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Five Principles for Advancing Racial, Economic, and Health Justice Through State Climate Policy

By Rachel Jacobson

Climate change negatively affects all people and sectors of society, but these impacts are not experienced equally. States, which play a critical role in responding to climate change, should approach climate policy with a commitment first and foremost to the people and communities most impacted and with the fewest resources to respond. That is, they should take a “climate justice” approach connecting climate action to broader efforts aimed at overcoming the inequities and barriers that hold some people and communities back. To do so, states can embed five principles into their climate policy decisions. This paper details the five principles and includes powerful examples of existing state policies that other states can draw on to design their own policy responses.

The first two principles lay the groundwork for policies that are just, equitable, and effective. The last three each correspond to one of the three forms of action states can take in response to climate change: actions to mitigate climate change, help people adapt, and respond to disasters. States can — and should — pursue all five of the following principles together as they design and implement climate policy.

- **Center those most impacted and with the fewest resources to respond** by understanding which residents are included in this category, co-creating priorities and policies with those residents, proactively applying those priorities when designing and implementing climate action policies, and allocating resources to monitor outcomes over time.
- **Equitably and sustainably invest in climate action** by raising revenue from companies responsible for climate pollution and from wealthy residents and investing that revenue in communities most impacted by climate change and with the fewest resources to respond.
- **Prioritize climate change mitigation policies and programs that make our energy system more fair, sustainable, and affordable.** Our energy systems will serve us better when they support local economies; value every community member’s safety, well-being, and economic security; and are governed by communities committed to a healthy environment.
- **Prioritize climate change adaptation and climate resilience actions that protect the health, safety, and well-being of those most vulnerable to climate impacts** by ensuring

adaptation-specific programs center the needs of vulnerable populations; upgrading and building new climate-resilient infrastructure in places with high concentrations of vulnerable populations; and integrating climate change considerations into policy decisions for the economic and health security programs on which vulnerable populations rely.

- **Address loss and damage from climate change-fueled disasters** by ensuring existing economic and health security programs are robust and accessible, and increasing the size, speed, and racial equity of disaster payments.

Climate Justice Prioritizes the People and Communities That Are Most Impacted by Climate Change and Have the Fewest Resources to Respond

In the U.S., people of color (particularly Black, Latine, and Indigenous people) and people with low incomes or low wealth are highly exposed to climate risks because of where they live, work, and play and have minimal resources, capacity, safety nets, or political power to respond to those risks. That reality is largely the result of interlocking discriminatory systems, including the continuing impact of historically racist housing policies, ongoing discrimination and bias, inequities in how governments invest in communities, and private sector policies that limit worker pay and rights. They are also likelier to live in communities where industries have located polluting facilities and where investments in the public good have been minimal.¹

Other populations likely to be highly exposed to climate risks with fewer resources to respond include people who are immigrants, those at risk of housing displacement, children and older adults, people experiencing homelessness, outdoor workers, incarcerated people, renters, people with disabilities, and chronically ill or hospitalized people.

A “climate justice” approach to climate policy is anchored in these realities. Such an approach recognizes that the impacts from fossil fuel infrastructure and climate change disproportionately affect the people and communities that have contributed the least to them; exacerbate existing racial, economic, gender, and other inequities; and inhibit communities from thriving. Climate justice centers the people and communities who are most impacted by the adverse effects of climate change and have the fewest resources to respond by prioritizing meaningful participation of those communities in climate planning and action.

Climate justice provides a framework to connect actions to mitigate climate change — and to adapt to and recover from climate change impacts — to broader efforts at reducing the racial, economic, and health inequities that hold many people and communities back, ensuring that benefits and burdens of climate action are equitably distributed. Climate justice also centers the knowledge and lived experience of people and communities most impacted by climate change to design and

