

Open Letter to Candidates on Climate and Health



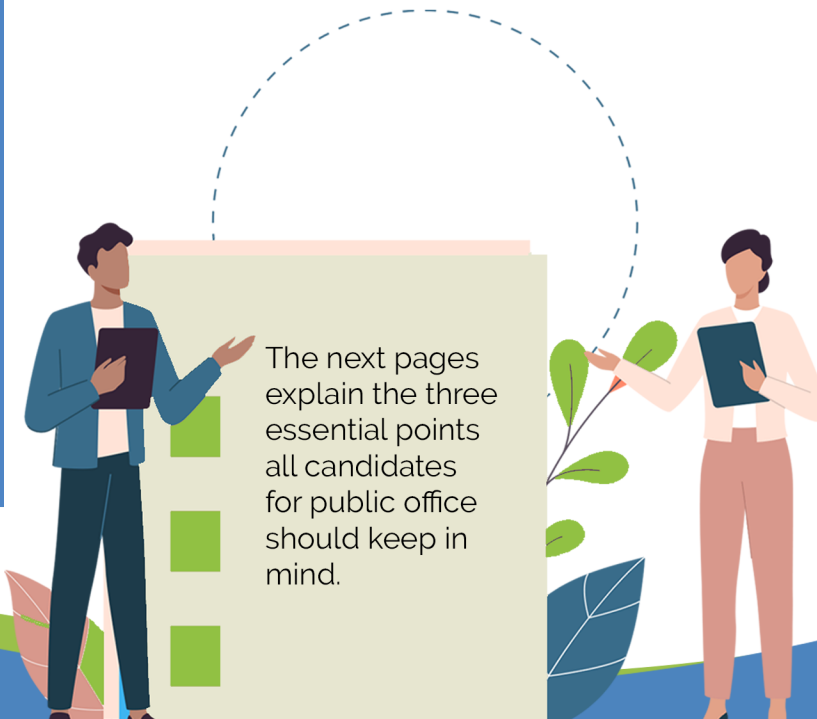
Open Letter to Candidates on Climate and Health

All public officials should consider speaking of climate change as a health emergency, which is the way the medical community has viewed it for several years. Without an urgent and concerted effort to prevent the worst and prepare for the inevitable, it will cause health, social and economic harms far worse than what we are experiencing with COVID-19. Climate change is jeopardizing the well-being of everyone alive today, especially our children and our grandchildren and communities of color. Because it threatens the air, water, food, and shelter on which we depend for survival, the climate crisis is literally an existential threat.

As physicians practicing on the frontlines, we know that the burden created by carbon pollution has become too overwhelming to ignore. Unprecedented heat waves are driving people into the hospitals, destructive wildfires and floods are displacing people from their homes, and superstorm events are leaving death, destruction and displacement in their wake. Climate change is no longer a distant reality but is playing out in our home communities, and we are seeing the effects of it in our patients around the country. We know that carbon pollution is the common enemy of our climate and air quality health and that taking action on climate will rapidly reward us with better health now as well as in the long run.

That is why over 150 major U.S. health and medical organizations, representing over 650,000 health professionals, have declared that climate change is a health emergency. They have endorsed a blueprint for transformative policy action - [The Call to Action on Climate, Health and Equity: A Policy Action Agenda](#) - that puts health, equity and a just transition at the center of guiding us to a better future.

We think candidates for public office should understand that supporting climate action to protect people's health demonstrates both good leadership and smart politics.



The next pages explain the three essential points all candidates for public office should keep in mind.

1. Public concern about climate change has grown rapidly, as has public understanding that climate change is a threat to human health and safety. The public strongly supports climate actions that address climate and health. Here are some key findings from public opinion surveys:¹




Americans' concern about harms from climate change has reached a new high point. Between 2016 and 2021, the percentage of Americans who are "alarmed" about climate change has grown from 18% to 33%. Another 34% are concerned. At the same time, the percent who are "dismissive" has remained at nine percent. Also, for the first time, most Americans say that climate change is already harming people in the United States and, again for the first time, a majority think that health harms of many kinds (e.g., bodily harm for storms, flooding and wildfires, heat stroke, asthma attacks, food and water contamination and allergies) will increase in the future.

