

2023

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR
THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

TENTH ASSEMBLY

**Climate Change Impacts on Health - Assembly Resolution of
20 October 2022 - Government Response**

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen Smith MLA
Minister for Health
November 2023**

Introduction

On 20 October 2022, a resolution was passed in the ACT Legislative Assembly calling on the ACT Government to:

- a. continue delivering the ACT Climate Change Strategy 2019-2025 and the Bushfire and Air Quality Strategy 2021-2025¹ to ensure that public health services and the community are prepared for the impacts of climate change;
- b. continue to work with the Albanese Government, through National Cabinet and Health Ministers' meetings to support the development of a National Health and Climate Strategy;
- c. develop a nation leading ACT climate change and health plan that reflects the ongoing work of National Cabinet and Health Ministers on a National Health and Climate Strategy;
- d. continue to participate in knowledge and information sharing through the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health and expedite consideration of formal membership;
- e. ensure that the ACT Health Directorate collects and reports on data to monitor against resilience indicators, including continuation of longitudinal survey and climate-related health impacts and costs; and
- f. report back to the Legislative Assembly by the last sitting of 2023.

Background

Australians are already experiencing the impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing. In just over a century, Australia's climate has warmed by over 1°C. Warmer temperatures have increased the frequency of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, bushfires, floods and droughts. Catastrophic events, such as the 2019-20 Black Summer Bushfires and the 2022 Eastern Australia Floods, highlight the growing impact climate change is likely to have on people's health and lives.²

In addition to extreme weather, climate change is impacting the lives of Australians by disrupting the environmental and human systems that play an important role in maintaining health. Climate change also affects health outcomes through its impact on mental health, productivity and workforce conditions, housing, infrastructure and population displacement.

In the ACT and the region, global warming is expected to drive higher maximum temperatures, more frequent heatwave events and a steady increase in mean temperature, an increase in more variable and extreme rainfall patterns, and more frequent and severe drought. Increased frequency of fire weather and number of severe fire danger days in spring and summer is expected to drive more frequent and severe bushfires.

¹ The original motion referenced the 'Bushfire and Air Quality Strategy 2020-2025' the correct titling of the strategy is 'Bushfire and Air Quality Strategy 2021-2025'.

² National Health and Climate Strategy Consultation Paper June 2023

The consequential impacts of a warming climate for the ACT are predicted to be increased pressure on healthcare, emergency response and recovery services, water storage impacts, damage and disruption to electricity and transport infrastructure, financial instability, lost productivity, and reduced thermal comfort in buildings and across the built environment.

Health System Context

In October 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified climate change as “the single biggest health threat facing humanity.” Health care delivery contributes to the problem and health care emissions continue to grow globally.

Pre-existing health inequities and the living and working conditions that impact people’s health contribute to disproportionate impacts from climate change on already socially disadvantaged groups. An emphasis on health equity is paramount in taking climate action, across all sectors, and particularly in health.

Mitigation in the health system focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions across the health system – from direct emissions produced by health care facilities and energy supplied to those facilities, as well as emissions that occur indirectly due to models of care and healthcare supply chains.

Adaptation in the health system seeks to minimise or prevent harmful impacts of climate change already locked into our climate system. Practical innovations must focus on building resilience in health sector infrastructure, our community and our workforce to cope with the current and longer-term impacts.

To meet the challenges of delivering a high quality, low carbon and climate resilient health system, adaptation and mitigation actions are needed to continue to build on and strengthen our response.

Sound public policy that addresses social and health inequities is an essential component of good climate policy. Health is well positioned to engage and collaborate with the range of stakeholders outside of the health sector to design and implement public policy for improved health and wellbeing outcomes, while also tackling climate change. Strong climate action will have co-benefits for health outcomes, patient safety, the health budget and climate emissions.

Delivering the ACT climate strategies to ensure that public health services and the community are prepared for the impacts of climate change

The ACT Government is a nation leader in climate change legislation and policy. Alongside ambitious climate mitigation policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the ACT, the government has a strong climate adaptation agenda, building upon the *ACT Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2016-2020*.

