

# Climate Change and Health Equity in Los Angeles County

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



LA County Chief Sustainability Office  
Environment • Economy • Equity



# INTRODUCTION

Now more than ever, supporting strong and resilient communities across Los Angeles County requires us to address the impacts of both climate change as well as disparities in public health—along with the intertwined impacts of these conditions on communities. The County’s recent Climate Vulnerability Assessment includes sobering projections of climate hazards. These include:

- Up to a ten-fold increase in the occurrence of **heat waves**, as well as more severe impacts from extreme heat;
- **Larger, more frequent, and more destructive wildfires**, putting more than a million units of housing in the wildland-urban interface at risk, with residents across the County feeling impacts from wildfire smoke;
- **Drier springs and summers and wetter winters**, with increased likelihood of inland flooding as well as landslides;
- **More frequent and severe coastal flooding**, driven by a rise in sea level of up to 2.5 feet by mid-century;
- **Increased likelihood of droughts and mega-droughts** that will impact water supply and critical infrastructure.

The communities that often face inequities in health outcomes, such as life expectancy, infant mortality, infectious diseases, and chronic illness, are also more heavily impacted by climate change. Communities of color and low-income communities are often more exposed to climate hazards, such as higher temperatures and worse air quality, and have fewer resources to weather these conditions. This means that individuals and families who already are at risk for worse health outcomes due to their community conditions are also at greater risk from acute and long-term climate change impacts that exacerbate and trigger health issues, and are also expected to become more frequent and severe.

The Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the cascading impacts of a shock on underlying health disparities in vivid detail, exacerbating longstanding health inequities as Angelenos already at risk due to community conditions faced more significant health and economic impacts during the pandemic. Moreover, the ongoing recovery from the pandemic only poses additional challenges—related to employment, housing, and access to health insurance, for example—that impact both climate and health vulnerabilities.

For all of these reasons, we must take action today, and deploy an integrated approach in addressing climate and health risks. Fortunately, community conditions that support good health outcomes also foster preparedness for future climate events. These include, for example, good schools, safe neighborhoods, sustainable and healthy environments, strong social connections, and a thriving and inclusive economy. We continue to see stark differences in these community conditions across LA County, which drive inequalities in quality of life, health outcomes, and longevity. These differences are largely based on income, geography, and race and ethnicity. Typically, our most under-resourced and overburdened communities are also low-income and predominately communities of color, the result of past and present policies and practices influenced by prejudice, discrimination, and systemic racism. As the County continues to recover from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to take concrete steps to address these underlying conditions and foster communities that are healthier and better prepared to weather the impacts of our changing climate.

The County’s forthcoming Climate Change and Health Equity report in Fall 2021 will provide an overview of key opportunities to build healthy and climate resilient communities across Los Angeles. The report was developed by the County Department of Public Health’s Climate Change and Sustainability Program, with support provided by the [California Resilience Partnership](#), through an analysis of the latest climate impacts and public health data across the region, including the County’s recent Climate Vulnerability Assessment; integration of recent planning efforts, including the [OurCounty](#) regional sustainability plan; a scan of best practices in other communities; and a series of stakeholder engagement activities, including two virtual workshops and one-on-one outreach. Furthermore, set to release in Fall 2021, the County’s Climate Vulnerability Assessment is meant to spark and inform complementary action to address climate resilience action including, but also beyond, public health.

The resulting report will include concrete goals and strategies, summarized below, aimed at fostering healthier and more climate resilient communities across the region.

# Climate Change's Unequal Impact

Climate change affects all LA County residents, but some communities are affected more than others. The communities that often face inequities in health outcomes, such as life expectancy, infant mortality, infectious diseases and chronic illness, are also more heavily impacted by climate change.



## A - Language & Literacy Barriers

If someone cannot understand health or emergency information during climate crises like heat waves or wildfires, their health is at risk. The responsibility is on institutions to ensure everyone can understand vital information.



## B - Over-burdened & Under-resourced Populations

People who are often excluded from, or unable to access, various forms of opportunity – such as people experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities, immigrants, and LGBTQ individuals – may lack the resources to cope with climate hazards, and be more susceptible to negative impacts.



