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Environmental Justice

This month, the Community Health Series Partnership (CHSP) is focusing on environmental justice, including commentary from Carlos T. Carter, President and CEO of the Urban League of Pittsburgh.

Q: Carlos, the term 'environmental justice neighborhoods' is intended to denote the structural inequities and systemic racism that have contributed to more of our region's Black residents being exposed to environmental hazards like air and water pollution, toxic waste, and climate change. What are ways in which environmental hazards contribute to

poor health outcomes that you've seen among individuals and families served by the Urban League?

Carlos Carter: According to research from PennEnvironment, Allegheny County is ranked in the top 2% of counties nationwide for cancer risk from air pollution. The city of Clairton is home to the top polluter of Allegheny County, Clairton Coke Works. Clairton is nearly 40% Black — and these individuals often live near this coal-based, steel-making fuel plant.

Health risks outside of cancer exist as well. In a 2020 edition of the academic journal Environmental Health, it was estimated

that about 40% of air pollution-related coronary heart disease deaths in Allegheny County occur in environmental justice communities — even though such communities represent just 27% of the county's total population.

One of the Urban League's key goals is Health and Quality of Life Empowerment. Through our work, we are advocating toward improving the quality of life for the Black community. We will continue to raise awareness of issues, including climate change, that impact the lives of our people. Just as we approach other issues, we are open to collaboration and partnership with



CARLOS T. CARTER

other organizations who specifically tackle environmental justice issues daily.

Q: There are many ways in which community members can reduce risk from harms of environmental hazards. What are ways we can educate ourselves about our role in creating healthier environ-

ments?

Carlos Carter: It's important that community members not only understand the environmental risks that exist around them, but also know both the individual and collective actions that can mitigate environmental hazards. There are ongoing community workshops and seminars, advocacy campaigns, and organizations people can join to actively support measures for a healthier environment.

As a collective region, we must acknowledge the impact health issues caused by environmental degradation has had on our people. Specifically, we must acknowledge the disparate impact it is having on children and marginalized communities.

We must leverage our power to vote for candi-

dates who acknowledge the need to invest in environmental justice communities. And we can't just stop with voting! We must continue to hold all entities responsible for negatively impacting the health and wellbeing of Black people. We must be vigilant and ensure that public officials — and our local, state, and federal government — are accountable. They must be proponents of people-centered, environmentally responsible policy.

We must also support organizations that are doing the work to protect our planet and committed to sustainable practices that keep safe our most vulnerable communities.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with us to look out for ourselves and our communities of color.

Advocates listen and learn, celebrate and plan at first Environmental Justice Summit

May 9-11 was Pittsburgh's first Environmental Justice Summit with the theme *Reflections, Connections, and Collaborative Action*. Attendees included community partners on the forefront of environmental initiatives, as well as practitioners, academics, researchers, and other advocates.

The event celebrated the good work that's being done to promote environmental justice in our region. It also brought together different groups to meet, network, listen, and brainstorm a collaborative way forward.

The summit's goal was to kick off a collective force of people who will work together to eliminate environmental health disparities caused by air and water pollution, chemical waste, climate change, and lead exposure.

The summit was created, planned, and co-chaired by Dr. Tina Ndoh, Pitt Associate Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health in the School of Public Health and Dani Wilson, Executive Director of the Cancer & Environ-

mental Network of SWPA.

What is environmental justice?

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and involvement of all people in making and enforcing environmental laws, regulations, and policies in the natural and built environment. The movement promotes a healthier society regardless of color, race, income, or national origin.

In Pittsburgh, like many other parts of the country, Black and Brown communities are exposed to more pollution than white communities. This inequity impacts physical and mental health and lowers life expectancy due to higher levels of cancer, heart disease, asthma, depression, anxiety, and more.

Not your typical summit: 3 days of healing and joy

The summit was anything but ordinary. During the three-day event, participants collectively reignited the region's environmental justice movement. The sobering task was interspersed with celebration, joy, and healing activities on Thursday night

in Homewood, with yoga, crafting, cooking, storytelling, and more.

On Friday in the Hill District, summit keynote speaker Dr. Sacoby Wilson from the University of Maryland's College Park School of Public Health, led a lively discussion about connecting and addressing injustices in housing, education, employment, and healthcare. Breakout panels during the day helped participants dive deeper.

In one panel for example, participants learned how the Black Environmental Collective, the Black Equity Coalition, and the University of Pittsburgh teamed up to fight COVID-19 health inequities. The group collected and distributed timely health data and research to county and state health departments and politicians. The model they created is now being used to fight other health inequities in the region.

