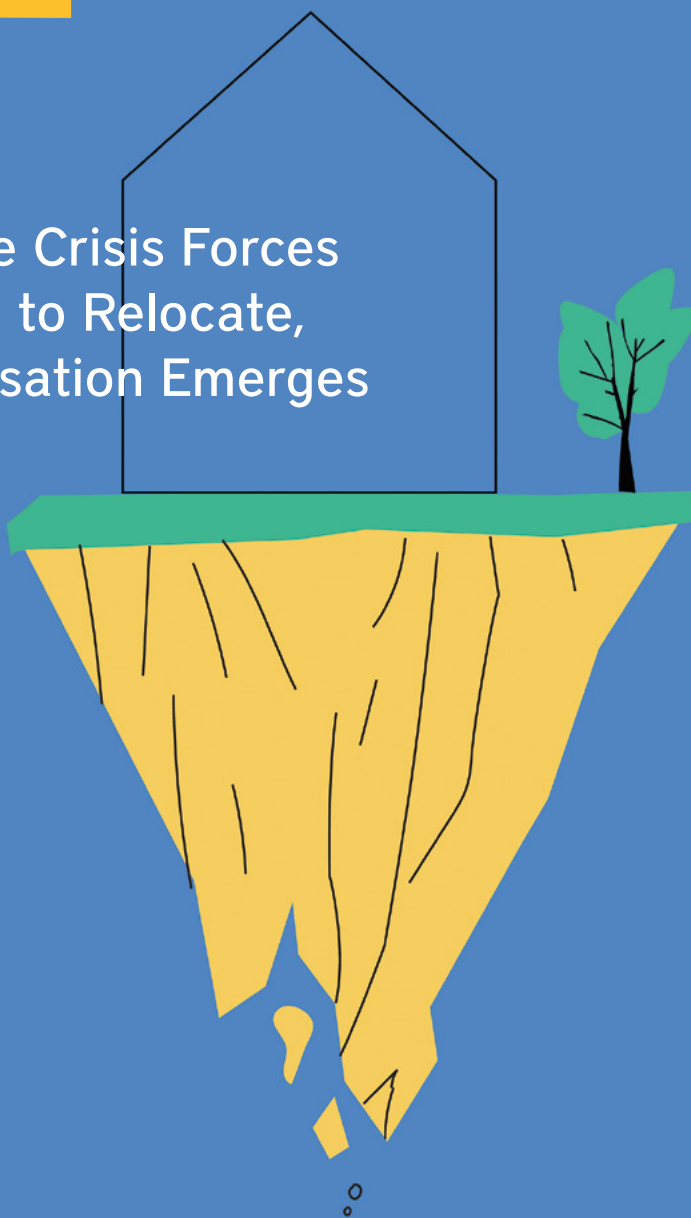


Uproot

As the Climate Crisis Forces
U.S. Residents to Relocate,
a New Conversation Emerges



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By Alexandra Tempus

EVEN THOUGH SHE'S EXPECTING IT, Frances Acuña screens my call. “I’ve been getting a lot of people trying to buy my house,” she explains, after calling me right back. “Sometimes I get five letters in the mail. Five, six, seven, ten calls.”

The Dove Springs neighborhood in southeast Austin, Texas, where Acuña has lived for 25 years, is just 15 minutes from downtown and right on the edge of the latest wave of gentrification. A decade ago, she says, outsiders wanted no part of the working-class community of modest ranch homes: “To them it was a ghetto area.”

Then in 2013, the waters of nearby Onion Creek—burdened by nearly 10 inches of rain in a single day—poured into the streets. Five residents died, and more than 500 homes were flooded. Two years later, another historic flood swept in. The City of Austin, which had already begun to buy out and remove homes from this low-lying area with the help of federal grants, accelerated its efforts, eventually acquiring and demolishing more than 800 homes.

Property acquired through FEMA-funded home buyout programs is legally required to remain “open in perpetuity,” allowing it to safely flood in the future. In this case, the city transformed hundreds of acres of land left behind near Dove Springs into a park. The area now boasts attractive amenities—a playground, a dog park, walking trails, and shady places to rest.

