



Lessons from the Storm

Climate Displacement Three Years After Hurricane Sandy

By Danielle Baussan and Miranda Peterson October 2015

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Just weeks ago, the New York City metropolitan region faced the threat of a severe hurricane nearly three years to the date after Hurricane Sandy devastated areas of New York and New Jersey.¹ As government agencies began preparing for expected flooding, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) told a radio show, “I have learned the hard way it’s better to prepare for the worst. I’ve learned not to say we’re prepared for whatever comes our way because you can never be prepared for whatever comes our way.”²

Hurricane Joaquin subsequently moved eastward, sparing New York and New Jersey from significant flooding. Still, the storm was a stark reminder of the region’s vulnerability to extreme weather. On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy swept up the Atlantic Seaboard, wreaking unprecedented damage in coastal areas of New York and New Jersey. U.S. damage estimates rose to \$67 billion, and 159 deaths were directly linked to the storm.³ When the water receded, New York and New Jersey faced a housing and employment crisis. More than 650,000 residences were damaged or destroyed,⁴ and unemployment claims increased from 35,000 to more than 100,000 for up to three weeks after the storm.⁵

The combination of lost or damaged housing and decreased economic security resulted in major climate displacement—a growing issue for climate resilience planners—with as many as 776,000 people displaced from their communities in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.⁶ The scale of the housing crisis, coupled with the not-so-distant memory of the 1.5 million people displaced by Hurricane Katrina, prompted government and community organizations to focus on programs that would not only rebuild communities, but also curb climate displacement in the region. Policymakers and community organizers quickly developed plans that sought to reduce the housing, economic, and health impacts on the climate displaced. Despite some successes, as many as 39,000 people still remain displaced today from Hurricane Sandy.⁷ Although official displacement numbers do not exist for other extreme weather events, it is clear that thousands of people are forced to relocate from their homes, either permanently or temporarily, every year.⁸

Hurricane Sandy affected the entire Northeast region, but low-income communities bore the worst outcomes.⁹ Low-income communities are disproportionately affected by extreme weather due to several factors, including living in less resilient housing stock, the precarious nature of wage-based earnings during and after disasters, environmental markers such as susceptibility to heat waves or nearby industrial sites, and restricted mobility or communication options.¹⁰

As New York and New Jersey continue to help the displaced return home, other cities and states should analyze their resilience and rebuilding programs to proactively protect against mass climate displacement. The projected increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather due to climate change¹¹ will make events such as Hurricane Sandy less of an exception and more of an expectation. This, in turn, will make climate displacement a growing problem. And while it is impossible to predict where and when a disaster will occur, states and cities that proactively prepare for the damage and displacement wrought by extreme weather can create more resilient, equitable, and economically healthy communities.

Climate resilience is often defined as programs and plans that allow a community to bounce back to its pre-event state; however, that definition should be expanded to account for the need for low-income communities to bounce forward, or avoid the factors that make them more vulnerable to the effects of extreme weather in the first place.¹² This resilience is also made possible by the work of nongovernmental, community-based organizations, whose unique contributions to low-income climate resilience should be an integral part of any climate resilience plan.

In order to avoid displacement and equitably strengthen communities against the effects of increasing extreme weather, cities and states should adopt proactive climate resilience plans that include the following:

- Efforts to fortify hard and soft infrastructure
- Programs that prioritize keeping or returning people to their homes to prevent climate displacement
- Analysis, support, and integrated planning with community organizations that can assist communities before and after an extreme weather event
- Initiatives to incorporate affordable housing needs with climate resilience and anti-displacement measures

Broadening climate resilience planning to promote community strengths and cohesiveness can retain residents and help communities thrive before and after extreme weather events. The efforts of New York City, New York state, and New Jersey to broaden resilience in this manner after Hurricane Sandy provide an important blueprint for other cities and for climate resilience generally.