In another panel, participants discovered how Oasis Farm and Fishery uses vacant land to grow food for communities that don't have easy, affordable access



(LEFT TO RIGHT) TINA NDOH, SALLY WENZEL, TIFFANY GARY-WEBB, JEANINE BUCHANICH, AND DARA MENDEZ, FACULTY FROM PITT'S SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

to fresh fruits and vegetables. Community members help to decide what should be planted and can take free cooking and urban farming classes.

Friday also featured a tour of vacant lots in the Hill District led by Pitt School of Law faculty members Stephanie Dangel and Jacquelin Walker. The discussion centered on the past, present, and potential futures of historic Wylie Avenue.

On Saturday, an event in Hazelwood included environmental storytelling as

well as instruction on how to make healthy cleaning products. Some participants even made their own healthy beauty products.

The summit's conclusion was especially moving. Participants met in Clairton, a town fighting some of the country's worst pollution. There, they joined Melanie Meade, lifelong Clairton resident and member of the Black Appalachian Coalition, and Adam Lobel, Guiding Teacher, One Earth Sangha, for a "bearing witness" ceremony that acknowledged the slow

violence of environmental injustice on the land and its people.

Amplifying voices
"This first summit kicked off the power of community collaboration in healing one another and our environment," explains Dr. Ndoh. "Now, the Black Environmental Collective is hosting follow-up conversations that will continue to spark ideas and action on behalf of overburdened and underfunded neighborhoods that need it most."

Stay black, stay green!

Pittsburgh's Black Environmental Collective is a cross-sectoral network of Black leaders, rooted in a commitment to environmental equity and social justice.

The organization bridges the gap between community experiences, resource and information sharing, regional policy advocacy, and mutual learning. It brings together people and their ideas who would not otherwise meet.

The collective believes:

Cities should be built for people with people. Cities will prosper when lived experiences

of urban life are central to urban planning, design, and decision-making processes.

The voices and experiences of long-term and low-wealth residents should be a significant part — from the beginning and throughout — of any urban or community development project.

Everyone should live in a healthy home and neighborhood.

Residents who have stuck it out through tough times should be able to stay when their neighborhood changes for the better.

Lived experience and book

smarts are both forms of knowledge. Each is an important part of understanding.

Young people matter. They should be respected — not feared or dismissed. Their voices should be heard, supported, and empowered to make the changes they seek.

Publicly-held land should benefit the public first.

Informed by a diverse set of experiences and a critical interdisciplinary lens, the collective focuses on community engagement and education, collaboration and partnership, movement and coalition building,



and idea transformation into activities and solutions.

The group seeks to expand equitable and just outcomes, strengthen the voices of Black people within the environmental justice movement, and cre-

ate additional pathways to success for youth and burgeoning leaders within the sustainability sector.

The collective's work spans several areas, such as environment/place, food, climate change, and quality of life.

The Black Environmental Collective's authentic space is a place where leaders of color can nimbly, empathetically, and responsibly respond to the needs of Black populations as environmental emergencies persist and arise.

The group's success is rooted in its belief in asking critical questions. Members serve to challenge and disrupt perpetually significant environmental threats and impacts in Black communities. They are committed to acknowledging and acting on the need to address systemic root causes of environmental discrimination and creating effective solutions for progress and sustainability.

Contact the collective via email at info@urbankind.org, call 412.431.4619.

Feed the Hood expands culinary workforce and creates a healthy food environment and community

In 2016, Feed the Hood started as "Hotdogs for the Hood." However, when a Westinghouse teacher stated that, for some of the students, this would be their last meal of the day, "Hotdogs for the Hood" became "Feed The Hood." At that moment, Chef Carlos Thomas of Confluence Catering made it his mission to "feed the entire city for free or for profit."

Feed The Hood's mis-

sion is to expand the culinary workforce by providing students with peer-to-peer mentorship, culinary training, and real-world experience that prepares them for employment in the restaurant and hospitality industry.

Feed The Hood's vision is to create a community of innovative, engaged food service professionals within this industry who focus on sustaining

a healthy food environment and community.

In addition, the organization continues to transform into a multi-dimensional powerhouse that improves relationships between people and food and develops new approaches toward food and policy via a three-step, "theory of change" approach:

Build healthy relationships to construct a sustainable and equitable



CARLOS THOMAS

food system.

Use innovation to inspire communities to develop healthy habits.

Establish dynamic relationships that put community at the forefront.

When students complete a Feed the Hood program, they gain a vivid understanding of what they can offer to the industry — and society at large. The model is designed to focus the demographic regardless of age, color, or ethnic origin at age 5 and older.

Feed the Hood also serves as a voice of generations to end food insecurity.

Find out more about Feed the Hood. Log on to Facebook and friend Feed the Hood PA. Visit Chef Carlos Thomas' LinkedIn page. Or log on to justsaychef.com and click on Community: Feed the Hood.