

Policy Brief: Preparing Receiving Communities for Climate Migrations

Authored by

Rachel Bogardus Drew
and Ayate Temsamani

February 2023

This brief is part of the “Capacity and Change in Climate Migrant-Receiving Communities Along the U.S. Gulf: A Three-Case Comparison” project led by the Urban Institute with funding from the National Academy of Science’s Gulf Research Program.

The authors wish to thank the researchers and contributors to the Climate Migration-Receiving Communities project, including staff from:

- Urban Institute
- RAND Corporation
- University of New Orleans
- University of Central Florida
- Texas Southern University

About the Authors

Rachel Bogardus Drew is a senior research director with the Policy Development and Research group at Enterprise Community Partners. She conducts quantitative analyses and studies of important policy issues around affordable housing, housing and community development, housing finance, homeownership, and housing supply and demand concerns. Her work focuses on demand-side analyses of the affordable housing crisis, climate and disaster resilience, and the intersections of housing policy and racial equity.

Ayate Tamsamani is a senior policy analyst on Enterprise Community Partners’ Federal policy team, where she supports the organization’s advocacy efforts to safeguard and expand affordable housing and community development programs. In her role, she primarily focuses on disaster recovery and climate resilience. Ayate holds a Master of Public Administration in Public Policy and Nonprofit Management from NYU.



About Enterprise Community Partners

Enterprise is a national nonprofit that exists to make a good home possible for the millions of families without one. We support community development organizations on the ground, aggregate and invest capital for impact, advance housing policy at every level of government, and build and manage communities ourselves. Since 1982, we have invested \$54 billion and created 873,000 homes across all 50 states – all to make home and community places of pride, power and belonging. Join us at enterprisecommunity.org.

Unless otherwise specifically stated, the views and opinions expressed in the report are solely those of the report’s authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the National Academy of Science, the Urban Institute, or other contributors to the Climate Migrant-Receiving Communities project.



A home on stilts stands near a lagoon in Eden Isle, Louisiana. In 2019, the state introduced a blueprint for relocating residents living in areas vulnerable to climate change. Emily Kask/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Introduction

As the effects of climate change wreak ever greater havoc on our communities, millions of Americans and their families living in the hardest-hit areas are finding little choice but to leave their homes and resettle elsewhere. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that 1.7 million Americans were internally displaced due to disasters in 2021.¹ While not all relocations were permanent, with ever-more destructive impacts from climate change forthcoming – including acute disasters (e.g., hurricanes, wildfires) and more chronic conditions (e.g., repeat flooding, excessive heat, drought) – the scale and scope of such migrations is expected to increase.

Despite the expectation that many communities across the country will soon become destinations for climate migration, from both acute and chronic events, there has been little research and few policy proposals addressing this phenomenon or seeking to improve the resilience of receiving communities. This policy brief outlines steps policymakers at the federal, state and local level can take to help receiving communities address the impacts of climate migrations.

The policy recommendations include solutions to help communities anticipate future migrations, build capacity and networks to leverage additional resources, address migrants' needs for various services, and identify and fill funding and knowledge gaps.

The policy recommendations proposed in this brief are derived from the Climate Migrants and Receiving Communities (CMRC) study from the Urban Institute,² which is one of the first organizations to examine the effects of climate migration in U.S. communities. The study looked at three migration events: residents of New Orleans relocating to the Houston, Texas, area following Hurricane Katrina in 2005; residents of Puerto Rico arriving in central Florida after Hurricane Maria in 2017; and residents of coastal Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes in Louisiana migrating further inland due to the effects of land loss and sea-level rise in the Gulf of Mexico.

¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Report on Internal Displacement," p. 34, www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/grid2021_idmc.pdf.

² As part of the CMRC project, a summit was held in November 2020 that included policymakers from all levels of government. The result of that summit was a series of briefs summarizing discussions about considerations that should be included in potential policy interventions at various stages of the climate migration process. These briefs may be accessed at <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/federal-policy-and-climate-migration-briefing-federal-executive-and-legislative-officials>. A report on the findings of the CMRC study is also available at [\[link once available\]](#).

