



# Facing the Storm: Extreme Weather and the Workplace

Employees are increasingly confronted with catastrophic weather events that impact physical safety and mental health. Here's why HR should pay attention, and what they can do.

In America, it's hard to watch or read the news without hearing about a community either experiencing or recovering from an extreme weather event. Fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, droughts, and extreme heat are now common in the headlines.

In fact, a poll by the National Commission on Climate and Workforce Health showed that **82% of U.S. workers experienced at least one extreme weather-related disruption on the job in the past year.**

Yet research shows most companies are not prepared—and that includes HR teams.

In HRCI surveys of hundreds of HR professionals in April, 77% said that climate change or extreme weather can impact their own company's workforce. However, more than half (56%) said their company was not ready. Almost three quarters (71%) said they had not performed an assessment of extreme weather risks and readiness in the last 12 months. In surveys late last year, 41% said they were not concerned about extreme weather, and 34% said they were only "somewhat" concerned. About 40% said they do not see extreme weather as a risk, and 41% said it is not a priority.



**“The impact of weather on the workforce is something we all have to take seriously,” said Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI. “We can’t afford to assume weather won’t impact our teams, especially when many of us operate globally. The question now is whether or not our HR teams are ready to respond when it happens.”**

The United States has had hundreds of extreme weather events in recent decades, causing trillions of dollars in damage and killing hundreds each year, according to the National Centers for Environmental Information.

From 1980 to 2024, the U.S. averaged about nine extreme weather events each year that cost more than \$1 billion. Even more frightening is that these incidents are occurring more frequently. In the past decade, the number has grown to about 20 events annually. In 2023, a record-setting 28 events occurred, followed closely by 27 in 2024 and 23 in 2025. Since 1980, these disasters have caused roughly \$3 trillion in combined damage.

The time between billion-dollar incidents has shrunk from more than 80 days in the 1980s to about 18 days in recent years. According to Climate Central, a nonprofit that reports climate data, there were just ten days between major weather-related crises in 2025.

For businesses, this means everything from facility closures and power outages to supply chain disruptions, staff displacement, and even casualties. And those are just the emergencies. More commonly, work crews are forced to operate in severe heat, or employees are inconvenienced by daycare closures and other more routine forms of weather-related disruption. It all combines to impact key metrics like productivity, absenteeism, workers' compensation claims, healthcare costs, and even hiring and retention. It also affects areas that are harder to track, like morale and mental health.

"These events have become the baseline, and it is accelerating," said David Leathers, director of the [Extreme Weather + Work initiative](#) at the Health Action Alliance. "Workers are experiencing disruption across every type of work environment, every region of the country, and every industry. And they want their employers to respond in meaningful, practical ways."

As such, HRCI and the Health Action Alliance partnered to create an in-depth look at how extreme weather impacts companies and the workforce, [how businesses can respond](#), and what HR teams can do to take the lead.

"Employee safety, whether during a disaster or just a string of extremely hot days, should always be part of the HR mandate," Dufrane said. "There are simple strategies we can implement that can help every team be more prepared."

Do you believe climate change/  
extreme weather can impact your  
company's workforce?

YES  
**77%**      NO  
**23%**

Source: HRCI LinkedIn poll, April 2026, 721 respondents

Do you believe your company is  
ready for an extreme weather  
event?

YES  
**44%**      NO  
**56%**

Source: HRCI LinkedIn poll, April 2026, 300 respondents



## How Weather Impacts Work

The impact of changing weather on the workplace is widespread and often unrealized. Damage and disruption are obvious when a hurricane makes landfall. But when employees are less productive due to extreme heat, or a school is closed due to poor air quality (forcing employees to leave early to pick up their children), the ripple effect is quieter—but with the same potential to disrupt a workplace.

Those episodic events appear to be becoming more routine, as are large-scale weather disasters that make headlines. Employees themselves tell the story: 43% said extreme weather has become more disruptive to their ability to work in recent years, while only 8% said disruptions have decreased, according to a poll by the National Commission on Climate and Workforce Health and Switch 5 (formerly Northwind Climate).

