



Building for the Future:

Preparing at the Local Level for an Era
of Increased Climate Mobility

April 2025



The worsening impacts of climate-related disasters are affecting people in the U.S. and globally. In 2024, more than 4 million people in the U.S. were displaced by a natural disaster. In this photo, a family arrives at their home that was destroyed by a tornado spawned by Hurricane Milton in Lakewood Park, Florida on October 11, 2024. (Photo by Kathleen Flynn, for *The Washington Post*).

Climate mobility is a growing phenomenon.

The mass movement of people forced to leave their homes due to climate change is reshaping the United States and the world. In the last five years, the United States experienced 115 separate billion-dollar weather and climate disasters, averaging 23 events per year ¹. In 2024 alone, more than four million people were displaced by a natural disaster², and many are moving away from high-risk areas before disaster strikes.

While the majority of climate-displaced people are able to return home, a significant number cannot. For example, a decade after Hurricane Katrina, roughly 40 percent of the estimated 1.5 million people who fled Alabama, Mississippi, and particularly Louisiana were unable to return to their pre-Katrina homes. Climate-displaced people with low incomes can experience greater hardships than they did prior to evacuation. Their homes are often less climate resilient in the first place and more severely damaged; they have fewer financial resources to withstand even a temporary setback; their wage-based jobs are often disrupted or at risk following an extreme weather event; and reductions in affordable housing after disasters can make it difficult for low-income residents to return.³

Climate change is expected to transform our societies. According to the United Nations, by 2050, climate change will force 200 million people across the globe to migrate. In the Americas, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are bearing the brunt of our changing climate. In recent years, the largest number of people seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border (mostly families and unaccompanied minors) come from these three countries.⁴ These migrants are fleeing droughts, floods, increasing temperatures, and rising sea levels, all of which compound long-term drivers of migration such as poverty, political instability, and persecution. Within the United States, tens of millions of residents are predicted to become internally displaced, with the number forced to move due to sea level rise alone estimated to top 13 million.⁵

Terminology: We use the term “climate mobility” as shorthand for “climate-related mobility.” We use terminology as provided by the Climate Migration Council, IOM and Emerson Collective’s **“Climate Migration Explainer”**

Cover Image: Aerial view of John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge over the Ohio River and downtown Cincinnati skyline (Credit: Alexeys, istock by Getty Images)

- 1 NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (2025)
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau. “Phase 4.2 Cycle 09 Household Pulse Survey: August 20 – September 16.” Table 1. Displacement From Home Because of Natural Disaster, by Select Characteristics.
- 3 Baussan, Danielle. “When You Can’t Go Home: The Gulf Coast 10 Years After Katrina.” Center for American Progress, August 18, 2015.
- 4 Markham, Lauren. “How Climate Change Is Pushing Central American Migrants to the U.S.” *The Guardian*, April 6, 2019.
- 5 Hauer, M. “Migration Induced by Sea-Level Rise Could Reshape the U.S. Population Landscape.” *Nature Climate Change* 7, 321–325 (2017).

Why now? Working with cities in this moment would not only address urgent needs but also create models that can be replicated and scaled. We need to do this now, before the number of climate-displaced people dramatically increases.

Climate mobility intersects with and compounds virtually every justice and equity issue.

Whether originating from other parts of the United States or outside of it, climate-related mobility is inextricably linked to systemic racial and social inequities that underlie many of the challenges facing American democracy and society and our global community. As increasing numbers of climate-displaced people seek refuge in cities across the United States, community and government institutions—from food pantries to health clinics to schools—will have to address the impact. Quick and decisive action grounded in justice and equity, with an eye for strengthening our democracy, will make lives better for both longtime residents and the newly arrived, in communities across the country.

The United States is far from ready to effectively address climate mobility.

Indeed, each wave of immigrants to date has tested and sometimes strained the capacity of local governments and communities. Immigrants across the generations ultimately have become net contributors to American society. However, climate-related migration within and to the United States is projected to be at a scale larger than any of the previous migration flows. To ensure that climate-displaced people can thrive and contribute to their new communities, we need to plan ahead to build climate resilient, equitable, and welcoming communities.

