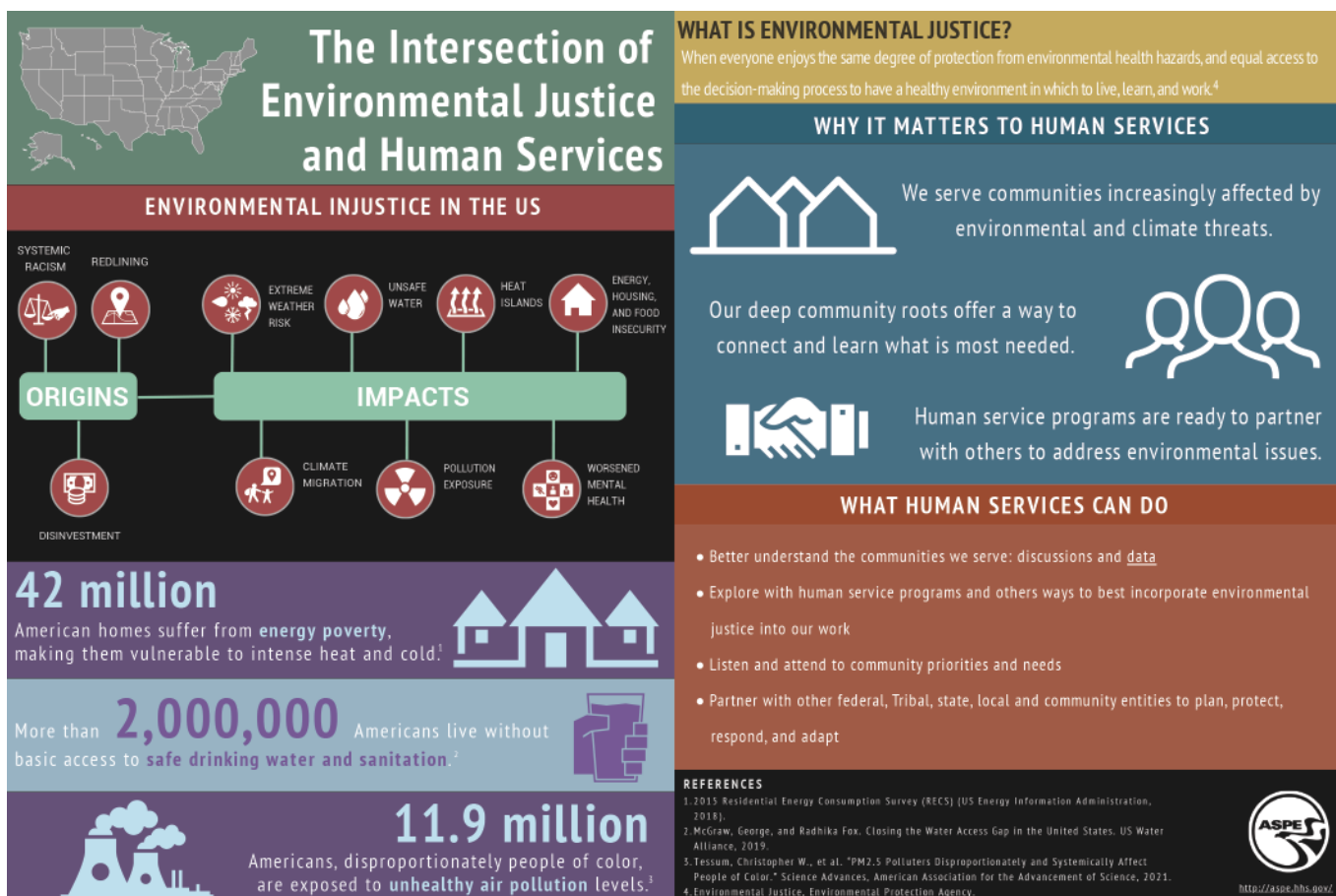




## Connecting Our Work to Environmental Justice



The impact of extreme weather has made headlines all too frequently over the past few years—from countless fires in the West, to once-in-a-century flood events occurring across the United States, to the devastating impact of Hurricane Ida stretching from the Gulf Coast to New York. All around us, we see the intensity of storms and fires growing rapidly and more frequently. The correlation of the impact of these events on our health and well-being is increasingly apparent, as is the need to understand the role of human services in promoting an equitable recovery and

strengthening the resiliency of people and communities.