## C- Housing & Neighborhood Conditions

People who live in low-resourced neighborhoods are less able to prepare for, cope with, and recover from climate events. Mental, emotional, and physical health can be affected by poor construction, insulation, or maintenance; lack of access to air conditioning; urban heat islands; and fewer trees.



## D - Pre-existing Conditions

People with pre-existing conditions are more sensitive to climate impacts like extreme heat, wildfire smoke, air pollution, and vector-borne disease.



## E - Age

The elderly, young children, and babies are more sensitive to climate impacts like extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and air pollution.



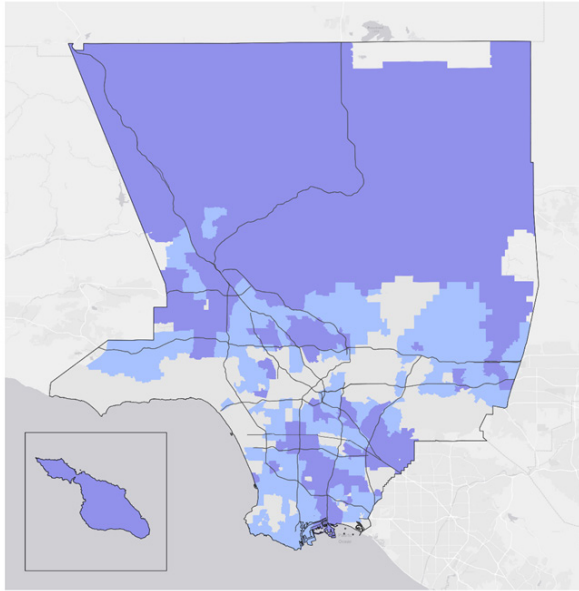
## F- Race & Income

Discriminatory policies and practices negatively affect the wellbeing of low income communities and communities of color. Climate change exacerbates existing disparities, making climate hazards even more dangerous for the health of these communities.



## G - Occupation

Outdoor workers (e.g., construction, agriculture) are more exposed to climate events like extreme heat, poor air quality, and vector-borne disease, making them more vulnerable to illnesses caused and worsened by these hazards.



Percent of Beneficiaries that are Electricity Dependent

- 0% - 2.1%
- 2.1% - 2.5%
- 2.5% +

Sources: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

## COMPOUNDING IMPACTS OF CLIMATE AND HEALTH VULNERABILITIES

This map shows the distribution of the over 43,000 Medicare recipients across LA County who rely on electricity-dependent medical devices. Severe weather incidents and other emergencies related to power outages can pose life-threatening impacts on seniors and other Angelenos who are already at risk for worse health outcomes and are dependent on electricity for health and medical needs. The County’s energy infrastructure is one of the assets at greatest risk due to increasing frequency of extreme heat, wildfire, and other climate-driven events. Vulnerable areas with relatively large numbers of people who are highly exposed to extreme heat and medically dependent on electricity may need outside resources and support during extreme heat, wildfire events, and power outages.

## WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM STAKEHOLDERS?

Here are some key takeaways from stakeholders interviewed in the development of this report.



### ENHANCING COLLABORATION TO INFORM PLANS AND POLICIES

“Supporting strong coalitions advocating for climate-related legislative priorities at the federal, state, and local levels are critical.”



### INSTITUTIONALIZING APPROACHES TO BUILD PREPARED AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES ACROSS GOVERNMENT

“Workforce development should be a priority. This would help build a sustainable pipeline of climate and health professionals. Explore paid opportunities for interns and fellows in partnership with CBOs, governmental entities, and academia.”



### PRIORITIZING DATA SHARING AND COLLECTION TO DRIVE MEANINGFUL CHANGE

“Make sure data sharing is publicly accessible to reduce barriers. For example, making data available on publicly accessible websites, in multiple languages, and on different platforms (websites, apps, print materials, public service announcements, etc.). Both macro and micro data should be accessible and tailored for specific communities.”



### GARNERING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INPUT TO INFORM STRATEGIES, PLANS, AND FUNDING

“Strategies must engage in direct organizing efforts to inspire, engage and support climate resilient communities. Additionally, such strategies must define specific plans of action for effectively creating information feedback and communication loop between communities and decision makers (government officials, public agencies, stakeholders, etc.) that leads to long-term planning, new policies, and additional funding for resilience implementation that aligns with community needs.”

