

OUR AIR!

¡NUESTRO AIRE!

**A HOLISTIC MODEL FOR
COMMUNITY WELLNESS,
SUSTAINABILITY,
CULTURAL ORGANIZING,
& SELF- DETERMINED
DEVELOPMENT**



「PHASE 1:
PROJECT
REPORT」



INTRODUCTION



Envisioned and implemented by El Puente and community members alike, Our Air/Nuestro Aire is a grassroots campaign to improve air quality, public health, and community development. Our Air/Nuestro Aire is a project of El Puente's Green Light District program (outlined in the next page) that applies the Green Light District framework of holistic and community-first development, promoting environmental justice and wellness through cultural organizing.

Our Air/Nuestro Aire is not only comprehensive in its vision, but also in its implementation. The project comprises five main components: air quality monitoring, mitigation planning and design, grassroots organizing, political advocacy, and cultural organizing. With each of these components together, we learned about air quality in Los Sures, informed our community of this environmental justice issue, developed policy and urban design strategies to improve air quality and community development, created culturally relevant art for the campaign, and engaged community members, elected leaders, and a wide array of diverse stakeholders to advocate for solutions. This has culminated in the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign as a powerful and creative grassroots movement for environmental justice, public health, the arts, and comprehensive community-led development. After launching a 5-point platform for action from our community conversations and in consultation with technical experts, engaging more than 6000 community members and collecting over 1,000 signatures in our petition during Phase 1, we plan to form a strong taskforce of partners to implement our platform and mobilize our community to take action during Phase 2.

While the issue of air quality has plagued our neighborhoods of Los Sures/Southside of Williamsburg and Bushwick for decades, the emergence of COVID-19 in the middle of the project served as a shocking reminder of the health disparities that have existed in our communities for decades, and the deadly effects of these disparities. The fact that in our city Latinx and African American/Black families have death rates twice as high as White families provides further evidence that neighborhoods with existing air quality and respiratory issues are suffering and will continue to suffer, unless this issue is addressed on an urgent basis by our electeds, private stakeholders, and community leaders. The ongoing Black Lives Matter movement further highlighted the devastating effects of systemic racism and the urgency of immediate change. For this reason, we also must connect environmental racism and air quality to the current momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement. These struggles are deeply interrelated, with inequality at the root of each. To achieve change, we must work together, building stronger movements that can help us all.

We recognize that this campaign could not have been more timely and urge all stakeholders to help us continue this movement that is rooted in our common goals and values, led by our young people, guided by our elders and organized by our artists to bring light, hope, and action to a year of revolution, crisis, and transformation!

EL PUENTE

El Puente's mission is to inspire and nurture leaders for peace and justice through the engagement of youth and adult members in the arts, education, and activism. Founded in 1982 by Luis Garden Acosta, with Eugenio Maldonado and Frances Lucerna, El Puente was originally created as a response to an epidemic of gun violence among young people in the Southside of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In the twelve-month period from July 1979 to June 1980, out of a population of a little over 30,000 people, 48 young people— virtually one adolescent every week— were assassinated in what the mass media termed the “teenage gang capital of New York City.” In nearly four decades, El Puente has led numerous groundbreaking initiatives while pioneering a national model for holistic youth development, all within the context of community development and self-determination.

These initiatives include several successful grassroots campaigns related to environmental and social justice, including stopping the development of a 55 story incinerator, the reforestation of the Southside, and closing down half of Radiac, New York City's only hazardous chemical and nuclear storage facility. Through six leadership centers in North Brooklyn, as well as El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (high school), MS 50 El Puente Community School, the Latino Climate Action Network in Puerto Rico, El Puente Arts, the Green Light District, and the Global Justice Institute, El Puente serves over a thousand members of the community on a daily basis and engages with several thousand community members through other programs, events, and partnerships. Organizing in North Brooklyn, Puerto Rico, and beyond, El Puente remains at the forefront of community-led movements for self determination and influences social policy locally and nationally.



The El Puente Green Light District (GLD) is a holistic community development and sustainability initiative to preserve, grow, and celebrate Williamsburg's Southside community. At a time when communities across New York City are facing rapid changes, the GLD seeks to flip the disempowering narrative of gentrification, instead, placing the power of transformation in the hands of local residents. The GLD builds equity and sustainability by connecting residents with each other, sharing knowledge, and building capacity through partnerships, coalitions, and alliances to support community lead projects. The GLD's five areas of focus are: Affordable Living, Arts & Culture, Education, Green Spaces & Environmental Justice, and Health & Wellness.

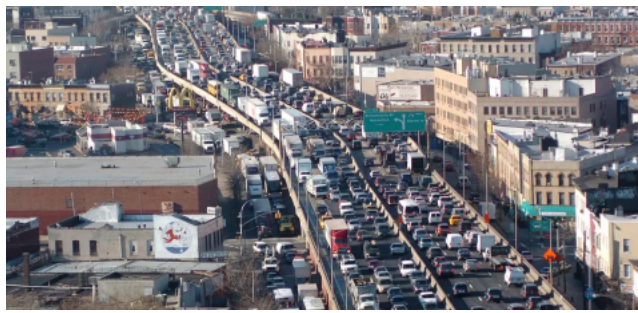
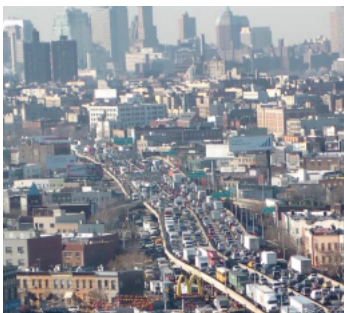
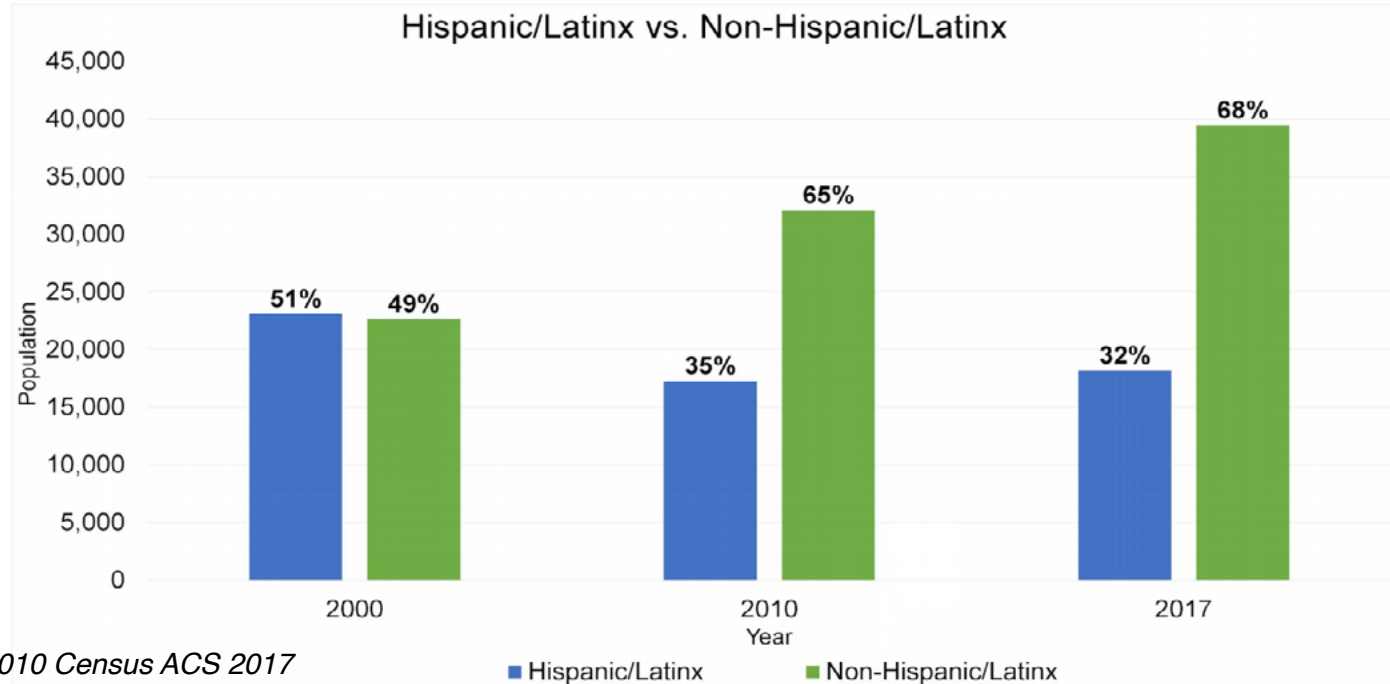