Through a combination of interviews with members of receiving communities and quantitative analyses of available data, the study considered the effects of these migrations on five different operational areas of receiving communities: housing markets; financial health; employment and economic development; health care systems; and cultural, social and recreational institutions. The study's findings reveal how each community addressed the challenges to their existing housing, financial, labor, health care and social and cultural systems from the influx of new residents, many of whom arrived unexpectedly and with few resources to quickly adapt and assimilate to their new environs.

The study's findings also lend themselves to a set of policy recommendations that, if implemented, could help future receiving communities better anticipate and prepare for the effects of climate-induced migrations. Table 1 summarizes the eight broad policy recommendations detailed in this brief, along with their applicability to the operational areas covered by the CMRC study. It also notes which level of government would lead on the suggested intervention, though coordination across federal, state and local leaders is essential to the effective implementation of any new policies or programs.



Marytza Sanz, president of Latino Leadership, helps revise paperwork at the foundation's headquarters in Orlando, Florida. Her organization helped families relocate from Puerto Rico to central Florida after Hurricane Maria. Ricardo Arduengo/AFP via Getty Images

Table 1: Summary of Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendation		Applicability to Receiving Community Operations					Level of Government
		Housing	Financial Health	Employment/ Economic Development	Health Systems	Social/ Cultural	
1	Encourage receiving communities to build capacity in advance of a migration event	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maybe	Federal
2	Allocate disaster relief to receiving communities when a migration occurs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Federal
3	Set up a centralized system for migrants to access available services and resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maybe	State and Local
4	Increase transportation options and availability for migrants	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Local
5	Provide cash assistance directly to migrants	Yes	Maybe	Maybe	Yes	Maybe	Federal
6	Bolster coordination between key stakeholders	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Local
7	Expand data collection during climate migrations to identify and address both current and future needs for migrants	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	State and Local
8	Plan for a long-term recovery	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	All

The brief begins with a set of guidelines policymakers should use in developing interventions to address the impacts of climate migrations on receiving communities. This includes some considerations that were not explicitly linked to the findings of the CMRC study, but that should be included in any interventions. It also includes suggestions for policy actions that do not specifically target climate migrations, but would help receiving communities develop the capacity and resources to assist migrants in the future.

Following this discussion, the brief looks at the eight policy recommendations in detail, noting the particular challenges each is meant to address, options for what form a potential policy solution could take, and what findings from the CMRC study helped to inform these suggestions. It concludes with a note of caution regarding the limited research on receiving communities and the need for flexibility in designing policy interventions to address climate migration effects not directly observed in the study.



A hurricane evacuation sign in Cameron, Louisiana as Hurricane Delta approached the state in 2020. Go Nakamura/Getty Images

Setting the stage for policy interventions

Any policy interventions intended to support receiving communities of future climate migrations must be viewed within the context of the existing landscape of available programs and best practices for addressing the needs of climate migrants. Therefore, before delving into the specific policy recommendations derived from the CMRC study, it is useful to review what we already know about how receiving communities can prepare for future climate migrations.

Local governments should self-assess their potential for serving as a receiving community. This is done by considering a range of factors that may increase their likelihood for becoming a climate migrant destination. For example, as the CMRC study reveals, migrants will often relocate to communities that are familiar, or with which they have existing cultural ties borne from prior migrations (whether due to climate change impacts or other factors, such as economic opportunity). Migrants may also look for jurisdictions in areas with a relatively low risk of climate-related impacts, especially if located relatively proximate to their own hazard-prone communities. Finally, a community may want to intentionally market itself as a receiving community in order to capitalize on the population growth and economic development that such a migration may bring. With this information, a potential receiving community can then identify its needs for building the capacity and resources to more effectively welcome future climate migrants.

Receiving communities should leverage existing resources.

Most federal recovery and resiliency programs center on assisting residents and communities directly impacted by natural disasters.³ For example, funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) can be used to shelter migrants whose homes are rendered uninhabitable for the short-term following a disaster, including in receiving communities. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) also allows grantees to use these funds for a wide range of activities including the development of housing and infrastructure for residents relocating out of high-hazard areas. Receiving communities that are within the same CDBG-DR-grantee jurisdiction (generally a state or county) as the original home of the migrating population could therefore use this resource to support climate migrants in their long-term resettlement efforts. Finally, communities that receive an annual Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) allocation from HUD can apply these funds toward serving climate migrants without a link to an explicit or proximate disaster. Other federal agencies that have programs available to address specific elements of climate migration include the Department of Transportation, Army Corps of Engineers, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Small Business Administration and the Department of Agriculture.