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH EQUITY GOALS

The goals and strategies outlined below are designed to initiate new and support existing collaborations between the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) and climate change and health equity partners in LA County.

## 1 Informed, Empowered, and Well-Resourced Residents

The public and key stakeholders understand the impacts of climate change and the health benefits associated with taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Communities most at risk for poor health outcomes due to climate change have the information and resources needed to act.

- 1a. Convene a community advisory council to shape the development and implementation of DPH's climate and health equity actions.
- 1b. Integrate climate change messaging into health communications pathways.
- 1c. Develop a community-informed messaging campaign on climate change and health using best practices.
- 1d. Collaborate with K-12 schools to incorporate health elements into existing climate and health education curricula.
- 1e. Identify and encourage local community leaders to participate in decision-making processes.

## 2 Healthy and Sustainable Communities

Local policies on planning, land use, transportation, water, and energy address systemic inequities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support healthy and sustainable community design in historically overburdened and under-resourced areas.

- 2a. Work across local government agencies and with community stakeholders to encourage and support existing and new initiatives to improve tree coverage throughout the county.
- 2b. Explore policy mechanisms for incentivizing food retail business practices that create living wage jobs in historically impacted communities and expand access to high quality, healthy, sustainable food.
- 2c. Provide guidance to policymakers and the general public on the health benefits of a just transition to a green economy.
- 2d. Work with school districts to incorporate sustainable practices that support community health into school settings.
- 2e. Promote transit-oriented development, active transportation, and Complete Streets policies that

prioritize underserved communities and actively prevent displacement in unincorporated LA County.

- 2g. Develop policies that prioritize the restoration and clean up of toxic sites (Brownfield & Superfund sites) that are adjacent to low-income communities of color.

## 3 Prepared and Resilient LA County

All communities are prepared for and resilient to climate change and the associated health risks.

- 3a. Improve the built environment and County infrastructure to promote climate adaptation and resilience.
- 3b. Develop and implement institutional policies and practices to protect health in a changing climate.
- 3c. Reach populations at risk during extreme events with health-protective messaging and resources.
- 3d. Improve emergency preparedness and response plans.
- 3e. Conduct a climate-focused community needs assessment.

## 4 Effective and Engaged Public Health Programs

DPH workforce has the capacity to address the health impacts of climate change in our programs, with a focus on building an institutional infrastructure that would support the climate and health needs of the highest risk communities.

- 4a. Train and equip professionals to engage in climate-related work.
- 4b. Bolster the capacity of climate-critical programs.
- 4c. Strengthen collection, synthesis, and use of data for health-protective decision-making.
- 4d. Build long-term capacity of organizations to address climate change.
- 4e. Institutionalize climate change considerations into DPH programs.
- 4f. Pursue shared legislative goals.
- 4g. Work across county departments to ensure opportunities for public engagement.
- 4h. Contract with community organizing groups to run public engagement and education programs that get community residents involved with climate and health decision-making.



# We can start our work today

It's critical that we all do what we can to get started as soon as possible. The forthcoming report will provide additional details on recommendations and actions, but consider how your department, team, or organization could begin to:



## Train and equip public health professionals to engage in climate-related work.



Public health comprises many diverse areas of expertise. However, public health professionals often don't have the knowledge or training to engage in climate-related work. We need to foster a workforce ready to address the public health challenges posed by climate change.



## Improve the collection, synthesis, and use of data for health-protective decision-making.



The pandemic and its related challenges have underscored the criticality of quality data collection and analysis. We must build a robust capacity in our public health system to be able to model, understand, and predict which communities are and will be in need so we can get ahead of future crises.



## Review current, planned, and future public health programs and initiatives with an equity and climate lens.



Many of the initiatives and programs we run today were designed for a different world--one without as much uncertainty driven by climate change. Organizations need to revisit current activities, and build structures into the review of new initiatives to ensure that equity and climate are centered in program design.



## Integrate climate change messaging into health communications pathways.



Help connect the dots between health, equity, and climate for your community. Opening a dialogue will build trust and shared knowledge in our communities.



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