



New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

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On the ground – and at the table

New York City Environmental Justice Alliance testimony to NYC Council Committee on Oversight and Investigations on Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on Communities of Color.

My name is Jalisa Gilmore and I will be testifying on behalf of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. Founded in 1991, NYC-EJA is a citywide network of grassroots organizations from low-income communities and communities of color in environmentally overburdened neighborhoods.

The negative health outcomes of COVID-19 closely mirror the racial and economic disparities that environmental justice communities have faced for decades. Disproportionate siting of polluting infrastructure in low-income communities of color, have resulted in higher levels of respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses, increasing susceptibility to COVID-19. We are seeing these same communities are being hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic.

In NYC, African Americans and Latinos represent higher rates of fatalities than their representation in the population. COVID-19 testing and resources needs to be prioritized in low-income communities and communities of color.

Research is showing that higher levels of PM_{2.5} are associated with higher death rates from COVID-19, and that small decreases in pollution could have resulted in fewer deaths in NYC. While worldwide air pollution has been decreasing, it's unclear how this is changing in EJ communities, that currently endure the highest levels of air pollution. NYC cannot afford to follow the lead of the federal administration and allow polluters to suspend pollution monitoring and reporting.

It's likely the COVID-19 crisis, and subsequent stay-at-home orders will extend through the summer months. Many communities most impacted by COVID-19 are also the most heat vulnerable. Residents without access or funds to utilize air conditioning will be at the greatest risk for heat mortality. The NYS Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) needs to increase funding for AC purchases, provide utility bill assistance, and ensure all low-income households are eligible. Additionally, the City should proactively begin purchasing ACs so that units can be distributed to the most vulnerable residents. NYC must also develop a plan for mitigation strategies for preventing the spread of the virus within Cooling Centers.

Furthermore, extreme heat puts increasing strain on our energy grid, causing the most polluting power plants in environmental justice communities to be fired up, worsening air quality and

increasing electricity costs. NYC must invest in resilient, clean and distributed energy to reduce strain on the grid.

NYC must also prepare for a possibly more active than usual hurricane season coinciding with the coronavirus pandemic. Superstorm Sandy damaged and disrupted critical infrastructure and services, and demonstrated the vulnerability of low-income communities of color. Furthermore, emergency shelters and hurricane evacuations may be complicated by social distancing orders.

Similar to climate change, COVID-19 is exacerbating already existing racial inequalities. COVID-19 is decimating our economy, and the widespread job loss and trauma for many people will continue to grow. Climate solutions will create direct opportunities for coming out of an economic collapse and address health disparities, but only if there is large-scale, coordinated citywide action rooted in equity. For more detailed recommendations of climate solutions, please visit NYC-EJA's website to review our Earth Day report "**NYC Climate Justice Agenda 2020: A Critical Decade for Climate, Health, and Equity.**"

<https://www.nyc-eja.org/campaigns/community-resiliency/>