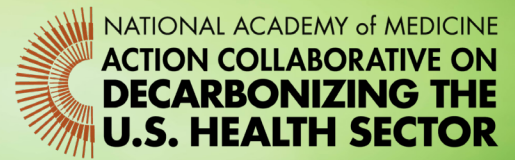


Why Decarbonizing Matters for the U.S. Health Sector



Exposure to excessive heat, air pollution, and other effects of climate change are worsening health outcomes year after year across the United States. By reducing the health sector's environmental footprint—or decarbonizing—health care organizations can better deliver on their foundational mission of preventing harm and providing care to create a more sustainable and healthy future for all patients and communities.

Duty to act: How climate change impacts human health

Climate change creates broad and inequitable harms.

Climate change has brought about more frequent and severe wildfires, heat waves, hurricanes, and floods. The effect of climate change:

- worsens air quality through catalyzing ground level ozone—or smog—production and wildfire smoke;
- undermines food and water security; and
- can promote the spread of vector borne diseases to new locations.

Climate change matters to the health of everyone, everywhere. However, climate change impacts are not equally distributed. People with pre-existing health problems, under-resourced communities, communities of color, and communities that have been historically marginalized bear the greatest health burdens from effects like increased air pollution.

Climate change threatens the ability to deliver affordable, high-quality health care.

Extreme weather events damage health care facilities and increase health care demand, all while simultaneously impeding care access for patients and staff, disrupting supply chains, and increasing the costs of care delivery. In 2021 alone, climate change associated disasters in the U.S. set a record for most deaths and caused \$145 billion in damages.

Health care currently relies heavily on fossil fuels and is responsible for a significant share of air pollution.

The burning of fossil fuels to support facility operations—electricity in hospitals and clinics, production of pharmaceuticals and medical devices, transportation, and food production—results in greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. Through these activities, health care provision generates roughly 8.5% of all greenhouse gasses and all particulate matter air pollution of the entire United States.

Value of decarbonization: How reducing carbon emissions benefits health and health care

Providing high-quality care improves patient outcomes and reduces emissions.

Health care facilities, including the electricity they consume, account for about 18% of the health sector's total carbon footprint, while the remaining emissions are largely embedded in supply chains for food, pharmaceuticals, and disposable supplies, among other sources. Health care interventions to promote healthier lifestyles lower disease risk, and, as a result, health care facilities can improve outcomes, lower costs, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Decarbonizing can improve financial and care delivery stability.

Decarbonization strategies can reduce energy costs as well as improve resilience to extreme weather and power outages that have grown more common with climate change. Although energy costs can be highly volatile, participation in financial or physical power purchase agreements can stabilize energy costs for the long term.

Decarbonizing can advance health equity.

The effects of climate change cause disproportional harm to people and communities who have historically been marginalized, as well as to future generations, robbing people of the stable homes and communities they need in order to lead healthy lives. Climate change also creates unprecedented intergenerational inequities: children born today will be forced to endure many more heats, floods, droughts, fires, and food shortages in their lifetimes than a child born just a few decades ago.

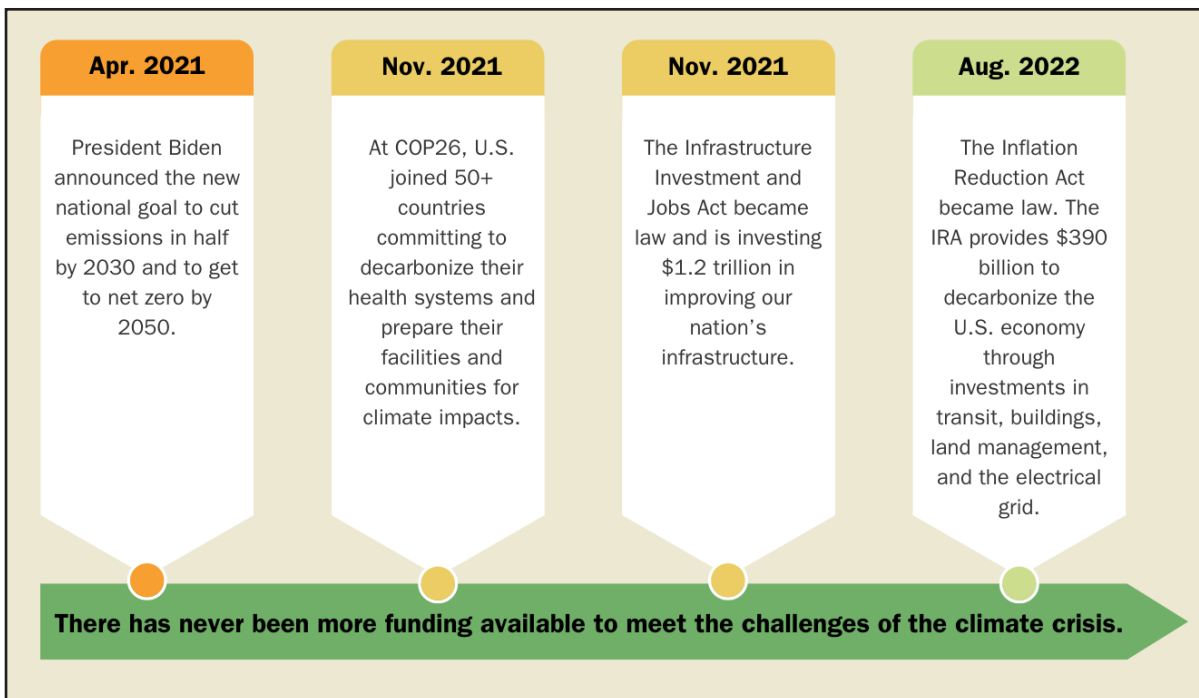
Health care organizations can lead climate action

The health sector is positioned to lead by example and motivate other sectors to take climate action.

Health professionals are one of the most trusted voices in the country and, as health is a major motivator for climate action, are positioned to be key messengers to advance decarbonization efforts and build momentum toward climate initiatives.

New sustainability opportunities and supports are becoming available.

Unprecedented actions on climate change nationally and internationally have unfolded in the past few years and create momentum for further decarbonization:



Resources are available to support you on accelerating your decarbonization journey.

The National Academy of Medicine's Action Collaborative on Decarbonizing the U.S. Health Sector has created an unprecedented collaboration among all stakeholders in U.S. health care to accelerate progress toward a net zero system. Highlighted resources include:

Key Actions to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions
A shortlist for getting started

Carbon Accounting 101
Webinar series with real world examples

How Health Care Organizations Can Use the IRA
Discussion paper

Access these decarbonization resources for health organizations and more at nam.edu/ClimateCollaborative.