

Climate Change and Health
California Department of Public Health
February 24, 2015 Working Group Meeting
JACQUELINE PATTERSON'S REMARKS

NAACP branches and chapters have by force been engaged in environmental and climate justice work because the communities they serve are in the frontlines of the injustices on both ends of the climate justice spectrum. On one end these communities are dealing with the emissions from coal plants and incinerators, near roadway air pollution, and factory farms and landfills. On the other end they've seen the impacts from deaths from heat waves in Chicago to death, and illness from Katrina to Super Storm Sandy and been engaged in emergency response to these situations.

However it was only in 2009 that at the national level we started a program which acknowledges and seeks to take action on the linkages between what was previously perceived as disparate experiences with climate change.

We hear a lot, from the people who are polluting our communities by burning fossil fuels and using the profits to buy airtime, about costs of climate action including loss of jobs from enacting regulations that reduce pollution and safeguard health.

But we don't hear enough about on the costs of climate inaction, including the economic, social, cultural, and even emotional costs borne by us all, but disproportionately by communities of color and low income communities who are most impacted by both climate change causing pollution and the impacts of climate change.

We see the results of this pollution in the studies that show hundreds of thousands of people already suffer from asthma. Every summer, smog-forming pollutants sending thousands to hospital emergency rooms from smog-related asthma attacks. Children and elderly people are particularly vulnerable to poor air quality. Rising temperatures lead to higher levels of smog and soot. All these toxins lead to respiratory and cardiovascular illness and deaths.

In 2012, the Coal Blooded Report found that approximately 68% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal plant and low income communities are also more likely to be host to a coal plant. 71% of African Americans live in districts in violation of air quality standards. And we must recognize that even above class, race is a key equity factor. As Dr. Bob Bullard has found, an African American family making \$50K is more likely to live next to a toxic facility than a white family making \$15,000 per year.

The impact of these inequities in exposure is clear in the rates of respiratory illnesses in these communities. African American children are twice as likely to die of asthma and 3 times more likely to be admitted to the hospital for an asthma attack and adults are more likely to die of lung disease while being less likely to smoke. Latino American, Native American, and low income communities that are host to these plants also have higher rates of respiratory illnesses and other conditions.

With the mercury, arsenic, lead, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and other pollutants that come from coal plants in communities nationwide, these conditions are creating lethal gas chambers for communities that are host to these facilities.

So the true costs of greenhouse gases and other pollutants for these communities include loss of life at worst, but also ER room visits, lost days of school with compromised educational outcomes, lost days of work with lower pay and compromised promotion opportunities, and more.

Esther, who is 10 years old, lives near a coal plant in Kansas City and has attention deficit disorder which has been tied to lead emissions. Even when she is in school, her opportunity to learn like other children is compromised by her challenges with paying attention. Five year old Antoine, who lives near a coal plant, is often home because of poor air quality days.

For us it also ties to the school to prison pipeline in that proximity to toxic facilities are tied to lower property values, property values finance schools which means that on top of compromised health, kids have a compromised learning environment. We know from studies that if a child isn't operating on grade level by the 3rd grade, they are more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

So we must acknowledge the intersectionality in order to effectively talk about equity and how to address it.

On the other side we see the impacts of climate change driven by these polluting practices:

2014 was the hottest year on record and it only stands to get worse. A fourfold increase in ozone action days is expected by the end of the century which will result in increases in populations of the insects that like to live in those states. Cities like Philadelphia will experience temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit for more than 80 days every year

Affordable access to nutritious foods will only lessen as climate change affects crops. Already so many communities of color and low income communities are food deserts, where children have better access to Doritos or Cheetos than broccoli or strawberries. This results in higher rates of obesity, as well hunger, and all of the health conditions that result from poor diet, such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and more.

We work with with coastal communities from Alaska to Florida, facing displacement in the next 20 years, due to sea level rise and storm surge and right here in PA, there are multiple coastal communities who can see similar impacts in years to come. In Tunica, MS folks are already being inundated by flooding because the homes of communities there were built in a flood plain and they aren't alone.

When I did hurricane relief after Katrina and Rita, the throngs of people who walked through the doors of the disaster recovery center were many and diverse. But they were largely African American and low income. I met scores of people with hearing impairments with no qualified interpreter to help them navigate the system. I encountered people with HIV and AIDS who went weeks without access to their life-preserving antiretroviral drugs. I met women who encountered sexual assault in the aftermath of the disaster. I met hundreds of people who had to completely start over after only escaping with their lives.

Again, the cost of inaction on climate change is the health, livelihood, culture, economic, and social wellbeing of communities worldwide, with vulnerable communities being hit first and worst.

We must establish aggressive targets for climate action including ramping up pollution reduction and designing sustainable, resilient systems and communities.

What NAACP is Doing:

- Mitigation—Reducing harmful emissions and advancing clean energy and energy efficiency
- Adaptation— Developing Resilience indicators, assisting local governments, implementing sustainable city initiatives.

Partners in California:

- APEN, CBE, Movement Generation for Change, Bus Riders Union