These urban improvements, explicitly driven by climate adaptation policy, have made the area even more appealing to the city’s recent influx of newcomers. (With an estimated 180 new arrivals per day in 2020, Austin ranks among the country’s fastest-growing metro areas.)

But for Acuña, the park is a painful reminder of neighbors who suffered losses—and of the fact that even well-intentioned efforts to move people out of harm’s way can themselves cause harm. “To me, it’s not a happy place to go to,” Acuña says. “Maybe [new residents] don’t even know, because all they see is green space.”

How can climate relocation occur in a way that avoids gentrification and displacement . . . and ensures that those who relocate can find safe, affordable places to live?

As floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and other disasters escalate under the influence of climate change, experts from the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to the U.S. Government Accountability Office now widely recommend that municipalities move homes and infrastructure out of hazard-prone areas to save lives and money. But how can that kind of relocation occur in a way that avoids gentrification and displacement, honors the culture and history of the original residents, encourages a shift from reactive to proactive planning, and ensures that those who relocate can find safe, affordable places to live?

These are the kinds of questions Acuña and a growing web of other community leaders, planners, researchers, agency officials, and policy makers are coming together to address as part of the national Climigration Network.

ESTABLISHED IN 2016 BY THE CONSENSUS BUILDING INSTITUTE, the Climigration Network aims to be a central source of information and support for U.S. communities experiencing or considering relocation due to climate risks. More than 40 percent of U.S. residents, some 132 million people, live in a county that was struck by climate-related extreme weather in 2021 (Kaplan and Tran 2022). Population growth in wildfire-prone areas doubled between 1990 and 2010, and continues to rise. And FEMA counts 13 million Americans living in the 100-year flood zone, while at least one prominent study says the figure is closer to 41 million (Wing et al. 2018).

The United Nations, the World Bank, and scholars alike recognize that most climate-driven migration occurs *within* national borders, not across them. But in the United States, conversations about the systems needed to support climate migration have been slow to

coalesce, even as climate change bears down on riverine, coastal, and other vulnerable regions. A White House report on the issue released last year marked, by its own estimation, “the first time the U.S. government is officially reporting on the link between climate change and migration” (White House 2021).

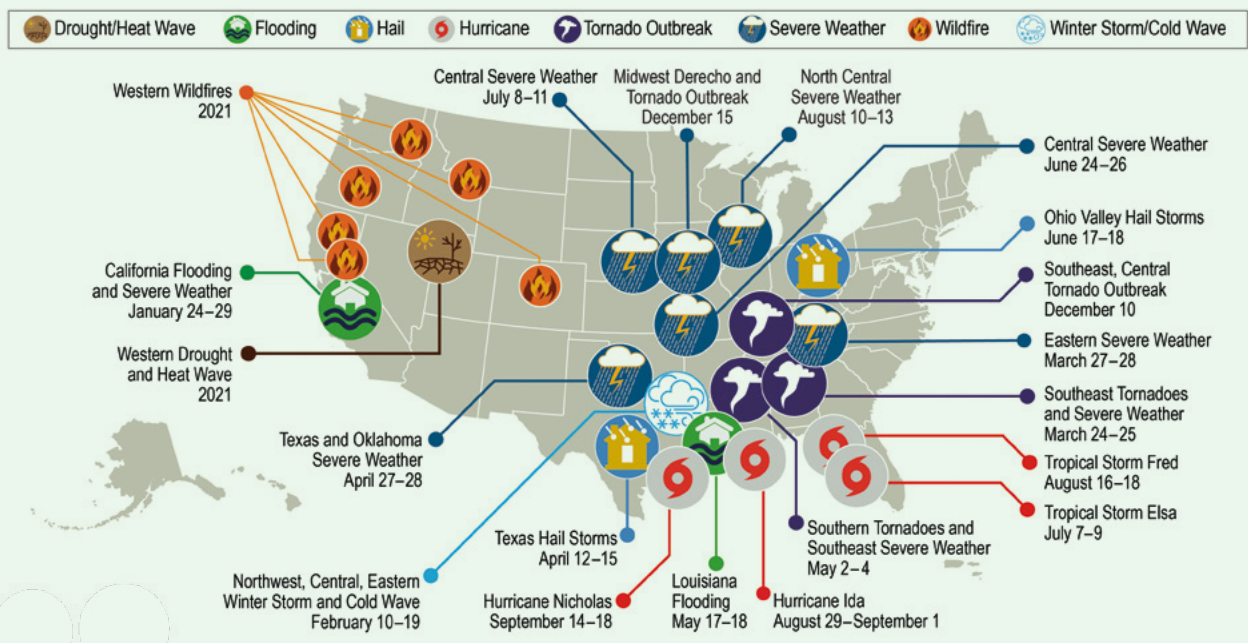
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Currently, most climate-related relocation in the United States happens the way it unfolded around Dove Springs. After a disaster strikes, federal recovery money, usually through FEMA

