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and Design Center



NEW JERSEY
ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE ALLIANCE

Select Committee on the Climate Crisis

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis. I am an Assistant Professor of Professional Practice at The New School University where I serve as the Associate Director of the Tishman Environment and Design Center. I also serve as a Trustee of the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance and as such, serve as a member of the Equitable and Just Climate Forum.

Introduction

The ongoing and intersecting public health, economic, and racial justice crises our country is in has put into sharp focus the systemic change needed to address long standing inequities. At the same time, we're in a climate crisis. Each of these crises disproportionately impacts Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian Pacific Island and other communities of color. As policymakers address each crisis, they must also look at solutions that address them holistically and are centered in equity and justice.

The House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis' majority Climate Crisis Action Plan¹ details both processes and policies that, if enacted, will address these crises and build a more equitable and just future. The Equitable and Just National Climate Platform² also identifies the need to advance economic, racial, environmental and climate justice as part of a national climate agenda, and as a co-author of the Platform, I am pleased to see our ideas acknowledged in the Select Committee report.

Events in 2020 have shone a bright light on longstanding racial disparities that have contributed to disproportionate health impacts on communities of color and low income communities. A Harvard study³ released in April linked long-term exposure to air pollution to higher death rates from coronavirus – demonstrating the devastating health impacts caused by

¹ <https://climatecrisis.house.gov/report>

² <https://ajustclimate.org/index.html>

³ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/air-pollution-linked-with-higher-covid-19-death-rates/>

decades of environmental racism. These findings were supported by the Rhodium group,⁴ which found that Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities in high environmental risk areas experience death rates from COVID-19 more than four times higher than those in counties with fewer environmental risks (See Appendix). The Rhodium Group also found that Indigenous, Black, and Latino communities experienced higher rates of unemployment and a slower economic rebound than whites.

Systemic racism has contributed to these disparities, and transformative, intersectional policy that centers justice and equity in the solutions are essential going forward. Climate policy can and should be designed in a manner that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution, while creating long-term economic sustainability for all communities. Without an intentional focus on equity and justice, we will replicate the same disparities in the transition to an environmentally sustainable economy.

Equitable and Just National Climate Platform

One year ago, environmental justice organizations from across the country along with six national environmental groups co-created and co-signed the Equitable and Just National Climate Platform (Platform). The Platform identifies the need to advance innovative, equitable policy solutions to address climate change and environmental justice. Central to the Platform is the recognition that in order to address the climate crisis, we must advance policy that addresses climate while advancing environmental justice, economic, and racial justice.

The Platform details a bold vision of a just, inclusive agenda that advances ambitious environmental justice and climate policy while addressing racial and economic justice. As it states, “Our vision is that all people and all communities have the right to breathe clean air, live free of dangerous levels of toxic pollution, access healthy food, and enjoy the benefits of a prosperous and vibrant clean economy.”

In order to achieve these goals and vision, the Platform recognizes the need to mobilize all assets – communities, government, science, research, business and industry – to develop long-term comprehensive solutions. These solutions must “meaningfully involve and value the voices and positions of environmental justice, frontline and fenceline communities.” These strategies must also “acknowledge and repair the legacy of environmental harms on communities inflicted by fossil fuel and other industrial pollution.”

Organizations who co-signed the Platform agreed that in order to address climate change, we must reduce legacy pollution in a way that creates jobs and contributes to the health and well-being of all communities.

Policies in the Platform will contribute both to short-term economic recovery in response to the pandemic and recession, as well as long-term economic growth, building towards an inclusive,

⁴ <https://rhg.com/research/a-just-green-recovery/>

pollution-free economy, all while reducing greenhouse gas and other emissions. We are pleased to see the core premise of the Platform in the Climate Crisis Action Plan.

HEROES Act and Representative McEachin and Chairman Grijalva’s environmental justice stimulus letter

A number of existing programs, if robustly funded, would contribute to the just and equitable future envisioned in the Platform. The HEROES Act, as passed by the House, included funding for programs that will have both short and long-term economic impacts while reducing emissions and creating and sustaining jobs. These include nearly \$2 billion to provide potable water to communities affected by the pandemic, specifically making funds available to assist Tribal and low-income families with water and wastewater services, in addition to a moratorium on dangerous water service shut-offs; and \$1.5 billion for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to reduce energy burdens for low income families. The bill also included \$50 million for environmental justice grants to study and address the disproportionate impacts of coronavirus on environmental justice communities.

