

CLIMATE 101:

Disability and the Climate Crisis

The climate crisis is a threat to human health all around the world. And the imperative to act urgently and boldly on climate is often most acutely felt in the marginalized communities that see the effects of global temperature rise first and worst. Communities of color. Low-income families. Indigenous tribes. And **people with disabilities**, a group too often left entirely out of the climate conversation.

People with cognitive, physical, and sensory disabilities face unique health burdens because of climate change.

EXTREME WEATHER	HIGH HEAT
<p>All around the world, weather events like powerful hurricanes, torrential rains and flooding, and extended drought are happening more often and/or becoming more severe. One reason why: Carbon pollution from our burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas is throwing natural systems out of balance—to often devastating, even deadly effect.</p> <p>Beyond the tragic fatalities that can result directly, extreme weather events can damage infrastructure, jeopardizing access to lifesaving care for extended periods of time, and leading to widespread power outages, which can create life-or-death situations for those who rely on medical devices to breathe and treat any number of other conditions.</p> <p>People with disabilities also face additional physical challenges associated with the evacuations that precede many hurricanes, floods, and wildfires—sometimes to the point of being unable to act upon (and in some cases even access) emergency information or instructions.</p>	<p>Every year, it just gets hotter and hotter and hotter. Extreme heat and humidity are one of the most dangerous impacts of the climate crisis—elevating the rate of death from heart attack, heat stroke, organ failure, and more in even the healthiest individuals. Exposure to long-lasting extreme heat truly overwhelms the human body.</p> <p>People with disabilities are even more vulnerable to high heat events than their non-disabled counterparts for reasons both physical and social. Heat can exacerbate any number of health concerns; having limited mobility and/or depending on others for the tasks of daily living can leave people unable to access heat wave necessities like water; and some disabilities themselves make it difficult to regulate body temperature.</p> <p>At the same time, people with disabilities also experience disproportionate levels of poverty, leaving many others without adequate housing or the respite of home air conditioning when the temperatures soar.</p>

“Climate extremes like prolonged heat and cold waves, high humidity, flash flooding, and power outages are extremely problematic for somebody with my intense medical needs,” Rachel, 38, of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, [told Climate Reality in April 2021](#). Rachel was born with a category of muscular dystrophy classified as a congenital myopathy, causing problems with the tone and contraction of skeletal muscles, which control voluntary movements and can cause severe general muscle weakness that complicates basic activities like walking, lifting, dressing, bathing, swallowing, and even breathing.

“Elected officials often seem to overlook the disability community in almost every way. In terms of climate change, they need to be **developing systems to locate, contact, rescue, and evacuate vulnerable citizens** in case of climate emergencies—or all emergencies, actually,” she continued. “They also should be **looking at ways to improve access to [public] transportation** for persons with disabilities. It is extremely frustrating to find adequate, accessible public transportation outside urban areas, and even then, seating is limited or the service times do not meet the 24/7 needs of the community.”

People with disabilities are a diverse community. Their needs differ, often drastically, from person to person due to the type and severity of their disability and age, as well as other factors like their financial circumstances. People with disabilities disproportionately experience high rates of poverty, and are twice as likely to be unemployed than those without disabilities.

So while there’s no one-size-fits-all approach to climate action for the disabled, [there’s plenty you can do to advocate for the well-being of the disability community.](#)

DID YOU KNOW?

About 1 in 5 people in the US has a disability, including about half of all American adults 65 and older.

GET STARTED NOW

Be an Advocate for Public Transit

Modern, electrified public transit systems allow communities to develop more compactly, making neighborhoods of all kinds far more accessible for all, particularly people with disabilities and the elderly. And with electric buses already taking over the market, we have an opportunity to drastically reduce emissions from the most polluting sector there is, transportation—all while helping people live better, easier lives.

Contact Your Member(s) of Congress

Contacting your elected officials’ offices is a useful way to communicate your opinions on the climate crisis. You’re unlikely to speak directly to the official, but their staff tracks the number of emails and calls they receive on various topics. Contact info for members of the [US House of Representatives](#) and [US Senate](#) is available on each chambers’ website, and the US Capitol Switchboard can be reached at (202) 224-3121. Be sure to email and call often.

It’s clear: We must transition away from dangerous, dirty fossil fuels and invest in reliable, affordable clean energy alternatives. Clean energy is good for our climate, our economies, and, very importantly, our health, particularly the health of the most vulnerable among us.