



June 9, 2020

The Honorable Frank Pallone  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy & Commerce

The Honorable Greg Walden  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy & Commerce

The Honorable Paul Tonko  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Environment & Climate  
Change

The Honorable John Shimkus  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Environment & Climate  
Change

To the Members of the House Committee on Energy & Commerce:

Thank you for holding today's hearing entitled, *Pollution and Pandemics: COVID-19's Disproportionate Impact on Environmental Justice Communities*.

WE ACT for Environmental Justice was founded in 1988 in response to an act of environmental racism in West Harlem, NY. Since then, our organization has grown to over 16 staff members and 2 locations in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Our mission is to build healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of environmental health policies and practices; and there is no better time to reiterate our message to Congress than now.

COVID-19 has devastated our communities in Northern Manhattan and The Bronx. For decades, these communities of color have endured living close to heavy pollution sites such as sewage

treatment plants, highways, and industrial facilities. This history of injustice, combined with a poorly managed respiratory pandemic, has led to high rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths in New York City's communities of color.<sup>1</sup> Even more disturbing is data that indicates the COVID-19 death rate in New York City public housing is nearly double the rate of the city itself.

2

It is important to note that for our communities, environmental justice does not only pertain to the outdoor environment. The lack of affordable housing options in New York City due to gentrification, particularly in Northern Manhattan, present severe challenges to finding high-quality housing. Furthermore, many of our WE ACT members live in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) buildings. Indoor living conditions in these homes can be less than ideal. For example, persistent exposure to moisture, mold, pests, and chemicals contribute to high rates of asthma.<sup>3</sup> As the threat of COVID-19 persists and Americans spend more time indoors, it is critical that Congress address not only pollution in the outdoor environment, but take steps to improve indoor living conditions nationwide.

To address these issues, the Federal Policy Office of WE ACT for Environmental Justice offers the following policy suggestions to the House Committee on Energy & Commerce.

1. WE ACT supports Congressional oversight efforts related to EPA's temporary enforcement policy. If this policy goes unchecked, EJ communities are at greater risk of exposure to pollutants that are detrimental to public health.<sup>4</sup>
2. WE ACT supports federal policies that promote the use of renewable energy, particularly in low income and/or minority communities.
3. WE ACT supports additional funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP).
4. WE ACT asks that Congress establish a fund to invest in the elimination of gas stoves within public housing units. Using gas stoves for everyday activities such as boiling water or baking can lead to the emissions of nitrogen oxide.<sup>5</sup> According to the EPA, low level exposure to NO<sub>2</sub> can cause "increased bronchial reactivity in some asthmatics;

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<sup>1</sup> The New York Times. "New York City Coronavirus Map and Case Count." The New York Times, The New York Times, 9 May 2020, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/nyregion/new-york-city-coronavirus-cases.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/nyregion/new-york-city-coronavirus-cases.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article).

<sup>2</sup> Cruz, David. "Map: COVID-19 Death Rate In NYCHA Developments Far Outpaces That Of NYC." Gothamist, Gothamist, 20 May 2020, [gothamist.com/news/map-covid-19-death-rate-nycha-developments-far-outpaces-nyc](http://gothamist.com/news/map-covid-19-death-rate-nycha-developments-far-outpaces-nyc).

<sup>3</sup> "Healthy Homes." *WE ACT for Environmental Justice*, [www.weact.org/whatwedo/areasofwork/healthy-homes/](http://www.weact.org/whatwedo/areasofwork/healthy-homes/).

<sup>4</sup> Friedman, Lisa. "E.P.A., Citing Coronavirus, Drastically Relaxes Rules for Polluters." The New York Times, The New York Times, 26 Mar. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/climate/epa-coronavirus-pollution-rules.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/climate/epa-coronavirus-pollution-rules.html).

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, David. "Gas Stoves Can Generate Unsafe Levels of Indoor Air Pollution." Vox, Vox, 7 May 2020, [www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2020/5/7/21247602/gas-stove-cooking-indoor-air-pollution-health-risks](http://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2020/5/7/21247602/gas-stove-cooking-indoor-air-pollution-health-risks).

decreased lung function in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; [and] increased risk of respiratory infections, especially in young children.”<sup>6</sup>

5. Lastly, WE ACT asks Congress to provide funding for Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) to specifically address indoor air quality conditions. This will help address the respiratory health triggers that many public housing residents must cope with each day.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter for the record. We look forward to working with each Member of the House Energy & Commerce Committee to address the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on environmental justice communities.

Regards,

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WE ACT for Environmental Justice

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<sup>6</sup> “Nitrogen Dioxide's Impact on Indoor Air Quality.” EPA, Environmental Protection Agency, 22 Feb. 2017, [www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/nitrogen-dioxides-impact-indoor-air-quality#Health\\_Effects](http://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/nitrogen-dioxides-impact-indoor-air-quality#Health_Effects).