing emissions by setting sustainability standards for funded projects. This effort has led to over 1 million affordable and sustainable homes. Enterprise also supports builders with grants and technical assistance to promote sustainable practices in affordable housing.

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ)–Strengthening Local Economies
New Orleans, LA

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ) partners with communities, scientific researchers, and decision-makers to advance climate and environmental justice. Its work focuses on housing, jobs, education, and health. In collaboration with the City of New Orleans and the Greater New Orleans Foundation, DSCEJ developed a Climate Action Equity Report that outlines recommended actions to address a range of community development issues. These include the creation of community solar projects to reduce energy costs in already overburdened neighborhoods and increasing the participation of disadvantaged business enterprises in city infrastructure planning to ensure more equitable and sustainable development.

Eastside Community Network (ECN)–Solutions Through Community Leadership
Detroit, MI

The Eastside Community Network (ECN) collaborates with residents to foster sustainable, equitable growth on Detroit's East Side. Central to this mission is the Neighborhoods First Engagement Model (NFEM), a framework that empowers community members to address local challenges through "learning," "creating," and "advocating." ECN's climate equity efforts are guided by the Eastside Climate Action Coalition, a resident-led group of community members, officials, and experts who meet monthly to shape climate strategies. These efforts include transforming ECN's headquarters into a Resilience Hub with solar power, battery storage, and stormwater management to support residents during climate events. The space will also serve as a wellness hub, offering holistic support and resources to promote long-term community well-being.

DEFINITIONS

Climate Change encompasses global warming but refers to the broader changes happening to the planet, including changes in precipitation, temperature, and wind patterns, as well as plant blooming times. Climate change can have a variety of environmental effects, including extreme weather incidents; rising levels of air pollution; changes in land, aquatic, and vector ecosystems and habitats; and changes in water and food quality.

Climate Justice recognizes the disproportionate impacts of climate change on low-income communities and communities of color around the world, the people and places least responsible for the problem. It seeks solutions that address the root causes of climate change and in doing so, simultaneously address a broad range of social, racial, and environmental injustices.

Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI): CDFIs are "private financial institutions dedicated to delivering responsible, affordable lending to help low-income, low-wealth and other disadvantaged people and communities join the economic mainstream".

Where to Start

When exploring partnerships at the intersection of climate and health, whether with public health, hospitals and healthcare systems, or government, the following questions will help you uncover opportunities for collaboration and evaluate each organization's priorities, capacity, and pain points to build your case for partnership:

- Is climate resilience a priority in the healthcare institution, or the public health department's Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA)? For example rehabilitating existing housing stock or expanding green spaces? Are there regional adaptation efforts underway?

- For those prioritizing climate resilience, hospitals that are part of a bigger healthcare system might have their own foundations with earmarked community investments and may be ready for partnership.

- What existing networks can amplify your climate and health work and create pathways to health partnerships? Consider national networks such as National Academy of Medicine's Climate Communities Network that connects community organizations in disproportionately impacted areas, as well as local coalitions that bridge health and environmental justice.

- How do community members view both your organization and your potential healthcare partners? Is there trust? Where might relationships need repair, and what steps will help rebuild trust and credibility, ensuring community voices are centered in your approach?

- What are the key regulatory requirements at play at the state or local level? e.g. the mission orientation of the local institutions, or city or state policies that focus on climate resilience. Where do they create opportunities and barriers? Consider state policies, local plans and health partner mission commitments to identify where your goals might naturally align. Where may advocacy be needed?

Tools to Move Forward

- The Public Health Primer shares recommendations and highlights opportunities for Public Health and Community Development partnerships that advance racial and health equity goals.

- Build Health Places Network's Crosswalk highlights the potential for health and community development partnerships to leverage federal investments that tackle climate change and enhance public health.

- The AAMC Center for Health Justice Principles of Trustworthiness is a co-developed community resource designed to help organizations demonstrate they are worthy of their community's trust. AAMC's other Community Engagement Toolkits help partners engage in dialogue to support the development of transparent, equitable, and lasting relationships that center community-defined values at every stage. To learn more about the AAMC Center for Health Justice or for support implementing the Principles of Trustworthiness, visit: aamchealthjustice.org or contact healthjustice@aamc.org.

- BHPN's Healthcare Playbook for Community Developers helps you build partnerships with hospitals and healthcare systems to improve community health and well-being.

- BHPN's Jargon Buster demystifies common industry jargon across sectors.

- Crafting a Health Equity Centered Narrative Factsheet—a resource that helps practitioners to communicate effectively across sectors, challenge harmful narratives and build trust-driven relationships that center community strengths.