



New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

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New York City Environmental Justice Alliance testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Public Safety: Hearing on Hurricane Sandy after action report and recommendations.

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Founded in 1991, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) is a non-profit city-wide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their struggle for environmental justice. NYC-EJA empowers its member organizations to advocate for improved environmental conditions and against inequitable environmental burdens. Through our efforts, member organizations coalesce around specific common issues that threaten the ability of low-income communities of color to thrive and coordinate campaigns designed to affect City and State policies. The impact of climate change and mitigation measures is central to NYC-EJA's agenda, and therefore, we would hereby like to testify in support of the bills that have been put forth by the City Council. We see appreciate the opportunity to advocate for an equitable recovery process that integrates regional rebuilding efforts with local resiliency priorities, strengthens vulnerable communities & addresses public health impacts, expanding community-based climate change planning, preparedness & response.

NYC-EJA's Waterfront Justice Project

In 2010, NYC-EJA launched the Waterfront Justice Project, New York City's first citywide community resiliency campaign. When the City of New York initiated its overhaul of the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan (Vision 2020) in 2010, NYC-EJA began an advocacy campaign to convince the Bloomberg Administration to reform waterfront zones designated as the Significant Maritime and Industrial Areas (SMIAs.) These are zones designed to encourage the clustering and concentration of heavy industrial and polluting infrastructure uses. There are only six SMIA's in the City – all are located in classic "environmental justice" communities (the South Bronx, Sunset Park, Red Hook, Newtown Creek, Brooklyn Navy Yard & the North Shore of Staten Island) and predominantly low-income communities of color. Development applications in SMIA's are treated differently – and to a lower review standard – than other waterfront areas, thereby easing the siting and clustering of polluting infrastructure.

As part of these efforts, NYC-EJA discovered the six SMIA's are all in hurricane storm surge zones, and that the City of New York had not analyzed the cumulative contamination exposure risks associated with clusters of heavy industrial use in such vulnerable locations. In collaboration with Pratt Institute, NYC-EJA began a research project to assess facilities that use, transport, or store hazardous or toxic substances in order to identify community vulnerability for those working and living in and around SMIA's in the event of severe weather. Preliminary results of this research were presented as part of NYC-EJA's testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Environmental Protection at the Hearing on Climate Change Impacts and Mitigation Measures in New York City that took place on December 16, 2011.

The Sandy Regional Assembly

Following the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, NYC-EJA co-convened the Sandy Regional Assembly, an association of environmental justice organizations, community-based groups, labor unions and our allies from Superstorm Sandy-impacted and storm surge-vulnerable areas in New York City, New Jersey and Long Island. Nearly 200 participants representing over 40 organizations participated in a January 2013 meeting to assess the aftermath of Sandy and the role of local communities in the Sandy Recovery process. Together, we are advocating for a grassroots-led recovery that includes priorities of low-income people, communities of color, immigrants, and workers. Participants of this meeting discussed goals and recommendations that structured a Recovery Agenda, available at www.nyc-eja.org. The Agenda was released on April 1st 2013, and emailed to the City Council after that. In addition, this agenda was handed that month to representatives of the Mayor's Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency (SIRR) for their incorporation in the City's recovery plan.

In an effort to advocate for the goals that have been articulated by the Sandy Regional Assembly, NYC-EJA urges the City Council to consider the following recommendations as they relate to the bills under discussion, seeking to engage the NYC Office of Emergency Management (OEM) in the long-term planning and capacity building efforts required to increase community preparedness and resiliency in New York City:

1. As part of the City Council's efforts to address the needs of vulnerable groups requiring special attention during emergencies, evacuations, and recovery operations, we urge you to consider the following recommendations:

(Intro. 1053: Tracking of Persons with Special Needs; Intro. 1070: A Sheltering Plan; Intro. 1073: Health Care Facility Evacuation Planning; and Intro. 1065: Outreach and Recovery Plan for Vulnerable and Homebound Individuals)

a. Address the specific needs of vulnerable populations:

- Support disaster plans focused on the most vulnerable population, including people with disabilities, residents in long-term care facilities, immigrant communities, seniors, youth, people with limited English proficiency, people with language access plans or disability plans, and residents of industrial waterfront communities vulnerable to storm surge.
- Include vulnerable populations in planning and outreach activities and create multilingual outreach materials.
- Maintain privacy rights while creating a public housing registry of elderly or disabled residents in NYCHA properties.

b. Improve evacuation and disaster response planning:

- Provide community-based registries/lists of local resources, distribution sites, and evacuation centers.
- Distribute information at a variety of locations that are accessible and contextually appropriate.
- Use "Old school" communication methodologies to share information with communities instead of relying on Internet or phones alone.
- Include youth in planning and make plans accessible to youth.

c. Train volunteers & local CERT teams:

- Train and certify local Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) in collaboration with community-based non-profits. Local CERT teams led by CBOs would supplement

NYC OEM's CERT teams. CBOs should receive funding to train community members and barriers to entry should be analyzed and addressed to ensure that people are able to participate.

- Expand access to training - many people don't have time to take off work and get trained; mandatory time off from work for public employees should be encouraged to receive disaster response training.
- Create a Youthcorps of First Responders (coordinate with local youth programs like NYC's Summer Youth Employment Program).

