Unleashing the Power of the People

Lessons on Public Engagement for Environmental and Climate Justice
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Located in every state in the nation, with over a half-million members and 2,200 units, the NAACP’s extensive influence is broad and deep. The Association and its membership champion a range of causes under its bedrock civil rights mission, spanning health, education, economy, criminal justice, voting rights, environmental justice, and more. The Environmental and Climate Justice Program was established in 2009 to better support community leaders organizing at the intersection of environmental issues and civil rights. Ensuring that communities are in the driver’s seat and centralizing self-determination as a core value is critical to the success of the NAACP as a change agent. NAACP units have executed a range of environmental and climate justice campaigns that have affected change at the individual, community, and state level, and had influence at the national and even global levels. This collection of case briefs profiles five NAACP units whose achievements in environmental and climate justice advocacy can be credited in large part due to their successful public engagement strategies. In the pages that follow, we catalogue the anatomy and highlights of winning change tactics that have successfully engaged communities and achieved campaign aims at the state and local levels.

"...With the fierce urgency of now climate justice is the solution to all of our challenges. Our dilemma is also our solution. The theory of change is to connect everyone, create equity, and redo these systems that have been incorrect..."

- Denise Abdul-Rahman, State Chair, NAACP Indiana Environmental and Climate Justice Program.

Introduction
The 2012 “Coal Blooded: Putting Profits before People” report gave the Jack Watson Plant in Gulfport, Mississippi a failing D-grade. The report, released by the NAACP in partnership with the Indigenous Environmental Network and Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, ranked the nation’s then 378 coal-fired power plants on their environmental justice performance—a score based on the plants’ toxic emissions and demographic factors of their surrounding areas.

Kathy Egland, Gulfport NAACP Member and Chair of the National Board Environmental and Climate Justice Committee, was stunned: “I’ve survived Hurricane Katrina, I walk out of my front door and within five minutes I’ve got the BP Oil Spill, and now you’re telling me I walk out my back door and I’ve got a failing coal-fired power plant!” The failing grade galvanized the Gulfport NAACP toward a tireless pursuit of environmental and climate justice—challenging the new normal of climate chaos along the gulf coast and declaring climate change to be a human and civil rights issue.

Over the course of 18 months the Gulfport branch worked with community partners, including the Sierra Club and S.T.E.P.S. Coalition, to pursue a steady and focused campaign to achieve clean air for Gulfport that resulted in an agreement with the Mississippi Power Company to stop burning coal at the Jack Watson power plant. Key to this victory was the Gulfport NAACP’s ability to infuse a new frame and new voices into the long held struggle. Employing a range of successful tactics, the NAACP garnered broad public engagement that has continued to sustain various community campaigns for environmental and climate justice—including the certification of churches in equitable emergency management and the establishment of various community garden sites. Through persistent and effective community-based organizing, the Gulfport NAACP successfully mobilized the public in the fight for climate justice along the Gulf Coast.

Key Strategies & Tactics

**Bringing the People Together**

Following the release of the Coal Blooded Report, which gave the Gulfport Jack Watson coal plant a failing grade on an environmental justice scale, the Gulfport NAACP held a series of town hall meetings to discuss the findings of the report and allow community members to share their reactions and experiences. Flyers promoting the town hall events advertised the opportunity to, “Come speak one-on-one with agency representatives about your water and air concerns.” A range of local, state, and federal agencies participated in the town halls, including the American Lung Association, City of Gulfport Water Department, Clean Air Task Force, Environmental Protection Agency, Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, Mississippi Department of Health, Sierra Club, Mississippi Power Company, and Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Gulfport NAACP conducted extensive community outreach to promote the town halls. Specifically seeking to engage directly impacted community members, the branch explained that anyone living within 30 miles of the plant, and especially those within five miles, ought to be concerned and learn more about the harms and health risks associated with exposure to coal pollution. The branch utilized both traditional and social media in an aggressive publicity campaign which included letters to civic groups and local churches, press releases, flyers, social media posts, and both print and television media coverage. As a result, the town halls engaged a broad and diverse cross-section of community members, including clergy, teachers, health professionals, elected officials, and others.

The town halls not only helped build awareness and educate the community about the environmental injustice of coal pollution, but also galvanized the public to actively participate in the
campaign for clean air. The branch coordinated phone banks and letter writing campaigns so that concerned community members could voice their opposition to coal burning at Plant Jack Watson. Particularly notable among these efforts was a postcard campaign targeting the state Governor. Among the many concerns raised by the community was the lack of equitable representation on the agencies charged with making the decision about the power plant. Despite being the state with the largest African American population (38% as of the 2010 census), the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) had never had an African American Commissioner and lacked diversity altogether. The postcard campaign, which focused on the failure of the State to appoint commissioners that reflect the demographics of Mississippi, eventually resulted in the appointment of the first African American Commissioner to the MDEQ.

**Base-Building through Community Education**

Central to the Gulfport NAACP’s success in halting coal burning at Plant Jack Watson was the branch’s ability to bring in previously unengaged community members to the campaign for clean air. While the failing grade on the Coal Blooded Report garnered widespread concern in the community, many had not previously been exposed to the language and subject matter often used in conversations about coal pollution, fossil fuels, and climate change. After the first town hall meeting the branch identified a need to train community members in key concepts and terminology so that they would be better equipped—and more compelled—to meaningfully engage in the campaign.