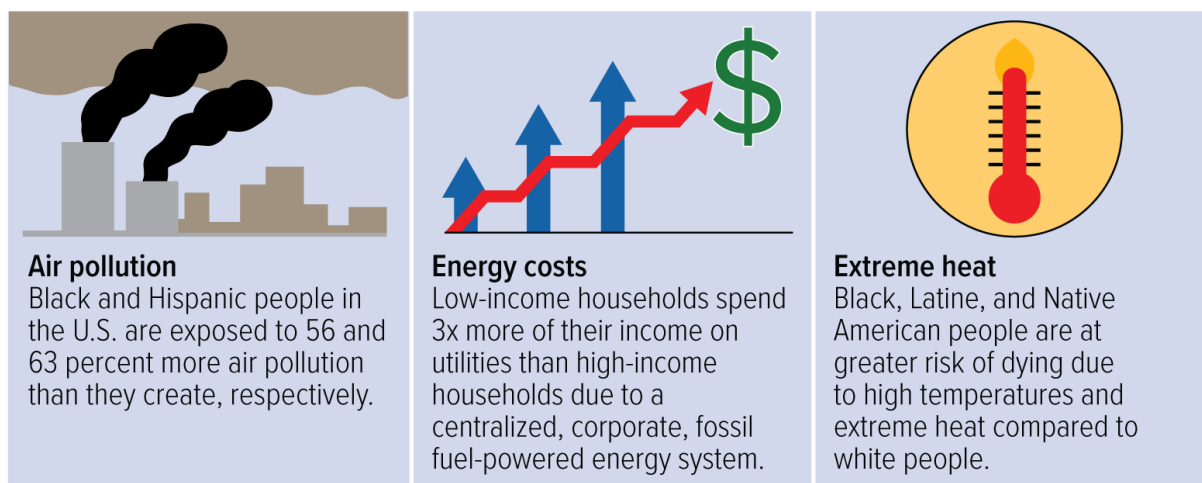
¹ Environmental Protection Agency, “Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts,” 2021, <https://www.epa.gov/cira/social-vulnerability-report>; Raymond Zhong and Nadja Popovich, “How Air Pollution Across America Reflects Racist Policy From the 1930s,” New York Times, March 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/climate/redlining-racism-air-pollution.html>.

implement equitable and effective climate action measures, repairing harm, and shifting decision-making power to them.² (See Figure 1.)

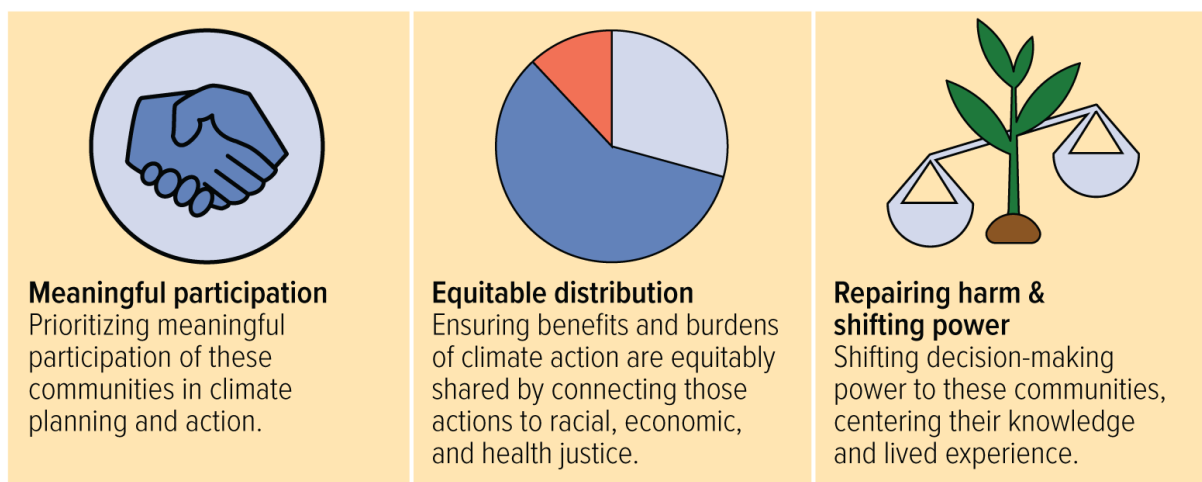
FIGURE 1

The Effects of Climate Change and Fossil Fuel Energy Are Unequally Distributed in the U.S.

Disproportionate impacts of fossil fuel energy and climate change include:



Climate justice centers the people and communities who are most impacted by the adverse effects of climate change and have the fewest resources to respond through:



Source: Air pollution: Tessum et al., Inequity in consumption of goods and services adds to racial-ethnic disparities in air pollution exposure. Energy costs: Drehobl, Ross, and Ayala, How High Are Household Energy Burdens. Extreme heat: Environmental Protection Agency, Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts.

