

Identifying Representatives of Frontline Communities

FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OR NON-PROFITS WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ON CLIMATE RESILIENCE PLANNING

Partners Advancing Climate Equity defines “frontline communities” as historically marginalized communities that experience the first and worst consequences of climate change and other injustices. This vulnerability is well known in the climate resilience field.

In 2021 the EPA released a useful analysis “[*Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts*](#)” identifying 4 groups particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change:

- ▶ **Low-Income:** Individuals living in households with income that is 200% of the poverty level or lower.
- ▶ **Minority:** Individuals identifying as one or more of the following: Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Other; and Hispanic or Latino.
- ▶ **No High School Diploma:** Individuals aged 25 or older with no high school diploma or equivalent.
- ▶ **65 and Older:** Individuals aged 65 and older.

! *Beyond these 4 categories, you may have other groups to consider in your community, such as people with disabilities and families with young children.*

Not only are these folks more exposed to climate change impacts due to the places they live and types of work they do, they also have fewer resources to adapt to these impacts. As a result, frontline communities should be afforded the highest priority in a community’s climate resilience planning efforts, and bona fide leaders and representatives of these groups must be included at the start of the decision-making process - not invited after the process is in motion. A planning process that is informed by frontline representatives in the beginning will help avoid approaches that reinforce the very systemic issues that make a population vulnerable. In addition, including those who are experiencing these impacts can inform solutions in ways that others cannot. This participation goes beyond community outreach, where the results of a planning process are communicated to members of a community, including frontline groups.

Identifying representatives and leaders can be a challenge, especially if participation by frontline communities has not been common practice. Pre-existing relationships and trust between such groups and local government are often lacking. While it can take months or longer to establish relationships, investing the time and money necessary to ensure frontline community participation is critical to an equitable planning process.

It will be important to understand that this process can bring up unresolved issues in a community. There may be people who still feel anger, pain, resentment, frustration, or sadness at the way they were treated, dismissed, ignored, or otherwise forgotten about in previous efforts. While events of the past cannot be changed, use this as an opportunity to both acknowledge the wrongdoings of the past and show how this climate resilience planning process will be different.

Help connect climate change impacts to their daily, immediate needs so that it’s not an abstract exercise. At the same time, acknowledge that community members are experts in their own lived experiences and know best how climate is impacting their community. Ask for their participation in the task force and workshops and compensate people financially for their time. It’s so important to plan ahead for this critically necessary funding.



Small Group Network via Unsplash

Following are several techniques for identifying frontline representatives:

- ▶ **Form a Focused Committee:** When the timing and available resources allow, help catalyze the formation of an independent, ongoing committee that is focused on equity issues and comprised of frontline community members, such as the Racial and Environmental Justice Committee that was formed in Providence, RI. This committee can then help identify frontline representatives for a climate resilience planning process that follows.
- ▶ **Find Informal Leaders:** Look for civic and neighborhood leaders who people trust and turn to for information. They may or may not hold an elected office or other formal leadership position.
- ▶ **Identify Invested Individuals:** During public community and local government meetings, identify the individuals who are most engaged (in a productive manner)
- ▶ **Identify Representative Groups:** Attend community or local NGO meetings that focus on neighborhoods or underserved or vulnerable groups. Once trust is established, and it may take attending several meetings, ask about potential frontline representatives; be clear about what you're offering in terms of support to address their concerns
- ▶ **Connect with other agencies:** Inquire with social services agencies of the city, county, and state. Also ask local economic development, parks and recreation departments, and others whose mission includes community engagement; these folks will often have suggestions for who may be willing to represent frontline groups
- ▶ **Ask All Stakeholders:** During initial stakeholder interviews, before the official climate resilience planning process begins, ask for suggestions on who could be an effective representative for communities that experience the first and worst consequences of climate change
- ▶ **Find Proxies Where Needed:** When representatives directly from the affected groups are not available, such as with individuals experiencing homelessness, consider finding a proxy. Look for leaders with community-based organizations such as food banks, shelters, or senior centers that are focused on serving the health, food, and other needs of these groups



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In the months before a climate resilience planning process begins:



- ▶ Begin establishing new or strengthening existing relationships to identify the available frontline participants, and/or establish a plan for doing so
- ▶ Assess your own organization's hiring practices to increase diversity and inclusion internally
- ▶ Develop funding sources to cover stipends and other expenses, such as transportation or childcare, that will enable participation by these participants

For a local government or other entity considering a climate resilience planning effort, these are three of the most important steps to take in advance because they enable so many of the methods mentioned above.