Billion-Dollar U.S. Weather and Climate Disasters, 2021

The United States saw 20 weather and climate disasters in 2021 that each caused more than \$1 billion in damages. The annual average was 17.8 such events from 2017 to 2021, and 7.7 events from 1980 to 2021 (cost estimates adjusted based on the Consumer Price Index).

This map denotes the approximate location for each of the 20 separate billion-dollar weather and climate disasters that impacted the United States in 2021.



Source: NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI).



In 2013, flash floods affected hundreds of homes in Dove Springs and other Austin, Texas, neighborhoods. The city has now purchased and demolished 800 properties vulnerable to chronic flooding. Credit: *Austin American-Statesman/USA TODAY Network*.

or the Department of Housing and Urban Development, is funneled to states and municipalities to buy out damaged homes. Individual homeowners sell their homes at prestorm market value to the government and move elsewhere. According to the NRDC, FEMA has funded more than 40,000 buyouts in 49 states since the 1980s.

Yet, despite federal buyout programs dating back decades, no official set of best practices or standards exists. Wait times for buyouts take five years on average. Costs for fixes and temporary housing stack up in the interim. Guidance for homeowners on navigating the buyout process is confusing or nonexistent, and relocation policies and funding focus on the individual, not on neighborhoods or communities that want to stay together.

At the local level, communities considering relocation face a range of social and financial barriers. Municipalities don't tend to encourage relocation, because they don't want to lose population or tax revenue. And residents—especially those reeling from a crisis—often lack the capacity and resources to find a new, safe place to live, even if they are willing to leave.

Despite those obstacles, some small towns have designed new neighborhoods and even entire new towns to relocate to. In the 1970s, a couple of Midwestern villages experiencing

chronic flooding—Niobrara, Nebraska, and Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin—initiated some of the earliest community relocation projects. In the 1990s, Pattonsburg, Missouri, and Valmeyer, Illinois, among others, relocated to higher ground following the Great Flood of 1993 along the Mississippi River. As climate impacts escalate, towns and neighborhoods from the Carolinas to Alaska are developing similar plans. But knowledge sharing is rare, as is coordination that could help other communities to refine or even reimagine the process.

The Climigration Network, in partnership with the Lincoln Institute and others, is connecting climate-affected communities with one another and with professionals poised to help. One of its early concerns was how to introduce the concept of “managed retreat” as an adaptation option for communities facing substantial risk. Meant to convey strategic moves away from disaster-prone areas, the term had become common in the policy discussions that had followed hurricanes and major floods over the previous decade. Should New York City consider managed retreat from its coastline, instead of costly and potentially ineffective seawalls, after Superstorm Sandy? Should Houston, after Hurricane Harvey? Policy makers, planners, and researchers discussed these questions at length, often without input from the affected



A volunteer helps with flood clean-up in the Dove Springs neighborhood of Austin, Texas, in 2013. Credit: *Austin American-Statesman/USA TODAY Network.*

communities, which found the term and the concept alienating.

