Living Standard U.S. Public Research Report lssue 02 Fall 2019 Ý The second in a series focusing on the power of storytelling for sustainability. Presented by the U.S. Green Building Council





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LIVING STANDARD 3



LETTER FROM THE CEO

Dear Friends,

Earlier this year, Living Standard, a campaign of the U.S. Green Building Council, <u>released the first</u> <u>volume of Standard Issue</u>, an in-depth qualitative and quantitative report that demonstrates the urgent need to recalibrate the way we talk about climate change.

In creating the report, we met with communities around the country to understand just how they were thinking about sustainability and its value on their daily lives.

Our findings?

Climate change is not widely understood. Even more concerning, there's real confusion around buildings and their profound impact on extreme weather, natural disasters, and the health and wellbeing of children.

As members of the green building community, we've got to start engaging wider audiences to convince the public of the reality of climate-related threats. We've got to illustrate the importance of small, everyday actions. And we've got to connect the dots between people and the planet they call home. The good news is that most people do believe environmental problems are important. They just don't believe these issues are important enough to make action a priority. To mobilize those outside our community, we need to shift their sense of urgency.

But first we need to shift our own.

Changing public perception will take nothing less than a radical re-framing of our communication methods, particularly our heavy reliance on data and numbers to prove our cause. To be clear, scientific language and startling statistics have their place. But if we are ever to reverse the dangers of climate change, we've got to bring more humanity into our conversations.

Here's the catch: This revolution won't spark overnight. As you'll see in this report, the way to reach people is not through drastic calls to action or dire warnings to fundamentally alter their way of life. It's through encouragement of small, gradual changes. It's through meeting them where they are and finding the story inside of every statistic. It's through baby steps.

What do I mean by baby steps?

I mean cheering on every little action whether it's recycling, conserving water and electricity, or choosing to work in a green building. I mean stepping outside of our comfort zones, looking beyond our own experiences, and extending a hand to communities that are not our own.

I mean initiating conversations, without agenda, about how our homes can affect our children's asthma, how the materials used to build a school can make our students sick, and how "going green" can reduce our utility bills, leading to a healthier and wealthier life for all of us.

I mean talking about these steps and your experience in taking them!

Standard Issue, Volume II, is intended to help you get started. Not only do we highlight new research of the general public, we've also included an <u>Action</u> <u>Toolkit</u> which provides new tactics for talking about these issues.

Those who believe the environment is important are more likely to persuade other members of their communities, participate in a call to action, and take political stands. But we must first get them to see before we can expect them to believe. That requires relating to people in new ways.

One of our most powerful tools in creating connection is to share our own stories with others. As we embark on this mission to make our communities healthier and more livable, I invite you to add your own experiences with the natural world at <u>livingstandard.org</u>. These might seem like tiny requests when faced with the existential crisis of our time. But I wholeheartedly believe this is the path to progress. Start with these small acts, not the least of which is speaking up, even if you don't yet understand where your experience falls on the spectrum of action we discuss in the coming pages. I have faith that your individual efforts, and our collective efforts, will lead to giant leaps forward, where intention becomes action and action becomes lasting change.

Sincerely,

Makesh Ramanfam

Mahesh Ramanujam President and CEO USGBC





In communities across the country, there are people taking action to halt the effects of climate change. This summer, 633 divers gathered on a Florida beach to conduct a massive underwater beach cleanup. Last year, high school students broke records in recycling and compost efforts. In July, hundreds of young people joined forces for the Zero Hour summit to uplift their efforts, train their peers, and hold adults accountable for decisions that will impact all of us for generations to come — if those generations do, in fact, come. These people may have each taken different forms of activism, but they share one critical understanding: that individual actions, and a belief that they matter, are what it takes to build a collective effort and make change.

By large margins, respondents in our second report feel the effects of the environment in their everyday lives, and they believe environmental issues are important.

They rank their surrounding environment as unhealthy, and nearly half of them have direct experience with asthma or dirty drinking water. However, many of the same respondents don't feel the agency to make their circumstances better. With this report, we are working to change that. We are focusing on the people who need help moving from inactivity to involvement: those who know the high stakes, see the impacts in their community, but don't know what to do about it. And we are giving them the tools to make gradual changes in their lives.

We all have a role in building that momentum: turning anxiety into action, organizing our families and communities, and allowing ourselves the vulnerability to share stories about how our environments affect the way we take care of our loved ones.





