

# Climate, Health, and Equity: A Dozen Questions Every Candidate Must Answer



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We need our leaders to recognize that the climate crisis is a health crisis and to take strong action to achieve equitable and healthy climate solutions.

***Use these questions to ask your candidates what they will do to protect and promote health in the era of climate change.***

Climate change is a health emergency. Doctors, nurses, and health and medical organizations have recognized that the climate crisis is a health crisis—our greatest health challenge of the 21st century. Climate change causes a myriad of health harms—heat illness, asthma and heart disease from more air pollution and wildfires, mental health problems from climate-related disasters, food and water borne infections, mosquito-borne diseases, and more. Children, the elderly, pregnant individuals, low-resourced communities, and communities of color are disproportionately harmed, exacerbating health inequities. The climate crisis threatens the air, food, water, and shelter that we depend on for our survival and is an existential threat to our children and future generations.

Health experts also recognize that the climate crisis could be one of our greatest health opportunities. That's because implementing climate solutions yields significant health benefits, as outlined in the [Health Promise of Climate Solutions](#) report. Clean energy reduces air pollution. Healthy and clean transportation means less air pollution and more physical activity. Regenerative agriculture and healthy food systems mean better nutrition, healthier soils, and less water pollution. Green spaces in public areas improve mental health and provide heat protection.

The questions below align with the pillars of our Policy Action Agenda and will push candidates to answer candidly about their positions on climate. For more information on climate solutions that protect and promote health, see the [U.S. Call to Action on Climate, Health, and Equity: A Policy Action Agenda](#).



## How to Take Action And Use These Questions

- Candidates participate in many events and forums, which are either sponsored by community-based and political organizations or hosted by their own campaign. Sign up to participate—see if you can send in questions in advance or sign up to ask a question. To find events, you can sign-up for candidates' mailing lists, reach out directly, or use an online resource. If you're with a 501(c)(3), make sure you first understand the legal limitations of your organization. [Bolder Advocacy](#) has a good resource to start with.
- Consider emailing these questions to all candidates from each party running for office (to remain nonpartisan). Ask them to read it or ask if they'd like to discuss it on a call.
- Consider choosing 1-2 questions, re-formatting them as a brief op-ed, and submitting it to a [local media outlet](#). Share the questions with local organizations and ask if they can disseminate.
- Consider hosting your own virtual, nonpartisan candidate forum to learn about the views of many candidates. If a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, ensure that you understand the legal guidelines and guidance—[here's](#) a good resource to start with.
- Ask one or more of these questions to your elected decision-maker by tagging them on social media. Also share these questions with your colleagues on social media—even if they don't use the questions, they provide background on key issues.



# 1 Climate-related disasters are increasingly impacting the health of people around the U.S. What federal actions will you support to build community climate resilience and protect communities from the health impacts of climate-related extreme events, especially historically disadvantaged and vulnerable communities?



**We need elected leaders who support the investments required to protect our health in the face of climate change and who will work to ensure that our climate resilience investments are prioritized to protect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged among us.**

Climate change is already increasing the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, including wildfires, extreme heat, droughts, and extreme precipitation and flooding events. The toll on human health is ever more apparent and is expected to increase exponentially by 2100. People of color, tribal communities, and low-income families are more likely to be adversely impacted by climate disasters and climate-related illnesses, exacerbating health inequities. For example, historical redlining practices created heat islands that increase localized heat by many degrees. In New York City, [50% of heat-related deaths](#) occur in the Black community despite comprising 25% of the total population. And worsening extreme weather events are [causing over \\$300 billion](#) a year in damages in the U.S.

There are many opportunities to reduce climate risks—urban greening brings parks, gardens, agriculture, forests, and other natural features to urban areas. But without elected leaders’ support for robust funding, many communities will not benefit from them. Green infrastructure uses trees, rain gardens, permeable pavements, and other strategies to better manage stormwater. Implementing technologies such as cool roofs and weatherization can significantly reduce energy costs and lower city temperatures. We also need expansion of programs to improve access to weatherization and lower the energy cost burden for low-income communities. Community resilience centers provide cool spaces, increase access to resources, and build community cohesion. These strategies all improve health by cleaning the air and water, providing green spaces for physical activity, and enhancing mental and economic well-being. Our investments must be equitable to serve the communities most in need.





# 2

Millions of people in the U.S. don't have access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water. What specific steps will you take to ensure that every American has access to clean and safe drinking water?