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² For more information on climate justice, see CBPP, “Policy Basics: Advancing Racial, Economic, and Health Justice Through Climate Action,” December 12, 2024, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/climate-change/advancing-racial-economic-and-health-justice-through-climate-action>.

States Play a Critical Role in Climate Action

As climate change impacts and climate-fueled disasters become more widespread and severe, public consciousness — and public policy — has shifted to focus not just on addressing the causes of climate change (by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or climate pollution) but also the consequences of climate change. “Climate action” refers to three categories of action to address climate change and its effects:

- **Climate change mitigation.** Reducing the pollution that causes climate change.
- **Climate change adaptation and climate resilience.** Adjusting to changing conditions.
- **Loss and damage.** Mourning and rebuilding in the wake of climate change-fueled disasters.

Climate action can be undertaken by individuals, communities, businesses, and governments at the household, local, state, regional, territorial, national, tribal, or international scale. All elements of climate action require policies and programs to create and deploy the necessary financial, physical, and social supports.

States provide essential momentum, innovation, and structure for climate policy, which is crucial for achieving substantial and sustained climate action. States serve as laboratories for policy options, with programs like California’s clean cars standard serving as the model for other states and the federal government.³ Ambitious targets in one state can inspire action from others. For example, 100 percent clean energy goals, which started in Hawai‘i, have been adopted in 24 states plus Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico.⁴ In cases where federal action is lacking or inconsistent, states can step up to maintain progress on climate goals. For example, when the U.S. announced in 2017 that it would leave a major international treaty that coordinates greenhouse gas reduction goals, known as the Paris Agreement, some U.S. states and territories formed the U.S. Climate Alliance to uphold the Paris Agreement’s international climate change goals.⁵

As successful state policies increase public awareness and gain support, they can shape broader public opinion and put pressure on the federal government and other states to follow suit.⁶ In many cases, policies at the state level are best suited to address specific needs arising from unique environmental, geographic, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Additionally, regulatory changes needed for many essential climate actions — such as those relating to utilities, building codes, and transportation systems — are primarily under state jurisdiction.

³ Mitali Das, Manuel Linsenmeier, and Gregor Schwerhoff, “Climate Policy Diffusion Across US States,” International Monetary Fund, September 13, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2024/09/13/Climate-Policy-Diffusion-Across-US-States-554226>.

⁴ Clean Energy States Alliance, “Table of 100% Clean Energy States,” <https://www.cesa.org/projects/100-clean-energy-collaborative/guide/table-of-100-clean-energy-states/>.

⁵ U.S. Climate Alliance, “Members,” <https://usclimatealliance.org/members/>. After a lengthy process that began in 2017, the U.S. formally withdrew from the Paris Agreement in January 2021. The U.S. re-entered the Paris Agreement 77 days later under President Biden. The Trump Administration’s January 20, 2025 Executive Order “Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements” started the U.S.’s second withdrawal which, under current rules governing the agreement, may take effect in just one year.

⁶ Das, Linsenmeier, and Schwerhoff.

The Three Elements of Climate Action

1. **Climate change mitigation:** This refers to slowing down or reversing climate change by reducing climate pollution. Climate change mitigation actions include increasing energy efficiency, using electricity as a source of energy, and transitioning to energy sources that do not produce carbon pollution.
2. **Climate change adaption and climate resilience:** Despite mitigation efforts, we are experiencing — and will continue to experience — unavoidable climate change impacts, such as sea level rise, more frequent and stronger storms, floods, and longer, more intense heat waves.⁷ Therefore, it is necessary to make changes — such as fortifying and relocating critical assets — in our communities, ecosystems, and economies to reduce harms from climate change. Adaptation and resilience require making sure people have the capacity — including knowledge, money, and power — to adapt; moving people and things out of harm's way so they are less exposed to climate hazards; and designing communities and infrastructure so that they are less sensitive to damage from climate impacts.
3. **Loss and damage:** Despite adaptation and resilience efforts, climate change-fueled disasters are becoming more frequent and severe. Therefore, it is necessary to create systems that enable people to recover, remember, and rebuild their lives and livelihoods after disaster. This requires making sure people have the resources they need to recover their health and rebuild or relocate their lives after a disaster; creating time and space for people to grieve and memorialize people and places; and enabling processes of redefinition as people's lives evolve after loss.

