



Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action

VIRGINIA CALL TO ACTION ON CLIMATE, HEALTH AND EQUITY

As doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals across the Commonwealth of Virginia, we call on state and local lawmakers to prioritize the recommendations below in order to protect the health and safety of all current and future Virginians from the rising threat of climate change.

Executive Summary of Priority Actions

1. Begin early and equitable implementation of Virginia’s greenhouse gas emission reduction commitments. Virginia is positioned as a national leader in climate solutions, having passed the Virginia Clean Economy Act and joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative in 2020.¹ We need to ensure a strong, coordinated statewide effort to enact these transformative policies, monitor results and ensure that equity is a guiding principle for implementation.

2. Transition to zero-carbon transportation systems and increase investment in active transportation. The transportation sector is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Virginia.² To reduce our state’s contribution to climate change, we must launch a rapid reduction of petroleum and natural gas use in transportation and invest in physically active modes of travel—walking, bicycling, and public transit. Transportation reform must be enacted to benefit marginalized communities bearing the greatest chronic disease burden associated with transportation pollution.

3. Engage the health sector voice in climate policy, action and equity. Health leaders are some of the most trusted members of our society. Preserving a healthy environment is vital for the health of people, and has been integral to the house of medicine since ancient times.³ Clinicians’ scientific training and trusted voice can significantly increase public support for the transformative climate action necessary to protect the health of every Virginian.

4. Incorporate climate solutions into all health care and public health systems. Hospitals and health care systems are pillars of leadership and healing within our communities. We can lead towards a just and healthy future by implementing climate-smart health care, building facility resilience, and leveraging our economic power to decarbonize the supply chain and promote local economic development, with equity as a core principle for this transformation.

5. Invest in climate and health. Virginia’s health departments do not have adequate capacity to build climate resilience on their own. Virginia should allocate resources to local health departments and the Virginia Department of Health’s Climate Change Committee to study and devise plans to address the health effects of climate change, particularly in our most vulnerable communities. Public health planning can help anticipate and prevent diseases that cost far more to treat in acute care settings.

¹ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2020/april/headline-856056-en.html>

² <https://www.eia.gov/environment/emissions/state/>

³ https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMms1907455?query=recirc_curatedRelated_article

BACKGROUND

We are joining with voices across our nation to make it known that climate change has become a health emergency.⁴ It is impacting the health of Virginia's communities today and poses grave risks to our future. Tackling climate change has been described as the "greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century".⁵ Extreme heat and other climate-related events are increasing in frequency and severity, posing rising immediate and long-term threats to health, safety and welfare.⁶ Air pollution, whose primary driver - fossil fuel combustion - is also the primary driver of climate change, causes profound health harms and premature death across the world.⁷ Vector-borne diseases are spreading more widely.⁸ The agricultural, food, and water systems we depend on are under threat.⁹ All of these problems fall disproportionately on low-wealth communities and communities of color.¹⁰

Action to reduce climate change can dramatically improve health. Many policies that move us towards our climate goals have demonstrable and significant health benefits. Climate action in the energy, transportation, land use, housing, and agricultural sectors has the potential to avoid millions of preventable deaths each year globally and significant health care cost savings.¹¹ Without urgent action, the environmental and health harms of climate change will escalate, threatening Virginians with illness, injury, and death, along with major community disruption due to displacement and potentially mass migrations.¹²

Health inequality is made worse by climate change. Climate change is a "threat multiplier" - it makes existing health threats worse.¹³ Communities of color and low-wealth households that already bear a disproportionate burden of disease are also more at risk of climate-related threats. These same groups have fewer resources and opportunities to prepare for, recover from, and adapt to climate impacts.

By mobilizing on climate action for health, Virginia can be a leader in reducing pollution and building healthy, resilient and just communities. The coronavirus pandemic is a public health emergency. At this crucial moment, we need strong state leadership on climate action to protect our health and that of future generations. The priority actions outlined below are urgent and essential steps to protect the health of Virginians in this era of climate change.

⁴ https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/climate/190429_declaration_climate_health.ashx

⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60854-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60854-6/fulltext)

⁶ <https://www.lancetcountdown.org/2019-report/>

⁷ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1817364> https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

⁸ <https://health2016.globalchange.gov/vectorborne-diseases>

⁹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>

¹⁰ Clark, H., et al. (2020). A future for the world's children? A WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission. The Lancet, 395, 605-658.