**We need elected leaders who will work to ensure that every American has access to clean and safe drinking water at home and in their communities and who will protect our precious water resources from contamination and wasteful use in the era of megadroughts and climate change.**

Most Americans enjoy high-quality water at an affordable price, in large part due to the great progress that has been made since the passage of the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act nearly 50 years ago. But millions of people in the U.S. continue to live with unsafe, unreliable, or unaffordable drinking water and substandard sanitation. Additionally, the previous administration weakened clean water regulations, allowing more pollution to enter our drinking water.

People of color are disproportionately exposed to higher levels of water contaminants, especially in low-income and agricultural communities. Native American and Indigenous communities frequently [lack access to clean drinking water](#), and too many Black Americans in the southeast [don't have indoor plumbing](#). Extreme climate events like drought and flooding further threaten access to clean water. Planning for sustainable groundwater use, water conservation, and stronger rules and enforcement to prevent water contamination are more critical than ever.

California law now recognizes the fundamental human right to water; that right needs to apply to all Americans. The federal government must invest more in drinking water and modern sanitation infrastructure—especially in impoverished and historically marginalized communities—including greater resources for tribal governments, state water revolving funds, and technical assistance. We need agencies to strengthen regulatory protections on water quality. We need support for more effective management of our shrinking water resources in order to limit waste and ensure universal access to clean drinking water. Additionally, we need better data on groundwater withdrawals and on communities that lack affordable water and sanitation access.



# 3

**The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act will together provide well over a trillion dollars for investments in transportation, energy, water, and other infrastructure, much of it through local and state governments. How would you work to ensure that these federal taxpayer investments prioritize equity, reduce climate pollution, and improve health? How can we ensure IRA dollars flow to frontline communities that are the worst affected by climate change and climate pollution?**



**We need our elected officials to support infrastructure investments that support climate resilience and health, redress historical inequities in community investment, and build the clean energy and transportation systems we need for a healthy future.**

[The Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act of 2021](#), or the “bipartisan infrastructure law,” makes a historic \$1.2 trillion investment in our nation’s infrastructure and programs over the next five years. Infrastructure—our roads, water and sanitation systems, electric grid, and more—forms the building blocks of our communities. It shapes our opportunities for health and is centrally important in decarbonizing the economy, protecting people from harmful climate impacts, and building community climate resilience. [The Inflation Reduction Act](#) provides an additional \$369 billion for climate and energy programs that will transform the U.S. response to climate change and accelerate the clean energy transition.

We can either use infrastructure spending to maintain our polluting status quo, or we can use this opportunity to build the infrastructure we need for healthier and more equitable communities. Elected officials can encourage and partner directly with agencies at all levels of government to target infrastructure investments in disadvantaged and vulnerable communities and to prioritize multi-benefit investments that promote health and address the climate crisis. This means that frontline communities must be given a seat at the table in designing how these funds will be administered. These include investments in energy efficiency and weatherization for low-income households, electrification of and EV infrastructure for school buses and trucks, public transit expansion and operations, walking and biking infrastructure, and green infrastructure.





## 4

**Our current transportation system exacerbates climate change and causes many injuries and illnesses. What actions would you support to ensure that all federal transportation expenditures are aligned with climate, health, and equity goals?**



**We need elected leaders who will push to align transportation investments with our climate and health goals.**

Transportation produces nearly a third of all U.S. greenhouse gas emissions—more than any other sector—and our current transportation system is associated with a grim array of health effects: respiratory and cardiovascular disease, adverse reproductive outcomes from auto emissions that pollute the air, motor vehicle crashes causing thousands of deaths and disabilities each year, noise pollution that increases heart disease, and congestion that causes mental stress and takes away from family time. Our auto-centric transportation system also leads to physical inactivity which is a major contributor to chronic diseases including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and osteoporosis.

We can reduce air pollution and damage to the climate through strong fuel efficiency standards and investments in the expansion of zero-emission vehicles (especially trucks and buses). But the biggest health benefits will come from making it easier for people to use public transit and safely walk and bike. Shifting to “active transportation” reduces air pollution too, but it can also significantly [reduce chronic disease related to lack of physical activity, potentially reducing the burden of cardiovascular disease by 14% and diabetes by 7%](#) and averting billions of dollars in health care costs. Transportation systems with good active transportation options are also more affordable and improve access to jobs, education, and services for everyone.

