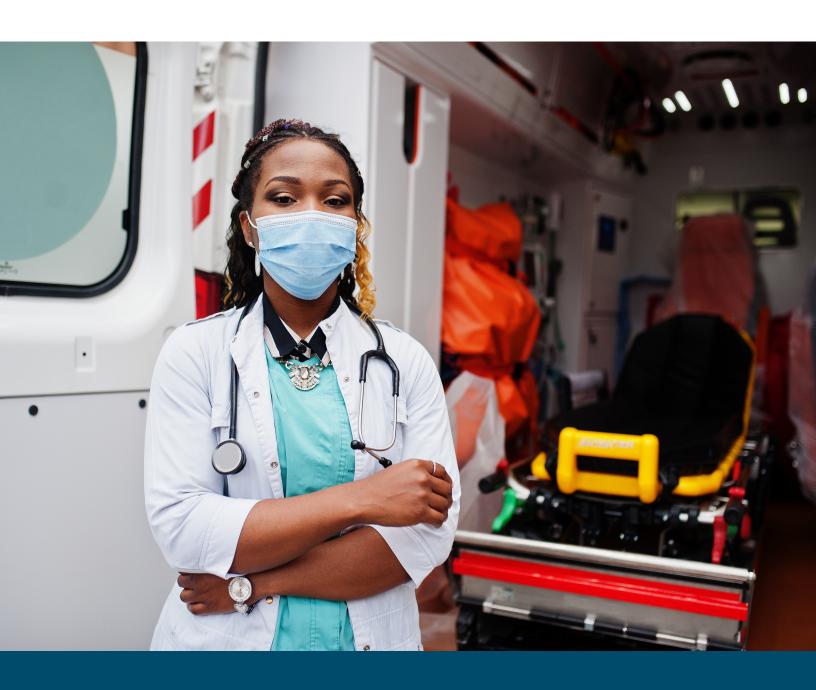# BLUEGREEN ALLIANCE

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

A Platform to Ensure the Public Sector, Public Services, and Workers are Resilient for Future Crises and Climate Change

Americans face three ongoing interconnected crises: economic inequality, racial inequality, and climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic cast a harsh spotlight on the severely disproportionate impacts of these crises. It also exposed the decades-long disinvestment in our public sector and public services. **Social infrastructure—the services required to promote the health and economic, cultural, and social well-being of the community—has too long been neglected and underfunded.** We need to rebuild and invest in our health care systems, public health agencies, education, and community-based services to make us better prepared for disasters like COVID-19 or extreme weather intensified by climate change. We also must rebuild and expand the social safety net—including pensions, healthcare, and retirement security—and ensure and enforce worker and community health and safety.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, "the bottom 90 percent of the American workforce has seen their pay shrink radically as a share of total income," from 58% in 1979 to 47% in 2015.[1] There is a direct correlation with the decrease of worker power over this time, as the share of workers in a union fell from 24% in 1979 to under 11% now.[2] With historic unemployment, families that are unable to pay bills or afford food, and those still at work being exposed to unacceptable health risks on the job, we're vividly seeing the impacts of diminished workers' rights. The pandemic has shown the importance of unions in giving workers rights in the workplace and the urgent need to reform U.S. labor laws to uphold those rights.[3] Labor law reform is needed to promote workers' power and grow union density. Workers who are union members fare better in crises—whether the crisis is COVID-19 or climate change. During crises, unionized workers have better access to enhanced safety measures, unemployment insurance, additional pay, paid sick time, and input in the terms of furloughs or other job-saving arrangements.[4,5]

It's also clear that systemic racism has stacked the deck against people of color, who, historically and persistently fare worse in our economy, having lower wages, less savings to fall back on, and significantly higher poverty rates.[6] Data point after data point illustrates exactly how unequal our economy is. Regardless of education level, Black workers are far more likely to be unemployed than white workers. In fact, historically, unemployment rates are twice as high for Black workers. That disparity carries into the workplace as well, with Black workers paid on average 73 cents to the dollar compared to white workers.[7] The wage gap persists regardless of education, and even with advanced degrees, Black workers make far less than white workers at the same level. So, it's no surprise that the poverty rate for white Americans sits at about 8.1%, but for Black households it's 20.7%.[8]

