



The Great American Climate Migration

A Roundtable Discussion by Grassroots Leaders

The document below was the product of a series of roundtable discussions among grassroots leaders from ten low-income, Black, Latinx, and Native American communities. They were convened by Anthropocene Alliance (A2) and The Climigration Network (CN) between February 23rd and August 1st, 2021 to address [The Great American Climate Migration](#), the resettlement of some [30 million](#) Americans over the next half-century due to climate change.

For the undersigned leaders, the crisis is now. They have suffered extreme heat, floods, and fires. Many must also confront racism, just like African Americans did during the Great Northward Migration (1916-1970). It's well documented that Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities in the U.S. [are more likely](#) than white ones to experience climate exacerbated disasters, and receive [less government support](#) for recovery.

Migrants are not, however, exclusively Black, Latinx or Indigenous. Anyone who lives in a floodplain (or near one), or in a region impacted by high heat and wildfires is liable to become a climate migrant. Anyone living on the Gulf, Atlantic or Pacific coasts may be forced to abandon their home.

Our goals in publishing these conversations are 1) to create a protocol for communities that decide to migrate; 2) encourage changes to the existing disaster relocation system to make it fairer and more effective; 3) ensure that unscrupulous developers don't exploit vulnerable communities to profit from The Great American Climate Migration; and 4) suggest the best ways to encourage discussions about migration within communities, and between them and supporting agencies or charitable foundations.

And finally, we ask for the immediate creation of a Climate Migration Agency within a new Department of Climate Change. The crisis of climate change displacement has already reached a level where it needs significant investment of human and financial resources. A robust response now plus sound planning will help us avoid a [catastrophic migration](#) later.

Note: This document was edited by the staff of A2 for the sake of succinctness. Edits were approved by discussion participants.

1. Before anything else, let's talk, reason, and learn together. Our communities have first-hand experience with floods and fires and knowledge about how to protect ourselves and others. We want to share those insights. But we also want to learn more: Federal, state, and local authorities should step up and provide us with whatever additional resources and expertise we need to understand climate exacerbated disasters and possible migration to safer areas.

"Everyone is making decisions about how to tackle the issues we are facing, but nobody is having conversations with us or drawing upon our experience protecting homes and communities."

"Don't say to us: 'We want you to become resilient.' We have always been resilient! Look at what we've had to overcome! Help us build strong, sustainable communities."

2. Before we discuss migration, let's first agree to stop development in places vulnerable to excessive heat, drought, floods, or fires. If a proposed development isn't safe, it shouldn't be built, otherwise, we're just ensuring even more climate migration in the future!

Existing communities must be protected, as far as possible, from climate-driven disasters. If an industry or business has left an area vulnerable to disaster – for example by building over a wetland – it should undo its mistake. And that also goes for areas that are largely uninhabited by people: non-human animals deserve a healthy environment too!

"Reckless development is increasingly exposing communities to flood risk. Practices like "fill and build" – raising elevation by building on dirt or sand fill – are a major flood hazard for adjacent properties."

"Many of us were forced by high prices and discrimination to live in communities threatened by floods, fires or pollution. Now that we've made lemonade out of lemons, the climate crisis is threatening us! People need information about future risks, and options to stay, if it's feasible, or assistance to go, if it's necessary."

"The city hasn't disclosed anything about our flooding risk. We have worked to uncover information, but now have lots of questions and no answers. What exactly are our options?"

"Before allowing development in risky areas, municipalities should focus on protecting existing communities and making sure they are safe from contaminants."

3. Please remember, we love our communities. So, when you suggest migration, have patience while we carefully consider it. The choice of whether to migrate is a big one and should be ours to make. Trust us: If we are given good, accessible information, we'll make the right decisions.

In America, everybody has the right to live wherever they want, but the best migration solutions require buy-in from both receiving and migrating communities. Government or foundation funded case workers will be necessary to provide application assistance,

emotional support, and transition assistance in receiving localities.

“Sometimes we are given information in a form we cannot understand. Please be sensitive to non-English speakers and to people (most of us) unfamiliar with complex government jargon. Give us the information we need in accessible form.”

“Many communities aren’t warned about their flood risk. Emergency management departments must widely share this information with us.”

“If my community wants to relocate, I’ll stand with them, and do everything I can to make it work. We’ve got to do it together. That’s the only way it’s gonna be a success.”