Government resilience programs target displacement

New York City's response to Hurricane Sandy was the first major example of post-disaster policy to incorporate climate resilience on the local, state, and federal levels.¹³ New York City's centerpiece programs were Rapid Repairs, which helped those who could return to or stay in their homes with quick repairs, and Build it Back, which assisted people who were uprooted for extended periods because their homes required rebuilding or major reconstruction.

Rapid Repairs

As local and federal government officials assessed Sandy's damage, they realized that the Federal Emergency Management Agency's, or FEMA's, typical protocol for emergency response—housing people in trailers or hotels—would not be a feasible or fiscally responsible long-term solution for most storm-displaced people due to New York City's dense urban landscape and high-priced lodging. Instead, New York City worked with FEMA to develop the Rapid Repairs program to maximize displacement aid and quickly move people back into their homes.

The Rapid Repairs program launched three weeks after the storm. It used a preapproved roster of local contractors to do quick damage assessments and swiftly restore heat, power, and water to homes at no cost to residents.¹⁴ While the program permanently repaired damage to some homes, it provided temporary fixes for others until work could be accomplished at a later date. By the time the program wrapped up in March 2013, Rapid Repairs had helped 20,000 households avoid long-term displacement by restoring basic services.¹⁵

Build it Back

The city's other stage of recovery was the Build it Back program, aimed at homeowners and renters facing potential long-term displacement because their homes suffered substantial structural damage, had health risks such as mold growth, or were demolished by the storm.¹⁶

Build it Back has been restructured since its inception in 2013, but the goals remain the same. Build it Back consists of a rebuilding program and a rental assistance program. The rebuilding program seeks to make rebuilt homes more resilient to future climate impacts through actions such as accounting for expanding flood plains and stronger, more frequent storms.¹⁷ For example, in addition to repairing structural damage, the program may elevate a home several feet off the ground as a flood precaution.¹⁸ The rental assistance program, called the Temporary Disaster Assistance Program, or TDAP, provides a rental subsidy for use within the city to help households afford emergency moves.¹⁹ Households pay 30 percent of their income toward rent and receive a subsidy to cover additional housing costs for two years or until their living situation stabilizes.²⁰ The program is open to households with incomes at or less than 50 percent of the area median income—or \$41,950 per year for a family of four.²¹

Build it Back is the largest recovery effort in a U.S. city since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The rebuilding and rental assistance programs provide critical aid that sets displaced people on a path to economic and housing resilience. But the initiative did experience growing pains.

Seeking to avoid the fraud problem that pervaded New Orleans' recovery after Hurricane Katrina,²² New York City designed Build it Back with strict application criteria.²³ For many low-income, displaced renters, TDAP provided a lifeline. However, other families were denied needed relief because of the program's eligibility rules, which required displaced applicants to either be housed in shelters or hotels or face expiring federal assistance, or because applicants had rented homes that were simultaneously registered by the homeowner through Build it Back.²⁴ Falling through the program's cracks, some households were pushed into untenable housing situations, such as expensive temporary leases or extended stays with relatives.²⁵

Two years after its launch, only about half of the original applicants remained in the program. Some were deemed ineligible, but many others dropped out due to the program's slow pace.²⁶ The quickly configured program became bogged down

by miscommunication between government and contractors and zoning codes that were incongruous with recovery plans. After 16 months, none of the more than 19,000 homes accepted into Build it Back had begun construction.²⁷

Build it Back relaunch

When New York City's new mayoral administration under Mayor Bill de Blasio (D) acquired Build it Back in January 2014, it worked to remove internal and external barriers to the program so promised aid could reach households that had been displaced for long periods of time. By April 2014, TDAP had been expanded to include households that were not in the Build it Back program but were spending 40 percent or more of their income on rent.²⁸ This expansion opened the program to 900 additional low-income displaced families.²⁹

After a methodical overhaul of the rebuilding program's mechanics and a push to move zoning amendments through the city council, displaced New Yorkers are moving back into upgraded homes and receiving reimbursements for self-made repairs.³⁰ As of October 1, 2015, more than 1,600 homes were under construction, 1,000 homes had been completed, and \$85.8 million in reimbursements had been provided.³¹

Build it Back was hastily launched in the wake of a major disaster, but despite its initial missteps, the program is currently supporting resilient rebuilding goals and helping prevent displacement from the city at large. Although the program experienced growing pains, its progress has since attracted families who were initially discouraged by the program's bureaucracy.³² Most importantly, the program has helped keep hard-hit households off the street and get them into more economically stable housing.