Not only are people of color more economically vulnerable in this crisis, but disproportionately their lives are being put at greater risk. Black Americans represent 18.7% of COVID-19 deaths while making up just 12.5% of the U.S. population.[9] Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Latinx communities have also been disproportionately impacted, with Latinx communities experiencing a more than three times greater share of confirmed cases than their share of the population in several states.[10]

The world's leading scientific organizations have been unambiguous that climate change is already a dire and urgent crisis, and just like COVID-19, climate change is already disproportionately impacting communities of color. Lower income communities and communities of color are hit the hardest and are less able to deal with the impacts of both COVID-19 and climate change. For example, these communities are more likely to be in neighborhoods impacted by extreme heat and air pollution. A 2019 report found that Black and Hispanic Americans live in

neighborhoods with more pollution but produce less, whereas white communities are less polluted but white people produce more pollution.[11] The Fourth National Climate Assessment states that exposure to pollution "results in adverse respiratory and cardiovascular effects, including premature deaths, hospital and emergency room visits, aggravated asthma, and shortness of breath,"[12] conditions which in turn increase the risk of COVID-19 infection. After decades of segregation in housing policy, communities of color are more likely to live in concrete-dense urban areas with little greenery known as heat islands, where trapped heat can create temperatures 22 degrees higher than surrounding areas.[13] Heat islands exacerbate air pollution and heat, contributing to respiratory problems or heat stroke. Longer and more frequent heat waves also put workers at danger. Occupations most often exposed to extreme heat—such as outdoor maintenance workers, transportation and materials-moving workers, meatpackers, and farmworkers—tend to be overrepresented by Black and Latinx workers.[14] Exposure to extreme heat on the job can cause heart attacks and heatstroke, increase the risk of injury, and increase workers' exposure to toxic chemicals.[15]

After decades of neglect, our public sector wasn't prepared for a pandemic, and it isn't prepared for climate change. Climate threats—wildfires, hurricanes, heat waves, droughts, and sea-level rise driven by climate change—are already hurting workers and communities across the country and will only worsen if we don't take decisive action to bolster our public sector and social infrastructure.

Without strong social infrastructure, workers and their communities cannot achieve resilience in the face of crises. Resilience is built by the public sector at the state and local level, but federal resources are needed to properly fund, staff, and train the workers implementing resilience policy. Too often federal policy is reactive, providing workers, resources, or establishing emergency protocols only after a threat has already transpired. Communities and workers must have the proper training and resources to build resilience ahead of time so that when a crisis hits, they have the capacity to withstand, recover, and learn from it.

Public sector workers are critical to building resilience in the face of climate change. Health care workers provide preventative and emergency care to communities; public health professionals help people understand how climate change may worsen acute and chronic illnesses; home care workers become de facto first responders in the face of crisis; social workers connect community members to public services; emergency services respond to everyday calls while developing plans for the aftermath of climate disasters; and librarians develop public information programs and operate cooling shelters during extreme heat waves. All of these roles—and more—are essential in responding to the day-to-day impacts of climate change, and become even more important when a climate disaster occurs.

Public employees providing public services are the first people to respond to a disaster and are the people we rely on for so many basic necessities— from health care and education to water, heat, and electricity. A strong public sector not only creates a standing pool of well-trained emergency responders, but contributes to a higher quality delivery of public services every day. There is no viable pathway to resilience in the face of climate change without investing in our social infrastructure.

This is why, in the BlueGreen Alliance's *Solidarity for Climate Action* platform, we call for:

- Dramatically increasing the capacity of the public sector and the health care system to prepare for and respond to the demands of our changing climate placed on first responders, healthcare workers, social workers, home care workers, and others who deal with climate-induced disasters. This includes:

  - ▶ **Fully investing in the public sector to ensure we have the people and resources needed to help workers and the communities they serve adapt to a changing climate:** All levels of government must ensure that workers and communities have adequate funding, staffing, and other resources to respond to crises and disasters. Full staffing is also necessary to properly implement emission reduction efforts, protect American families, and achieve an equitable net zero economy. We must ensure equity and fully address inequities and disparities in the most vulnerable communities, especially low-income communities, communities of color, and deindustrialized communities.