LOS SURES

Map and data visualization by students from
Pratt Institute GCPE Fall 2019 Studio



Since 2000, the **Hispanic/Latinx population** has decreased in both number and percentage.



BACKGROUND & HISTORY

Williamsburg's Southside is a historically environmentally marginalized community, with residents facing multiple severe risks. Poor air quality, however, may be among the most dangerous of these risks. Several sources contribute to poor air quality in Williamsburg's Southside and North Brooklyn as a whole, one major contributor being its transportation infrastructure, which includes the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, the Williamsburg Bridge, and the Williams Plaza Bus Depot, which services 6 bus lines.

North Brooklyn is also home to a significant amount of polluting industrial infrastructure, which not only brings heavy truck traffic, but also is a source of pollutants from industrial activities themselves. The siting of locally unwanted land uses, like waste transfer stations, a peaker power plant, private industry, and Significant Maritime Industrial Areas, in historic communities of color like Williamsburg and Bushwick is a clear example of environmental racism. This of course has serious consequences for public health. According to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, rates of asthma-related hospitalizations for children and adults in Williamsburg and Bushwick are double those of Brooklyn and New York City overall. Additionally, in Williamsburg-Bushwick 6.3% of the population reported having asthma, a percentage 2.1 and 1.7 times higher than the rates for Brooklyn and New York City, respectively.

This environmental injustice is compounded by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to adequate health care for long-time residents. In contrast to the Southside's history as the poorest Latinx neighborhood in New York State and part of the third poorest Congressional District in America, this community is now gentrified, with a disturbing juxtaposition of public housing, modest apartment buildings and multi-family homes next to luxury condominium towers, million-dollar brownstones, high-end small businesses and commercialized corporate retail. This 'revitalization' has only exacerbated the inequities faced by the community, by systematically restructuring resources away from our community, blocking access to opportunities for economic growth, and causing widespread displacement. This displacement is a profound loss of cultural representation and artistic expression, a sense of community ownership and connectedness, as well as the right to self-determination once felt by long-term community residents.

Since its founding, El Puente has seen the community of North Brooklyn, and New York City as whole, dramatically transform. From decades of government disinvestment to multiple waves of gentrification, what has remained constant is the inequity, with low-income communities of color continually bearing the brunt of environmental harms and none of the benefits of the city's economic redevelopment. These conditions present a critical need to put community development and transformation in the hands of indigenous leadership, in order to create a community that is safe, healthy, thriving, and culturally rich, for all.

*Living with Asthma,
1999
Los Muralistas de
El Puente*

*This mural not only
tells the long history
of health inequity
and environmental
justice issues in the
community, but also
offers solutions.*



POLITICAL ADVOCACY & COALITION BUILDING

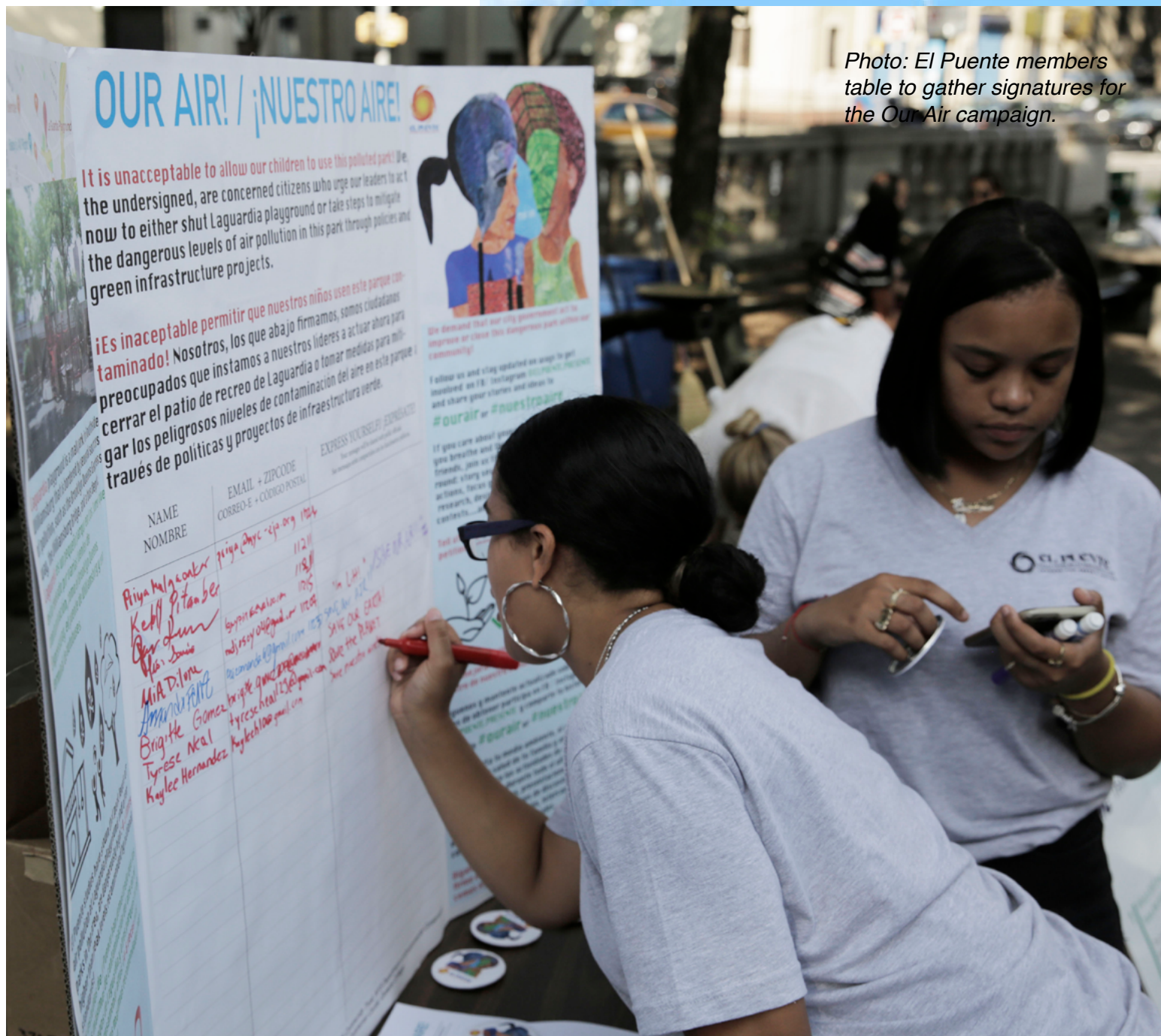
Map designed by Raísa Lin Garden-Lucerna