## Impact Varies by Industry

Of course, every industry is impacted differently. Those with a large population of outdoor workers, such as construction, agriculture, and utilities, encounter the most direct consequences. Retail, hospitality, and consumer-facing businesses tend to face revenue loss. Healthcare, emergency services, and essential infrastructure organizations (such as hospitals and urgent care facilities) experience surges during disasters, when resources are strained.

Even office-based and remote workers are not as insulated as might be expected: 53% of climate-controlled indoor workers say extreme weather has reduced their productivity in the past year, according to the National Commission on Climate and Workforce Health / Switch 5 poll. Power outages, commuting disruptions, school and daycare closures, and caregiving demands affect knowledge workers as much as those in any other industry or environment.

## The Productivity and Absenteeism Toll

The impact of extreme weather is often most easily observed via absenteeism. Nearly one in three workers said they were unable to work during recent extreme weather events due to power outages or building closures, according to that same poll. More than six in ten workers (62%) say extreme weather has reduced their productivity: 23% significantly and 40% to some degree.

Among employers, 39% report productivity losses due to extreme weather, according to MIT Technology Review.

Taken together, these statistics depict a workforce operating in a volatile environment—literally.

## Safety Risks and Rising Costs

Beyond absenteeism and lost productivity, employee physical safety is also at stake. For example, injury rates at work begin to increase at temperatures as low as 85 degrees. In 2023 alone, about 29,000 additional workplace injuries took place due to extreme heat, according to a 2025 study by researchers at Harvard and George Washington Universities. These injuries generate workers' compensation claims and drive up insurance costs. According to MIT Technology Review, almost two-thirds of employers (63%) report rising insurance costs and premiums linked to extreme weather. These incidents represent real harm to real people, something that HR teams everywhere work to avoid.

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Which statement best describes your organization's current approach to protecting employees from climate-driven health risks (extreme heat, air quality, severe weather)?

- 40%** We do not see this as a risk
- 30%** We are taking initial actions (e.g., heat protocols, communication plans) and would like to sustain or enhance these efforts
- 17%** We would like to take action and are currently exploring options or developing a plan
- 8%** We have established actions in place and are ready to share our approach with others
- 4%** We are aware of the issue and interested in learning more

*Source: HRCI webinar poll, December 2025, 469 respondents*

## Talent Implications Are Emerging

Extreme weather is also beginning to reshape the talent landscape. Forty-three percent of employees say their employer’s weather readiness influences their decision to remain with that organization long-term, according to the National Commission on Climate and Workforce Health / Switch 5 poll. Forbes reports that nearly one-third of Americans say climate change would motivate them to relocate. Almost a third of organizations (29%) report experiencing difficulty recruiting or retaining talent due to extreme weather, according to MIT Technology Review.

“For HR leaders in high-risk geographies, the talent implications of extreme weather are not a future concern—they are happening now,” Leathers said. “For employers, demonstrating visible and meaningful commitment to worker protection during weather events is becoming a vital capability.”

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As an HR professional, what are the biggest barriers you face in protecting your workforce from extreme heat and weather?

- 41%** This is not a top priority for my organization
- 29%** I have limited budget or resources allocated to this work
- 13%** I don’t have the right data to assess and address these risks
- 10%** I don’t know what role HR should play or where to start
- 7%** I don’t know which specific climate risks (e.g., extreme heat, flooding, wildfires) affect my workforce
- 7%** I don’t know how extreme heat and weather affect my workforce
- 6%** I don’t know which other business functions to partner with

Source: HRCI webinar survey, December 2025, 611 respondents



## A Shift Toward HR-Led Readiness

HR experts say part of the problem is that weather response is traditionally reactive and spread throughout the company. Departments like operations, facilities, and IT are typically the first responders, while HR is often left to handle later consequences, such as leave requests, benefits questions, absence tracking, and employee communications. HR is not traditionally involved in the preparedness conversation, but that is changing.