³ United States Government Accountability Office, Report to Congressional Requesters, "A Climate Migration Pilot Program Could Enhance the Nation's Resilience and Reduce Federal Fiscal Exposure," (GAO-20-488, July 2020), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-488.pdf>.

Communities should preemptively manage expectations with current residents. Those that anticipate (or want to encourage) climate migrants coming to their area should figure out how best to leverage existing resources without taxing established systems. Whatever needs or options are determined to be desirable, community leaders will gain more traction in developing and funding these investments if current residents feel included in the decision-making process. A clear understanding of what and how local resources are being allocated to assist climate migrants can also reduce feelings of resentment or discrimination.

Policymakers should anticipate challenges to implementing new policies or programs. This includes ensuring that available funding and assistance can be equitably accessed by those communities most in need, such as smaller or lower-resourced jurisdictions that may not have the capacity to apply for large or competitive grants. In these cases, programs should place emphasis on supporting capacity building so communities are better able to tap existing and future resources. Policymakers should also build flexibility and efficiency into any new policies to ensure resources can be quickly deployed to best meet the needs of receiving communities.

Receiving communities should seek efficiencies across operational areas. As the policy recommendations below reveal, public interventions can support receiving communities across the five operational areas evaluated in the CMRC study. This broad applicability of interventions not only allows for more effective and efficient responses from receiving communities, but also recognizes the interconnectedness of each area of engagement with climate migrants. Indeed, researchers heard repeatedly during the study about the need for more integrated and less siloed approaches to meeting migrant needs.

State and local governments should anticipate and prepare for climate impacts in their own regions. Receiving communities are often within striking distance of major climate disasters and may themselves be impacted by the same events that prompt a climate migration. Making investments in resilient buildings and infrastructure not only reduces the damage that potential receiving communities may suffer as a result of climate-induced disasters, but can also increase their appeal as a potential destination for climate migrants from nearby regions.



An aerial view of Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana. Residents here were relocated using \$48.3 million of federal dollars in anticipation of the effects of climate change. Cécile Clocheret/AFP via Getty Images

Policy challenges and solutions

With the above framing in mind, the policy recommendations below offer more specific actions that local, state and federal policymakers can take to directly address challenges and needs associated with the impacts of climate migration on receiving communities.

1. Encourage and provide resources for potential receiving communities to build capacity in advance of a migration event.

The challenge: A receiving community may have little advance warning to prepare for the arrival of climate migrants. Advance planning is thus crucial to quickly mobilizing resources and setting up coordinated systems to help new arrivals. This includes identifying immediate shelter and health care options, connecting migrants with employment opportunities, assisting them as they rebuild their financial health, and expanding social/recreational options to help them adjust to their new home. It can also involve building the capacity to address the specific needs of migrants, such as cultivating cultural competency to bridge gaps in traditions and language barriers, collaborating with community partners, and developing relationships with likely origin communities to facilitate information and record sharing. Anticipating and planning for a future migration requires resources and knowledge a potential receiving community may not have—and without which they are unlikely to do this important preparatory work.

The solution: Federal and state agencies should provide funding and technical assistance to encourage potential receiving communities to prepare for a future climate migration. Such a program would allow receiving communities to conduct evaluations of their current capacity to respond to a climate-based migration, anticipate a range of scenarios with different resources needed to address them, and develop off-the-shelf strategies that can be quickly activated. This would also allow receiving communities to identify and establish agreements with key partners from private, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations as collaborators in the effort to serve migrants' short- and longer-term needs. Finally, receiving communities should work with state governments to develop flexible regulations to address issues of employment

licensing, access to health care records, and connecting migrants with public assistance. Doing this work in advance requires an investment in time and resources, but will benefit receiving communities through more effective and seamless processes to help migrants who choose them as their new home.

