



A Passionate Voice for Compassionate Care

CARING FOR CREATION – ADDRESSING THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

THE ISSUE

In September 2021 over 200 medical journals, including the *New England Journal of Medicine*, issued a joint statement declaring "The greatest threat to global public health is the continued failure of world leaders to keep the global temperature rise below 1.5C and to restore nature." In 2022 the American Medical Association adopted new policy declaring climate change a public health crisis.

We are already seeing the negative health impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. More frequent and intense extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, flooding, wildfires and hurricanes are causing a rise in deaths, injury and illness. In addition to physical harm, the devastation and loss resulting from these events have mental health impacts such as increased rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Climate change and environmental degradation are also increasing the distribution and burden of insect-borne and water-borne infectious diseases, increasing and intensifying cardiovascular or respiratory illnesses, damaging water and food supplies, and displacing populations.

These impacts are not felt equally across our society. Pregnant women, children and people with pre-existing conditions are more sensitive to a changing climate. People in occupations that work outdoors or first responders face more frequent and longer exposure to climate threats. Older adults and people with disabilities experience more barriers than others in preparing for and dealing with extreme weather events. Low-income Black, Latino, and Native American communities have increased exposure to climate change threats due to generations of targeted disinvestment and environmental injustice.

A December 2020 article in *Health Affairs* describes how the ecological crisis will impact all aspects of the health care system, a system still recovering from the COVID pandemic. Health care costs will rise as more people are impacted by extreme weather events and new or worsened chronic conditions; health disparities will be exacerbated; access to care will be limited by system disruptions such as evacuations, facility damage or closure, power outages, damaged roads or transit systems and displaced medical professionals; and quality of care will be affected if hospitals cannot handle additional capacity or acquire needed medicines or devices due to supply chain disruptions. In addition to meeting these new challenges the health care sector will also need to examine and address its own contribution to this crisis. The U.S. health care sector is responsible for 8.5 percent of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions, is a large consumer of water and generates significant amounts of waste.

Given the scope and magnitude of the ecological crisis and its impact on health and the health system, it is imperative that policy makers start to prioritize, fund and implement changes that protect the health of our communities and prepare the health care system to deliver care in increasingly unstable conditions.

MINISTRY TRADITION

As a Catholic ministry which works to uphold the life and dignity of each human person, we recognize the interconnectedness between health and the political, social, economic, spiritual and environmental concerns which impact our nation. This integral ecology is a recognition that health, humanity and nature do not exist as separate entities, but rather are inextricably connected by our Creator and our responsibility to promote the “common good”. As a Catholic health ministry dedicated to continuing Jesus’s mission of love and healing to those in need, healing and caring for creation is therefore intricately linked to our efforts to care for those who come to Catholic health facilities in need of care.

CHA’S POSITION AND ACTIVITIES

Catholic health care is committed to protecting the environment, to minimizing environmental hazards and to reducing our contribution to the problem of climate change. Our members, supported by CHA, are working to raise the issue of environmental stewardship as a mission– based clinical and public policy imperative. As a reflection of this commitment, they have joined initiatives such as Health Care Without Harm’s Health Care Climate Council and Health Care Climate Challenge, the National Academy of Medicine’s Action Collaborative on Decarbonizing the US Health Sector, the new HHS Office of Climate Change and Health Equity pledge and the Vatican’s Laudato Si’ Action Platform.

Mitigate climate change and environmental degradation

CHA supports efforts to transition the country to 100% clean, renewable energy. The passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, which CHA supported, is an important step in mitigating climate change and the air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels. CHA urges the Administration to work with health care organizations as it implements the IRA and coordinates federal agency actions in this area so that resources can be specifically targeted to helping the health care sector reduce its carbon emissions. This may include:

- Incentives to encourage energy efficiency upgrades at existing health care facilities and for new hospitals to be built for maximum efficiency.
- Allowing hospital investments in clean, renewable energy and other efforts to reduce their carbon footprint to be reported as “community benefit” on the IRS Form 990 Schedule H
- Funding the HHS Office of Climate Change and Health Equity which is helping educate health care organizations about the health and equity impacts of climate change and promoting learning opportunities on ways to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to climate change.

Build climate-resilient communities and health systems with a focus on equity

CHA supports efforts to help communities, public health and the health care sector adapt to the impacts of the ecological crisis. CHA encourages coordination among federal agencies and programs when addressing resilience given the wide scope of climate impacts across society – from the social determinants of health to the health care delivery supply chain and workforce readiness. CHA also encourages engagement with health care organizations so that efforts are effective and remove barriers to action.

- Community resilience - CHA supports the Administration's environmental justice initiatives and encourages continuing efforts to engage communities most impacted by the ecological crisis in planning, policy development, and funding decisions related to building resilience.
- Public health - Funding research and facilitating coordination among key stakeholders (including public health departments and federal agencies) to develop public health programs, policies and tools to protect those most vulnerable to climate risks. Supporting coordinated resilience planning at all levels of government and across appropriate agencies.
- Health care system – Providing funding and guidance to help health care organizations identify and address areas of vulnerability, such as building codes to protect facilities from geographic specific climate threats, protecting supply chains, and building a climate-ready workforce that understands how care needs to adapt when communities are impacted by climate risks.