



Human Services' Unique Position: Flexing New Ways to Pursue Environmental Justice

On the surface, human services agencies may not play the most obvious role in how federal, state, and local governments respond to climate change. After all, they aren't involved in agriculture, energy, or environmental policy. But human services agencies are responsible for enhancing the health and well-being of individuals and families across the country—and climate change and related environmental injustices impact the health and well-being of the people they serve every day.

APHSA president and chief executive officer Tracy Wareing Evans, recently appeared as a guest on an episode of Mathematica's podcast, *On the Evidence*, that dove into how human services fit into climate conversations. Wareing Evans joined Michael A. Becketts, director of the Fairfax County Department of Family Services; Shavana Howard, a former assistant secretary for the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services; Matt Stagner, a vice president at Mathematica; and podcast host J.B. Wogan to share the following insights into how they believe human services are positioned to address the inequitable impacts of climate change, promote environmental justice, and foster more resilient communities.

Where Human Services and Environmental Justice Intersect

The human services sector is no stranger to responding to climate change's damaging effects. An extreme weather event like a hurricane can



devastate a community by increasing food insecurity, heightening exposure to pollution, contaminating drinking water, and causing greater housing displacement. In the immediate aftermath, human services agencies react quickly and are often on the scene to provide support and resources to anyone in an affected area, whether they regularly rely on human services agencies or not.

As severe climate events become increasingly commonplace, human services agencies are more frequently being stretched beyond their limits. The individuals and families that participate in these services outside of emergency situations are further disadvantaged as the services on which they rely bleed dry, exacerbating existing health disparities and social inequities. In this way, communities

that have been historically underserved, both economically and socially, bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change, though they are often the least equipped for adapting to or mitigating its risks. This disproportionate suffering is exactly why the pursuit of environmental justice is a human services issue and why the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services houses an Office of Environmental Justice. Their mission is to “protect the health of disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations on the frontlines of pollution, and other environmental hazards that affect health.”

Envisioning a New Future for Human Services

Many of the individuals, families, and communities human services agencies are designed to serve are the ones most directly impacted by environmental injustice and climate-related hazards. Yet, the conversations surrounding the role human services should play in advancing environmental justice are nascent, particularly when compared to other sectors such as health or agriculture. To develop programs and policies that can more proactively address communities' needs in the face of climate change, human services agencies must examine how they might do things differently. Leaders need to consider how diverting from the status quo may uncover new ways to increase access to resources, services, and supports and create more equitable and resilient communities that can withstand—and even thrive amid—the current and future impacts of a changing climate.

Getting Started

Human services agencies have many existing responsibilities and may be hesitant to add more to their plate by taking on a more prominent role in responding to climate change. In reality, though, much of what agencies and leaders require to do this work already exists. Agencies deeply understand the communities they serve, and now they need to learn to flex their existing muscles in new ways to respond to evolving needs. Below

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are some key ways human services agencies and leaders can get started:

1. Raise Awareness

The impacts of climate change and environmental injustice are certainly not new, but the focus on these issues within human services is. As such, it's crucial for leaders who grasp their vital role in advancing environmental justice to spread the word and create awareness among their peers. Dialogues that result from these awareness-raising efforts can drive a collective push toward devising equitable and enduring solutions to serve communities disproportionately affected by climate change.

2. Increase Partnerships and Collaboration

By working together, human services agencies can learn what their peers are doing to respond to climate events and environmental inequities. Interdepartmental and cross-community conversations and connections can support more equitable access to programs, services, and resources in times of acute need and help human services agencies to become more proactive. Pooling ideas and approaches can better equip agencies to provide critical social supports to the communities they serve and better position them to withstand adverse climate and weather events.

3. Leverage Data

To help meet participants' immediate needs and build stronger, more resilient communities, human services leaders need to look to the data. Agencies have access to a wealth of quantitative data about the communities they serve, which can shine a light on the

inequitable impacts of climate change. Plus, rich qualitative data, gathered through conversations with impacted communities, can show where service gaps exist; identify those whom climate events may affect and how; and guide where to invest attention and resources in pursuit of environmental justice on broader and more localized levels.

4. Try It!

While human services leadership won't have all the answers right away when diving into efforts to advance environmental justice, they can't be afraid to try new things. They can talk to each other about missteps and wins while learning from both. Otherwise, the human services sector runs the risk of staying stagnant while the impacts of climate change barrel forward.

The national conversation surrounding human services' role in advancing environmental justice has just begun. However, by talking about it, working together, looking to the evidence, and having the courage to try innovative ideas, agencies can pave the way for more equitable, resilient communities in the face of climate change. 📌

Chloe Green is a Senior Policy Associate for Food and Nutrition Services at the American Public Human Services Association.

Colleen Psomas is the Senior Communications Specialist at Mathematica.

Matt Stagner is the Vice President of Human Services at Mathematica.

Alex Bauer is an Advisory Services Analyst at Mathematica.