“That was one of those aha! moments,” Kathy Egland, Gulfport NAACP member, recalled. “We need to reach people where they are and allow them to have the opportunity to feel comfortable with the information that they are receiving.” By making technical information accessible to the general public through community trainings and information sessions the Gulfport NAACP was able to engage a broader cross-section of the community. These trainings not only helped reach previously unengaged community members, but also developed the leadership of directly impacted people. By centering these voices, the campaign was able to advance a powerful people and justice-centered campaign.

**EcoDistrict Visioning Process**

The Gulfport NAACP’s campaign to stop coal burning at Plant Jack Watson was not an isolated victory, but one component of the NAACP EcoDistrict Initiative. A climate justice project found by the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program, the EcoDistrict Initiative aims to develop scalable models for
community-based climate adaptation planning rooted in equity and resilience. The EcoDistrict planning began with a small group of about 25 people representing a diverse cross-section of the Gulfport community coming together for a visioning process. The group came together to discuss key concerns and brainstorm potential solutions towards the ultimate objective of building a resilient model community.

Research coupled with community stakeholder engagement informed the community visioning process, which resulted in the Gulfport NAACP EcoDistrict Action Plan. Over the course of four months the group researched community demographics, including economic, racial, gender, and health statistics, to determine what factors to address in the EcoDistrict action plan. Through this process the group was able to ascertain, for example, a connection between health disparities and a lack of access and availability to fresh fruits and vegetables. They discovered that the community had only 1.75 grocery stores per 10,000 residents, compared to 4.2 neighborhood convenience stores per the same population.

This hard data not only informed the planning process but was proved beneficial when engaging city officials and other powerful stakeholders in EcoDistrict planning and implementation. The group’s research surrounding community health disparities and gaps in food access resulted in the city mayor giving 12 acres to the NAACP’s local unit for a community garden and providing irrigation. The community broke ground on the community garden on Earth Day in 2016 and the space has since become a thriving community space that not only offers access to fresh and healthy food but also engages the community in lessons in gardening, healthy food preparation, and food preservation.

Engaging the Faith Community in Emergency Management

The Gulfport area, which ranks third in the nation for Worst Places to Own a Home based on natural factors, is geographically prone and uniquely vulnerable to natural disasters. In fact, Hurricane Katrina’s highest confirmed storm surge occurred in Harrison County where Gulfport is located. Recognizing the region’s disproportionate exposure to extreme weather events—and that these storms are increasing in frequency and intensity in a warming climate—the Gulfport branch incorporates emergency management training into EcoDistrict planning.

As residents of Gulfport know first hand, marginalized communities such as those living in poverty and the elderly experience the impacts of extreme weather emergencies more acutely. With this in mind, when the Gulfport NAACP set out to better equip the community with skills and training in emergency management they did so with the ambition of reaching the most vulnerable populations. In order to do so, the Gulfport NAACP engaged churches and members of clergy as critical leaders in this cause.

The branch started out by asking ministers if they could come into the church on a Sunday and invite the congregation to a meal after the service. These Sunday afternoon meals were a big draw, and provided a captive audience for training on emergency management. The NAACP partnered with various agencies including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to conduct trainings at churches directly following the Sunday service. As a result of the trainings, the Gulfport NAACP was able to certify numerous churches in the community on best practices in emergency management.

An important aspect of the branch’s success in preparing houses of worship for disasters and emergencies was gaining the support of faith leaders. One of the goals of the trainings was to compel clergy members to begin to incorporate emergency preparedness and management practices into their ministry. Not only does this leadership help sustain efforts to better prepare the community for disaster events, but it brings a moral authority to efforts towards equity in emergency management. People respect their faith leaders, and take their leadership on emergency management seriously. This has proven effective as clergy take on a central role in engaging the public in emergency planning and response in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Effective Messages and Framing

Human and Civil Rights

A crucial component of the Gulfport NAACP’s success is their ability to shift common narratives about environmental issues and climate change and in doing so achieve new kinds of public engagement. When the branch first began working on environmental and climate justice they found that many in the community had preconceived notions about environmental issues as having more to do with hugging trees than directly impacting
their lives. In contrast, the NAACP brought a human and civil rights perspective and a focus on human health and welfare to their advocacy on these issues. By advancing people-centered narratives, the Gulfport NAACP changed the way people in the community engaged with environmental issues. Using messages that people could directly relate to, such as the pollution-related illnesses affiliated with coal burning, mobilized previously unengaged community members to the cause.

Making it Personal

The Gulf South is on the frontlines of climate change in the United States. At the same time, many of the people who live in these frontline communities, including Gulfport, depend on the oil and gas industry for their livelihood. Given these deep ties, it can be challenging to have conversations about topics like climate change or transitioning away from fossil fuels. The Gulfport NAACP has found success in bridging this gap by helping people to make connections between the tangible conditions in their own community to the otherwise relatively abstract idea of climate change. For example, drawing connections between coal burning at Plant Jack Watson, Hurricane Katrina, and climate change helped the community to relate their own experiences to conversations about climate justice. The branch also found that people respond to concrete data and statistics specific to their community. For example, the branch gained public interest in their community garden when they publicized the fact that there are only 1.23 grocery stores per 10,000 people in the Gulfport area.

