



New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

166A 22nd Street, Brooklyn, NY 11232 | www.NYC-EJA.org

On the ground – and at the table

New York City Environmental Justice Alliance testimony to NYC Council Committee on Consumer Affairs and Business Licensing jointly w/ the Committees on Resiliency and Waterfronts, Environmental Protection and Health on Consolidated Edison’s Summer Preparations and the City’s Cooling Needs.

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 – including those on the front lines of climate change and its impacts such as extreme heat, which results in more deaths than any other weather-related event.

NYC-EJA commends Mayor de Blasio and his team on the COVID-19 Heat Wave Plan to keep vulnerable New Yorkers cool and safe at home. As NYC-EJA advocated in our *NYC Climate Justice Agenda 2020*, released last month on Earth Day, and in our COVID Heat Mitigation Plan Campaign (#Covid19HeatCampaign), which also launched last month, low-income communities of color are especially vulnerable to extreme heat impacts as the climate warms. Low-income New Yorkers, who are also disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19 – and whose best defense is to stay in their homes – will be able to take comfort that they now can do so safely and with relief from extreme heat. However, there is still more that the City can do to protect vulnerable New Yorkers from extreme heat.

The administration has taken an important step towards preparedness with their announcement for the use of schools as cooling centers to provide for more social distancing than typical cooling centers can. There still are necessary improvements that need to be made to the City’s Cooling Center program, such as publicizing cooling center locations prior to an extreme heat event, which are only accessible online once there is a heat emergency. We commend Speaker Corey Johnson for acknowledging the need for building-specific cooling centers for vulnerable populations in his 2020 State of the City. Furthermore, these building-specific cooling centers and general cooling centers should ensure extended and overnight hours to address high nighttime temperatures due to the Urban Heat Island effect.

It’s likely that NYC is significantly underestimating the actual number of annual heat related mortality because deaths from other illnesses that may have been exacerbated by an extreme heat event are not counted. It is absolutely necessary to ensure current and future numbers are as close to accurate as possible so that the scope of this issue is not underestimated and the appropriate amount of resources can be directed towards reducing heat related vulnerability, morbidity, and mortality. NYC-EJA appreciates City Council Speaker Johnson’s call for legislation requiring DOHMH to re-evaluate its metrics for counting heat related deaths, as we have long championed. We also recommend that this legislation call for data transparency by making daily-level heat mortality data available.

The NYC Panel on Climate Change projects by the 2050's New York City can expect to see the number of 90-degree days to double, and the number of heatwaves to either triple or quadruple, which puts increasing strain on our energy grid and causes the most polluting peaker power plants to be fired up, worsening air quality and increasing electricity costs. As Con Ed considers their implementation plan for their Climate Change Vulnerability study, they need to specify a clear plan for how to protect NYC's most heat vulnerable communities from extreme heat in the event of brown and black outs, in the future and in the present. These same communities also should be prioritized for investments to make the energy grid more resilient. Furthermore, NYC must invest in resilient, clean and distributed energy to reduce strain on the grid. There was a missed opportunity for local green job hiring throughout Central Brooklyn when Con Ed pursued the Brooklyn Queens Demand Management Program in 2016-2017. This time around, both Con Ed and NYC must ensure that clean, renewable distributed energy investments commit to a Just Transition framework, where green local jobs are stimulated and maximized for frontline communities, residents threatened on three fronts by COVID-19, climate change and a devastated economy.

NYC-EJA calls on Governor Cuomo and New York State officials to also protect low-income New Yorkers from extreme heat impacts exacerbated by COVID-19. Through the federal CARES Act, New York State received an additional \$28.8 million in federal funds for the HEAP program, which provides winter heating and summer cooling assistance for low-income families. Governor Cuomo needs to immediately dedicate those funds to include utility assistance, waive or remove medical eligibility requirements, expand eligibility to households receiving federal housing subsidies, and allocate a larger percentage of funds for cooling assistance. These funds should go where the need is greatest: to low-income NYC neighborhoods that have been ignored for decades.

NYC-EJA generally supports Council Member Brannan's bill, "Annual reporting of heat vulnerability and heat-related deaths." and Council Member Salamanca's bill "Comprehensive cooling and communication plan." to address extreme heat, but we look forward to ensuring that these bills address all of NYC-EJA's long standing priorities related to extreme heat. As the climate continues to warm, we will see increased social consequences of more frequent and severe extreme heat events, which disproportionately impact low-income communities, communities of color, socially-isolated populations, and the elderly. NYC needs to ensure that we are protecting the most vulnerable by properly preparing for heat emergencies, prioritizing nature-based solutions like green infrastructure to cool the City, and reducing GHG emissions that are causing the climate to change.