As the Climigration Network began its work, it was immediately obvious that a different kind of conversation was needed, says its director, Kristin Marcell. With funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the network commissioned a Black and Indigenous–led creative team whose members hailed from or had worked with communities affected by the climate crisis. The team, helmed by Scott Shigeoka and Mychal Estrada, proposed reframing the discussion around the actual issues facing towns and neighborhoods that might relocate.

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One clear takeaway: “managed retreat” suffers from more than bad branding. The word “managed,” community leaders made clear to the researchers, calls to mind paternalistic, top-

down government programs. In Black and brown communities, it conjures not-so-distant memories of forced removal—the slave trade, the Trail of Tears, internment camps, redlining. And the concept of “retreat” left a lot of questions unanswered.

“It creates a negative narrative that people are *fleeing from* something, instead of *working toward* something else,” the researchers wrote in the guidebook. “The word communicates *what* we should do, but doesn’t communicate *where* to go or *how* to do it” (Climigration Network 2021).

THE CLIMIGRATION NETWORK IS NOW DRAWING ON THOSE INSIGHTS IN CONVERSATIONS with three community-based organizations in the Midwest, Gulf Coast, and Caribbean that are supporting locals actively weighing adaptation strategies including relocation. Partners in these conversations include the Anthropocene Alliance, a coalition of flood and other disaster survivors across the United States, and Buy-In Community Planning, a nonprofit working to improve home buyout processes.

Network members have started using more empowering alternatives to “managed retreat,” including “community-led relocation” and “supported relocation.” But the goal isn’t to come up with a single new term or a rigid plan that can be universally adopted. As Marcell notes, it can be “very offensive” when outsiders approach communities with nothing but models and templates.

“You can’t expect to build trust in a community if you don’t start with an open-ended conversation about how to approach the issue, because [each] context is so unique,” she says.

Instead, the network aims to co-create, with each of the three community-based organizations, a method for identifying the specific needs and goals of each place. That includes identifying and interviewing community “influencers” and, with the help of Buy-In Community Planning, developing questions for a door-to-door survey.

“There’s a lot more individual interaction and coaching that needs to be done with people who are at the hard edge of climate change,” says

Osamu Kumasaka of Buy-In Community Planning. He first came to this conclusion while working as a Consensus Building Institute mediator in Piermont, New York, in 2017. The Hudson River town was experiencing the beginnings of chronic flooding: water in basements, swamped backyard gardens, denizens wading through streets on their way to work. A wealthy small town with its own flood resilience committee and access to world-class flood risk data, Piermont nonetheless found itself uncertain about how to move forward.

“We really struggled to figure out how to squeeze all the work that needed to be done with all these homeowners into public meetings,” Kumasaka says. Each household had very specific factors influencing decisions to stay or leave: elderly parents with special needs, kids about to graduate from high school, plans to retire. Organizing surveys, small discussions, and individualized risk assessments was a more effective approach, Kumasaka says, in helping the community get a better picture of where it stands and where it wants to go.

In the end, the hope is that this type of legwork can help inform a community strategy, from identifying risk tolerance to submitting an application to a buyout program. The network and its partners hope this highly customizable approach will help communities navigate around barriers others can't see.

Just as the Climigration Network did when gathering input from frontline leaders for its guidebook, Buy-In Community Planning compensates members of the three community organizations for their time and insights. It's a key element of the process—helping to flip the dynamic from one in which outsiders dole out generic research and expertise into a true collaboration in which locals and professionals alike are paid to work toward a shared goal.

RELOCATION IS AN ESPECIALLY THORNY SUBJECT in low-income, largely Black and brown communities, because residents haven't historically been extended the same flood protections provided to those in wealthier areas. In discussions about home buyouts, as Kumasaka puts it, there tends


to be a “feeling that it's not fair to jump right to relocation.”

It's a fair point, and represents a vicious cycle. In 2020, the FEMA National Advisory Council endorsed research findings that “the more Federal Emergency Management Agency money a county receives, the more whites' wealth tends to grow, and the more Blacks' wealth tends to decline, all else equal.” Because funding tends to go to larger communities better positioned to match and accept those resources, “less resource-rich, less-affluent communities cannot access funding to appropriately prepare for a disaster, leading to inadequate response and recovery, and little opportunity for mitigation. Through the entire disaster cycle, communities that have been underserved stay underserved, and thereby suffer needlessly and unjustly” (FEMA NAC 2020).