ACT Climate Change Strategy 2019-2025

The *ACT Climate Change Strategy 2019-2025* (the Climate Change Strategy) sets out a pathway to reduce emissions by 50 to 60 per cent (from 1990 levels) by 2025 and achieve net zero by 2045. The focus of the strategy is on radically reducing emissions from the transport and gas sectors - the two largest sources of emissions since the ACT transitioned to 100 per cent renewable electricity in 2019. The Climate Change Strategy commits to a net zero emissions ACT Government health sector by 2040.

Whole of Government Adaptation Framework

Recognising the need to integrate adaptation strategies into government business, a whole of government adaptation framework is guiding ACT Government directorates and agencies to identify climate risks, build an adaptation plan to better anticipate future risks, and develop a climate resilient operational model.

Bushfire Smoke and Air Quality Strategy 2021-2025

The complex health, environmental, social and economic impacts arising from poor air quality in the ACT led to the development of the whole of government *Bushfire Smoke and Air Quality Strategy 2021-2025* (Air Quality Strategy) to guide the ACT's approach to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from significant bushfire smoke events.

The Air Quality Strategy identified eight objectives to direct ACT Government actions over its life, focusing on prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. These actions include the management and reduction of bushfire risks and consequences; strengthened measures to address air quality, including enhanced monitoring and forecasting; supporting development of buildings that are resilient to air pollution; supporting the health and wellbeing of Canberrans; and supporting businesses.

The ACT Government is currently preparing its reporting on the first action plan and developing the second action plan, which will include a focus on the government's response to the investigation into wood heater policy in the ACT.

Working with the Albanese Government to support the development of a National Health and Climate Strategy

The Australian Government is developing a National Health and Climate Strategy with the overarching purpose of protecting the health and wellbeing of Australians from the impacts of climate change. The recent consultation paper proposed that the National Strategy has a broad reach encompassing:

- Emissions mitigation as well as adaptation to the unavoidable impacts of climate change, recognising the interdependent relationship between these two areas.
- All levels of the health system, national, state/territory, and local health systems.
- Primary and community care, secondary and tertiary care, and aged care -- including public health and preventive health.

- Private as well as public providers – including health and aged care providers, providers of diagnostic and pathology services, and providers of health-related education and training.
- Manufacturers – including manufacturers of health technology products and consumables used by the health system.
- Actions beyond the health system to improve the resilience of communities to prevent and improve health, in line with the Health in all Policies approach.

ACT Health is regularly engaging with the Australian Government and states and territories as the National Strategy is developed.

The ACT Minister for Health co-hosted a climate and health roundtable with the Australian Government Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care in Canberra on 25 May 2023 to support the national consultation.

The National Strategy is due to be released by the end of 2023 and will provide a nationally consistent direction from which to progress work underway in the ACT.

Developing a nation leading ACT climate change and health plan

A systematic approach to identifying potential actions, both adaptation and mitigation, across the health system, and across government more broadly, is necessary. Opportunities across all activities, functions and components of the health system must be sought to enable the delivery of safe and high-quality healthcare through an environmentally sustainable and climate resilient ACT health system.

The approach requires collaboration, commitment, and engagement across our complex health system, recognising the interface across Commonwealth, jurisdictional and local governments as well as with non-government organisations and private industry.

The ACT Government has already made significant commitments to improving the sustainability of our health system.

All new health infrastructure is now being planned and built to be fully electric. The Canberra Hospital Master Plan 2021-2041, which guides the future growth and development of the campus, maps the Campus's transition to net zero emissions by 2040 and provides opportunities to reach and exceed canopy cover targets, water management, and reduce environmental impacts to surrounding areas. The more than \$600 million being invested by the ACT Government into the current expansion of the Canberra Hospital will make it the first acute services building in Australia to run on 100 per cent renewable electricity, via all-electric heat pumps, when it opens next year.

The ACT Government is also investing more than a billion dollars into a new Northside Hospital, which will also be all electric and built to high environmental standards – as will our new community infrastructure.

Additionally, a *Sustainability Strategy* for Canberra Health Services (CHS) is being developed to broaden sustainability efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from energy

consumption to encompass clinical care and broader CHS operations. This will involve a review of the organisation's approach to environmental sustainability across the built environment, circular economy and procurement, waste, transport, climate adaptation and clinical care, and prioritise sustainability initiatives that reduce emissions without compromising patient care.