The New York Governor's Office of Storm Recovery

New York state also developed a recovery and resilience program following Hurricane Sandy, called NY Rising. NY Rising received federal funding to work with several communities affected by the storm, including homeowners, renters, businesses, and buyout and acquisition initiatives.³³ These programs focused on interacting with local community groups to determine needs and offer technical and financial assistance for housing to low- and middle-income residents. It is not

unusual for federal funding to take up to a year to be dispersed, but by working with NY Rising, almost \$83 million was awarded to Sandy-hit homeowners two months after the storm.³⁴ The program also altered its payment structure to allow for an initial payment before work was complete, based on community feedback.³⁵

ReNew Jersey Stronger

New Jersey also offered housing assistance to the nine counties battered by Hurricane Sandy, where more than 40,500 primary residences were damaged.³⁶ The ReNew Jersey Stronger rebuilding and rental assistance programs were similar to Build it Back, both in terms of operation and goals.³⁷ New Jersey's programs provided an equally rocky path to recovery for many displaced residents. Two years after Hurricane Sandy, only 113 homes had been reconstructed, and the voucher program for low-income renters was not up and running until January 2015.³⁸ While New Jersey continues to chart a path to resilience, the current status of the program is another example of the need for governments to plan ahead for climate displacement.

Voluntary buyout programs

While some displaced residents in communities such as the Rockaway area of New York City decided to rebuild, others sought assistance to demolish and leave their homes through a voluntary buyout. Voluntary buyout programs allow homeowners to sell their property at preflood fair market value to the government, which then converts the land to a permanent flood buffer zone.³⁹ The NY Rising Buyout and Acquisition Program and the New Jersey Blue Acres program organized voluntary buyouts for residents who had endured years of routine flooding.⁴⁰ New York communities such as Oakwood Beach, Staten Island, and Manville, New Jersey, democratically decided to move out of harm's way, buoyed by their states' financial support.⁴¹ As of April 2015, New York and New Jersey had extended buyout offers to 1,200 households that were extremely vulnerable to flooding.⁴²

Voluntary buyout programs benefit both city coffers and homeowners. Residents can use funds from the sale of their homes to move to and live in more resilient housing without the fear of recurring flood damage, and governments can avoid the costs of emergency response and additional rebuilding efforts in flood-prone communities. In Oakwood Beach alone, 250 acres will be turned back into wet-

lands, which will help reduce floods in surrounding areas.⁴³ Buyout programs routinely create a return on investment of about 250 percent for taxpayers.⁴⁴ While these programs contribute to climate displacement by moving communities, they also provide funding to help lower-income homeowners move out flood-prone areas. These programs are purely optional for communities, however, voluntary buyout programs that cover contiguous areas are more successful for homeowners, local habitats, and government budgets. Thus, community consensus and cohesiveness before an extreme weather event are helpful in ensuring that homeowners agree to sell their land in neighboring plots and make voluntary buyout programs an option for low-income homeowners.

