

**BRIEF** SEPTEMBER 2024

# AT THE CROSSROADS OF CLIMATE AND HOUSING JUSTICE

Field Scan and Needs Assessment

Authored by Miriam Zuk, Ph.D., Idalmis Vaquero, Zully Juarez, MURP., and Lin Chin



Over the last few years, there have been significant investments to address climate change and improve U.S. infrastructure, such as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021. Although historic in their reach, the laws are insufficient to meet the climate justice and housing needs of the moment. Earlier this summer, Just Solutions released the first brief from the Housing and Climate Equity series. It took a deep dive into two federally funded programs from the IRA and IIJA that directly benefit EJ communities and low-income tenants: the Green and Resilient Retrofit Program (GRRP) and Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) and concludes that the two programs alone are still not sufficient to meet the needs of housing and climate justice.

In this second brief, we embarked on a landscape scan and needs assessment by interviewing thirteen EJ leaders, including three from grassroots organizations and ten from grassroots advocacy and coalition organizations. This brief takes a bottom-up approach to assess the innovative practices at the intersection of climate and housing justice emerging from environmental justice (EJ) organizations and the needs on the ground to amplify this crucial work.

Shining a light on the just path forward.

[justsolutionscollective.org](https://justsolutionscollective.org)



@Just\_Solutions\_



@just-solutions-collective



JustSolutionsOrg



@justsolutions\_org



# About Just Solutions

---

Just Solutions is a BIPOC-led organization working to broaden and deepen the understanding of equitable and effective policies and programs to support the priorities of environmental justice organizations to define, innovate, replicate, and scale their solutions to the climate crisis. We do this work by: identifying and coalescing leading community-created policy solutions; conducting requested, relevant, comprehensive, and accessible policy analysis and research; organizing peer learning, foundational educational programming, space for states to share and strategize; and providing financial support for expertise, ideation and participation.

# About Ground Works Consulting

---

Ground Works Consulting works at the intersection of community power-building and community development. We partner with communities to advance health equity, climate justice, and shared prosperity with a focus on housing justice and community development systems. We believe that communities can achieve more healthy and equitable futures through an honest reckoning with all forms of inequity, particularly structural racism. Operating between big vision and implementation, we work with a wide range of communities and leaders to transform aspirational ideas into positive community outcomes.

## Authors

**Miriam Zuk, Ph.D. - Ground Works Consulting**

Partner

**Idalmis Vaquero - Just Solutions**

Senior Policy Analyst

**Zully Juarez, MURP. - Just Solutions**

Senior Research & Policy Analyst

**Lin Chin - Ground Works Consulting**

Partner



# Table of Contents

---

- 4 Introduction**
- 5 Housing and Climate Justice Practice Scan**
  - Building decarbonization and healthy homes
    - Targeting retrofit resources
    - Passing building performance and healthy homes standards
    - Demand side approaches to healthy homes
    - Protecting tenants from renovations
    - Green social housing
  - Accelerating a Just Transition and Relieving Energy Burden
    - Rooftop and Community Solar
    - Utility Justice
  - Neighborhood-level decarbonization and resilience
    - Disaster Recovery and Adaptation
    - Neighborhood Resilience and Decarbonization
    - Land Use and Transit-Oriented Development
- 9 Ongoing Challenges and Needs to Advance Housing and Climate Justice**
- 10 Conclusions**
- 11 Acknowledgments**



# Introduction

Ensuring the well-being of people, their homes, and the environment is increasingly important in the context of the climate crisis. The connections between housing and climate justice are vast,<sup>1</sup> and in these critical times, the climate and housing justice movement provides opportunities for lasting impact for frontline communities. This brief takes a bottom-up approach to assess the innovative practices at the intersection of climate and housing justice emerging from environmental justice (EJ) organizations and the needs on the ground to amplify this crucial work.

Over the last few years, there have been significant investments to address climate change and improve U.S. infrastructure, such as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021. Although historic in their reach, the laws are insufficient to meet the climate justice and housing needs of the moment.<sup>2</sup> Earlier this summer, Just Solutions released the [first brief](#) from the Housing and Climate Equity series. It took a deep dive into two federally funded programs from the IRA and IIJA that directly benefit EJ communities and low-income tenants: the Green and Resilient Retrofit Program (GRRP) and Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) and concludes that the two programs alone are still not sufficient to meet the needs of housing and climate justice.