States Should Take a Principled Approach to Climate Action to Advance Racial, Economic, and Health Justice

States can advance racial, economic, and health justice through climate action by embedding these five principles into their climate policy decisions:

1. Center climate action on those most impacted by climate change and with the fewest resources to respond.
2. Equitably and sustainably invest in climate action.
3. Prioritize climate change mitigation actions that make our energy systems more fair, sustainable, and affordable.
4. Prioritize climate change adaptation and climate resilience actions that improve the health, safety, and well-being of low-income people and people of color.
5. Address loss and damage from climate impacts through economic and health security programs and disaster policy reforms.

⁷ Hoesung Lee *et al.*, “Climate Change 2023 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers,” Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf.

The first two principles lay the groundwork for policies that are just, equitable, and effective. The last three each correspond to a specific element of climate action. States can — and should — pursue all five principles together as they design and implement climate policy.

FIGURE 2

Five Principles for Advancing Racial, Economic, and Health Justice Through State Climate Policy



Center climate action on those most impacted by climate change and with the fewest resources to respond.



Equitably and sustainably invest in climate action.



Pursue climate change mitigation actions that make our energy systems more fair, sustainable, and affordable.



Prioritize climate change adaptation and climate resilience actions that improve the health, safety, and well-being of low-income people and people of color.



Address loss and damage from climate impacts through economic and health security programs and disaster policy reforms.

Source: CBPP, “Five Principles for Advancing Racial, Economic, and Health Justice Through State Climate Policy”

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1. Center Climate Action on Those Most Affected and With the Fewest Resources to Respond

As discussed above, state climate action should be grounded first and foremost in the needs of those people and communities most affected by climate change and with the fewest resources to respond. For instance, states should:

- **Understand and define** which people and communities in the state are most affected by climate change and have the fewest resources to respond by combining a bottom-up approach (speaking directly with community residents) with a top-down approach (drawing on academic research). Washington’s 2021 Healthy Environmental for All Act creates

governance structures to define and act on environmental justice in accordance with the recommendations of community residents.⁸

- **Co-create climate and environmental justice priorities** with community residents, codify them in planning documents, and publicize them to gain buy-in, promote complimentary efforts in other sectors, and set the state up to measure and communicate impact. Many states fall short of using truly inclusive processes for creating, codifying, and publicizing priorities. Environmental and climate justice groups often step in with supplemental public engagement opportunities. For example, Alliance for Affordable Energy engaged environmental justice communities to provide input on Louisiana’s 2022 Climate Action Plan.⁹
- **Apply priorities** by proactively setting aside funding resources for impacted communities, attaching incentives for siting and ownership of beneficial infrastructure in communities that need it most, and special programs that address the unique needs of vulnerable populations. For example, Washington’s Climate Commitment Act requires improved air quality in communities disproportionately burdened by pollution and directs a minimum of 35 percent of carbon pricing revenues to state projects that improve pollution in such communities.¹⁰
- **Measure impact** to ensure policy interventions have the intended effect — improving environmental, economic, and health conditions in priority communities. This requires co-developing metrics with community residents and allocating resources to monitor outcomes over time. For examples, Rhode Island has produced health equity metrics and statewide data that agencies and other stakeholders can use to evaluate health outcomes of various programs in communities across the state.¹¹

State policymakers can ask themselves these guiding questions to help design policies and programs that center the experience of those most affected by climate change and with the fewest resources to respond:

- How does this policy/program recognize and leverage the context expertise of affected people and maintain or transfer autonomy and decision-making authority to them?
- Could this policy/program increase cost of living? If so, what policies/programs are in place to address the potential for displacement of low-income people?
- How might age, race, disability, immigration status, or income level affect people’s access to the benefits of this policy/program?
- Could this policy/program perpetuate systems that increase vulnerability for people of color and low-income people? How might that be avoided?

⁸ Washington State Department of Health, “Environmental Justice,” <https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/health-equity/environmental-justice>.

⁹ Alliance for Affordable Energy, “Governors Climate Initiative Task Force,” <https://www.all4energy.org/watchdog/governors-climate-initiative-task-force>.

¹⁰ State of Washington Department of Ecology, “Climate Commitment Act,” <https://ecology.wa.gov/Air-Climate/Climate-Commitment-Act>.