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The concept of voluntary relocation remains fraught, and the Climigration Network's three community partners preferred not to be interviewed or identified in this article. The stakes are high as this global crisis makes itself felt locally, and careful engagement can mean the difference between quite literally keeping a community together, or not.

With its focus on community voices, a project like this could signal a seismic shift in how the United States approaches climate migration, says Harriet Festing, executive director of the Anthropocene Alliance. Festing, who helped the Climigration Network build relationships with the three community organizations, which are all part of the Anthropocene Alliance network, underscores the emerging theme of this work: “Really the only people who can change that conversation [are] the victims of climate change themselves.”



She's bagged up the mud-drenched belongings of flooded-out homeowners and brought city officials to meet with locals in her living room.

Frances Acuña walks through a detention pond area designed to help protect her Austin, Texas, neighborhood from flooding. Credit: *Austin American-Statesman*/USA TODAY Network.

BACK IN AUSTIN, FRANCES ACUÑA WORKS as an organizer with Go Austin/Vamos Austin, or GAVA, a coalition of residents and community leaders working to support healthy living and neighborhood stability in Austin's Eastern Crescent, which includes Dove Springs. One of her roles is helping her neighbors better prepare for disaster by taking steps like getting flood insurance, dealing with insurance agents, and learning evacuation routes. She's bagged up the mud-drenched belongings of flooded-out homeowners, brought city officials to meet with locals in her living room, and triaged emergency situations—like when an elderly couple that had been evacuated following a flood found themselves with three dogs, two cats, and nowhere to stay.

"I used to love thunder and lightning and pouring rain. It was like seeing God himself in the flesh," Acuña says. Now, she adds, she can't go

long in a rainstorm before nervously checking out the window.

Austin's buyout program in her area provided relocation assistance for homeowners, who had the option to reject or counter the buyout offers they received. But many did not want to leave at all, lobbying unsuccessfully for the city to implement solutions such as a flood wall or channel clearing.

Despite nearby flooding and the calls and mail from realtors and developers, Acuña has no immediate plans to leave her home. Taking part in Climigration Network conversations with other local leaders guiding their communities through floods, fires, and droughts, she says, has provided a major release: "It was a very therapeutic process, at least for me."

In addition to the guidebook, the input from those frontline leaders—who hailed from 10

CLIMATE MIGRATION BY THE NUMBERS

20 million people are forced to relocate within their countries each year by increasingly intense and frequent extreme weather

216 million people will be forced to move within their countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America by 2050, according to the World Bank

80% of global climate migrants are women

162 million U.S. residents are expected to experience a decline in their environment in the **next 30 years**

13 million Americans are expected to move away from submerged coastlines

It would cost an estimated **\$250–\$350 million** to restore and protect Tangier Island, Virginia, which lost **62 percent of its inhabitable area** between 1967 and 2019, or an estimated **\$100–\$200 million** to relocate its 436 residents

1% of the globe's land surface is currently experiencing extreme heat

19% is projected to experience extreme heat by 2070

3 billion people live in areas that are or will be affected by extreme heat

100,000 people were forced from their homes by California wildfires in 2020

Sources (top to bottom): UNHCR (1), World Bank (2), UNDP (3), Pro Publica (4, 8), Nature Climate Change (5), Frontiers Science News (6), PNAS (7).

low-income, Black, and Latinx communities from Mississippi to Nebraska to Washington—powered a strong statement acknowledging the “Great American Climate Migration” and calling for the creation of a federal Climate Migration Agency “to help plan, facilitate, and support U.S. migration.”

Many of the group’s suggestions—most of which are aimed squarely at government officials—are practical, if not straightforward to execute: provide information free from jargon. Streamline the FEMA home buyout process so money no longer takes five years to land in pockets. Reduce federal grants’ local matching requirements for small, under-resourced communities.

Other recommendations tackle the larger context of racial inequity, acknowledging the findings that FEMA programs benefit wealthy homeowners more.