4. Once we have made the difficult decision to migrate, don’t make us wait forever!

FEMA says on its website: “It is not a simple process” and “It’s a lengthy process.” We understand, but have they removed all unnecessary barriers? It shouldn’t take [five years](#) – the current average – to organize home buyouts. Think of how many floods and fires might occur in that time! Also, FEMA should reduce its 25% match requirements for smaller, local governments with limited capacity or resources.

Make sure home buy-out finance formulas are fair. The existing model, based upon cost-benefit analysis, doesn’t recognize that people of color are often given [lower home appraisals](#) than white people in equivalent homes and neighborhoods. As things stand, [expensive real estate](#) almost always beats-out cheaper property in the race for federal money.

And if, after full deliberation, a neighborhood decides against migration, be sure there’s a plan in place if things get worse and people change their minds. Always avoid a crisis!

“Climate change is here; sea levels are rising, and many people should be relocated; there’s just no other way around it. Those who are elderly may prefer to just stay and pray, but that may not save them. We need to look at ways to support them and other vulnerable populations. (And we should have serious conversations with young people who think they can ride out hurricanes.)

“Federal buyout programs are problematic for two main reasons. 1) They are prejudiced against poorer, smaller communities and communities of color; and 2) They take way too long, leaving people stuck in dangerous homes, trailers or even tents!”

“Allocating federal money through the state can be a huge barrier for getting money to Black and brown communities. Some of our state governments still celebrate the confederate flag! Send federal dollars directly to our communities, so we don’t have to hope that the state will do the right thing.”

“When you’re in a flood, you may lose your documents, but government agencies want them before they will help you. Also, some of them ask “Did you pay your taxes? What’s that got to do with me getting out of a flood zone?” Cut the red tape!

“Smaller governments sometimes resist supporting a buyout because it hurts their tax base when people move outside their jurisdiction. They must be either compensated or bypassed. The people themselves shouldn’t be made to suffer.”

5. OK, so let’s suppose: a) We have chosen to relocate; b) Red tape is minimal; and c) Low-wealth communities are given a fair shot at federal dollars. Will government payouts be enough to let us to buy safe houses in nice neighborhoods? Remember: [Redlining](#) and a history of flood or fire damage has already devalued our homes. Are we going to be punished again by inadequate buyout offers? Will there be jobs, good schools, and recreational opportunities in the receiving community? The imperative underlying payments should be: “Make the family and the community whole.” Besides, buyouts are really [good investments](#) for impacted communities and the government agencies that pay for disaster relief.

“There’s nowhere for most of us to go, nowhere affordable, that is.”

“We need to ensure that we have safe housing, away from vulnerable areas.”

“We need enough money to move and get settled in a new location – enough to live on until we find another job and get on our feet. There may be some good programs out there to help, but we shouldn’t have to fight so hard to get access to them.”

“Once folks are offered a buyout, they may challenge it if they think it’s too low. Make the appeals process transparent. We’ve got to try to make families and communities whole.”

6. Here’s something we all strongly agree on: Nobody should profit from our distress! It’s wrong for private developers or politicians to pressure us to relocate from communities we love and then rebuild on the same spot to make a profit. That’s happening [all over](#) the place. It’s called “[disaster capitalism](#)” or “[climate gentrification](#)” and it’s got to stop.

Government buyouts are a different story. Vacated land, according to FEMA and HUD, must become “open space...in perpetuity.” But it’s not good enough to just leave an empty, concrete pad or a pile of rubble. The land should be restored to its natural state so it can become a home for native plants, birds, butterflies, animals, or fish. And one more thing: Respect the pain and loss of the people who moved away – memorialize their lives and histories with physical markers and oral history projects.

“In our city, real estate developers and their political allies are trying to do everything to get people out of their damaged homes so they can sell it to others at a huge profit! That’s not fair. If our neighborhood is safe to live in, help us repair our homes so WE can stay!”

“For years, rich, white neighbors said our communities were bad in all sorts of ways. But now we are valuable riverfront property, and they’re looking for a way to move us out and redevelop our neighborhood. That’s just a fancy version of stealing. So, hands off!”

“We are trying to put together all the moving parts to save our neighborhood before some rich developer comes in to line his own pockets as well as that of the mayor and city council. We won’t be forced to move just so that somebody else can get rich.”

