

US Disaster Response

The impact of climate change on the disaster response landscape

In the United States (US), it is projected that sea level rise alone will force at least 13.1 million to migrate by 2100,¹ and tens of millions more will be forced to leave their homes in that same time period because of major storms, drought, heat, wildfires and other impacts of the changing climate.² Over nine million people in the US have already been internally displaced by disasters in the past ten years,³ and in the summer of 2021, one in three people in the US were impacted by a weather disaster.⁴ Though there is still rapid population growth in many disaster-prone areas,⁵ property insurance markets are beginning to fray.⁶ Soon, only the wealthy may be able to afford insurance in these locations.⁷ Meanwhile, some disaster-affected people are already migrating, seeking lower risk, economic opportunity and/or social connection⁸—others are already facing financial catastrophe or will be in the event of another disaster. And without a significant focus on affordable housing construction in *destination communities* (communities receiving those who choose to relocate), displaced populations can drive up costs in the cities where they land, leading to cycles of displacement often called *disaster gentrification* as low-income people from destination cities move to riskier areas to find affordable housing. Previous large-scale migrations in US history have led to increased inequality, and with current trends, climate displacement will follow the same pattern.⁹

While people are increasingly on the move in disaster-prone areas, most disaster response and recovery frameworks respond to place and property, not people. There is ongoing work to rethink the US disaster response framework and its strategies,¹⁰ however, at present, disaster resources flow to counties, cities and states based on the location of the disaster's physical destruction, not where the population is located post-crisis. Increasingly, disaster resources each year flow into places that probably won't be sustainable or even inhabitable within 100 years.¹¹

Episcopal Relief & Development is thinking beyond the immediate location of the disaster. Under our refreshed US disaster response strategy, our programs will advance a people-prioritized, climate-adaptive disaster response approach. We will continue to deploy resources to meet families' immediate and long-term needs after disasters, but do so where the people are, not necessarily where the disaster occurred. We will support communities in high-risk areas plan, adapt, relocate and protect assets before and after a disaster.¹²

What is climate-adaptive disaster response?

Climate-adaptive disaster response means that the actions taken before, during or after a disaster to save lives and meet basic needs should also be strategies to lower risk to harm caused by the changing climate. We are therefore proposing that we treat all our disaster response activities as unique opportunities for positive climate adaptations. Despite broad awareness that climate change is enormously consequential and that disaster responses cause many more resources to flow into high-risk communities than at any other time, climate adaptation is not yet an overarching function of the disaster system.

¹ Assuming a 1.8m rise per Mathew Hauer's research: Mathew Hauer, Jason Evans and Deepak Mishra, "[Millions projected to be at risk from sea-level rise in the continental United States](#)," *Nature Clim Change* 6, 2016, 691–695 (2016)

² Abraham Lustgarten, "[Climate Change Will Force a New American Migration](#)," *ProPublica*, September 15, 2020,

³ Norwegian Refugee Council, "[United States Country Page](#)," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

⁴ Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 256

⁵ Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 265

⁶ Christopher Flavelle, Jill Cowan and Ivan Penn, "[Climate Shocks Are Making Parts of America Uninsurable. It Just Got Worse](#)," *New York Times*, May 31, 2023

⁷ Alice Hill, "[Climate Change and U.S. Property Insurance: A Stormy Mix](#)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 17, 2023,

⁸ Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 257

⁹ Linda Shi, "[The Northeast as Climate Refuge? Migration Histories and Future Prospects](#)," Managed Retreat Conference, Columbia University, June 21, 2023

¹⁰ Christopher Flavelle, "[As Climate Shocks Worsen, U.S. Disaster Agency Tries a New Approach to Aid](#)," *New York Times*, January 18, 2024

¹¹ Episcopal Relief & Development's programming has largely followed this trend of place-based focus over the last 10 years. Only in response to Hurricane Maria did the organization develop response and long-term strategies that supported both those staying in disaster-impacted territories (Puerto Rico) and migrating (to places in Central Florida).

¹² Under the organization's Asset Based Community Development framework, assets include physical, financial, temporal, social and spiritual.



