



The Climate Crisis As a Bridge to Belonging

Insights from BHPN's Summit on multi-sector approaches to climate-driven disasters.

Climate-driven disasters are no longer abstract future threats. On May 5, Build Healthy Places Network (BHPN) convened leaders across sectors for a Summit on what it actually takes to move from fragmented responses to coordinated, community-led resilience.

1. Belonging Is Infrastructure.

Co-Executive Director Ruth Thomas-Squance grounded the day in the Rippel Foundation's Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being. At the center sits the engine of everything else: belonging and civic muscle. Social fabric, cultural identity, and the power people feel to shape their own communities can be as protective in a disaster as any physical infrastructure - sometimes more so.



“When a disaster hits, the impact is felt across housing, transportation, food, and healthcare — a trauma to the social fabric of the neighborhood, all at once.”

Ruth Thomas-Squance, Co-Executive Director, BHPN



“Climate disasters don't create inequity — they crystallize long-standing inequities with urgency.”

Dr. Manuel Pastor, Director, Equity Research Institute, USC

2. Climate Disasters Don't Create Inequity. They Expose It.

In conversation with Co-Executive Director of BHPN Colleen Flynn, Dr. Manuel Pastor, Director of the Equity Research Institute at USC, named three interlocking crises: a fraying multi-racial democracy, deepening inequality, and accelerating climate impacts — all bound by a single thread: disconnection. Better policy isn't the missing piece, he argued. Civic muscle is.

3. Where Climate Hits Hardest, Communities Are Leading.

In Miami, climate gentrification is pushing communities of color out of neighborhoods — now desirable because they flood less. In LA, the Eaton Canyon fire accelerated a displacement already underway. Yet the same communities bearing the heaviest burden are authoring the response. When Catalyst Miami raised extreme heat with the County, officials said they had no data — so Catalyst trained residents as citizen scientists, who recorded readings 30 degrees hotter than official reports. That data produced Miami's first Chief Heat Officer. In LA, Christopher Locke is centering youth in a Black Cultural District and using land banking to keep land in community hands.



“Our elders hold wisdom, but we need youth to carry those stories forward.”

Christopher Locke, Steward, The Collective UNbound

4. Unlikely Partners Make the Strongest Bridges.

At Boston Medical Center, Dr. Anna Goldman leads Clean Power Prescription, which uses the hospital's solar array to send energy credits straight to the utility bills of Medicaid patients with chronic disease and utility insecurity. Making it work took an unlikely partnership: a safety-net hospital, an investor-owned utility, and a long-standing community services organization, all aligned around a patient's electric bill. The bridges, not the lanes, are where resilience gets built.



“The utility has ended up being a really important partner — that collaborative work is what makes the credits actually reach our patients.”

Dr. Anna Goldman, Medical Director of Climate & Sustainability, Boston Medical Center

5. The Power Inversion: Philanthropy Follows Community's Lead.

Monica Valdes Lupi of The Kresge Foundation closed with a candid challenge to her peers: flexible, multi-year funding matters, but who gets to define success matters more. Kresge's Climate Change, Health and Equity Initiative rests on a simple inversion — communities set priorities and define progress, the foundation organizes capital. Trust-building and emergent learning, she argued, are as important as health outcomes and policy wins.



“Foundations are beginning to learn how to share their power with communities — communities identifying and setting the priorities, communities defining what success means to them.”

Monica Valdes Lupi, Managing Director, Health Programs, The Kresge Foundation

The Time to Come Together Is Now.

Dr. Pastor closed the Summit with a story. When the Eaton Canyon fire reached his daughter's rental property, a tenant rushed to the backyard with water buckets — joined by his father-in-law, who had just lost his own home to the same fire, and neighbors who broke through fences to help. Three lessons, Pastor said: sometimes you just have to rush toward the fire; it's better to go with friends and neighbors; and it's better when government helps put out the fire rather than fanning the flames.

Every step we take to dismantle structural inequity, invest in social infrastructure, and strengthen community civic muscle is a step toward resilient places.

That future won't build itself — and no one sector can build it alone.

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