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Global Nurses' Proposal to Address the Health Impacts of Climate Change

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Global Nurses United is a federation of nurse and health care worker unions in more than 30 nations, coming together to fight for labor rights for nurses, health and safety protections in the workplace, a strong public health infrastructure, and for safe and therapeutic patient care for patients and communities.

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Nurses and their unions are on the front lines of responding to the health impacts of climate change around the world. It is clear to us that our health care systems and infrastructure are not currently prepared to adequately respond to the health challenges that will result from the changing climate.

Nurses know that the effects of climate change are already being felt in our countries and our communities – from heat waves, drought, and wildfires to rising sea levels, flooding, and other disasters. Climate change is already accelerating disease transmission, air pollution, crop losses, and global migration as people leave regions that are becoming inhospitable to human survival. Increasing temperatures and extreme weather events are already having profound effects on public health leading to increased risks of heat stroke, physical injury, malnutrition, exposure to infectious diseases, and health impacts from displacement and exposure to conflict.

A 2023 [World Health Organization](#) report estimated that if our global emissions trajectory continues, nine million people per year will die annually from climate-related causes by the end of the century unless serious governmental action is taken to address the health impacts of climate change.

The 2015 Paris Agreement invoked the “right to health” as a foundational principle for climate action, and health care providers across the globe have always known that the health of our planet and the health of our people are intertwined. In order to protect public health, governments must invest in the infrastructure, public health preparedness, and health and safety protections that are necessary for human survival and the fight for climate justice.

For the first time ever, the international climate negotiations at COP28 hosted by the United Arab Emirates will include an official “Health Day” and a health ministerial meeting. Global Nurses United welcomes the official inclusion of health care as part of the climate negotiations, and we urge every country to use this meeting to make commitments that will invest in the combination of public health and climate preparedness measures that will protect communities.

Nurses are dedicated to protecting the public health of our communities. We call on governments to commit to the following proposals in order to mitigate the climate crisis and increase health care systems preparedness:

1. **Mitigate the climate crisis** by phasing out both the production and consumption of fossil fuels and rapidly reducing global carbon emissions.

Despite the officially recognized need to move rapidly away from fossil fuels, new fossil fuel infrastructure projects are either under construction or at the planning stage in many countries around the world. To reach a zero-emissions future we must stop producing as well as consuming fossil fuels.

Globally, the health care system is responsible for nearly 5 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, arising from both hospital infrastructure and the supply chains of health care goods and services.¹ It is crucial that countries work to decarbonize critical care infrastructure and push health care organizations to divest from fossil fuels to stem the rise in global emissions associated with the burning of fossil fuels.

2. **Bolster health and emergency infrastructure** by ensuring all hospitals and health care facilities will continue to operate in the face of climate disasters and are resilient to future extreme weather events.

Nurses across the world have experienced immense disruptions in the care they are able to provide because of climate events. These extreme weather events are likely to increase in both frequency and severity, while at the same time, medical services risk becoming besieged by unanticipated outbreaks of infectious diseases like dengue and zika. It is critical for governments to invest in resilience, sustainability, and disaster mitigation efforts for health care infrastructure to ensure that patients can continue to receive care. Health services must be included in risk management frameworks. Governments must also ensure that medical supply chains are resilient, transparent, and sustainable in the face of the growing number of climate-related extreme weather emergencies. We encourage government support for, and development of, onshore manufacturing and local supply chains as part of resilience building.

3. **Protect global public health** in the face of rising temperatures and increased disease transmission by safeguarding the public from the health impacts of climate change.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen the international community fail to contain a rapidly spreading virus and millions of people have died, including significant numbers of health care workers. It is critical that countries and regions plan for the future in ways that can best protect vulnerable populations, including through guaranteeing health care and high-quality public services for all. This includes the need to provide access to safe water and improved sanitation, and to enhance access to health education and information, and essential health services including vaccination. In order to ensure that low-income countries are equipped to invest in essential public health infrastructure, governments and international multilateral financial institutions must provide debt relief and update debt resolution frameworks for low-income countries in the Global South.²

¹ Matthew J. Eckelman, Kaixin Huang, Robert Lagasse, Emily Senay, Robert Dubrow, and Jodi D. Sherman. "Health Care Pollution And Public Health Damage In The United States: An Update." 7 December 2020. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.01247>. Accessed 11/13/2023.

² Ivana Vasic-Lalovic, Lara Merling, Aileen Wu, Center for Economic and Policy Research. *The Growing Debt Burdens of Global South Countries: Standing in the Way of Climate and Development Goals*. October 12, 2023.

Investments in global public health and climate adaptation measures are public goods and improve the lives of all citizens.

4. **Support front line nurses and other health care workers** in the face of disasters by ensuring they are prepared to handle extreme weather events and care for patients affected by a rapidly warming climate.

Rising temperatures pose significant physical, mental, and emotional risks to health care workers, and governments have a responsibility to incentivize increased investments in clinical training related to climate disasters to ensure that our health care workforce is prepared to handle the health impacts of a rapidly warming planet. Health care facilities must institute safe staffing, workplace protections and hazard pay when protections are not possible, for nurses and other health care workers during climate disruptions, as well as appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Governments must respect the right of nurses and other health care workers to organize and bargain collectively.

5. **Ensure that all relevant stakeholders are consulted** in the development of climate and health care preparedness programs.

To ensure that measures to address public health and climate preparedness are equitable and sustainable for all, it is imperative that governments consult with a broad and diverse range of stakeholders. Climate change exacerbates racial injustice and gender injustice in part because the most severe health impacts of climate change fall on populations that are already vulnerable to health inequities. Indigenous communities, women and gender-oppressed people, people of color, and low-income communities are on the frontlines of the intertwined health and climate crisis. Proactively addressing the threats of climate change to racial justice and gender justice requires governments to consider the racialized and gendered impacts of climate and health care preparedness programs. This must include consultation with nurses, other health care workers, and our unions. It must also include meaningful consultation with leaders of first nations and Indigenous communities, often among the first impacted by climate change, who must have a seat at the table in health care preparedness efforts.