¹¹ State of Rhode Island Department of Health, “Rhode Island Health Equity Measures,” <https://health.ri.gov/data/rhode-island-health-equity-measures>.

2. Equitably Invest in Climate Action

Climate action requires public investment. Equitable investments raise revenue from companies responsible for climate pollution and from wealthy residents and spend the revenue on communities most impacted by climate change and with the fewest resources to respond, which are often least responsible for climate pollution.

Investments needed include:

- **Increased governance and administrative capacity** to handle new regulatory and funding programs.
- **Building physical infrastructure**, such as clean energy and clean transportation installations and upgrades to buildings and water and sanitation systems.
- **Financial support for residents and local governments** to take climate action in their homes and communities.

A just and equitable way to pay for these investments is to tax past or current climate pollution. Coupling taxes on climate pollution with cash, credits, or dividends¹² for low- and middle-income households can ensure they remain progressive.¹³ States can also free up funds for climate action by eliminating direct tax subsidies for fossil fuel companies and taking advantage of federal tax credits, loans, and grants available for climate action.

3. Pursue Mitigation Actions That Make Our Energy System Fair, Sustainable, and Affordable

The goal of climate change mitigation is to reduce climate pollution in order to slow down climate change and avoid catastrophic impacts. However, as the need for mitigation creates fundamental shifts in our energy system, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to harness those shifts to improve health, increase energy affordability and reliability, build wealth, and protect workers in low-income communities and communities of color.

States can pursue this by focusing on policies and programs that shift the corporate, centralized fossil fuel energy system to one that supports local economies; values every community member's safety, well-being, and economic security; and is governed by communities committed to a healthy environment.¹⁴ For example, Virginia's utility commission sets annual energy efficiency savings

¹² Dividends return fees collected to taxpayers, minus administrative costs. See explanation from Citizens' Climate Lobby, "The Basics of Carbon Fee and Dividend," <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/basics-carbon-fee-dividend/>.

¹³ Alex Muresianu, "Carbon Taxes in Theory and Practice," Tax Foundation, May 2, 2023, <https://taxfoundation.org/research/all/global/carbon-taxes-in-practice/#distribution>; Tax Policy Center, "What is a carbon tax?" updated January 2024, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/what-carbon-tax>.

¹⁴ These are characteristics of a just, democratic energy system. Institute for Local Self-Reliance tracks state policies across several issue areas relevant to energy justice and energy democracy. See ILSR, "Energy Democracy Initiative," <https://ilsr.org/energy/>.

targets for Dominion Energy, the private utility company, to meet for customers who are low-income, elderly, disabled, or veterans.¹⁵

State policymakers can ask themselves these key questions about policies and programs designed to decrease carbon pollution:

- How will this policy affect energy bills for low-income households?
- Will this program enable new clean energy infrastructure to be built? If so:
 - How could construction or pollution from those facilities impact low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color?
 - Who will be able to use the renewable energy created?
 - Who will own the facility and who will receive the revenue it generates?
- How will this policy/program impact air or water pollution, and in which communities?
- Will this policy displace existing economic activity (e.g., shutting down coal or gas infrastructure)? If so, what programs are in place to transition workers to high-quality jobs in the community?
- How could this policy/program be improved to better center those most affected by climate impacts? (See considerations described in the section above, Equitably Invest in Climate Action, regarding context expertise, autonomy and decision-making authority, and impacts on underlying vulnerabilities.)

4. Pursue Adaptation and Resilience Actions That Improve the Health, Safety, and Well-being of Those Most Vulnerable to Climate Impacts

Despite mitigation efforts, we are experiencing — and will continue to experience — unavoidable and irreversible climate change impacts. States should pursue adaptation and resilience actions that protect the health, safety, and well-being of those most vulnerable to climate impacts by decreasing their exposure and sensitivity¹⁶ and improving their adaptive capacity. States can do this by:

- **Centering the needs of vulnerable populations in programs designed explicitly to address climate impacts** like flooding, heat waves, and wildfires. For example, Rhode Island is using American Forests' Tree Equity Score Analyzer to guide implementation of its statewide resilience plan so that historically marginalized neighborhoods experience the flood, heat, and air pollution mitigation benefits of trees and green space.¹⁷
- **Prioritizing upgrading and building climate-resilient infrastructure** in places with high concentrations of vulnerable populations. Colorado is supporting the development of several

¹⁵ Patrick Larsen, "Energy efficiency savings bill passes General Assembly," Virginia Public Media, February 21, 2023, <https://www.vpm.org/news/2023-02-21/dominion-energy-virginia-efficiency-savings-sb1323-passes>.