Representative McEachin and Chairman Grijalva sent a letter to House and Senate leadership in March that also identified key short-term spending that would reduce emissions and improve public health while also stimulating economic growth. Rhodium’s jobs analysis of the programs outlined in the letter found that if funded, these investments would create up to 300,000 new jobs per year for five years. For example, Rhodium estimates that a \$30 billion investment in the Community Development Block Grant program, which provides grants to states for community development and affordable housing, would create 92,000 jobs per year for five years.

Both the letter and the Climate Crisis Action Plan discussed the importance of expanding funding for the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP). By investing in energy efficiency and home updates, individuals can lower their energy burdens and reduce electricity usage. As the Climate Crisis Action Plan notes, “Investments in weatherization have economic multiplier effects because workers develop skills through construction-related jobs that are readily transferable to other economic sectors” (p. 166). They both discuss the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and the essential utility bill assistance it provides. The Climate Crisis Action Plan also envisions expanding LIHEAP and using these funds to increase solar access in low income communities (p. 77, 167). Both also recommend increasing funding to “clean up and reuse contaminated properties (brownfields)” (p. 398).

As Rhodium concluded, “As Congress turns their attention from near-term relief to investing in a sustainable economic recovery, investments in the kinds of programs outlined in the Grijalva-McEachin letter can both make a meaningful contribution to national job creation and serve as a down payment on creating a more environmentally just future.”

Prioritize Climate Action Spending in EJ communities

As the pandemic and economic challenges continue, the health and economic wellbeing of Indigenous, Black, and Latino communities have been disproportionately impacted. Rhodium found that “Between February and May, the number of Black and Latino people employed in the US fell by 16% and 18%, respectively, compared to 11% for white people.” And, as employment showed beginning signs of recovery in May, the same note found that Black and Latinx employment did not recover as quickly as white employment.

With a backdrop of the current economic crisis, these statistics reveal the devastating effects of environmental racism during a global pandemic. It is clear that environmental regulation does not equate to healthy environments for all. As policymakers take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it is essential for these policies to also reduce legacy environmental and economic impacts and ensure that policies do not contribute to further harm placed on these communities. Criteria and mechanisms to prioritize investment in disproportionately impacted communities to address these harms should be included in climate policy. As the Equitable and Just Climate Platform states, “Strategies to address climate change must not disproportionately benefit some communities while imposing costs on others. In fact, the national climate policy agenda should be used to reduce the disproportionate amount of pollution that is often found in EJ communities and that is associated with cumulative impacts, public health risks, and other persistent challenges.” We strongly recommend pursuing local economic development and building economic diversity that will also reduce the vulnerability of overburdened communities to pollution. Climate action must “create and support strategies that shift away from high pollution products and production processes toward those that are low-emission and sustainable. This also includes investments in innovative and worker-supported economic organizations such as cooperatives and other community wealth-building strategies.”

Research investments are also necessary to address equity and justice in climate policy. As detailed in the Platform, research focused on environmental justice and climate equity is a critical component of building a climate-sustainable future that addresses inequities instead of reinforcing inequities.

How to Invest and Prioritize spending in EJ communities

Underpinning all of these policy proposals, is the necessity of crafting policy inclusively and ensuring benefits are distributed equitably. We support the goal of creating an inclusive, just, and pollution-free energy economy. In the Equitable and Just Climate Platform, we call for “investing in the development of innovative decentralized models of energy provision; community governance and ownership; incorporation of social and health benefits into energy systems planning; incentivizing the inclusion of equity into future energy investment through public programs; and supporting public and private research and development to include equity considerations in new technology development.”

One key recommendation made in the Climate Crisis Action Plan is that “Congress should direct EPA to create a plan to (1) develop a methodology to assess the cumulative and disproportionate impacts of pollution on environmental justice communities, and (2) integrate

that methodology into agency decision-making” (p. 304). This critical first step is necessary to ensure that policy to address climate reduces pollution in overburdened communities.

Both the Platform and the Climate Crisis Action Plan recognize the importance of environmental justice community participation in policymaking. The Climate Crisis Action Plan’s recommendation to increase funding for EPA existing programs that provide technical assistance and build capacity of stakeholders engaged in policy is equally important. Throughout the Plan, the Committee majority recommends developing policy in partnership with communities. This model of policymaking will ensure that community expertise is taken into account, and that policies are responsive to community priorities.