City-level climate migration participatory planning is key to building climate resilient and welcoming communities. This image shows the The Solutions Project grantee partner 'La Marana' community participatory design process for resilience in Puerto Rico.

Setting up robust and equitable infrastructure at the local level, to address climate mobility, is imperative.

This infrastructure—in both sending and receiving communities—is needed to help climate-displaced people, both U.S. residents and new arrivals from other countries, successfully build new lives and contribute to their new communities. Infrastructure in receiving communities would meet immediate and long-term needs of climate migrants, while infrastructure in sending communities would support those unable to leave and those who have returned to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

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Cities have a vital role to play, providing a key path to effectively address climate mobility. They are a bright spot of opportunity for philanthropy.

Cities—and the metropolitan areas surrounding them—are where the vast majority of climate-displaced people eventually settle⁶ and thus where support infrastructures are most needed. As early adopters and “first movers,” cities have deep experience developing, implementing, and scaling innovative and inclusive solutions to many of humanity’s most pressing challenges. Many local jurisdictions experience the impact of extreme weather events on their communities directly and are eager to partner with philanthropy to innovate solutions.

Planning for climate mobility is relatively new in the United States, but over the past two decades, some U.S. cities and cities around the world have laid the foundation for building a climate mobility infrastructure through equitable planning and through programs and policies that welcome immigrants and prepare for and adapt to the impacts of extreme weather. Some cities have also strengthened their physical infrastructure, including transportation, utilities, housing, and communication. While only a handful are currently specific to climate mobility, these efforts provide solid building blocks for cities to address the needs of internal and international migrants who have been displaced by climate change. Philanthropic support can help cities develop mechanisms to incentivize and support these efforts and develop multi-sector models that can be adapted and replicated across the country.

6 Chung, J.-H. (2023, February 7). “Climate-Related Migration Into Cities: What We Know and Why It Matters.” United Nations University.

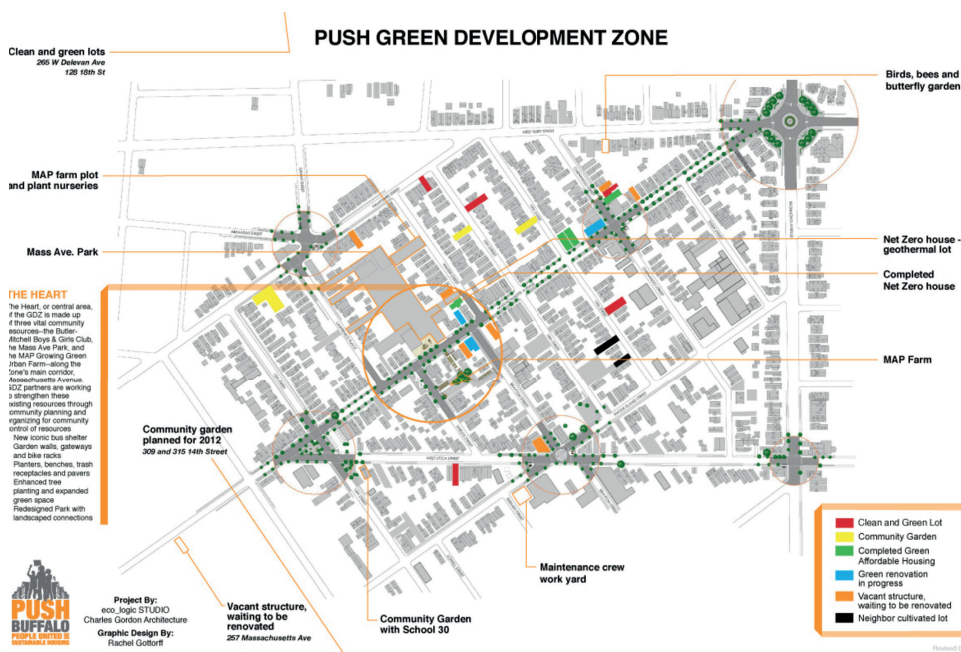
Interconnected challenges require interconnected solutions.

