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Local climate and health projects in action

Many local public health authorities and community-based organizations (CBOs) around Oregon are working on projects to address health inequities related to climate change. The aim is to help communities build resilience and prepare for climate-related extreme weather events and disasters. The following is a sampling of a few projects now under way:

[United Way of the Columbia-Willamette](#)

The devastation caused by the massive wildfires that started on Labor Day 2020 was unprecedented. But it also became a rallying point for a group of culturally specific CBOs that wanted to better support underserved, frontline, rural and low-income communities of color that are disproportionately impacted by disasters and climate change. Enter *United Way of the Columbia-Willamette* (UWCW), a leader at advancing equitable disaster resilience through funding, advocacy, partnerships and communications.

“When the 2020 fires happened in Southern Oregon in September, it activated folks to donate resources to United Ways, and this created a rapid response fund that allowed us to be really intentional about its allocation to community-based organizations, whose populations were communities of color functioning in these marginalized gaps,” said Jamila Wilson, UWCW’s Climate Resilience Program manager.

Since 2020, in partnership with OHA and *Trauma Informed Oregon*, UWCW has brought together more than 20 CBOs into a Disaster Resilience Learning Network that works to improve and support the health and wellness of culturally rooted CBO leaders impacted by disaster and working toward climate resilience. The network places culture and interdependence at the core of disaster resilience, and increases representation at decision-making tables while building relationships for these leaders across the state.

“This network positions itself really well in providing sort of a sphere of support for, particularly, leaders of color,” Wilson said. Last year, UWCW published a report on [Preparing Oregon’s Communities of Color for Disaster](#) that highlighted statewide gaps in linguistically accessible, culturally competent communications and messaging during disasters.

“Statewide emergency response and disaster preparedness directly impacts our public health and community resilience,” said Cristy Muñoz, Climate Resilience senior manager at UWCW. “What we’ve been working on now, after the research report came out last year, is advocating for Oregon’s communities of color who deserve equitable access to lifesaving and culturally relevant disaster preparedness resources, while also building statewide, cross-sectoral relationships and trust between government, CBOs and funders toward increasing collective resilience.”

Climate and Health Central Oregon

The people living in the high-desert region of Central Oregon know extreme weather events all too well: wildfires and related smoke; drought and dry domestic wells; blistering winter storms and excessive heat. It’s one of the state’s most unique climate zones.

That’s why *Climate and Health Central Oregon* – an effort focused on Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties, and coordinated out of Deschutes County Health Services (DCHS) – is raising awareness of climate effects in the region by distributing health-promotion and safety information in health care settings and through CBOs and other regional partners. Major projects include tracking data on climate hazards and health impacts related to wildfire smoke, drought (dry wells), winter storms (accidents and power outages), and extreme heat (illnesses and deaths attributed to heat). DCHS is also partnering with regional CBOs serving high-priority populations (LatinX, older adults, homeless) to identify needed resources – such as clean-air shelters and N95 masks – and provide education around climate health concerns.

“A lot of our work is focused on serving populations that are disproportionately affected by health impacts related to climate,” said the project’s lead, Sarah Worthington, regional climate and health coordinator. “There’s a lot of discussion going on around what we can do to provide for unhoused persons, for example.”

[Multnomah County Health Department: Healthy Homes & Communities](#)

The team in the Multnomah County Health Department’s *Healthy Homes & Communities Program* is fighting climate change by applying core public health functions such as monitoring diseases and causes of premature death and determining their relationship to climate change, as well as responding to emergencies caused by

climate hazards. County officials are also forming community partnerships to work for policy, system and environmental changes that protect people from future hazards.

That, says Brendon Haggerty, supervisor of the Healthy Homes & Communities Program, will help the county accomplish “a just transition to a resilient community” that is more involved in decision-making and better able to manage climate change effects.

One recent example of this is the county’s Climate Justice Plan, a vision for climate action developed in partnership with community organizations. The county also recently launched a Heat Vulnerability Index (HVI) to guide planning and investments to reduce effects of extreme heat. The HVI is an interactive map that displays differences in people’s sensitivity to heat based on age and prevalence of underlying health conditions, as well as heat exposure levels based on population and housing densities, tree canopy and vegetation, impervious surfaces and urban heat islands.

The HVI also displays data on factors that predispose a person to heat exposure, such as whether they live in rental housing or have cognitive difficulty.

[Nurturely](#)

At *Nurturely*, pursuing climate resilience solutions is a natural function of its work. The Eugene-based nonprofit promotes physical and psychological wellness during the perinatal period – the time immediately before and after birth that is critical to the long-term health of both parent and baby.

It’s the time when prolonged, low-level wildfire smoke exposure can increase risk of pregnancy complications such as hypertension, low birth weight, preterm birth, later immune system problems and compromised lung function in babies, and severe parental stress associated with pregnancy complications and mental health challenges. It’s also the time when people of color are particularly vulnerable to poor health outcomes.

“We are focused on health equity and homing in on racial injustice and racial inequity as the underlying threats to the health and well-being of all of us, not just pregnant and postpartum people,” said Emily Little, Ph.D., *Nurturely*’s founder and executive director. “It’s really that intersection of anti-blackness and racism in perinatal health and during the perinatal period that is the root cause of broader inequities we see in society.”

Nurturely is combatting these inequities by equipping perinatal professionals – nurses and nursing home visitors, doulas, physicians and midwives – with tools to provide more equity-centered care. This includes sharing evidence-based information with patients in a culturally competent way to help reduce their smoke exposure, or providing them with N95 masks or air filtration devices.

Trauma Informed Oregon

Recognizing and responding to the impacts of lifetime trauma on a person's health and wellbeing is the hallmark of being trauma informed. It's why *Trauma Informed Oregon* – a nonprofit based out of Portland State University– is concerned about how life-threatening, climate-related weather events, such as wildfires, poor air quality, droughts, floods, and extreme cold and heat, effect lifelong health.

Trauma Informed Oregon was initially recruited by *United Way of the Columbia-Willamette* to evaluate how trauma-informed care could be imbedded in a new Disaster Resilience Learning Collaborative that was created in response to the devastating wildfires that swept across Oregon in September 2020. The collaborative is made up of more than 20 culturally specific, community-based organizations serving communities of color disproportionately affected by disasters, and its members quickly realized they needed more than just a “one-and-done” evaluation by Trauma Informed Oregon, and invited it to become a permanent part of a new, expanded Disaster Resilience Learning Network to advance equitable disaster resilience.

“Organizations that interact within the disaster sector have slowly become organized around trauma and trauma response,” said Trauma Informed Oregon research assistant Christy da Rosa. “We help organizations move back into that flexibility, that fluidity and that long-term planning that are really needed to move away from that crisis.”