Creating an equitable, just and climate-sustainable economy will drive job growth and sustained investments by government as well as private entities. The Platform details the need for policies to be shaped by communities and must lead to benefits at the local and community level. It also recognized the need to realign government spending in order to accomplish these goals. It envisions working at multiple levels of government using a variety of policy tools. Specifically, the Platform favors “policy tools that help achieve both local and national emissions reductions of carbon and other forms of pollution.” This shift will “require substantial new forms of capital investment by both the public and private sectors to build a new national infrastructure as well as democratic community participation to help set infrastructure investment priorities.” Without proper investment and engagement, we will repeat mistakes of the past.

The Climate Crisis Action Plan recommends significant federal investments to update infrastructure and housing to reduce emissions and build climate resilience. It follows with a recommendation to “direct a significant percentage of this spending to environmental justice communities and communities most affected by the economic transition away from fossil fuel consumption” (p. 304). This prioritization is necessary and we strongly support this recommendation.

The Climate Crisis Action Plan includes recommendations of a number of policies that can meet dual goals of reducing pollution and driving local economies. One of its building blocks is expanding low-income solar access and community solar initiatives. The recommendations to achieve this building block include funding and expanding programs to bolster solar access. It also encourages creation of a solar workforce program, with a focus on “individuals who have historically faced barriers to employment” (p. 76-77). The Platform and the Climate Crisis Action Plan both identify transportation and goods movements as a key sector where strategic investments can reduce air pollution while creating jobs. The Climate Crisis Action Plan includes recommendations like investing in zero emissions school buses (p. 118) and transit buses (p. 119), increasing electrification infrastructure access (p. 93, 126), and supporting research and development to drive new transportation technology (p. 126-127), among others.

In addition to investments informed by communities, as employment opportunities arise from these investments and new policies, the Platform recommends that workforce and job training programs be prioritized “especially in communities with disproportionately high underemployed

and unemployed populations and in communities that have been historically reliant on fossil fuel extraction and energy production.” The Climate Crisis Action Plan makes a similar recommendation. As it says, “This report makes several recommendations for new federal investment and incentives for clean and resilient infrastructure. Congress should direct a significant percentage of this spending to communities most affected by the economic transition away from fossil fuel consumption and environmental justice communities. These communities should receive federal spending and investment first, most often, and in larger amounts” (p. 291).

The intersecting crises our nation currently faces are dire - and the policy solutions to address these crises are interconnected. With meaningful action to address racial, economic, environmental and climate justice, Congress can use policy to reduce disparities and begin to build the just and equitable future envisioned in the Platform and the Climate Crisis Action Plan.

NO COMMUNITY WILL BE LEFT BEHIND.

All communities have a right to resources to withstand and cope with unanticipated natural and man-made threats and to live free from exposure to dangerous toxic pollution. Yet persistent racial and economic inequalities—and the forces that cause them to have created disproportionately high public health and environmental risks. Federal climate policy must address these injustices head-on by developing and implementing solutions at the scale needed to significantly improve their public health and quality of life. We need actions that will end environmental racism and the historic concentration of pollution in environmental justice communities, and that will rebuild the economy so that it works for all people and all communities. In meeting the goals and priorities outlined by the Plan, we encourage Congress to support the following, in line with the Select Committee’s Climate Crisis Action Plan⁵:

Invest in equitable and just research and innovation. The EPA’s Office of Research and Development provides the scientific and technical foundation to address our nation’s environmental and public health problems. This environmental research and development infrastructure must invest and support data collection and tools development that provides robust, scientific analysis on environmental, health and socioeconomic conditions that will assess community burden and vulnerability to pollution.

Invest in equitable and just community collaborative projects. The EPA can enhance its commitment to addressing community priorities and needs through investment in collaborative projects that will yield innovation in program development, and data/information collection. EPA’s Environmental Justice Small Grants (EJSG) Program. provides small grants to communities to address environmental risks associated with high concentrations of pollution, prepare for climate change effects, and improve public health. Significantly expanding this EJSG and similar grants programs will support pioneering community-based projects that can support and catalyze innovation in the federal family.