Americans are increasingly seeing climate as a threat to health and safety. Between 2014 and 2020, there was a dramatic increase in the number of Americans who understand that the health harms from global warming are becoming more common and may threaten them. Vast majorities of Americans support policies that reduce the pollution that causes global warming and promote the clean energy that can stabilize the climate. These include:

- 87% support providing tax incentives or rebates to homeowners, landlords, and businesses to make existing buildings more energy efficient.
- 79% support funding more research into renewable energy sources.
- 77% support providing tax rebates to people who purchase energy-efficient vehicles or solar panels.
- 77% support providing federal funding to make residential buildings in low-income communities more energy efficient.
- 77% support providing tax incentives or rebates to homeowners, landlords, and businesses to purchase appliances that can be powered without burning fossil fuels.
- 74% support regulating carbon dioxide as a pollutant.
- 69% support transitioning the U.S. economy (including electric utilities, transportation, buildings, and industry) from fossil fuels to 100% clean energy by 2050.
- 69% support increasing federal funding to low-income communities and communities of color who are disproportionately harmed by air and water pollution.
- 66% support requiring fossil fuel companies to pay a tax on the carbon pollution they produce, and using that revenue to reduce other taxes (such as the federal income tax) by an equal amount (i.e., a revenue-neutral carbon tax).
- 63% support requiring electric utilities to produce 100% of their electricity from renewable energy sources by 2035.





2. The recent passage and enactment of two measures give candidates an opportunity to say public officials can get things done on climate, health and equity.

[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.

In addition, [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.

3. Climate change is affecting every person in the world, but voters will be most interested in the health risks they face locally from climate change and how climate solutions will benefit their health.



Climate change is no longer seen as an issue of far away places being affected far in the future. Your voters will want to know how climate change is affecting their health, how it's being addressed and how their health will benefit from climate action. You need to have the answers when asked about how these new laws will be implemented effectively and fairly, along with what else needs to be done. Here's how we would respond to the key questions you're likely to have.

1. Why should I be talking about climate change rather than the economy, war, social issues and the threat to our democracy?

Climate change is an issue that's affecting every aspect of your voters' lives. That includes their concerns about their health, the economy and the challenges we face as a democracy. The good news is that with the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, we are showing that, even with all that divides us, we can still come together and respond to an issue that affects every one of us.

2. Are Americans really concerned about climate and health?

The answer is, increasingly, yes. As discussed above, polls conducted by Yale and George Mason show that a majority of Americans understand that a range of health harms will become more common in their community--including heat stroke, injuries from storms, floods and wildfires, and diseases carried by insects--unless something is done about it. That was not the case five years ago, when the average American saw the health threats of climate change as a problem in the future.

3. Americans are divided and stressed. How can talking about a "doom and gloom" issue like climate and health help?

When it comes to how climate will affect their health, Americans want to know the threat they are facing. More than eight in 10 Americans (83%) say the future of our nation is a significant source of stress. Worrying about climate change is already a part of those worries. Our research shows that people want to know about the health harms and risks they are facing from climate change.

The simple truth is that, while some people still associate the term "climate change" with the culture wars, this number is dwarfed by those who see it for what it is--a human caused change that must be addressed. Beyond this, the public, across the political spectrum, are united in their concerns about pollution and desire for policies that clean their air and water. If these are the policies that also solve climate change, the public will rally to leaders who advance them.

4. How do I talk about the benefits of climate action for health?

The good news for candidates is that placing the protection of health as the central focus of climate action provides an opportunity to talk about the rapid and localized health rewards of taking action. That's why health experts see responding to the climate crisis as one of our greatest public health opportunities. These health benefits are outlined in the recently released [Health Promise of Climate Solutions](#) report. In brief:

- Clean energy reduces air pollution.
- Healthy and clean transportation means less air pollution and more healthy physical activity.
- Available, affordable approaches to designing, building and improving heating and cooling systems in homes and commercial buildings improve health by reducing exposure to indoor and outdoor air pollution.
- 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 that educe the significant burden of high healthcare costs on our economy.