The theme of this issue is *Navigating Upstream: Achieving Better Health and Well-Being Through Prevention*. In it, we feature articles that focus on improving overall health by advancing well-being, preventing harm, and advancing equity. As I write this column, it has never been clearer to me that if we are to truly get upstream, we have to be much more intentional about connecting our work to environmental justice (see <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice>).

To do so, we must first do more to understand the intersection of human services and environmental justice. In August, HHS's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) published a new infographic (see above and online at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/ej-human-services>) illustrating this very intersection, and why it matters.

As I studied the infographic, I reflected on my own life journey which has so often met at this intersection,

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often in ways I didn't fully appreciate until much later.

One of my first professional experiences at this intersection involved chairing a state working group on emergency preparedness for “vulnerable populations,” in which my eyes were opened to how much our existing systems—human services, health, education, employment, transportation, and others—didn't know about the others. This presented a major challenge in our ability to deliver on the common good, especially in an unexpected widespread emergency like a natural disaster, let alone the ways in which our systems had been built to assume people were on the same playing field should one occur. While, at the time, the answers weren't immediately apparent to me, one thing was: human services had a fundamental role to play.

The ways in which human services systems must rise to the occasion became clearer to me when the state of Arizona was called upon to provide shelter and support for hundreds of people who had been evacuated from New Orleans after the levees broke in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In a matter of hours, we had a fully operational shelter that included access to apply for emergency supports and a range of human services programs that would be a key bridge to recovery for people who had been displaced from their homes. That cross-sector and cross-system response led to significant changes in what we now knew to be possible in human services delivery, and forever changed the way in which I approach this work.

A few years later, as fate would have it, I ended up at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) working closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), supporting long-term recovery from Hurricane Katrina and working across the federal enterprise, including HHS and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Education to enhance both our nation's preparedness to natural disasters and our long-term recovery strategies and effectiveness. Our efforts included

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hosting stakeholder forums across the nation that informed development of a new long-term disaster recovery framework, and standing up the first-ever Children's Working Group to ensure that the specific needs of children were integrated into all disaster planning and operations across FEMA.

During my time at DHS, the nation witnessed ice flooding in the Dakotas, the H1N1 flu, and an oil spill off the Gulf Coast. What I came to understand through those experiences was what it means *to listen and attend to community priorities and needs* through a whole-of-government approach. In reflection, although we didn't name it as such, we were beginning to actively incorporate environmental justice into our work.

For example, in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, we stood up an interagency team to support people in the Gulf displaced from their employment in the fishing, hospitality, and tourism industries. Working across agencies and systems, our job at the federal level was to provide support to states and localities by removing unnecessary barriers and supporting use of both existing and new programs to stabilize impacted families and communities. This work required deep listening and understanding about who had been impacted and what communities most needed to ensure people could be made whole. If you asked people today about what they remember about the oil spill, I doubt few would mention the social and economic support, but it was critical

to an equitable recovery for the people most directly impacted.

Since joining APHSA 11 years ago, we've witnessed the many ways in which human services are an important tool for communities devastated by a natural disaster—both in meeting the immediate needs of impacted families and in advancing recovery for the community. During any widespread crisis, we focus our energy on what federal flexibilities should be triggered to support this recovery. Often these experiences have ultimately informed necessary policy and practices changes, such as the need to enhance disaster preparedness for critical employment supports like child care.

There are also many stories seared in our minds about the often-forgotten impact of these events on the human services workforce itself that works alongside emergency responders to provide critical supports for their community in times of crisis, while dealing with the direct impact on their personal lives. In August 2011, Vermont suffered catastrophic flooding (from Tropical Storm Irene) that literally wiped out one of its main offices, destroying IT servers and critical records. In the last few years, we know many human services workers in California lost their homes to fires, and continued to get up every day to provide support for their neighbors. *Understanding our own deep community roots* is a way to connect and learn what is needed most.


