



One Storm Shy of Despair

A Climate-Smart Plan for the Administration
to Help Low-Income Communities

By Cathleen Kelly and Tracey Ross

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Introduction and summary

Climate change puts communities, businesses, and the economy at greater risk of heat waves, drought, flooding caused by severe storms and sea-level rise, and other extreme weather events.¹ It imposes an unfunded mandate on state and local governments and the American people to manage these risks and foot the bill for the damages.²

Recognizing these risks, President Barack Obama announced this week at the fourth and final meeting of the State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience a series of actions to help state, local, and tribal officials prepare their communities for the effects of climate change. These actions range from helping communities to develop more resilient infrastructure and rebuild stronger and smarter existing infrastructure, to making our coasts more resilient, to providing decision makers with better information on flood and other climate change risks.³ These are laudable actions that will help communities better prepare for the real and costly effects of climate change.

But more action is needed, in particular, to address the skyrocketing risks of climate change in low-income communities. Our nation saw firsthand the value of investing in climate-resilient communities when, on October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy crashed into the eastern seaboard from Florida to Maine, eventually reaching as far west as Ohio and Michigan.⁴ The hurricane caused more than 150 deaths, damaged 659,000 homes, and disrupted millions of lives as transit systems, power, cell phone networks, and other critical services failed or closed.⁵

Three weeks later, with floodwaters receded and most services restored, life returned to normal for many, including for people in New York City. But for federal disaster workers in the area, something was not adding up. Only 6,800 people arrived at shelters, even though 375,000 New Yorkers—including 45,000 public housing residents—lived in the mandatory evacuation zone hit hard by the hurricane. Workers eventually discovered the nightmare lurking behind low shelter turnout. Many low-income elderly and disabled residents of New York City's public housing complexes were stranded in their dark and cold apartments

without heat, backup generators, emergency boilers, or working elevators, the latter preventing many of these residents from descending multiple flights of stairs.⁶ Others endured these conditions because they had no other affordable place to stay or no reasonable means of leaving their neighborhoods because mass transit was shut down, among other reasons. While the overall response to Sandy was quick and honed by the tough lessons of Hurricane Katrina, recovery efforts left many low-income communities in distress.

Aside from a few new federal disaster assistance requirements aimed at helping low-income communities recover from Superstorm Sandy,⁷ increasing equity and protecting the most vulnerable populations from climate change risks have not been a strong focus of federal disaster-recovery efforts, resilience strategies, or planning. The task force, which the president created in his Climate Action Plan and launched by a November 2013 executive order,⁸ has an important opportunity to change this and help create resilient, safe, and equitable communities. It can do this by recommending in its report, which it is due by November of this year, that the president, state and local governments, and Congress take the following actions:

- **Strengthen affordable housing and infrastructure.** The president should call on agencies to make resilience a core aspect of all federal infrastructure and disaster-recovery funding.
- **Reduce environmental hazards and disaster risks.** The president and Congress should expand funding for the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program fund, the Weatherization Assistance Program, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program to help communities evaluate their disaster risks, develop hazard mitigation plans, increase energy efficiency, and pay electricity bills.
- **Enhance economic stability.** The president and Congress should oppose budget cuts in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and ensure that there is adequate funding for Disaster SNAP to assist people harmed by natural disasters to purchase food. They should also reform the National Flood Insurance Program to remove flood-insurance subsidies to better reflect actual flood risks in insurance prices, and offer means-tested vouchers to middle- and low-income families so they can afford the insurance.

- **Take further steps.** While the federal government has an important role in catalyzing action on climate preparedness, leadership is required at all levels. Cities and states must update building codes and strengthen electricity grids to protect communities and businesses from power outages, and Congress must authorize investments critical to fortifying our nation's infrastructure and building resilient and equitable communities.

These critical steps will improve the quality of our housing and infrastructure, reduce environmental hazards, and increase economic security in low-income communities.

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