Law and Policy Pathways to Community Centered Protection from Extreme Heat

The Network for Public Health Law

Heat is the number one cause of weather-related death in the U.S., but not all communities are impacted the same. Historically redlined communities have experienced higher heat exposure through urban heat islands. Outdoor workers paid low-incomes and Latino/a workers are especially vulnerable to poor health due to non-working days and lost income linked to extreme heat. Heat exposure contributes to heat illness, respiratory problems, and heat stroke and also adversely affects the Social Determinants of Health. Jurisdictions developing strategies to mitigate the impacts of heat exposure must consider community needs and ensure a just transition that benefits communities on the frontlines of these harms. Law and policy play an essential role in supporting community-centered processes and solutions to reducing the negative health impacts of heat and extreme heat.

Create Accessible Cooling Centers

Enhance inclusive and multigenerational programming at city-run cooling centers to increase their use

Utilize geographic information system tools with community needs assessments to strategically locate cooling centers in areas most vulnerable to extreme heat exposure

Provide free transportation to and from cooling centers to address access barriers

Increase community knowledge concerning what cooling centers are and who they serve

Improve cooling center signage to increase their accessibility

Support Green Infrastructure

Integrate green infrastructure into routine streetscape upgrades

Develop an Urban Forest Management Plan for private and public property with sustainable funding

Create an Urban Forest Fund to support new greening projects in communities with a low percentage of tree covers and high concentrations of impervious surfaces

Adopt landscape ordinances which set minimum tree standards or require the planting of trees in energy conservation zones near buildings

Increase tree cover in formerly redlined neighborhoods

Engage in Community Planning

Develop a Community Benefits Agreement to prevent climate gentrification and residential displacement

Enact policies so impacted communities can shape heat mapping initiative priorities

Use The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership tool to measure local government's level of community engagement

Use value-driven data for traditionally excluded groups to culturally tailor the CDC's Building Resilience Against Climate Effect framework

Adopt a cultural safety emergency planning model Add climate goals to declarations of racism as a public health crisis

Fund a heat response and mitigation office

Protect Workers

Provide culturally inclusive written and oral communications about safety during high/extreme heat days

Adopt state laws that protect outdoor workers from heat illness by mandating access to shade, water, rest, and training

Provide benefits including health care and paid leave for missed workdays due to extreme temperatures

Enact national heat standards to protect workers at risk for heat illness

Establish task forces to engage with at-risk workers to determine barriers to working safely (e.g., immigration status, income needs, pregnancy)

Enact Equitable Energy Strategies

Use a community-centered energy justice scorecard

Adopt community solar programs like Illinois Solar for All requiring community input from and benefit to communities with low-incomes

Create energy assistance programs that cap fees at a percentage of a person's income and make eligibility / participation easy (e.g., opt-out not opt-in)

Establish a clean energy fund centered on renewable energy, green infrastructure, and job training needs of frontline communities

Require that spending on renewable and energy efficiency programs benefit underserved communities.

Network law and policy experts are available to consult on this and other public health issues.