Speaking Truth to Power

Messages about power and accountability also resonated with the Gulfport Community. When the community first learned that the Jack Watson Power Plant had earned a D- grade on the Coal Blooded Report, people quickly began to question the agencies tasked with overseeing the power plant, such as the state’s Department of Environmental Quality. Gulfport NAACP member Kathy Egland recalled, “Very quickly, that’s one thing that people picked up on—who are they protecting?” Framing the environmental injustice as a failure of government accountability galvanized the public into action, inspiring the successful post card writing campaign calling for equity in representation on the MDEQ commission. Centering themes of equity and justice proved a powerful messaging strategy for both engaging the public and inspiring change.

Key Strategic Lessons

• Do your homework, get the facts, and educate your community.
• Meet people where they are.
• Focus on shifting the narrative from the outset.
• Help people to make the critical connections and see the big picture.
Centering Impacted Communities in the Fight for Environmental and Climate Justice

Stopping Coal Burning at the Harding Street Plant

The Harding Street Coal Plant in Indianapolis, Indiana was known to be the city’s number one polluter. Estimates from the Clean Air Task Force held the plant responsible for 76 deaths, 120 heart attacks, 55 hospitalizations, and 1300 asthma attacks every year. The plant ranked 12th in the nation for dirtiest coal plant for sulfur dioxide emissions and earned an F grade for environmental justice in the NAACP Coal Blooded Report. Recognizing this reckless injustice, the Indiana State Conference of the NAACP launched a campaign to stop coal burning at the Harding Street Coal Plant in the fall of 2013. Bringing a civil rights analysis that centered the most impacted populations, the NAACP joined a powerful coalition of organizations calling for the end to coal burning at the plant and in doing so engaged new constituencies in this fight for justice. Given the disproportionate impacts of pollution from the Harding Street Plant on its base constituency, the Indiana NAACP also brought new urgency to the call to end the burning of coal. While partners were willing to negotiate for a 2020 closure, the Indiana NAACP was steadfast in its urgent demand for closure by 2016, with a provision to ensure a just transition for plant workers.

Leading up to the launch of the Just Energy Policies: Reducing Pollution and Creating Jobs campaign, The NAACP hosted a range of community forums to engage impacted community members. Together with Kheprw Institute, Concerned Clergy of Indianapolis, the Black Nurses Association of Indianapolis, and Mount Zion Baptist Church the NAACP hosted Just Energy Policies: Reducing Pollution and Creating Jobs town halls, roundtable discussions, and summits to discuss and strategize on topic such ending coal pollution in Indiana, improving energy efficiency, increasing access to clean energy, and strengthening engagement in the green economy for African American communities, particularly youth. Local service providers like Marion County Health, WorkOne Indy, and Energizing Indiana partnered to provide participants with relevant information. These discussions became the foundation for the NAACP campaign to cease the burning of coal at the Harding Street Coal Plant. This community-based strategy proved successful and led to the 2015 concession by Indianapolis Power and Light to stop coal burning the following year.

The Just Energy Campaign that Stopped HB 1320

While the ceasing of coal burning at the Harding Street Plant was a major victory for the Indiana State Conference NAACP, the struggle for energy justice proved far from over. In 2015 Indiana House Bill 1320, which sought to charge a fee for ratepayers with distributed energy generation through sources like rooftop solar, gained traction with the support of a coalition of corporate interests including utility companies and ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council). These interests uplifted the narrative that distributed energy generation drives up electricity prices and forces communities of color and low-income communities to subsidize predominantly wealthy and white rooftop solar owners. By coopting the equity frame championed by energy justice advocates in earnest and twisting facts to spread misinformation, anti-solar interests also garnered support from National Blacks in Energy and the Congressional Black Caucus.

In order to push back against the fossil fuel and utility company’s public relations machine and defeat HB 1320, the Indiana NAACP had to change the narrative surrounding distributed generation and rooftop solar. Denise Abdul-Rahman explained, “Our narrative was that we are a state organization, NAACP Indiana, and we were the only state organization representing a large community of people of color and that we believe that
“Solar is good for our communities.” To convey this truth, the Indiana NAACP mobilized their statewide membership to speak on their own behalf and in doing so challenge the false narratives purporting to represent their best interest. A group of people of color representing the NAACP assembled at the state capitol donning badges that read “Just Energy” to testify in opposition to the bill. The Indiana NAACP also held a private “Support Tax Free Net Metering” event for the Indiana Black Legislative Caucus and other selected leaders. With partners from the Alliance for Solar Choice, Citizens Action Coalition, and other the NAACP was able to advocate for the NAACP’s position on distributed generation. Through this kind of public engagement the NAACP was able to help defeat HB 1320 and also the false narrative claiming that solar is not good for communities of color.

