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The Climate World Is Changing, So Can We

Editor’s Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column from ecoAmerica whose mission is to build public support and political resolve for climate solutions. NEHA is an official partner of ecoAmerica and works closely with their Climate for Health Program, a coalition of health leaders committed to caring for our climate to care for our health. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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Over the past century, the world has experienced a dramatic increase in emissions from burning fossil fuels, resulting in changes to the climate across the globe (Lindsey, 2022). We know that the outcome of these changes on human health is far-reaching, with every child around the world at risk from at least one climate change impact such as heat and air pollution (UNICEF, 2021). The 2022 Global Report of the *Lancet* Countdown (2022) confirms that life-threatening extreme weather events are becoming more frequent. These risks and health impacts are changing attitudes of people in the U.S. A 2022 ecoAmerica survey revealed that nearly 7 in 10 people in the U.S. agree that climate change is a serious problem (Hill, 2022).

As public consensus to take climate action grows, leaders and organizations at the local, national, and international levels are responding. A total of 196 parties signed the Paris

Agreement at the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 21), agreeing to limit global warming to below 2 °C. In 2021 the U.S. formed the National Climate Task Force alongside additional executive actions from President Joe Biden prioritizing climate change. And just last year, the Inflation Reduction Act was passed—a historic bill estimated to bring economic growth, clean energy expansion, and emission reductions. People in the U.S. support these actions: over 4 in 5 say addressing climate change should be a priority for the U.S. (Hill, 2022).

The new resources and billions of dollars of investments and direct grants included in the Inflation Reduction Act will lower the price for renewable energy and help to address climate-related environmental hazards. Tax credits for individuals and organizations will significantly lower the up-front cost to transition to clean energy and resilient facilities and communities. Rewiring America

(n.d.) has prepared a tool kit to estimate your benefits and plan how to access them. The federal government is also releasing regular updates on the Inflation Reduction Act (The White House, n.d.).

These advances owe a great deal to the engagement, advocacy, and strong voice of leaders in the health sector. Individual and community health is a strong motivator for action on climate change; people from all walks of life care deeply about clean air, safe water, and the risks of severe weather (Hill, 2021). The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) is leading the way. The association’s commitment to climate action is outlined in their policy statement on climate change (NEHA, 2020) and their declaration on 100% clean energy by 2030 (NEHA, 2018). NEHA was one of the first organizations to offer the Climate for Health Climate Ambassador Training at their 2019 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition. As of January 2023, 46 national associations representing hundreds of thousands of healthcare professionals have joined ecoAmerica’s Climate for Health coalition and are committed to climate action to prevent future health harms.

You can make a difference in your workplace, local community, and home. In the workplace, advocate for a climate position statement or include it in your organization’s mission. Review the climate statements from national climate leaders like NEHA for ambitious language to use. Stay in touch with Inflation Reduction Act implementation as specific credits and programs for transportation, buildings, and energy are defined. In your community, your role as an environmental health professional gives you an opportu-

nity to highlight the links between climate action and community health. Your voice can make a difference, spurring action to reduce children's exposure to exhaust by transitioning buses from fossil fuels to electric, reducing heat island effects through gardens and green spaces, and shifting energy sources to renewable energy that will reduce the health harms of climate change.

Finally, there are many options for action within your own home. The typical household and vehicle use of people in the U.S. make up two thirds of their carbon emissions (Song et al., 2019). You can reduce these emissions while saving money. Some options include:

- Prioritize insulation. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that improving your insulation alone can reduce utility bills by over 10% (Energy Star, n.d.).
- Reduce harmful exposures in your home. Replacing appliances that burn methane with cleaner and more efficient ones, such as heat pumps and electric or induction ranges, saves money and improves the health of your family.
- Switch your gas burning car for an electric one.

The thousands of dollars of federal tax credits to make these improvements mean that the up-front investment for safer and cheaper energy is in reach for many more of us than we may realize. While we look at the scope of the overlapping impact of climate change and environmental degradation on individual health, it can feel overwhelming and hard to process. Recognizing that the situation is changing—and that tools are available to take meaningful action—is empowering and can help break through that

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Lancet Countdown, 2022

paralysis. Taking action as an environmental health professional, as a community leader, and as an individual will help us all to secure safety and health. ✨

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Did You Know?

Jurisdictions can review our Climate Health Adaptation and Mitigation Partnership (CHAMP) and strategic framework at www.neha.org/climate-change. CHAMP can be used to identify climate-related health risks, develop climate adaptation plans, and implement targeted adaptation actions to protect communities. The program provides an opportunity to share lessons learned, stories of impact, and resources. The program also helps communities make progress toward meeting Healthy People 2030 objectives, raises awareness about how climate change disproportionately impacts health, and incorporates the Building Resilience Against Climate Effects (BRACE) framework from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.