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New York City Environmental Justice Alliance Testimony on The Administration's Response to Summer 2023 Air Quality Emergencies

Good morning Chairs Gennaro, Schulman, and Brewer, and members of the Council. My name is Eunice Ko and I'm the Deputy Director at the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA). Founded in 1991, NYC-EJA is a non-profit citywide membership network linking 13 grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color across all the 5 boroughs in their struggle for environmental justice. Over 76% of people living in our members' neighborhoods are BIPOC.

Last month, the City was overwhelmed with orange skies, red moons, and choking smoke from the raging Canadian wildfires. The city gasped for breath as it turned gray, orange, and then red. "What the hell is this?" asked the Mayor a little too late as he stepped outside. By the time the Mayor issued a statement late on Tuesday night, people were already getting headaches and chest pains, coughing, and/or having trouble breathing. Neighbors, kids, family, and friends were scared and confused as we asked ourselves – fan or AC? How bad is it to leave a window open? What will this do to my health?

NYC residents were left on their own again and, of course, those most vulnerable like the unhoused, delivery workers, and those with asthma and other health conditions, suffered the most consequences. Asthma related emergency visits spiked during this time and many areas in the city like the Bronx reached AQI levels higher than 400. According to the Public Advocate's "Orange Sky, Red Alert" report, between June 6 and June 7, the hospitalization rate in New York City jumped 81% with 175 asthma-related ER visits on June 6 and 317 ER visits on June 7. For June 8 and June 9, ER visits remained in the 200s.¹ Unsurprisingly, the New York City ZIP codes with the highest numbers of asthma-related emergency room visits during last week's smoke haze were disproportionately in low-income, predominantly Black and Latino communities, according to Gothamist's analysis of DOHMH and Census data.²

Despite how unhealthy and hazardous conditions were, the administration didn't act swiftly and aggressively enough to alert the public and protect the most vulnerable. The administration failed to minimize the effects of the wildfire smoke by not providing timely notice and sufficient information and failed to lead a strong coordinated response. Although the State's DEC issued its second air quality health advisory on Monday, it wasn't until Wednesday morning that Mayor Adams held a press conference to address the air quality crisis and issue guidance. Eventually, the City also handed out masks to some public housing residents. While the event on this scale

¹ <https://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/static/assets/AQI-UPDATED.pdf>

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<https://gothamist.com/news/asthma-er-visits-during-nyc-smoke-haze-were-highest-in-high-poverty-black-and-latino-areas>

was unprecedented, the administration could and should have done a lot more for a public health emergency at that scale. Disappointing, yes. Shocking, no.

Our immediate concern is the people most vulnerable to hazardous air quality and aren't plugged into traditional government communication channels. The City should have canceled outdoor events and activities sooner. Instituted a policy similar to Codes Red and Blue where all shelters would have to take in anyone unhoused and seeking shelter. Set up free mask distribution points all across the city like we did during the pandemic. Immediately encouraged other energy-saving and emissions-saving activities like minimizing car use, household appliances, and indoor sources of PM 2.5 such as smoking. Used LinkNYC to show AQI levels and alerts and DOE schools to disseminate information to students and their families.

The reality is that some communities in NYC experience bad air quality and pollution every day. These communities live by polluting peaker power plants that get turned on in the summer when energy demands spike; highways and heavily-trafficked roads; waste infrastructure, last mile e-commerce facilities, and truck traffic; and other polluting facilities that spew greenhouse gas emissions and co-pollutants. NYC-EJA and our members are fighting daily to change the very built environment in our neighborhoods that were designed and zoned to push out, marginalize, and sicken our communities. Together, we're pushing for the Last Mile Coalition's DCP Zoning Text Amendment to address last mile facilities; the PEAK coalition's goal to shut down peaker plants statewide; net-positive emission reductions in the Bronx with the congestion pricing plan; and more.