We need to align federal transportation spending with our health and climate goals through massive investments in public transit, “complete streets” that provide safe places for active transportation, and affordable housing to ensure that people of all income levels can afford to live in neighborhoods with access to jobs, schools, and groceries. Transit projects must receive at least the same federal share of funding as road projects, and federal funding to states should incentivize the provision of healthier transportation options. States should be required to measure and report the safety, climate, and health impacts of their transportation investments—like measuring the impact on vehicle miles traveled, for example.



# 5

**There is growing concern among health professionals, parents, and teachers that children and youth are experiencing significant mental health problems associated with climate change. This is on top of a [national emergency](#) for children’s health declared by the major medical associations serving children. How can we address this burgeoning mental health crisis?**



Climate change affects our mental health and well-being in many ways. The experience of extreme events such as flooding or wildfires—especially if they cause the loss of a loved one or displacement from one’s home and community—can lead to PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Extreme heat increases the occurrence of violence. Many people are impacted by worries due to climate-related food and water insecurity. Children and youth are especially vulnerable as they worry about how climate change affects their future. In a [2021 survey of young people](#) around the world, more than 45% of respondents said the climate crisis is negatively affecting their ability to function on a daily basis.

Elected officials can support funding and policies to (a) improve access to mental health services in schools and clinics and ensure access to these services in the aftermath of climate-related disasters, (b) increase research and training on prevention and intervention strategies to reduce the impacts of climate change on mental health, and (c) improve community preparedness and response through integrating mental health into emergency response services and monitoring the emotional well-being of children and youth after a climate disaster.





6

For many decades, the Environmental Protection Agency has worked to improve our access to clean air and water, and now it must play a vital role in responding to the climate crisis. What actions will you support to ensure that the executive branch (e.g., EPA) has the ability to combat climate change after the recent Supreme Court decision that severely limits the strategies EPA can utilize to safeguard public health?



**We need elected leaders who are willing to stand up for the ability of regulatory agencies to protect and promote health based on sound science and evidence-based policy.**

For over 50 years, regulatory agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency have implemented environmental protection laws passed by Congress to successfully reduce air, water, and land pollution without impeding strong economic growth. The Supreme Court decision in *West Virginia v. EPA* up-ended long-standing legal precedents and significantly limits the authority of EPA to utilize the best available tools to reduce climate pollution and address the climate health emergency. The Court's ruling did not remove EPA's authority to regulate carbon dioxide or the many other harmful pollutants from power plants, vehicles, or oil and gas wells. In the short term, we need the EPA to act as quickly as possible to finalize strong rules that limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from power plants and to strengthen rules and standards to prevent harmful exposures to particulate matter, ozone, methane, and other pollutants.

But the ruling also makes it even more important that our elected officials act with urgency to pass legislation to invest in clean energy and strategies that reduce climate pollution in agriculture, transportation, industry, and buildings. Many experts believe that Congress should also act to re-balance the power of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches through constitutionally allowed changes in the Supreme Court and its authority.



7

**Our food and agricultural systems both contribute to climate change and are at serious risk from climate impacts. What measures would you advocate for in the upcoming Farm Bill to help America's farmers increase access to sustainably grown healthy fruits and vegetables and implement agricultural practices that reduce greenhouse gasses, reduce water pollution, and promote a climate-resilient food system?**



**We need elected leaders who will support healthy and climate-smart food and agriculture systems.**

The Farm Bill is a package of legislation that is reauthorized by Congress every five years and impacts every aspect of our food system and our farming communities. The current Farm Bill is up for renewal in 2023 and negotiations are ramping up. Among the many aspects of our food and agricultural system the Farm Bill covers, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Fund (SNAP/"food stamps"), sustainable farming opportunities, and decreasing food waste represent three important opportunities to move us toward healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable nutrition and farming practices.

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) addresses food insecurity in the US, with 41.5 million people participating in the program. SNAP funding comprises roughly two-thirds of the [total Farm Bill budget](#). While SNAP plays an important role in addressing food insecurity, data shows SNAP participants have a worse diet quality than income-matched peers who do not utilize the program, with more spending on items such as sugary drinks. This is partly due to insufficient funding for the program. Data shows that providing SNAP participants with more funding results in more purchasing of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains that can improve their health. Moving the population toward more plant-based options both improves health and reduces our carbon footprint when replacing meat options.