WHAT IF THE THREA **IS LESS CLFAR?**

A BURNING QUESTION

What if you learned that something in the environment around your home was putting your health at risk? What if air pollution from a fire or industrial plant settled over your neighborhood? Or your drinking water was suddenly undrinkable, contaminated, or off limits to you and your loved ones? What if you discovered that the materials used to build your schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods could make you sick, not safe?

What Would You Do?

We presented this sick vs. safe scenario to a nationally representative, random sample of U.S. adults and saw very different responses. Almost half of the public indicated they would make real adjustments to their routines and consumption habits in order to protect themselves and their families from harm. Almost three in 10 respondents would mobilize or take action, by donating their time or money to support those impacted by an environmental disaster in their immediate area.

One fifth of respondents would engage local elected officials to solve the problem. Over a third of the respondents would make minor changes and wait out the threat (18%), or make no changes and not worry (17%). One in six would actually relocate to a healthier area.

This represents the full spectrum of action-from individual behavior change to collective action; from voting at the ballot box to voting with your wallet; from major life changes to inaction. Even though we experience an event together, it does not mean we react the same way, with the same urgency, and the same intensity. If you are in a "take action" camp, it might be unfathomable to you that someone would do nothing. If you are in a "wait and see" camp, you might feel there are more pressing issues to deal with than something that can seem out of your control.

In these hypothetical scenarios laid out in the first paragraph, the danger is imminent and clear. It was local. It impacted the ones we love. It was close to the community we call home. And still, a large minority of 35% was only willing to "make minor changes and wait and see" (18%) or those who would "make no changes at all" (17%).



Engage local elected officials to solve the problem



Participate in or mobilize my community to take a large scale action in solidarity

Make real adjustments to my routine and what I consume to protect me and/or my family from harm



ABOUT TIME

That is the challenge we are facing due to climate change. The risks posed by extreme weather events, such as natural disasters, mass migration, and loss of homes and property, make our lives less healthy, less wealthy, and more vulnerable. And just as with our hypothetical scenario above, we find reactions to this very real threat all over the map. In this case, the disparate reactions are exacerbated by the disconnect—in time and immediacy, in presence and tangibility, in belief and credibility-between the climate-related risks which are predicted to happen at some point in the future.

If there is no consensus on how to act when a pollution cloud settles over your house or foulsmelling contaminated drinking water comes out of your faucet, how can we expect consensus on these more distant-but nevertheless existential-risks?

TURNING ANXIETY INTO ACTION

As discussed in Standard Issue, Volume I, there is a strong and growing consensus around the importance of solving environmental problems. The stakes are high. The window for solving them is closing-and our goal must be to turn a sense of urgency into action now. We need to show what can be done by each of us alone and by all of us together-whether that's making small changes to a routine or understanding more about the buildings we live and work in and how they can impact our well-being.

To do this, we must accept that people's perspectives will differ depending on their circumstances. The key is persuading them to embrace broader, lasting changes. Getting someone to make small adjustments in their personal routine is just as necessary as mobilizing a community to create healthier living environments.

Every conversation must begin with the understanding that environmental problems are impacting our daily lives. Thankfully, there is a growing recognition that environmental problems, such as natural disasters, poor air quality, drought, famine, and other issues brought about by climate change are important. Fully 82% of the U.S. public believe these environmental problems are very or somewhat important, an increase of 8 percentage points in the last six months since we conducted the research.

> As an amenities provider to the multifamily industry, we provide doorstep recycling to more than one million apartment homes across the U.S. We help residents learn the importance of recycling properly while giving them an easy and efficient means to do so from their doorstep!

> > - Heath H., Tampa FL

Yet that large majority is not all alike—different people hold this belief with different levels of intensity.

In our survey, 49% say environmental problems are very important while 33% say they are somewhat important. Our "core community" is comprised of those who believe the environment is very important and more likely to mobilize their communities, participate in a call to action, and take political action. Those with less intense convictions on the issue are still on the same side, but the actions they are willing to take may be more incremental and more individual. There are

I'm enrolled in the urban planning graduate change issues through planning.

How important are environmental problems to you?



also people who say these problems are important, but fully "in" the community. We can help them on their they cannot afford to spend more money on living in a journey from inactivity to involvement. And, by that healthier environment. same token, we also need to continue to speak to our core supporters who say environmental problems These audiences who believe the environment is are important and urgent and are prepared to take action to find solutions. These advocates for healthier important but are not taking action for different reasons are important targets for us. We cannot environments are also looking for more ways and fail to engage people simply because they are not more tools to show their commitment.





THE PRESSING PARADOX

How do we persuade people who believe
environmental problems exist, but who are not
engaged in solving them, to convert their concern
into action? If we want change, we must talk to this
group of people as much as we talk to environmental
advocates. Because we need to understand how best
to activate them.