¹⁶ Exposure is the presence of people, assets, and infrastructure in a place that could be adversely affected by a climate-related hazard. Sensitivity is the degree to which individuals or systems are susceptible to experiencing adverse impacts from climate change.

¹⁷ State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, "Trees for Climate and Health," <https://dem.ri.gov/programs/forestry/urban-forestry/climate-health-01.php>.

resilience hubs — trusted, community-managed facilities that provide resources and services during emergency events and year-round — through its Climate Resilience Challenge, which is funded by the state’s Energy and Mineral Impact Assistance Fund Program.¹⁸

- **Integrating adaptation into social services programs.** For example, the Michigan Public Service Commission and state law require all regulated gas and electric companies and some electric cooperatives to provide shut-off protection for adults 65 and older during the winter.¹⁹ Integrating climate change considerations into such laws could protect older adults from summer cooling shut-offs as well.
- **Increasing residents’ adaptive capacity** by offering direct cash and tax credits, broadening access to more robust economic and health security programs, and fostering social cohesion through policies that increase neighborhood connectivity.

Key questions state policymakers should ask about programs designed to increase climate resilience:

- Could the adaptation enabled by this policy/program increase climate risk for people in a neighboring geography? How can it be designed to address impacts across geographic scales?
- Could improvements in the community lead to people being priced out of their homes? If so, what measures are in place to control cost of living for existing residents?
- Will the adaptation enabled by this policy/program achieve its intended outcomes in both current and future conditions as the climate continues to change?
- How could this policy/program be improved to better center those most affected by climate impacts?

5. Address Loss and Damage Needs Through Economic and Health Security Programs and Disaster Policy Reforms

Despite mitigation and adaptation efforts, climate change will continue to increase the severity and frequency of disasters for decades to come.²⁰ While our domestic disaster policy system has been mobilized to address climate change-fueled disasters, it is not explicitly designed to address loss and damage from climate change. The system was not designed to absorb more frequent and severe events; has been applied only to certain events (for example, hurricanes but not extreme heat waves); doesn’t factor future climate risk in funding levels or program design; and doesn’t deal with the permanent loss of cultures and lifeways. However, states can improve existing economic and health security programs and disaster policies and programs to make progress in this space by:

¹⁸ For a description of Colorado’s resilience hubs see Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Resilience Hubs, <https://dlg.colorado.gov/resilience-hubs>. For information about the state’s Climate Resilience Challenge, see Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Climate Resilience Challenge, <https://dlg.colorado.gov/climate-resilience-challenge>.

¹⁹ Michigan Legislature, “Services for Seniors: Laws and Programs for Senior Adults,” revised October 2022, <https://www.legislature.mi.gov/Publications/ServicesforSeniors.pdf>.

²⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Foresight Drivers & Signals Library,” https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_strategic-foresight-2050_drivers-and-signals-library.pdf. For an inventory of climate-fueled disasters across all states from 2011-2024, see Rebuild By Design, “Atlas of Accountability (2011-2024),” <https://rebuildbydesign.org/atlas-of-disaster/>.

- **Addressing known needs** for programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and housing assistance to better equip those programs to support people in the face of increased health and economic hardships due to climate change.
- **Planning for increased funding needs** for economic and health security programs given the potential for climate change to increase the number of families eligible for programs.
- **Working with federal agencies** to leverage existing disaster authorities embedded in economic and health security programs — such as extended report submission deadlines and flexibility on eligibility requirements, enrollment processes, and cost-share requirements — and ensure people can maintain their benefits during unexpected interstate moves, which may increase due to climate disasters.
- **Improving equity and accessibility of disaster programs** at the state and local level. States can optimize program administration; work with people on the ground to identify urgent and long-term needs; appropriate funding to address unmet needs; procure federal funding; and incorporate hazard mitigation into disaster recovery actions.
- **Advocating for federal reforms** that build racial and economic justice into disaster policy; redefine what disasters fall under the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster declaration triggers; increase the size, speed, and equity of disaster payments; and establish new policies for community-led relocation, grief and remembrance, and cultural redefinition.