Evidence from research: While the three receiving communities in the CMRC study worked diligently to meet migrants' needs, a lack of advance preparation hampered their ability to be more effective and efficient with their efforts. This was especially evident in receiving communities' approaches to helping migrants find intermediate and permanent housing, which largely relied on the private market to meet the surge in demand. In central Florida, an existing shortage of affordable and available housing meant sheltering migrants in short-term motels for up to a year after their arrival. While there was some excess housing supply in Houston and Louisiana, migrants still struggled to navigate an unfamiliar and more expensive housing market. If receiving communities had anticipated these needs in advance, they would have been better positioned to identify available housing options and prepare resources to help migrants quickly resettle. Likewise, receiving communities were unprepared to help migrants quickly access and transfer important documentation and information, such as employment licensing and health care records, which could have facilitated a smoother transition and placed less strain on existing resources to accommodate these needs.



Evacuees from Hurricane Katrina receive assistance from local volunteers near Houston's Astrodome. Bob Levey/Getty Images

2. Allocate disaster relief to receiving communities when a migration occurs.

The challenge: Even with pre-planning, receiving communities may be hard-pressed to fund the resources and services needed during a migration. Existing sources of funding for disaster recovery are ill-suited for use by receiving communities. Most federal programs, such as HUD's CDBG-DR program, target jurisdictions that are directly impacted by natural disasters, not those managing the secondary effects of mass migrations from disaster sites. The strain on municipal budgets and services may also foster animosity and discrimination from existing residents, further hampering migrants' efforts to integrate into their new communities.

The solution: The federal government should make grants available to fund receiving communities' climate migration support services. These grants could be modeled on existing disaster recovery programs, such as CDBG-DR, which provides considerable leeway to grantees to spend funds on the most urgent needs. This could include hiring staff to develop and manage migrant-specific systems, expanding existing public assistance programs to meet higher demand, and supporting community institutions directly engaged with the migrant population. It could also be used to expand housing options and affordability in receiving communities with tight private markets through the building of more resilient housing that can withstand future harm, thereby stopping the risk cycle for receiving communities facing their own climate impacts. Other programs administered by the U.S. Departments of Labor and of Health and Human Services could similarly support increased access to resources to meet migrants' needs in these areas.

Evidence from research: In all three CMRC sites, officials repeatedly commented on the impact that meeting migrants' needs had on municipal budgets. This included the higher demand for existing public assistance programs (e.g., housing subsidies, food assistance, medical services), as well as new services required to address the particular needs associated with the trauma and disruption of migrants' relocation. For example, officials noted increased demand for physical and mental health services, which may be urgent and specific to the nature of the migration and thus not easily



Climate migrants from Puerto Rico arrive at the Osceola County Hurricane Maria Reception Center in Kissimmee, Florida following Hurricane Maria. Jayme Gershen/Bloomberg via Getty Images

