



**Testimony of Elizabeth Yeampierre  
Executive Director of UPROSE & Co-Chair of the Climate Justice Alliance**

**Frontline Communities: Impacted by the Climate Crisis, Leading on Solutions**

My name is Elizabeth Yeampierre. I am Co-Chair of the Climate Justice Alliance, a national organization that links more than 70 organizations across the U.S., Guam and Puerto Rico. I am also Executive Director of UPROSE, Brooklyn's oldest Latin@ organization. Founded in 1966, UPROSE is dedicated to environmental and social justice and part of the national frontline climate justice movement representing those most impacted by climate change.

Like climate change, the conditions of our communities are the consequence of a long history of extraction. We share legacies of fighting colonialism, as well as race, class and gender oppression, while advocating for environmental justice. And we share vision, values and principles that guide our environmental, economic, and social justice organizing. Our communities are the first and most impacted by the storms, fires, floods and droughts, and are disproportionately burdened by the pollution, poverty and systemic violence associated with the multinational corporations driving these ecological crises.

**Toward a Just Transition**

To effectively tackle climate change, we must invest in a Just Transition toward specifically local, living economies of scale. Years of grassroots organizing and frontline community leadership won the hard-fought battle for New York's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act—the most progressive climate policy in the nation, paving the road for models and processes that are inclusive and community-led climate solutions grounded in racial justice and equity.

These community-led models serve as a foundation from which the federal government can accelerate a Just Transition. Representative Yvette Clark's proposal for a Climate Justice Working Group represents an important step forward for the prior and informed consent of frontline communities in a just and equitable transition towards a clean, zero-emission economy that protects and prioritizes our communities, those on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy - not just for workers but for whole communities. Within our vision of governance, a deep democracy is a core principle that calls for the rights of workers and communities to have control over the decisions that affect their daily lives.

We applaud the bill for centering representatives from frontline community-based organizations as advisors and experts to the president and federal agencies on matters pertaining to the impacts of climate change and environmental pollution in our communities.

In order to transition away from fossil fuels, improve health conditions in severely polluted communities, and ensure the resilience of frontline communities to the debilitating effects of climate change, we need to redress past harms, create new relationships of power that ensure

the self determination of communities, and create spaces for frontline leadership to share their expertise.

### **Lived experiences become innovative solutions**

UPROSE is located in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. It is a diverse working-class community where the majority of the residents are People of color/immigrants, mostly of Latinx and Chinese descent. We have a poverty rate of nearly 26 percent, above the city average and far above the national average. Housing affordability is a major crisis, with nearly half of my neighbors being rent-burdened and the city undergoing extreme gentrification that will only worsen with the expansion of Opportunity Zones.

From a climate perspective, we are an industrial waterfront community exposed to flooding from hurricanes and storm surges, as was the case in 2012 when Superstorm Sandy hit. As a poor and working-class community, housing displacement and disruption of services due to storms and other severe weather affect our people much more acutely compared to residents of affluent communities with more resources. Further, on a day-to-day basis, disproportionate exposure to fossil fuel pollution and other climate change impacts, such as extreme heat, is built into New York City's policy fabric, transportation planning, and economic development, all arising from racism that compounds the pollution impacts with socioeconomic inequities. The oppression of low wages and underfunded schools in our community is exacerbated by high rates of asthma and other pulmonary diseases, heart disease, and lung cancer, which further restrict my neighbors' economic and educational potential.

This bill's proposed Climate Justice Working Group would, in its duty, create a set of criteria to identify climate burdened communities and create guiding principles for the federal government to protect and prioritize frontline communities in greenhouse gas emissions reductions, co pollutant reductions, and investments. The set of criteria to identify climate burdened communities not only looks at the public health effects of cumulative environmental pollution and the vulnerability of communities to climate related weather events, but also takes a holistic approach to identify racial discrimination (racism), income and wealth, rent burden, home ownership, education, and access to green spaces as contributing factors to environmental inequities.