In this second brief, we embarked on a landscape scan and needs assessment by interviewing thirteen EJ leaders, including three from grassroots organizations and ten from grassroots advocacy and coalition organizations, including two from the East Coast, one from the Midwest, five from the West Coast, one from the Mountain Region, and two from the South.<sup>3</sup>

EJ organizations are working on a wide range of programs and policies at the intersection of housing and climate justice, from working in coalitions to advocate for specific policies and programs to monitoring, outreach, and engagement around implementation. This brief highlights many examples of this work across the following categories:

- *Building decarbonization and healthy homes*
- *Accelerating energy transition and relieving energy burden*
- *Neighborhood-level decarbonization and resilience*

While tremendous work is underway at the intersection of housing and climate justice, many challenges remain. This brief concludes with recommended investments in 1) technical assistance and research, 2) movement support, and 3) toolkits and popular

<sup>1</sup> Just Solutions, "[Housing & Climate Equity: Analysis on climate and housing policies that benefit environmental justice communities and low-income tenants](#)". 2024

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> See the Acknowledgements section for the list of interviewees and their organizations.

education materials to unlock the potential of the work and ensure more healthy, stable, and resilient homes for EJ communities.

# Housing and Climate Justice Practice Scan

## *Building decarbonization and healthy homes*

Building decarbonization is a burgeoning field, and most environmental justice organizations interviewed were engaged in efforts to ensure that funding and programs to retrofit homes are designed to benefit low-income households, across a range of activities such as:

- Targeting retrofit resources
- Passing building performance and healthy homes standards
- Demand side approaches to healthy homes
- Protecting tenants from "renovictions"
- Green social housing

### Targeting Retrofit Resources

As more programs and resources become available to retrofit and decarbonize homes, EJ organizations are working to ensure that resources are targeted to low-income households and people living in rental housing to ensure they can also benefit. California established an [Equitable Building Decarbonization program](#) that provides low to no-cost retrofits for low-income homeowners and multi-family buildings that rent to low-income households, as well as a statewide incentive program, for which 50% of the resources will be targeted to under-resourced communities.<sup>4</sup> Other states have similarly passed legislation and built targeted retrofitting programs and funds, such as Oregon's [Healthy Homes Program](#). EJ activists in Washington DC, recently won the passage of the [Healthy Homes Act](#), to install electric appliances for low and moderate-income households. Finally, many activists are looking to Pennsylvania's [Whole Home Repair Program](#) as an inspiring framework to make homes healthy and safe (e.g., mold cleanup, installing cooling to withstand extreme heat, lead remediation, etc.) on top of decarbonization.

### Passing Building Performance and Healthy Homes Standards

Incentivizing building owners to decarbonize their properties voluntarily could bypass many low-income households, especially renters, keeping them from experiencing the health benefits of cleaner technologies. A number of EJ organizations are working to

<sup>4</sup> As designated by the state's [CalEnviroScreen](#) neighborhood classification system





pass building performance standards that would require property owners to upgrade their buildings. The first of its kind, New York City’s Dirty Buildings Law, [Local Law 97](#), requires large buildings to meet energy efficiency and greenhouse gas emissions standards. Other large cities are trying to follow, including Portland, where Verde and the Coalition of Communities of Color have been working with the City to develop [HEART standards](#), including energy efficiency, indoor air quality, and minimum/maximum indoor temperature standards, among other performance measures.

## Demand Side Approaches to Healthy Homes

Many community-based organizations are engaged in outreach and education to ensure that their members, be they homeowners or renters, know about the health hazards of gas-powered appliances and the benefits of decarbonization to ensure that low-income households know about and benefit from new policies and programs. In DC and Maryland, Interfaith Power and Light has partnered with Sierra Club and Washington Interfaith Network in the [Beyond Gas](#) coalition, which involves indoor air quality testing and media campaigns to increase awareness about the harmful pollutants of gas-powered appliances and HVAC systems.

## Protecting tenants from “renovictions”

For places with building performance standards or suffering from the affordable housing crisis for generations, activists have been working to ensure that decarbonization efforts do not negatively impact tenants by increasing housing costs via pass-throughs or “renovictions” and forced displacement. In Los Angeles, SAJE and partners in the [LA for Resilient and Healthy Homes](#) coalition are working to close loopholes in the City’s rent control policies that allow landlords to pass through retrofit costs in rent-stabilized properties while also strengthening construction regulations to ensure retrofits can’t lead to harassment and “soft evictions.” In 2021, Inglewood, CA, updated its rent stabilization ordinance to close the substantial remodel eviction loophole and require relocation of tenants during renovations. Many of these efforts are outlined in SAJE’s [Decarbonizing California Equitably](#) report. Furthermore, the Climate and Community Project’s report, [Decarbonization without Displacement](#), provides advocacy ideas to strengthen IRA implementation while protecting renters.

## Green Social Housing

One area of emerging work that could pertain to new and existing buildings is the development of the Green Social Housing concept. The social housing movement has been gaining momentum among tenants’ rights advocates looking for affirmative solutions on top of their ongoing work to stop displacement and minimize harm to tenants and low-income households. Building on this paradigm, groups like the California [Green New Deal Coalition](#) are beginning to work on models and campaigns to build a stable, affordable, and sustainable housing system.



