

White House announces climate change guide and toolkit

By Audrey Pinto

As part of the President's Climate Action Plan, the administration released Dec. 16 a voluntary guide, [Primary Protection: Enhancing Health Care Resilience for a Changing Climate](http://www.eenews.net/assets/2014/12/15/document_pm_02.pdf) (http://www.eenews.net/assets/2014/12/15/document_pm_02.pdf)

Coauthored by NIEHS Senior Advisor for Public Health [John Balbus, M.D.](#), the guide offers health care system managers, health care providers, public health professionals, and policymakers a set of approaches to enhancing the resilience of health care systems to climate change impacts. The guide and an accompanying online toolkit comprise the core of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Sustainable and Climate Resilient Health Care Facilities Initiative, which also involves a public-private partnership for the development and dissemination of the information.

Linked Video

[Watch this fast-paced video about the new toolkit \(03:09\)](#)

"This guide and toolkit represent an important step forward in the [Climate Action Plan](#) (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/energy/climate-change>) and the administration's commitment to strengthening the resilience of the U.S. health care system, protecting vulnerable populations, and building a safer, healthier, and more prosperous nation," Balbus said. "They outline best practices for mitigating the effects of extreme weather events on people and communities and ways to strengthen U.S. health care infrastructure and delivery settings, such as hospitals and emergency clinics."

Building awareness and steps to resilience

In recent years, the number of weather-related events that adversely affect human populations and public health has been on the rise. Scientists warn that, in the future, communities will face more frequent and severe storms, causing costly damage and challenging an already fragile health care system to maintain continuity of care. Despite the warnings, most Americans are unaware of or confused by the [health risks associated with global warming](#) (<http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication/article/public-perceptions-of-the-health-consequences-of-global-warming/>)

Using a five-element framework, the toolkit and guide are designed to help health care providers build a strong infrastructure to ensure the continued quality of health care before, during, and after extreme weather events. Elements of the framework address identifying system and community vulnerabilities, understanding the relevant codes and regulations for buildings and infrastructure, enhancing the resilience of buildings and infrastructure, protecting critical assets including health care facility staff and their families, and using ecosystem services to buffer climate impacts.

As Balbus pointed out, "When health care systems invest in resilience and sustainability, they assure that their communities have uninterrupted access to quality health care services in the setting of weather and climate disasters and at the same time help reduce the costs and environmental impacts of their day-to-day operations."

Balbus worked with coauthor [Robin Guenther](#) (<http://perkinswill.com/people/robin-guenther.html>) to create the new guide, which received substantial stakeholder input, including a workshop with environmental justice and public health representatives and formal peer review. Guenther is an architect honored for her work in designing sustainable health care facilities and a senior advisor to Health Care Without Harm, a collaborative campaign for environmentally responsible health care.



Balbus is the lead on NIEHS and trans-National Institutes of Health initiatives in the area of climate change and human health. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Health care system executives and public health leaders gathered with HHS Secretary Sylvia Burwell and other senior administration officials Dec. 16 in the Treaty Room of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building for a roundtable discussion of health care system sustainability and resilience. (Photo courtesy of John Balbus)

(Audrey Pinto, Ph.D., is technical editor for the journal Environmental Health Perspectives.)

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