NY Rising voluntary acquisition programs

Voluntary buyout programs are not a panacea for climate resilience; not all flood-prone communities want to sell their property, and it can be difficult for cities and states to find funds for these programs. As a result, New York state ended its voluntary buyout program after one year⁴⁵ and launched a voluntary acquisition program. This program allowed the state to purchase a flood-damaged property and sell the property on the condition that the buyer will rebuild to new flood-resilient standards.⁴⁶ The acquisition program sought to jump-start resilient rebuilding by leveraging private money from developers and remaining residents in long-damaged communities where homeowners may not wish or be able to afford to rebuild. The first auction of 226 of the 700 acquired properties took place in May 2015,⁴⁷ and 93 percent of the properties sold.⁴⁸

New York's voluntary acquisition program balances the need for resilience with the reality of fiscal constraints. It also offers a financial opportunity for homeowners who were not candidates for community buyout programs to move to areas with a reduced risk of extreme weather damage. For example, the Reilly family of Long Island decided to seek an acquisition because they were concerned an ambulance would not be able to reach their asthmatic daughter if the roads were washed out, even if their upgraded home did not flood.⁴⁹

Designing voluntary buyout and acquisition incentives to prevent displacement

Although there are benefits of voluntary buyout and acquisition programs, governments should still be concerned that these programs do little to maintain the social and economic cohesion of communities. Among the most important features available to participants in the NY Rising buyout program is an additional 5 percent incentive for residents who move to another home within the same county.⁵⁰ Even with the income realized from the sale of their homes to the state government, finding nearby affordable housing for residents who wish to move out of harm's way can be a struggle due to rising prices.⁵¹ Households that are only able to relocate to housing outside the county may still apply for the 5 percent incentive by making a hardship appeal.⁵² This flexibility is important as households go through the often life-changing process of moving after a disaster. Currently, this incentive is not offered to accepted acquisition program households.⁵³

Another concern related to buyout and acquisition programs is that they displace low-income renters who have to grapple with post-storm housing shortages and raised rents that may exacerbate financial hardship. Indeed, many households living in storm-damaged properties were low-income renters or received public housing benefits.⁵⁴ In accordance with federal law, the NY Rising Buyout and Acquisition Program provides allowances for tenants who may be displaced if their landlord wishes to participate in the program instead of rebuilding. Some of these measures include relocation assistance for public housing tenants and case-by-case availability of housing of last resort for tenants who are unable to locate affordable housing on the market.⁵⁵

While no public data exist on how many residents are able to take advantage of the incentives and assistance that complement buyouts and acquisitions, these are worthwhile initiatives to try to keep displaced residents off the street and near their jobs, schools, and social networks. Governments that set up buyout and acquisitions programs should be mindful of families' struggles with both climate displacement and the uphill battle to find affordable housing near their communities.⁵⁶ This commitment requires defining strategies that not only build resilient communities, but also strengthen economic and housing opportunities that avert displacement among low-income households.

Defining climate resilience and fighting displacement through equity

Two years after Hurricane Sandy, New York City was due to provide a quadrennial update to its climate action plan—PlaNYC. In addition to maintaining PlaNYC’s strong carbon mitigation goal and climate adaptation framework, the updated plan—with a name change to “One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City,” or OneNYC—integrates economic equity as a core pillar of its goals through new anti-poverty, affordable housing, and job growth targets.⁵⁷ This focus on equity has a clear resilience benefit, as communities with strong economies are more likely to fare better after an extreme weather event.⁵⁸ Tackling climate displacement risks through both traditional adaptation and newer equity-building strategies is one of the city’s resilience indicators, which seeks to “eliminate disaster-related long-term displacement of New Yorkers from homes by 2050.”⁵⁹

State and local governments should consider the benefits and applicability of programs such as Build it Back, Rapid Repairs, and voluntary buyouts and acquisitions, as well as holistic climate plans such as OneNYC. Developing plans that are informed by the successes and setbacks of post-Sandy efforts in New York and New Jersey well before another extreme weather event will ensure a smoother recovery and resilience effort for other cities and states. Yet few cities are formulating adaptation plans, and likely far fewer are incorporating anti-displacement efforts within those plans. According to a U.S. Conference of Mayors survey, 53 percent of cities have committed to mitigate their impact on global warming, but only 40 percent are developing climate adaptation plans.⁶⁰ Dan Zarrilli, director of the New York City Mayor’s Office of Recovery and Resiliency, says having an adaptation plan is critical to grappling with extreme weather: “Every city should have a plan—and not just one focused on a silver bullet solution. You don’t know what’s coming next, so a multilayered approach is critical.”⁶¹