Building alliances and coalitions across sectors is essential for the success of Our Air/Nuestro Aire, and in achieving self-determined, holistic community development. In nearly every facet of this project, we have worked in deep collaboration with a wide range of partners. Some of these relationships have been built and nurtured across decades while others are more recently emerging into caring partnerships. Longtime academic colleagues at Pratt Institute and The New School were instrumental in conducting research that would eventually become a platform of policy and urban design strategies. The Barry Commoner Center at Queens College, North Brooklyn Parks Alliance, and the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene have provided technical and financial support for the project. Experienced health professionals like Dr. Maxine Orris and longtime neighborhood community development experts like Ron Shiffman who are as committed to El Puente's principles and mission towards peace, justice, and self-determination have informed and guided our work in numerous ways. Our elected officials have championed our campaign and will be essential to the implementation of policy. We have convened all of these partners and more as part of the Our Air/Nuestro Aire advisory committee. In Phase 1, the advisory committee provided invaluable insight and leadership and demonstrated a commitment to the project. In Phase 2, we will expand the advisory committee in order to build a strong coalition of partners that will advocate for and implement solutions identified in our 5-point platform.

PROJECT LAUNCH



The Our Air/ Nuestro Aire campaign was launched through a vibrant public event that brought together community organizers, youth, seniors, artists, residents, and political representatives to learn about the issue of poor air quality and demand action.

Music, art, a photobooth, painting and coloring activities, tables to sign petitions, and a poster presentation of our data from our partners at Queen College's Barry Commoner Center were punctuated with powerful speeches by our Executive Director Frances Lucerna, community leaders, longtime environmental justice activists including former El Puente members, and elected officials. A troupe of talented youth members and senior artists performed 'Breathe/ Respira', an original theater production about the dangers of air pollution and alarming rates of asthma, directed by Gloria Zelaya. The play communicated the urgency of the campaign to all attendees, including press, and included a participatory component to develop solutions to improve air quality.

Strong commitments and calls for mobilization came from Council Member Antonio Reynoso and Assembly Member Joseph Lentol in the backdrop of the highly polluting Brooklyn Queens Expressway (BQE).



Above & bottom: Photobooths, oral history stands and petitions for social media campaigning along with coloring books for our little ones and buttons to raise awareness on the streets



Left: Antonio Reynoso makes a public commitment to support the community-led Our Air campaign

Right: Master Quilter Sylvia Hernandez exhibited a quilt made for the campaign that was also used as a mobile set for a community theater performance titled 'Breathe/Respira'.



YOUTH-LED AIR MONITORING

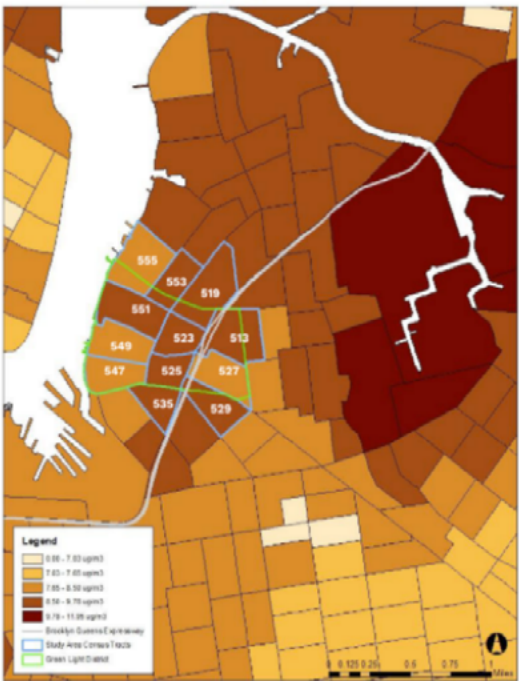


The foundation of the Our Air campaign is youth-led citizen science. Sixty young people from El Puente's Williamsburg Leadership Center as well as students from El Puente Academy High School collected air quality data in South Williamsburg through mobile monitoring and counting trucks. We also partnered with Queens College's Barry Commoner Center and the NYC Department of the Health to install a network of stationary monitors throughout the neighborhood.

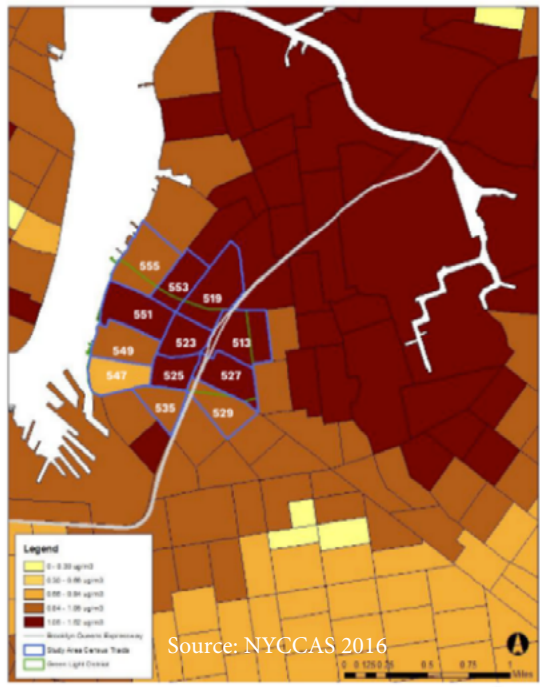
We used low-cost portable sensors called Airbeams, which connected to phones for mobile monitoring, and were co-located with more expensive, high quality sensors from the city's NYCCAS system, for stationary monitoring. From Spring 2019 to Fall 2019 we measured PM 2.5, the smallest, and thus most dangerous particulate matter pollutant. Though we wanted to get a sense of the neighborhood overall, we focused on studying parks and schools. In addition to Queens College and the Department of Health, our research was coordinated with the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance and the Heimbinder Foundation as part of NYC-EJA's Community Air Mapping Project, and was supported by the NYC Department of Health and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, in addition to New York Community Trust.