Watching news coverage of the most recent images of the widespread damage of Ida—and its

unexpected impact in the Northeast, in particular, brings to mind a very personal story. In 2010, at the same time as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Nashville, TN, was devastated by historic flooding, much of which impacted areas not considered to be at flood risk. I will forever remember waking up to a call from my sister, who had been rescued, walking waist-deep along her street carrying her dog on one shoulder. Her entire community had been flooded when a nearby levee was breached, with virtually no time to warn the residents. I was grateful she was alive, appreciative of the emergency responders, and immediately mobilized into doing what I could to help her. What I quickly realized was

that beyond my moral support, there was little I could do for her. Ultimately, what provided my sister and her community with the ability to recover was the support of multiple systems and sectors—public and community based, including a supportive employer—that gave her the time she needed to focus on getting a roof back over her head.

In looking back on these experiences in my own world, I am struck by how many were largely reactionary in nature, even those intended to be on the preparedness side. Going forward, part of laying new foundation for an equitable, thriving, and sustainable future requires that we understand all issues that communities face, including the pervasive environmental impacts

illustrated as ASPE's infographic, and the ways in which inequitable protections have further harmed communities, particularly for people of color.

I am heartened to see state and local agencies across the country infusing equity into their response to COVID-19, and actively seeking to apply lessons learned to all future disasters. At APHSA, we are in the early stages of exploring how we can best support the field as we deepen our understanding of the intersection of human services and environmental justice, and encourage you to share your questions and ideas with us. 



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historically marginalized communities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. We've also learned a lot about the power of shared goals to drive cross-team collaboration that we will bring to this reorganization.

**Tierney:** How is that translating into action on the ground?

**Perry:** NCDHHS is a large organization with 17,000 people and responsibility for the full suite of health and human services. Rethinking how we're structured was the first step. Since we announced the reorganization in April, we've begun the hard work of bringing teams, programs, policies, funding streams, and operations together. WIC, SNAP, and CACFP are great examples. In most states they're operated separately with little to no overlap. We're thinking about how we can bring those three programs together to help people access the full complement of nutrition programs. That's just one example of how we're looking across the system to meet the needs of the child and the family.

**Tierney:** Breaking down silos and enabling family-centered service delivery are no small tasks. Recognizing that you're still at the beginning stages, what lessons have you learned so far?

**Perry:** First, you need the commitment from the very highest level of leadership as well as the staff who make these programs happen. That's critical, and we have that. Second, we're using data to hold ourselves accountable to outcomes and inform our work. This has been a core strategy of our pandemic response beginning with our commitment to look at data from an equity perspective. North Carolina was one of the first states to publicly provide data on COVID cases, testing, and vaccinations by race and age and has been nationally recognized for the quality of its data. We're focused on making more of our data transparent and using it to inform our practice.

Finally, while we've received strong support from within and outside NCDHHS for this reorganization, we know it can be a significant challenge to bring a vision like this to life. We're investing significant time and resources in operationalizing this work. And we're focusing on very intentional change management and communication efforts with our people. So far, I've observed that there isn't so much "resistance to change" as "fear of the unknown." That's something we can address through ongoing engagement and shared work.

**Tierney:** When you look back in three years, what results do you hope to have accomplished?

**Perry:** I come to this work with lived experience. My family used food stamps. We experienced periods without a home when we stayed with people or even in a tent for a short time. My mother was severely and persistently mentally ill, and in and out of the hospital. I've experienced what it's like to live under adverse conditions, but I've also experienced what it's like to have protective factors around me—like a community of people who supported my family with things like food, credit, a job for my dad, a scholarship to summer camp for me, and lots of kindness, love, and respect.

In the next three years, we will be able to articulate more clearly what it looks like for us to have shared responsibility for children and families across the state of North Carolina, and begin to operationalize that with our partners at the state level and in local communities. We will have better clarity on what each person's role is in achieving a community of resilience. As a result, more children and families will be able to experience the protective factors that helped me as a young person—and NCDHHS will support better outcomes for the people we serve. 