To meet the challenge at hand, we need to build and nurture vibrant, multi-sector ecosystems at the local level—and a strong national infrastructure to support work on the ground. In addition to city and other local governments, the ecosystems include community organizations, advocacy groups, academia, think tanks, K-12 schools, business, labor, philanthropy, as well as experts in a diverse range of areas from climate adaptation and urban planning to narrative change and immigrant justice. These ecosystems—which in the United States are in the early stages of development—work to support and engage impacted communities and ensure a strong and effective climate mobility infrastructure. And they are, in turn, supported by national associations of cities, business, labor, and urban planners; and national experts in climate and migration.

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Equitable, welcoming, climate resilient cities require thoughtful planning. This image shows initial drawings for Buffalo, New York’s Green Development Zone, a 25-square block area on Buffalo’s West Side, which encompasses green affordable housing construction, community-based renewable energy projects, green jobs training, green infrastructure, and vacant land restoration.



Philanthropy has a unique opportunity to catalyze and build a robust climate mobility ecosystem and infrastructure in cities across the country.

Had such an ecosystem and infrastructure been in place previously in the United States, Black people migrating to the North during the Great Migration, flood-impacted individuals and families fleeing New Orleans as a result of Hurricane Katrina, and the communities in which they settled would have fared better socially and economically during the initial in-migration period and over the long term.

Although current efforts to build a climate mobility ecosystem and infrastructure are siloed, fragmented, and uneven, there are neighborhood-based resilience hubs, regional collaboratives, and state and national city networks that—with philanthropic support—are poised to include climate mobility in their work and eventually replicate and scale their efforts.

Philanthropy can support multi-sector leaders and stakeholders with **resources for general planning, scenario planning, alignment, and coordination** to develop this burgeoning field. These stakeholders need to work together to define and move forward collective goals, priorities, and strategies. And they need predictive modeling for their specific geographies to help them understand and plan for climate change and migration. Philanthropy can significantly advance this field by **funding pilot projects** with a strong documentation and evaluation component, as well as **training and technical assistance** to support replication.

Philanthropic funding can **incentivize and leverage public investments** at the local and state levels, particularly through public-private partnerships. And funding for **policy and advocacy** can encourage local and state governments to integrate climate mobility into planning; put in place **policies, practices, and resources** that support the needed infrastructure; and **work in collaboration** with other actors in the ecosystem.