Strategy objective

Episcopal Relief & Development has a long history of mobilizing faith leaders to be agents for change and draw upon their capacities and those of their communities and institutions to respond to disasters in their contexts. By 2030, Episcopal Relief & Development aims to equip 3,000 faith leaders and other community change agents across 200 counties in the US to engage communities acutely vulnerable to climate risk and to respond after disasters occur. Additionally, we will engage and support 1,000 faith leaders in target destination communities to increase their capacity to welcome and equip newly arrived populations.

Our refreshed approach to responding to disasters

Over the past 20 years, Episcopal Relief & Development has developed a robust disaster response program, partnering with and equipping local faith-leaders and Episcopal institutions to respond to disasters. We have worked with partners all across the country, from Hawai'i to the US Virgin Islands, Maine to South Texas, responding to events that overwhelm the community's ability to recover on its own, whether that's tornados, hurricanes, mass violence, terrorism or the pandemic. By investing in the Episcopal network and its local partners, the increased preparedness and response capacity has remained in the community after a specific project ends.

Under the refreshed strategy, this work continues. Disaster preparedness and response activities will continue to engage the wisdom, lived expertise and networks of The Episcopal Church in specific US geographies. However, now, together, we also intend to identify and support faith leaders, across faiths, in prioritized high-risk areas, to foster dialogue around climate adaptation with communities vulnerable to disasters and to mobilize and provide resources when disasters do occur. We will expand our partner engagement strategy to include institutions and platforms whose work enhances these efforts, providing rapid access to cash and case management, and non-traditional shelter for those most impacted by the disaster. We will mobilize and equip faith and other local leaders to be change agents, leveraging their deep relationships with and influence on congregations and communities, and support their capacities and those of their communities and institutions to plan, adapt, relocate and protect assets before and after a disaster. We will engage and invest in destination communities to support newcomers from higher risk contexts in ways that reduce the risk of their displacing or driving up costs for those already living there. We will work with people as they move, in addition to those who choose to stay.

Ways of working

Episcopal Relief & Development supports and leverages a locally-led network of change agents and institutions working to address injustice, poverty, disaster and climate change.¹³ In the US, we provide funding and technical consultant services that facilitate contextual dialogue before disasters, meet immediate needs after disasters, and reach those falling through the cracks with essential supports and services. All those we work with are empowered to choose their own next steps throughout the disaster life cycle. The chart on the next page presents the principles that will guide our program design and implementation throughout the lifecycle of a disaster.

¹³ One way to visualize this is through the vulnerability tab on the [National Risk Index](#) map

Chart 1: Guiding Principles for Program Design

DESIGN	Preparedness	Embrace focus on Episcopal faith leaders and institutions in specific geographies of climate risk. Expand to multi-faith leaders working within the same area	Ensure partnerships facilitate community-led recovery planning dialogues; reach highly vulnerable populations and engage both-pre- and post-events	Ensure co-designed materials and programs center dignity, agency and choice of the people in vulnerable populations and geographies	Ensure spiritual and psychosocial support is woven into all planning efforts	Equip and engage faith leaders for community-led dialogue and resilience over extended periods of time
	Response	Maintain focused on meeting the immediate needs of vulnerable households not well-served by the disaster response systems in impacted areas as well as destination communities	In the first days and week of the crisis, focus on the people from the disaster-impacted community where they are rather than responding only in the disaster-impacted community	Expend specific recovery resources on case management in destination communities who are able to support people in multiple geographies. Create disaster response hubs in receiving communities	Ensure cash and voucher assistance (CVA) reaches participants directly and rapidly	Link those utilizing cash and CVA platforms to case managers for holistic resourcing
	Recovery	Maintain focus on sustained recovery of vulnerable households falling through the cracks of the disaster response system	Invest in the efforts of households choosing to lower risk	Promote other responding agencies to expend resources to those choosing to adapt via relocation to ensure at least parity between those who relocate and those who do not	Emphasize resources for housing but also provide resources for community integration and livelihood support	Support partners in receiving destinations that bridge concerns of locals and disaster migrants
IMPLEMENTATION	Maintain relationships and partnerships with key Episcopal partners and networks		Ensure project length and preparedness and recovery is sufficient for coalition building, faith engagement, reflection, learning and planning		Ensure staff and volunteers are proactively supported and supervised through all activities to promote social inclusion, and their own psychosocial wellbeing, especially after disasters	

Illustrative activities

Climate-adaptive disaster response activities should be aligned to the phase of a disaster. The below table presents sample priority activities and organizes them by phase: preparedness, response and recovery. The table is color-coded to indicate staff and partner institution level of effort, with darker blue indicating a higher level of effort.