⁵ <https://climatecrisis.house.gov/report>

Expand environmental investments in vulnerable communities. Significant new investment in climate resilient water infrastructure is needed to address unsafe drinking water and climate-related flooding, sea level rise, and drought. To ensure that vulnerable communities receive these investments and technologies, it is imperative to engage workers and firms from vulnerable communities in the design, construction, operations and maintenance of these water infrastructure systems.

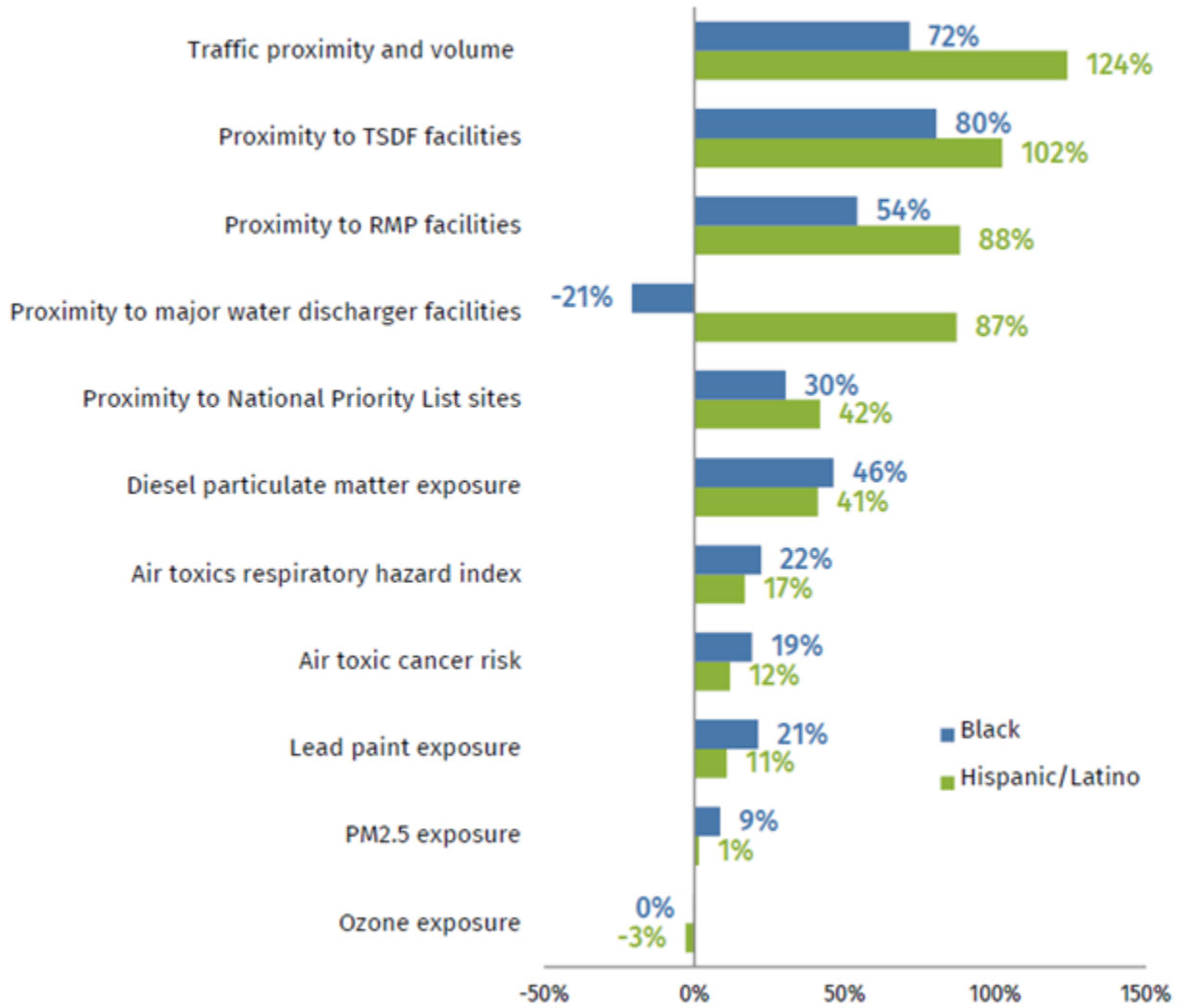
Investments in environmental worker training through NIEHS. The Institute of Environmental Health Science (NIEHS) Environmental Career Worker Training (ECWTP) provides job and safety training to secure jobs in environmental restoration, construction, handling hazardous materials and waste, and emergency response. A 2015 report assessing the program found that “an annual federal investment of \$3.5 million in the ECWTP generates a \$100 million return” due to increased wage-earning potential, tax revenue, and reduced workplace injury and hiring costs. Increasing this investment to disadvantaged and underrepresented members of communities of color and low-income communities will contribute to reduction in economic and employment inequalities.