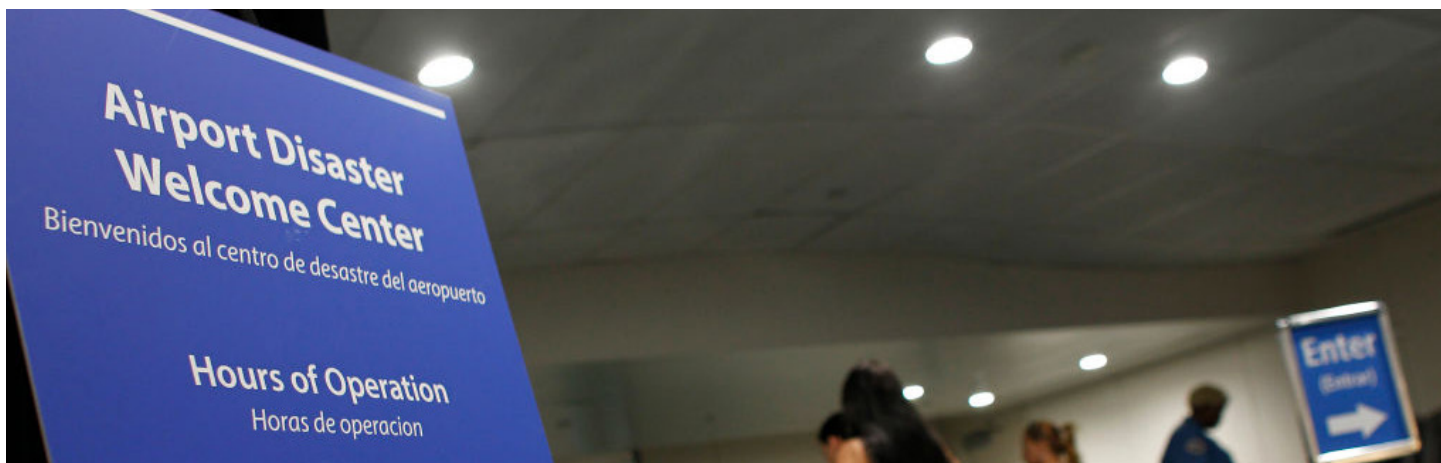
served by the existing health care system. Disaster relief funding allocated to receiving communities could serve to strengthen and expand free health services, mobile clinics and more mental health capacity, specifically for climate migrants. Similarly, schools and faith-based organizations are key sites of social and cultural integration and serve as a link between immediate needs of new migrants and incorporation into receiving communities. This includes the provision of clothing, food, shelter, housing assistance, tuition assistance, after-school programs and transportation. Public funding should be made available to these partners to support their collaboration in serving migrants.

3. Set up a centralized system for migrants to access available services and resources.

The challenge: During a crisis, receiving communities can serve their own and migrants' needs better through simplified and easy-to-access resources. Yet, often receiving communities must piece together their service provision across a complex set of programs, policies and regulations. They may also place these services in dispersed locations across their jurisdiction, based on where existing resources and programs are sited, thus requiring migrants to travel to multiple offices to receive assistance.

The solution: A central hub for migrants to learn about and access critical services, as well as streamlined applications and support programs that can flexibly address a range of needs, can greatly enhance the migration response efforts of receiving communities. As part of their advance planning, receiving communities should identify likely locations for such one-stop shops and coordinate with important stakeholders, including private and nonprofit organizations, to pair information on housing, employment, education, health and financial service needs. Developing a streamlined process for migrants to apply for assistance across different operational areas reduces the burden on administrators, while also improving uptake and facilitating faster delivery of needed services. Having a single application process to allow migrants to apply for assistance with common, flexible and easy-to-understand qualification criteria would also significantly help migrants streamline their process of settling into a new community and recovering from the trauma of their relocation.

Evidence from research: In their efforts to best serve migrants arriving from Puerto Rico, officials in central Florida created a welcome center at Orlando International Airport, where migrants were provided with information on available resources for housing, health and disaster assistance, as well as referrals for other community services. Houston also provided access to emergency supports at the Astrodome, where many Katrina evacuees were initially housed. Yet even with these one-stop shops, there remained challenges in coordinating services and assistance for migrants. For example, the lack of centralized processes was noted as a barrier to helping migrants meet their health care needs in multiple receiving communities; they instead sought care piecemeal from various health care providers, resulting in inefficient and duplicative processes to get migrants the health supports they needed. Interviewees from across sites stated how they had to shift services or offer more services that went beyond their focus area. For instance, in Florida, an interviewee stated that they couldn't focus on health services only; they had to scale up services and provide clothing, food and career services, as well as connecting families to English classes, which they described as challenging due the improvised nature of the work.



A sign directs Puerto Ricans to a welcome center at Orlando International Airport in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Ricardo Arduengo/AFP via Getty Images

4. Increase transportation options and availability for migrants.

The challenge: Many migrants arrive in their new community without a private vehicle, particularly if coming during or in the immediate aftermath of a disaster event, where their vehicle may have been destroyed or left behind during their evacuation. A robust public transportation system, therefore, becomes crucial to allowing these migrants to travel between housing, employment, health care and other location-based services. Yet some receiving communities may not have such a system in place, leaving migrants either isolated or relying on expensive private transportation options. In sprawling and car-dependent communities, migrants may also struggle with the expense of traveling long distances to access needed services. In communities with public transportation options, migrants may still face challenges if existing transit lines cover only a limited area, lack the capacity to adjust to migrants' demand, or are unaffordable.

