

# The Role of Human Services Agencies in Advancing Climate and Environmental Justice



In recent years, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) has been exploring the intersection of human services and climate and environmental justice by bringing together our members at state and local agencies with federal, philanthropic, and research partners. Research and evidence show us that the people most impacted by increasing severe weather events and pollution closely overlap with those that interact with human services, and are often the families and communities that have the least resources and power to respond to and recover from natural disasters and environmental hazards. To truly be human-centered and advance well-being in our work, we must understand the full scope of what people who access human services experience, and that includes how environmental quality, climate, and weather are impacting their lives.

Through several conversations, facilitated meetings, and a national survey, APHSA and our partners at Mathematica have asked the question—**what can be the role of the human services sector in advancing climate and environmental justice to build more resilient communities?** This paper presents the what, who, why, how, when, and where of the relationship between human services and issues of climate and environmental justice.

## What is climate and environmental justice?

**Climate justice** is a movement that recognizes the disproportionate social, economic, public health, and other adverse impacts on communities with low incomes and communities of color, often the people and places least responsible for the problem. It seeks solutions that address the root causes of climate change while addressing a broad range of social, racial, and environmental injustices.<sup>1</sup>

**Environmental justice** is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.<sup>2</sup>

**What can human services do?** Human services agencies have the potential to both help mitigate the impacts of increasing severe weather events, as well as to adapt and build more resilient systems in the face of climate and environmental injustices.

<sup>1</sup> Our definition is adapted from other versions from Yale, UCal, and MIT.

<sup>2</sup> Our definition is based on the EPA.

## Who is relevant when we think about climate and environmental justice and why?

The people who are most impacted by climate and environmental injustices tend to be People of Color and people with low incomes. Recent research shows that People of Color, regardless of income level, are exposed to higher levels of particulate matter than White individuals—poorer air quality is tied to a myriad of health effects. Similarly, there are tools, such as Mathematica’s [ClimaWATCH](#), that show the disproportionate impacts of climate events on people with low incomes; for example, the impacts of heatwaves on Medicaid beneficiaries. These tend to be the same populations that human services agencies serve—and these agencies likely already have connections throughout their community through outreach and service providers.

## How can human services agencies help advance climate and environmental justice?

Through a nation-wide survey and several workshops conducted by APHSA and Mathematica, human services practitioners have elevated four key takeaways for agencies to help advance climate and environmental justice efforts (Graphic 1):



**Apply a climate and environmental justice lens to all aspects of the work.** Climate and environmental injustices present such barriers to realizing the mission of human services agencies that efforts to address them must be integrated into a wide range of agency policies and day-to-day operations, not just those focused specifically on climate change and disaster response. Above all, this means continuing to center the voices of impacted communities when developing and implementing any human services programs and policies. Other steps to embed climate and environmental justice into human services may include educational campaigns to increase awareness and understanding of these issues internally among staff and externally among partners and across agencies. Agencies may also consider further emphasizing these concepts within their larger diversity, equity, and inclusion plans.



**Center and empower people and communities in making decisions.** Climate events have the ability to upend the health and well-being of people in every corner of the country, often disproportionately affecting communities that human services agencies serve. When offering support amid climate events and related climate and environmental injustices, human services agencies must remember the “human” element of their mission and lead with empathy and openness. By actively listening to and respecting on-the-ground perspectives directly from people with critical lived experience, agencies can more effectively pivot their programmatic and strategic decision-making to meet communities’ evolving needs. This empathy should also extend to human services agencies’ own staff who live in impacted geographies themselves. While staff may put their own needs aside to help others in their communities, we cannot overlook the fact that they, too, experience the impacts of climate events firsthand. Additional support and understanding can go a long way toward aiding staff’s wellness and resilience over time.



**Build and maintain strategic relationships that help strengthen networks to respond to these issues.** Throughout our workshop, partnerships consistently rose to the top as one of the most promising tools that human services professionals can use to drive more equitable and resilient communities. For example, working closely with communities that are most directly impacted by climate risks and related injustices is critical to understanding their needs and developing feasible and relevant community-driven solutions. Partnerships within and across state and local agencies and departments can expand the capacity of everyone involved, so each can remain more nimble and able to address changing community needs. Similarly, partnerships with key funders can help to ensure the necessary resources are available to act on the identified solutions.



# The Role of Human Services to Improve Health & Well-Being in the Face of Environmental and Climate Injustice

## Environmental Factors

### Slow-Moving



Increasing Heat



Floods & Droughts



Air, Water, & Soil Pollution

### Fast-Moving



Storms



Hurricanes



Wildfires & Pollution

## Strategies for Human Services Agencies to Mitigate Harmful Impacts

1

Embed climate and environmental justice everywhere

2

Center community

3

Partner to build resilience

4

Use data and evidence

## Impacts to Health & Well-Being



Food & Nutrition



Safe Housing



Employment & Education



Mental Health



Early Child Care



Disability Inclusion



**Use data and evidence to inform policy and programming changes.** Agencies often have access to a wide array of quantitative and qualitative data about their programming and the populations they serve—from basic demographics and utilization metrics to costs, outcomes, testimonials, and much more. They can also leverage existing data tools—such as service maps and other federal, state, and local environmental justice mapping tools—to identify how different climate risks and injustices may impact different communities. By considering these quantitative and qualitative data points collectively, human services agencies can extend their view beyond numbers alone to access a more complete story about who they serve, and how, as well as how these populations may be impacted by different types of climate events. Such insight can help agencies to maintain a human-centered focus on the people they serve. It can also help agencies to better understand existing gaps or opportunities and use strategic approaches, like rapid cycle learning, to tailor their services in an informed manner and meet evolving community needs equitably and sustainably.

## When and where should human services agencies jump in?

Now and everywhere. The time is now to start leaning in and addressing these challenges. There are already a plethora of tools and resources that Human Services agencies can use to bolster their approaches to service delivery by embedding climate and environmental justice principles into their work. Additionally, human services agencies have a wide reach at the state and local levels. They have direct connections with communities on the ground, experiencing these challenges firsthand. Talk to your community members, understand the issues they are facing, and work with them to develop solutions.

To learn more about APHSA's work on environmental and climate justice, and to find a broad array of resources related to this work, visit our [website](#) or reach out to [Chloe Green](#), Senior Policy Associate.

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