Community organizations' role in improving resilience and preventing displacement

Community organizations filled important gaps in government support during Hurricane Sandy response and recovery efforts. In the Red Hook area of Brooklyn, 21 community organizations, faith groups, and companies provided crisis response for neighbors in need and supported the government's longer-term recovery operations.⁶² Many of these organizations were already embedded in the storm-damaged communities in New York and New Jersey, where they worked full time on issues related to housing and economic equity, so they had important local knowledge of where to target assistance. By understanding the strengths of these community organizations, government-based resilience planners can consider how these organizations can help prevent displacement following an extreme weather event.

Emergency response

Community organizations in New York and New Jersey helped alleviate far-flung displacement by providing critical information about local needs and offering supplies that could help keep people in their homes. Ten days before the FEMA Disaster Recovery Center opened in Brooklyn in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the community organization Red Hook Initiative, or RHI, became a crisis management hub.⁶³ Its undamaged headquarters became a meeting place where neighbors could trade information, receive supplies and hot meals, and charge battery-dependent technology, such as cell phones.⁶⁴ When the level of need for assistance outpaced already active community organizations such as RHI, grassroots movements of volunteers, including Occupy Sandy, soon became official community presences in Brooklyn.⁶⁵ As more and more storm-damaged residences proved unsuitable places to live due to ongoing power outages, Occupy Sandy helped residents move to shelters at local churches where their basic needs could be met.⁶⁶

Community organizations were also able to relay information to and from government emergency responders after Hurricane Sandy. Two weeks before the storm, RHI set up a Wi-Fi mesh network, or an ad hoc wireless network, to increase community members' economic competitiveness through free Internet access.⁶⁷ When Sandy struck, Red Hook was the only neighborhood in greater Brooklyn with Internet for days.⁶⁸ RHI used the mesh network to communicate important information to government officials, such as twice-daily reports on the local public housing community's power, heat, and water services.⁶⁹ By communicating with the city government on the status of critical services, RHI was able to alleviate the community's needs for services as displacement risks grew by the day.

When FEMA arrived in Red Hook, it used the mesh network to run its own recovery services and amplified the service for community citizens.⁷⁰ The White House recognized RHI's Wi-Fi mesh network as a best practice in crisis response.⁷¹

Government and private-sector collaboration to prevent climate displacement

Community organizations can also collaborate with the government to provide economic services to storm-stricken residents. For example, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, or LISC, is a national organization that seeks to enable community building by mobilizing government, corporate, and philanthropic giving.⁷² After Hurricane Sandy, LISC New York City, which is led by government and private-sector representatives, used money from donors to set up an emergency relief fund to quickly funnel money to 10 community organizations in storm-ravaged areas to help keep people in their homes or neighborhoods.⁷³ This funding was used to help the organizations hire housing specialists, construction managers, and multilingual aides to reach out to more than 9,000 vulnerable households and connect them to recovery resources.⁷⁴

Rental and housing assistance

Community organizations use local knowledge to organize effective response and recovery efforts to help displaced persons and those at risk of displacement. In Newark, New Jersey, the Ironbound Community Corporation, or ICC, stepped in to organize the area's local Hurricane Sandy recovery effort in the absence of action from the state and city governments. By working with giving organizations,

the ICC provided easily attainable rental and housing assistance to low-income community members.⁷⁵ In contrast, it took the New Jersey state government program more than two years to begin to provide rental assistance.⁷⁶ The ICC was also able to support other residents who were excluded from receiving recovery assistance because they had flood insurance.⁷⁷ For example, New Jersey homeowner Janet Rosero reported that the ICC was the only public or private organization that would help her with the remaining \$70,000 in rebuilding costs not covered by her insurance.⁷⁸ Similarly, the Red Hook Initiative of Brooklyn provided \$50,000 of assistance for devastated households in that community.⁷⁹ According to a Monmouth University poll, “money to pay for home rebuilding and elevation” was the number one area of need and agreement among displaced and nondisplaced Sandy victims in New Jersey.⁸⁰