The solution: Receiving communities need to factor migrants' transportation needs into their planning and provide alternatives where existing transit systems are not suitable. For example, when identifying short-term housing options, local governments should prioritize locations that are proximate to existing transit lines migrants can use to access employment, health care and other services. In some cases, receiving communities might need to increase capacity in their transit systems, such as by running trains and buses more often or outside of peak commuting periods. Migrants may also benefit from receiving discounted passes for public transportation as they look for employment and permanent housing. Where existing public transportation systems are either unavailable or not located near where migrants live, receiving communities may need to create new options to assist migrants as they resettle. This could include creating van-sharing services in areas where migrants are known to have clustered, with routes to take them to service centers, employment hubs, health care facilities or existing transit nodes. Local governments can also contract with private ride-hailing companies to provide expanded and subsidized service to migrants for a limited time.

Finally, receiving communities can work with charitable organizations to offer migrants a chance to affordably purchase a used car, while also facilitating and expediting the registration and licensing process.



As Hurricane Delta headed toward Louisiana, people line up to board an evacuation bus in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Chandan Khanna/AFP via Getty Images

Evidence from research: Despite not being one of the operational areas evaluated in the CMRC study, transportation was mentioned in all three receiving communities as a barrier to effectively meeting migrants' needs. In Houston and central Florida, for example, most migrants did not have the option to bring a vehicle with them, either because they lost it in the storm or by the nature of their transport (by bus or plane) to the receiving community. While emergency shelters in Houston were located near downtown bus lines and proximate to key services such as health care facilities and disaster recovery centers, migrants were quickly relocated to other communities that lacked public transportation in order to access jobs and other services. Likewise, the motels and communities in central Florida where most migrants were housed were generally not accessible by available transit options, which limited the employment, health care and social/cultural opportunities available to these migrants. In Louisiana, many migrants relocated from coastal communities where transportation by boat was common, and thus also lacked a personal vehicle. The dispersed nature of this migration also meant traveling long distances to access housing, employment and health care, which strained migrants' financial and mental well-being, according to interviewees from this region.



Skyla M. Thomas, Quaylon Pitre, and their children in an OYO hotel in Baton Rouge, Louisiana after being displaced by Hurricane Laura in 2020. Bryan Tarnowski/Washington Post via Getty Images

5. Provide cash assistance directly to migrants.

The challenge: Many climate migrants have low-incomes and few, if any, assets to begin with, which limits their options to either move in advance of a crisis or stay and rebuild in their original community. Compounding this with the loss of assets, employment, and other supports due to the migration event generally leaves climate migrants in precarious economic circumstances. While FEMA Individual Assistance funds are available to those impacted by a declared disaster, they are generally limited to immediate post-disaster needs, such as temporary shelter, food and medical care. Yet the needs of climate migrants may go well beyond these few categories, and last for longer durations as they resettle in their new communities. Migrants moving due to more chronic climate-related impacts are not eligible for such assistance.

The solution: A cash grant program could be made available specifically to allow individuals and families leaving a high climate-risk location to resettle in a new community, with extended and less restrictive terms than current programs. Such funds would provide migrants with a financial cushion as they acclimate to their receiving community, allowing them to, for example, purchase a car to mitigate transportation barriers or afford higher housing costs relative to their

previous community. This assistance would also be available equally to both migrants fleeing sudden-onset disasters, as well as chronic climate change impacts. Alternatively, existing cash assistance programs could be made more flexible, allowing climate migrants to use unemployment, housing vouchers or other post-disaster supports outside of their original communities.

Evidence from research: The needs of climate migrants often last longer than what FEMA and other immediate disaster assistance programs provide. Indeed, many Puerto Rican migrants who relocated to central Florida found themselves reliant on temporary housing assistance up to a year following their move, due to high housing costs and short supply of affordable private housing options. Cash assistance could have helped these migrants to cover security deposits and other up-front costs, thus facilitating a faster transition to resettlement in their new community. Likewise, direct transfers would have helped more migrants afford high health care costs, especially those who may have lost their health insurance as a result of their relocation. Providers in receiving communities in particular noted high rates of preventable diseases, mental health needs, and addiction among migrants—all of which could be better addressed if access to health care were made more affordable through cash assistance.