Our Community Scientists in East Chicago

East Chicago, Indiana is a city of about 29,000 people—about 90% of which are people of color and over a third of whom live below the federal poverty line. The residents of East Chicago who surround the community’s former lead smelter plant have an even larger concentration of persons of color and people living below the poverty line than the city at large. This neighborhood was added to the Superfund National Priorities List in 2009, but it took several years for the severity and urgency of the contamination crisis to be communicated to residents. In 2016 that East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland sent residents of an East Chicago, Calumet housing complex a letter informing them they had to vacate their homes due to high levels of lead and arsenic in the soil.

The Indiana NAACP immediately responded to the gross human and civil rights violations in East Chicago, engaging with the community through listening sessions and roundtable discussions. The NAACP also responded to requests from the community with direct services and submitted letters to the governor advocating on residents behalf. Perhaps the most innovative component of this dynamic response was the launch of the “Our Youth Scientists Project.” For this community science initiative the NAACP worked with Joseph L. Block and Urban Enterprise Middle Schools in East Chicago to equip students with the materials needed to collect soil, air, and water samples in their neighborhood so they can be tested for contaminants. The NAACP then partnered with the two middle schools, Indiana State University, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the local State Senator Lonnie Randolph and the First Baptist Church to host a training where students learned how to test their samples for toxicity and how to document environmental injustice and communicate their own stories through media. Students also went home with lead testing kits, certificates of achievement, a backpack, and t-shirt. The Our Youth Scientists Project was well received among students and the broader community. It modeled a form of community-centered engagement that is consistent across the Indiana NAACP’s environmental and climate justice work.

Key Strategies and Tactics

Community Empowerment from the Ground Up

Reflecting a deep commitment to community-based organizing, one of the Indiana NAACP’s primary operating principles is to establish strong local connections. Regardless of issue area or location, the unit’s public engagement strategy intentionally targets the most impacted people in the community. “With all of the engagement aspects [across campaigns], we reach out to people on the ground first,” explained Indiana NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Chair Denise Abdul-Rahman. By centering the lived experiences of those who are directly impacted by environmental and climate injustices, the unit advances community-driven campaigns that supports bottom up organizing, shared community leadership, and neighbor-to-neighbor connections.

And while establishing strong local connections is a consistent strategy across campaigns, the approach to this process differs to reflect local specificities. In the case of the NAACP’s

“Our communities had only seen people who spoke around ‘environmentalism.’ So communities relinquished power to the environmentalists. Meanwhile there was this unknown narrative around ‘environmental justice.’ We are living in environmentally racist communities. Being in under-invested, blighted, food deserted communities, we have lack of investment in our schools, lack of clean water to drink, and lack of green grass to play on.”

- Denise Abdul-Rahman, State Chair, NAACP Indiana Environmental and Climate Justice Program.
work responding to the lead crisis in East Chicago, the state conference hired a local organizer who already had close ties to the community to ensure that their efforts successfully engaged impacted people in the community and effectively responded to their needs. When the Indiana NAACP first started exploring what an NAACP campaign to stop coal burning at the Harding Street Coal Plant in Indianapolis might look like, they started by hosting a Just Energy Town Hall at the historic Mount Zion Baptist Church. The church sits in the shadow of the Harding Street Coal Plant—within ten miles—a proximity that facilitated a deeply personal discussion of the impacts of exposure to coal pollution and ultimately inspired the successful campaign to stop coal burning at the plant. Even while organizing around state policy with the Just Energy Campaign to stop House Bill 1320, the Indiana NAACP engaged local leadership from NAACP branches across the state. NAACP members traveled from various branches to the state capitol to meet with legislators and testify publicly.

Meeting Community Needs

Another key component to the Indiana NAACP’s public engagement strategy is to employ a service-minded mentality that seeks to directly meet the needs of the impacted community. “We try to bring something to [the] community,” explained Indiana Environmental and Climate Justice Chair Denise Abdul-Rahman. “We’re not just trying to extract, and we’re not trying to use [the community] for a specific campaign and leave.”

This approach is particularly evident with the state conference’s work responding to the East Chicago lead crisis. When the crisis first occurred the Indiana NAACP immediately consulted with community members on the ground to find out what needs they had and what the NAACP could do to assist. What they found out was that lead toxicity causes brain damage in children and that the right types of fruits and vegetables could potentially help to absorb any further toxicity impacting the brain. Responding to this need, the Indiana NAACP partnered with Strack Van Til and Whole Foods grocery stores and First Baptist and Friendship Baptist churches to launch the “Food Absorbs Lead Initiative” to help supply kids in the community with free and nutritious food to help slow the impacts of lead poisoning.

The Indiana NAACP also hosted several listening sessions and round table discussions to provide an outlet for impacted community members to give voice to their experiences and express their individual and collective needs. Representatives from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Indiana Civil Rights Commission, NAACP Flint, Michigan, and Staff and Board of Directors from NAACP National all participated in some capacity in these series of events. One of the outcomes of this early public engagement with impacted community members was the development of the East Chicago Toxic Crisis Report, which provides background on the crisis, outlines community accounts of the state of affairs, unveils a community change agenda with both short and long term actions, and relates lessons learned to implications for broader systems change. As a result of these public forums, the NAACP also identified and met a need for PUR water filtration systems and lead testing kits, which the NAACP also delivered directly to those community members in need.