On average, Americans waste 40% of their food, which costs \$161 billion per year in wasted expenses. The food waste ends up in our landfills releasing a significant amount of methane gas—the warming equivalent of 42 coal fired plants in one year. There are opportunities within the farm bill to create food redistribution programs and support funding for more research on how to best reduce food loss and waste in our systems.

Finally, our current agricultural practices are unsustainable. The use of pesticides and fertilizers erode soil health and pollute downstream waterways. Combined with agricultural practices that erode topsoil health, we are losing an important carbon sink for our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Eroding soil health also hurts the quality of the crops we can grow. Our current system also heavily subsidizes commodity crops used for animal feed and corn syrup. We need to better use our agricultural commodity subsidies to support diverse and nutritious food and promote regenerative agricultural practices. We need to increase support for fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes to enhance availability and affordability of healthy foods for all.



## 8

The fossil fuel industry currently receives billions of dollars of taxpayer money in tax breaks and subsidies that support the continued expansion of fossil fuel production. Will you support ending tax breaks and subsidies for fossil fuels?



**We need elected leaders who will actively support efforts to remove all tax breaks and embedded subsidies for the fossil fuel industry.**

Fossil fuel subsidies refer to tax breaks, low-interest loans, or direct payments to fossil fuel companies that reduce the cost of producing coal, oil, and gas, as well as to subsidies that cut the price of fossil fuels for end-users. In a 2021 report, The International Energy Agency (IEA) stated that to reach greenhouse gas emissions targets, “all governments need to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies” in the next few years. According to the Environmental and Energy Study Institute, “conservative estimates put U.S. direct subsidies to the fossil fuel industry at roughly [\\$20 billion](#). For over a century, these subsidies have been designed to lower the cost of fossil fuel production, which continues to uphold an uneven playing field. Fossil fuels are also indirectly subsidized because polluting fossil fuel industries are not paying for the damages they cause to health or the environment through air and water pollution and climate change; these externalized costs amount to trillions of dollars.

President Biden’s Executive Order 14008 in 2021 ordered federal agencies to identify and take steps to ensure that agencies are not directly subsidizing fossil fuels and ordered the Office of Management and Budget to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies from the federal budget. The President’s proposed budget did recommend [eliminating several subsidies](#); however, most fossil fuel subsidies remain embedded in the tax code, which can only be changed through congressional action.



9

**While a rapid transition to clean energy is critical to protect our health from catastrophic climate impacts, that transition may inadvertently harm workers and communities that are currently economically dependent on fossil fuel jobs. What specific policies do you support to ensure a just transition for workers and communities adversely impacted by climate change and the transition to a green economy?**



**We need elected leaders who will work for a rapid transition to a zero-carbon economy while protecting the health and well-being of all Americans.**

A rapid transition from fossil fuel energy to clean renewable energy will be required to avert catastrophic climate change. Without careful and intentional planning, this transition could leave some workers and communities behind. For example, coal miners or refinery workers could lose their family-sustaining jobs, adversely impacting their families and communities. It's critical that all households and communities are able to benefit from the clean energy transition by ensuring that low-income communities and communities of color have access to clean energy, zero-emission vehicles, and clean air and water.

A “Just Transition” ensures the transformation of our energy, transportation, building, and agricultural systems are equitable in the distribution of their benefits, and include strategies to mitigate any potential negative impacts on workers and communities. Examples include greater investments in clean energy workforce training and development, funding to stabilize the retirement funds of fossil fuel workers, ensuring that clean energy jobs are family-sustaining, subsidizing EV purchases and expanding weatherization and renewable energy for low-income families, and protecting community health from the impacts of climate change—especially in already burdened communities. We should also approach new technologies intended to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions or climate impacts (e.g., biomass to energy) with caution, as the only proven solution to climate change to date is stopping the burning of fossil fuels.





# 10

We know that people who understand that climate change threatens our health and well-being are more likely to support climate solutions. Do you support funding for a communications campaign to proactively inform the public about the health and economic impacts of climate change and the health benefits of climate solutions?



**We need elected leaders who will support funding for a proactive campaign to inform the American people that climate change is a health emergency.**

For many people, the most personally relevant thing about climate change is that it impacts their health and the health of their loved ones. Better awareness of the health harms of climate change—and the health benefits of climate action—can help Americans make more informed decisions about how to protect their health.