Priority Areas	Preparedness	Response	Recovery
Highly vulnerable geographies, likely sites of retreat (e.g., rural southern Louisiana)	Ensure deep engagement using updated faith leader toolkit to support communities as they proactively plan for their recovery from future disasters.	Provide resources immediately in the communities and identify people on the move.	Focus on working with residents in this context who are deciding to relocate, especially those who fall through the cracks of other systems, such as renters.
Highly vulnerable geographies, likely sites of extensive protection (e.g., parts of Miami, Houston, New York City)	Resource faith leaders with self-facilitated toolkit.	Provide resources immediately to the affected and identify people on the move.	Focus on working with residents in this context who are deciding to relocate (maybe very short distances) or adapt in other ways, especially those who fall through the cracks of other systems—e.g., renters.
Lower vulnerability geographies, sites of relocation, destination communities (e.g., northern Alabama)	Resource faith leaders with self-facilitated toolkit (see tools and resources section below).	Develop partnerships with non-traditional sheltering spaces (motels or parking lots) and cash platforms to identify outflow communities quickly and get resources to them rapidly.	Focus on creating housing and other necessary infrastructure to welcome newcomers while not displacing current residents.

Our tools and resources

Episcopal Relief & Development co-creates with its partners, ensuring that all tools and resources are driven by local experience and expertise while also contextualized to new situations and communities. Through our refreshed strategy, we will update existing tools and develop new ones to better support communities and institutions plan, adapt, relocate and protect assets before and after a disaster. Some of these tools include:

Faith leader resources:

Materials to equip faith leaders to engage their communities on climate adaptation. Materials will be contextualized for communities highly vulnerable to climate risk before a disaster. The resources will guide participants through a process of understanding the local risk, the likely impacts of climate change and likely post-disaster resources, as well as processing the grief and loss related to the possible futures for their communities. This process will support faith communities and households to develop action plans for recovery from future events by evaluating gaps and discerning steps to be taken now or after the next disaster to adapt to the changing climate and risk environment.

Response and Recovery Community of Practice:

Virtual and in-person platform for knowledge and experience sharing and relationship building among practitioners seeking to advance their disaster response programs. Members come from our current disaster recovery partners from across the US. The membership of the group changes over time based on partnership strategy and disaster response portfolio.

Cash and voucher assistance (CVA) toolkit:

Materials designed to equip local faith and community-based organizations with information on available cash and cash voucher assistance platforms in their areas. The toolkit provides guidance on demographic-specific financial services as well as advice on how to rapidly deploy resources while ensuring safeguarding and proper targeting. Selected platforms will adhere to privacy best practices and employ internal controls to ensure tracking of indicators for those participating.

Receiving community resources for specific demographics:

Quick guides that provide disaster-specific learnings for receiving-community service providers and faith leaders needing to scale up inclusive programs to meet the needs, both short and long-term, for newly arriving people impacted by disasters. These resources will foster community building strategies between receiving and migrating communities and have a focus on marginalized groups—e.g., non-citizens, the elderly, renters, communities themselves—and emphasize strengthening local partnerships with organizations already serving these populations.

Meeting the needs of Louisiana after Hurricane Ida

In August 2021, Hurricane Ida devastated the state of Louisiana. Episcopal Relief & Development partnered with the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana to help families pay rent and buy domestic appliances that were destroyed in the flooding. The program focused on the Latinx community, single mothers, older adults and those with special needs.