Changing the Face of the Environmental Movement

Even though communities of color and low-income communities have been—and continue to be—disproportionately exposed to hazardous pollution, industrial practices, and other forms of environmental degradation, the mainstream environmental movement has historically failed to understand or address this injustice. As a result, common conceptions of “environmentalists” center the narratives and images of mostly middle-upper class, mostly white people. One of the goals of the Indiana NAACP is to challenge those misconceptions. Engaging NAACP members in legislative advocacy from environmental justice is a simple, yet deeply impacting, means of doing so. Environmental and Climate Justice Chair Denise Abdul-Rahman explained, “With HB 1320 we brought people from the community to speak to [then Representative] Eric Koch, people of color, that are almost never in the state house, especially when it comes to environmental and energy related decisions.” The Indiana NAACP also utilizes social media to shift public perception. Social media provides a platform to amplify the voices of NAACP members who are advocating for environmental and climate justice while also engaging the public more broadly. “I think that that was a stark difference, because we continued to show people of color in videos and pictures holding signs [advocating for environmental issues] and so that was probably sort-of a game changer too,” Abdul-Rahman reflected.
Effective Messages and Framing

*The Personal is Political*

The NAACP shifts dominant narratives about environmental issues not just by taking a stand on these issues alone, but also by framing them in new ways. A powerful way that the Indiana NAACP has been able to transform environmental advocacy and engage new constituencies in environmental and climate justice is by drawing personal connections that people in the community can relate to. When the NAACP talks about transitioning to solar power, for example, instead of just talking about the benefits in terms of emissions they also speak to the tangible ways that it can make a community healthier or benefit household wealth. “We share the connections, like the increased cost of energy because our communities [tend to] live in older housing stock,” explains Indiana Environmental Justice Chair Denise Abdul-Rahman. “I always say, big mama doesn’t want to turn on her air conditioning and so we have to be concerned about her having heat stroke—or the babies having heat exhaustion. We have to heighten our consciousness around that as a community and we need to advocate for heating stations and cooling stations. But we also have to advocate against policies or for programs and policies.”

Environmental issues are also made personal when related to the various other social issues that intimately impact communities of color, such as mass incarceration and economic inequality. Therefore—a conversation about the green jobs is not only about jobs, but also includes ideas about how we can put returning citizens into an apprenticeship so that they benefit from the green economy. Through these new frames, the Indiana NAACP not only broadens stakeholder awareness of environmental issues but also repositions the movement as multiracial, multi-sector, and deeply personal.

**Key Strategic Lessons**

- Build strong local connections and move with the culture of the community.
- Prioritize engagement of most impacted people.
- Make connections to make it personal.
At the end of the 2015 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation instituting a two-year moratorium on hydraulic fracturing or fracking—a resource intensive process of drilling for natural gas. The moratorium responded to an outcry from anti-fracking advocates who voiced numerous concerns including the potential for ground and surface water contamination, air quality problems, and public health concerns associated with fracking. The state was not host to any fracking sites at the time, but the drilling industry had proposed drilling and fracking the Marcellus shale in Garrett and Allegany counties in western Maryland and was eyeing gas deposits in other basins throughout the state. According to the legislation, the state was prohibited from issuing a permit to frack prior to October 1, 2017 and established a study group to review the emerging research on both the environmental, public health, and economic effects of fracking in Maryland.

While the moratorium temporarily kept fracking out of Maryland, the legislation left a small window for advocates to organize to ban fracking in Maryland for good. Over the course of two years a powerful coalition including environmental, faith, and civil rights activists worked together to organize a grassroots campaign that resulted in the Maryland Senate passing a statewide fracking ban bill, HB 1325, by a vote of 35 to 10. The state became the first in the nation to legislatively ban fracking, a historic victory that the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP played an integral role in achieving. Building power on the state and local level, the Maryland State Conference engaged NAACP members and other allies from across the state in the campaign to ban fracking. Emphasizing the disproportionate impact that fracking would bear on low income and communities of color, the NAACP brought a social and environmental justice narrative to the campaign to ban fracking that engaged new advocates to the cause. Through a range of tactics, the NAACP and their allies organized a grassroots campaign to pass the statewide ban on fracking. Brooke Harper, Environmental Justice Chair of the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP, remarked in reflection, “We have built an unprecedented environmental movement in Maryland that would not have been possible without all of those who lobbied, marched and those who risked arrest to say we will not compromise on our health, our communities, and a frack-free future for Maryland.”

Key Strategies and Tactics

Education and Base Building

Primary to the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP’s strategy to build power against fracking in Maryland was to educate their membership on the issue so that each branch could take action on their own community’s behalf. Leadership from the Maryland State Conference’s Environmental and Climate Justice Committee worked with NAACP branches across the state, facilitating educational trainings, presentations, and film screenings to educate NAACP members and the broader public about the issue of fracking in Maryland. In addition to providing more information about fracking and its negative implications, the Maryland NAACP also helped to educate community members...
Building Local Power

The Maryland State Conference of the NAACP advocated for fracking bans on the state and local level. Prior to the legislative session the NAACP helped to pass local fracking bans and resolutions across Maryland in support of a statewide fracking ban. This strategy was effective not only in building momentum going into the legislative session, but also in challenging false narratives spread by pro-industry interests. At the time state legislators, particularly those from areas with high fracking potential, were spreading false narratives about the economic benefits fracking would bring the communities they represent, including the support it would give local farmers and land owners. These talking points neglected to acknowledge the growing resistance to fracking that existed in these communities.

