

The Dangers of Ad Hoc Climate Change Relocation Policy in America

Victoria Herrmann



Credit: Eli Keene

As of May 2017, at least 17 communities have already begun the process of managed retreat inland due to the effects of climate change. Yet, the US federal government remains ill-prepared to deal with the immense policy challenge at hand. At present, there is no dedicated funding, lead agency, or policy framework to guide communities in need of relocation. And only one of the 17 communities engaged in climate-induced relocations, the Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana, has received enough federal funding to move their town in full.

During its final two years, the Obama Administration took a number of executive actions to guide federal action on climate-induced relocation. But because President Obama faced a hostile Congress, his Executive initiatives were tentative and failed to leave a strong, lasting impact upon which future policy work could build. Still, in spite of their shortcomings, they offer important lessons on climate-induced relocation policy for the field of public administration moving forward.

Change of Guard: From Obama to Trump

President Obama first spoke on climate-induced relocation during his visit to Alaska in September 2015, when he became the first sitting President to visit the Arctic. After holding a successful conference on global leadership in the Arctic (GLACIER) in Anchorage, President Obama traveled above the Arctic Circle to Kotzebue. En route, he flew over the Native Village of Kivalia, one of Alaska's communities that is most at-risk of complete inundation.

Citing his flyover as part of his inspiration, President Obama mandated that the Denali Commission, an independent federal agency in Anchorage, would "play a lead coordination role for Federal, State and Tribal resources to assist communities in developing and implementing both short- and long-term solutions to address the impacts of climate change." To further this cause, the President pledged \$2 million to help with voluntary climate-induced relocation efforts in Alaska. (Though it must be noted that the pledged sum covers less than two percent of the cost to relocate one Alaskan town, estimated at \$100 to \$200 million). The following year President Obama announced an interagency working group on community-led managed retreat and voluntary relocation to develop a framework and action plan for managed retreat following a Symposium on Climate Displacement, Migration, and Relocation in Hawai'i hosted by the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

And, in a hopeful nod towards the next administration's work, President Obama's White House Budget for FY 2017 included a \$2 billion Coastal Climate Resilience Program to provide resources over 10 years for at-risk coastal States, local governments, and their communities. The budget noted that "a portion of these program funds would be set aside to cover the unique circumstances that climate change forces some Alaskan communities to confront, such as relocation expenses for Alaska native villages."

Unfortunately, as with many other climate policies, most of the above initiatives have been defunded or scrapped by the Trump Administration.

President Trump's own proposed budget plan eliminates key programs for coastal adaptation research and capacity building like the National Sea Grant College Program; it reduces the US Army Corps of Engineers' construction account by more than 50 percent, one of the most involved government entities in relocation planning; and it cuts dozens of EPA programs, including

infrastructure assistance to Alaska Native villages. Perhaps most telling, the Denali Commission is now shut down, and its budget is zeroed out in President Trump's proposed plan, and the interagency working group has been silent since January 21st.

The Need for A Federal, Comprehensive Framework for Relocations

Federal programs for disaster assistance are limited and mostly unavailable to towns that require climate-induced relocation. Relief programs focus on sudden natural disasters, like Hurricane Sandy, and on rebuilding in place rather than supporting the relocation of towns facing gradual inundation or other slow-onset disasters.

Importantly, current policies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program privilege individual household buyouts at the expense of relocating an intact community. Relocating a community together requires more than buying out homes; it necessitates programming and funding to maintain social support systems, safeguard cultural heritage, build communal infrastructure at the new site, and mitigate the psychological distress of moving. Because of these gaps, coastal communities facing slow-onset challenges across the country rely on ad hoc federal and state grants and attempt to rebuild and relocate in bits and pieces, in the hope that the work will be done before an emergency evacuation is needed.

Many of President Obama's policy initiatives and funding allocations prolonged this cobbled approach to relocation. Each relocation decision during the last Administration, from the Denali Commission to the funding of the Isle de Jean Charles relocation through a competitive Housing and Urban Development grant competition, came as one-off resolutions. These actions failed to establish a durable, comprehensive framework at the national level to guide relocation decision-making and support. The interagency working group, instituted in December 2016, was a necessary first step in this process, but came too late to make any lasting impact.

Whether they are initiated by this administration or the next, federal-level policies must move past ad hoc actions to instead embrace a lasting administrative framework capable of addressing the guidance, legal, funding, and socio-cultural needs of the relocation process. This is particularly important because at least 414 towns, villages, and cities across America will be partially flooded by the end of this century no matter how much humans decrease greenhouse gas emissions. All of these will require transformational adaptations, and some will choose partial or full retreat away from America's eroding edges.

From this, two crucial lessons for the study of public administration emerge. First, complex policy issues that require action from multiple administrative units must be coordinated. While Homeland Security might not be the best example, it certainly reveals an attempt to bring administrative coherence to actions of different administrative units to address a common problem. Second, the

scale of the response must have some resemblance to the scale of the problem. Small efforts such as one time grants or trips to the Arctic can prove important, but only if they are implemented within a coherent, comprehensive framework for relocation.

Victoria Herrmann is the President & Managing Director of The Arctic Institute and a Gates Scholar at the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge. For a full report on this topic, please see the author's forthcoming Issue