That is the paradox. We need a revolution in the near term, but it must start by growing gradually in order to bring everyone along and have maximum impact.

This means taking baby steps today, even though we know we will need to take big leaps in the future. We can start a conversation about how to live in a more environmentally sustainable way today and let those conversations and actions build toward collective leaps forward in the future. This means stepping out of comfort zones, looking beyond our own experiences, and engaging people outside of our immediate communities. This means using inclusive language and powerful images to make everyone feel they have the ability to take action in their day-to-day lives to create a more sustainable environment.

FAMILY MATTERS

No matter your background or circumstance, the simplest and most organic way to connect with others on the importance of the environment is to frame the conversation around the importance of people. You want people to focus their attention on climate-related risks? Then focus your attention on the health and well-being of their families and loved ones.

Both our core community and our "somewhat important" target audience, 61% and 63% respectively, are most passionate about protecting the health of their family and friends. While our core is equally passionate about helping protect the planet at 63%, the people we need to convince are much less focused on the planet at only 41%.

As one survey respondent said, they are motivated to live a greener and more sustainable life by "cooperating, assisting, and partaking in changes to benefit my family and friends and in turn the world."

From the following list, please select the three people places or things whose health you feel most passionate about protecting and improving.



The top reasons both groups say citizens should demand action to address environmental problems is "our families deserve to inherit a safe, healthy environment" and "environmental problems are already causing unhealthy air and drinking water which hurt me and my family's health today." This is followed by economic benefits.





17%

New types of clean energy will save American consumers money

18%

Solving environmental problems can create millions of green jobs



Doing nothing risks endangering more wildlife we depend on, like insects and fish

31%

Unhealthy air & drinking water hurt me & my family's health today

43%

Our children deserve to inherit a safe, healthy environment



Economy



On a scale of 1-10, where 10 is EXTREMELY HEALTHY and 1 is EXTREMELY UNHEALTHY, how healthy is your local environment where you currently live?



FROM BABY STEPS TO BIG LEAPS

What do we do if where and how we live is hurting us? The answers to this question vary. Some people are already taking significant steps, while others are taking little or no action. Some are doing a lot on their own but nothing as part of their community.

If we can agree on the premise that our families, loved ones, and children deserve a healthy environment, then no matter where we are on the spectrum of concern, we can take small, meaningful actions and move forward together. That should be our goal: helping to inspire others to take the next step.

It is not simply a matter of sharing information. It is about connecting information to people's real experiences. In our research we asked respondents to score their local environment on a scale of 1 to 10, with "healthy environment" defined as an air quality index of under 100, safe drinking water clean from

> My construction managers tease me for scouring our dumpsters for foam board that can still be used. I visit our product manufacturers' plants, ensuring quality while looking for ways to reduce costs and home prices. And I work with government, community leaders, and residents to find funding to make green living a right for all, instead of a luxury.

chemicals, toxins, and other industrial run-off, and being a safe distance from cancer-causing electromagnetic fields, like power lines or energy plants. Only 7% of respondents rate their local environment as a 10 out of 10 for being "extremely healthy" and another 24% say their local environment is an eight or a nine out of 10. That means approximately 70% say their local environment ranks a 7 or lower on health and half of those rank their environment a 5 or lower. If we believe people deserve to live in a healthy environment, then there is work to be done to improve these numbers.

The missing piece of the puzzle is context. When people take individual action first and then share their experiences, others can better understand how small actions can have big, lasting impacts. Statistics reflecting how millions of peoples' lives are being negatively impacted by environmental issues can be less powerful than describing how one individual's life could be hurt by an unhealthy environment, whether it be contaminated tap water, unhealthy air, or sick buildings.

- Marshall G., Sarasota, FL



MIND THE GAP

Volume I.

The way people's surroundings affect their well-being is not top of mind. When asked how often they consider the impact of the buildings they spend time in on the environment and on their health, only 38% consider this impact weekly or more, while 23% say they might consider it every month or year, and 39% percent say they have never considered it or don't know.

A plurality of respondents (46%) say their home's walls protect them only a little, not at all, or possibly harm them with respect to air pollution, toxins, smoke, and other unhealthy microbes. Another 16% have no clue. This is the same story when it comes to water pipes, whereby 44% say their water pipes protect them only a little, not at all, or possibly harm them with respect to contaminated drinking water, toxins, chemicals, and other unhealthy microbes. There, too, another 20% say they have no clue.