Public health communication campaigns, such as those on tobacco, seat belts, and drunk driving, have proven effective in saving millions of lives. The tobacco prevention campaigns were especially important in countering the disinformation spread by the tobacco industry, which spent billions of dollars trying to hide the truth that tobacco kills. The fossil fuel industry similarly spends huge amounts of money to turn our attention away from the harms of oil, gas, and coal and to raise doubts about actions to address those harms. Only a well-funded, coherent campaign focused on telling the American people the truth about the health harms of climate change and the health benefits of climate change solutions can counter this intentional disinformation.



## 11

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for a strong, well-funded, and resilient public health system. What actions will you support to rebuild and improve our public health infrastructure to better address crises like COVID-19 and climate change?



**We need elected leaders who will support sustained funding and capacity for local, state, and federal health agencies to prepare for climate disasters, track climate-related diseases, and take action to prevent climate health impacts.**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, our public health infrastructure has been severely frayed through years of neglect and underfunding. The situation for climate-health capacity is even worse. The CDC's Climate Ready Cities and States program has \$10 million in funding it disperses to 16 states and two cities; meanwhile, healthcare costs due to climate change are estimated at \$820 billion. Most states, and over 3,000 local health departments, have no formal support or capacity and little guidance. Few resources have gone into building the capacity of local, state, and federal agencies to protect and promote public health in the era of climate change.

Our public health system needs resources for better real-time monitoring and response to climate-related disease, including infectious diseases, wildfires, and heat illnesses, and to train the public health workforce—including community health workers—to promote and protect physical and mental health in the era of climate change. Our public health system must also be equipped to analyze the potential health risks or benefits of proposed climate actions and educate the public on important climate health risks.



12

Our care for human health and well-being does not stop at the U.S. border. Many of the countries that have contributed the least to climate change are suffering the most extreme impacts, while also lacking economic resources to transition to clean energy. Analysis of historic emissions finds the U.S. has fallen woefully behind in paying its fair share. Will you advocate for substantial increases in U.S. climate finance to assist low- and middle-income nations in adapting to climate change and transitioning to clean energy?



**The Biden Administration has pledged to provide \$11.4 billion a year in international climate finance by 2024. Analysis by the Overseas Development Institute finds that the “fair share” calculation including the size of our economy and historical emissions is actually \$45-50 billion annually.**

Unfortunately, we are already far behind our \$11.4 billion annual goal. To the distress of the global community, Congress approved only \$1 billion in climate finance for 2022. The climate crisis is a global crisis. That means that our success in averting catastrophic climate change relies on all of the nations of the world reducing climate pollution. Nations with less wealth and historic emissions require and deserve resources for green economic development and to protect their people from the effects of climate change. The U.S. also has an important role to play in international climate negotiations; failing to meet our already limited commitments harms our credibility on the global stage. The U.S. economy is many times the size of Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan, but we currently provide less climate finance than all four.

Climate finance is a lifesaving intervention. It has the power to transform energy systems, limit global emissions, and facilitate health and resilience worldwide. With the assistance of climate finance, many countries have been able to accelerate their transition to clean energy and have begun adapting to climate impacts on public health, agriculture, and livelihoods.





# 13

**As climate-driven extreme events increase in frequency and severity, we need our hospitals to be able to remain operational to serve disaster-stricken communities. How will you work to support efforts by America's hospitals to build a more climate-resilient health care system?**



**We need elected leaders who will work with our hospitals and health care systems to ensure that health care is available to all who need it following increasingly frequent and severe climate-related disasters.**

Climate change threatens the ability of hospitals to maintain life-saving services in the face of increasingly frequent and severe climate-related disasters, including wildfires, floods, and extreme heat events. Health care providers and hospitals need technical assistance and funding to prepare for extreme weather. For example, the federal government could allow the use of Medicaid waivers and Medicare/Medicaid Quality Improvement Organizations to provide technical assistance and funding for health care providers in marginalized communities, community health centers, nursing homes, and federally qualified health centers to prepare for extreme weather and climate impacts.

Minor changes in the tax code could authorize nonprofit hospitals to count measures that increase resilience (e.g., renewable energy, battery storage, microgrids) towards their Community Benefit. A change in Community Benefit would support hospitals in implementing measures that improve community health and climate resilience. Congress could also authorize sufficient funding for the new HHS Office of Climate Change and Health Equity to take the lead in health care preparedness and resilience planning.





As suggested above, you can use these questions and summaries to educate candidates and your colleagues about some of the most pressing issues in climate, health, and equity. You can find more election-related resources here: [medsocietiesforclimatehealth.org/advocacy-resources](https://medsocietiesforclimatehealth.org/advocacy-resources)