  - ▶ **Modernizing federal health and safety protections to address the realities of climate change and ensure adequate enforcement:** Federal health and safety laws and the practices of most employers have not kept pace with our changing climate. Climate change is already making existing workplace hazards worse and creating new ones. This situation will only get worse as our world gets hotter and weather more extreme. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) have key roles to play in the development and enforcement of policy addressing the impacts of climate change on workers.

  - ▶ **Ensuring workers' rights, representation, and training:** Ensure workers have the rights, representation, and training to cope with the ongoing impacts of climate change and be prepared for future impacts/disasters. Unions are vital to keeping workers and communities safe, and workers are better protected and able to respond to climate crises with union representation. The people within the public sector and providing public services need support and training in order to properly deal with adaptation, assisting with the economic transition that frontline communities must make, protecting public health, disaster response, contamination issues, and new efforts to mitigate pollution.

  - ▶ **Rebuilding and expanding the social safety net:** Tackling climate change goes hand in hand with ensuring that we rebuild and expand the social safety net—including pensions, healthcare, and retirement security. Social safety nets are key to supporting workers and communities in the face of climate disasters.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. FULLY INVEST IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR TO ENSURE WE HAVE THE PEOPLE AND RESOURCES NEEDED TO HELP WORKERS AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE ADAPT TO A CHANGING CLIMATE.

- Reinstate and build on Executive Order (EO) 13653 to make climate change preparedness, resilience, and adaptation an essential element of federal operations, policy, and implementation, and declare the climate crisis a public health emergency. A new EO should:

  ▶ Reestablish the Council on Climate Preparedness and Resilience as the interagency coordinating mechanism for climate adaptation.

    - Federal agencies should update their Climate Adaptation Plans every 5 years. As they update these plans, agencies should:

      - Evaluate climate risks to their missions and operations; and

      - Ensure that program implementation does not exacerbate climate risks. Plans should include identification of infrastructure improvements and evaluation of funding and resources needed for the improvements. Plans should also identify opportunities to address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on frontline communities and vulnerable populations.

  ▶ Direct the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to develop a comprehensive national strategic action plan to address the risks from climate change to public health systems and health care facilities, and to assist communities and public health departments in preparing for and responding to the public health risks of climate change.

    - HHS should update the Emergency Preparedness Rule to require health care facilities to prepare for extreme weather and climate impacts.

    - Strengthen and increase funding for the HHS Hospital Preparedness Program to support hospitals and other critical health facilities to prepare emergency plans that address increasing climate-related risks, including provisions to ensure reliable power and water supplies during disasters.

    - Increase funding to the HHS Public Health Service's Ready Reserve Corps to enhance capacity for the public sector.

    - Ensure that the Public Health Emergency Fund maintains sufficient reserves for activation of public health resources for a climate-related emergency—like a hurricane or wildfire—that requires a rapid response.

  ▶ In coordination with the National Climate Adaptation Program, direct federal agencies to develop and provide authoritative, accessible, usable, and timely data, information, and decision-support tools on climate preparedness and resilience. This data should be publicly available, and should be used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Mitigation Framework Leadership Group (MitFLG) and other relevant agencies to support state, local, and tribal training and education efforts.

- Support state and local governments in climate change planning and response.

  ▶ Congress should establish a National Climate Adaptation Program that provides funding and resources to state and local governments, workers, and communities for climate change planning, resilience, adaptation, and response, prioritizing low-income communities and communities of color that are disproportionately affected by climate impact. This program should:

    - Establish a resilience revolving loan fund and grant program, to be overseen by the National Climate Adaptation Program, and a resilience hub grant program to assist local governments in identifying and augmenting existing community facilities to support residents and coordinate resource distribution and services for day-to-day needs as well as before, during, or after a crisis.

- Establish a new initiative to provide skilled technical assistance to help state, local, and tribal governments assess their climate change risks, develop Climate Resilience Plans. Technical assistance should enhance and harness local public sector capabilities and help state, local, and tribal governments develop project funding strategies and prepare grant requests for funds through the National Climate Adaptation Program.