The NAACP recognized a need to mobilize the citizens of Western Maryland, who were on the frontlines of fracking proposals from the oil and gas industry. In order to counter false narratives spread by the fossil fuel industry and its allies, it was crucial to engage a broad cross-section of the public in order to demonstrate the community’s opposition to fracking. The Allegany County NAACP played a pivotal role in this process. Leaders from the Allegany County NAACP arranged for educational meetings with membership, mobilized members to sign onto petitions, attended press conferences, rallies, and spoke publicly on behalf of the NAACP to implore the Frostburg City Council to pass a ban on fracking. Alongside a robust community organizing effort the Frostburg City Council passed a fracking ban. This bold local action sent shockwaves downstate and to the halls of the Capitol as Frostburg was the largest municipality in Allegany County to pass a fracking ban. Councilman Eugene Frazier, who is also a member of the Allegany County NAACP branch, helped to spur a similar effort in Cumberland—the second largest municipality in Allegany County. The Maryland NAACP also worked with municipalities across the state to pass resolutions or bans in across the state beyond Western Maryland. These local actions helped to build a statewide movement to ban fracking when the legislative session began.
Pursuing Diverse Engagement Tactics

Another component of the Maryland NAACP’s successes in mobilizing its constituents in the fight against fracking was the practice of pursuing a diversity of tactics. Leading up to the legislative session the NAACP invested in base building through community education and built grassroots power by advocating against fracking on the local level. By the time of the legislative session a broad coalition had come together to push for a statewide fracking ban as the moratorium expired. NAACP members met with their representatives and marched in the streets of the state capital and NAACP Maryland State Conference President Gerald Stansbury was a keynote speaker at the rally. The NAACP staged a sit-in at the state house steps with faith leaders, Western Maryland landowners, and other allies. The civil disobedience resulted in multiple arrests, sending a strong message to decision makers. The day following the civil disobedience, Governor Hogan announced his support for the fracking ban and the Senate passed the bill into the law making Maryland the first state to legislatively ban fracking.

Effective Messages and Framing

Inequities and Disproportionate Impacts

The Maryland NAACP brought a social and environmental justice narrative to the fracking ban campaign, emphasizing disproportionate impacts and highlighting inequities. In order to do so, they researched how fracking would impact communities across the state and found that low-income and communities of color would bear the brunt of the burden of fracking. They found that these communities were more likely to host drilling and fracking sites and have fracking infrastructure near their homes and schools. The NAACP elevated this messaging throughout the campaign: when educating NAACP members on the issue, while conducting outreach to the general public, and while lobbying on behalf of fracking ban on the state and local levels.

Key Strategic Lessons

- Commit to your base.
- Build local power to pass state policy.
- Pursue diverse engagement tactics.
In the spring of 2017 four NAACP Presidents representing Oregon’s four NAACP Branches called a press conference at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem, Oregon. Joined by NAACP members from across the state participating in the annual NAACP Lobby Day, the NAACP leaders announced the release of the Oregon Just Energy Policies: Reducing Pollution and Creating Jobs report. In part, the report challenged Oregon’s reputation as a leader in progressive environmental policy, stating, “The NAACP applauds this leadership but we are also committed to ensuring that the benefits of clean energy are felt by all—especially those who have borne the brunt of the fossil fuel economy and are most directly impacted by climate change.”

Jo Ann Hardesty, who was President of the Portland, Oregon NAACP branch at the time, spoke on behalf of the report at the press conference. “What we believe is that middle-class and upper-middle-class white communities are really taking advantage of this new emerging [green] economy,” she said. “And if we don’t now develop a pathway for people of color, low-income people, people coming back from our prisons, to be able to be trained in this new economy, once again we will be left behind.” Following the press conference NAACP members from all four Oregon branches distributed the report to lawmakers and branch Presidents met with the Governor Kate Brown to share their desire to work with her and the legislature to assess who benefits from the new energy economy in Oregon.

And while the release of the Just Energy report signaled the beginning of environmental and climate justice advocacy for the NAACP on the state level in Oregon, the NAACP Portland was already building power towards these aims on the local level as a founding member of the Portland Just Energy Coalition. Along with NAACP Portland, the coalition is made up of primarily person-of-color led, community-based organizations, including The Coalition of Communities of Color, Verde, APANO (Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon), NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center), 350 PDX, and the Sierra Club. NAACP Portland played a central role in convening the coalition, which came together with goal of developing an action plan for a just transition to clean and renewable energy that positions the communities most impacted by climate change—namely people of color and low-income communities—in the lead.

