

# CLIMATE READY BC

Submission to the  
Ministry of Environment and  
Climate Change Strategy



HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

*January 2020*

## Introduction

HEU is the oldest and largest health care union in British Columbia, representing more than 50,000 members working for public, non-profit and private employers. Since 1944, HEU has been a strong and vocal advocate for better working conditions for our members and improved caring conditions for British Columbians who access health care services.

HEU members work in all areas of the health care system – acute care hospitals, residential care facilities, community group homes, outpatient clinics and medical labs, community social services agencies, and First Nations health agencies – providing both direct and non-direct care services.

The HEU welcomes the opportunity to provide input on how the province can best prepare for climate change. As workers who are on the front lines of a health care system that increasingly bears the burden of responding to the health impacts of the climate crisis, our members are concerned about how climate change impacts their work and their communities.

In this submission, we focus our recommendations on four broad areas:

1. Ensuring bold provincial climate action, which includes science-based greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction targets and the transition to a zero carbon economy guided by a just transition plan.
2. Creating a “climate responsible and ready” health care system.
3. Building capacity in the health care system to address climate change, and enhancing our communities’ health.
4. Supporting health care worker involvement in climate plans and actions.

Across Canada and in B.C., climate change is affecting our local environments and communities in new and unanticipated ways. Canada is warming at approximately twice the rate of the rest of the world, with Northern communities, including those in B.C., being hit particularly hard.<sup>1</sup>

Global warming has increased the likelihood and intensity of extreme weather events, which have resulted in record temperatures, unprecedented wildfire seasons, and major floods and storms. Resource extraction projects, which dig up fossil fuels and are major GHG emitters, are also linked to violence against Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people<sup>2</sup> and are a key focus in struggles over Indigenous sovereignty and title.

Climate impacts have a massive and growing social, environmental, economic and health toll. Climate scientists have told us we have very little time to act to avoid catastrophic climate change. This will require a coordinated and comprehensive provincial, national and global effort in which B.C. must continue to play a leading role with bold and decisive climate action.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bush, E. and Lemmen, D.S., editors (2019): *Canada’s Changing Climate Report*; Government of Canada, Ottawa, ON. 444pp.

<sup>2</sup> National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls*, Volume 1a, 352pp.

## Climate-related health impacts, emergency response, and HEU members' work

Health care is on the front lines of climate change. Health care workers deal with the immediate and long-term physical and psychological climate-related health care needs in their communities. Climate change is a major global and national public health threat. It will place increasing demand on our health care system and workers' already heavy workloads.

The extent of climate impacts will be regionally specific and depend on the vulnerability or resilience of impacted areas and populations. The elderly, ill and disabled – populations that HEU members support and care for in their everyday work – are particularly at risk. Climate change intersects with the social determinants of health, such as access to health care and social supports, clean air and water, and good working conditions. Climate change thus deepens health inequities.

HEU members were acutely affected by the forest fires that raged across B.C. over the past couple of years. The Interior and Northern regions were hit especially hard in 2017 and 2018. Forest fires have adverse population health outcomes that include respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, exacerbated asthma, and threats to mental health. During the forest fires, physician and emergency room visits rose.

During emergency responses, HEU members stepped up and went above and beyond in their work. They struggled to protect their communities and their own homes and families while continuing to care for vulnerable patients and residents in their workplaces. In some cases, they evacuated patients, helped set up emergency shelters, and organized donation drives – even as they faced their own losses and hardships. As the number of people needing care, and the intensity of that care, increased, our members were challenged to provide these services. They worked long hours, and for large stretches of time without a day off. They helped out in different facilities and units when the need arose.

Because of the nature of their work, health care workers are at far higher risk of illness and disability – and having to take time off of work because of it – than workers in other sectors. Climate change can adversely affect workers' mental and physical health outcomes and workplace safety. For example, an HEU member has spoken out publicly about her experience with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that developed as a result of the panic, stress and trauma of emergency response work. Front line health care workers in these situations face greater risk of exhaustion, anxiety, burnout and PTSD.

During the wildfire crisis, urban centres like Prince George were a hub where people from smaller towns and rural areas accessed supports and services. Members working here voiced concern over the community's capacity to effectively respond to the influx of people and their particular needs. In these circumstances, members noted the need for accessible and stronger social supports, including health care and counseling services to handle the mental and physical health impacts of climate change, and a process to better handle emergency response.

