

Engaging Essential Hospitals in Climate Mitigation and Resilience Action



Mission:

With an eye toward improving individual and population health, especially for those facing social and economic barriers, the Institute supports essential hospitals in providing high-quality, equitable, and affordable care to their communities by identifying promising clinical practices, conducting research, disseminating innovative strategies, and helping members improve their organizational performance.

As a grant-funded partner in the Climate Change Health and Equity (CCHE) network, Essential Hospitals Institute (EHI) increases awareness and technical capacity among essential hospital leadership and staff to implement equitable climate mitigation and resilience solutions, focusing on low-wealth communities and communities of color. Their efforts align with the overall [CCHE Theory of Change](#) as part of Strategy 1.

EHI motivates climate action across America's Essential Hospitals' (AEH) membership by amplifying and disseminating learnings in climate resilience, decarbonization, and return on investment from members' projects. The organization convenes interest groups, develops resources, fosters peer-to-peer learning among hospital staff and leaders, and promotes collaboration among essential hospitals to drive operational shifts and sustain project efforts. Over the long term, this work aims to support essential hospitals' efforts to invest in climate mitigation and resilience solutions, ultimately enhancing climate resilience and reducing health risks for low-wealth communities and communities of color. See an overview of EHI's key activities and intended impacts in their [CCHE theory of change \(slide 7, 2022\)](#), and described in more detail below.

Policies, Activities, and Initiatives Advanced During the CCHE Initiative

Increased Demand for EHI CCHE Events, Tools, and Resources. Since 2021, the demand for EHI CCHE activities and resources has grown significantly. When EHI first convened a conversation about climate change at its annual VITAL Conference, there were questions about why climate was on the agenda. By 2023 and 2024, interest in the topic had surged beyond expectations. Attendance at the Climate Change Luncheon at the 2024 America's Essential Hospital VITAL Conference more than doubled compared to 2023, exceeding 100 attendees. Due to space constraints, EHI had to turn people away. This increased interest in climate change led to EHI building a significant cohort of hospital staff across its membership working on climate issues. This work involves engaging new players, such as facilities and sustainability staff, and fostering cross-departmental teams.

Select Resources and Media

[The State of Climate Resilience and Climate Mitigation Efforts at Essential Hospitals](#)

[Advancing Climate Resilience and Mitigation at Essential Hospitals](#)

More resources can be found online at [Essential Communities](#)

Expanded of Climate Vulnerability and Structural Racism Components. EHI expanded the Climate Vulnerability and Structural Racism components of the Climate Resource Library within the Essential Communities website, an online resource which provides insight into essential hospitals' efforts nationwide to address social determinants of health among their patients and members of the community. The site was viewed 4,200 times in 2024. Over 50 climate-related resources, including toolkits, frameworks, and action lists for decarbonization in healthcare, have been added. Multiple sustainability programs have also been included in the program map, highlighting ongoing climate mitigation and resilience efforts at essential hospitals. EHI will continue to upload resources and programs to meet members' interests.

Leveraged Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Funding for Climate Mitigation and Resilience Initiatives. EHI collaborated with the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Climate Change and Health Equity (OCCHE) to plan a seven-week program on the IRA from January to April 2024. This program aimed to help healthcare providers leverage IRA funding for climate mitigation and resilience initiatives. Essential Hospitals Breakout Sessions were held bi-weekly, with 30-50 representatives actively participating. Additionally, EHI hosted a webinar on March 27, 2024, attended by 60 members, featuring speakers from Deloitte and the Commonwealth Fund on decarbonizing healthcare and IRA tax incentives. In collaboration with Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), also a CCHE-funded network partner, EHI launched an IRA Learning Lab in 2024 to provide bi-weekly hands-on guidance, workshops, and various resources to help essential hospitals leveraged IRA funding for decarbonization projects.

Provided Proof of Concept Through Focused Pilot Projects. Due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, EHI shifted its strategy from broad-based motivation and education to smaller, more focused pilot projects at St. Luke's Medical System (internal waste auditing), University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (strategic elevator energy monitoring and usage), and University of California, San Francisco (greening the operating room). EHI invited their grantees to AEH's annual conference, which helped build connections between members. Throughout the conference, members discussed how they can begin engaging in the climate change, health, and equity space, how to navigate this space with limited resources, resource sharing, and the financial advantages of investing in climate projects.