Community organizations can also help people navigate the bureaucracy to receive government aid. Once city, state, and federal assistance were made available, many organizations—including the ICC, RHI, and LISC New York City—helped people with case management and navigating the various assistance programs. Other organizations, such as El Centro del Inmigrante, took steps to ensure outreach to communities that do not speak English.⁸¹ This may have been a result of lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina, when homeowners wrestled with inadequate information about permits, confusing grant guidelines, and opaque government programs.⁸²

Legislative advocacy

Assistance from community organizations covered a broad range of needs for Sandy-affected communities. While some organizations participated in crisis response, others advocated for changes to government programs to ensure assistance was reaching displaced individuals in need. In New York City, Make the Road New York, a nonprofit empowering Latino and working-class neighborhoods, played an important role in advocating for the Temporary Disaster Assistance Program to be more inclusive of immigrant, homeless, and public housing communities.⁸³ The Alliance for a Greater New York also lobbied the city for the creation of a Build it Back local hiring program to increase job opportunities and income building within economically depressed, storm-damaged neighborhoods.⁸⁴

Other organizations filed lawsuits against city and state governments to advocate on behalf of displaced community members. For example, the Coalition for the Homeless filed a lawsuit on behalf of displaced public housing residents whose housing assistance was expiring.⁸⁵ The group won an extension in assistance for the low-income families, who would have been turned out on the streets without aid.⁸⁶

In May 2014, the New Jersey Fair Share Housing Center, Latino Action Network, and New Jersey NAACP settled a lawsuit with the state of New Jersey, claiming discriminatory use of Hurricane Sandy recovery funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development by the state.⁸⁷ Under the terms of the settlement, the state agreed to increase resources to displaced low-income renters; direct more storm assistance to hard-hit areas of the state; provide assistance recourse for households that were erroneously deemed ineligible; and provide multilingual information on housing resources.⁸⁸ The lawsuit directly affected New Jersey's expansion of displacement aid in January 2015.

Citizen's associations and buyouts

Communities organized themselves to ask the government for buyouts and to maximize buyout incentives. This collective action built off of existing community organizations, such as the Oakwood Beach Citizens' Association in New York and the Ironbound Community Corporation in New Jersey, and helped facilitate the acquisition and buyout program described previously.

Recommendations

Strengthen hard and soft infrastructure

States and localities throughout the United States should develop resilience plans for more extreme weather exacerbated by a changing climate. As they prepare these plans, states and local communities should not only improve hard infrastructure such as homes, roads, and bridges, but also strengthen soft infrastructure—community networks and assets to reduce climate displacement. In addition, resilience plans that reduce the economic strain of climate displacement by increasing affordable housing, fortifying access to job opportunities, and providing services through government programs to assist low-income communities would make cities even stronger through increased climate resilience and equity for all income levels.

Prioritize displacement prevention

To minimize the displacement of people, city and state resilience plans should be developed before a storm, not after. New York and New Jersey were developing rebuilding and anti-displacement programs during the Hurricane Sandy crisis, which created confusion and unnecessary red tape and generated negative press. Cities should consider similar programs to those of New York and New Jersey but learn from their missteps.

When developing a New York- or New Jersey-style rapid repairs program, governments should develop a list of approved contractors in advance and circulate information about the program before a storm strikes. State and local policymakers who wish to replicate Build it Back should develop procurement and permitting systems that maximize efficient service while deterring fraud. These programs should focus on bringing resources to low-income communities with minimal hassle through well-designed outreach and communication efforts. Additionally, funding sources, even if aspirational, should be identified for emergency rental assistance and voluntary buyout programs in advance of an extreme weather event.