Actualizing this community-lead vision, the coalition worked together to craft a measure for a just, clean energy future that fights climate change while also addressing social and economic inequality. If the measure is passed, The Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF) initiative will generate $30 million annually to weatherize homes, build rooftop solar, provide job training, grow local food production, and fund green infrastructure—with low-income households and people of color first to receive these benefits. By investing in the leadership of the most impacted populations and advancing a vision for climate justice that unapologetically positions equity at the core, the Portland NAACP unit has helped to build a powerful, community-based movement for climate justice.
Key Strategies and Tactics

Positioning Impacted Communities as Leaders

From the outset, the Portland NAACP unit’s operated under the premise that for impacted communities to benefit from climate policy than they must be the ones to shape it. In order to determine who else to engage in this process they considered questions like, who are the people on the frontlines today? Who are the people who are suffering from the impacts of climate change? Who are the least likely to have a seat at the table?

“We were very intentional about who we wanted as the core group and then we went out and encouraged partnerships,” reflected Jo Ann Hardesty, who was the President of NAACP Portland at the time. “Our core value was about building power in communities of color to really control their destiny.” Through a slow and intentional process, the Portland NAACP unit helped to build a powerful coalition of community-based organizations representing diverse constituencies often left out discussions about climate policy. In the past mainstream environmental organizations went through the process of developing policy solutions and then sought the support of communities of color once the policy was already shaped. In contrast, the NAACP’s work with the Portland Just Transition Coalition meaningfully engaged communities of color from the start. The coalition was slow and intentional throughout this process, taking the time to develop a shared language and understanding around concepts like just transition and the new green economy. Positioning themselves as the necessary leaders in the fight for climate justice and speaking on their own behalf, the membership and constituencies from these diverse groups worked together to determine what needs existed within their communities and what a policy solution would look like and require.

Base-Building and Leadership Development

The Just Transition Coalition was not only intentional about bringing the right people to the table, but also ensuring that the process through which they worked was not transactional in nature but one that built real power for the organizations and the communities they represent. In order to do so, the group worked at a slow pace and took the time to educate themselves and one another on the political process so that they could remain in the drivers seat. “The approach we’ve taken, is to slow down to actually do trainings on what does it mean when you say, a ballot measure campaign? What is a campaign? How do you put a campaign together? What are the components?” reflected Jo Ann Hardesty, who represents the NAACP in the coalition. “The goal, again, was for us to be united in a coalition that really had a shared vision.”

The outcome of this investment in base-building and leadership development was a methodical two-year process that resulted in the successful launch of the Portland Clean Energy Fund Initiative in the Spring of 2018. NAACP members were actively involved in every step of the process: playing a role in writing the measure, meeting with city council members and other public officials, educating the broader community about the Portland Clean Energy Fund, and participating in the signature collection process as volunteers. The justice and people-centered vision that the initiative supports has garnered broad public support. There are over 100 faith institutions, elected officials, labor unions, neighborhood associations, and businesses who endorsed the measure and the campaign is well on it’s way to collecting the necessary signatures to qualify for the November Ballot by the July 6th deadline. “What I know is that if you organize your community and have the community who is most impacted be the advocates you can do incredible things,” remarked Jo Ann Hardesty of the Portland NAACP. “We’ve done a great job of actually building community support.”

Effective Messages and Framing

Who Benefits?

One of the most common narratives leveraged by opponents to climate legislation is that these measures will burden low income people and people of color. The argument goes that by taxing businesses the price of goods will go up and hurt consumers. Rather than shying away from this critique the Portland NAACP and their allies faced it head on. NAACP member Jo Ann Hardesty explained, “We incorporated what we knew would be the push back…we didn’t back away from who we prioritize—who
this measure is meant to benefit.” The campaign pitch leads with, “Low-income households and people of color will be first to receive benefits from the Portland Clean Energy Fund since they are first and worst impacted by climate change. Portlanders who need it most will receive energy efficiency housing upgrades and job training to address historic inequities.”

The Urgency of Local Action

Another effective message that the NAACP uses to promote The Portland Clean Energy Fund is the urgency of local action. At a time when any hope of federal action on climate change seems near impossible, the opportunity to take meaningful action on the local level offers some level of progress. When talking about the campaign with the average Portlander, NAACP members say, “Right now we cannot depend on the federal government to fund a green economy and resiliency to climate change. We cannot wait. It’s up to us.” Not only does this messaging emphasize the necessity of local policy solutions, but it also positions Portland as a national leader in a time when many are unsatisfied with the leadership of state and federal officials.

Key Strategic Lessons

- Position impacted communities as leaders.
- Invest in base-building and leadership development.
- Be explicit about who benefits and who doesn’t.

“We know that communities of color are on the frontlines of climate degradation. We developed a coalition which addressed economic justice and which led with race in a very white state and built support from traditional enviros and others with communities of color leading the effort. It took us two years to organize this effort. We sat together and taught our members and volunteers how to be proactive. We wanted the community to lead and we needed to take the time to educate because we couldn’t even begin to take action until they were knowledgeable.”

- JoAnn Hardesty
Legacies of segregation and racist housing policies remain legible in the layout of cities across the United States to this day. Among the patterns of social and environmental inequalities produced by residential segregation, dirty energy infrastructure is often located in close proximity to communities of color. African American communities are disproportionately impacted by coal-fired power plants—arguably the dirtiest method of energy production. Air pollution produced by coal emissions is linked with a range of severe environmental and public health impacts including cancer, asthma, heart and lung ailments, and neurological problems.