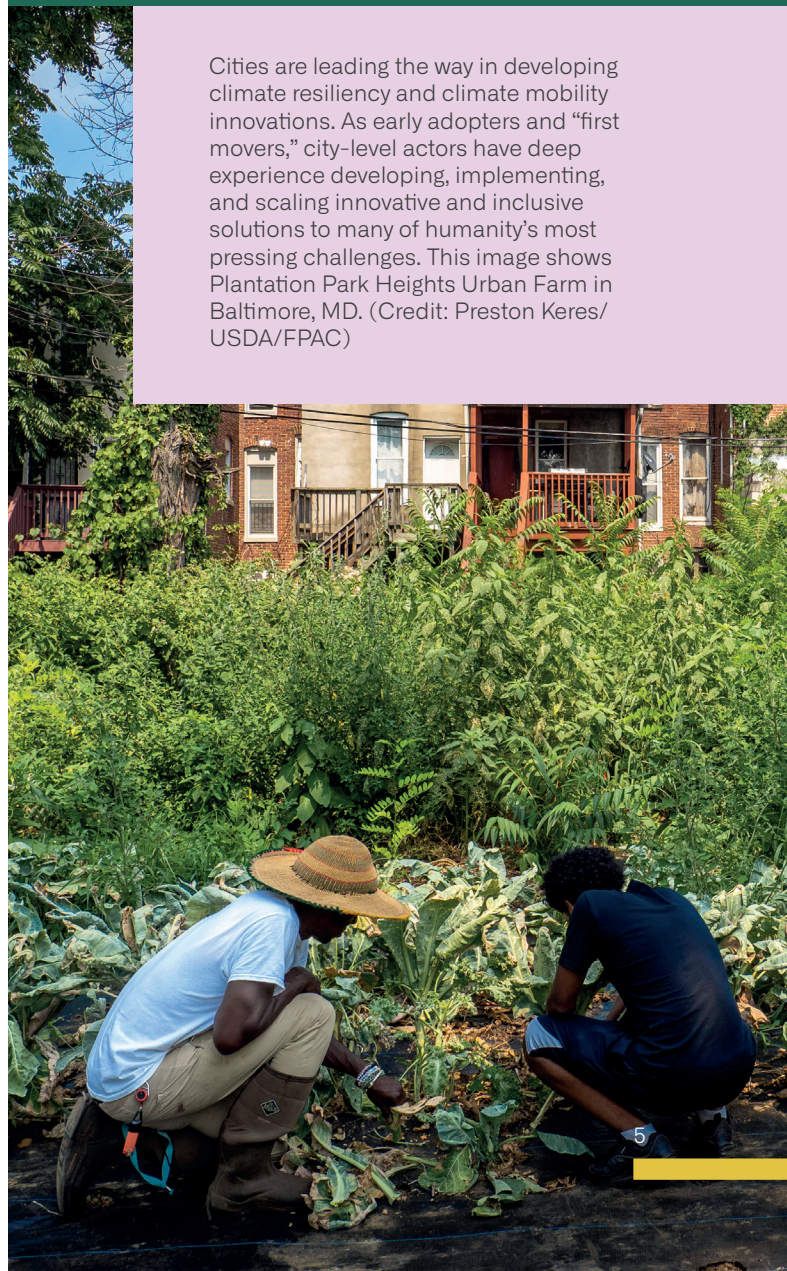
We invite our funder colleagues to consider how each of us can enter the climate space from our particular lens. There is a role for all of us, no matter our issue area or our size. By integrating climate mobility into our analysis and strategy, our sector can help build this ecosystem and improve outcomes in our priority areas (e.g., health, education, workforce, economic development, democracy, equity, and justice).

Funders, particularly those new to climate mobility, can begin by stepping back and learning about trends, challenges, key actors, current efforts, and emerging best practices to understand the urgency and complexity of the issues. By engaging and deploying resources at the intersection of climate, migration, and our funding priorities, philanthropy can help local communities across the country prepare both for climate change and the resulting movement of people in ways that strengthen our democracy and reap social and economic benefits for all.



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Cities are leading the way in developing climate resiliency and climate mobility innovations. As early adopters and “first movers,” city-level actors have deep experience developing, implementing, and scaling innovative and inclusive solutions to many of humanity’s most pressing challenges. This image shows Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm in Baltimore, MD. (Credit: Preston Keres/USDA/FPAC)



Building for the Future:

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This brief was commissioned by Unbound Philanthropy to provide grantmaking institutions with entry points for investing at the intersection of climate and migration in the United States.

Credits

Building for the Future: Preparing at the Local Level for an Era of Increased Climate Mobility is based on a forthcoming white paper by Social Entrepreneur **David Lubell**, who has been helping communities prepare for immigration-related demographic change for over 20 years. He founded Welcoming America in 2009 and led this groundbreaking organization until 2018. During that time, he helped scale the Welcoming model to over 200 communities across the United States and later helped replicate it in seven countries through the Welcoming International Initiative. Prior to that, he founded and led (2002-2008) the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. David is currently a Climate Mobility and Cities fellow with ICLEI-USA, the Sustainability Network, where he has been researching opportunities for collaboration between various actors in the Climate Mobility and Cities ecosystem. He is also an advisor to Unbound Philanthropy on the intersection of climate mobility and cities.

Daraneé Petsod, currently a senior advisor at Hyphen and former president of Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (1998-2020), adapted David's white paper into this brief to guide philanthropic investment. The expertise and insights of trailblazing groups in this developing ecosystem, too many to name, inspired and informed this brief. **Scott Preston** conducted essential research grounding the brief's analysis; the **team at Unbound Philanthropy** provided crucial thought partnership and financial support; and **Rich Stolz** offered invaluable guidance and mentorship.