Measuring our impact: high level indicators of change by 2030

As a result of our disaster response programs:

- > Implementing partners should demonstrate:
 - Improved understanding among partner staff of the concepts of disaster and climate change mitigation and adaptation and methods to achieve each
 - Improved capacity and awareness of local populations most vulnerable to disasters and the local partnership networks active with these communities
- > Participants should demonstrate:
 - Reduced risk to future hazards¹⁴
 - Increased housing security and safety
 - Increased financial security
 - Increased well being measured over time (measured pre- and post-relocation)
- > Other high-level program metrics:
 - # of community change agents equipped
 - # of community partner institutions
 - # of people reached with cash and CVA

Beyond these year-to-year indicators, the program will also have an in-depth evaluation after 5 years—in 2029—to assess the efficacy of this strategy, theory of change and objectives and will be updated as necessary.

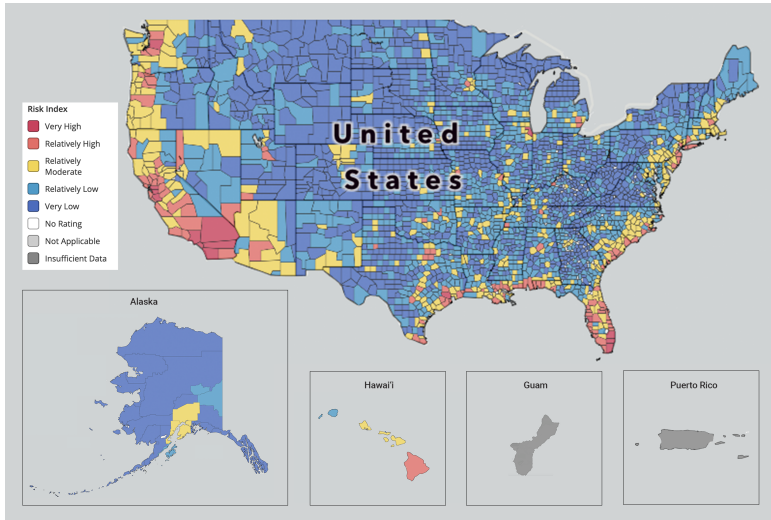
¹⁴United Nations Development Programme, “Disaster Resilience Measurements: Stocktaking of Ongoing Efforts in Developing Systems for Measuring Resilience,” February 2014. https://www.preventionweb.net/files/37916_disasterresiliencemeasurementsundpt.pdf

Additional references:

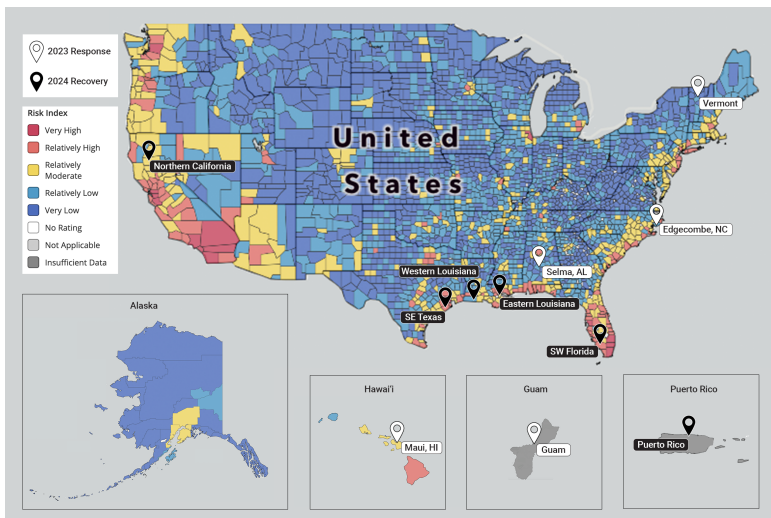
1. Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023)
2. Christopher Flavelle, Jill Cowan and Ivan Penn, "Climate Shocks Are Making Parts of America Uninsurable. It Just Got Worse," *New York Times*, May 31, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/31/climate/climate-change-insurance-wildfires-california.html>
3. Christopher Flavelle, "As Climate Shocks Worsen, U.S. Disaster Agency Tries a New Approach to Aid," *New York Times*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/climate/fema-disaster-aid-climate.html>
4. James Hansen, Makiko Sato, Paul Hearty, Reto Ruedy, Maxwell Kelley, et al. "Ice Melt, Sea Level Rise, and Superstorms: Evidence from the Paleoclimate Data, Climate Modeling and Modern Observations That a 2 degree Global Warming Could Be Dangerous," Copernicus Publications (2016), <https://acp.copernicus.org/articles/16/3761/2016/>
5. Mathew Hauer, Jason Evans and Deepak Mishra, "Millions projected to be at risk from sea-level rise in the continental United States," *Nature Clim Change* 6, 2016, 691–695 (2016) (<https://www.nature.com/articles/nclimate2961>)
6. Alice Hill, "Climate Change and U.S. Property Insurance: A Stormy Mix," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/climate-change-and-us-property-insurance-stormy-mix>
7. Abrahm Lustgarten, "Climate Change Will Force a New American Migration," *ProPublica*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/climate-change-will-force-a-new-american-migration>
8. Norwegian Refugee Council, "United States Country Page," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/united-states>
9. Shi, Linda. Talk at the Managed Retreat conference. "The Northeast as Climate Refuge? Migration Histories and Future Prospects" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geKS-UJ_pxc&list=PLPmPmV9ZCh-jYKvQv-lg2xxbtY94lgftR&index=7 2023
10. Norwegian Refugee Council, "United States Country Page," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/united-states>
11. Linda Shi, "The Northeast as Climate Refuge? Migration Histories and Future Prospects," Managed Retreat Conference, Columbia University, June 21, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geKS-UJ_pxc&list=PLPmPmV9ZCh-jYKvQv-lg2xxbtY94lgftR&index=7
12. United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Report of the open-ended intergovernmental expert working group on indicators and terminology relating to disaster risk reduction", February 13, 2017. <https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/report-open-ended-intergovernmental-expert-working-group-indicators-and-terminology>.
13. Rob Verchick, *The Octopus in the Parking Garage: A Call for Climate Resilience*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