Keeping people and communities healthy has multiple benefits. Reducing the need for hospital based and high intensity healthcare will decrease healthcare-generated emissions, and reducing the susceptibility of our community to climate related impacts will assist with adaptation. The Healthy Canberra Grants funds community organisations to support work in this area, with a focus on priority areas of the *Healthy Canberra: ACT Preventive Health Plan 2020-2025*, contributing to our broader efforts in addressing climate change-related health impacts.

ACT Health is developing an enhanced planning, preparedness and response model to manage current and emerging public health threats and hazards, including those that arise from climate change, utilising a One Health framework. One Health is an effort to integrate human, animal, agricultural and environmental health to support prevention and improve outcomes. ACT Health will promote collaboration across relevant sectors and disciplines in the ACT to prepare for and address challenges such as emerging and changing infectious diseases, increased cross-over of animal diseases into humans, antimicrobial resistance, and environmental threats to human health, including spread of disease-carrying mosquitoes.

Work is underway to ensure health sector readiness to respond to extreme weather and air quality impacts over spring and summer 2023-24 and ensure these arrangements are efficient, effective and sustainable in the face of predicted increases in frequency and severity of extreme weather events. This work focuses on preparedness and response to heatwaves, prolonged poor air quality from bushfire smoke, extreme pollen levels and the risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma. In addition, ACT Health is closely collaborating across the ACT Government on disaster risk reduction activities.

Locally the ACT Government will develop an action plan that aligns with the National Strategy and includes actions to both decarbonise the ACT health system ('mitigation') and build resilience to respond and recover to climate shocks and stressors ('adaptation'). The action plan will bring together existing efforts and activities, with opportunities for strengthening or adapting these in response to the changing environment, as well as new opportunities.

Participating in knowledge and information sharing

As a member of the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network, an international community of more than 1,450 members in 70 countries representing hospitals, healthcare facilities, health systems and health organisations working to achieve significant improvements in sustainability while promoting environmental health in their communities, the ACT will have access to a variety of experiences to inform our work progressing towards a zero-emissions health sector by 2040.

Over the first half of 2023, ACT Health has been consulting with key stakeholders (including CHS, ANU, University of Canberra, Capital Health Network, Justice and Community Services (JACS) and Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD)) to collect information on current activity and build networks to contribute to building a climate resilient health sector/community and a sustainable health care system.

This has provided value across several areas including collecting information on current activity, establishing networks to support future activity in this space, and participating in forums and relevant network meetings to build knowledge and understanding.

ACT Health will continue to participate in knowledge and information sharing through the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health and consider formal membership.

Ensure that the ACT Health Directorate collects and reports on data to monitor against resilience indicators

Monitoring the impact of climate change, including resilience of health systems, has been acknowledged as an important activity by the Australia Government during consultation on the National Strategy. There are a range of data sources that can provide information about climate impact and resilience. This includes a range of stakeholders with potential sources of data across not only health services, but also from intersectoral partners, including ambulance and emergency services, the Bureau of Meteorology, CSIRO, academic partners, animal health partners and water and environment agencies. Noting the complexity of the health system and necessary climate change response, careful consideration of the impacts of the range of potential data sources and variability in methods of collection is needed to allow useful interpretation. This will require a whole of government response.

It is expected that the National Strategy will provide guidance to support consistent data monitoring given the interconnectedness of the health systems.

Next steps

The National Strategy will establish a national plan to prepare for the health challenges presented by climate change. In acknowledging that state and territory governments have made significant progress on emissions mitigation and health system adaptation, it is anticipated that the National Strategy will present the opportunity to identify where the Commonwealth can provide a coordinated, common, collaborative approach across Australia through the sharing and adoption of best practice approaches and reducing duplication of effort.

ACT Health has commenced work on identifying existing activities and new opportunities to support and strengthen our progress towards a climate resilient health system which can protect and improve population health in a warming climate. An initial investment of \$360,000 will be used to strengthen our understanding of the health specific risks and impacts of climate change in the ACT. This will support the development of an ACT strategy and action plan, which will include existing activities as well as opportunities for the future. The national strategy will be key to informing and validating the ACT's approach to the managing the local health and wellbeing impacts of climate change going forward.