## Accelerating a Just Transition and Relieving Energy Burden

Many environmental justice groups advocate against “false solutions” such as carbon capture and net zero requirements that would continue reliance on fossil fuels and, where building standards are in place, would allow buildings to opt out of upgrades. Furthermore, as more buildings electrify and peak electricity demand increases, many EJ organizations are working to ensure that decarbonization doesn’t result in increased operations of fossil fuel power plants, especially [gas peakers](#). As such, decommissioning and fighting against fossil fuel power plant expansion, a long staple of environmental justice fights, is getting a new wind in the climate justice fights of the modern day. Similarly, EJ organizations continue to advocate for transitioning power in their states to be 100% renewable and clean (e.g., Oregon’s 100% Clean Energy for All [House Bill 2021](#)). Additional work in this realm includes advancing community and rooftop solar and utility justice work to reduce the energy burden of low-income households, as [energy burden reduction plays an integral part in the clean energy transition](#).

### Rooftop and Community Solar

Many EJ organizations are working to expand access to solar power in their communities. In California, the [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#) (CEJA) and others successfully fought for the creation of the [Solar on Multifamily Affordable Housing \(SOMAH\)](#) incentive program, which many EJ groups, such as the [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#) (APEN), are engaged in implementing through outreach and community engagement. Additionally, grassroots and EJ groups nationwide are entering the rooftop solar business. For instance, [We Stay / Nos Quedamos](#) is developing rooftop and deployable solar and battery projects in the South Bronx, NY, and [Grow Solar Highland Park-Detroit](#) has been working to increase energy independence through a bulk purchasing program to make going solar more affordable. Finally, many organizations are working on community-owned solar, to create clean sources of energy that they collectively own in their communities. Through the REVitalize collaborative, the [NYC Environmental Justice Alliance](#) supports partners in developing plans, conducting baseline research, and working with public agencies to dismantle regulatory barriers to community-owned renewable energy projects.

### Utility Justice

Despite the promises of higher-efficiency electric appliances, [European research](#) shows that building retrofits and upgrades may not reduce utility cost burden. Furthermore, the [split incentive](#) of property owners means that benefits do not always reach renter households. Given the [high rate of energy burden](#) impacting BIPOC and low-income households, many EJ organizations try to tackle these injustices directly by working to reduce or subsidize energy costs for EJ communities. In Oregon, the Coalition of Communities of Color worked in a coalition to pass the Energy Affordability Act ([House Bill 2475](#)) that allows the Public Utilities Commission to make classifications and rates based on environmental justice considerations of customers. Furthermore, they’re pushing the utilities to do better at community engagement in their planning and investments.

## Neighborhood-level decarbonization and resilience

Acknowledging the harm that siloing issues and sectors can cause to the environment and society, many EJ leaders situate housing justice within a larger context of neighborhood and environmental resilience and sustainability. For many, a home expands beyond the physical walls of a building and extends into the neighborhood and community. At the neighborhood level, EJ organizations are engaged in a range of activities at the intersection of housing and climate justice, including:

- Disaster recovery and adaptation
- Neighborhood resilience and decarbonization, and
- Land use and transit-oriented development

### Disaster Recovery and Adaptation

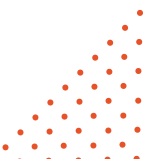
Environmental justice organizations have been at the helm of disaster recovery efforts, as the negative impacts of climate disasters disproportionately impact their communities. Many are working to ensure that disadvantaged communities can access federal recovery dollars and advocate for equitable distribution of funds, in addition to disaster preparedness and prevention, which also intersects with housing justice. For instance, [West Street Recovery](#) in Houston, Texas, works to help residents of Northeast Houston repair their homes after climate disasters and, through the [Northeast Action Collective](#), works to improve drainage systems in the community to prevent flooding.

### Neighborhood Resilience and Decarbonization

Efforts to increase community resilience are a growing priority among EJ organizations that seek ways to support their members in adapting to climate change. Whether it be creating grid resilience through community solar, building [deployable solar units that can act as shade in the summer](#) (Nos Quedamos in South Bronx), or advocating for funding for [neighborhood resilience centers](#), EJ organizations are working to ensure that their communities can weather the changing climate. Finally, [neighborhood-scale decarbonization](#) is an emerging strategy that focuses on transitioning a whole neighborhood off the gas system, coordinated in such a way as to reduce costs and distribute benefits.

### Land Use and Transit-Oriented Development

Efforts at smart growth, infill housing, and ensuring that new development is located in areas proximate to transit, amenities, and destinations have been on the climate mitigation agenda for decades, as denser, more connected land use and development has the potential to reduce transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions and reliance on cars. Furthermore, housing location shapes residents' access to resources and exposure to environmental risks, especially in situations where housing projects are slated on brownfields and potentially contaminated lands. Several EJ organizations are working to advocate for affordable, transit-oriented development in healthy neighborhoods, such as those incentivized through California's [Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities](#) program.