2. As part the City Council's efforts to create a community recovery plan to respond to emergency conditions, we urge you to consider the following recommendations:

(Intro. 1054: Creation of a Community Recovery Plan to Respond to Emergency Conditions; Intro. 1075: Plan Review and Reporting to the Council (Rodriguez and Gentile; and Intro.1072: A Small Business Plan)

a. Address potential public health impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities:

- Identify industrial waterfront threats by funding a participatory investigation of public health risks associated with potential exposures to industrial clusters of hazardous substances and toxic chemicals, and the opportunities to mitigate them – as a collaborative effort between community, industry and government.
- Prevent environmental hazards after disasters, training recovery workers and first responders on protocols for hazardous materials and contaminants.

b. Create community oversight and inclusive decision-making:

- Guarantee that City recovery efforts authentically include local/neighborhood/grassroots involvement beyond “invitation-only” style meetings.
 - Require that NYC's Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resilience (SIRR) related and successor plans/ processes be more participatory.
 - Require that government and task force decision-making be transparent, including any amendments to the recovery plans.
- Ensure community oversight of CDBG and other funding decisions:
 - Obligate local officials to keep track of federal funding expenditures.

c. Support community hubs for climate resiliency planning & disaster response:

- Support Disaster Relief/Evacuation Coordination/Climate Centers where people can get help & information before and after storms. Give funding to existing community-based centers to undertake this work.
- Fund Community-based organizations to retrofit existing facilities as evacuation centers.
- Link local stakeholders with scientific community and information.

d. Support local climate resilience and community-based planning initiatives:

- Encourage technical assistance grants for policy and planning networks and community-based organizations with histories of effective advocacy partnerships promoting environmental justice, resiliency and sustainability with the most vulnerable

communities: Federal Sandy funding to support planning should not be dedicated exclusively to local or municipal planning agencies. Funding should also support community-based initiatives to reduce vulnerability through research, training, and emergency preparedness.

- Create Interagency Climate Adaptation Teams for each Community Board. All agencies (City, State, Federal) that work in those communities must participate.

e. Support comprehensive community-based disaster preparedness plans using ground-up grassroots planning principles:

- Support Comprehensive Community Disaster Preparedness Plans built around community driven planning and local priorities. Utilize community plans that already provide adaptation/resiliency strategies, such as Sunset Park’s & Williamsburg’s 197-a plans and the Hunts Point Vision Plan.
- Community Asset and Vulnerability mapping: provide support to community-based organizations to identify local assets and vulnerabilities.
- Engage community knowledge of disasters and include immigrant populations that experience these issues. For example, immigrant populations may be familiar with strategies from Caribbean islands (i.e. Puerto Rico’s resiliency plan for Mayaguez, and Cuba’s plan for storm response).

f. Secure local recovery jobs that pay wages and benefits at the established industry standards:

- HUD Section 3 opportunities for local hiring/contracting should be maximized for the Disaster Recovery.
- Employ local businesses & workers at prevailing wages for recovery and rebuilding – maximize Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) opportunities.

3. As part the City Council’s efforts to take advantage of the opportunities to build redundant, distributed, sustainable systems related with energy, transportation and food distribution, we urge you to consider the following recommendations:

(Intro. 1069: A Food and Water Access Plan; Intro. 1076: Traffic Management Planning; Intro. 1077: A Fuel Management Plan; and Intro. 1073: Health Care Facility Evacuation Planning)

a. Reduce vulnerabilities involving critical energy by building energy security:

- Distribute solar-powered wireless and cell phone charging stations in vulnerable areas prior to severe weather events.
- Identify strategies to decentralize energy infrastructure and create distributed networks of sustainable energy sources.
- Create back-up power systems in vulnerable areas that will maintain critical building systems (elevators, heat, hallway lights, and water) in the event of power outages.
- Reduce dependency on fossil fuels (e.g., encourage expansion of alternative fuel vehicular fleets, expedite conversions/switches of cleaner heating fuel for large buildings, support repowering for dirty electricity-generating “peaker” units, etc.)
- Create/deploy solar energy projects that will generate power when the electrical grids go out in storm surge vulnerable areas. (One example is the North Brooklyn Community Solar Initiative to generate back-up power for First Spanish Presbyterian Church in

Williamsburg: This can serve as a model for solar back-up power in critical facilities such as schools, nonprofits, churches, etc., near vulnerable waterfront areas.)

b. Reduce vulnerabilities involving transportation, by creating a resilient transportation system:

- Expand public transit (public buses and Bus Rapid Transit) in underserved, vulnerable coastal areas.
- Develop local emergency transportation plans and inform local communities about evacuation protocols in partnership with local environmental justice and community-based organizations.
- Implement regional transportation improvements that respond to community priorities regarding mobility needs, pollution reduction, and the need for increased capacity in underserved communities.

c. Reduce vulnerabilities involving critical food distribution networks by building food security:

- Protect regional food distribution systems: The Hunts Point Food Distribution Center (the nation's largest, handling 70% of the Tri-State area's produce alone) is located in a Significant Maritime and Industrial Area and is vulnerable to storm surge. If impacted, the entire region's food supply could be seriously disrupted. Another food distribution center should be created – without losing any of the jobs currently active in Hunts Point - so the region's food distribution system can become more decentralized and redundant.
- Ensure access to food and Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) after a disaster: Post-Sandy those without power/Internet did not receive information about food sources and local residents were unable to use EBT cards in areas without power.
- Identify local resources for food preparation and distribution (existing assets, such as food trucks, soup kitchens, etc.)
- Promote locally grown food, by supporting current farming activities and the creation of additional community gardens: El Puente's Green Light District has identified 10 publicly owned properties in North Brooklyn that should be converted into community gardens.

We commend the Committee on Public Safety for holding this hearing allowing an opportunity for public comment to offer insight into the recovery process. The City Council plays a critical role in ensuring that New York City fully recovers from Superstorm Sandy and builds the resiliency required to face the challenges posed by future climate change impacts.