



A Federal Policy and Climate Migration Briefing for State, Tribal, and Local Governments

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Awareness is growing of the displacement, relocation, and migration taking place within the US because of the effects of climate change, including flooding from sea-level rise and frequent severe weather events, as well as the less recognizable chronic heat, drought, and air-quality changes. Residents have been moving and continue to move away from these acute disasters and chronic environmental changes. They also relocate because of public-sector incentives, infrastructure needs, and land conversions or because the local economic base has been devastated by diminishing population from others' moves. But public recognition of these changes contrasts with the blind spots in federal policy.

With Enterprise Community Partners, the Urban Institute hosted the Stakeholders Summit on Federal Policy for Climate Displacement, Relocation, and Migration on November 18 and 19, 2020, to discuss the challenges and opportunities for federal intervention. Participants addressed gaps in federal policy, with the goal of envisioning a new framework as climate policy evolves under a new presidential administration.

The recommendations for federal policymakers were synthesized in a separate report¹ and are outlined here. However, state, tribal, and local governments are where the proverbial rubber hits the road on land use decisions, service implementation, and the coordination of residents, businesses, and

ecosystems. The following are takeaways related to future federal policy for local elected officials and civil servants:

- **Corroborate federal data.** Subnational governments are primed to ensure that local measures of exposure and vulnerability are accurate and viable for defining aid thresholds.
- **Eliminate government silos.** Aggressive and effective responses from agencies, departments, and staffs after any shocks to their systems have involved collaboration and, in some cases, integration. Summit participants called for coordination across federal agencies, noting that local governments would benefit from the same.
- **Prioritize the vulnerable.** Local officials are often beholden to constituents with enough political capital, wealth, and information to make their own decisions. To secure the welfare of all, local governments must design infrastructure and services for the most vulnerable neighbors, whose well-being shapes everyone's.
- **Involve all residents.** Jurisdictions have reformed, centralized, or expanded engagement strategies, to mixed results. Investing in new methods so all residents have access to information (in various languages and media) and then acting on their guidance will improve civic participation and make decisions more democratic.
- **Reform local land uses.** Federal funds cannot go to jurisdictions that encourage exposed development, compounded vulnerability, infrastructure segregation, and unsustainable growth. Local governments that avoid climate mitigation and adaptation planning will not be viable in federal eyes.
- **Think beyond borders.** Effective local governments are good neighbors. Initiating regional plans, land and infrastructure cooperation, and mutual aid agreements, potentially with federal resources, could attract more funding and prepare government operations for changing conditions and possibly populations within individual jurisdictions.
- **Leverage resources.** Bonds and innovative public-private financing options can be explored, but jurisdictions must ultimately raise funds through traditional means or by leveraging philanthropic resources despite political challenges.

Pathways Forward

The US must respond to climate change’s acute and chronic effects with substantial climate action—both mitigation and adaptation. Displacement is one effect that is already occurring (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014; Kumari Rigaud et al. 2018; US Global Change Research Program 2018).² State, tribal, municipal, and special district governments are leading the response because of their proximity to affected places and populations and because of the long-term effects, such as possible displacement, that climate change has on land use, public coffers, and their constituents’ lives.³

The stakeholders summit sought a new vision for a comprehensive federal policy on climate displacement. This vision builds from current statutes and programs across nine aspirational policy areas while keeping the principles of evidence, equity, efficacy, and efficiency in mind. Insights from representatives of local governments were important in helping identify the opportunities and limitations in federal policy and programs, particularly in the areas of costs, local transitions, and the relationships between different levels of government. Opportunities for the local governments’ involvement in climate migration supports are summarized below across the same “pathways” as are described in the federal policy briefing. Unattributed quotations from members of this critical stakeholder group who participated in the summit are interspersed throughout the brief.

1. Triggers and Community Eligibility

What conditions should consistently elicit federal attention, funds, and programs for climate relocation? Summit participants overwhelmingly argued that disaster declarations should not be the trigger for climate adaptation planning and action. Rather, the federal government should fund research to measure the physical exposure of all places to climate effects and assess their social and economic vulnerability—including the legacies of underinvestment, political marginalization, and capacity constraints in local government—to define “at-risk places” eligible for federal intervention and to inform residents. This inquiry, however, should involve indigenous knowledge and citizen science, both for getting an accurate picture of local conditions and incubating trust and partnership with communities. Local governments should help develop federal data and implement federal thresholds for aid eligibility—and trust in the evidence provided by communities.