We're also extremely concerned at how ill-prepared this administration is to handle and respond to multiple extreme events happening at the same time like a wildfire or hurricane during a heat wave. Summer is now in full swing, and as experts have warned, it's shaping up to be one of the hottest on record, with the global high temperature record broken 4 days in a row just last week. Extreme heat disproportionately kills Black and Brown New Yorkers with heat waves tripling, and potentially quadrupling, by the 2050s according to NPCC. Each summer, an estimated 370 New Yorkers die prematurely because of hot weather in NYC and we can only expect this to increase. As we know, high temperatures trap pollutants in the lower atmosphere, making air quality worse. So as heat worsens, and extreme climate events like out of control wildfires become the norm, life-threatening air quality will become a problem that even the wealthy and resourced will be unable to ignore in NYC.

We need to look at the bigger picture. Climate change is here, today, and it will continue to wreak havoc on our lives. As emissions continue to pour into our atmosphere, the planet will get warmer. As the heat intensifies, air quality will worsen, and severe weather will be more frequent. We need to anticipate, prepare, and plan for all of these things and be able to adapt to the severity and scale of the problem with proportional planning and funding.

These types of climate-driven emergencies will happen more regularly in this city, but we don't have to accept the City's response as the norm and **we can** be better prepared. The City needs to take a more active role in improving its processes, rather than continuing to fall back on outdated, insufficient strategies and plans. Disaster after disaster, from Sandy to Ida to wildfires, we see communities being left in the dark and forgotten during emergency response and recovery.

Given the speed, scale, and regularity of extreme weather events today and in the future, agencies need to re-imagine and innovate emergency outreach, communications, and planning

and engage and resource community organizations who know their communities best to improve emergency and disaster response. We need an enhanced notification system and comprehensive communications strategies that target wide ranges of New Yorkers so that everyone is informed and can stay safe.

The City also needs to plan for these events in the short-term and long-term. EM should include wildfires as a hazard in their mitigation planning and develop an operational playbook similar to their heat wave and hurricane ones to provide agencies guidance on response and coordination. MOCEJ should evaluate wildfires as a climate threat to NYC and implement climate adaptation strategies to address this risk. DEP should consider how frequent wildfires will affect our air quality in the city. All agencies should be assessing how wildfires and every climate risk that the city faces will affect their operations, budget, and planning. DOHMH should start thinking about how to raise public awareness and campaigns on air quality and the impacts of wildfires on health.

Additionally, we need to measure air quality at the hyperlocal level, in addition to the standard regional levels, to gain a clearer understanding of what communities are breathing in their neighborhoods. NYC-EJA and 6 of its members in Brooklyn and the South Bronx found that their communities were breathing in PM2.5 concentrations 20x higher than State-run monitors after collecting and analyzing air quality data in their neighborhoods ([CAMP-EJ Report](#)). Knowing the true level of co-pollutants in communities across the city will allow for more targeted and timely mobilization of resources and response networks. The City should create clean air centers all across the city, but make sure to distribute them equitably in EJ communities.

We understand how enormous and complex the challenges that climate change presents us are. But if we treat these challenges as serious as they are then we can actually have a shot at minimizing the impacts of climate change. Unfortunately, the level of urgency from this administration is not commensurate with how dangerous and lethal the climate crisis at hand is. If you think this administration is serious about climate change, you need to look no further than its strategic climate plans (e.g., AdaptNYC, PlaNYC) and the City's budget. With effective planning and funding, the City can quickly prepare and respond to the many impacts on health, transportation, housing, education, etc. that climate change will have.

We must anticipate and prepare for the unforeseen in order to keep our city safe and healthy. The city can't put New Yorkers in a position to respond and adapt to climate change on their own whether it be from wildfires, flooding, or extreme heat because it will mean that our city and the communities made most vulnerable to climate change will suffer the most. Mayor Adams needs to take the impacts of wildfires and climate change as seriously as he takes his nightlife schedule and photo opportunities.