



August 27, 2021  
Hearing 2021-7-21  
Joint Legislative Committee on  
Emergency Management

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senator Henry Stern *Chair* Assemblymember Freddie Rodriguez *Vice Chair*

CONTACT: (916) 651-4027 | [JLEMC@sen.ca.gov](mailto:JLEMC@sen.ca.gov)

## Rectifying Inequities in California's Climate Resilience Strategy: A People-First Approach

### Background

In the Joint Legislative Committee on Emergency Management's first hearing on the inequities of the climate emergency, the Committee took a hard look at how California's most vulnerable populations are being disproportionately impacted during this crisis, and how to remedy these systemic risks.

Climate author and journalist David Wallace-Wells' lead testimony corroborated the results of a recent State Auditor's report, which found California is not prepared for the scale of risk that it is facing<sup>1</sup>.

When asked by Committee chair Senator Stern if California was ready for the impending climatic conditions facing its citizens, Wells' answered: "No."

This stark assessment was validated by testimony from the Gender Equity Policy Institute that the current approach to resilience policy and investment in California is failing "the climate justice test." The Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) testified about the need to build resilience through equitable, community driven

infrastructure before disaster strikes.

Although California and its counties have engaged in extensive planning -- Los Angeles County testified about its forthcoming comprehensive map of where vulnerable populations live and what they need -- it is increasingly clear neither the state nor local governments have sufficiently planned for or invested at the scale necessary to address the multi-hazard hydra that is climate change.

This is not simply a matter of disaster prevention, as noted by Michael Wara, the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment's Director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program and Alex Hall, Professor, Dept of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences; Director, UCLA Center for Climate Science. The long term health effects of wildfire smoke and extreme heat for low income families, especially expectant mothers and children living in rental housing, will be particularly acute. Health impacts caused by inhaling wildfire smoke vary in type and severity, including preterm births, lung inflammation, cardiovascular disease, stroke, allergies, autoimmune disorders, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, lower childhood IQ, autism, lung cancer, bladder cancer, and childhood leukemia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Wallace-Wells, Editor at Large, *New York* magazine, Author, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, testifying July 21, 2021 in this hearing.

<sup>2</sup>[The Costs of Wildfire in California: An Independent Review of Scientific and Technical Information --A Commissioned Report prepared by the California Council on Science and Technology: 10-2020](#)

## Key Findings of July Hearing

### CLIMATE INJUSTICE HITS WOMEN AND CHILDREN OF COLOR HARDEST

Since climate disasters are human-created and exacerbated by human policies and actions, this is not just an environmental problem, but also a question of social justice. The most vulnerable residents of California -- the elderly, the poor, those suffering from asthma or other chronic health conditions, those whose reading or understanding of English may inhibit their ability to be reached by existing emergency warning or communication systems -- are not only most likely to be harmed by a climate disaster but also the least likely to have access to the resources needed to survive it. This injustice implores the state of California to direct planning and resources to its most vulnerable residents.

### CLIMATE CHANGE FORCES A NEW APPROACH TO EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Climate related disasters are no longer “emergent,” as extreme heat waves and wildfires have become commonplace and will only increase in frequency. As such, while California has emergency forces to respond to disasters as they occur, we need to marshal a people-centric care-oriented approach to home and community level resilience that recognizes the unique vulnerabilities of renters, who tend to lack access to adequate insurance, in-home cooling, insulation against wildfire smoke, and other climate disaster hazards.

### SOLUTIONS EXIST

By investing in caregivers at the frontline and combining in-home protection with community resilience centers there are a number of hazard mitigation solutions available, from improved insulation for extreme heat protection, clean energy installations for backup power during grid outages, or air filtration systems to combat wildfire smoke. These solutions can achieve a multitude of economic, health, and social benefits for the communities that need it the most.

## Key Recommendations

### COMMUNITY SCALE HAZARD MITIGATION AND DISASTER PREPARATION ARE MORE COST EFFECTIVE AND JUST THAN RELYING ON EMERGENCY RESPONSE

In many ways, California leads the field in planning, coordination and grant-making for climate adaptation and resilience but there is more to be done. California

Climate Change Assessment<sup>3</sup> defined climate vulnerability and put in place a framework to assess where we are every 5 years. But we can do more. The state should create and support a program to provide planning grants for projects in certified regional climate adaptation and resilience action plans with greater clarity.

### WILDFIRES & MEGAFLOODS

The planning and grantmaking in law and to come paves the way for a people first strategy for both wildfires and megafloods. We need to direct public dollars to hardening people’s homes. We need to address the direct risk of wildfire and adverse public health impacts from smoke too. We need to stop building new housing in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) or in flood plains. We need to maximize federal dollars to shore up levies and dams.

### EXTREME HEAT: BEYOND COOLING CENTERS

We must make it sustainable for people to live safely through extreme heat events in their own home. The state should support a people-first cooling program to keep vulnerable populations safe in their homes and communities, including:

- Low income weatherization, installation of ultra efficient heat pump and cooling units using the CEC’s TECHprogram, and back-up solar powered electric batteries for those at risk of public safety power shut offs.
- Training and support for caregivers, social workers, in-home support service workers and community emergency response volunteers to assess vulnerabilities, assist vulnerable residents with navigating incentives and emergency preparation, and help improve the connection between county and state emergency services and the people most vulnerable to climate disasters.
- Low cost retrofits to roofs, parking lots, sidewalks and pavement, shading and urban forestry, park expansion and other efforts that will reduce the urban heat island effect.
- Rehabilitation and construction of community resilience centers can provide access to drinking water, food storage & distribution, shelter, workforce development, computer connection and economic assistance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Aka “Fifth Climate Assessment” codified in 2020 with SB 1320 (Stern)