“For underresourced municipalities who don’t have staffing or funding outside of disaster relief funds, it can be very difficult or impossible to engage communities. Dedicated pre-disaster planning resources could help make the engagement process more accessible.”

2. Individual Needs

What should the range of federal services be for someone facing climate relocation? Most foreseeable federal interventions related to climate relocation focus on households' property and possessions—including titles, insurance, damages, and temporary shelter. These are especially relevant to state and local governments. Consequently, representatives of local governments emphasized the services needed beyond housing and employment, including health care, education, and the arts, but stressed how state and federal coffers and silos currently restrict them and limit local governments' ability to provide them.

“What tends to happen, and what we have seen, is that individuals who are normally still hanging on are the folks that are financially vulnerable and lack the skills to make those decisions independently and need that extra assistance.”

3. Individual Assistance Funding and Eligibility

State and local government participants in the summit emphasized the challenge of implementing state and federal programs consistently across different services and for different needs. But which income levels, demographics (including race and ethnicity), and climate-hazard exposures should be prioritized for federal climate relocation assistance to households? The average amount of disaster aid that households receive is much lower than the federal caps, and the assistance rarely accounts for the actual costs of rebuilding or compensates for the disproportionate effects of even slight financial disruptions on lower-income, vulnerable households and the nonmonetizable costs to lives and livelihoods (Martín 2019). These costs are disproportionately borne by people with low incomes, communities of color, and renters (Ratcliffe et al. 2020). Federal service providers must prioritize for eligibility low-income households in concentrated at-risk areas that have low public-sector capacity and progressively scale the total value of individual aid to make climate relocators whole. Factors that contribute to vulnerability—such as living in a historically segregated neighborhood, having a physical disability, and having an undocumented immigration status—should be considered in prioritization decisions. Local governments must then mirror the delivery of these services but are better prepared than federal providers to understand who needs them.

“Eligibility is first and foremost about understanding which households are interested or willing to leave in the case of buyouts or property acquisitions, as opposed to the state or city defining the boundaries of the area in which people are eligible.”

4. Community Decisionmaking

Local governments are sensitive to the methods used to engage their residents, particularly because local officials live among them. The summit stressed how self-determination and procedural justice are important means and ends in climate adaptation decisions for communities and households. Having seats at the table is as important as outcomes. What kinds of engagement could be implemented to ensure procedural justice in adaptation planning? Summit participants stressed the importance of elevating residents at all stages of policy. Inclusive engagement helps communities understand their challenges and devise solutions. Participants believed the federal government could build capacity in underprepared local governments but were wary of too much federal intervention.

“Is there an opportunity for the federal government to help municipalities set up a separate engagement with communities that helps us create buy-in? There isn’t a clear funding source to support that and capacity building on both sides, and I think it would be very beneficial.”

5. Needs of Governments That Face Relocating Populations

Several state and local governments have started planning for climate adaptation, and in many cases, they have invested in projects (Vogel et al. 2016). Local government representatives who have been involved with local buyout and formal resettlement programs that used federal funds were particularly vocal about the needs of communities before, during, and after their residents are relocated. The local government representatives believe the federal government can slow losses in highly exposed jurisdictions through creative funding and programming—such as revolving loan funds, bond negotiations, and pilot relocation programs—in much the same way it did in deindustrializing cities over the past few decades. However, they acknowledged the importance of accountability and distribution of responsibilities, especially if the responsible governmental parties have supported the development of exposed land or unsustainable economic activity within their borders. They also noted the political challenge for elected officials in accepting and planning for future losses.

“There needs to be some formalized construct by which municipalities, states, whatever jurisdictional boundary...has to contemplate the potential for negative growth over time.”

6. Needs of Governments That Receive Migrants

Most participants had little experience with the needs of or planning by communities that receive climate relocators. This mirrors the lack of attention given to these places overall even though climate-

related relocations are generally to existing towns and cities, particularly large ones with jobs and housing.⁴ Should federal aid be directed before and after a disaster to governments whose communities are likely to receive relocating people, and, if so, for what purposes? Participants were not averse to this aid but reflected realistically on the political and social reactions in these places. They argued that relocating residents within the same jurisdiction or as close as possible to their original community may be preferable.

“Before talking about the assistance that federal agencies can give to receiving communities is NIMBYism [not in my backyard]...A lot of communities might do everything they can to prevent people from showing up.”