In December 2019, students from the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice presented their research and analysis for their senior capstone project, to great success. In February 2020, Queens College and the Department of Health presented a draft of their full data analysis and report on the project, but we are still waiting for a finalized report. We will also receive an analysis of our data from NYC-EJA and their partners at the Heimbinder Foundation. Additionally, in partnership with faculty from the Pratt Institute and an air quality expert from MIT, we are currently conducting advanced analysis and visualizing of the data to ensure that our findings are made accessible and comprehensible to all.

Particulate Matter 2.5 (PM2.5)
Concentrations



Black Carbon (BC) Concentrations



Source: NYCCAS 2016

Though we do not have our full results yet, we know that the state of air quality in our community is alarming. According to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, while air quality has steadily improved across most of the city, improvements have been slower in North Brooklyn, comparatively. Additionally, we have compared the results of our 2016 pilot study, the Urban Lab for Open Spaces, with the preliminary findings of our current study and found consistently high levels of air pollution, much above recommended levels.



El Puente youth members record neighborhood PM 2.5 levels and Summer Youth Employment Program members learn about Our Air/Nuestro Aire and how to collect air quality data with El Puente GLD's Environmental Justice Coordinator, Leslie.

CULTURAL ORGANIZING THROUGH COMMUNITY THEATER



Data produced from the air monitoring research were alarming, but often too dense to easily interpret and share meaningfully with our community, especially at large gatherings. One of El Puente's long standing traditions is the "arts for social justice", that is, using the arts and cultural organizing to mobilize our community and raise awareness. To accomplish this, we worked in collaboration with CADRE (Community Artists' Development & Resource Exchange), El Puente's network of artists, artisans and cultural workers who are rooted in North Brooklyn, with a goal to advocate for equitable access to artistic and cultural expression.



A powerful team of CADRE artists (credited at the end of report) came together to explore and interpret the outcomes of the Our Air campaign using methodologies and principles of community theater.

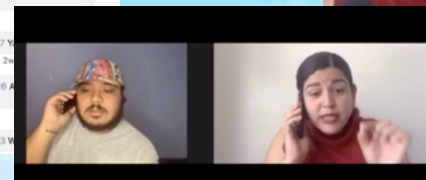
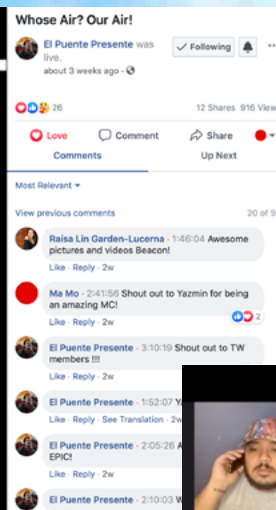
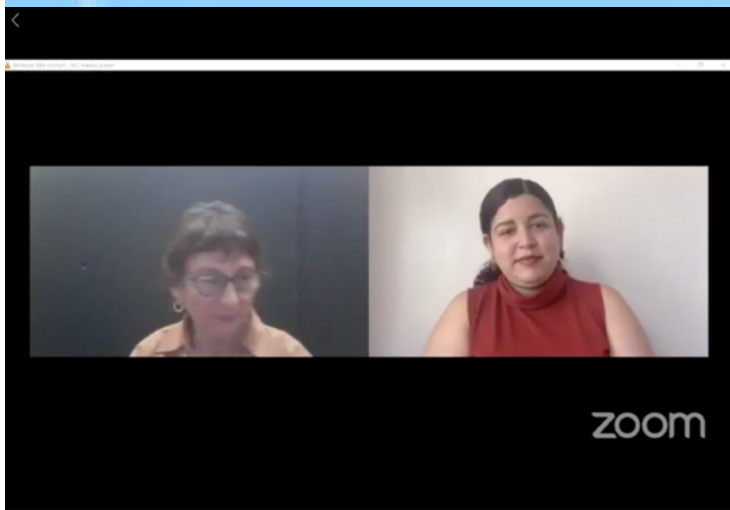
As one of the outcomes of this collaboration, an original play, titled 'Breathe/Respira' was conceptualized, scripted and acted out by CADRE artists and El Puente youth at various locations and events during the project, including the event launch, focus groups, festivals, community forums, and as a part of presentations that reached out to a wide spectrum of residents. Produced and led by Gloria Zelaya, the play was directed and scripted by Jorge Berrios, had costumes designed by Jahziel Lazala, a quilt backdrop created by Sylvia Hernandez, and featured choreography, singing and acting by Andrew Reyes and Yazmin Morales-Vicente (also the Arts & Cultural Coordinator for GLD), rapping by Jaime Rivera, and acting by W.L.C. theatre class youth.

The play presented air quality issues from the perspective of children and the dying trees that reside in Los Sures parks, emphasizing the life long impact and inequity of growing up in a community that is exposed to multiple sources of pollution. The play is interactive and asks audience members for solutions to improve air quality, allowing our community to lend their invaluable perspective and voice, so our project is informed by their lived experience and deep expertise on this subject. Through songs and conversations, the performers ask us to come together and brainstorm solutions to this urgent problem, and take action!



THREE KINGS DAY

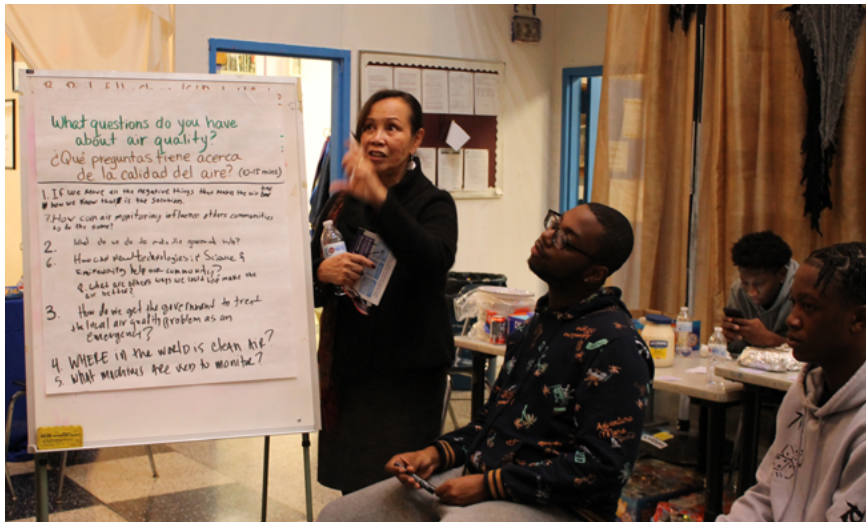
El Puente's 33rd Three Kings Day performance titled "Nuestro Aire, Nuestro Mar, Nuestra Tierra" was a spectacular, original production that highlighted issues of air quality and environmental justice in our neighborhood. It was created for community residents, of which more than 1,200 attend each year, and directed, written, performed, choreographed, and designed by youth members and leaders of El Puente specifically around the theme of Our Air/Nuestro Aire. El Puente youth members called for urgent action, collected signatures for our petition, and spoke to political representatives, some of whom were also present in the audience.



