



# Building Resilient Communities in the Face of Climate Change

## *A Resource for Local Communities*

The National Health Security Strategy of the United States calls on people and communities to prepare for the threats to health that come with disasters and emergencies, to be ready to protect themselves, and to remain resilient in the face of such threats. Climate change has the potential for severe impacts, but communities can develop approaches and practices that promote resilience. This resource provides information from the fields of psychology and other social sciences to help communities better understand and prepare for the anticipated adverse effects of climate change.

### **Why do communities matter?**

Evidence of a changing climate appears in every region, every state, and every locality, but the effects vary from place to place. As a result, strengthening *community resilience* most effectively takes place at the local level, where people and institutions can attend to the impacts of a changing climate on local populations, with attention to local strengths and vulnerabilities.

The geophysical, psychosocial, and other effects of climate change will vary from place to place, as will the risks to human health and well-being. Abrupt effects, such as hurricanes and floods, could make roads and bridges impassable, make food and other essentials unavailable, and lead to physical injury and psychological trauma. Less abrupt effects, such as rising temperatures and rising sea levels, could threaten local farming practices and housing, make people more susceptible to

mosquito-borne illnesses and allergies, and lead to more interpersonal violence and depression.

Although community groups may vary in size, formality, and focus, they share key attributes that are vital to local resilience-building: 1) They are equipped with knowledge of local realities and concerns, 2) they are already embedded within local social networks of community stakeholders, 3) they embody local value systems, and 4) they include constituents and local governance structures that are the direct beneficiaries of local resilience-building policies and programs.

From Maine to California, communities around the country will need to focus on resilience-building efforts that work for their unique populations and conditions. Community groups can play a central and critical role in this effort.

*Find electronic copies of both this brief and the longer version on which it is based by visiting: [www.spssi.org/climatechange](http://www.spssi.org/climatechange)*

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### How can community groups support local resilience?

**1. Identify and tap into community strengths.** Conduct an asset analysis to note existing strengths and address vulnerabilities. Existing strengths can include physical assets (e.g., infrastructure) and people assets (e.g., informal networks, skills) that often go unseen but keep the community functioning. Informal networks, for example, can guide plans for information sharing or emergency supply chains in the event of a disaster.

**2. Become aware of and attend to diverse needs.** Some people may be more vulnerable than others, such as migrant workers, the elderly, and people living with disabilities. Resilient communities consider ways to ensure that all people are included in information networks.

**3. Integrate climate change resilience activities into existing efforts.** Most people are pressed for time so it is important to link climate change to the community activities and issues that people are already working on. For example, local parents, coaches, educators, and pediatricians might be especially interested in learning how improving air quality could help reduce the incidence of childhood asthma.

**4. Emphasize the benefits.** Talking only about problems can turn people off and bring on a sense of helplessness. Instead, emphasize the benefits of addressing climate change, such as new opportunities for economic development and civic engagement.

**5. Use history.** Communities can celebrate their history at the same time that they are trying to make their way to an even better future. Drawing from the knowledge of elders can be helpful in thinking through areas of continuity and discontinuity, change and renewal.

**6. Learn from differences.** Issues and concerns about climate change can be divisive, and climate change can look different to different groups. By hearing everyone's perspective, communities can identify better solutions and build consensus about how to move forward.

**7. Find boundary spanners.** Boundary spanners are people who readily cross boundaries and are able to identify common ground. Within a community, they can help with the flow and use of information across different networks. They can also help link local efforts to state, national, and international efforts.

**8. Learn across communities.** Communities can look to other communities to see what has and has not worked in the past, and can adapt others' practices to take local characteristics into account.

*For more detailed information on the content outlined in this brief, including "do's and don'ts" for communicating about climate change in community contexts, visit: [www.spssi.org/climatechange](http://www.spssi.org/climatechange)*