Increased Visibility and Responsibility in Healthcare. Visibility around the issue of climate change and healthcare's contribution has significantly increased. Healthcare systems are recognizing the impacts on their operations and the communities they serve, fostering a growing sense of responsibility to help. This has created a strong connection to health equity, with hospital leaders increasingly discussing climate change as a health equity and racial justice issue.

Supported AEH Members to Increase Focus on Climate Change and Integrate it into Strategic Planning. EHI has seen increased emphasis on climate change in essential hospitals; some are addressing climate as a carbon footprint issue while others are addressing it as a racial justice issue. For example, Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital (ZSFG) had a program connecting patients with local Black-owned farms as part of their climate and health equity efforts, though it is not longer in operation as of November 2024. This initiative supported sustainable agriculture and improves food security for vulnerable communities. By partnering with these farms, ZSFG provided fresh, locally grown produce to patients, promoting healthier eating habits, supporting local economies, and reducing the carbon footprint from food transportation. In another example, Boston Medical Center (BMC) involves the community in sustainability efforts, including a rooftop farm. Over the last seven years, 75% of the food grown on the farm has gone to low-income communities experiencing food insecurity. BMC also built a behavioral health center funded by savings from sustainability initiatives. Their power prescription program helps patients by applying a \$50 credit from their own solar panels.

Engaged Essential Hospital Leaders in Climate Resilience and Mitigation. In partnership with HCWH, EHI hosted a C-Suite-facing event called "Enhancing Climate Resilience and Mitigation: A C-Suite Convening" to gather key hospital decision-makers who could advocate for climate change initiatives to their boards. Initially focused on CFOs, the event engaged a more diverse group of staff than expected, including chief equity officers, and leadership representing facilities and sustainability divisions. Participants gained insights into each other's views on climate change and health and what it takes to advance climate resilience and mitigation strategies in healthcare. Many participants expressed a need for clear guidance, often saying they didn't know the first step and needed a roadmap for action. The complexity of implementation remains a challenge, focusing on the "how" rather than the "why."

Key Partners

Organization	Type
Health Care Without Harm	Health Partner
Practice Greenhealth	Health Partner
Department of Health and Human Services. OCCHE	Health Partner
Wells Fargo	Funding Partner
Oakwell	Funding Partner
The Commonwealth Fund	Funding Partner
National Academy of Medicine	Academic Partner
Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center	Health Partner
Boston Medical Center	Health Partner
University of Arkansas Medical Sciences	Health Partner
St. Luke's Health	Health Partner
University of California	Health Partner
Association of Healthcare Executives	Health Partner
Grantee-requested local partners (e.g., Idaho Clinicians for Climate and Health)	Community Partner

Insights from CCHE Initiative

- Learning from CCHE network members has been transformational for understanding how this work gets done through a community power building lens.** Shared learning from CCHE meetings has supported EHI's work in racial justice and structural racism. The importance of building trust between the hospital and community-based organizations in a non-transactional way is something that has been emphasized in both the CCHE network and has resonated across other parts of the EHI research portfolio.
- Investing in hospitals goes beyond policy white papers to providing hospitals with the resources they need to sustain their work.** It is okay to start small and focus on low-hanging fruit, like changing out light bulbs and reinvesting the savings. These changes can yield returns on investment that lead to subsequent larger-scale efforts.
- Initially, identifying the right staff within the member hospitals was challenging, but this work paid off in the development of a strong climate-focused network of hospital leaders.** Having a climate champion is key, but it requires extensive collaboration and communication, as climate initiatives touch every aspect of operations. EHI's current challenge is meeting everyone where they are and providing support across the board. Some participants are assessing what they can do, while others are dealing with regulatory red tape. Managing these diverse needs means the Institute will continue to address this topic from multiple angles.

Looking Ahead

Six years ago, EHI's work on climate change, health, and equity started with funding from the Kresge Foundation to implement a research project. Today, there are dedicated staff leading work on climate policy. EHI is currently exploring new collaboration opportunities to support no-cost energy audits that inform essential hospital strategic plans.