Advertisements for job opportunities hang on a bulletin board at the Osceola County Hurricane Maria Reception Center in Kissimmee, Florida. Jayme Gershen/Bloomberg via Getty Images

6. Bolster coordination between key stakeholders

The challenge: Climate migrations require considerable coordination among different levels of government, along with organizations and institutions within the private and nonprofit sectors, to address the needs of new arrivals. A lack of awareness of different entities' capacities and resources to address a climate migration, however, can hamper response efforts, potentially leaving gaps in service provisions or valuable assets underutilized. This may be especially relevant where there are cultural or language differences between receiving and origin communities that require translators or other assistance to bridge gaps in knowledge and familiarity with the migrant community. Coordination among public agencies in receiving and origin communities can facilitate the transfer of records and information vital to helping migrants find employment, receive health care, access education and establish themselves in their new homes.

The solution: Stakeholders can prepare for climate migrations by identifying ready and relevant partners in advance, developing scenarios of potential migratory events, and establishing protocols for implementation and collaboration if and when needed. This advance planning would substantially streamline the response effort needed, ensure appropriate distributions of resources at critical times of need, and leverage existing relationships and capabilities to support climate migrants. Federal and state officials should look for opportunities to encourage and facilitate these collaborations, potentially as a condition of receipt of funding for advance planning.

Evidence from research: The importance of strengthening stakeholder collaboration was seen throughout the three case sites in the CMRC study. For example, some schools in receiving communities chose to partner with local organizations to raise awareness about climate-related issues and expand educational opportunities for migrants. The University of Central Florida partnered with the city of Orlando's Hispanic Office for Local Assistance to ensure migrants' educational needs were met. In Houston, a local organization worked with elementary school classes to teach about fostering a welcoming culture for kids from New Orleans. In Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes, the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center partners with schools

to educate students about existing environmental conditions in their community, from coastal land loss to hurricane resilience and preparedness plans. Such programs can foster a welcoming culture in receiving communities from a young age, build knowledge about ways to address climate change issues, and build capacity to increase the resilience of receiving communities. Still, gaps in coordination among agencies remained an issue in all three locations, particularly between agencies in receiving and origin communities. These gaps meant long delays in transferring records and certifications used to access employment, especially in high-skill and high-demand professions such as nursing and transportation, which could have helped support other migrants at the same time.



Georgia Carrol looks for Hurricane Katrina evacuees outside the Astrodome in Houston, Texas who can begin working in local stores. Stan Honda/AFP via Getty Images

7. Expand data collection during climate migrations to identify and address both current and future needs for migrants.

The challenge: As the CMRC study has shown, there is a considerable dearth of knowledge about climate migrants and their experiences with receiving communities. Not knowing who these migrants are, what challenges they routinely face, and what solutions have been successful at helping them transition to their new communities limits the ability of public and private organizations to quickly respond when new migrations occur. This data could also be used to help potential receiving communities anticipate and prepare for future climate migrations by identifying best practices for helping migrants adjust and assimilate to their new homes. Data could also help inform effective policy interventions before, during and following a migration event.

The solution: Receiving communities can require certain data collection and reporting tasks of organizations and providers that are contracted to support or serve migrant populations. This should include any recipients of federal funds, including state, regional and local governments. The data to be collected could then include not just information on the migrants themselves—including their use of available assistance programs and the outcomes of this support—but also on the cost, composition and duration of the programs. This information could help receiving communities better anticipate and prepare for activation of these programs in the event of a migration. These requirements, however, should not place undue burdens on providers but should be developed in consultation with them, as well as with researchers, advocates and migrants themselves, to ensure only the most valuable and vital data is being collected. Any plans or systems to conduct data collection should be developed in advance of a migration, as standing up new data collection initiatives during a migration crisis is likely to be challenging. Receiving communities should thus consider ways to extend the capabilities of existing data systems, while the federal government can provide incentives and resources to develop a data infrastructure prior to any future migrations.



