

Climate change: Disproportionate impact on people of color

Written by Lydia Schwartz

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Minneapolis, MN—On May 15, Green For All and The Sierra Club hosted a public forum at Kwanzaa Community Church, located at 3700 Bryant Avenue North, to discuss the realities of climate change and its disproportionate effect on people of color. The event included a panel discussion moderated by United States Representative Keith Ellison (Democrat-District 5), spoken word, and a passionate performance by the Minneapolis High School for the Recording Arts' Green Team, a youth hip-hop group dedicated to environmental justice.

The forum was held in response to the recent release of the National Climate Assessment, created by the United States Global Change Research Program. The scientific research team was established by a presidential initiative in 1989 and was made mandatory by Congress the following year. The lengthy report confirms that current trends in energy consumption will continue to adversely damage the planet and the health of its inhabitants.

According to the National Client Assessment, human-induced climate changes will amplify existing health threats. Children, the elderly, the sick, the poor, and communities of color are especially vulnerable. At the public forum, Nikki Silvestri, Executive Director at Green For All, spoke to the importance of the government finally addressing the impact that environmental changes has on human health, especially for people of color. "African Americans are four times as likely to have asthma," she said. "This is huge for us."

Rising carbon dioxide levels and toxic air pollutants around the globe has increased the overall amount of particulate matter and ground-level ozone, creating smog. Smog is associated with many health problems including diminished lung function, asthma, and premature deaths. Air pollution also contributes to higher pollen concentrations and longer pollen seasons, increasing allergic sensitizations and asthma episodes.

The global warming caused by excess carbon in the atmosphere has triggered many changes to the Earth's climate. Over the last 50 years, much of the United States has seen increases in prolonged periods of excessively high temperatures, heavy downpours, intense winter storms, tornadoes, severe floods, and droughts. Extreme rainfall and rising temperatures can also foster indoor air quality problems, including the growth of indoor fungi and molds, increasing respiratory and asthma-related conditions. While heat stroke remains the leading cause of weather-related deaths in the United States, heat waves are also associated with an increase in

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hospital admissions for aggravated cardiovascular, kidney, and respiratory disorders.

The most direct way to mitigate the effects of climate change is to reduce emissions from the energy sector, by using energy more efficiently and switching to lower carbon sources. The demand for electricity is high and a failure in the electrical grid, because of a disruption in the supply of fossil fuels or adverse weather, would shut down and threaten many vital systems including water treatment, transportation services, public health, and food safety. According to the National Climate Assessment, many Midwestern cities have aging infrastructures that are particularly vulnerable to heat waves, flooding, and other forms of extreme weather.

Research shows that carbon dioxide emissions can also be lowered by adopting energy-efficient components and systems in buildings, vehicles, manufacturing processes, and appliances. At the public forum, Silvestri discussed how easy it is to make construction designs 'greener,' and the importance of supporting the few government institutions who do take a stand against environmentally-damaging practices. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does have the authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, and the efficiency of appliances, under the Clean Air Act of 1970. However, the agency faces stiff opposition from large businesses who are reluctant to change their practices. "Our job is to protect the EPA, just as they protect us," Silvestri said. "Green construction isn't rocket science; it's just that we've never done it before."

Marty Cobenais, an organizer for the Indigenous Environmental Network and member of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, was also a panelist at the public forum and discussed the array of human-induced, climate change impacts and vulnerabilities that directly affect the native peoples of Minnesota. Future climate change impacts on tribal groups are projected to be especially severe, since these impacts are compounded by poor social and economic conditions made persistent by historical and contemporary government policies.

According to the National Climate Assessment, reservation lands have experienced significant decreases in water quality and the environmental damages from mining fossil fuels are forcing many tribal communities to relocate. In addition, the lack of government mechanisms to fund or support them is causing a painful loss of their community and culture, further exacerbating tribal impoverishment. "We need to leave the fossil fuels in the ground," Cobenais said, "and live in a good way with Mother Earth... I think that if we take it in baby steps, we can lower our carbon footprint."