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Environmental Health Leadership on Climate Solutions Amidst COVID-19

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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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We are orienting ourselves to a new world. We are amidst a global pandemic and economic contraction, and are immediately concerned about our families, communities, and futures. As our perspectives are narrowed, however, by the urgency of COVID-19, our other big challenges, especially the climate health emergency, have not gone away.

If we look at addressing these challenges in tandem, the COVID-19 crisis provides useful guidance for addressing our climate health emergency. The stimulus money we are indebting ourselves with has the potential to go a long way to solving climate change. Comprehensive COVID-19 and economic solutions with a longer-term perspective can lead us to climate solutions—a more prosperous, healthy, thriving, and just America.

It can reignite the true spirit of America's leadership.

Environmental health professionals have a critical role to play in climate leadership, especially at the local level. They are a trusted group of messengers who understand the science, as well as health impacts. Solutions to climate change lie in resiliency and adaptation initiatives in local governments, in food safety specialists adapting the field to prevent contamination and shortages, and working professionals bringing this message to their elected officials at all levels of government. Those of us who can continue to work on climate solutions during this time must. The consequences of inaction are too high.

What have we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic that helps us better prepare for the slower moving threat of climate change?

- **We can tackle monumental challenges:** The most important lesson overall is that we can muster society, policies, and financial resources to quickly address problems of significant importance—namely our climate and health emergency. Once leadership listened to the experts and understood the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. acted with extraordinary speed and scale. Congress aligned and mustered up a \$2 trillion action plan to address the immediate health and economic implications in less than two weeks. Climate solutions would actually cost less and provide greater health benefits.
- **Timing matters:** With COVID-19, quick action by health and governmental officials in places like Singapore flattened the curve. Delayed action by mere weeks in places like Italy and the U.S., however, has resulted in explosive outbreaks, increased mortality in patients, and harm to providers. The longer we wait to dedicate significant resources to mitigating and preparing for the climate health emergency, the more it will cost us both in lives and livelihoods.
- **Crises highlight injustices in society:** COVID-19 is shining a light on the health, economic, societal, and racial inequities embedded in our society. Systemic disinvestment in some communities has directly contributed to the health disparities that make people more susceptible to COVID-19, as well as more vulnerable to climate impacts. Wealthier people can comfortably self-quarantine in their large homes and their vacation homes. The disadvantaged among us face far higher and disproportionate health risks, cannot

work from home, and can least afford the economic harms of losing their jobs and healthcare. This situation is a moral challenge and responsibility.

- **Preparation matters:** Countries that were prepared with good public health systems and pandemic trained professionals who were ready with testing, protection, and treatment equipment and supplies have had much lower COVID-19 incidence and much quicker recovery than we have had in the U.S. We must prepare for climate change with similar mastery. One idea is a U.S. recovery authority charged with foreseeing and preparing for calamities. As we head into hurricane season, it is important to prepare for extreme weather events that could impact physical distancing requirements and safe shelter-in-place orders.
- **Science matters:** Trust in experts and science has been critical for the successes in COVID-19 response and public welfare. Many political leaders in places like Italy, UK, and the U.S. did not listen to experts, believing their judgements of the situation were better. Leaders and health professionals who took the science seriously and made evidence-based decisions are saving thousands of lives. The lack of consistent messaging and informed risk communication has resulted in critical errors and lives lost.
- **Leadership matters:** Chief executives are the people who can act in the moment and make a difference. With COVID-19, prime ministers, presidents, governors, and mayors who made the right decisions and acted promptly reduced impacts. They surrounded themselves with experts and understood the people they represented. We need our leaders to step up and champion the information, plans, and resources to effectively address climate change.
- **Transparency and honesty matter:** Labeling COVID-19 as an emergency has triggered historic national and worldwide collaboration and action. When political leaders, the media, and other decision makers suppress science, however, they have distracted people and organizations from action and driven up morbidity, mortality, and a myriad of individual and societal injustices.
- **Communities matter:** Most Americans are self-quarantining and many are making

room to care for and connect with others beyond their own families. They are providing moral outrage that is forcing governments to act with people as a priority. Their individual and collective actions have made governments realize that social welfare is a primary responsibility.