..... WINDOW TALKS

When our CADRE artists were faced with the challenge of abruptly moving to online platforms in order to continue advocating for clean air and public health in the face of COVID-19, they rose up to the challenge and created a digital play, called 'Window Talks'. Using a video conferencing platform to mimic neighbors speaking to each other through their windows, a talented team of artists developed and recorded a performance that discussed and advocated for our 5-point policy platform, which was developed to address air quality issues and respiratory health. Written by Gloria Zelaya and Jorge Berrios, 'Window Talks' connected these policies to everyday life, explaining each, and making them relatable. With more than 600 views, this newly developed form of virtual theater was a big hit!

AWARENESS RAISING CAMPAIGNS



Conversations with community members, staff, youth, seniors, artists, parents, and teachers were held to facilitate focused discussions and share findings from our air quality studies throughout the year. At our bilingual community forum, we informed residents of the issue of air quality and led roundtable discussions to gather feedback on our project and develop solutions with our community. We also went to our community, hosting events and workshops at senior citizen centers, schools, PTA meetings, parks, markets, etc., which resulted in a high rate of engagement from diverse groups who are usually not engaged in traditional approaches to research and planning. Nearly all of these events included an arts component, like 'Breathe/Respira', which communicated the impacts of poor air quality, and helped kick off several discussions and collect feedback.





- petitions on trees
- lights used to measure pollution
- has to be movable
- raw data sculpture
- ↳ tangible
- immersive/interactive (PVC pipes, lungs, simple machines...)
- Black netting on trees (1% of polluted air in space)
- pollution snow globe
- gas masks on kids playing in park
- use of wind + fabric (black) (video)
- dying trees & dying lungs
- sound of trouble breathing
- planting day/painting pots w/ message/data

Since April 2019, CADRE members have met regularly to co-design and execute visual and performing arts projects that address, raise awareness, and politically educate Los Sures residents through cultural organizing.



During Earth Week young leaders learn about and discuss the importance of environmental justice and plan how they will be participating in the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign.



AWARENESS RAISING & CULTURAL ORGANIZING



WEPA Festival: El Puente's staff, youth members, and artists connected with more than 1000 festival attendees including community residents, artists, small businesses, youth, and political representatives to promote the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign. Attendees enjoyed interactive activities related to environmental justice, music, and signed our petition. Celebrations included a public performance of the play 'Breathe'.

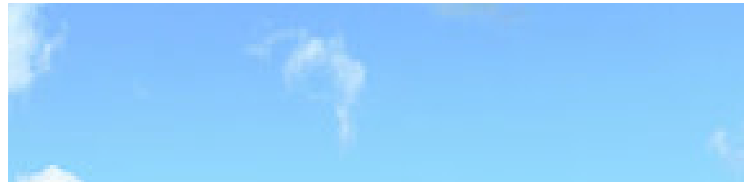


Our Air/Nuestro Aire Branding: El Puente Youth from our Williamsburg Leadership Center worked collaboratively with El Puente art facilitators to create the Our Air/Nuestro Aire logo, title, and hashtag. After learning about the project, youth members brainstormed and drew images that could be used to create the logo, came up with the project title, created a bilingual hashtag, and suggested strategies to promote the campaign online.



Breaking Bread Community Health Event: El Puente hosted a community health event at Moore Street market that distributed free food to attendees, and engaged them in educational activities about public health and environmental justice. Youth from El Puente's Williamsburg Leadership Center performed 'Call to Action', a puppet show about the issue of air quality that encourages audience members to get involved in the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign. Youth members worked with El Puente facilitators to write the script and create the set and the puppets.

AWARENESS RAISING & CULTURAL ORGANIZING



Flash Mob: SYEP members who participated in a Latin dance class went to Domino Park to dance Rueda de Casino as a flash mob. They stopped dancing after a few minutes and began to cough (dramatized) to get the park-goers' attention, as a few people from our program stepped in with signs about the poor air quality in the neighborhood and park-goers took pictures or video, or came closer to read the signs. To wrap up, young people walked around the area near the sprinklers to distribute flyers and raise awareness.



Big Green Theatre at P.S.106: Big Green Theater, an activist theater program for young people and adults, was inspired by the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign to create a play about air quality. They invited El Puente to present to their class of 3rd and 4th grade students at P.S.106 about the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign and environmental justice. El Puente coordinators Leslie and Yazmin explained the concept of environmental justice, the importance of air quality, what the Our Air/Nuestro project is, demonstrated how the air beams work, and engaged the class in interactive activities.

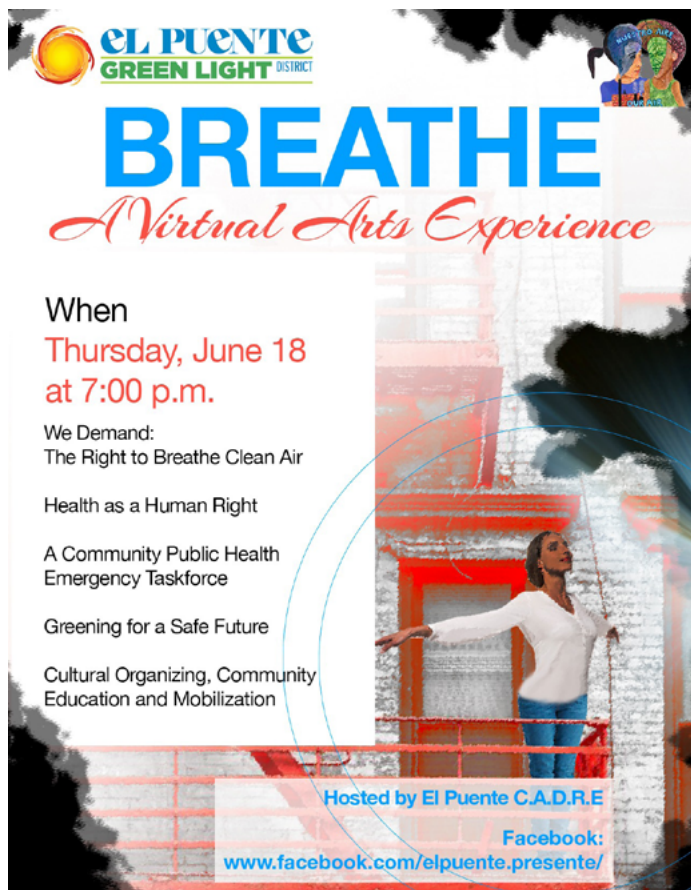


Climate Strike: El Puente youth from our leadership centers, M.S. 50 El Puente Community School, and El Puente Academy High School for Peace and Justice joined together with youth from across the city to strike for climate justice during Climate Week. Youth worked with facilitators to create banners and art for the march, serving as ambassadors for their community, and connecting climate change to local environmental justice issues. In addition to art, El Puente youth prepared songs and chants for the march.