¹¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60854-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60854-6/fulltext)

¹² <https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/150724-congressional-report-on-national-implications-of-climate-change.pdf?source=govdelivery>

¹³ <https://health2016.globalchange.gov/>

PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Begin early implementation of Virginia’s greenhouse gas emission reduction commitments. Virginia passed the Clean Economy Act in 2020, and we have joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. Large, sustained reductions in carbon emissions, year over year, are essential to mitigating the worst effects of climate change and protecting health and welfare. As the economy recovers from the coronavirus pandemic, we need to ensure no time is wasted. Key policies include:

- Develop a strong, coordinated statewide effort to implement these transformative climate policies and monitor results. This effort includes partnership with the private sector and coordination across agencies and sectors to advance climate mitigation and climate adaptation in Virginia, with equity as a guiding principle.
- Assess and address the health impacts of oil and gas extraction, production, pipelines and transportation on Virginia’s communities and provide stronger protections against fossil fuel industrial impact on clean air and water. This must include protection for marginalized communities experiencing greatest exposure to these harms.
- Promote strong green building standards at the state and local level. Green building methods have been demonstrated to improve health.^{14, 15} Energy-efficient homes decrease the financial burden associated with energy costs.¹⁶ Clean energy innovation can lower energy bills and health risks for these populations, promoting equity in Virginia.

2. Transition to zero-carbon transportation systems and Increase investment in active transportation. Almost one half of Virginia’s greenhouse gas emissions come from the transportation sector¹⁷ and these emissions are rising. Reducing emissions from transportation is critical to reducing our state’s contribution to climate change. Shifting from driving to active modes of travel—walking, bicycling, and public transit—can not only help us reach those goals, but substantially reduce rates of chronic diseases, particularly in marginalized communities. Key policies include:

- Direct Virginia transportation agencies to make carbon reductions central to their mission. This means prioritizing policies that incentivize low-carbon choices such as deploying electric vehicles and charging systems; electrifying transit and increasing transit service; and significantly increasing the percentage of transportation investments in infrastructure and programs that promote safe walking and cycling, and affordable, accessible, and convenient public transit.
- Invest in affordable housing throughout Virginia to ensure just opportunities, avoid displacement and long commutes based on families’ ability to afford housing near jobs.
- Establish targets for the vehicle miles traveled reductions necessary to achieve strengthened regional greenhouse gas emissions targets along with incentives and accountability to meet them.

¹⁴ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12053-013-9216-8>

¹⁵ https://journals.lww.com/jphmp/Abstract/2015/07000/Moving_Into_Green_Healthy_Housing.5.aspx

¹⁶ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/executive-actions/EO-43-Expanding-Access-to-Clean-Energy-and-Growing-the-Clean-Energy-Jobs-of-the-Future.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.eia.gov/environment/emissions/state/>

3. Engage the health sector voice in climate policy and action. Health leaders are ready to engage in climate policy discussions and public education, and can significantly increase public support for just, transformative climate action. Key policies include:

- Ensure that Virginia's hospitals and health system leaders are at the table to maximize health co-benefits of climate policy and action.
- Implement a coordinated statewide cross-agency campaign, using lessons from public health campaigns such as tobacco control, to emphasize the health impacts of climate change and the health benefits of climate action.

4. Incorporate climate solutions into all health care and public health systems.

Virginia's public health departments do not have adequate capacity to build climate resilience on their own. We are seeing local health departments stretched to the point of breaking from the coronavirus pandemic. Hospitals and health care systems need to implement climate-smart health care, build facility resilience, and leverage their economic power to decarbonize the supply chain and promote equitable local economic development. Key policies include:

- Support the Virginia Department of Health Climate Change Committee to work at the nexus of climate, health, and equity. Support their research on existing health impacts and development of programs to educate the public and health community and reduce further impacts. Many health effects of climate change can be avoided through enacting changes in our policies, systems, and environments. Investing in our environmental public health infrastructure and early warning systems can help us prepare for projected health risks.
- Support policies to advance implementation of climate-smart energy, water, transportation, food, anesthetic gas and waste management practices in Virginia's health care facilities, including compatible health facility building codes.
- Develop incentives for health insurers, hospitals, and other providers to use low-carbon models of care, including expanding population-based interventions that prevent or reduce severity of chronic diseases and therefore reduce the need for more intensive, acute/urgent/emergent care. Focus on marginalized populations bearing the greatest burden of disease.

5. Invest in climate and health through public financing. We know that Virginians value the clean water, clean air, and stable climate that enable all Virginians to live healthy, prosperous lives. It's time to increase our investments in building and maintaining this quality of life for all, beginning with our most impacted communities. A key policy to include:

- The state budget should allocate resources for the Virginia Department of Health Climate Change Committee to study and devise plans to address the physical and mental health effects of climate change. Appropriate funding must also be provided to implement the recommendations of the Committee. Our current public health infrastructure is minuscule compared to health delivery organizations like clinics and hospitals. As a result, we are always addressing population health issues after they are making us sick. We need to protect the health of all Virginians in the face of climate change by planning for the future.

CONCLUSION

Together, these five policy recommendations provide a roadmap for Virginia to develop coordinated strategies for tackling the health impacts of climate change. Our members include physicians, nurses and allied health professionals working within Virginia's medical offices, hospitals and public health agencies. We have dedicated our lives to improving the health of our communities. We believe that all people, including our marginalized communities and future generations, have the right to the environmental, economic and social resources needed to live healthy and productive lives in Virginia. We stand ready to partner with you in advancing these recommendations - it's time to take action.