That is why it is important to talk about safety. Green buildings are not only good for the planet, they help mitigate immediate and direct negative health outcomes. Nearly four in 10 of our respondents have direct, personal experience with asthma, dirty drinking water, asbestos, and sick buildings, and increase from three in 10 from the survey conducted for the <u>Standard Issue</u>,



A SPECTRUM OF POSSIBILITIES

The green building community must do more to help people connect the dots between the places they work and live and their families' health and well-being. We should not have to question whether the places we live, work, learn, and play are harming our health and survival. We should have confidence in the ability of these places to protect and enrich our lives in a sustainable way. A consistent, high standard of living is not a privilege or a luxury, it's something that everyone should expect and enjoy. No matter where people are on their level of commitment to action, if we can connect their environment to their families' health and well-being, we can make it relevant and help take them from baby steps to bigger, bolder leaps.

Before seeking to move people to action, it is important to identify where they fall on the matrix of major and minor individual and collective action. Maybe they are taking some basic individual actions like recycling or conserving water and electricity? What actions are they not taking in that same general quadrant that they could take? If we can get everyone who is somewhat concerned about their environment to take one additional action, the sum of their activity could change our collective course.

I still remember the day my mom drove us to the recycling center behind the high school football stadium in Morten Grove, IL. As folks were collecting our newspapers and cans, a young man approached us with a paper towel roll. "This is what your material gets turned into," he proudly stated. At nine, I thought I heard the most remarkable thing in the world. That was it! That grew into my journey to becoming the first sustainability coordinator in the health care industry.

- Kai Kestutis A., Longmont, CO





Use solar lights for walkways

Pick up litter in your neighborhood

Wash clothes in cold water

Insulate hot water pipes

and landscaping

- free diapers or feminine products
- Minimize stockpiling of excess paint Use salvaged, recycled, or renewable materials for home improvement projects
- 3-5 years Purchase non-bleached paper products, print on both sides of the paper, and use

Have septic system pumped every

Refrain from using pesticides

- Help educate neighbors about community resilience measures and home disaster planning
- Make food accessible to all through urban gardens & farmers markets
- Move toward an all-electric grid
- Hold a neighborhood conversation about climate change, resilience, or other relevant topic
- Organize to get workplace electric vehicle charging and more bicycle parking
- Organize for better bus routes and more bike lanes
- Form or join a coalition of your peers
- Start a petition within your office or community



- Upgrade washing machine and dishwasher to high-
- Purchase or switch to renewable energy through

efficiency ENERGY STAR models

your utility

- Give up your car
- Clean up chemicals in refrigerators and air conditioners
- Cook on a clean stove
- Install solar panels or green roofs
- Monitor your carbon footprint
- Landscape with native plants

LIVING GREEN MEANS...

We asked survey respondents to tell us what "living green" means to them and their answers spanned the spectrum of personal action to collective action, and from big to small things:

A building built with earth friendly materials that are non-toxic to the environment and a healthy place for people to be. Using as little resources as possible: From recycling all plastic and bottles to composting my garbage, and also, getting others to adopt a vegan diet and buying items whose packaging is made from recycled items.

> Recycling, Composting, Reusing items if possible - grocery bags, food containers, paper products.

The impact that each individual leaves on the planet as far as resources used.

> How much an individual consumes non-renewable resources, and also contributes to pollution.

Intentionally monitoring water, electricity, and the consumption of food, as well as sustainability of the resources we have.

Eating healthy, and recycling.





GREEN BUILDINGS

WHERE WE LIVE AS PART OF THE SOLUTION

One of the biggest steps we can take to improve the health and well-being of our families is to improve where we live and work. That doesn't mean renting a moving truck or quitting your job; it means advocating for green buildings or taking steps to make your home greener.

However, even for the strongest supporters of the environment there is a disconnect between "living green" and green buildings. They don't think about them as part of the solution. Most people just think of green buildings in terms of the energy the building is producing or consuming—or more generally as having a clean, safe, and healthy place to work or live in. We know that green buildings are so much more—they can save money, improve the health of your family, and even make your life easier—but what can be done about the fact that a large majority is not aware?

To activate these strong supporters and awaken them to the power of green buildings, we first need to educate

them on what a green building is. Emphasizing the human health benefits, potential personal savings, and carbon emissions reductions are all stronger messages than focusing on the buildings themselves, like the temperature cooling impact of green roofs and the buildings' maintenance and operations savings. We need to arm those already open to green building strategies with the information and tools they need to advocate for green workspaces and homes. At USGBC, we like to lead by example.

We have produced an <u>Action Toolkit</u> that accompanies this research as a first step. The purpose of this Toolkit is to give our community—from LEED professionals and practitioners to USGBC members, from advocates to developers to teachers—tools for how to carry our message into the broader public. The Toolkit presents six methods for community outreach.