## Recommendations on how to prepare for the impacts of climate change

### *Ensuring B.C. government commitment to bold and rapid climate action*

We commend the B.C. government for taking concrete steps on climate action, particularly the *Climate Change Accountability Act* (CCAA), which enacts meaningful accountability mechanisms to assess

provincial progress on climate targets. At the same time, the province admits its own climate plan will not meet its targets for 2030. They aim to close the gap with future measures carried out over the next 18 to 24 months. To ensure this promise is delivered, the HEU supports recommendations to government from numerous organizations, such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, including:

1. Commit to setting legally binding, science-based GHG reduction targets that keep global warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius.
2. Adopt and implement the principles of a just transition in climate change, including industrial and labour policies and programs that facilitate the move to a zero carbon economy. A just transition prioritizes access to income support, employment programs, skills training and education for affected workers and communities as well as disadvantaged groups. It places the growth of sustainable, secure and living wage jobs at its centre, while advancing social justice.
3. Further to this, we propose the introduction of a climate change lens to all cabinet decisions.

### *Creating a climate responsible and ready health care system*

The health care system is associated with environmentally unsound and toxic practices, including those related to energy use, the consumption of plastics and disposables, and toxic chemical pollution. It is also a major source of GHG emissions, contributing to five per cent of Canada's GHG emissions.<sup>3</sup>

Given its scale and purchasing power, the health care sector has significant potential to reduce its carbon footprint. And given its mandate to heal and do no harm, it must be a leader in mitigating its contribution to climate change and better preparing for its impacts. Health care facilities, technologies, services and activities must be climate responsible and ready. Sectoral targets, which will be established as per the CCAA, ensure the Ministry of Health can provide resources and assistance to the health authorities to identify climate strategies and reduce emissions. To achieve this, it will be necessary to:

1. Establish climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience plans across the entirety of the health care system, inclusive of private contractors and subcontractors. This will entail integrating a climate lens into all health care system decisions and activities. Climate plans should be guided by legislation created to unify standards across health authorities and by operator type (public and private). It will be essential to reverse trends in privatization and maintain public ownership and operations to more effectively manage and meet sectoral targets.
2. Implement sustainable procurement practices in all health authorities and for private contractors and subcontractors. This will help drive the transition to green energy and technology and a low-carbon supply chain, and must support good-paying, quality jobs. Sustainable procurement related to energy, food, anesthetic gases, supplies and transportation can significantly reduce GHG emissions, and grow local businesses and industries.
3. Ensure a percentage of the health authority budget goes toward equipping the health care system with the staffing, training and resources needed to implement climate policies and plans.
4. Swiftly enact the transition to a zero carbon standard and maximize energy efficiency for all new buildings and their construction. This not only lowers health care buildings' significant GHG emissions, but also creates good green jobs and reduces energy costs.
5. Accelerate the retrofit program and expand it to include health and seniors' care buildings of publicly funded private contractors, the cost of which will be recouped in energy bill savings.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hancock, Trevor. (1999). Creating health and health promoting hospitals: a worthy challenge for the twenty-first century. *International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance: incorporating leadership in health care services*. Vol 12, no. 2, viii-xix

6. Review and revise the GHG emissions accounting system in the health care sector to ensure true carbon neutrality. This must include contractors and subcontractors that supply goods and services to, or on behalf of, health authorities, and account for a wider scope of sources of GHG emissions such as the procurement of goods and services (i.e. pharmaceuticals, supplies and medical instruments, food, waste products and recycling), which are currently excluded.<sup>4</sup>

### *Building capacity in the health care system and enhancing our communities' health*

Our communities' health depends on the health of the planet and local environments. Yet, climate change exacerbates health disparities and poses major challenges to community wellness. Health care faces not only stressors associated with rising climate-driven health impacts, but also infrastructure damage and degradation, which erodes access to critical services. Healthy and resilient communities are required to effectively prepare for, respond to, and generate solutions to climate change.