- Increase funding for FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program to support planning and projects.

- Increase funding for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Multipurpose Grants to States and Tribes, Environmental Justice Small Grants Program, Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement Program, and Community Action for a Renewed Environment Grant Program to reduce disparities for frontline communities affected by climate change.

- Expand eligibility and increase funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Public Health Emergency Preparedness Cooperative Agreement to provide state and local public health departments with the resources to help hospitals and health care facilities increase capacities and capabilities to confront climate threats.

- Increase funding for the CDC's Climate-Ready States and Cities Initiative (CRSCI) and Building Resilience Against Climate Effects (BRACE) programs.

- Increase funding for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Competitive National Disaster Resilience Grant (NDRG) Program.

- Establish a Care and Climate Program to make sure that those who provide care for children, elders, and the disabled—who are most vulnerable to climate impacts—have the training and resources they need to support their clients.

- Codify EO 12898, the Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice (EJ IWG), a statute that requires mandatory reporting to Congress to identify and address, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on communities of color and low-income populations.

2. MODERNIZE FEDERAL HEALTH AND SAFETY PROTECTIONS TO PROTECT WORKERS ON THE JOB DURING A CRISIS, ADDRESS THE REALITIES OF CLIMATE CHANGE, AND ENSURE ADEQUATE POLICY ENFORCEMENT.

- Congress should ensure OSHA has enough budget to hold employers accountable for workplace health and safety, focusing on staffing for timely and effective enforcement.

- Congress should ask the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) to evaluate OSHA's current use of maximum penalties, including maximum penalty levels, where warranted.

- Congress should amend Section 3 of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSH Act) to extend federal protections to public sector workers in all federal OSHA states and territories.

- Congress should amend Section 20 of the OSH Act to explicitly direct NIOSH to expand its research on climate change and occupational safety and health, and to ensure NIOSH is sufficiently funded to carry out the research.

- Congress should extend OSHA protections to home based service workers including home health workers, landscapers, and gig workers.

- OSHA should establish an enforceable federal heat health standard for all workers.

- OSHA should expedite its review and update of the existing emergency response and preparedness standards. The review should include an assessment of the durability of the revised standards under future climate conditions.

- DOL should work with the CDC and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to develop a coordinated, climate-relevant, and publicly accessible national monitoring and early warning system for occupational health and safety.

3. ENSURE WORKERS' RIGHTS, REPRESENTATION, AND TRAINING.

- Support and pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act.
- Uphold public sector collective bargaining rights.
  - ▶ 116th Legislation:
    - H.R. 3463, the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act; and
    - H.R. 1154, Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act.
  - ▶ Ensure access to unions for all federal employees.
- Train workers for climate response, recovery, and adaptation.
  - ▶ Establish and fund a climate resilience workforce training program targeted at training workers on climate impacts, disaster response, and resilience, building on existing worker training programs. These programs should include but are not limited to:
    - DOL: Susan Harwood Training Grants;
    - The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS): Environmental Worker Training Program;
    - NIOSH: Training and Workforce Development; and
    - FEMA's Community Emergency Response Training Program.
  - ▶ Fund workforce development programs that create career ladders to overcome structural barriers to employment.

4. REBUILD AND EXPAND THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET.

- Raise the minimum wage and index to inflation.
- Ensure access to paid sick leave.
- Improve access to affordable healthcare.
- Prevent and mitigate wage and job losses.
  - Unemployment insurance:
    - Allow immediate access, increase benefit size, expand work-sharing eligibility, allow for extensions, and expand coverage to self-employed and gig workers.
- Retirement security:
  - Protect workers' healthcare and pension plans and coverage of missed contributions due to missed work or layoffs;

- Guarantee retirement security through a federally-funded cash infusion to shore up multi-employer pension plans, using the House-passed Butch-Lewis Act and/or direct fiscal aid; and
- Protect workers and their benefits in bankruptcy proceedings, including the Protecting Employees and Retirees in Business Bankruptcies Act of 2018 (S. 2518, 115th Congress).

ENDNOTES

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