

We Can't Be on the Sidelines

The Role of Human Services in Advancing Environmental Justice

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“Some might ask, why are you even talking about environmental justice if you work at HHS? In many ways, we serve the same individuals. It’s the same families that will end up coming to us after the event of any disaster—for any resources, or any support.”

– Shavana Howard,
Assistant Secretary,
Louisiana Department of
Children and Family Services

Climate impacts are not experienced equitably across communities in a given geography; rather, adverse weather and other environmental health hazards disproportionately affect populations that may be more vulnerable and less able than others to adapt or recover. For example, children, older adults, and those without access to cooling or heating systems may be more susceptible to harm from extreme weather such as heatwaves, floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters that can have serious implications for those living in high-risk areas without the financial resources needed for preparedness measures. And factors like systemic racism, redlining, and disinvestments can place communities of color, those experiencing poverty or homelessness, and other disenfranchised groups at risk—in other words, many of the individuals, families, and communities that human services agencies are designed to serve.



A number of additional factors further contributes to climate vulnerability for these same populations, including limited availability of information and resources; less ability to rebuild after a disaster; higher levels of existing health risks in comparison to other groups; decreased reliable access to food, adequate housing, and consistent employment; and limited access to health care services.

The data highlight these inequities. For example, take a look at the graphic on the next page, which illustrates how heat impacts the Medicaid population. In 2016, there were 971 heatwaves in 20 percent of the counties across the nation. **Half of the Medicaid population lived in a county experiencing a heatwave and nearly \$15 million was spent on the Medicaid population on illnesses resulting from heatwaves.** Given that the Medicaid

population closely aligns with the populations served by human services agencies, one can infer that many individuals served will be affected by extreme heat.

This is precisely why human services leaders need to embed themselves in the conversations surrounding climate change, environmental inequities, and securing environmental justice (EJ) that are already happening in other departments, such as public health. The Environmental Protection Agency defines EJ as 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” and says, “This goal will be achieved when everyone enjoys: (1) the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards; and (2) equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.”¹

Human services professionals are well positioned to serve as trusted messengers to help achieve that goal, supporting and engaging the individuals and families they serve, their peers, their community, and policymakers in the pursuit of EJ. It is now time for human services leaders

to leverage that position and proactively engage with other departments, agencies, and community partners that are already committed to this work to pursue effective solutions together.

Taking the EJ Reins at the Federal, State, and Local Levels

More recently, the connection between EJ and human services has become a priority at the federal level, as illustrated in an infographic created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, which was referenced in APHSA President and CEO Tracy Wareing Evans’ October 2021 memo.²

In January 2021, President Biden issued an Executive Order to spur climate action across all federal agencies.³ In May 2022, the Administration established the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) within HHS to “better protect the health of disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations on the frontlines of pollution and other environmental health issues.”⁴ The President’s Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request and the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act also have significant provisions to address climate issues and advance EJ efforts.



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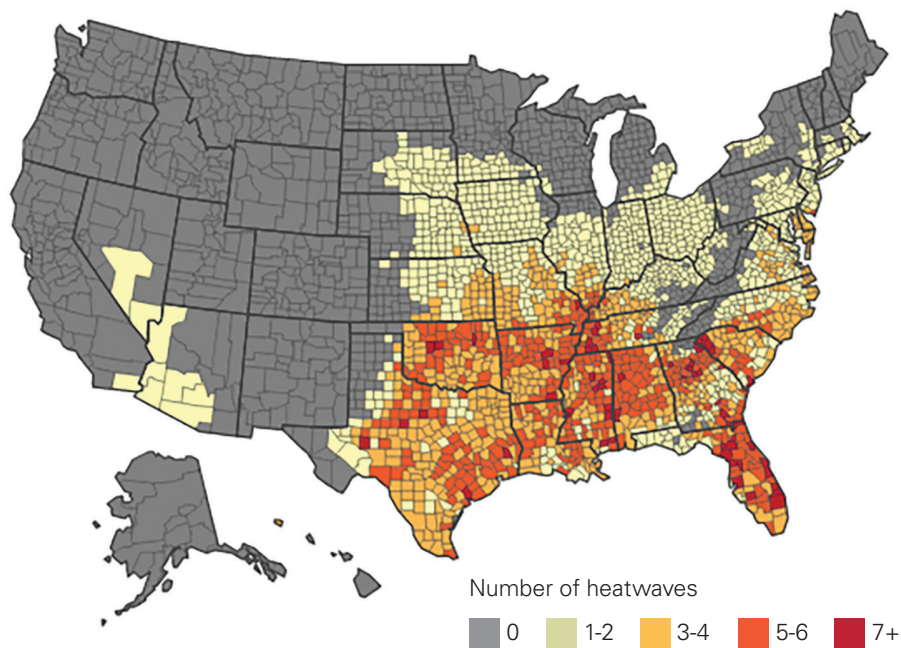
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Number of heatwaves (U.S., 2016)

Number of counties with 1+ heatwaves: 2,033



While this represents a strong federal model, more substantial change can happen when led by agencies at the state and local levels. APHSA and its partners, such as Mathematica, recognize that state and local human services cannot sit on the sidelines as the conversation surrounding EJ—and the role human services agencies need to play in this space—is taking shape. With their deep community roots, they are better situated to advocate and assure fair treatment for constituents affected by climate change. Now is the time to collaborate and bolster the work happening at the intersection of EJ and

human services. Now is the time to recognize and embrace the urgency behind what Roderick Bremby, former Secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Social Services, says of EJ: “EJ is central to the work of the 21st century human services sector, because climate change is the challenge of our lifetimes.”

