

# TURNING UP THE HEAT

**Climate change, California worker health, and ensuring good jobs in a climate-safe economy**



# Executive Summary

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This report explores how climate change and transition impact the health of California workers and the communities where they live. Drawing from a review of existing literature and conversations with Californian workers across industries, we found that unmitigated climate hazards and unplanned transition exacerbate health risks, but addressing climate by ushering in good jobs and strengthening the public sector workforce offer health opportunities.

In California, climate change is changing everything. Climate crises are accelerating and devastating human health, life, and well-being — with Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other workers and communities of color feeling the greatest impacts. At the same time, climate policies and investments are bringing a massive economic shift that will impact all Californians with new industries, more jobs, and opportunities for healthier working conditions.

This is a critical moment of decision for California's future and health. Workers and communities are at risk of being left behind as jobs and industries change, downsize, or shut down entirely. But all this change also presents an opportunity for the state to advance economic, climate, and health justice by ensuring an equitable, worker-centered transition, growing the labor movement, improving pay and labor standards, supporting workers and communities in transition, and shoring up the public sector to protect Californians' health while mitigating climate impacts.

We discuss our findings in four main sections:

**I. Climate hazards and disasters are devastating for workers' physical, mental, and financial health.** Climate hazards and disasters — wildfires, smoke, drought, flooding, and air pollution, including methane leaks from oil wells and fossil fuel pollutants — are associated with a host of mental and physical concerns, ranging from respiratory distress and PTSD to injury, chronic disease, and even risk of death. Extreme heat kills the most workers by far, but wildfires, air pollution, drought, and floods are dangerous and deadly as well. Climate also threatens workers' finances, causing many to put their health on the line to avoid income loss and its health ramifications, while still facing medical expenses and reduced work hours. Any and every Californian worker may be affected, but low income workers of color face the greatest harm both at work and home. This exacerbates existing health inequities.

**II. Ensuring good jobs in the low carbon economy protects worker health.** Public health has long known that workplace conditions shape worker health and well-being. Liveable pay, health-supportive benefits, control and predictability, absence of excessive demands like long hours and heavy workload, workplace hazard prevention, and equitable hiring and promotion practices are key components of good, healthy jobs. Unionization builds worker power to shape these healthy conditions, and the very act of power building is healthy in-and-of itself. Large-scale climate investments designated through both state and federal law mean that billions of dollars will create over a million jobs in California. This change presents an opportunity to grow the labor movement and ensure that all jobs are good jobs that protect worker health and safety, while maintaining a positive environmental impact.

**III. Transition without supports for impacted workers and communities harms health.** Climate is forcing workers and communities into transition through hazard- and

policy-driven industry changes, downsizes, and closure. There is ample historic and contemporary evidence that transition is destructive for worker and community health when it fails to support those affected. Job loss, unemployment, and workplace unpredictability are associated with health harms including depression, heart disease, sleep quality, and even mortality. In fossil fuel-dependent communities, the harms ripple through the public writ large. Industry closures shatter local budgets, leading to public sector job loss and funding crises for health-giving public services, and abandoned wells leak harmful chemicals without proper remediation. Instead, a thoughtfully planned and executed transition led by workers offers an opportunity to uplift health for all workers and communities.

**IV. A strong public sector workforce is required to protect public health from climate change.** California's public sector workforce plays an essential role in mitigation and adaptation. The many services they are responsible for hold the promise of ensuring public health. To be able to play this essential role, the public sector workforce must be fully funded and fully staffed with good jobs, without outsourcing to private corporations. Otherwise, limited funding means limited resources and limited staff, which means limited capacity to protect Californian's health.

The evidence is clear that climate change and transition present both health risks and health opportunities. Actualizing these opportunities is not an inevitability. Without action, we will perpetuate the same inequitable power dynamics and systems that lie at the root of climate crises and health inequities. Although transition is inevitable, health, racial, and economic justice are not. To advance a worker-led transition to a healthy, just, and climate-safe economy, we must:

- Strengthen California's climate hazard protections and enforcement mechanisms to ensure the safety and well-being of workers across industries
- Promote fair labor practices, support local economies, and advance workforce development goals in emerging industries while ensuring accountability and transparency in the use of taxpayer funds
- Address the challenges faced by displaced workers in declining industries, improve health and safety standards in refinery operations, support workforce transition to good jobs in new technologies and sectors, and mitigate the economic impacts of declining oil and gas revenues on local communities
- Strengthen the public sector workforce to protect public health from climate change

# Acknowledgements

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## **Suggested Citation**

Human Impact Partners. "Turning up the Heat: Climate change, California worker health, and ensuring good jobs in the climate-safe economy." California, June 2024

## **Acknowledgements:**

First and foremost, we extend immense gratitude to the 16 people who took the time to share your stories and experiences with us. Your contributions are important and invaluable. We are deeply thankful.

Thank you to the [California Labor for Climate Jobs](#) coalition. Without your collaboration and coordination, this work would not have been possible.

Thank you to Bertha Rodriguez, UFCW 770 Communications Team, for your support and coordination. From Human Impact Partners, thank you to Sari Bilick, Clara Long, Solange Gould, Jamie Sarfeh, Clara Liang, Sukhdip Purewal Boparai, and Christine Mitchell for offering collaboration, guidance, review, and input throughout the research process. Thank you Candace Cross for contributing research on work conditions and health.

## **Copyediting:**

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## **Graphic Design:**

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Background photo on cover: Colin Anderson Productions

Overlaid workers photo on cover: Brooke Anderson

## **About Human Impact Partners (HIP):**

HIP transforms the field of public health to center equity and build collective power with social justice movements.

This project was supported by generous funding from the Blue Shield of California Foundation, The California Endowment, and the California Wellness Foundation.