Vastly increase funding for the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) Program, LIHEAP, and WAP. The EECBG program should prioritize spending in communities left behind by past and ongoing energy efficiency programs. Expanding LIHEAP and WAP not only prepares us for the new reality of climate change, it can address historic investment inequalities.

Mobilize new investment in safe and healthy communities through the creation of a National Climate Bank. Such investments include clean and affordable energy and transportation options and climate-ready infrastructure projects. Consistent with the National Climate Bank Act introduced by Debbie Dingell (D-MI) in December 2019, the National Climate Bank should prioritize investments in economically disadvantaged areas, tribal communities and communities of color. Specifically, at least 60 percent of the Bank capital should be invested in tribal communities, low-income communities and communities of color.

Appendix

FIGURE 3
Difference in environmental risk exposure compared to white Americans
Percent, 2019

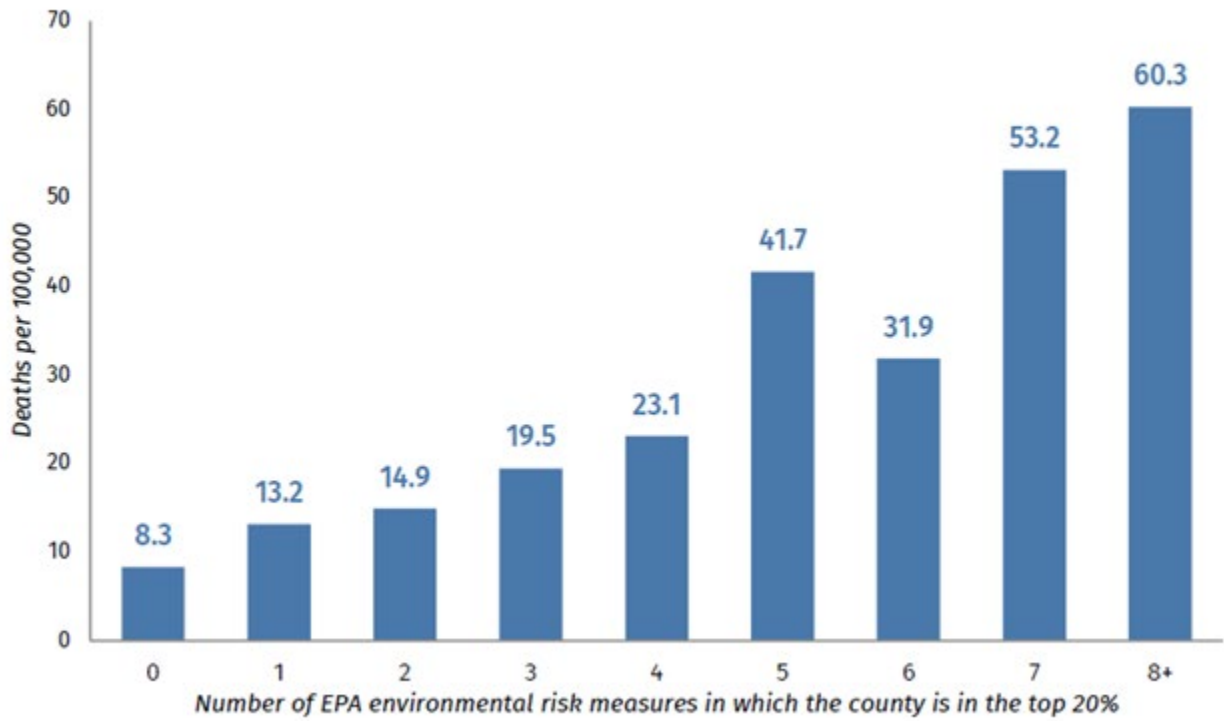


Source: EPA, Census and Rhodium Group estimates

FIGURE 4

COVID-19 death rates by county based on level of environmental risk

Environmental risk data from 2019, COVID-19 death rate data through June 23, 2020



Source: EPA, Census, CDC and Rhodium Group estimates