Pollution and Pandemics: COVID-19's Disproportionate Impact on Environmental Justice Communities

REMARKS BY JACQUELINE PATTERSON

As we all know, the same systemic inequities that make certain populations differentially vulnerable to various impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic are the same systemic underpinnings that comprise the root causes driving environmental injustice including climate change. Racism, xenophobia, and sexism combine with poverty, housing insecurity, racial profiling, differential access to health care, under-resourced education, privatized criminal "justice", and disproportionate exposure to pollution that attacks the lung rendering communities even more vulnerable to COVID-19 that also targets the lungs ……These are all critical commonalities.

One recent study found that even small increases in fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, have had an outsized effect on COVID-19 in the US. An increase of just 1 microgram per cubic meter corresponded to a 15% increase in Covid-19 deaths, Evidence shows that people who have been living in places that are more polluted over time, that they are more likely to die from coronavirus,". In the study, which looked at 3,080 counties in the US, people who had lived in counties with long-term pollution exposure for 15-20 years had significantly higher mortality rates likely due to the higher risk of existing respiratory and heart diseases in areas of higher pollution. Air pollution is also known to weaken the immune system, compromising people's ability to fight off infection.

To add to the injustice, African American and Latino American people are typically exposed to 56% and 63% more PM2.5 pollution than they produce through consumption and daily activities. In sharp contrast, non-Hispanic white people are typically exposed to 17% *less* pollution than they produce. Just as African American and Latino American people are less likely to contribute to the green house gas emissions that drive climate change, yet we are more severely impacted by climate change.

Furthermore, **health effects** associated with **indoor air** pollutants include respiratory illnesses, heart disease, and cancer, each of which have been linked to increased vulnerability to mortality due to COVID-19. African Americans are more likely to have respiratory conditions exacerbated by indoor air pollution. COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in toxic poisoning due to exposure to cleaners and disinfectants. COVID-19 is compounding an already dangerous level of African American exposure to toxins between exposure at work and exposure through intense interactions and sanitizing during compliance with stay at home orders.

Once again, we have government responses that prioritize protecting the profits of big corporations while comparatively neglecting to advance a response at the scale and depth that truly upholds the wellbeing of people. As we talked about in the NAACP Fossil Fueled Foolery report last year, the tie between corporate interests and some of our policy makers and our policies are far too enmeshed. Instead of strengthening regulations to reinforce protections for communities made vulnerable by poor air quality, we have an administration that has rolled by over 100 regulations in the context of COVID-19 thereby paving a pathway to poisoning of our communities.

All of this combines to ensure that black, indigenous and other communities are facing the harshest fall out of direct impacts of COVID-19 just as we in the EJ community saw with Hurricane Katrina, the BP Oil Drilling Disaster, and beyond. In each and every one of these disasters, including the COVID 19 pandemic. With racism as a through-line that imperils us at every turn, not just in extreme circumstance such as disasters, but merely when we are walking in a park, making a purchase in the store, jogging down the street, sleeping in a dorm hallway, sleeping in our own bedroom, in our own homes or just breathing air….simple actions that white people take for granted as not risky to their very existence. Time and time again we've seen how structural inequities lead to inequities in health and wellbeing.

When I first drafted the NAACP 10 Equity Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States document and people first looked at it, the reaction was, "Wow!! That's a lot of information. Can't we sum it up somehow?" And my response was, "Yes, we can put it all in buckets, sub-categories, and sub-bullets including. But when people begin to summarize, the most vulnerable, the most marginalized populations fall through the cracks, just as they do in a system that is predicated on a philosophy and set of policies and practices that favor a survival of the fittest mode of operating."

Each marginalization factor, whether it's gender, race/ethnicity, immigration status, incarceration, LGBTQ orientation, age, geography, disability, or poverty or more…..each factor stands as a risk on its own. And by definition, many compound on top of each other causing double and triple jeopardy for individuals, families and communities of color and low income communities. As such, the response systems must be led by groups who represent constituencies on the frontlines of impact.

Modern day redlining leads to under-resourced infrastructure and lack of choices in our communities. We have 71% of African Americans living in counties in violation of federal air pollution standards. We have the domination of policies by big agriculture and domination of our markets with foods high in sodium, sugar, and preservatives. The lack of green space has made us less likely to get exercise. Then the "war on drugs" has made our streets less safe. At every turn the deck is stacked against us.

Frontline communities must lead on designing and implementing the solutions.

To pivot to solutions, the good news is that our communities are organizing ourselves to build solutions to what's before us now with COVID-19 and including the challenge of climate change given the common underpinnings and impacts.

Frontline communities are rising up and putting together platforms of demands at the federal, state, and local levels. At the same time we are implementing changes on the frontlines, forging linkages: organization to government entity, non-profit to non-profit, community to community, family to family to family, person to person.

Communities are demanding reinstatement and strengthening of environmental regulations. Communities are doing our own testing and monitoring of air, water, and soil quality. Communities are calling for stronger regulations on household projects and a more inclusive Toxics Release Inventory. Communities want policies that support localism and regenerative design as well as clean energy and building and vehicle electrification.

We are setting up locally controlled, sustainable food systems. Women are leading on restoring our relationship with the land. Women are pushing back on water shut-offs while establishing water sovereignty models. We are comforting those in mourning, while pushing for the policies and practices we need to establish a regenerative, caring economy that advances healthcare for all, frees people who are imprisoned, provides income for those whose livelihoods who are in jeopardy, provides protection for those who are on the frontlines, and the list goes on….. And those in power need to get behind those on the frontlines to scale up, scale deep, and scale forward! Thank you.