Appendices

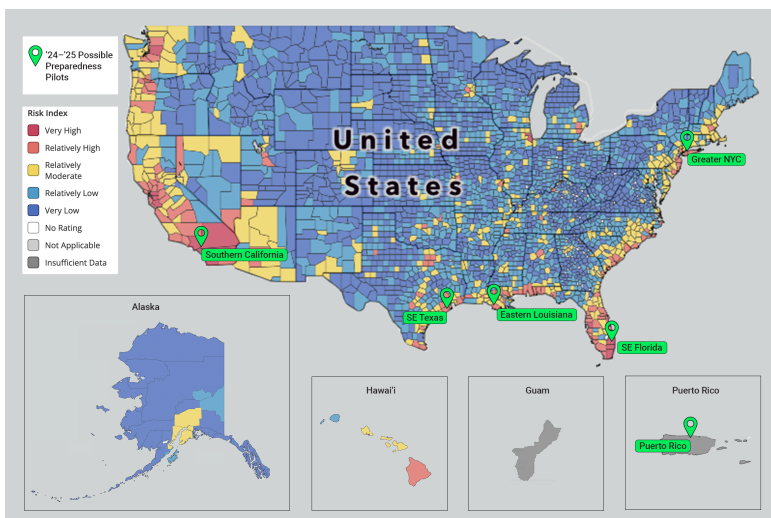
Maps



Federal Risk Index¹ is a map at a county level that multiplies predicted loss to disasters by vulnerability factors divided by resilience. This is a very useful tool with the main caveat being that it calculates risk based on current risk without taking climate change into account.



The same map as above, but showing response projects from 2023 and recovery partners for 2024.



We propose starting to pilot the preparedness work in highly vulnerable populations in locations like those on the map above where risk is high and expected to increase with the effects of the changing climate.

Our theory of change



Glossary*

1. **Climate adaptation:** Adjustment in natural or human systems to a new or changing environment that exploits beneficial opportunities or moderates negative effects.
2. **Disaster:** A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts.
3. **Disaster Response:** Actions taken directly before, during or immediately after a disaster in order to save lives, reduce health impacts, ensure public safety and meet the basic subsistence needs of the people affected.
4. **Recovery:** The restoring or improving of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities, of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and “build back better”, to avoid or reduce future disaster risk.
5. **Response:** Actions taken directly before, during or immediately after a disaster in order to save lives, reduce health impacts, ensure public safety and meet the basic subsistence needs of the people affected.

** Definitions from US Global Change Research Program and UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction*