

**Environmental Justice: An Essential Part of Building Back Better**  
**Op-Ed by Representative Gilda Cobb-Hunter (SC)**  
**President, National Black Caucus of State Legislators**

Our country has been subjected to unceasing waves of challenges and tragedy over the past decade. It is all too unfortunate that these events tend to hit communities of color and low-income families the hardest. From the ongoing tensions resulting from race-motivated killings, to COVID-19, to the economic fallout from the pandemic – these instances are the most recent in a long line of challenges that our most vulnerable citizens must disproportionately bear. While there is undoubtedly a plethora of difficulties facing marginalized communities, some of the most persistent of these issues relate to climate change, environmental justice and critical infrastructure inequality. And just as we united to address other threats, so too must we have united to overcome these intractable and pervading challenges.

Every person deserves the right to live in a community free from toxic pollution in the soil beneath their feet, in the air that they breathe and in the water they drink. Sadly, despite these inherent rights, too many are exposed to elevated levels of contaminants, with a toll that can be measured in illness and death.

The slow-moving tragedies are myriad, and many relate to critical infrastructure systems that we rely on to deliver essential utility services like water and electricity to our homes. Insidious lead contamination in cities like Flint and the fine particle pollution [emitted by coal power plants](#) that puts low-income families and people of color at risk are some of the many difficulties that disproportionately affect communities of color and low-income households. According to recent studies, African Americans are [three times](#) more likely to die as a result of air pollution than white Americans. Race and other demographical considerations impact the quality of water as well; a [report](#) by the Natural Resources Defense Council found that “race, ethnicity, or language spoken had the strongest relationship to slow and inadequate enforcement of the [Safe Drinking Water Act].” Decades of inaction have dealt grievous harm to these communities, and it is now upon us to attack this problem head on.

Beyond the difficulties of environmental justice is the formidable challenge of affordability and the economic disparities which drive inequitable outcomes. For many, essential utility services represent an ever-increasing household expense; some, particularly in the midst of this economic and public health crisis, are having difficulty keeping up.

Solutions to these persistent challenges cannot be meager or piecemeal – they must be intrepid and comprehensive. There are innumerable policy solutions that can be fashioned to address issues of environmental justice and affordability, but one universal component of these solutions is the need for holistic solutions and concerted efforts by every level of government. These actions must include investment and economic

support, and they must invite all stakeholders into the process of addressing this country's legacy of indifference and complacency to environmental justice and the plight of low-income families.

Now more than ever, the issue of affordability stands out as one concern that can be readily addressed through concerted action. While a number of utilities have voluntarily and proactively suspended service disconnections, more must be done to address affordability in the long-term, particularly in the water space where, unlike with electricity, there is a shocking lack of government-backed financial support for low-income households. The federal [Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\)](#) supports “initiatives that assist families with energy costs.” Such does not exist for water services. One solution would be to fund a LIHEAP-like program for water to mitigate the challenge of affordability. This is especially critical as the sector continues to invest in infrastructure renewal to address pervasive issues like lead contamination and other contaminants. Federal lawmakers explore establishing such a program, along with other environmental justice policies, in their next COVID-related relief bill.

At the state level, elected officials and regulators might consider creating more robust assistance programs that permit funding through rates or a state funded program. Often, there are statutory barriers to direct assistance, diminishing the ability of utilities to offer much-needed relief to low-income customers. In these difficult times, balancing needed infrastructure investment with affordability is a tall, but necessary, order. Access to safe, reliable and affordable water service, particularly now, requires the concerted efforts of all stakeholders.

To these ends, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators recently issued a [resolution](#) that, among other things, supports economic diversification, sustainable development and increased investment so that everyone, regardless of race or wealth, can access affordable and safe essential utility services. These are certainly challenging times, but they may also prove to be an opportunity to create a better, more equitable and more sustainable future for all Americans.