This transition away from fossil fuels and an extractive economy must be just and equitable, redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations, living wage jobs and economic and social development that aims to address historical harm and discrimination. When it comes to policy work, those closest to the problems have the most innovative solutions, and are the experts on the issues affecting their lives. We are changing the way governance works by building Our Power and pathways to solutions that work for frontline communities and workers, while pushing back against false solutions to climate change.

### Examples of community led solutions

#### **New York's first solar cooperative is community owned**

All around the country there are examples of frontline communities developing projects that engage innovative infrastructure, further local control, and create jobs. Some of these projects are in the early stages. Others are ready to be scaled up and replicated in ways that will benefit more people and communities if there is public investment and incentive to do so. The fossil fuel

industry receives millions in subsidies. Imagine what communities already forging comprehensive solutions to the climate crises could do with the reallocation of those subsidies.

My organization, UPROSE, partnered with the NYC Economic Development Corporation, Solar One and Co-op Power to create the first community-owned solar cooperative in New York State to provide local solar energy to 200 households and small businesses for a 15% savings on monthly energy bills.

### **Educating for the future, solving problems now**

For years, in another part of the country, the residents of Highland Park, Michigan suffered high energy costs and energy blackouts along with massive flooding. When the municipality was in financial crisis, the local energy company repossessed 1,000 streetlights, leaving the residents in the dark. Soulardarity, a local environmental justice group and a CJA member, stepped in and designed a system for installing solar-powered street lights. They have installed 7 solar-powered streetlights and created a proposal for the City to finance and install a full 1000, re-lighting the streets and providing affordable internet and civic engagement tools. Building on its commitment to energy democracy and community empowerment, Soulardarity created a bulk purchasing program that is training residents in solar installation and weatherization, readying them to step into clean energy jobs as they become available, and has deployed \$30,000 of solar lighting and other products in Highland Park and neighboring communities. They are using education and organizing to literally make light of a dark situation. The group is shortly releasing a Blueprint for Energy Democracy, a plan to make Highland Park a global model of sustainability and democracy, and collaborating with a diverse array of stakeholders to advance the plan, and advocating for state and federal actors to provide financial resources and technical assistance to bolster community plans.

### **Expanding solar while growing community jobs**

In Chicago, CJA member Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), which is based in a low-income, mainly Latinx immigrant neighborhood, worked hard to directly represent environmental justice communities in the state of Illinois' Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) by insisting that it focus on health, environmental justice, and economic justice opportunities. With unprecedented funds directed to low-income environmental justice communities, LVEJO developed access to a solar panel training program delivered in communities across the state that prioritizes community members that were formerly incarcerated or had aged out of the foster care system. FEJA programs were designed to bring the benefits of solar energy to low-income communities, whether or not they are able to install the panels on their homes, including energy sovereignty opportunities for low-income communities to build ownership of solar systems. The group is also at the center of a plan to repurpose a closed down coal-fired power plant, with the goal of using it for community-run projects.

These are but a few examples of how our communities are developing concrete projects to address the climate crisis. There are many more that look at the different tipping points and sectors needed to halt the climate crisis. If we want to ensure a healthy future for future generations we must start prioritizing these solutions and scaling them now.

## **Following the lead of the frontlines and acting now**

We urgently need a Just Transition to center frontline communities leaders as experts in the decision making that directly affects the lives of our people. As the bearers of the historical and present day brunts of environmental degradation and climate change, our communities need to be at the forefront of the solutions not only as recipients but leaders in innovation and change.

Simply put, we must have legislation that clearly prioritizes investments in scalable projects like those mentioned today that reduce emissions at the source and address the historical harm and discrimination communities like mine have faced for centuries.

Investment in just development plans around the nation through mandatory funding for block grants earmarked for community-based organizations and community development funds would go even further to repair historical harm and center community innovation for water, land, air, and energy resources, in both urban and rural areas, as well as Indian Country.

Climate change demands that we live with what we need instead of what we want. Everywhere people are learning to do this, and frontline communities are leading the way and reclaiming their traditions. Our hopes are that our government will work with us to build a regenerative economy and a just and equitable future.