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Our Climate Change And Health “Moment”: How Philanthropy Can Help

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Some would say that the climate change and health connection is having its “moment.” It could not have arrived too soon.

Environmental funders have, to a large extent, provided the primary philanthropic support for fighting climate change. The money spent annually by foundations and individual philanthropists has been directed toward wringing carbon out of our energy systems and to other measures that will slow our inexorable path toward a warmer world.

According to the [Environmental Grantmakers Association’s \(EGA’s\) *Tracking the Field*](#) report, its members gave \$308 million in 2014 to support issues relevant to “Energy” and “Climate.” That figure accounted for 23 percent of EGA members’ total environmental giving. The EGA is a membership organization made up of more than 200 funders that award about 40 percent of US environmental funding.

Funders have come together to create organizations like [ClimateWorks Foundation](#), a funders’ collaborative that has helped shape philanthropy’s response to climate change. And while some foundations, including [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#), the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#), and the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#) (where I am currently a Visiting Scholar) have long understood how climate change affects their other programmatic work, health foundations, by and large, have not seen climate change as an area worthy of major investment.

That may be changing, though—climate change is the existential threat of our time, and health philanthropists are starting to realize that climate change has the ability to overwhelm the substantial progress we have made in improving human health and extending longevity.

Witness the recent [Climate & Health Meeting](#) held at the Carter Center, in Atlanta, Georgia, in February. This one-day conference assembled an international group of health and climate experts to learn more about the dramatic impact of climate change on human health as well as on health systems. The conference was organized by former Vice President Al Gore’s Climate Reality Project, the American Public Health Association, and the Harvard Global Health Institute, with funding from the [Turner Foundation](#). (This conference replaced a three-day

session that was to be hosted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention but was canceled following November's presidential election.)

A few stark take-aways from that conference at the Carter Center:

- The effect of climate change on human health is well documented, but the enormity of this impact is now being better understood—increased heat and humidity, vector-borne diseases, and degraded air and water quality all could lead to enormous public health challenges;
- Rising sea levels and extreme weather events threaten health systems around the world, as was graphically demonstrated in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy and the 2011 Joplin, Missouri, tornado, which destroyed St. John's Regional Medical Center;
- We are not adequately training the next generation of public health professionals to address climate change and health;
- Beyond their effects on physical health and the need to build more resilient health systems, changing weather patterns and weather variability are being recognized as important contributors to mental health issues.

And, as is often the case, those most affected by the health implications of climate change are the ones least prepared to cope—the poor, the elderly, and children.

In a call for increased philanthropic funding and cooperation, Hewlett Foundation President Larry Kramer recently noted, "[Less than two percent of philanthropic dollars are currently spent in the fight against climate change. . . .](#)" With the effects of climate change being felt more and more with each passing day, the time has come for funders to evaluate their portfolios and look for investment that can protect the gains we have made.

The broader public health community is increasingly exploring how it can make a difference. This week in Chicago, the [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#), the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), the [Rockefeller Foundation](#), the [Packard Foundation](#), the [Children's Investment Fund Foundation](#) (in the United Kingdom), and the [ClimateWorks Foundation](#) hosted a day-long session on the climate/health nexus, which included many regional and global health

fundings. The American Public Health Association will be devoting its annual meeting in November to climate and health.

And there is a growing consensus around a global climate/health agenda for philanthropy that includes building sustainable communities with cleaner transportation; increased use of renewable energy and green spaces for the public; stepped up efforts to address air quality in the United States and around the world; “de-carbonizing” the health care system, best exemplified through [Kaiser Permanente’s extraordinary commitment to becoming a net carbon positive health system by 2025](#) and the pioneering work of [Health Care Without Harm](#); and the increased training of health professionals through programs like the one at [Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health](#).

But much, much more needs to be done, and time is truly of the essence. We have made remarkable progress over the past few years in putting in place major agreements and policies to address carbon emissions (albeit with a setback this week)—and that is the good news—but we are still not on track to keep global temperature rise from exceeding the two-degree Celsius mark needed to avert the worst outcomes of climate change.

Health philanthropy can play a major role—should it seize its moment—in helping bend the temperature curve downward, while preparing people for the guaranteed health implications of climate change.

Related reading:

[“Trump Signs Executive Order Unwinding Obama Climate Policies,”](#) by Coral Davenport and Alissa J. Rubin, *New York Times*, March 28, 2017.

[“Foundations Invest In Environmental Health,”](#) by Kathryn Sessions, Karla Fortunato, Philip R.S. Johnson, and Amy Panek, GrantWatch section, *Health Affairs*, November 2016.

[“Foundations Begin Investing In Climate Change And Health: New Report,”](#) by Karla Fortunato, GrantWatch section of *Health Affairs* Blog, June 17, 2015.

[“Foundations Must Move Fast to Fight Climate Change,”](#) by Larry Kramer and Carol Larson, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 20, 2015.

“Six Climate Change–Related Events In The United States Accounted For About \$14 Billion In Lost Lives And Health Costs,” by Kim Knowlton, Miriam Rotkin-Ellman, Linda Geballe, Wendy Max, and Gina M. Solomon, *Health Affairs*, November 2011.

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