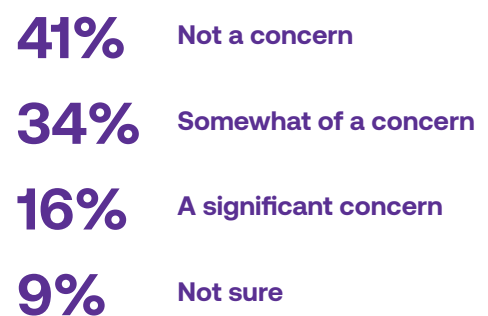
“Companies must demonstrate a visible and practical commitment to worker well-being,” Dufrane said. “Employees are increasingly looking at these measures to evaluate where to work and whether to stay. Companies that build real readiness—before the next major event, not after—will emerge stronger and more quickly from those disruptions. HR must be part of that conversation.”

Shelie Gustafson, SPHR, GPHR, HRCI Board Director and former Fortune 250 global executive, said strategy is a critical element of emergency preparedness.

“While extreme weather events demand rapid, in-the-moment decisions, the real opportunity for HR is to shape how those decisions are made long before a crisis occurs,” she said. “This means establishing clear governance, decision rights, and communication protocols that enable leaders to act quickly and consistently under pressure. Done well, this is not just about response; it is about building organizational resilience, protecting the workforce, sustaining customer commitments, and reinforcing trust in leadership when it matters most.”

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Extreme heat and weather events are \_\_\_\_\_ to my workforce



*Source: HRCI webinar survey, November 2025, 469 respondents*

# What Your Team Can Do

HR experts say most teams already have the tools, relationships, and organizational influence to address extreme weather. “Many of the most effective responses do not require significant new investment,” Dufrane said. “They require doing what HR already does, but doing it through extreme-weather scenario planning. The gap between the most and least prepared organizations is often a function of acting with intention and communicating effectively.”

## Here are some things HR teams can do to prepare for weather disruptions:

- **Audit your existing benefits.** Review your health plan, employee assistance program, pharmacy benefit, and leave policies to surface coverage that already applies to heat illness, respiratory conditions, mental health, and disaster recovery. Your company may offer more support than you realize.
- **Proactively communicate before, during, and after weather events.** Employee assistance programs often include disaster-related counseling and financial guidance. Rather than relying on annual benefits communications, push targeted outreach whenever a significant weather event is anticipated or has occurred.
- **Educate employees on public assistance resources.** Many workers do not know about FEMA assistance, state disaster relief funds, utility programs, or local emergency resources. Compiling and sharing this information is simple for HR and appreciated by employees.
- **Update remote work and attendance policies to address weather.** When air quality reaches hazardous levels or a major storm is approaching, employees shouldn’t have to guess whether they’re expected to be in the office, or what the time-off protocol dictates. Written policies, communicated in advance, can greatly reduce confusion and remove unnecessary stress.
- **Add extreme weather questions to your next survey.** Ask employees about weather-related concerns, preparedness, confidence, and awareness of available benefits. Responses may surface risk, benefit gaps, or communication failures. This also signals to employees that the organization takes weather seriously.

## The Impact on Mental Health

Extreme weather can impose a significant—and often underrecognized—psychological burden on those who live through it.

Anxiety, grief, displacement-related stress, and long-term trauma are common consequences to major weather events, and not just for employees who experience harm directly. Workers who witness destruction in their community, lose colleagues to evacuation or restructuring, or have routines disrupted for months can experience mental health consequences that affect their performance and well-being long after the event itself has passed.

“The impact of a flood, fire, or hurricane can be extremely broad,” Leathers said. “It impacts the entire community in one way or another.”

Forty percent of organizations still do not offer mental health support to employees following a weather event, according to a 2024 report by the International SOS Foundation.

That said, many organizations do have Employee Assistance Programs and mental health benefits in place. The gap exists when such programs do not explicitly cover weather-related trauma, and because providers are not always trained to address it.

“The mental health gap is one of the most common flaws in company readiness,” Dufrane said. “Thankfully, it is also a relatively easy solve if we are intentional.”