5. Immediate economic concerns like inflation and the risk of recession will be one of the important issues to voters in November. Opponents of climate action will say addressing climate change will hurt our economy. How do I respond?

The facts are that addressing climate change will actually reduce inflation and improve our economy, in both the short and longer term. Economic research has established the economic case for climate-focused transformation of our energy, transportation and agricultural sectors. Conversely, the health and safety considerations make the costs of inaction on climate change all too apparent. To cite just one example, climate-related extreme events already cost billions every year in the U.S. The health costs alone are staggering - just 10 climate sensitive events resulted in \$10 billion in health-related costs.⁴

The case for transforming our approach to energy, transportation and agriculture gets even better when the health benefits of taking action are taken into account. Every step we take toward a cleaner, more sustainable future delivers a healthier and more productive people, accompanied by greater productivity and lower health costs.



6. How can I present acting on climate as a way to heal the social divides in our country?

Like many other health crises, climate change is a health crisis we're all in together. But some people are more vulnerable to the health harms of climate change simply for being who they are, for living where they live or for doing the work that they do. For example, communities with a history of racist redlining live in communities with less shade and are at higher risk in extreme heat events. People living in poverty are more likely to be permanently displaced from their homes in a wildfire, flood or hurricane. Fighting climate change cannot on its own solve the problems of racism or persistent poverty, but it presents a chance to take a big step in the right direction. Solutions to climate change that are centered around respecting, listening to and prioritizing the health of the most impacted workers and communities is a concrete and essential step toward justice and social healing.

7. What are candidate statements of policy priorities for advancing climate and health solutions that would most align their views with those of health professionals?

We recommend emphasizing the following as your priorities:

I will support the investments required to protect our health in the face of climate change, and I will work to ensure that our climate resilience investments are prioritized to protect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged among us.

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.



I 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.

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.

I will 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. The Inflation Reduction Act will support the growth of a clean energy economy. We must make health the central focus of these investments by ensuring they decarbonize the economy, protect people from harmful climate impacts, and build community climate resilience.

I support aligning our federal transportation spending with our health and climate goals through major 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.

For many decades, the Environmental Protection Agency has worked to improve our access to clean air and clean water, and now it must play a vital role in responding to the climate crisis. **I will stand up for the ability of regulatory agencies to protect and promote health based on sound science and evidence-based policy.**



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. **I will support funding and policies to (a) improve access to mental health services in schools and clinics and to 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.**

Our food and agricultural systems both contribute to climate change and are at serious risk from climate impacts. **I will advocate for measures 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.**

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. **I will support efforts to remove all tax breaks and embedded subsidies for the fossil fuel industry.**

I will work for a rapid transition to a zero-carbon economy while protecting the health and well-being of all Americans. The transition supported by passing the Inflation Reduction Act will create thousands of new jobs and give a major boost to our economy. While a rapid transition to clean energy is critical to protect our health from catastrophic climate impacts and will provide thousands of good jobs, that transition may inadvertently harm workers and communities that are currently economically dependent on fossil fuel jobs. 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 job training and to the changes that will clean their air, namely clean energy, zero- emission vehicles, and clean air and water.

I 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. I 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.



Our bottom line proposition for candidates is that standing with health professionals to make the protecting and improving the health of all Americans the central focus of taking action on climate is good policy and good politics. We are here to help inform your policymaking and inform your constituents if you do.



The Medical
Society Consortium
ON CLIMATE & HEALTH

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3. New Study Finds That Complementary Policies Can Reduce Costs While Accelerating Emissions Reductions. (2022). Resources for the Future. <https://www.rff.org/news/press-releases/new-study-finds-that-complementary-policies-can-reduce-costs-while-accelerating-emissions-reductions/>

4. Limaye, V. S., Max, W., Constible, J., & Knowlton, K. (2019). Estimating the HealthRelated Costs of 10 ClimateSensitive U.S. Events During 2012. *GeoHealth*, 3(9), 245-265.