

Good Morning, my name is Celeste Flores; I'm the Lake County Outreach Director at Faith in Place (FiP) and co-chair of Clean Power Lake County (CPLC). On behalf of my community, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on the important subject of Perspectives from the front lines: how climate change uniquely impacts environmental justice communities.

I was born and raised in Lake County, Illinois. While a student at Bellarmine University in Kentucky, I saw the devastation of Mountaintop removal and became involved in environmental justice. It was the first time that I questioned where the electricity came from when I turned on a switch. As a person of faith, I felt morally challenged to know my luxury was affected the lives of my brothers and sisters & the planet.

After graduation, I spent a year as an AmeriCorps volunteer in Appalachia then returned to Lake County, where I discovered local opportunities for environmental justice work.

I began as a volunteer with Clean Power Lake County, CPLC for short. The mission of CPLC is to organize within frontline environmental justice communities to shift Lake County toward healthy, renewable energy—and to achieve self-determination for immigrant, low-income, and working-class families.

Like so many in my community, I was unaware that I grew up in a fence line community and spent most of my childhood within miles of a coal-fired plant and 5 superfund sites. It was upon my return that I was educated on the environmental justice that existed. That was five years ago. I never imagined when I moved back home to work at my local church, I would become an expert on particulate matter, coal plants, PJM grid, capacity market, coal ash, Superfund sites, Ethylene Oxide, let alone to organize a whole community to demand for their basic right to breathe clean air, drink clean water, and have healthy land.

Waukegan is a predominantly Latinx and American American, low income, working-class, immigrant community. A town with a once booming economy that was left behind by industry but not without first taking resources from our community, polluting the land, air, and water and once these polluting corporations were no longer profitable leaving the community economically devastated and polluted.

Pollution that we are still dealing with. Growing up, I had no idea the land across the apartments I visited every week was a landfill considered a superfund site by the EPA. I would ask adults why the land had a fence to which I was told oh it must be private property. I would regularly see groups of folks play soccer on the land.

I had not seen the coal plant on the lakeshore of Lake Michigan until I was an adult. As a child in the summer, my family did not go to the Waukegan beach because if you did not have a resident sticker there was a charge to visit the beach but if we drive 10 minutes north, you arrived to IL beach state park which was free. I spent many summer days swimming in Zion, IL, unaware of the nuclear plant hundreds of feet from the beach area. I am sure I asked an adult in my life what was the building I could see while I swam. My educated guess would be that I was told the building was a part of the state beach.

This is out polluting corporations get away with making a profit on the backs of the most vulnerable communities by the community being kept in the dark. When I first learned

about the coal plant, I would ask every person I met if they had been to the Waukegan Beach. If they answered yes, I would follow up asking if they knew what the building with stacks to the north side of the beach was. The most regular answer was, I was told as a child it was a factory cloud. From some that knew it was a coal plant, they would say it is clean now because I do not wake up with my car covered with grey dust. Others would say we need the coal plant for the power to stay on. A false notion that the newest owner of the coal plant is NRG Energy, has helped get traction. The company hired a former employer of the city to be their lobbyist locally.

An environmental justice community like Waukegan is dealing with cumulative impacts from multiple sources of polluters. CPLC was formed to develop a just transition plan for the coal-fired electric generating plant. Yet we quickly learned Waukegan is home to *five* EPA Superfund sites. That means residents have been exposed to an incredible amount of toxic pollution over the years. Four sites on the lakefront, which include Johns Manville, Outboard Marine, North Shore Gas North and south plant. In addition, the superfund site across apartment complexes Yeoman Creek Landfill.

Other factories have abruptly abandoned the lakefront, leaving Waukegan to deal with serious consequences, including contaminated sites, layoffs, and less money for the community.

We know what happens to our community when a company abruptly exits. We do not want that to happen again. That is why we have called for a just transition task force. To ensure that we as a community can build on our vision for a revitalized lakefront and stronger community.

According to the Clean Air Taskforce in 2018 the pollution from the coal plant contributed to eighteen deaths, five hospital admissions, seven asthma-related ER visits, eleven heart attacks, four cases of chronic bronchitis, one hundred and eighteen asthma attacks and eight hundred and seventy-one work loss days. In a world where everyone's health and wellbeing are valued the same. There would be no statistics of any kind of pollution.

A 2010 Risk Assessment Report by the US EPA determined that living near a wet coal ash pond, like the ones on our lakefront, is more dangerous than smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

In 2012, the IL EPA issued notices of violations for groundwater contamination coming from the plant's coal ash ponds.

Between 2010 and 2013, the Waukegan coal plant had 154 violations for exceeding safe levels of toxins, including arsenic, manganese, nitrate, boron, and sulfate. While the plant owner has installed new liners for the coal ash ponds, the problem has not subsided according to groundwater monitoring. We have also been informed the liners installed are not up to the EPA standards.

Furthermore, the plant owner's own analysis shows that there are legacy sites in addition to the functioning coal ash ponds. Toxic waste from the coal plant has been left in these sites for decades.

Unfortunately, our environment is under attack by the current administration.

Which is one of several reasons CPLC has decided to focus to create stronger coalition work in the state of IL and pass state legislation? In this past General Assembly session SB9 (the Coal Ash Cleanup and Storage Act). A historical step in holding polluters accountable.

