

A Summary of EPN's Special Webinar From Friday, Juneteenth, 2020

Public Health in the Time of COVID-19, Racism, and Deregulation

EPN member Mustafa Santiago Ali discussed the historical public health inequities imposed on communities of color and lower-wealth communities and how COVID-19, racism, and deregulation are exacerbating them. EPN member Lynn Goldman, M.D., also contributed to the presentation. (Information on presenters is below.)

The disproportionately high numbers of people of color dying from COVID-19 can be traced back to centuries of systemic racism, but is more directly tied to the also disproportionate amount of air pollution in frontline communities. For decades, fossil fuel facilities, highways, and factories have been placed in or near communities of color and lower-wealth communities, leading to levels of air pollution that have aggravated residents' health problems and made them more susceptible to respiratory ailments like COVID-19. Frontline communities also often lack financial resources, medical and health care resources, citizen and immigration status, proficiency in English, personal transportation, and more. All of this compounds the impacts of pollution and makes it difficult to access proper medical advice and treatment.

In addition, the policies of the Trump administration are exacerbating the social and racial inequities that have existed for centuries. The administration's rollbacks and suspended enforcement of environmental protections are increasing the disproportionate pollution burdens on environmental justice communities, and the influx of pollution adds to high COVID-19 mortality rates. Vulnerable communities are now "sacrifice zones."

For EPA to move forward, the agency and its workforce must represent the people it is protecting. It must also increase communication and transparency with the communities it serves. This includes fully engaging with young people and ensuring that people from frontline communities are being heard and given a chance to participate and lead conversations concerning their health.

Presenters

Mustafa Santiago Ali, Senior Vice President for Environmental Justice at the National Wildlife Federation, and former Senior Advisor for Environmental Justice and Community Revitalization and Assistant Associate Administrator for Environmental Justice at EPA.

Lynn Goldman, M.D., Dean of the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University and former Assistant Administrator for Toxic Substances at EPA.