OPAN | Older Persons Advocacy Network

Climate change and older people

Position Statement

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Climate change is an aged care, public health, human rights and equity issue. Extreme heat, bushfire smoke, floods and storms can threaten older people's health and safety [1,4]. Disruptions to power, transport, food, medicines, housing and services can interrupt the care and support people rely on. Australia's 2025 National Climate Risk Assessment identifies 11 priority risks across systems including health and social support, infrastructure and communities, as well as food, water and supply chains [1].

OPAN's position

Older people have the right to live safely, with dignity and choice, as the climate changes. Aged care must prevent and prepare for climate impacts, adapt services and support recovery while maintaining safe, continuous and affordable care at home, in the community and in residential aged care.

The Aged Care Act 2024 places older people's rights at the centre of the system and sets sustainability and resilience among its principles. The strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards already require providers to plan for and manage emergencies and disasters. Governments and providers should build on these foundations by making climate risks clear in aged care planning, guidance, funding and oversight [2].

Climate risk and older people

Older people are not a single group, and age alone does not determine climate risk. Health, disability, income, housing, gender, location, language, social connection and reliance on services all shape exposure and capacity to prepare, respond and recover. Older people should be recognised as rights-holders, decision-makers and partners with knowledge that strengthens local preparedness.

Climate planning must be gender-responsive and culturally safe. At 30 June 2025, women were 66% of people using home care and permanent residential care; women made up 86% of directly employed nursing and personal care staff in the 2023 provider workforce survey [5,6]. Planning should account for unpaid caring responsibilities and the needs of gender-diverse older people. First Nations leadership, self-determination, connection to Country, culture, kinship and community must guide action affecting First Nations older people [1,7].

What OPAN calls for

Australian Government

- Develop and fund a national aged care climate plan, aligned with the National Health and Climate Strategy and National Adaptation Plan, with clear responsibilities, timeframes and public reporting [3].

- Build on the Act and Quality Standards with practical, funded guidance on climate risk assessment, accessible emergency planning, individual support needs and continuity of care.

- Invest in climate-resilient homes, community services and residential facilities, including cooling, clean energy, backup power and accessible recovery support. Public funding must meet these costs; climate action must not mean higher fees, reduced services or extra costs for older people.

- Work with older people, OPAN, First Nations organisations, workers and providers to set priorities, strengthen workforce preparedness and report on climate-related risks and outcomes, with data that shows who is affected.

State, territory and local governments

- Include older people receiving care at home, in the community and in residential care in emergency, evacuation and recovery plans. Provide accessible warnings, welfare checks, transport and safe places to go.

- Coordinate with aged care services, health services and First Nations-led organisations, and support local cooling, housing and community resilience.

Regulators

- Give providers clear guidance on climate-related hazards and continuity of care; include preparedness and response in quality oversight, use complaints and incident information, and require improvement where gaps are found.

Aged care providers

- Assess local hazards and the needs of each person; keep emergency plans current, accessible and tested with older people, families, workers and partner services.

- Plan to maintain essential care, medicines, food, water, power, transport, communications and staffing during disruption, and support workers to prepare and stay safe.
- Reduce avoidable emissions and waste while protecting care quality, affordability, choice and workers' conditions. Do not pass the costs of climate resilience on to older people.

References

[1] Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Assessing Australia's climate risks: National Climate Risk Assessment (2025)

[2] Aged Care Act 2024 (Cth) Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, Outcome 2.10: Emergency and disaster management

[3] Australian Government, National Health and Climate Strategy (2023) Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, National Adaptation Plan (2025)

[4] Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, Summer clinical alert 2025–26: Preventing heat stress in older people

[5] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, GEN Aged Care Data, People using aged care (updated 2026)

[6] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, GEN Aged Care Data, 2023 Aged Care Provider Workforce Survey

[7] United Nations General Assembly, Human rights of older persons in the context of climate change-induced disasters, A/78/226 (2023)

For more information on climate change and older people, please see here