

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

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Equity-informed water management decisions in the era of climate change: A fledging practice gains a foothold

Education, training, financing identified as key needs to transform water systems for benefit of all

Flooding fueled by climate change hits low-income neighborhoods most severely, disproportionately harming those with limited resources to prepare for and recover from damages – particularly communities of color.

A small but effective cadre of people and organizations is assembling the knowledge, skills and information base to equitably build the resilience of those communities, but an infusion of education, training and financing is necessary to transform inequitable systems and practices in the water sector, according to a new report.

The report, “[Building a Community of Practice at the Intersection of Water, Climate Resilience and Equity](#),” analyzed the challenges and opportunities for those working to address the interplay of water systems, climate resilience and equity. The analysis includes an examination of the work of organizations across the nation that are part of The Kresge Foundation’s [Climate Resilient and Equitable Water Systems](#) (CREWS) initiative. Kresge funded the report, written by Meridian Institute for American Rivers.

“A primary driver for our support of this report is to equip community leaders, municipal and water utility decision-makers, and funders with the guidance they need to make smart decisions about water infrastructure, use inclusive decision-making and explore innovative financing mechanisms that better incorporate the needs of low-income residents and communities of color,” said Dr. Jalonne L. White-Newsome, senior program officer at Kresge and manager of the CREWS initiative. “We are confident

that the recommendations will be valuable for water utility managers, policymakers, community leaders, the philanthropic sector and others working in this arena.”

The report acknowledges the water/climate resilience/equity nexus is still a fledgling arena for many community leaders and policy makers to explore. It summarizes key needs necessary to expand work that explicitly addresses all three. They include:

- Deeper education about climate science and training on how to use it to inform water infrastructure project planning and decision making.
- Greater awareness of the importance of stormwater and wastewater infrastructure among residents and those making policy and funding decisions.
- Better data, information and communication of the benefits of green stormwater infrastructure like rain gardens and wetlands, along with the co-benefits they provide in the way of community aesthetics, cooling capacity and recreation.
- Education and skills training for local organizations and community members.
- Funding that allows community-based leaders to build institutional capacity over time.
- Balancing and integrating investments that advance the field of work as a whole with “on the ground” funding of efforts in particular communities to achieve optimal impact and equitable outcomes.

Several promising methods to meet these needs are being developed by organizations working together under the Kresge CREWS initiative. Examples include:

- The **Anthropocene Alliance**’s Flood Forum USA initiative, which has built a nationwide grassroots coalition of flood survivor advocacy groups demanding action on environmental challenges and climate change. Group leaders engage in monthly videoconferences where they are provided with access to training, information, contacts and flood mitigation techniques.
- **Earth Economics** provides economic expertise in ecosystem valuation and cost-benefit analysis. They have supported local partners in obtaining federal funding for post-disaster green infrastructure (GI) investments and are helping expand financing for GI by working to have it considered an “asset” in government accounting systems.
- The **U.S. Water Alliance**’s Equitable Water Future initiative builds the capacity of a range of stakeholders to advance equitable and resilient water management practices. The initiative’s Water Equity Taskforce engages utility leaders and city partners in the acceleration of equitable practices.
- **American Rivers** supports the work of the Atlanta Watershed Learning Network to train residents of marginalized communities affected by flooding and combined sewer overflows to engage in water decision making and advocacy.
- **One Voice**’s Water, Inclusion and Innovation Project includes a review of climate plans. A key component is an assessment of adaptation plans for six cities in the Southeast to understand how they have prioritized water and wastewater infrastructure to manage both financial and environmental needs.

The CREWS initiative was launched in 2017 to transform urban stormwater and wastewater systems so they provide reliable, equitable and innovative services to communities despite the uncertainties introduced by climate change. It aims to strengthen climate-vulnerable regions and water systems by nurturing a new cadre of water leaders; building the case and enabling environment for equitable water system transformation; and advancing nontraditional approaches to financing, operations and community participation that produce multiple community benefits.

The CREWS work is making a difference, the report concludes: “Spurred by the vision, leadership and philanthropy of The Kresge Foundation CREWS initiative, this emerging community of practice is having a notable impact in communities and policymaking decisions across the United States. The emphasis Kresge has put on the equity dimension of urban flooding and climate resilience is helping to instill an “equity lens” in the water sector more broadly.”

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[American Rivers](#) protects wild rivers, restores damaged rivers and conserves clean water for people and nature. Since 1973, American Rivers has protected and restored more than 150,000 miles of rivers through advocacy efforts, on-the-ground projects and an annual America’s Most Endangered Rivers® campaign. Headquartered in Washington, DC, American Rivers has offices across the country and more than 275,000 members, supporters and volunteers.

[Meridian Institute](#) is a not-for-profit organization that helps people solve complex and controversial problems, make informed decisions, and implement solutions that improve lives, the economy, and the environment. We design and manage collaboration, providing services such as facilitation, mediation, convening power, and strategic planning. Drawing from over two decades of experience, we help people develop and implement solutions across a wide range of issue areas, including climate change and energy, agriculture and food systems, oceans and freshwater, forests, and health.

[The Kresge Foundation](#) was founded in 1924 to promote human progress. Today, Kresge fulfills that mission by building and strengthening pathways to opportunity for low-income people in America’s cities, seeking to dismantle structural and systemic barriers to equality and justice. Using a full array of grant, loan, and other investment tools, Kresge invests more than \$160 million annually to foster economic and social change.