“People here are living in tents,” says one testimonial included in the statement. “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 statement also urges authorities to back plans that allow tight-knit communities the option to relocate together instead of sending each homeowner off individually.

It’s an option that Terri Straka of South Carolina would appreciate. Like Acuña, she’s an active leader in her community who has participated in Climigration Network conversations and joined the call for a new climate migration office. She’s lived in Rosewood Estates, a blue-collar neighborhood in Socastee, South Carolina, on the Intracoastal Waterway outside of Myrtle Beach, for nearly 30 years. For a long time, flooding



Terri Straka, left, with other members of Rosewood Strong, an advocacy group she cofounded in her South Carolina community. After years of flooding, a county-led buyout program began this year. Credit: Courtesy of Terri Straka.

wasn't an issue, but in recent years, that changed: since 2016, Straka's county has weathered at least 10 hurricanes and tropical storms. Average national flood insurance payouts there have increased fivefold in less than a decade, from a little less than \$14,000 to just under \$70,000. In the most recent flood, Straka's 1,300-square-foot ranch took on four feet of water, which didn't drain for two weeks.

"It's nothing fabulous, but it's home," Straka says. "I raised all my children in it. I know everyone." Her parents live in the neighborhood. Local high schoolers use the streets for driving school practice. "I've watched so many kids grow up."

These days, she says, "they call me Terri Jean the Rosewood Queen." It's a name she's earned following the neighborhood floods, as she advocated for her neighbors in visits to local FEMA and county housing offices, made phone calls to state recovery officials, and staged protests at county council meetings. Many of her neighbors would have moved after the first couple of floods if they'd been able to, Straka

says. She and others pushed for a buyout program, but the federally funded offers were less than adequate by the time they came through in 2021; community members continue to push for better offers. A lot of her neighbors are service industry workers in Myrtle Beach's robust tourism trade. Others have retired on a fixed income. Many had already sunk money into repairing their homes. For others, buyouts would only pay off their current mortgages, falling far short of the amount needed to purchase comparable new homes, to say nothing of flood insurance. "You live on the outskirts of Myrtle Beach itself because, number one, you can't afford to live in Myrtle Beach," Straka says. "Even if you have the option, if the buyout would be financially beneficial, where do you go? And how do you do that?"

The Climigration Network and its partners are coming at these questions from several directions. The three community organizations now working with the network are on track to conduct their surveys and use the results to begin developing local strategies this summer. The network hopes to create a small grant program that could fund similar work in other communities. Meanwhile, members have formed six workgroups of technical experts and community leaders, with focus areas ranging from policy and research to narrative building and communications, that meet regularly to discuss how to identify and help dismantle the many roadblocks communities face. Taken together, these efforts are an attempt to lay the foundation for a whole new field of climate adaptation.

"Not everyone is trying to go out in the field and build a system for helping 13 million people move in the next 50 years," says Kelly Leilani Main, executive director of Buy-In Community Planning, chair of the Climigration Network's Eco-systems and People workgroup, and a member of

"Not everyone is trying to go out in the field and build a system for helping 13 million people move in the next 50 years. We're building the bridge as we're walking across it."

its Interim Council. “We’re building the bridge as we’re walking across it.”

Doing so, Main and other network members agree, will require continuing to build trust and deep working relationships with residents on the ground. Like Acuña, Straka says that sharing the story of her own experiences with others in the Climigration Network has been a critical first step. “When we would have meetings, I was completely honest,” Straka says. “And they gave you that capability to be vulnerable, because you are vulnerable.”

The whole process was far removed from her experiences hitting walls with state and federal officials, she adds. The officials she’s dealt with “don’t get it. It’s a job to them, they go to work, they’ve got these projects to do,” she says. “The involvement on a personal level is what’s going to bring big change. That’s what’s needed.” □

Alexandra Tempus is writing a book on America’s Great Climate Migration for St. Martin’s Press.

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Flooding from the Intracoastal Waterway inundated homes in Socastee, South Carolina, in 2020.
Credit: Jason Lee/The Sun News via AP.