HR teams that want to go further can take additional steps. New policies and offerings can go a long way toward making employees feel more secure. “As someone who has led the emergency support function, my HR team’s primary concern was accounting for and assisting all affected employees,” said Shaun Mayo, SPHR, HRCI Board Director and Chief People Officer for the Arizona Cardinals Football Club. “Questions arose about everything from pay to disaster relief, and in our case, setting up call centers for our team to easily access that advice was the right move. Taking the time to consider possible scenarios and make contingency plans goes a really long way.”

#### Here are some additional ideas:

- **Create dedicated extreme-weather leave.** Many employees face poor choices during extreme weather: use paid time off, call in sick, or risk an unexcused absence. A clearly defined “weather disruption” leave category, with eligibility criteria covering evacuation, home damage, building closures, and caregiving responsibilities, removes ambiguity and provides real protection.
- **Establish clear return-to-work protocols.** Recovery from a major disaster often takes weeks or months. Define in advance how and when employees are expected to return, and provide options for those still managing housing instability, family displacement, or health consequences.
- **Expand telehealth access.** Telehealth can be critical for mental and physical well-being during events that disrupt transportation, overwhelm local health systems, or make in-person care impractical. Verify that your telehealth platform is easy to navigate, that coverage is clearly communicated, and that mental health services are explicitly included.
- **Offer home-preparedness stipends.** Offered through existing lifestyle spending accounts or similar flexible benefit vehicles, these allow employees to apply funds toward fans, air conditioners, air purifiers, backup power supplies, emergency preparedness kits, or other weather-related needs. Workplace emergency savings accounts are another option.
- **Provide dependent care support.** When schools, daycares, or eldercare facilities close due to weather events, working caregivers face massive logistical problems and stress. Backup care benefits, flexible scheduling arrangements, and temporary dependent-care stipends can help employees manage these situations.

## How Your Company Can Get Help

While every company should address extreme weather, they don’t have to do it alone. Extreme Weather + Work, launched by the Health Action Alliance in partnership with leading employers including Mercer, The Hartford, Disney, Google, CVS Health, Bristol Myers Squibb, and others, is designed to help companies prepare for extreme weather risks.

‘There are many resources that companies can turn to, including one another,’ Leathers said. ‘Extreme Weather + Work was designed to help companies ask the right questions and to provide them with answers.’

Employers can engage for free and access guidance and tools, including the [Climate Health Cost Forecaster](#) and [Climate and Worker Health Scorecard](#), both developed in partnership with Mercer. The resources help organizations identify climate risks to their employees, estimate the impact on healthcare costs, and assess their ability to mitigate those risks.

Employers ready to go further can apply for [membership](#), gaining access to peer learning, expert advisory sessions, and priority access to Workforce Resilience Labs—regional, in-person sessions where teams address weather events relevant to that locale.

Learn more at [www.extremeweatherandwork.org](http://www.extremeweatherandwork.org).

Of course, there are many more options companies can pursue. Some have established an employee disaster relief fund. Others offer “parametric” insurance options that pay out automatically when predefined weather thresholds are met (such as when a Category 3 hurricane makes landfall). There are also employer-supported recovery loans, which are low- or no-interest loans, repayable through payroll deduction over two to five years, that can help employees address home damage or replace essential property.

“Extreme weather is not going to become less disruptive, so minimizing the gap between awareness and preparedness is key,” Dufrane said. “That gap has direct operational consequences in absenteeism, in healthcare costs, and in the well-being of our workforce. HR is not the only function that needs to respond to this challenge, but we are uniquely positioned to lead that response effort.”

## Methodology

HRCI data was collected via several polls conducted on HRCI’s LinkedIn platform and in conjunction with the Alchemizing HR webinar series.

LinkedIn polls were conducted from April 13-16, 2026, with 721 respondents; April 17-20, 2026, with 300 respondents; and April 20-23, 2026, with 205 respondents.

HRCI webinar polls were conducted on November 20, 2025, with 469 respondents; December 11, 2025, with 469 respondents; and December 18, 2025, with 611 respondents.