

How Nonprofits Can Meet the Risks of Climate Change



By Rachel Sams

Lead Consultant and Editor

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Picture this: Rolling blackouts hit your community when a broiling summer strains the power grid. Your nonprofit, whose work includes perishable food assistance, has a generator to keep food fresh during an outage. But your already-tight budget didn't provide for the possibility that you might have to rely on the generator dozens of times this summer.

Another scenario: A 100-year flood damages infrastructure in a community your organization serves. You must rapidly reassess the logistics of how to provide services and the additional funds required to do so.

All nonprofits need to prepare for the effects of climate change and extreme weather on operations and service delivery – but that's just the start. Climate change will shape the logistics of your organization's programs for the long term, and it will shape the types of services your community needs. If your organization prepares for that reality now, you'll have a strong foundation to navigate uncertainty.

Here are a few things to consider.

Make sure you have a business continuity plan. This will lay the groundwork for your nonprofit to continue essential services during a business disruption, such as a natural disaster, power outage, or supply chain interruption. For many nonprofits, extreme weather events are among the most likely disruptions from climate change. [Our Business Impact Analysis worksheet](#) and [My Business Continuity Plan app](#) will help your team sort through key continuity questions and document your backup and contingency plans.

Anticipate how climate change will shape community needs. "Climate change is contributing to humanitarian crises where climate hazards interact with high vulnerability," the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the international body that assesses the science on climate change, writes in [its new report](#). The planet's warming will also speed the spread of infectious disease, destroy property and infrastructure, and decrease access to food and water. Those issues cover a lot of the primary sectors in which nonprofits work. Your nonprofit's strategic plan should take into account how a warming planet could change what community members need, and how your organization can respond.

Reach out to historically marginalized communities your organization serves. [A McKinsey report finds](#) that racial and ethnic minorities and lower-income communities frequently have more exposure to climate hazards. Communities that have been marginalized often don't have as much access as more privileged communities to programs and resources that might help them deal with climate change hazards. "Race—even more than class—is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities in this country hit by climate change," [writes the NAACP](#). Last year Anti-Racism Daily [urged nonprofits to build collective movements](#), in which people with direct experience of oppression make the resource allocation decisions.

Offer support. Seek ways to support grassroots racial and climate justice efforts that shift power to community leaders—and understand that this may require new funding approaches, [Alice Ng of nonprofit accelerator Multiplier urges](#).

Advocate. Gene Takagi [writes on the Nonprofit Law Blog](#) that consideration for the ecosystem can be viewed as mission-related for most nonprofits, or written into their governing documents. Could your organization join with others in the nonprofit sector and beyond to work on climate issues? Leading and funding advocacy on climate is a key way for nonprofits to have an impact, [according to the Johnson Center for Philanthropy](#).

Green your own house. How can your nonprofit be more climate-focused in its daily operations? Can you use more renewable energy in [a fleet or a building](#)? You have already been talking about what job functions and roles can be fulfilled remotely for the long term. How much of a factor is your carbon footprint in those discussions? Environmental awareness may require you to bring a new lens to discussions that already take place.

“Our collective response to climate change must be on a scale commensurate with the threat; it’s an all-hands-on-deck, all-sectors-step-up moment,” [the National Council of Nonprofits writes](#). “If nonprofits don’t involve ourselves in practicing and demanding solutions, none of us will be able to deal with the consequences.”

The warming of our planet affects every human being and every nonprofit mission. It may feel overwhelming to consider how your nonprofit can address this issue. But the IPCC says near-term actions that limit global warming to close to 1.5 degrees Celsius would “substantially reduce projected losses and damages related to climate change in human systems and ecosystems.” That outcome is one we all can and must strive for—and contribute to.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer with the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where a changing climate manifests in a longer wildfire season, aridification, and the urban heat island effect, among other things. She would love to hear how your nonprofit works to meet the risks of climate change at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.