

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

### Topline Asks

1. Would you support Oakland County working with unions and solar installers to help train clean energy workers in disinvested communities to help create job opportunities?
2. Should Oakland County establish and/or facilitate programs to help increase investments in energy efficiency/renewables in environmental justice communities to help build wealth and close opportunity gaps?
3. Would you support Oakland County taking a more active approach in intervening in rate cases at the Michigan Public Service Commission, as other municipalities have done, to expand community access to renewables and keep rates affordable?

The U.S. Environmental Protection agency defines environmental justice as: “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” [1]

Scholars like Dr. Robert Bullard who helped compile data that launched the modern environmental justice movement in the 1980s repeatedly observed that racial minorities and low-income communities saw pollution sited more in their neighborhoods and experienced disproportionate health impacts from those sites. [2]

For over a century, fossil fuel companies have polluted environmental justice communities. Therefore, residents in these areas should be some of the first to have access to wealth-building, clean technologies like solar and energy efficiency.

While national and state policies and tools have been developed to examine the impacts of environment hazards on low-income, minority communities, county-level policies have been less forthcoming. Among the backers of the County Climate Coalition, only a few make explicit references in their climate action plans [3] and have almost no policy prescriptions. While Washtenaw County has not finished its plan, it does have an environmental council which includes an appointed councilor for ‘Racial Equity & Environmental Issues.’ [4] Given the dearth of county initiatives, this is a chance for Oakland County to set the model for equity for the entire United States.

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## Energy Burden

- Nationally, low-income households spend a larger portion of their income on home energy costs (e.g., electricity, natural gas, and other home heating fuels) than other households spend. This measure is often referred to as a household’s “energy burden.” One recent study found that low-income households face an energy burden three times higher than other households. [5]
- A new study of Low-Income Energy Efficiency Opportunities finds that increasing investments in comprehensive energy efficiency services for low-income families would benefit everyone by creating healthier and more resilient communities, saving energy, and lowering bills for customers who need it most. [6]
- The more than 36 million U.S. households with incomes below twice the federal poverty level (\$49,200 for a family of four) use more than 30 percent of U.S. residential electricity and comprise 27 percent of U.S. households. Yet, the Consortium for Energy Efficiency estimates that, as of 2015, only 6 percent (\$350 million) of U.S. electric energy efficiency spending was dedicated to low-income programs. [7]
- In Colorado, nearly 400 households enrolled in low-income solar projects save between 15 and 50 percent on their electricity bills. [8]

## Jobs and Economic Programs

- In Pontiac, for example, 35.7% live in poverty, according to census data. More than half of the city's children are in poverty. The median household income is \$28,505. [9] As a result, clean energy and affordability programs can have a disproportionate positive impact on residents and the overall community.
- Utility shutoffs are a reality for those living in poverty. A report to the Michigan Public Service Commission showed more than 1.6 million DTE electric and gas accounts were more than 90 days past due at the end of the first quarter and more than 50,000 were disconnected for non-payment. And that was even before the impact of COVID-19. [10]
- Washington, D.C.’s new Solar for All program, which aims to help 100,000 low-income households slash their energy bills in half by 2032, recently awarded \$13 million in grants for community solar and similar projects. And in New York state, a new initiative will cover the enrollment fees and other costs for 7,000 low-income households to join community solar projects. [11]
- Some solar developers also incorporate job training and hiring into their projects. In Minnesota, the nonprofit developer Cooperative Energy Futures works with groups like Renewable Energy Partners to provide on-the-job training for local workers, who could go on to get employment in one of the nation’s fastest growing industries. [12]

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## Pollution

- There is no safe level of lead. Service lines do not have to be disrupted to deliver an elevated level of lead into a home's water supply. All lead lines must be replaced over the next two decades. The 90th percentile of the sample results must be below the lead action level of 15 ppb, or 12 ppb starting in 2025, for corrosion control to be considered effective. An estimated 500,000 lead service lines still exist in Michigan's homes, each presenting a public health threat. [13]
- Poor air quality remains the largest environmental health risk in the United States. In fact, with 100,000 deaths per year, more Americans die from air pollution than car crashes and murders combined. [14]
- Despite consuming less, BIPOC communities are consistently exposed to higher levels of air pollution than wealthier, whiter neighborhoods. There is a significant gap in pollution burden versus consumption by race in the United States. [15]

## Reference Links

1. <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>
2. The Quest for Environmental Justice (1994), Dr. Robert Bullard, Sierra Club Press
3. <https://www.kingcounty.gov/services/environment/climate/actions-strategies/climate-strategies/strategic-climate-action-plan/2020-SCAP-update.aspx>
4. <https://www.washtenaw.org/2845/Environmental-Council>
5. [https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2019/01/f58/WIP-Energy-Burden\\_final.pdf](https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2019/01/f58/WIP-Energy-Burden_final.pdf)
6. [https://www.edf.org/sites/default/files/documents/liee\\_national\\_summary.pdf](https://www.edf.org/sites/default/files/documents/liee_national_summary.pdf)
7. Ibid.
8. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/energy-equity-bringing-solar-power-to-low-income-communities#:~:text=Revenues%20from%20the%20solar%20electricity,arrays%20can%20provide%20additional%20benefits.>
9. <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2018/05/12/pontiac-poverty-millennials-comback-detrot/499356002/>
10. <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063189771>
11. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/energy-equity-bringing-solar-power-to-low-income-communities#:~:text=Revenues%20from%20the%20solar%20electricity,arrays%20can%20provide%20additional%20benefits.>
12. Ibid.
13. <https://www.greenmdp.com/resources>
14. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/03/11/air-pollution-inequality-minorities-breathe-air-polluted-whites/3130783002/>
15. Ibid.