The Hillside community in Colorado Springs, Colorado sits in the shadow of the coal-burning Martin Drake Power Plant. In the past, racially restrictive neighborhood covenants limited the areas where African Americans could live, and Hillside was one of the few neighborhoods where African American households could live without restriction. This neighborhood, which sits directly adjacent to the Martin Drake Power Plant, has a higher concentration of people of color than other parts of Colorado Springs. According to the NAACP Coal Blooded: Putting Profits before People report, which gave the Martin Drake Power Plant an “F” grade for environmental justice, 26.6% of the population living within three miles of the Martin Drake Power Plant are people of color.

Recognizing the blatant environmental injustice posed by the Martin Drake Power Plant, the Rocky Mountain State Area Conference of the NAACP first began talking in earnest about the need to shut down the plant in 2009. The conversations began among NAACP members, who shared their personal experiences of living in the path of the power plant, and evolved into a sophisticated campaign that mobilized the most affected people in the fight for clean air and environmental justice. Centering the voices and experiences of community members directly affected by the coal pollution, the NAACP played a critical role in successfully pressuring the Colorado Springs Utilities Board to stop coal burning and shutter the Martin Drake Power Plant.

**Key Strategies and Tactics**

**Centering Critical Community Voices**

One of the most powerful components of the Colorado NAACP’s work organizing for the closure of the Martin Drake Power Plant was the centering of community voices that could speak credibly about the impact of coal pollution on communities living in close proximity to the plant. When the NAACP first began discussions surrounding the Martin Drake Power Plant, conflicting narratives caused confusion among NAACP members. Many had bought into the idea that economic opportunities associated with polluting industries outweigh other social and environmental impacts. Utility companies with a vested interest in maintaining the dirty energy status quo spread misinformation that discredited clean energy and implied that communities of color would be negatively impacted by transitioning energy sources. Meanwhile, the messages used by environmental organizations...
to talk about the implications didn’t resonate with the community. With a whole range of conflicting and often inaccurate or incomplete information about the fossil fuel industry, coal pollution, and the Martin Drake Power Plant circulating in the public discourse, the perspectives of credible community members became an invaluable asset.

Mary Lou Bland, a lifetime NAACP member and a longtime resident of the Hillside neighborhood spoke plainly and clearly to people in the community about her personal experience living in close proximity to the Martin Drake Power Plant. “When she talked, people listened because she was a respected messenger and community member,” reflected Rosemary Harris Lytle, President of the Rocky Mountain State Area Conference NAACP. Bland was not only a credible community voice, but her stories were relatable and helped other community members make connections to their own lived experiences. This proved a powerful, galvanizing force for engaging community members. People in the NAACP and broader community started to educate themselves about coal pollution and evolved their understanding of the issue as one revolving around social justice and civil rights.

Community Outreach & Education
Once they adopted a strong stance in opposition to coal burning at the Martin Drake Power Plant, the Rocky Mountain NAACP became fierce advocates for the interests of the most impacted people. The NAACP engaged people living in close proximity to the coal plant, communities of color, faith leaders, youth, and other impacted populations in their local Coal Blooded campaign. They brought the community together to discuss their experiences living in the shadow of the power plant and hosted events for the public about the impact of the power plant on the Hillside neighborhood.

NAACP members gave presentations for fraternity and sorority groups in the area and at Colorado Springs’ historically black churches—four of the five of which are located in the Hillside neighborhood. Each month an NAACP member would attend the local utility board meetings to express concern over the impact of coal pollution on the community and share community member’s stories. After the Coal Blooded report came out and gave the Martin Drake Power Plant an “F” grade NAACP members showed up at the utility meetings waving signs marked “F!” Every time a hearing would take place, NAACP members would show up to testify on the community’s behalf. “If we’re not present, our interest won’t be known or cared about,” said Rosemary Harris Lytle, President of the Rocky Mountain State Area Conference NAACP. Through targeted and consistent community outreach, the NAACP was able to engage new constituencies in the fight for climate and environmental justice and in doing so change the narrative around coal burning in Colorado Springs.

Effective Messages and Framing

People-Centered Narratives
The NAACP mobilized previously unengaged people in the fight to shut down Martin Drake Power Plant by telling people-centered stories that reflected the lived experiences of the most impacted people. When the NAACP first started hosting conversations around coal pollution they invited activists from conventional environmental organizations to discuss their organizing around the Martin Drake Power Plant. These groups, which are predominantly white, approached the issue in ways that often didn’t resonate with NAACP members or reflect their community’s experiences. The NAACP base didn’t understand why they were spending their time talking about coal or what it had to do with the NAACP’s civil rights mission. It wasn’t until those living in close proximity to the power plant spoke on their own behalf and discussed the impact that coal pollution has on communities of color compared to other groups that the base was propelled into action. These people-centered narratives not only engaged stakeholders in the campaign, but also were influential in ultimately pushing key decision makers to vote to close the power plant.

Key Strategic Lessons

- Center credible community voices and their lived-experiences.
- Pursue targeted and consistent community outreach to educate the community.