Incorporate the strengths of community organizations to mitigate climate displacement

Community organizations can leverage existing relationships, trust, and local knowledge to quickly identify community vulnerabilities and communicate with residents. These organizations' history of fast responses to extreme weather events indicates that they will continue to play an important role in future recovery and resilience efforts. Moreover, many Sandy-affected community and environmental justice organizations view climate resilience as an opportunity to build resilient and economically vibrant communities from the ground up. Recognizing and supporting the role that community organizations play in meeting government resilience goals, including preventing displacement of people, enhances inclusion and equity. Federal, state, and local governments should help strengthen the ability of these organizations to help their communities after extreme weather events through grants, training, and collaboration.

Look beyond the immediate impacts of an extreme weather event

In addition to the recommendations above, there are three specific ways that governments can design anti-displacement climate resilient programs with a long-term lens on climate resilience and increased equity. First, programs should aim to return people to their homes as quickly as possible without creating additional health hazards from improper remediation of mold or hazardous waste. Industrial hazards can be particularly dangerous for low-income communities, which are often situated near industrial sites. For example, during Hurricane Sandy, some of the hardest-hit residents, predominantly people of color, lived in an industrial area of Brooklyn that was home to a Superfund site.⁸⁹ And in New Jersey, the ICC noted that Newark residents were concerned about nearby industrial waste in their floodwaters but were unable to contact state environmental authorities to know if it was safe to return. The ICC was able to contact the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, but the agency was not able to mobilize in time for testing to be conclusive.⁹⁰ In order to address these types of situations, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and FEMA need to strengthen coordination to ensure people are not sheltering in place or being returned to their homes despite residual pollution. Additionally, community organizations and residents should have direct access to environmental hazards offices.

Second, policymakers who are developing climate resilience plans should incorporate current and future affordable housing needs into those plans. When some residents are displaced through voluntary buyouts or acquisition programs, it may also deplete affordable housing stock, which can in turn squeeze low- and middle-income households out of an area. Resilience plans that fail to account for future affordable housing needs may avoid climate displacement only to see subsequent economic displacement from their communities.

In Portland, Oregon, more than 30 community organizations have advocated for anti-displacement measures to be part of the draft Portland Comprehensive Plan.⁹¹ Seattle, Washington, launched a government-wide equity and environment initiative to make land-use and other city policies more inclusive by using solutions identified by grassroots leaders.⁹² Land-use planning that is climate resilient and actively prevents economic displacement can strengthen economic opportunity for all. After extreme weather events, low-income neighborhoods may become more attractive to middle-income households.⁹³ Bringing together environmental justice and fair housing advocates to collaborate with policymakers in identifying resilient and equitable land-use solutions can diminish foundational climate displacement risks.

Third, states and cities should identify their own specific strengths to evaluate the community programs, community organizations, and climate vulnerabilities that are crucial to developing a climate resilience plan that prevents displacement and incorporates equity. Identifying these strengths through participatory asset mapping engages the community and shares valuable information about resources that can make resilience plans comprehensive, equitable, and successful.

Conclusion

It is difficult to know where and when future extreme weather events will strike and what the ultimate impact will be. However, it is easier and less costly for cities and states to prepare for the projected increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather than to be blindsided by disaster and rebuilding in the aftermath. It is also important to bear in mind that low-income communities are disproportionately affected by extreme weather events and particularly vulnerable to climate displacement. Displacement not only upsets individual households but can negatively affect states and cities as employment rates suffer, housing prices skyrocket, and economic stability is threatened.

Three years after Hurricane Sandy, programs and community responses in New York state, New York City, and New Jersey serve as important guidance for other states and cities that seek to make their communities more resilient and equitable and deter climate displacement. They also raise additional considerations that cities and states should include in their climate resilience plans. Most of all, these efforts underscore the importance of developing proactive climate resilience and displacement programs along with strong partnerships between governments and community advocacy groups to assist the thousands of people who are now—and will be—searching for a way to return home.

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