VIRTUAL CULTURAL ORGANIZING



EARTH DAY Due to the sudden lockdown caused by COVID-19, El Puente was challenged to rapidly move from in-person community organizing and engagement to organizing online. In a community with limited access to internet and multimedia training, this transition demanded creativity and resilience. Gracefully meeting this challenge, we kicked off our virtual organizing with a day of digital programming for Earth Day. Programming was dedicated to raising awareness of local environmental justice issues and mobilizing the community for the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign. Activities including workshops around protest sign making, regrowing vegetables, preparedness kit making, and an Earth Day dance party. The day opened and closed with a powerful Call to Action and participants were successfully directed towards the petition and 5-point platform throughout the day.



CREATIVITY THURSDAYS

Following Earth Day, we hosted weekly programming to promote the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign. One example of this regular programming is Creativity Thursdays: open community meetings for local artists and CADRE to host workshops, share their art, respond to the COVID-19 crisis, and increase awareness of the Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign. These events were held weekly, leading up to the Virtual Day of Action and Virtual Art Exhibition, and helped with getting a critical group of people engaged and committed to our work.

VIRTUAL ART EXHIBITION

Co-hosted with CADRE and curated by Jahziel Lazala, this event was El Puente's first ever virtual art exhibition. Legendary artists like Silvia Hernandez and Joe Matunis presented their artwork, specially commissioned for this project, alongside rising stars like Megan Gomez and Elisabet Díaz Cintrón. Facilitated by Jorge Luis Berrios, this event engaged more than 600 viewers, many of whom participated through the comment section and were able to converse with artists, thus becoming one of our most successful models for virtual engagement and advocacy with art.



EL PUENTE
INSPIRED BY LEGACY
CONTINUING THE MOVEMENT



WELLNESS WEDNESDAYS

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 3RD
FACEBOOK LIVE
@ELPUENTEPRESENTE
3PM

Learn about and take
action for
Our Air/Nuestro Aire!
campaign for clean air &
community wellness



**BREATHING,
RELAXATION
& HERBAL
REMEDIES
WITH
SHADAE
HYDE.**



EL PUENTE
LEADERS FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

Whose Air? Our Air!



A Virtual Day of Action

Celebrate the end of the year with art and
presentations from each El Puente site and learn
about El Puente's Our Air/Nuestro Aire campaign.

Date: June 17th

Time: 2-6pm

Facebook:

El Puente Presente
www.facebook.com/elpuente.presente/

WELLNESS WEDNESDAYS

Wellness Wednesdays were the first steps towards our goal of incubating holistic and culturally responsive Wellness Centers, which were selected as a public health priority by many community members, especially in response to the impacts of Covid-19. Our experienced facilitators nurtured physical and mental wellness through activities like breathing exercises, mindfulness, reading, creating herbal remedies, growing vegetables, and more. These were well attended, bilingual events and indicated the need for more such actions during a time of grief and loss in the community.

VIRTUAL DAY OF ACTION

The Virtual Day of Action was designed to be a celebration of the work each of our sites have done over the course of the school year, in addition to a platform for our sites to speak about environmental justice, Our Air/Nuestro Aire, COVID-19, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Each of our leadership centers presented highlights from the year and work from their members. Artwork from members thoughtfully reflected the critical moment in which we find ourselves, connecting issues of public health, environmental justice, and racism, and included poems, visual art, dance, music, informational presentations, and videos.

MITIGATION PLANNING & DESIGN



For this project, we didn't want to just provide evidence of the problem of poor air quality through citizen science, we also wanted to provide solutions. We partnered with graduate classes and professors from the Pratt Institute and the New School to develop urban design and policy solutions that would improve air quality, health, and community development. The classes conducted rigorous research on the existing conditions of Los Sures, compiled and analyzed an exhaustive list of relevant policies and case studies, and proposed comprehensive urban design recommendations. Selected recommendations from students from both universities were adopted in our 5-point platform, while others like green worker cooperatives, community land trusts and community archives will be explored further through El Puente's Green Light District.

BEST PRACTICES STUDIES & POLICY

CREDIT:

The New School

Environmental Justice & Sustainable Policy

Fall 2019 Seminar

Faculty: Ana Baptista



Newark

In 2016, the historic Environmental Justice and Cumulative Impacts ordinance was passed to address the problems that have led to unhealthy levels of pollution in Newark's poorest communities. Through consistent advocacy, political lobbying, and deep resident engagement, Newark succeeded in developing a first-in-nation ordinance that requires developers requesting environmental permits to inform the city of any environmental impacts.

Minneapolis

In 2016 Minneapolis started developing the idea of designing Green Zones, as part of the city's Climate Action Plan. The city worked in partnership with community residents to designate Green Zones. The city identified communities that face a cumulative impact of higher levels of environmental contamination. Since 2018, several City programs have targeted resources to the Green Zones.



Image: Medium.com, 2016

San Francisco

The local organization, United to Save The Mission, started drafting memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that are customized for each business and are entirely neighborhood driven, expressing the concerns and needs of the community. From tackling gentrification to protecting cultural heritage, the shared agreements were meant to build understanding between new businesses and the community, with a focus on education, intention, recognition and participation.

Graduate students, guided by environmental justice scholar and activist Ana Baptista, conducted best practices studies from other communities facing air quality issues and proposed policy recommendations that build on El Puente's Green Light district and play on the existing strengths of our neighborhood. Our team has used these case studies to guide policy and advocacy efforts as we move into Phase 2. These studies will also be included in presentations made to Elected officials to showcase precedents and push for immediate and brave action. Students also produced a podcast to present and discuss land use and investment tools that can ensure self-determination centered development in Los Sures.

PETITION & EMERGENCY CALL TO ACTION

COVID-19: OUR AIR EMERGENCY CALL TO ACTION



El Puente started this petition to NYC city government

We call for every member of our South Williamsburg and Bushwick community to come together and send a powerful message to our elected officials: **take action to reduce the air pollution in our parks and open spaces TODAY so that we do not continue to suffer from the most dangerous effects of pandemics like COVID-19 and climate change!**

COVID-19 is having a shocking impact on Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American communities in New York City, with alarmingly high death rates, as per [recent data](#) released by the NYC Department of Mental Health and Hygiene.

