

Support children's health through the Public Health Climate Resiliency Act

Written by Gallupsun Staff
Friday, 10 February 2023 02:21



In the Land of Enchantment, families should be able to enjoy our state's natural beauty without worrying about whether worsening environmental conditions will harm their children's health. Unfortunately, children are especially vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, which include extreme heat, poor air quality, drought, flooding, and wildfires. However, this legislative session, lawmakers have the opportunity to protect New Mexicans from these threats to public health by passing the Public Health and Climate Resiliency Act, thereby ensuring a healthier, brighter future for New Mexico children.

The Act – HB 42 and SB 5, sponsored by Rep. Liz Thomson and Sen. Liz Stefanics – enables the state to take a proactive approach to worsening extreme weather events, instead of reacting to each climate event in isolation. If passed, the Act would create a Public Health and Climate Resiliency Program within the Department of Health to increase cooperation and capacity between agencies and to develop and implement response systems before extreme weather events take place. In addition, the Act would also establish a Public Health and Climate Resiliency Fund making resources available to local and tribal communities to adapt to climate change and respond to public health emergencies.

Passing the Public Health and Climate Resiliency Act is especially important given the warming that makes extreme weather events more likely. For example, New Mexico has an average of 50 more days of extreme wildfire conditions now compared to the 1970s. The state also experienced an 18% increase in respiratory emergency room visits during the wildfire season compared to previous years.

Unfortunately, these harmful weather events have a disproportionate impact on children's health and well-being because children's bodies and immune systems are still developing, making them more susceptible to environmental contaminants. Children also breathe in more air and

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drink more water for their body weight than adults, resulting in higher exposure levels that are compounded by the fact that children tend to spend more time outdoors. Furthermore, people who are exposed to environmental pollutants from a young age are more likely to develop health problems compared to people who are exposed in adulthood.

Children are especially vulnerable to a wide range of environment-related health concerns, such as higher rates of asthma, chronic lung diseases, and heat-related deaths. Moreover, youth experience worse mental health outcomes and higher suicide risk after being impacted by an extreme weather event, which is exacerbated by the overall anxiety and stress youth already feel regarding the increasing threat of climate change.

Harm from climate change is not experienced equally, either. Low-income families and children of color, for example, already experience the harms of climate change disproportionately due to socioeconomic disparities, and children who live in high-risk areas are even more vulnerable. In addition, climate change also exacerbates inequalities through its downstream effects, such as worse educational outcomes and economic and community instability.

Fortunately, legislators can address these negative health outcomes and disparities by passing the Public Health and Climate Resiliency Act so the state can better adapt and respond to climate change. In a state as beautiful as New Mexico, children should be able to enjoy the outdoors without suffering from poor health due to worsening environmental conditions. Passing the Act is essential to ensuring that children and families are healthy and able to thrive.

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