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The Mass. Legislature's Climate Bills Are Important. But They Wouldn't Do Enough For My Most Vulnerable Patients

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6-7 minutes

On July 31, the Massachusetts House of Representatives overwhelmingly [passed](#) the [2050 Roadmap Bill](#), a wide-ranging climate bill that commits the state to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The bill now goes into conference committee negotiations with the state Senate's bill, the "Next Generation Climate Policy," and then, hopefully, to the governor's desk. I know many state legislators, their passion for climate mitigation and adaptation, and the efforts it took to bring these bills to bear. It is critical that these bills are reconciled and passed into law.

As a human rights physician, I also know these bills are not nearly enough. Climate change is a threat to everything I care about as a physician. It increases the number of summer nights my frail, elderly patients sweat through dangerous heat while they sleep. It sends children to the hospital with

respiratory disease. A recent [meta-analysis](#) showed that both heat and air pollution can increase the risks of premature birth, low birth-weight and still birth. As a global health physician, I know climate change will make the horrifying scenes in Bangladesh more common — after being decimated by Cyclone Amphan in June, more than a quarter of the country is underwater from devastating new floods just a month later, leaving 1 million people without homes. All in the midst of a global pandemic.

COVID-19 is deeply intertwined with the climate crisis. These dual public health threats have forced a new reckoning with our history of racial injustice. My patients, many of whom have been infected with coronavirus over the last five months, are the faces of those who suffer from these converging crises. For instance, my Latinx patients who live in communities like Chelsea face a [greater chance of death](#) when infected with coronavirus because of the air pollution they have inhaled for decades.





A young boy cries to his father after being tested for COVID-19 at the free testing being offered by the state in Chelsea Square. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

I also know that unless we change our relationship with our ecosystems, we will be barreling towards the next pandemic, one that could be more virulent and deadly. The coronavirus originated in animals and then spilled into the human population. Deforestation, destruction of biodiversity and encroachment into natural habitats for agricultural and corporate interests significantly increases the likelihood of the next pandemic.

To truly reckon with the crises we face, we must replace systems that harm with systems that heal. In this great moment of disruption, as we feel things falling apart around us, we must have the courage to imagine a new future — one worthy of our children.

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Transformative climate legislation will help us make the systems change we need. It will recognize that climate justice is racial justice is pandemic mitigation. The vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions come from three sectors: transportation, energy and buildings.

In transportation, it is not enough to simply support the transition to electric vehicles. We must reimagine the

configuration of our communities. We should strategically close roads to cars to create an abundance of green community space. We should give those who are able the opportunity to safely walk and bike to where they need to go. Everyone should have access to affordable, high quality, efficient public transportation. We must support families so that more can successfully work from home and avoid a commute that results in traffic gridlock.

In energy, the national Democratic party platform on clean energy policy now not only recognizes the need to reduce emissions over 30 years, but to also immediately stimulate our depressed economy by upgrading infrastructure to fight climate change. It commits to creating a carbon-free energy system by 2035.



A woman takes a photo of the animal rights group PETA's ice sculptures in the shape of farm animals with a placard that

says "Meat = Heat," Aug. 7, 2020. (Alastair Grant/AP)

In buildings, last year, Brookline enacted a bold policy to largely ban oil and gas infrastructure in new construction. This makes sense. If you've dug yourself into a deep hole in the fight to save the planet with decades of inaction, it's smart to stop digging. The attorney general's office recently overturned the town ban and suggested building codes must be determined at a state level. State legislation should have enacted this oil and gas ban policy statewide.

In all of these policies, we must prioritize removing the toxic exposures that result in environmental racism. It is unacceptable for the health of communities of color to be sacrificed for the benefit of others. We must also do our part to improve our relationship with our land. That means investing in tree canopies to mitigate urban heat islands, stopping deforestation, changing our food systems and supporting regenerative agriculture. Our state bills could have done far more to stimulate these changes.

As a physician, I feel urgency because I know delay on climate policy means more suffering and more death. We should pass the legislation that has been brought forth in this session. It is an important step in the right direction. But my patients deserve leaps. Massachusetts must regain its mantle as a national leader in climate change policy.

We cannot take care of each other without taking care of our earth. It is unacceptable that our children grow up in a future in which they are scared that their world is too unsafe or

unhealthy for them. Let us look back at this moment and say that it was the time when we mended the broken pieces around us, and built a world that allowed our best and healthiest days to be ahead of us.

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