To mobilize community members and gain support, we created a petition that demanded action from our elected leaders and city agencies to improve air quality in Los Sures. By strategically promoting the petition at the events and activities outlined previously in this report, our petition for clean air and community wellness gathered more than 1,500 signatures, both on paper and online, in Phase 1. The petition not only raised awareness of air pollution and demanded immediate action from elected officials, but also connected the issues of air quality and systemic racism as a crisis, and provided a way forward through a 5-point platform that was put together by El Puente's Green Light District in consultation with residents, experts, community leaders, and more, through the Our Air campaign. Outlined in the next few pages, this platform was a critical outcome of Phase 1 of our project, and a roadmap for Phase 2, which will heavily focus on mobilizing community members, our advisory committee, and partners to advocate for and implement the solutions outlined in the 5-point platform.

1,161 have signed. Let's get to 1,500!

- Leslie Velasquez signed this petition
- Jennie Olyae signed this petition
- Sara Handler signed this petition

First name

Last name

Email

Brooklyn, 11216
United States

- ☒ Please share my name and email address with El Puente, so that I can receive updates on this campaign and others.
- ☒ Display my name and comment on this petition

Sign this petition

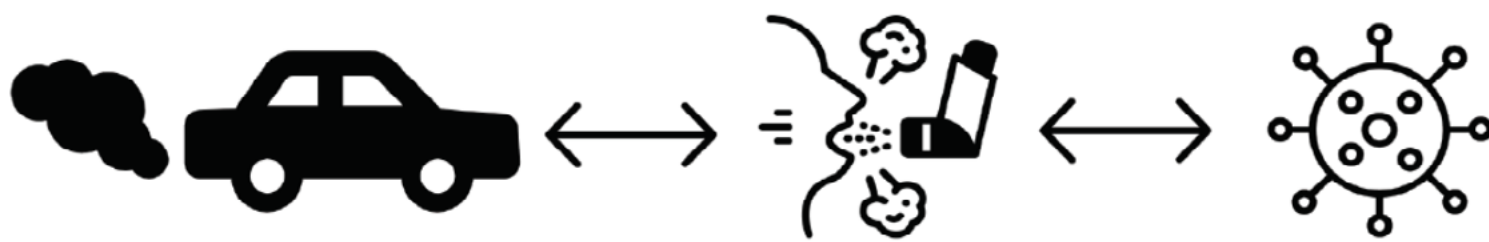
By signing, you accept Change.org's [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#), and agree to receive occasional emails about campaigns on Change.org. You can unsubscribe at any time.

OUR AIR 5-POINT ACTION PLATFORM

We call for public officials and community leaders who represent our South Williamsburg/Los Sures and Bushwick communities to come together and take action to reduce the air pollution in our parks and open spaces TODAY so that we do not continue to suffer from the most dangerous effects of pandemics like COVID-19 and climate change!

Covid-19 has had a shocking and [disproportionate impact](#) on Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American communities in New York City, with alarmingly high death rates as per the NYC Department of Health. [Data](#) from the state's health department updated on May 17 shows that Hispanic residents (29 % of the population) make up 34 % of fatalities in New York City, while black New Yorkers (22 % of the population) make up 28 % of deaths.

As a virus that attacks respiratory systems, Covid-19 has been a wake up call for residents of Los Sures. Levels of air pollution and asthma rates in our communities are double those of NYC and the rest of Brooklyn. Breathing in polluted air causes many other respiratory diseases and chronic health conditions, including cancer, and has been shown to shorten lifespans. This is an unacceptable situation that needs to be addressed with renewed urgency.



According to a [new nationwide study](#) conducted by Harvard University, coronavirus patients in areas that had high levels of air pollution and long-term exposure to PM2.5 [fine particulate air pollution] before the pandemic are more likely to die from the infection than patients in cleaner parts of the country. Since the Covid-19 death rates were found to [increase by 8%](#) for every 1 µg/m3 increase in PM2.5, scientist and environmental justice scholar Sacoby Wilson at the [talks about](#) the importance of examining the pandemic through the lens of environmental justice- “In this country, we have structural inequalities that are a major driver of why we see these different social and environmental conditions in communities of color. Environmental regulations in this country are not color blind. If the laws and regulations were enforced fairly across all racial ethnic groups, we wouldn't have environmental injustice. Why do we have communities with more sources of pollution? Well, that could be because those communities don't have a strong political voice. In many cases, in white, higher-income communities, you have more political power because of your economic power.”

Toxic air quality in South Williamsburg and Bushwick is due to an abundance of polluting industrial and transportation-related infrastructure, along with a lack of greenery and open space. Historical inequities like lack of access to adequate healthcare and health insurance have put our communities at risk during this crisis. Food insecurity and a lack of access to affordable, healthy food have weakened our immune systems over the decades. Many of our people work on the frontlines as essential workers, and are yet not entitled to paid sick leave, child care, or rent assistance. With internet access that is either unreliable or non-existent, many of us are unable to organize for remote work, remote schooling, or remote consultation with doctors. Undocumented community members face additional fears of ICE raids, lack access to healthcare, stimulus benefits, and small business loans. Language barriers prevent many of our community members from being equipped with information that could save our lives.

These facts have been known for decades through studies conducted by community organizations like El Puente. Covid-19 has now exposed the deadly results of the lack of prompt action, resources, and policies ensuring clean air for our families and neighbors.

These are man-made, not natural disasters.

Our people have the right to live safe and healthy lives!

The recognition of inequity needs to transform into policy and action.

This is a moral imperative!

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El Puente's campaign for clean air and community wellness DEMANDS:



- 1. The Right to Breathe Clean Air**
- 2. A Public Health Emergency Taskforce**
- 3. Health as a Human Right**
- 4. Cultural Organizing, Awareness Raising & Education**
- 5. Greening for a Safe Future**

Standing with the ongoing protests and demands of the Black Lives Matter movement and condemning through action the long history of violence exercised by the city's police, we call for the defunding of the NYPD and reinvesting of funds in agencies and initiatives in low-income communities of color suffering from decades of systemic racism, marginalization and environmental injustice.

In light of our ongoing public health disasters, we call for the prompt implementation of a 5-point Action Platform that is a community led, self-determination centered, and holistic approach to preparedness and resilience, as outlined below:

1. THE RIGHT TO BREATHE CLEAN AIR



MITIGATE VEHICULAR POLLUTION

- Identify critical sources of vehicular pollution in the area through socially distanced neighborhood traffic studies conducted by the Department of Transportation in partnership with local, community based organizations and transit advocacy groups.
- Take immediate measures to regulate deliveries to businesses and industrial sites. Local electeds need to work with businesses and truck company owners to advocate for a reduction in truck route coverage and restrict local deliveries made by trucks or vans by:
 - Organizing an off-hour delivery (OHD) program for businesses located along congested roadways and/or businesses that receive multiple truck-loads of goods each business day;
 - Replacing trucks with cargo bikes that can boost local employment, and are a safer and greener alternative;
 - Enforcing existing laws and increasing fines for vehicular violations, such as idling trucks with traffic cameras;
 - Prioritizing funding to retrofit or replace diesel trucks and bus fleets with electric or cleaner engine trucks;
 - Targetting funding to turn over trucks in hotspots where trucking is most intense through stimulus investments in green infrastructure.