Of course, there are many general questions still unanswered about COVID-19 and our response to it. How long will it last? Will there be a second wave, perhaps larger than the initial pandemic, in the fall or next year? Can we develop immunities, vaccines, or treatments that will protect us? What will we learn from this pandemic? How can we “multisolve” and address health, climate, and equity issues with COVID-19 solutions? How will we mitigate the possibility of and prepare for future crises?

There are also specific questions for the environmental health profession. How can we advance food safety practices to prevent the next pandemic? How can we prepare buildings for reentry? How will vector season and hurricane season be impacted by reduced workforce activities? How can we address the mental burden of seeing the suffering and responding to the pandemic? The next pandemic might have significantly higher morbidity and mortality rates than COVID-19. And climate change will assuredly have even greater impacts if left unaddressed.

We will establish a new normal post-COVID-19, which can be better or worse for us. This virus is causing us to change almost everything we do—how we work, connect, travel, shop, go to school, worship, and more. At least one half of the environmental health workforce is being pulled into immediate response mode while some health departments are closing completely. We hit the pause button on our everyday lives but certainly not the snooze button. In many ways, we have awoken and are thrust into new ways of being, punctuating the equilibrium of the past. We must translate these learnings to equitable climate solutions.

We are in the middle of the story and can write our own ending. There are certainties that can guide our action. We are interconnected, interdependent, and empowered to multisolve. Here are a few guiding principles for addressing climate change that we have learned or have been reinforced after being faced with the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Act and react with empathy and kindness:** In our personal interactions, in our communities, and with our policy solutions, we need to treat others, especially the less fortunate, as we would like to be treated if we were in their shoes. We need to build a more personal and broader sense of equity and justice to our climate work. Listen well to both optimize your efforts and help others adjust.
- **Keep equity at the core of our responses:** Start with people. Listen to and work from their priorities. Prioritize healthy housing, make school lunch programs available for at-home learning, shore up public health, create work opportunities, and build shared and sustainable prosperity.
- **Base our decisions on facts, science, and experts:** Political and financial interests are experts in propaganda. They obfuscate facts and confuse and misdirect the public to line their pockets with our money while increasing harms to the rest of us. The facts, science, and experts should guide all our decisions.
- **Inspire, empower, and take action:** People will not act on any issue if they think it will not impact them or if they cannot make a difference. As with COVID-19, the exact opposite is true with climate change. We need to lean in and move our families, workplaces, congregations, communities, and the country toward effective climate mitigation, restoration, and justice. Show up for others. On an individual level, we can donate to food banks, help neighbors get groceries, help folks apply for economic assistance, and press government at all levels for regenerative solutions. On a professional level, environmental health practitioners can participate in online learning to build a new skill and engage colleagues in keeping up the steady drumbeat on climate solutions.
- **Elect leadership with a strong record on public and environmental health:** Primary to solving COVID-19 is leadership that places the public's well-being as an essential priority. Ineffective leadership exacerbates problems and increases harm. The most critical thing we can do to address climate change is elect people who understand the climate health emergency—and the cost of inaction—and will take the necessary measures to build equitable climate solutions.

- **Communicate and collaborate:** We have at hand all the money, technology, and policy solutions we need to address climate change. What we need is a social tipping point. Activists alone are not enough. We need to reach out through our spheres of influence to motivate others to act and to act together for climate solutions.
- **Capitalize on the moment:** Social disruptions open space for rapid, massive social

change. By structuring solutions to crises in ways that multisolve for other issues, we can create self-reinforcing benefits. We need to realize that we and our problems are interconnected and interdependent, and so are the solutions. We must all embrace our critical roles as advocates.

This guidance from ecoAmerica, a partner of NEHA, is a work in process. There is a lot to learn from our compound crises and shar-

ing learning will help us get through them. We welcome your thoughts and recommendations as we continue to work in partnership to address these dual threats. 🌱

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