Human Services and EJ in Action

State and local human services agencies are already engaging with EJ to varying degrees. We share some

examples of strategies and tactics that agencies are either employing today, or actions they are considering taking, to engage in EJ efforts moving forward. Human services leaders can adapt these approaches to best suit their organization, help prioritize EJ in their work, and navigate how to communicate about available resources to peers, clients, communities, and policymakers alike.

Grow internal EJ awareness and education. To truly embed EJ at the core of an agency’s work and keep it a priority moving forward, buy-in from staff and leadership will need to be secured. Given that conversations surrounding the intersection of human services and EJ are still in their early stages in many jurisdictions, intentional education and awareness efforts are necessary to connect the dots for internal teams. This will help staff not only to understand how their existing work supports EJ efforts but will also spur them to start thinking outside the box for future solutions. To engage in EJ internally, human services leaders can consider the following:

- Educate staff across all departments about EJ and regularly incorporate it into conversations at all levels of the organization to encourage understanding of how EJ is related to human services.
- Incorporate EJ into strategic planning and budgeting and consider dedicating funding specifically to advancing EJ.
- Develop new and/or realign existing roles and responsibilities to be dedicated to climate change and EJ, and help staff throughout the organization identify ways they can support EJ efforts through their existing work to minimize additional staff burden.

Keeping staff engaged and on board. Staff is vital to successfully bringing any organizational EJ efforts to fruition, so it is necessary for human services leaders to involve their staff in this work early and often. This may look like:

- Helping staff to balance workloads and competing priorities that may detract from an intentional EJ focus;

“Together with APHSA, we see the need for human services leaders to come together to share best practices, lessons learned, barriers to overcome, and opportunities. As these leaders look to meaningfully apply an EJ lens to their policies and operations, it’s necessary for all to fully examine how they show up for the communities they serve to ensure that no one is subject to inequities arising from where they live or how climate events impact them.”

— MATT STAGNER, VICE PRESIDENT OF HUMAN SERVICES AT MATHEMATICA

See *Environmental Justice* on page 32

- Incorporating EJ into organizational values, priorities, and mission, which can help recruit talent looking for employment that aligns with their interests;
- Shining a light on staff that is taking initiative and positioning them as leaders among their peers; or
- Exploring staff members' personal passions related to EJ and tying them back to their work to ensure they feel driven and invested.

Collaborate and coordinate with others in human services around EJ issues. Human services agencies have long recognized the need to integrate with each other to collectively support whole-person health and well-being. For decades, they have been working together to promote health equity and positively impact social determinants of health (SDOH). Now, it is time to approach environmental and climate-related risk factors in the same cross-cutting manner as is done with SDOH. By continuing efforts to break down existing siloes and collaborate, human services will be better positioned to incorporate more perspectives and more effectively direct available resources to those most likely to be impacted by environmental inequities. To elevate EJ efforts across the sector, it may help to:

- Raise awareness about EJ within and across other human services agencies, and lead with an explicit focus on addressing issues of equity.
- Understand what resources exist in a community and, where possible, coordinate to make them available to human services clients across agencies and departments to help build more resilient communities while accounting for local context

(for example, transportation, weatherization, heating and cooling systems/centers, food).

- Partner to provide services modeled through an EJ lens to address the increased demand and need for a wide range of services that arise from climate change impacts (for example, food access, mental health support, disaster response).

Integrate principles of EJ into their service model. All too often, the communities most impacted by climate change are left out of conversations surrounding their needs and impactful solutions. Bringing human services clients and others in the community into the dialogue early on will position the sector better to build trust and ensure that its EJ initiatives resonate and are reflected in the services it provides. Elevating the voices of those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change will enable human services to engage these community members as leaders, develop equitable and relevant solutions, generate transformation, and tackle systemic issues that contribute to environmental injustice. To incorporate EJ into offered services, the following should be considered:

- Engage participants and the community to assess their needs related to climate change and continue to involve them while adapting and developing new service offerings that are more equitable and accessible for all.
- Promote sustainable business practices, such as requiring less driving by staff, promoting virtual interviews, creating an all-electric fleet, or shifting paper notices to electronic messages wherever applicable.

- Establish and grow sustainable funding sources beyond emergency response funds to support those in need following a climate-related crisis.

Looking Ahead

Human services agencies and systems have long served as powerful tools to protect and improve the health and well-being of populations faced with a wide array of needs arising from disasters or larger systemic issues—such as combatting food insecurity, securing shelter, aging with dignity, and so much more. The role human services plays in addressing issues stemming from climate impact and environmental injustice among the same or similar populations should be no different. Fortunately, much of the work that must be done to commit to EJ with intention is in expanding and amplifying *what many in the human services sector are already doing*, rather than starting from scratch. If human services leaders continue to think creatively and keep open minds, they can learn from, and with, each other to advance the whole field and ensure that equity remains top-of-mind in a sustainable manner.

“We find ourselves presented with the unique opportunity to deepen our collective understanding of all the ways in which human services and environmental justice intersect,” says Tracy Wareing Evans, President and CEO of APHSA. “We have the ability to elevate the voices and perspectives of those communities we serve to truly establish our place in these vital conversations in pursuit of a more equitable future for all. But we must make our first move together, and we must make it now.” 

Reference Notes

1. <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>
2. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/ej-human-services>
3. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad>
4. <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2022/05/31/biden-harris-administration-establishes-hhs-office-of-environmental-justice.html>

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