

Joint Advocacy and Outreach Committee
of the
CLIMATE PSYCHIATRY ALLIANCE
and
CLIMATE PSYCHOLOGY ALLIANCE - NORTH AMERICA

August 21, 2023

Mr. Uwe Brandes
Chair, Commission on Climate Change and Resiliency
Government of the District of Columbia

Dear Mr. Brandes:

Thank you and your colleagues for your service on the Commission on Climate Change and Resiliency. Your research and insights have enabled the District of Columbia to gain a reputation as a national leader on climate change.

We are mental health professionals who reside, practice, and teach in the District. We also represent two national groups that are deeply concerned about climate change and its impacts on patients, families, and communities. The Climate Psychiatry Alliance (www.climatepsychiatry.org), which was established as a 501(c)(3) organization in 2019 and has about 850 members, and the Climate Psychology Alliance - North America (www.climatepsychology.us), which was established as a 501(c)(3) organization in 2018 and has about 500 members, are both dedicated to educating professionals, policymakers, and the public about the mental health and social dimensions of climate change and to developing and advocating for constructive responses at local and national levels.

As noted in Commission materials, a substantial body of research demonstrates that climate change leads to or exacerbates a broad range of mental and behavioral health conditions (including depression, anxiety, trauma, and substance misuse) and social problems (including lower academic performance, interpersonal conflict, domestic violence, economic disruptions, and forced migrations). These effects arise from extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and floods, as well as from longer-term climate trends, such as rising temperatures and sea levels. Consistent with research findings, our members' clinical experience shows that patients' concerns about climate change and its impacts can be primary sources of distress and amplify other mental health symptoms.¹

¹ For summaries of recent research and discussion, see: American Psychological Association (2022), *Addressing the Climate Crisis: An Action Plan for Psychologists* (<https://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-crisis-action-plan.pdf>); Clayton, S., et al. (2021), *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Inequities, Responses*, American Psychological Association & ecoAmerica (<https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/mental-health-climate-change-2021-ca-apa.pdf>); and Crandon, T.J., et al. (2022), The clinical implications of climate change for mental health, *Nature Human Behavior*, 6, 1474-1481 (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01477-6>). For work specifically on youth, see also: Hickman, C. et al. (2021), Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: A global survey, *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(12), E863-E873 ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)).

Local governments can play important roles in addressing the mental health and social dimensions of climate change. Examples of initiatives that the District government could pursue include:

- Conducting a District-wide assessment of the current impacts of climate change on mental and behavioral health and community well-being, and projections of future trends, with attention to variations across wards and neighborhoods and to disparities among population groups (as characterized by socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, abilities, and other dimensions).
- Supporting the development of community resilience programs that help individuals and households build the psychological, social, and practical skills and community connections needed to respond effectively to climate change and other challenges.²
- Sponsoring training for health care and social service providers across the District on the mental health and social impacts of climate change on individuals, families, and communities and how to prevent and treat them.
- Developing effective communications about climate change and health for (a) community members, including messaging for specific communities at risk of climate impacts, and (b) professional audiences, such as climate and energy professionals and health professionals.
- Encouraging age-appropriate coverage of the mental health and social impacts of climate change in environmental and health education in the District's public schools (including guidance to students on coping with climate anxiety).
- Advising businesses and non-profit organizations on how to incorporate considerations of the mental health and social impacts of climate change into their strategies, operations, and employee services.

² Community resilience programs may involve collaborations among public, non-profit, and for-profit entities. These programs may take various forms, including resilience hubs (Urban Sustainability Directors Network, resilience-hub.org) and the resilience coordinating networks described in the proposed federal Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/3073>). See also: Doppelt, B. (2023), *Preventing and Healing Climate Traumas: A Guide to Building Resilience and Hope in Communities*, Taylor & Francis/Routledge (www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781003262442/preventing-healing-climate-traumas-bob-doppelt).

- Developing plans for meeting the mental health and social welfare needs of individuals and families who are displaced within the District or migrate to the District due to climate change.

Various departments and agencies of the District government could participate in designing and implementing these activities, including those falling within the Executive Office of the Mayor: and the Deputy Mayor for Education, Health and Human Services, and Public Safety and Justice. The Commission could offer guidance on initiating and assessing such efforts and coordinating them across government and private entities.

We would be pleased to provide additional information about the mental health and social dimensions of climate change and initiatives that the Commission might consider proposing to the District government. Further, we could facilitate connections with other local experts, such as faculty and staff at academic institutions and policy organizations and members of the Washington Psychiatric Society and DC Psychological Association. At the national level, organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, and Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health can provide guidance as well.

Thank you for considering our suggestions. Please be in touch if we can be of further assistance. You may contact Liz McLaughlin at lizmclphd@gmail.com or (603) 560-7615.

Sincerely,

Lise Van Susteren, M.D.
Chair, Joint Advocacy and Outreach Committee

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