



Vermont Climate and Health Alliance

Medical and Health Professionals Calling for Change

Good morning. I am Dan Quinlan - the Chair of the Vermont Climate and Health Alliance - a coalition of more than 300 Vermont medical and health professionals who are working to open people's eyes to the magnitude of the health threat that climate change poses to their children and grandchildren.

I am here this morning to express our strong support for increasing the funding for the state's weatherization program by, at a bare minimum, what is described in H.439. We also strongly support the idea that the added funding should come from an increase in the tax on heating fuels. As in other pollution arenas, the most logical solution for funding pollution mitigation programs is that they be funded by fees directly linked to the cause of the pollution.

We do not support any funding mechanism that might include reducing or reallocating funds from other clean energy or climate changes mitigation programs. In fact, we believe that any such solution would be far worse than doing nothing.

So, let me say a few words about why we hold these positions.

I'll start with the big picture. In September of last year, at the Global Climate and Health Summit, national political leaders met with an international group of physicians, health care NGOs, and leaders of major hospital systems. The communique issued at the end of that meeting led with these seven words: "Climate change is a global health emergency." In a similar vein, hundreds of medical societies across the planet have issued similar statements over the past two years. If that doesn't scare the hell out of you, the rest of this statement will be meaningless.

Across the United States today, we are already seeing how climate change driven deviations in weather patterns severely impact human and animal health. Sea level rise in Florida, repeated heavy flooding in the mid-west farm belt, and more prevalent extreme storms across the country are just a few examples of how climate change will radically destabilize the ways in which our society ensures the health and well-being of all Americans. In collaboration with VT Interfaith Power and Light, VTCHA is hosting screenings of a new film called "Paris to Pittsburgh" – a film that vividly depicts what I'm talking about. This movie clearly, and painfully, demonstrates the societal risks we face – and it includes people in so-called "red" and "purple" states talking about their lived experiences and their growing worries about things like the potential collapse of agricultural food systems and mass migration.

Some people think a movie like this is hysterical fear mongering. To those people I say this - read the testimony given by the Defense Department, commercial insurance companies, and the Center for Disease Control to the US Congress. These are not organizations who engage in hysteria. They deal in facts and data. They share a collective goal to protect the health and well-being of our society – not to tear it down.

Here in Vermont, the heat wave of 2018 caused a record spike in heat related illness and emergency room visits. Heavy rains caused an unprecedented release of untreated waste from municipal water treatment plants. We have the highest per capita rate of Lyme disease in the nation. These and other health issues are not random. They are precursors of devastating health effects the Center for Disease Control has been predicting for years. The most vulnerable among us – the elderly, Vermonters with low incomes, those with chronic illness, and children – are, and will be, hit first and hardest. They are also usually the slowest to recover. We have been presenting a talk on climate change and public health that includes a presentation on from a Gund Institute researcher on the continuing impacts of Hurricane Irene on low income folks in Waterbury. That storm happened 8 years ago and some of these people have never fully recovered.

Joined by the Vermont Medical Society, the Vermont Public Health Association, the Vermont Chapter of the American Nurses Association and the Vermont Veterinary Medical Association, the Vermont Climate and Health Alliance argues that dramatically accelerating the state's investment in our weatherization program must be a budget priority for the following reasons:

- Buildings account for about ¼ of Vermont's greenhouse gas emissions. We must drive this number down, and as rapidly as possible.
- Weatherizing a home typically reduces a household's energy costs by \$500-\$1500 per year.
- As noted in the December 2018 Vermont Department of Health report titled "Weatherization and Health", households in a properly weatherized home are estimated to save at least an additional \$275 per year in avoided health costs. Why? Weatherization also mitigates problems like mold and mildew build-up which cause or exacerbate a wide range of severe respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.
- Per that report, it is highly likely that the household co-benefit savings are significantly greater than \$275. That is because there is no established methodology for making reliable savings estimates for many key health impacts. As such, the health savings estimate noted is highly likely to be very conservative, as noted in that report.
- Finally, weatherizing 50,000 homes over 10 years would yield \$300-\$700 million in other public health benefits - due to reductions in respiratory and cardiovascular disease associated with air pollution and home heating.

The fact that the plan to increase the funding for weatherization has been tagged as “regressive” is a sad statement about our politics, including the cynical (and highly effective) use of simple one-liners to kill good ideas and hide painful truths. To allow the single word “regressive” to dominate the conversation ignores science, economics, common sense, and, most importantly, the aspirations of a lot of people who care about their fellow Vermonters and who devote their lives to human services.

The weatherization program was designed to save low income Vermont households a lot of money. That is exactly what it does in reality. The program does it at low cost (and it has created good jobs). Even for middle- or upper-income people who can afford to pay part or all of the cost of weatherizing a home, the return-on-investment data definitively shows that weatherization investments are far-and-away some of the best investments a household will ever make. From a pure ROI perspective, spending tax dollars on weatherization is a no-brainer.

On the other side of the ledger. People don't want taxes to go up. But they will go up, and they will be go up a lot. Why? Because our physical infrastructure - including many buildings and many systems - are wholly unprepared for climate change. We can see the leading edge of that cost in recent actions like the issuance of bonds in the 10's of millions of dollars over the last year-and-a-half across Vermont as municipalities upgrade sewage treatment systems to handle the documented (and, by the way, predicted) increase in heavy rain events. Hurricane Irene was estimated by the state to cost more than \$150m. More Hurricane Irene's are coming. These costs are clear signals that taxes will go up. The only question is - how many zeros will we allow the costs to grow by due to our collective inaction?

In the face of realities I've just described, the idea that we are arguing about a \$0.02 per gallon increase in the fuel tax is a painful reminder of how hard it is for people and governments to deal with big problems, and where the time horizon is more than a few months.

You folks work hard on our behalf. The stack of problems you are tangling with is big and it is thorny. You know better than most that moving climate change up on the list of priorities goes against the way humans are wired. But, god help our kids if we don't figure out very soon how to use our intellects to overcome our instincts. As history shows, we only do that when, as Lincoln said, “the better angels of our nature” guide our decisions.

Thank you for the opportunity to come here and share these thoughts. And, thank you for the hard, and often thankless, work you do on our behalf.