



The Guardians of Flushing Bay, Inc., Queens



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New York's Investments in a HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

& JUSTICE

BY ROSA MENDEZ, DIRECTOR OF DEC'S OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

The words of Martin Luther King, Jr., inscribed in stone at the national memorial in his name in Washington, D.C. served as a rallying cry during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. More than a half century later, they serve to inform and inspire a similar fight for fairness: the modern-day Environmental Justice (EJ) movement.

Across America and amid the COVID-19 pandemic, issues surrounding climate change and social justice are colliding. Environmental experts and advocacy groups are joining together, with leaders in communities of color that have been historically disenfranchised and disproportionately impacted by pollution and environmental degradation, to root out systemic environmental injustice and build a cleaner and green future for all. New York State is leading the way and setting the national standard for programs and policies



Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments, Inc. (VINES), Binghamton

that ensure environmental justice for everyone. The State is advancing a comprehensive plan to completely overhaul a system that for far too long has profited and protected polluters at the expense of the environment and the most vulnerable among us. And not only are programs and policies being developed to address the challenges we face and achieve the change we seek, they are being backed by the resources necessary to implement and sustain them. At the heart of New York's environmental justice agenda is the landmark Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), a bold plan that will transition the state to a clean-energy economy of the future. Strategic investments are being made to modernize infrastructure and incentivize cutting-edge advances that will enhance capabilities and expand the capacity of clean, renewable energy technology. It's a smart plan guided by science that will reduce our dependence on dirty fossil fuels and ultimately eliminate their use and the harmful emissions

they produce. What's more, beyond protecting public health and the environment, the plan is designed to fuel a growing green economy deeply rooted in sustainability and based on shared prosperity for all, bolstering the state's economy. To ensure inclusion, the CLCPA established a Climate Justice Working Group to provide representatives from EJ communities statewide with a seat at the energy policy planning table. The Act also contains benchmarks set in statute that require investments into EJ communities that have historically been excluded from accessing the resources needed to protect disadvantaged New Yorkers.

Complementing the CLCPA and work of the Climate Justice Working Group is a round of recent Environmental Justice grants awarded to assist 21 communities with key projects to create clean, healthy, and sustainable communities. Grant recipients include organizations in the Capital Region, Central New York, Hudson Valley, Long Island, New York



Sure We Can, Inc., Brooklyn



Grassroots Gardens of Western New York, Buffalo



Groundwork Hudson Valley, Yonkers



Kite's Nest, Hudson

City, and Western New York. This assistance focuses on ways to help these communities overcome long-standing environmental degradation issues, such as poor air quality, residential proximity and exposure to waste or hazardous materials, and even the lack of fresh produce. We often don't give a second thought to such items, and are unaware, or forget, that some communities do not have access to such basic, vital products and services.

In October 2019, DEC selected WE ACT, a New York City-based organization founded in 1988, to manage the State's new Administration of Environmental Justice Capacity Building Grants program. The program is providing critical funding to help smaller organizations build their EJ programs and expand their ability to address local causes of pollution and provide needed services to ensure individuals and families are not negatively impacted due to where

they live. Overall, 18 community-based EJ organizations in the state are receiving funding to advance projects such as electric vehicle infrastructure and charging stations, and water infrastructure projects. The investments will also promote critical scientific research to help these EJ communities prepare for climate change impacts and improve their neighborhoods.

New York State and DEC are committed to leading efforts to create a clean, healthy, and accessible environment, one that includes everyone, no matter where they live. Investments in our EJ communities empower individuals, strengthen communities and local economies, and build a better system and better state for all New Yorkers. As Governor Cuomo recently stated, "We have an obligation to help ensure every New Yorker has a clean, safe, healthy environment to call home."



About DEC's Office of Environmental Justice

Created in 1999, the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) works to advance DEC's environmental justice policy and help low-income and communities of color address their environmental justice concerns. OEJ operates on the principles that communities and populations should not be disproportionately exposed to adverse environmental impacts and should be meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect their environment. In addition, OEJ facilitates consultation with Indian Nations on issues relating to protection of environmental and cultural resources within New York State.

OEJ also administers a grant program that provides competitive funding opportunities to community-based organizations to support and empower local communities as they develop and implement solutions that: address environmental issues, harms, and health hazards; build community consensus; set priorities; and improve public outreach and education. DEC has incorporated Environmental Justice considerations into all aspects of its activities, making it a fundamental goal.

For more information on DEC's Environmental Justice program, see www.dec.ny.gov/public/333.html.