

IMPACT OF CLIMATE-RELATED EVENTS ON THE HIV CARE WORKFORCE IN CALIFORNIA

Northern California HIV/AIDS Policy Research Center | March 2024

In a paper recently published in *PLOS Climate*, our policy research center conducted a qualitative study to explore the impact of climate-related events on HIV, sexual health, and harm reduction services in California.

Moran, L., Fuller, S. M., Joshi, S., Outram, S., Koester, K. A., Steward, W. T., & Arnold, E. A. (2023). "Am I going to have to run to get out of this place?" A qualitative study exploring HIV clinical and service provider experiences from California regions heavily impacted by climate disaster. *PLOS Climate*, 2(10), e0000269.

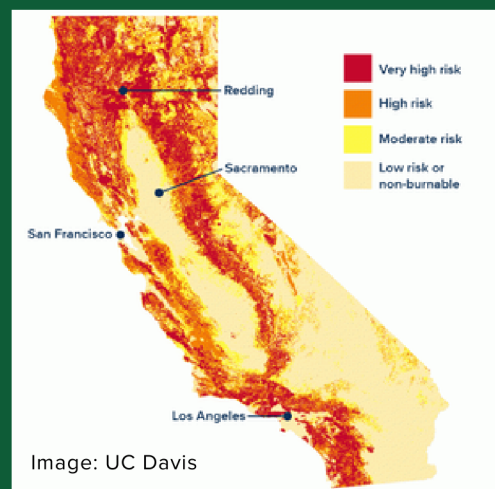
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Climate disasters are becoming more frequent and intense in California, with direct and indirect impacts on public health, including HIV care services.
- 2 As client needs surge during and after climate disasters, **service gaps are widening further due to workforce migration** from areas heavily impacted by climate change.
- 3 Individual providers worked extensively to maintain access to essential services for their communities.
- 4 Investment is needed in **health systems resilience** to reduce the burden on the health workforce.

CLIMATE CHANGE IN CALIFORNIA

- 12 of the 20 largest wildfires in California history have occurred between 2017-2021.¹
- Increased flood risk following intense storms.
- Hotter and drier conditions. 8 of the 10 warmest years on record have been in about the last decade (2012-2022).²

The map to the right shows large areas of high wildfire risk in the state.³



STUDY SAMPLE & METHOD

- ▶ 18 providers and leaders from HIV, sexual health, and harm reduction clinical/service organizations in a sample of California counties heavily impacted by wildfires.
- ▶ Individual, in-depth interviews lasted 45-60 minutes each and were analyzed for themes.

EXEMPLARY QUOTES & FINDINGS

Clinic staff and providers experienced substantial trauma and loss, making it difficult to provide services and in a number of cases, leading to relocation.

“ The agency itself did not burn down, but my home burned down... We also, a year later, had another staff member whose home burned down. Again, that was very disruptive, very traumatic. Then in the last two months, we've had another staff member's home burned down, and it disrupted to the degree that this person has had to go out on disability... There's just waves of grief if you will, and waves of inability to do one's job. [Program leader, HIV clinic]

“ Eventually, this provider just had to leave the area, because she lost her home. And I think with the threat of the future wildfires, she just moved out of the area. And so we had a big gap in care for people in that particular area. [Clinician, hospital system]

Providers served as trusted community partners, offering services and support far exceeding their official roles.

“ Even though we didn't have access to client contact information, our team ... knew the clients well enough. They knew where they lived. So, we were able to go out and check in on them. We were able to physically go out in our vehicles and check in and make sure the clients were okay. [Program manager, non-clinical HIV service center]

We propose 4 recommendations:

- ▶ Identify and leverage existing frameworks, such as Griffith University Healthcare Workers' Resilience Toolkit,⁴ to **better support healthcare workers** in climate impacted regions.
- ▶ Apply findings from studies on **climate disaster survivors** to develop a framework tailored to the needs of the healthcare workforce, who are often climate disaster survivors themselves.
- ▶ Recognize climate change as a **social determinant of health** and acknowledge the burden placed on the healthcare workforce in these areas who are exposed to similar risks.
- ▶ Explore and implement **flexible funding sources** to support clinic infrastructure and personnel during and after climate disasters.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire). (Oct 2022). Top 20 Largest California Wildfires.
2. Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA). (2022). Indicators of Climate Change in California.
3. Kerlin K. (2021). Turning Mud into Wildfire Resistant Housing. UC Davis Big Ideas.
4. Mohtady Ali H, et al. (2022). Healthcare Workers' Resilience Toolkit for Disaster Management and Climate Change Adaptation. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 19(19):12440.