At the same time, climate change brings with it opportunities to strengthen health care and social infrastructure, which in turn bolsters communities' health and resilience as crucial defences to climate change. The health care system – embedded in local communities, employing large numbers of people, and working across multiple jurisdictions – is an essential partner in advancing and coordinating community-based climate policies and strategies. The system is well positioned to collaborate with community stakeholders, and educate and engage the public on climate change and health.

The definition of green jobs has shifted beyond green energy and technology to include a variety of sectors that are vital to a sustainable economy and thriving communities. The health care sector and its workers play a key role in enhancing the well-being of current and future generations.<sup>5</sup> And health care's role in the sustainability agenda will be strengthened as it moves toward a zero carbon future. Our recommendations centre on creating resilient communities by building capacity in the health care system and strengthening our communities' health by:

1. Developing climate-resilient community plans and integrating a climate lens in public policy and programs. This will also entail a community-based health plan that focuses on community health profiles and health service needs, and closes inequities in health status and access to care.
2. Including health care work in green jobs initiatives.
3. Proactively building capacity in the health care system and investing in growing the health care workforce to better provide for climate-related population health impacts and emergency response. This would entail reversing trends in privatization and continuing investments in public builds and higher staffing levels.
4. Implementing a robust recruitment and retention (RR) plan to meet the growing demand in health care work, based on stable and permanent jobs, sector standard wages and benefits, and quality working conditions. RR efforts will further be aided by a long-term market adjustment.

---

<sup>4</sup> Currently, the scope of emissions includes direct and indirect GHG emissions from electricity, heat and air conditioning, paper, and vehicle use as well as machine, appliance, and equipment operation in buildings that are owned or leased by the health authority. Excluded emissions, such as the procurement of goods and services and contractor and subcontractor operations, would in fact account for a very large portion of the total health authority carbon footprint.

<sup>5</sup> Novello, A. & Carlock, G. (Dec 2, 2019). *Redefining Green Jobs for a Sustainable Economy*. The Century Foundation.

5. Conducting research into, and monitoring, the health effects of climate change on specific regions and groups in B.C., and the impact on health service demand and health care work.
6. Drawing on the health care system's expertise in disaster response and disease surveillance to develop more flexible and mobile health care services to respond to crisis situations.
7. Continuing to make local communities affordable and viable by expanding social infrastructure, including low-carbon public transit, social and co-op housing, child care and pharmacare.
8. Exploring access to extended health care benefits and sick, family and disability leaves as avenues to support workers and their families tend to health and safety concerns, and allow time to recover from climate change-related hardships.

### *Supporting health care worker involvement in climate plans and actions*

Since HEU members work on the front lines of climate change, they also are on the front lines of building solutions through environmental and climate change advocacy and activism in their workplaces and communities. They facilitated recycling, composting and energy-efficiency initiatives, and have put forward resolutions to “green” their union and that oppose fossil fuel infrastructure development, such as the Kinder Morgan pipeline and hydraulic fracking. Workers need to be supported in this work and should not bear the burden of implementing workplace climate strategies without input and necessary time and resources. The B.C. government can support health care employers and unions to engage and assist workers in public and private health care workplaces to take an active role in climate action by:

1. Engaging workers around climate change issues, and empowering them to take action in and beyond their work through education, leadership and skills training and engagement programs.
2. Creating, adequately resourcing, and providing paid time off for workers involved in workplace environment and/or climate action committees and working groups, so they can meaningfully participate in the development of workplace climate strategies.
3. Supporting employer and union efforts to integrate a climate lens as well as “green” and climate-related provisions (i.e. for programs, funds and strategies that support climate action) in collective agreement bargaining.

## Conclusion

Across Canada and in B.C., people are taking to the streets and turning out to vote, demanding action on the climate crisis and holding governments to account. To effectively respond to the climate crisis, we need to work toward a long-term vision of our future that supports the quality of life for all people, and ensures a healthy planet. To this end, climate action must work in tandem with social justice, environmental stewardship, and Indigenous sovereignty. We urge the B.C. government to advance its position as a climate leader in providing policy direction, funding and resources to build climate responsible, ready and resilient communities and health care system. The B.C. government has a significant opportunity to accelerate its bold climate action initiatives to ensure long-term co-benefits for a strong and sustainable society, economy and ecosystem. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, there is no time to waste.