

Guest column: Now is the time to prepare for the future

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This guest column was written by Diane Legomsky, chair of the Bloomington Refugee Support Network.

An unanticipated benefit of the COVID-19 crisis is that it allows us to become a stronger and more resourceful community and country, and can be a very constructive teacher for the future. Rather than panicking and protesting, there is much constructive, long-range action we can take to mitigate the impact of future similar crises. This includes the imminent onset of pandemics from environmental migration.

While still in the midst of the COVID-19 restrictions, we nevertheless can improve our circumstances and preparedness, for the present and the future. Right now, we can collaborate to recognize the vulnerabilities, demographic and circumstantial, that the crisis has spotlighted. This includes the multi-faceted and interconnected vulnerabilities of the homeless and other no- and low-income populations, as well as the elderly and immigrants, all of whom are experiencing hardships that had been under-analyzed and under-addressed. Lack of safe rooms for those with no home, the elderly community's unfamiliarity with telecommunication (and they are being deprived of communication with family and friends, which they dearly need), the loss of employment by immigrants, who are destitute and terrified — a problem compounded globally by their home family's loss of income and subsequent inability to assist the family here and, of course, the brave workers — medical personnel, police, firefighters, and the clerks, cooks, and drivers trying to support their families. We should not be making plans for safety equipment, screening and tests — we should have been making them already.

When we have a hiatus from this social isolation, we can solidify our ideas, put them into action and institutionalize them. (For example: funds and health care for the poorest, safe space for the homeless and the ill, tele-communication for the elderly, funds and friendship for the now-

unemployed immigrants, food for nightshift workers, socially- and agency-coordinated supply drop-offs, patronizing local businesses, supporting farmers, medical safety measures for all and all other constructive products of our collective brainstorming.

Climate change will generate frequent and widespread environmental migration. With this will come merging of new and host populations. Having different immunities, this will create a series of pandemics — but we can learn and plan from past and present pandemics.

It is estimated that by 2050, there will be hundreds of millions of environmental migrants globally, caused by water insecurity, crop failure, sea level rise and extreme weather (World Politics Review). Even now, there are over 17 million displaced individuals due to disasters within their countries (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019a). These are new classes of refugees and migrants, and the humanitarian crisis is already a reality. There is no reason to be caught unaware or flat-footed, and certainly no solution to be found in isolationism or closed borders. This is a global issue.

We are talking only 30 years for the environmental migration explosion. We need a shift from short-term emergency measures to long-term attention — medical, social, political, financial and legislative. We also must develop a significant shift from quantitative international cooperation to qualitative global collaboration. By the latter, I mean a change from the metaphorical “dues-paying” contributions paradigm to a team-themed global effort to tap into and develop the various resources of each region, and find and coordinate creative and effective anticipatory measures to enact. And to begin now.

Our country has the potential and resources to play a leadership role in this new global reality. Ignoring climate change, and looking after-the-fact at the impact of pandemics, will exacerbate the consequences. We cannot say “crisis over” and bury our heads in the sand. COVID-19 is an unexpected harbinger — and we gain by heeding it.