7. Costs and Cost Share

Participants from state, tribal, and local governments were particularly vocal about the costs of hazard mitigation, climate adaptation, and climate relocations—and who should pay for them. Federal expenditures for hazard mitigation and climate adaptation have not increased significantly in recent years despite evidence of their benefits and the growing need. Except for flood defenses managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers, local jurisdictions have increasingly funded their own infrastructure needs (Martín 2021). What would be an acceptable appropriation for a climate relocation program, and who should pay it? Federal resources can support community viability, neighborhood cohesion, resident livelihood, and vernacular culture, as well as one-way tickets out of harm’s way. The costs can be justified with improvements to cost-benefit analysis tools and mitigated by distributing the burden across government tiers and private-sector actors according to their proportional contribution to the risks. The exact distribution, though, is up for debate.

“I recommended that FEMA allow jurisdictions who can’t accommodate the cost share to amortize that over 30 years, similar to how the [US Army Corps of Engineers] might for a large levee when a community can’t absorb all the cost share immediately.”

8. Time Frames

Federal buyout and formal relocation programs take a long time to come to fruition, and that creates challenges for people who need to prepare for and plan around such a major transition in their lives

(GAO 2020).⁵ For jurisdictions, whose staff members and elected officials become the face of recovery or mitigation, delays create significant problems. When they are responsible because of their own capacity constraints, though, there is little recourse. The federal government must understand timing (from its own timelines to the deadlines it imposes) and its effect on service quality, migrants' well-being, and community outcomes, but local governments need to understand their role in that timing and the expectations of them with some predictability and guidance.

“As soon as there is a federal declaration, there needs to be some immediate availability of resources that can directly go into social service needs. There shouldn’t be a prolonged application process. There shouldn’t be really any process at all.”

9. Authorities

Another thorny subject for local governments is the lines of authority and responsibility among the various levels of government, up through the federal. Although the federal government's role in disaster assistance has expanded, questions persist about what authority the different federal agencies have to provide this aid, as well as what should be the responsibility of state and local governments and of the private sector (Lindsay and Webster 2020). Among the suggestions that participants made were for clear lines of authority, oversight, and leadership between agencies in the federal government and with state and local governments, as well as capacity building for underresourced jurisdictions and the promotion of “bottom up” solutions from residents.

“Local officials don’t want anyone to leave. And that goes back to our principles of federalism and states’ rights and deferring to local government on land use. So when we say that an underlying principle is to respect local preferences, whose local preferences?”

Conclusion

Local governments adopt and enforce land use policies, and they are the vehicle for federal funding and program management. Typically, federal aid comes only after a presidential disaster declaration, in response to realized damages, and only to the places experiencing the disaster. Federal policy focuses on short-term losses in affected communities and not the long-term potential for climate displacement.

It also does not address the increased demand for services in communities that receive displaced households. Local governments are caught between providing stability for residents, managing limited resources, and addressing future climate scenarios.

Local governments also become the face of federal policy, for better or for worse. Yet local and state governments' relationships with the federal government have been restricted in many ways—for example, they face strict grant accountability and cannot innovate so activities are more cost-effective and beneficial for their communities. Efforts to integrate climate-related relocation into national climate policies that speak to local governments date to the 2013 White House State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience, which explicitly called for the federal government's involvement. Local governments can contribute to federal goals not only by being good stewards of local assets, ecosystems, and constituents but also by being honest and transparent about their exposure, their communities' vulnerabilities, and the role they play in creating these problems—and finding solutions.

The summit included voices from state, tribal, and local governments to ensure that their experiences in the trenches inform federal policy. From coordinating with local governments through a central conduit that can work across agencies to helping underresourced jurisdictions build their capacity to handle services, the federal government can provide financial and informational resources, as well as oversight and regulation over the relocation process.

“The siloed funding sources at the federal government are replicated at the state and local levels...If there could be [federal] coordination, you would see that trickle down also.”

Notes

- ¹ See Martín and Williams (2021).
- ² *Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change UNFCCC-Paris COP-21: Recommendations from the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility*, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, November 2015, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/201511-human-mobility-in-the-context-of-climate-change-unfccc-Paris-COP21.pdf>.
- ³ Georgetown Climate Center's Managed Retreat Toolkit (Spidalieri and Bennett 2020) provides helpful summaries of local efforts in climate displacement, as well as guidance for state, local, and tribal governments.
- ⁴ In cases of evacuation, mutual aid agreements can help with shelter, although the “host state” can request Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for this temporary assistance. For longer-term displacement, two cases of Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery funds' being used by receiving communities to support newcomers from disasters have been documented; however, in both cases, the receiving communities were eligible for funds only because they had experienced a disaster in the same year.
- ⁵ “Climate Change,” Alaska Institute for Justice, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.akijp.org/policy-and-research/climate-change/>.

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