

THE STATE OF CLIMATE ACTION IN NEW MEXICO: *A Call to Action*



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The Toll of Climate Change on First Responders and Public Health

Climate change, and the resulting heat waves and temperature extremes, are already leading to increases in heat-related incidents requiring emergency and hospital intervention (Prokop, 2024). **Heat illnesses can include dehydration, heat rash, sunburn, heat cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Populations most vulnerable to heat-related illnesses include Indigenous and other communities of color, low-income families, pregnant people, people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ+ people, youth, the elderly and outdoor workers, who all frequently lack access to treatment, cooling facilities and other resources (Hansen, 2023; Nguyen, 2023).** Extreme temperatures also increase the likelihood of death and illness due to heart issues, diabetes and respiratory issues (McPhillips, 2023). Of those impacted, communities that experience disproportionate discrimination and racism are often less likely to be able to afford or seek medical treatment for health problems, even acute issues, resulting in conditions increasing in severity or going untreated (Shukla, 2022). Asthma and respiratory illnesses also increase in communities with high levels of air pollution or particulates, including car emissions and other climate pollutants.



Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

Temperature extremes and climate disasters can also exacerbate stress and other factors, leading to increased incidents of domestic violence, hate crimes and child abuse. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Cambridge found that following climate disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, incidents of sexual and domestic violence increased for nearly a year (Van Daalen et al., 2022). Additionally, the LGBTQ+ community was targeted in the storm's aftermath and prevented from receiving aid or access to shelters. They also experienced direct physical harm and threats. **Furthermore, studies have found that hate speech and online bullying also increase during incidents of temperature extremes, contributing to racism, sexism, harassment, and threats (Nelson, 2022).** As climate disasters grow more common, physical violence and harassment of already marginalized communities have also dramatically increased, resulting in devastating physical and mental health outcomes for impacted people.

Heat and climate pollution are also predicted to lead to the emergence of new diseases and disease vectors as a result of the migration of animals and insects, such as mosquitoes, that carry diseases, combined with lowered human immune systems due to heat and stress (Hansen, 2023). This is happening now with the rise of H5N1 (“bird flu”) in dairy cows, which has been transmitted to dairy workers. Disease spread, along with increased incidents of abuse and heat illness, will increase the need for community members to access health care services.



However, New Mexico has a shortage of healthcare providers and infrastructure, leaving medical staff overstressed and overworked (Catlin, 2024; Furlow, 2023). As witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, prolonged health emergencies quickly lead to healthcare worker and first responder burnout, further aggravating the shortage of qualified staff and creating a cascading staffing problem that negatively affects patient outcomes as patients are triaged. This shortage of staff results in delayed treatment for “non-critical” patients and, inevitably, avoidable death and disability outcomes. Staff and supply shortages place increased burdens on healthcare facility budgets because contracted traveling staff cost more, further impacting quality of care, especially in rural healthcare facilities and at trauma centers. Compounding the problem is the fiscal crisis affecting New Mexico’s community-based clinics, so-called federally qualified health centers, which serve all patients, insured or not, in their local communities. While demand for their services has grown, federal funding, which is their overwhelming source of revenue, has remained the same, leading to an impending public health crisis in those areas (Porter, 2024).



First responders, such as firefighters and paramedics, are also relied on to address emergency situations, including climate disasters. Wildfires, in particular, are increasing in frequency and severity. Since 2015, the United States has seen fires increase by approximately 100 wildfires per year (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2020). Fires are also burning hotter, resulting in more acres burning and more permanent damage to soils, making restoration difficult. The impact is substantial: Wildfires are estimated to cost the nation approximately \$395 to \$893 billion in economic outlays and damages annually (Joint Economic Committee, 2023). Additionally, the number of emergency responders, such as firefighters, is declining due to increased stress and disaster-level events, low pay and inadequate healthcare (Perano, 2019).

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