



April 23, 2020

Ms. Marissa Aho
Chief Resilience Officer
Office of Mayor Sylvester Turner
City of Houston
611 Walker, 13th Floor
Houston, TX 77002
Via Email: marissa.aho@houstontx.gov

Re: Comments for a Successful Environmental Justice Working Group, an action of the City of Houston's Resilient Houston Plan

Dear Ms. Aho:

The Coalition for Environment, Equity and Resilience (CEER) is a collaboration of twenty five non-profit organizations that work cooperatively to raise awareness of the connection between pollution, place and the public's health. CEER and our members participated in the creation of the Resilient Houston strategy and want to be considered thought partners in its implementation. We are encouraged that you are moving forward on strategies in the plan and want to prioritize one in particular.

CEER is encouraged that action 20.1 in the Resilient Houston plan is to "Coordinate environmental justice actions with partners. To better align existing and new efforts, the City of Houston and Harris County will form an Environmental Justice Working Group. This group of government stakeholders, advocate stakeholders, academic institutions, and industry partners will coordinate and collaborate with community members on program and policy recommendations to mitigate environmental injustices."

CEER's own eight-point plan calls on decision makers to "Develop a regional body, adopted in partnership with community and environmental groups that operates under principles of equity, to address pollution, place, and the public's health." Successful implementation of this action is significant for communities who are disproportionately harmed by the legacy of environmental racism.

The Environmental Justice Working Group has the potential to be an innovative and game-changing solution that can institutionalize long-term systems change in our region. Achieving this comes down to how the group is structured, what values it adopts, who serves on it, how community voice is represented, what scope it has, and who facilitates the process. We are writing today to share best

practices and recommendations to help define what success looks like for this body. **We would also like to sit down with you, and any others, who will be leading the implementation of this Environmental Justice Working Group** to co-design the approach, answer questions you may have about the information provided in this letter, and collaborate on next steps.

Values of the Environmental Justice Working Group:

It is imperative that the Working Group adopt and follow a set of guiding principles and values to articulate how it will navigate decision-making, discussion, action and be accountable to impacted community members. Environmental justice communities, advocacy groups and other stakeholders are not interested in being complicit with oppression and do not want to engage in tokenism.

We suggest you adopt a set of principles and values, borrowing from the various Environmental Justice principles linked below. Once adopted, the agreed upon principles will serve as “rules of engagement” for the Working Group. These are helpful resources:

- [Principles of EJ](#), Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing - six concrete practices for how to live out inclusivity and justice.
- Bali [Principles of Climate Justice](#) - a set of demands and affirmations that are helpful to understand how climate change impacts communities at a disproportionate level and how to address that to achieve climate justice.
- <https://therightsofnature.org/cochabama-rights/> - a global agreement on the rights of people and the rights of Mother Earth.

Purpose of a Working Group:

A successful Environmental Justice Working Group shall take on the following in its scope and purpose:

1. Educate the City of Houston and Harris County on environmental justice and how it intersects with the scope of multiple departments as well as the City’s plans, practices and policies.
2. Recommend policies and actions that ensure environmental justice at the local level.
3. Request actions of multiple departments to implement an environmental justice framework through intra- and inter-departmental coordination.
4. Provide impacted community members a forum where they are considered subject matter experts. Give communities direct access to decision-makers to build authentic relationships.
5. Create environmental justice action plans with measurable goals and metrics defined in collaboration with impacted residents.
6. Advise the City of Houston and Harris County on methodology, timeline and approach to address legacy issues of environmental racism. Look to the future to inform local government response to climate change, pollution, and natural and manmade disasters.

Role of facilitator:

The importance of a third-party, skilled, independent facilitator cannot be emphasized enough. We anticipate that the conversations this group will surface will be uncomfortable, complex, and nuanced. They will require a strong facilitator who can build trust and ensure the group dynamic remains high-functioning, effective and respectful. This includes the ability to:

- Guide honest and difficult discussions around institutional racism, environmental racism, and how to practice equity and racial justice at multiple levels of government.
- Hold stakeholders accountable to recommended actions.
- Create a space for meaningful learning and action.
- Be patient to influence members to take steps that achieve lasting systems change (which will take time) but also move with urgency.

In its first year, the EJWG shall:

1. **Craft a definition of what environmental justice** means for the City of Houston and Harris County - a place where we are unique in several ways.
2. Examine the local legacy of environmental racism and its intersection with multiple issues to understand, **“how did we get here?”**
3. **Categorize and prioritize neighborhoods** facing environmental justice issues, borrowing from best practices and using indicators that are nuanced and context-specific.
4. **Identify coordinated government actions** that can be taken in the short, medium, and long term by the City and County individually and together. Assign those actions to the appropriate department(s) within the first 60 days.
5. Participate in an **inventory of all task forces, working groups, and other bodies** to understand the big picture opportunities and create a comprehensive strategy adopted at the top levels of government and mandated for implementation by all departments and agencies.
6. **Identify resources** to sustain the work of the EJWG and provide trainings to City and County departments.

Questions for success:

1. How will the City and County resource this work?
2. What are plans to include larger cities with EJ issues, such as Pasadena and Baytown?
3. What do the City and County need the most help with to make this group effective?

Library of Best Practices:

We have assembled a few local and national best practices that will be useful in standing up the structure, scope and purpose of the Environmental Justice Working Group.

[EJ Taskforce Outline](#)

[Examples of EJ Ordinances nationally](#)

[Bylaws for Re-Imagined HCFCF Task Force](#)

[SEATTLE EJ COMMITTEE AND EQUITY AGENDA](#)

Thank you again for your work towards creating a vision and strategy for resilience in the City of Houston and the region it sits within. Global crises like the covid-19 pandemic highlight the importance and relevance of this work and accelerate its urgency.

If you would like to discuss any of these recommendations, you may contact Iris Gonzalez, CEER's Coalition Director, at 713-331-9913 or iris@ceerhouston.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Iris Gonzalez', written in a cursive style.

Iris Gonzalez
Coalition Director