Parents sign their children up for school in the Reliant Center near the Astrodome in Houston. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, thousands of evacuees attended local schools. Dave Einsel/Getty Images

Evidence from research: Interviewees in the CMRC study frequently commented on the lack of data on migrants as an impediment to identifying and meeting even their basic needs. This was especially vital to providing health care services for migrants, many of whom had chronic or acute conditions that differed from most of the existing population, thus requiring new specialized and targeted approaches to getting migrants the care they needed. Even data on who in the health care system had come from the origin community was not collected, which made understanding the scale of the needs a challenge. Likewise, data on the housing needs and trajectories of migrants would allow future receiving communities to better anticipate and provide for appropriate housing options, especially in markets with existing tight supplies.

8. Plan for a long-term recovery.

The challenge: Many receiving communities are unprepared for an extended duration of meeting the needs of migrants and navigating the community-wide impact of climate migrations. As such, funding and programmatic commitments may not be readily available to match the length of engagement required to help migrants resettle in their new communities. By focusing on addressing short-term and urgent needs of migrants, such as emergency shelter and health care, communities may also not build the capacity to adapt as those needs change to longer-term concerns, such as finding steady employment, rebuilding financial status and integrating into the community.

The solution: Receiving communities should expect any climate migration to be a slow and evolving process, and be prepared to support migrants' needs for months or even years following their relocation. Such an extended commitment requires available financing to bridge what is available to address immediate needs, and what comes as part of a longer-term recovery when migrants are absorbed into the existing population. This financing can be used to support ongoing

case management for migrants as they seek to set down roots in their new community, subsidies for intermediate housing options, job training and educational services, and social/recreational programs to help migrants retain their culture while integrating into their new community.

Evidence from research: Receiving communities in the CMRC study reported approaching the climate migration initially as a short-term project, which involved time-limited agreements and collaborations with community and nonprofit groups. As the length of the engagement with migrants became apparent, however, many such groups were no longer able to continue service provision, either due to turnover and burnout among staff or a loss of funding for specific programs. Other organizations and programs were designed as emergency responses and did not have the capacity or resources to make the shift from short- to longer-term needs among migrants. Finally, interviewees noted how the continued movement of climate migrants – both within receiving communities and even back to their original communities – meant that long-term supports needed to remain flexible to these changing conditions.



Joann Bourg, a climate refugee from the Isle de Jean Charles, carries her belongings inside her new home at The New Isle resettlement community in Terrebonne Parish near Schriever, Louisiana. Cécile Clocheret/AFP via Getty Images

Conclusion

These policy recommendations make clear the scope of the challenge facing receiving communities. A lack of policy attention to the funding, capacity, programmatic and specialized service needs of these communities has already significantly hampered their ability to effectively address the challenges associated with climate migrations. Continuing to ignore this growing phenomenon will only further exacerbate the strain such events place on migrant destinations, leading to both conflict with existing residents and more inequitable outcomes for migrants themselves.

It is important to stress that the recommendations described here are based on a limited set of data, which may not represent the full range of experiences and challenges all receiving communities face. The CMRC study, which informs this brief, was itself unable to answer all its questions about the impact of climate migrants on receiving communities. The study also only evaluated migrations linked to coastal-based disasters and among communities in the Gulf Coast

region, rather than considering a wider range of migration and receiving community profiles. Thus, any policy interventions intended to support receiving communities should retain a high degree of flexibility and adaptability to the unique circumstances of each migrant community and migration event.

It should further be noted that, while climate migrations spurred by sudden, catastrophic events are more visible, millions of Americans are likely to relocate in coming decades as the more chronic impacts of climate change render their homes, neighborhoods and livelihoods untenable. The effects of these slow and dispersed migrations are no less traumatic to migrants, nor less impactful to receiving communities. All government jurisdictions need to anticipate these moves and prepare their own systems and infrastructures – such as flood control, heat reduction and decarbonization of energy systems – to mitigate the impact.



Hurricane Katrina evacuees Kim Brooks and Sondra Jackson look into their new apartment at the Primrose Casa Bella Senior Apartments in Houston, Texas. Dave Einsel/Getty Images