# Ongoing Challenges and Needs to Advance Housing and Climate Justice

---

Despite the growing attention and opportunities coming from federal investments, many challenges remain to working at the intersection of housing and climate justice, including:

1. Few building decarbonization incentive programs will likely benefit renters, who depend on property owners to upgrade their units. Given the power imbalances in the relationships between landlords and renters, it is challenging to design programs with which renters can engage and benefit directly.
2. Climate and energy justice does not always rise to the top of the priority list for community-based organizations where low-income members may have other, more urgent needs.
3. The ever-growing number of policies, programs, agencies, and requirements are difficult to track for small, under-resourced advocacy organizations, making it hard to determine where to focus their attention.
4. Targeted funding and investments are newer areas of work for many grassroots EJ organizations, necessitating new knowledge, skills, and relationships.
5. In places that have successfully won targeted programs or standards, there is an ongoing need for monitoring and enforcement, which is underfunded.

EJ leaders identified various tools and resources that could help them advance their work. Similar to [Mosaic's](#) recent report about what it will take to implement federal climate laws, we found that EJ groups identified the need for technical assistance, outreach and popular education materials, and strategy and movement-building support in order to capitalize on existing opportunities and build towards larger impact. Their needs are outlined in the following table:

## Needs Identified by EJ Leaders to Grow and Deepen Work at the Intersection of Housing and Climate Justice

Technical Assistance and Research	Toolkits and Popular Education	Strategy and Movement Building Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible and regularly updated resources about programs, timelines, and how to influence state energy offices around the implementation of federally funded programs.</li> <li>• Written resources combined with on-demand TA about how to advocate with state energy offices.</li> <li>• Case studies on campaigns, programs, and policies at the intersection of housing and climate justice.</li> <li>• Research to support policies and programs at the intersection of housing and climate justice, such as studying the impact of climate investments on tenant displacement, among others.</li> <li>• Tracking new federal, state, and local funding opportunities and providing grant-writing support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best practices toolkit on how to ensure state energy offices are positioned to implement programs and meet J40 targets, with considerations for the political conditions in different types of states.</li> <li>• Popular education for potential beneficiaries to inform residents and property owners of the harms of gas-powered appliances, the benefits of decarbonization, and how to access resources.</li> <li>• Guides and examples on how to inventory and monitor local programs (e.g., energy efficiency, weatherization, energy assistance, etc.), and how to braid federal, state, and local resources into new and existing programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Messaging and communications support on how to connect housing and climate justice, including storytelling for outreach and base-building.</li> <li>• Support on how to identify political opportunities at the state level and coordinate across groups.</li> <li>• Space to think and strategize about how to build on the momentum from federal investments toward a bigger and better future (e.g., what is the unfinished work from the THRIVE ACT and the Green New Deal for Public Housing?).</li> </ul>



## Conclusions

As detailed above, tremendous work is happening on the ground to a) decarbonize the homes of EJ communities, b) accelerate the transition to cleaner energy and reduce utility cost burden, and c) make EJ communities more resilient to climate change. The policies and programs included here merit replication and federal support to make these common sense practices the status quo. These efforts work because the EJ leaders crafting them begin with the needs and expertise of their members, the very EJ communities that the solutions aim to benefit. With sufficient resources to expand capacity, EJ organizations are well-positioned to continue to lead in passing and implementing innovative policies and programs to protect low-income and renter communities from climate change and pave the way toward a cleaner, more just future.



## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the following interviewees for sharing their time, knowledge, and experience with us:

Tiffany Eng ([California Environmental Justice Alliance](#)); Nikita Daryanani ([Coalition of Communities of Color](#)); Sneha Ayyagari ([Greenlining Institute](#)); Dr. Sabrina Johnson ([Natural Resources Defense Council](#)); Marnese Jackson ([Midwest Building Decarbonization Coalition](#)); Daniel Chu ([NYC Environmental Justice Alliance](#)); Robin Lewis ([Interfaith Power and Light](#)); Zach Lou ([California Green New Deal Coalition](#)); Sophia Cheng ([People's Action](#)); Ayesha Abbasi ([Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#)); Grace Hut ([Strategic Actions for a Just Economy](#)); Tyneshia Griffin ([New Virginia Majority](#)); Yocelyn Iboa ([9to5](#)); Julia Orduña ([Texas Housers](#)).



# At the Crossroads of Climate and Housing Justice: Field Scan and Needs Assessment

 JUST SOLUTIONS

[justsolutionscollective.org](https://justsolutionscollective.org)

**GROUND  
WORKS**  
CONSULTING 

[groundworksconsulting.org](https://groundworksconsulting.org)