

Strengthening Community Resilience to Address Hazardous Weather Risks

WORKSHOP 6 SNAPSHOT





About

The Community Health and Environment initiative offers insights and resources to support hospitals and health systems and their strategic partners in addressing the health impacts of environmental conditions on their communities and patient populations. As part of this initiative, the American Hospital Association hosted workshops across the country to assess health risks, generate new solutions for addressing them and enhance community resilience.

The initiative's sixth workshop, held in Seattle, brought together hospital and public health leaders from across the Pacific Northwest to discuss practical strategies for improving resilience in addressing acute and chronic health impacts related to hazardous weather.

Participants highlighted persistent challenges for two populations in particular: communities with limited economic resources and people living in geographically isolated areas. These communities may face barriers in coordinating emergency planning and have limited or fragmented access to health care and social services. In addition, these population groups may face barriers in aligning preventive and reactive tactics during hazardous weather events and establishing a coordinated response to support health after the acute phase of such an event has passed.

Insights and strategies from other workshops convened as part of this initiative are available by visiting [AHA.org/community-health-environment/workshops](https://www.aha.org/community-health-environment/workshops).

Key Themes

This Community Health and Environment workshop explored how hospitals and communities can better address health issues while navigating hazardous weather events, especially communities in isolated locations and those facing socioeconomic challenges. Discussions focused on five themes that highlight opportunities to improve resilience during hazardous weather events, ameliorate risks to community health, and align hospital and health system activities and strategies with broader community health goals:

- Better understanding the health impacts of hazardous weather events.
- Linking emergency preparedness and community health.
- Building hospital and health system team capacity to recognize and respond to environmental conditions that impact health.
- Partnering beyond traditional boundaries to build resilience.
- Making the case for improving health and resilience.



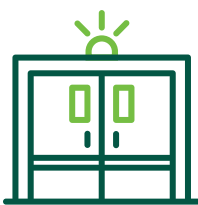
Better Understanding the Health Impacts of Hazardous Weather Events

Participants emphasized that front-line hospital and health system leaders can use community health assessments to better understand how environmental hazards, such as extreme weather, affect health issues like asthma, cardiovascular diseases and behavioral health disorders.

Identifying and framing environment-related risks through a health lens helps engage patients, teams and community partners to consider weather-related risks and their impact on health.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Some hospitals and health systems communicate weather-related health risks to their patient populations and communities, connecting the potential risks to people's daily lives and experiences. For example, asthma is exacerbated by wildfire smoke; medicine efficacy is affected by high temperatures.
- To help identify the most pressing risks for the populations they serve, hospitals and health systems can gather data by asking questions as part of community health assessment (CHA) and community health implementation plan (CHIP) processes. For example: "In the past 12 months, have environmental conditions such as heat, air quality, flooding, storms or poor housing conditions affected your health or daily life?"



Linking Emergency Preparedness and Community Health

Hazardous weather events can quickly magnify existing health and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. For example, during periods of extreme temperatures or poor air quality stemming from wildfire smoke, capacity at community shelters may be exceeded. When this happens, individuals without adequate shelter may seek relief in hospital facilities. These conditions heighten demand for emergency services and disrupt access to routine care, particularly for patients with chronic physical or behavioral health conditions.

Workshop participants emphasized that sustaining essential health care operations is as critical as emergency response. By assessing emergency management and community health issues together, hospitals can work to keep clinics open, maintain telehealth access and communicate proactively — actions that prioritize patient safety, reduce surge demand and preserve essential hospital capacity.

One workshop participant described how their health system focuses on infrastructure resilience to anticipate patient surges and maintain operations during hazardous weather events.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Prioritizing continuity of operations, such as keeping clinics and primary care sites open when safe to do so during emergencies, can be an important aspect of emergency preparedness planning and response.
- Some hospitals and health systems are aligning emergency preparedness teams with community health planning professionals to coordinate outreach, communications and patient tracking.
- Documenting lessons learned from recent emergency events can help advance annual preparedness activities and community health updates. Navigating a crisis offers opportunities for improvement.



Building Hospital and Health System Team Capacity to Recognize and Respond to Environmental Conditions That Impact Health

Workshop participants underscored the importance of educating hospital and health system teams about how environmental factors can affect patient care and their own health. Education can include staff training, workforce safety activities and quality improvement initiatives. Also important is communicating with leadership teams to help connect the dots between hazardous weather and health outcomes and embedding environmental awareness into existing operational, governance and performance improvement processes.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Electronic health record systems can generate alerts or dashboards that identify high-risk patients during hazardous weather events, supporting timely outreach and continuity of care.
- Some hospitals and health systems are using existing quality improvement projects to test adjustments in clinical practice, such as modifying care protocols during wildfires or extreme heat events, and to track outcomes through established reporting processes.
- Service line leaders can learn from and replicate best practices that demonstrate the link between hazardous weather and operational, financial and clinical metrics.
- Some hospitals and health systems are incorporating discussions of hazardous-weather risks — such as wildfire smoke, extreme temperatures and air quality — into workforce safety briefings, new staff orientation and continuing education courses.



Partnering Beyond Traditional Boundaries to Build Resilience

Participants emphasized that making the greatest impact on community health involves collaboration, including working with community-based organizations, local governments, private sector partners, and other hospitals and health systems.

The [Healthy Baton Rouge](#) model illustrates this “co-opetition” approach. Six hospitals worked together to coordinate public health priorities with more than 90 community partners, including chambers of commerce, parks departments and educational institutions. Through regular meetings and organizational asset mapping, the group of partners identified a list of shared priorities ranging from behavioral health to chronic disease and violence prevention.

