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Coalition of Health and Environmental Justice Leaders Petitions HHS: *Making America Healthy Again* Requires Confronting Climate Change as a Public Health Crisis

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, a broad national coalition of leading public health organizations, nurses, physicians, and climate justice advocates formally petitioned the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under the Administrative Procedure Act, the Clean Air Act, and international law. The petition demands that the federal government fulfill its statutory and multilateral obligations by recognizing climate change as a direct contributing cause of adverse public health outcomes, particularly chronic childhood illness, and immediately reinstating the shuttered Office of Climate Change and Health Equity (OCCHE).

The petition, spearheaded by U.S. Mobilizing for Urgent Sustainable Transformation (USMUST) alongside key health and climate organizations, holds HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the administration accountable to their stated pledges under the President's Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Commission. Under oath during his Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary Kennedy acknowledged that "human health and environmental health are inseparable" and promised an "unbiased, science-driven HHS." Furthermore, Executive Order 14212 explicitly mandates that the MAHA Commission investigate the root environmental factors driving the nation's childhood chronic illness crisis and provide transparent, evidence-based recommendations.

This administration has systematically dismantled vital health safeguards, including rolling back the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS), defunding heat-monitoring networks, and abruptly closing the OCCHE under the pretext of anti-DEI directives. The petition establishes that these actions directly violate both domestic public health statutes and customary international human rights law, specifically Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which guarantees the right of all people to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

About USMUST: U.S. Mobilizing for Urgent Sustainable Transformation (USMUST) is an independent 501(c)(4) social welfare organization dedicated to building unapologetic, frontline-led political power, defending the civil and voting rights of impacted communities, and shifting national policy toward genuine climate and health justice.

Statements from Coalition Leaders

Bill Snape, Professor, American University, Washington College of Law: “The law demands that the Department of Health and Human Services address air pollutants that harm human health and also injure our shared environment through climate change and global warming. While the Secretary has some latitude about how he fulfills this legal requirement, he does not possess the entitlement of doing nothing.”

Brian Campbell, Program Director, Physicians for Social Responsibility (National): “As doctors, nurses, and public health professionals, Physicians for Social Responsibility’s members are on the frontlines, confronting the devastating impacts of climate change and environmental pollution in our patients and communities. Our duty is to prevent harm, but clinicians alone cannot solve problems like toxic chemicals, extreme weather, dirty air, dangerously high heat, and the spread of infectious diseases. To truly Make America Healthy Again, we depend on leadership in the federal government and especially within the Department of Health and Human Services, but instead of fulfilling this promise and what’s required by law, the current administration is dismantling the policies, protections, and programs that ensure clean air, water, and a stable climate. For the health of all Americans, we demand better.”

Ife Kilimanjaro, Executive Director of U.S. Climate Action Network (USCAN): “At USCAN, we know in the depths of our spirits that public health and environmental justice are matters of sacred survival. You cannot claim to protect the health of our children while turning a blind eye to the toxic air in their lungs, the extreme heat threatening our pregnant mothers, and the climate disasters displacing our families. For generations, frontline Black, Brown, and low-wealth communities have borne the brunt of pollution and neglect. If this administration is truly serious about Making America Healthy Again, it must start with the truth: climate change is a public health emergency. We are holding Secretary Kennedy to his own words and sworn oath. Our people’s breath, dignity, and future are non-negotiable.”

Georges C. Benjamin, MD, CEO, American Public Health Association (APHA): “The devastating health impacts of extreme heat, increased droughts impacting farmers and vital water reservoirs communities rely on, are a few of many indicators of how climate change is affecting populations. More must be done to treat escalating changes in climate as a threat to the health and longevity of all communities.”

Katie Huffling, Executive Director, Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments (ANHE): “Nurses see the human toll of climate change every day: more asthma attacks, more ER visits, more people struggling to breathe. The facts are clear - climate change harms health. Denial of well-established and credible science linking greenhouse gasses to harms to human health will only deepen inequities and push our health systems beyond their limits. This administration cannot claim to make America healthy again while gutting the very protections that clean up the air we breathe and the water we drink. Rolling back environmental safeguards doesn’t reduce

chronic disease — it guarantees more of it. Nurses are calling on HHS and the federal government to deliver proven public health interventions: clean air, clean water, and safe food.”

Tonyehn Verkitus, Executive Director, PA Physicians for Social Responsibility: “If the true goal of HHS and the administration is to Make America Healthy Again, it would not ignore the impacts that reckless environmental policy has on the health and wellbeing of this nation's citizens. The continued decimation of climate and health-focused agencies, dismantling of emissions standards and rollback of clean air rules directly harm human health - especially within vulnerable populations like the very young and elderly or black, brown and fenceline communities that bear a disproportionate impact. Since air and water knows no boundaries, HHS is required to prioritize the health and safety of all Americans, regardless of background or zip code.”