While CPLC has been educating and empowering the community we have faced many obstacles. The first being that there is not enough information readily available in Spanish or other languages spoken in Waukegan.

How can a community advocate for itself when it cannot educate itself in the language they prefer to read in?

This is an environmental justice community that is facing many other injustices from mass incarceration, limited access to healthcare, limited access to healthy food options, a crumbling public education.

As we canvassed the community to bring awareness and education. We meet folks that were willing to sign our petition asking the city council to proactively plan for a just transition of the coal plant. These folks did not have the luxury to attend a meeting once a month to get more involved. This is exactly what companies like NRG energy count on. Entering communities that are too busy surviving day to day to demand their basic rights.

When you are working a minimum wage job, raising a family. You do not stop and question why your child has asthma when there is not a history of asthma in your family. You simply know you need to find the money to pay for your child's inhaler. You do not stop to realize that one in three children in Waukegan has asthma or asthma-like symptoms. Well above the national average because survival is your goal.

The goal is to have your child get a better education to have the American dream.

Environmental justice is at the heart of every injustice a community faces but is usually the last injustice to be called out. We have worked extremely hard to educate folks on the intersectional of our work.

As if our community needed another toxic polluter. A year ago, the Chicago Tribune broke the story that two facilities in Lake County were emitting Ethylene Oxide (EtO). The US EPA was classified EtO as a class one carcinogen. Vantage Chemical Specialist is emitting this into our air in Waukegan by Medline Inc and in Gurnee.

I do not believe we would have become aware of EtO if it wasn't for the reporting following the story of EtO in the Willowbrook community and his curiosity if EtO was being emitted in other communities in IL. When I received the call from the reporter in late October, I learned about EtO and that city elected officials knew about the high levels of EtO since August I felt angry, disappointed, tired.

I knew once again CPLC would need to do the groundwork to educate the community on yet another issue. I did not feel like we had the bandwidth to become an expert on another issue. We were currently focused on moving the state to pass legislation that will put IL as a leader in renewable energy with environmental justice communities being prioritized to shift away from coal-fired plants to renewable working hubs.

For a brief moment, I thought I had found individuals that would be able to lead in the education of EtO these folks lived in Gurnee. I start leading meetings in Waukegan to organize folks and bring them into the fold. Yet when I brought up that this is one of many issues environmental justice communities in Lake County face, there was immediate push back from the most vocal folks attending the meeting. I was told I was being divisive, making it about race, that our elected officials would move on EtO because they care about public health. These comments came from middle high class, Gurnee residents, and European descent. I was once again I was reminded how far along some folks need to come. I tried to have individual conversations with a handful of folks. These meetings proved to be unsuccessful.

As a leader in the community, I have personally sacrificed being away from my family and friends, missed important milestones to be at community meetings or traveling to speak on behalf of the community. I would miss those events again in a heartbeat because working towards a healthy community will directly benefit my current family and future generations to come. So when Environmental justice is dismissed, I will not continue to engage because I am sacrificing time away from my family and the community. I refuse to feel obligated to bring along every Caucasian individual I meet if they are not willing to engage in a conversation.

For too long Women of Color, particularly black women have had to carry this burden. So when any person of color shared with you their story or a story about their community to you senators or to your staff, make sure to honor and believe every word that POC is sharing. Because no one should have to re-experience being told "you do not represent the community" I should not have to share the group text exchange Stop EtO Lake County Leadership initiative dismissing my friend and colleague value as a leader in the community. Yet it is quick because a game of they said. Rather than out these racist individuals, we have both continued work on educating our community because that is why we do this work.

Unfortunately, we have seen how this group has taken ownership of the narrative around EtO in Lake County. How they have kept CPLC out of the room when state legislation was being drafted to address EtO. How they meet with state and federal

elected officials and claim to speak for Waukegan residents yet their core leadership does not include Waukegan residents or Waukegan demographics.

Environmental justice organizations need elected officials to force groups that do not acknowledge environmental justice to have those tough conversations with their leadership. To show that you are a co-conspirator with environmental justice organizations. I say co-conspirator because frontline leadership needs more than someone that will align with us, we need someone that is willing to plot with us. To draw a line in the sand with our values and not compromise on those values.

As you have heard, it is critical we start to look at the cumulative impact these communities face. These past October Waukegan residents were expected by the IL EPA to attend three separate meetings all within two weeks. The first meeting was held in Grayslake, IL 25 minutes' drive from Waukegan to learn about EtO. This meeting was scheduled with no input from frontline leadership. This meeting was scheduled to end at 830pm but was extended until 930pm due to how many community questions were turned in. The second meeting was held in Waukegan regarding a title V permit for NRG energy coal plant. The final meeting was held in Waukegan for coal ash rulemaking comments. The meeting was scheduled to end at 830pm and the IL EPA staffer made it very clear that the meeting had come to an end even though there were still community members that wanted to make a public comment.

We need federal and state agencies to start looking at environmental justice communities and take into account the cumulative impact. That "trying" to make an event bilingual but not meeting the needs of the community is unacceptable. We need bold leadership from this elected committee to help environmental justice across the nation to address our problem holistically and not in silos.

Thank you for your consideration and time.