

Hearing on Energy Infrastructure and Environmental Justice

Jacqui Patterson's Testimony

7/14/2020

- 10 year old Thomas of Jacksonville, Florida can tell an illustrative tale of the complex relationship between our energy infrastructure and the health and wellbeing of black communities. He lives 2 miles from a coal fired power plant. He has severe asthma and has to stay home from school on poor air quality days. When Thomas stays home from school, his parents, who do shift work without paid leave, lose income, while Thomas loses critical ground in his educational advancement.
- Grandma Maisie of St. Louis, MO could further elaborate on the complexities. When she was asked about whether she would be in favor of a hike in her electricity bill so that the utility could invest in energy efficiency measures, she responded that she would gladly pay more, if it meant that she didn't have to take her grandbaby to the emergency room due to his asthma attacks because of pollution from power plants.
- Mr. Hartwell of Charles Town, West Virginia would say that there are no easy answers. He is a coal miner who is in a profession where 76,000 of his comrades have lost their lives due to black lung disease. Yet he feels trapped in the only profession he has ever known that puts food on his table, provides healthcare, and guarantees a pension.
- Ms. Eglan of Gulfport, MS keeps saying there has to be a better way than the \$400 monthly energy bills she pays during the summer while she and her husband are on a fixed income in a state with such high energy burden that some people pay upwards of 30% of their income on electricity.

These aren't just one-off examples. Each of these is an illustrative indicator of a widespread pattern of systemic energy injustice:

- In our Coal Blooded Report, we found that 68% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal fired power plant and our Fumes Across the Fenceline Report describes how African American, Latino American, and Native American communities we are more likely to live in the shadows of oil and gas refineries. These fossil fuel facilities pollute our communities with mercury, arsenic lead, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, methane, and benzene-- toxins that are tied to respiratory, digestive, and circulatory illnesses, cognitive and behavioral challenges and endocrine disruption. For us that spells cancer clusters, poor birth outcomes, adults who are less likely to smoke but more likely to die of lung disease, and children who are 2-3 times more likely to die of asthma attacks.
- While we are more likely to suffer the impacts of exposure to pollution from energy production, we are less likely to have the benefit of energy. In our report titled, Lights Out in the Cold: Reforming Utility Shut Off Policies as If Human Rights Matter, we chronicle family after family that have paid the price of poverty with their very lives whether they are burning down their houses with candles or space heaters, or dying in their sleep from carbon monoxide poisoning from bringing a generator inside, or the multiple examples of respirator dependent sick people who had the source of energy for their lifeline cut off over a \$60 energy bill.

- In our report on the 10 Equity Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic we spoke of how the pandemic has severely exacerbated energy insecurity as well as how pollution from energy production creates particulate matter that has been tied by Harvard University to our COVID-19 susceptibility and mortality.
- Through our coalition building with the groups involved in the Extreme Extractive Energy convening, we heard of missing and murdered indigenous women around the pipelines and man-camps of the oil and gas industry.
- In our In the Eye of the Storm toolkit and Equity in Climate Resilience Training, we detail the impacts of the excessive greenhouse gas emissions that have us in the crosshairs of catastrophic climate change which also disproportionately impacts economically and politically disenfranchised communities.
- And In our Fossil Fueled Foolery Report we detail how profits from pollution are invested in anti clean air and anti-clean energy lobbying to maintain a status quo that is a death sentence for too many in our society, the oft disenfranchised, whom the Bible refers to as “the least of these”.

However, Robert Wallace the African American President and CEO of BithGroup Technologies which is a multi-million dollar clean tech company, Jihan Gearon Executive Director Emeritus of the Black Mesa Water Coalition in Flagstaff, Arizona which owns its own energy infrastructure, Rosemary Harris Lytle President of the NAACP Rocky Mountain Area Conference who started a PowerUp Employment project in Colorado Springs, Colorado, for formerly incarcerated persons to be trained in the new energy economy, and Denise Fairchild of Emerald Cities Collaborative which is creating high road careers in renewable energy. All of these leaders and more have seen the promised land!

- In our Just Energy Policies Report we shared data from the National Renewable Energy Laboratories that clearly says we have extensive wind and solar potential from Alaska to Florida and in between.
- In our Power to the People Toolkit, we have shared how we can develop microgrids, create jobs, and ensure access to clean energy for all!
- In the Our Communities, Our Power Toolkit, we describe comprehensive models of developing and financing community building anchored by clean energy development.
- In our Unleashing the Power of the People Report we uplift the work of NAACP leaders in like Oregon, Maryland, Indiana, Mississippi, and Illinois resulting in policies and practices that center human rights in the new energy economy.
- In our work with partners like, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Soulardarity, Co-Op Power, People’s Solar Energy Fund, the Local Clean Energy Alliance, Native Renewables, and so many more, we have not only seen what’s possible. We’ve seen what’s already happening.

Our only task is to scale up!!

If we are truly serious about Black Lives Mattering; If we deeply value taking the knee of white supremacy off of the neck of Black America; If we sincerely want to end the inhumane practice of sacrifice zones and the poisoning of entire communities of African Americans, Latino Americans, Indigenous Nations, Low income white American communities, and others with toxins; If we truly want to legislate upholding human rights and preservation of the earth.... We must aim to deconstruct a utility business model that will withhold life-saving heating or cooling or the electricity to power the respirator of an oxygen-dependent sick person all while lining the pockets of the utility baron to the

tune of an average of \$9.8 million in annual compensation. We must advance a radically transformative transition to a new energy economy.

We must have a system that puts power, literally and figuratively, in the hands of the people. ALL people. Thank you!!