The impact of extreme weather has made headlines all too frequently over the past few years—from countless fires in the West, to once-in-a-century flood events occurring across the United States, to the devastating impact of Hurricane Ida stretching from the Gulf Coast to New York. All around us, we see the intensity of storms and fires growing rapidly and more frequently. The correlation of the impact of these events on our health and well-being is increasingly apparent, as is the need to understand the role of human services in promoting an equitable recovery and strengthening the resiliency of people and communities.

The theme of this issue is Navigating Upstream: Achieving Better Health and Well-Being Through Prevention. In it, we feature articles that focus on improving overall health by advancing well-being, preventing harm, and advancing equity. As I write this column, it has never been clearer to me that if we are to truly get upstream, we have to be much more intentional about connecting our work to environmental justice (see https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice).

To do so, we must first do more to understand the intersection of human services and environmental justice. In August, HHS's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) published a new infographic (see above and online at https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/ej-human-services) illustrating this very intersection, and why it matters.

As I studied the infographic, I reflected on my own life journey which has so often met at this intersection,

See President’s Memo on page 28
During any widespread crisis, we focus our energy on what federal flexibilities should be triggered to support this recovery. Often these experiences have ultimately informed necessary policy and practices changes, such as the need to enhance disaster preparedness for critical employment supports like child care.
unexpected impact in the Northeast, in particular, brings to mind a very personal story. In 2010, at the same time as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Nashville, TN, was devastated by historic flooding, much of which impacted areas not considered to be at flood risk. I will forever remember waking up to a call from my sister, who had been rescued, walking waist-deep along her street carrying her dog on one shoulder. Her entire community had been flooded when a nearby levee was breached, with virtually no time to warn the residents. I was grateful she was alive, appreciative of the emergency responders, and immediately mobilized into doing what I could to help her. What I quickly realized was that beyond my moral support, there was little I could do for her. Ultimately, what provided my sister and her community with the ability to recover was the support of multiple systems and sectors—public and community based, including a supportive employer—that gave her the time she needed to focus on getting a roof back over her head.

In looking back on these experiences in my own world, I am struck by how many were largely reactionary in nature, even those intended to be on the preparedness side. Going forward, part of laying new foundation for an equitable, thriving, and sustainable future requires that we understand all issues that communities face, including the pervasive environmental impacts illustrated on ASPE’s infographic, and the ways in which inequitable protections have further harmed communities, particularly for people of color.

I am heartened to see state and local agencies across the country infusing equity into their response to COVID-19, and actively seeking to apply lessons learned to all future disasters. At APHSA, we are in the early stages of exploring how we can best support the field as we deepen our understanding of the intersection of human services and environmental justice, and encourage you to share your questions and ideas with us.

Tierney: When you look back in three years, what results do you hope to have accomplished?

Perry: I come to this work with lived experience. My family used food stamps. We experienced periods without a home when we stayed with people or even in a tent for a short time. My mother was severely and persistently mentally ill, and in and out of the hospital. I’ve experienced what it’s like to live under adverse conditions, but I’ve also experienced what it’s like to have protective factors around me—like a community of people who supported my family with things like food, credit, a job for my dad, a scholarship to summer camp for me, and lots of kindness, love, and respect.

In the next three years, we will be able to articulate more clearly what it looks like for us to have shared responsibility for children and families across the state of North Carolina, and begin to operationalize that with our partners at the state level and in local communities. We will have better clarity on what each person’s role is in achieving a community of resilience. As a result, more children and families will be able to experience the protective factors that helped me as a young person—and NCDHHS will support better outcomes for the people we serve.

Tierney: How is that translating into action on the ground?

Perry: NCDHHS is a large organization with 17,000 people and responsibility for the full suite of health and human services. Rethinking how we’re structured was the first step. Since we announced the reorganization in April, we’ve begun the hard work of bringing teams, programs, policies, funding streams, and operations together. WIC, SNAP, and CACFP are great examples. In most states they’re operated separately with little to no overlap. We’re thinking about how we can bring those three programs together to help people access the full complement of nutrition programs. That’s just one example of how we’re looking across the system to meet the needs of the child and the family.

Tierney: Breaking down silos and enabling family-centered service delivery are no small tasks. Recognizing that you’re still at the beginning stages, what lessons have you learned so far?