Participants also pointed to King County, Wash., as a model for regional coordination. The county health department leads a [joint community health needs assessment](#) with 10 hospital and health system partners, pooling resources and data to reduce duplication and strengthen local care capacity. For smaller and rural hospitals, the shared framework provides access to high-quality data and analytics they could not produce independently.



TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- CHA and CHIP processes can serve as useful frameworks for bringing together multisector partners around shared health and emergency preparedness priorities.
- Some hospitals and health systems are establishing decision-making structures that leverage community-based organizations’ local expertise and engagement methods.
- Many hospitals and health systems are documenting and sharing partnership models that demonstrate measurable improvements in community health outcomes. Some examples are highlighted in [AHA Community Health Assessment Case Studies](#).



Making the Case for Improving Health and Resilience

Workshop participants discussed how hospitals and health systems, particularly those serving rural and lower-income communities, are exploring ways to better understand and communicate the value of preparedness and continuity of care during hazardous weather events. Traditional metrics may miss the broader benefits of preparedness, such as sustained patient access, shorter wait times and reduced pressure on emergency services when hazardous weather occurs.

The case for action extends beyond cost savings to include metrics tied to patient access, continuity of operations and reduced disparities in health outcomes, which provide a fuller picture of value.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Hospital and health system performance can be tracked with operational metrics such as continuity of outpatient services and telehealth use during crises.
- Some organizations are developing and sharing case studies that show how resilience planning supports patients and strengthens community health in the long term.
- Resilience metrics such as avoidable emergency visits, reduced downtime and improved community health access can be incorporated into business cases, reimbursement frameworks and organizational performance dashboards.

EXAMPLE

Workshop-Generated Example: Sustaining Behavioral Health Care During Environmental Disruptions — Community-based Solutions for Isolated Regions

The Problem

Hospitals in geographically isolated and rural areas report that behavioral health needs often surge during environmental events such as heat waves, wildfire smoke or power outages. Transportation barriers and infrastructure disruptions can cut off access to counseling or crisis services. When outpatient care options close or are themselves impacted, patients in distress frequently turn to emergency departments, even for access to air conditioning or shelter, possibly straining acute care capacity and delaying medical treatment for others.

The Big Idea

Hospitals, health systems, local governments and community organizations can work together to create multipronged community-based intervention plans for ensuring continuity of behavioral health care services in geographically isolated areas.

- Integrate environmental risk factors into behavioral health care plans.
- Develop checklists and protocols to support care continuity for at-risk patients during crises.
- Establish alternative telehealth access points in trusted community spaces, such as fire departments, libraries or community centers.
- Strengthen communication pathways by operating phone hotlines, assigning mobile crisis teams and establishing peer-support networks such as community emergency response teams.
- Coordinate with first responders before an emergency occurs to build capacity to provide in-home or mobile assessments when travel or connectivity is limited.

Together, these strategies could help sustain behavioral health care services when hazardous weather disrupts normal operations, reducing preventable ED admissions and supporting patient stability close to home.



Impact

- Fewer behavioral health-related visits to EDs and reduced length of stay.
- Increased continuity of care and faster connection to outpatient or virtual services.
- Lower operational costs (e.g., from reduced spending on patient sitters/one-to-one observers) and greater medical capacity.
- Strengthened collaboration between hospitals and health systems, first responders and community organizations.
- Increased community awareness of environmental stressors and the impact on behavioral health.

Long-term Value Proposition

- Building community-based resilience for behavioral health improves outcomes beyond a single crisis.
- Ensuring consistent access to care can reduce readmissions, stabilize demands on the workforce, and enhance trust in local hospitals and health systems.
- Developing networks of cross-sector partners in geographically isolated areas helps build a long-term bridge between environmental preparedness and population behavioral health.



Assumptions and Risks

- Reliable data-sharing and privacy safeguards are needed for better coordination between hospitals and health systems, first responders and community partners.
- Sustained funding is needed for telehealth infrastructure and mobile teams.
- Rural connectivity gaps may hinder virtual care; alternative communication modes, such as phones or radios, remain essential.

Example Initiative

[Washington State Health Care Authority – Mobile Crisis Response Program](#) is a statewide standardized framework for delivering 24/7 community-based crisis intervention through regional Behavioral Health Administrative Services Organizations. This framework specifies how mobile crisis response services — comprising clinicians and certified peer specialists — can provide in-person and telehealth crisis support to address behavioral health emergencies in homes and communities. Designed to improve health care access in rural and isolated areas, this model reduces reliance on hospital EDs and also helps build and sustain continuity of behavioral health care during environmental or infrastructure disruptions, such as hazardous weather or extended power outages.

Top Takeaways for Leadership

- **Assessing risks from hazardous weather through specific health outcomes**, such as minimizing asthma or other chronic conditions, connects hazardous weather-related challenges to a hospital's or health system's core mission. This approach centers patient health outcomes in decision-making and enables external influences to be assessed based on identified health impacts.
- **Structured partnerships can create shared value across hospitals and health systems in a community.** By coordinating assessments, health care organizations can reduce duplication, improve forecasting, and identify community health risks that may be harder for a single organization to identify and address.
- **Planning for operational continuity can be an important step toward emergency preparedness.** Hazardous weather can disrupt and interrupt care, strain emergency services and isolate at-risk populations. Addressing operational continuity in emergency response planning can help hospitals and health systems maintain essential services and reduce downtime during crises.



For more information on AHA's Community Health and Environment initiative, visit www.aha.org/community-health-environment.

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