7. We could have listed this one first: Systemic racism makes all other inequities worse. Recent research has proven what we already know from experience: White people [get better government support](#) after disasters than non-white people and can relocate without worrying about being harassed for the color of their skin. Transportation and sanitation [infrastructure](#) is usually worse in poor and non-white communities, reducing home values and making them more vulnerable to disasters. In addition, redlining, and discrimination in banking and home appraisals is an ongoing – not merely historical – crime. These injustices need to be addressed before migration can be successfully undertaken.

“Historic and existing racism limits where people live and how they live.”

“I don’t want to live in a white neighborhood. It’s not because I don’t care for white folks, but it only takes one white person in that neighborhood to say the word “n---r”, and my kids or grandkids will have to start dealing with hatred. This is what we’re dealing with. I don’t mean to spill all this out, but yes, racism and systemic racism is driving people insane.”

“People here are living in tents. Thousands still don’t have homes after the storms. It frustrates me because I know the government has the funding and the ability to help us. The reason we can’t get the services we need is because of our zip codes.

“The wealthy double dip on FEMA money, but if you live in a certain zip code, you can’t even get a first dip! We’ve been discriminated against for years.”

8. Do we repeat ourselves? Federal and state governments need to acknowledge racism and oppose it. Black, Latinx people and Indigenous Americans are tired of being told they must move along! If we decide to migrate because the risk of staying is too great, we’ll need better homes and neighborhoods than the ones we presently have. That’s the only way to repair past and present injustices. Also: Offer us the option to [relocate together](#).

“My parents had means, but we couldn’t live on this side (the white side) of the tracks. We were forced to live in poor conditions because that’s all that was available to us. My grandma passed on her property to the kids who then passed it to their kids. That’s all the property we had, and if I’m relocated, I’ll lose that. I can’t afford to buy anywhere else. So, I think the federal and state governments owe us something, and I think they know it.”

“It’s not just historic injustice, it’s the current refusal to fix a continuing injustice.”

“I’m up to here with studies. We know the problem. We’ve got to push the government to correct it.”

9. Migration will be difficult, but we want to make it work as well as possible for everybody – so, please also pay attention to the [receiving communities](#) as well as the migrating ones. Just as migration should be a consultative process, so should reception. State and federal governments can help receiving towns and cities plan and manage the infrastructure costs of welcoming new residents. Help us recreate some of the things we loved about our old communities. Support us as we work to make our homes and neighborhoods safe and sustainable.

“The common thread is that it has to be community-owned and community driven.”

“Purposeful, community-led design is a good model, and it works.”

“One of the things that is important is keeping neighbors together, wherever they move. Buyouts can put that into jeopardy unless there is careful, community-led planning, including consultation with receiving towns and cities. And help these relocated communities be sustainable.”

10. Climate migration is a fundamental issue of justice and national health and demands a commensurate, federal response. More than [a million people](#) have already moved away from parts of the U.S. impacted by floods and wildfires. Some of them did so in advance of catastrophe, others in the wake of it. In the decades to come, those numbers will vastly increase, and so will the level of difficulty of accommodating them in receiving communities. It isn't enough – not nearly enough – that organizations like A2 and CN assist communities and individuals considering climate migration and home buyouts. What's needed is robust state and federal engagement. That's why we are calling for the immediate creation of a Climate Migration Agency within a new, Department of Climate Change to help plan, facilitate and support U.S. migration.

List of participants

Camille Hadley, Little Growers Inc, Melbourne, Florida
David Southgate, Un Nuevo Amanecer, Ponce, Puerto Rico
Debra Campbell, A Community Voice, New Orleans, Louisiana
Frances Acuña, GAVA Go Austin/Vamos Austin, Austin, Texas
Gordon Jackson, Biloxi NAACP, Biloxi, Mississippi
Hilton Kelley, Community In-Power and Development Inc, Port Arthur, Texas
June Farmer, Marin City, California
Luis Marcos, Comunidad Maya Pixan Ixim, Omaha, Nebraska
Rosario-Maria Medina, Georgetown Open Space Committee, Seattle, Washington
Terri Straka, Rosewood Strong, Socastee, South Carolina

Media contact:

Stephen F. Eisenman
(626) 394-3311
S-Eisenman@Northwestern.edu
