How to Frame the Health Impacts of Climate Change

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Americans are already experiencing the health impacts of climate change, and communities will increasingly be affected depending on their exposure, sensitivity, and ability to adapt.[1]

"Climate change impacts health," said Corinne Schiff, Deputy Commissioner for the New York City Health Department's Division of Environmental Health. "We are already experiencing hotter and more frequent extreme heat days, more intense coastal storms, and an expanded geographic range for vector-borne diseases. Local public health departments stand at the forefront of this fight against climate change. Action is needed now and that must include communicating the risks of our changing climate."

Across the country, residents want their local governments to take climate action and address the related threats to their well-being.

- 81% favor passing laws for more efficient buildings and cars.[8]

- 80% favor expanding public transit like buses and trains. [8]

- 76% want the town or city where they live to prepare for the impacts of climate change.[8]

Each year, local health departments spend considerable time and expense preparing for and responding to extreme weather events, which are growing more severe due to climate change. However, only 11% of local health departments report conducting activities related to climate change preparedness.[3] Health departments have an opportunity to increase public awareness about climate change impacts and government response by framing their work around climate change when communicating with the public.

The ability to adapt to climate change is a measure of economic, political, and social resources available to communities to ensure resilence.[2]

Because of the geographic, demographic, and administrative complexities of addressing the health impacts of climate change, local health officials may feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to generate solutions. In many cases, the first step is using one's role as a trusted local health professional to engage the community and help them understand the local impacts of climate change.

Whether local health departments communicate with the public using social media, press releases, newsletters, or other forms of communication, health officials can use the principles in ecoAmerica's Let's Talk Health and Climate Guide to raise public awareness about climate change. One common theme to remember across all these principles is that message discipline is critical. Use consistent language and evidence in communications across the health department.

Below are examples of tweets that uses the principles from ecoAmerica's 15 Steps: How to Create Your Own Message.

Sample tweets

It's hot! As #ClimateChange increases the frequency & intensity of heat waves in AnyCity we can work together to protect our families' health. Know where your cooling centers are, and be extra careful with your kids and grandparents, who are more sensitive to heat.

If you were flooded in last week's storm, the AnyCounty Health Department is here with resources to help. We can help you identify risks for mold and improve the air quality in your home. Visit www.anycountyhealthdepartment.gov for more information. #ClimateChangesHealth

Start with people. Build on a shared experience and offer to help, making sure we say, "If you were flooded," not "If your house was flooded," as there are many dwellings people call home.

Emphasize solutions. Make people aware of black mold, a common consequence of flooding.

Connect on common values. Protect our health, especially our children's health.

Make it real. Talk about the people in our lives who will be most at risk.

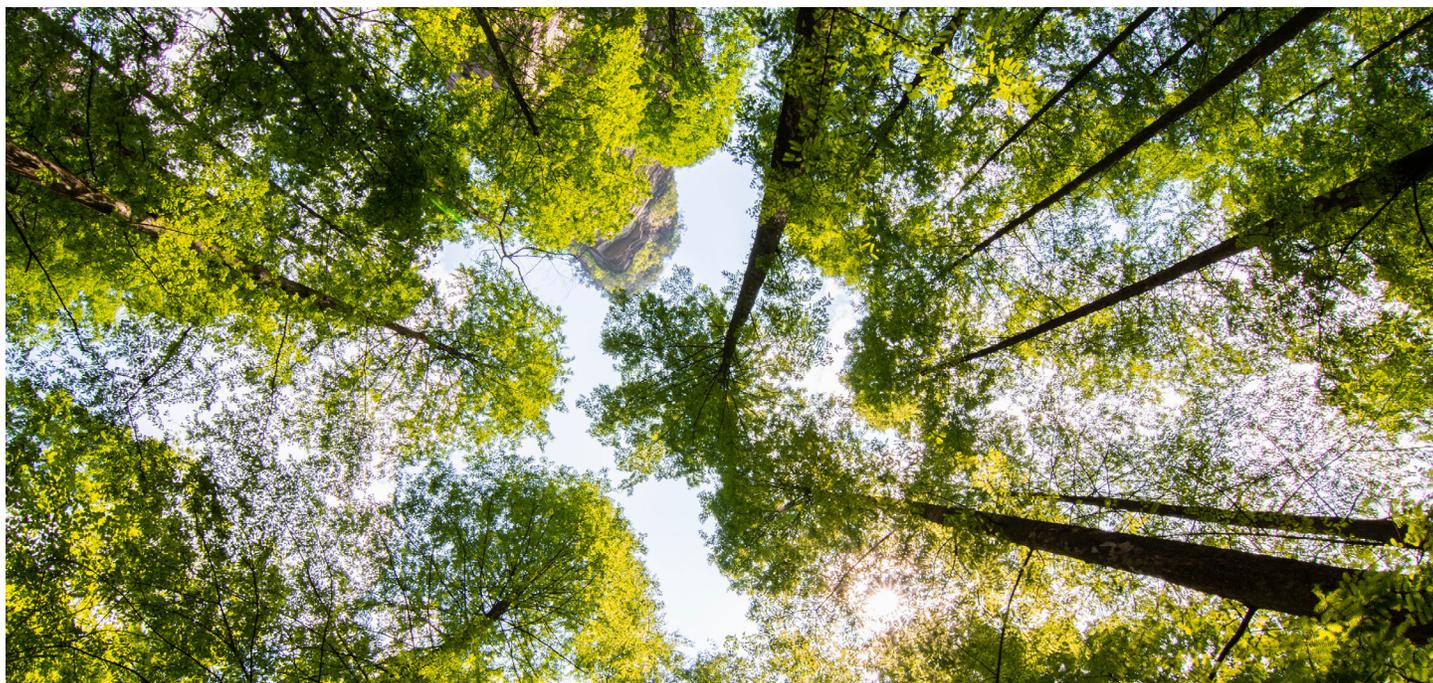**Focus on personal benefit.** We can protect our families' health.

Another resource local health departments can use is the Climate Change, Health, and Equity Guide from the American Public Health Association (APHA) and the Public Health Institute. This guide is designed to help local public health departments integrate climate change and health equity into practice. One section of the guide focuses on Climate and Health Communications. This section offers guidance on framing climate and health messages and integrating climate change into routine messaging.

Learn more about NACCHO's climate change work here.

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The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to improve the health of communities by strengthening and advocating for local health departments.

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