Linking personal behavior to environmental problems is part of the Living Standard campaign. The good news is, people with strong ties to environmental concerns attribute these issues to their individual actions. It's not a bigger global issue for them. Individuals have agency over their actions and can make changes in their routines, as long as people know how to adjust properly.





2'

THE FINE **"PRINT**

We also need to connect "carbon footprints" with green buildings. And that starts with educating our advocates on what "carbon footprint" actually means. Reducing carbon emissions was the most common phrase associated with sustainability both for the general population as well as our core supporters at almost 50% and 66% respectively.

People talk about energy and carbon footprint in reference almost entirely to cars, but they are not alone in producing carbon emissions and, for many, changing modes of transportation is not an option. We need to expand the conversation and green buildings are a clear and natural way to show an additional solution to this problem.

To make this connection, we must do a better job of talking about the impact green buildings have on reducing carbon emissions. Over three quarters of the general population and nine in 10 of core environment supporters believe the following message is very or somewhat important: "while a city's buildings account for roughly half of its carbon emissions, green buildings reduce carbon emissions by 30-50 percent."

We also hear people talk about green building benefits in their own words. Some respondents speak about it generally, as one survey respondent says, "a green building would be a building that does not emit carbon dioxide and recycles." Others have very specific ideas around green buildings: "I believe a green building has lots of special aspects added to it to make sure you only breathe good, clean air. That the water you drink is the best available. And, that there is no chance of carbon monoxide poisoning."

When the connection is truly made, people talk about green buildings both in terms of their own health and the environment. One survey respondent says, "a green building is a building okay for your health, built with natural materials as much as possible to help sustain the environment." And another says a green building is "a building built with earth-friendly materials that are non-toxic to the environment and a healthy place for people to be."

Now you'll see some statements about green buildings. For each statement, please rate how important this is to you. Is this very important, somewhat important, just a little important, or not important at all?





% Very Important shown



GREENER BUILDINGS BIGGER BENEFIS

"

I recently joined volunteers who are working to help our city implement its commitment to get 100% energy from renewable sources. I wanted to take substantive action to mitigate climate change and had to think bigger than my own household's impacts. Getting involved in community-wide action was the most significant thing I could do to make a difference.

Ultimately, as we speak to our community and the public, we need to help connect the personal and the planet in the following way:

Green buildings and green communities allow you to live more sustainability in ways you can experience—in your health, the air you breathe, the water you drink. They offer a better quality of life for everyone, while also lowering global carbon emissions, reducing electricity and water bills, and creating new green jobs.

And, of course, it's incumbent on our community to raise awareness that living green can lead to savings, for example, on utility bills. Many people think living in a sustainable way is a luxury or costs a lot of money and is out of reach. We need to make it attainable by suggesting affordable action items.

- Sara L, South Lake Tahoe, CA

A GALL TO AGTON

We all want better lives for ourselves, our families, and our children. We all can take part in making our communities healthier and more livable. Every little action—from recycling, to conserving water and electricity, to choosing to live and work in green buildings—helps everyone. These small steps spark a larger discussion about air ventilation, toxin-free building materials, or energy conservation. And, those larger discussions lead to the giant leaps where intention becomes action.

Every conversation we have inside or outside our community must leave others with concrete actions to take:

1. Use our Action Toolkit to talk about these

issues. Most people believe environmental problems are important but do not take action or make it a priority. Talk about the issues with family or friends. Talk about them with clients. Talk about it with your coworkers or supervisors. By talking about the issues in the context of our personal stories we make them more immediate and real.

2. Make the link between the high stakes and the local impacts. What are the environment-

related problems your community is dealing with—is it contaminated water, pollution, high energy costs, or extreme weather events like fires, droughts, hurricanes, or flooding? Gather this information and share it back to us for feedback at livingstandard@ usgbc.org. Having a clear sense of how environmental issues are playing out in communities all across the country will make it easier to draw the connection between the existential stakes and people's every day.

3. Share your story at livingstandard.org. People respond to human stories much more than facts and figures. As the people on the front line of the USGBC community who have helped support this effort over the past 25 years, we need you to share your story to help show others how green buildings, green communities, and green living relate to them.

4. Incorporate more green living practices into your daily life. We believe in green buildings and green communities and want everyone to incorporate that ethos into their every day. This can include recycling, turning off lights, conserving water, or bringing air-purifying plants into your home or work. Those small actions help you live a healthier life and also can save you money.



livingstandard.org