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STRATEGIC CIRCULATION & ACCESS

- Close access to the Williamsburg Bridge on Roebling and South 4th St., and unite Continental Army Plaza and Laguardia Playground to create a continuous plaza space that is green, safe, and reroutes vehicles to reduce pollution.
- Implement congestion pricing passed in the state budget in 2019 that would also establish tolls on the Williamsburg Bridge and reduce the burden of traffic in Los Sures.
- In coordination with the Open Streets campaign, explore a permanent or long-term closure of certain streets to vehicular traffic.

COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT OF BROOKLYN QUEENS EXPRESSWAY (BQE)

- Incorporate policy and community-led mitigation design strategies like green decking as part of the ongoing environmental review process being executed by the Department of Transportation to assess proposals to fix the BQE.
- Currently, a plan is receiving traction to make an \$11 billion tunnel to keep cars off a stretch of the Expressway in South Brooklyn. Parts of this budget must be dedicated to addressing the role of the BQE in creating inequities during public health emergencies, and no proposal should be finalized without deep community engagement and a holistic and inclusive assessment of needs across the entire corridor of the BQE.
- Target investment in air filtration systems for schools, daycares, senior centers and apartments closest to BQE and traffic routes with high concentrations of diesel pollution, and with high rates of asthmatic or health compromised populations.

2. HEALTH AS A HUMAN RIGHT



- Strengthen the public healthcare system by ensuring that public hospitals are as well equipped to respond to a health emergency as private hospitals, and are permanently retrofitted with testing centers and high-end technologies.
- Pilot inclusive Holistic Wellness Centers that empower people, including members of our undocumented community, to nurture good health and mitigate chronic health conditions through access to nutrition, exercise, traditional cultural wellness practices and mental health support. Facilitators should be community members in order to reinvest in our community and provide culturally competent care. These centers can be housed in existing community institutions like Moore Street Market in order to expand access to healthcare.
- Develop and launch a culturally responsive, bilingual Community Health Platform that acts as a central resource hub for families to seek support, report needs and get connected to resources, especially during a crisis. Ensure that key health information is distributed in languages and through different kinds of media that are accessible to all demographics.
- Conduct a detailed survey and oral history interviews to analyze the health outcomes of poor air quality on residents and workers, and document the lived experiences of community members within highly polluted areas in Los Sures.
- Invest in and reinforce community-led emergency healthcare programs to compensate for direct and indirect losses connected to public health disasters. This may include reimbursement for emergency healthcare costs regardless of immigration status, small business recovery aid, food distribution networks and pantries, support with completing applications for federal funding and loans, language support in emergency rooms, and more.

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3. A COMMUNITY-LED RESILIENCY & PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY TASK FORCE



- Organize a Community Resiliency & Public Health Emergency Task force to assess and respond to community health needs through a self-determination centered and holistic approach, including building capacity and tools to exchange resources, facilitate recovery, relief and preparedness efforts, during and in the aftermath of public health emergencies and disasters. This coalition needs to cooperate across departments, with representatives from various city agencies, elected officials, community organizations, schools, religious and cultural institutions, local artists, and small businesses.
- Brooklyn Community Board 1 must be informed and activated by the issues and needs of our communities in Los Sures, and all decisions made through inclusive and deeply engaged outreach. Ensure that preparedness planning and action continues after the emergency to address underlying inequities and are incorporated as priorities into local governance agendas.
- Commit to sustainable and long-term community controlled mechanisms by conducting feasibility studies and investing in initiatives like community land trusts and credit unions. Declare Los Sures (and other NYC neighborhoods that are in need of urgent resources to address environmental injustice) as the first Green Zones of the East Coast.

4. GREENING FOR A SAFE FUTURE



- Organize a Green Development Fund through capital funding from city agencies like the Department of Transportation, the Parks Department, and the Department of Environmental Conservation and recurring contributions from real estate developers and businesses that are located in Williamsburg. The fund would be community controlled and utilized to build and maintain green infrastructure in open and public spaces to mitigate air pollution.
- Organize and fund tree planting programs in partnership with schools and local, community organizations. Prioritize and expand the build out of green infrastructure in the public right of way.
- Increase landscaping and greenery to buffer high pollution points from a concentration of emissions, reduce asphalt and concrete, and increase permeable surfaces in existing open spaces in parks and plazas like LaGuardia Playground and Continental Army Plaza. These measures would not only improve air quality, but also reduce extreme heat by providing shade and reducing surface-level temperatures, and reduce the incidence of flooding by increasing permeable surfaces.
- Connect existing open spaces and identify brownfield spaces and vacant lots that can be converted to open space.
- Invest in innovative green infrastructure projects to protect residents from the impacts of pollution, both indoors and outdoors. A green wall on the south side of LaGuardia Playground would reduce noise and air pollution from vehicles, expand natural land cover within a vertical space, and increase the sense of place of the park by effectively separating it from the BQE on-ramp.
- Create opportunities for green jobs and training programs in the neighborhood that will support the building, installation and maintenance of green infrastructure. Promote community based innovation through the seeding and incubation of green infrastructure projects developed by local entrepreneurs and students.

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5. CULTURAL ORGANIZING, COMMUNITY EDUCATION, & MOBILIZATION



- Commit to a comprehensive, community dissemination of air quality research, data and preparedness plans through culturally and linguistically grounded participatory processes that ensures that every person who lives or works in Williamsburg is aware of the impacts of air pollution on their health, the inequity of development in our neighborhoods, and can get involved in efforts towards accountability, transparency and action.
- Pilot Holistic Community Wellness education programs that informs, trains and empowers residents during and beyond crisis. The “Clean Air/Community Wellness” curriculum will include tools and practices that promote healthy living and nutrition that draw on the rich cultural expertise and wisdom of our residents. The curriculum will be collaboratively developed and facilitated with artists, cultural workers, wellness practitioners and community educators. The bilingual curriculum will be offered to schools, daycare centers and other community centers.
- Commit sustainable funding to local artists and cultural organizers who are the heart of our community, through programs like block grants, to specifically raise awareness and mobilize residents around public health inequities as well as address trauma, stress and depression within our community through healing and empowering arts and cultural programs/projects To challenge inequity in public health access and information, sustained cultural organizing and engagement of longtime and new residents, schools, small businesses, senior centers, NYCHA communities and religious institutions is effective and powerful.
- Organize free internet for every household and safe, common spaces at local community organizations and cultural institutions for WiFi, considering that more frequent public health disasters are imminent due to climate change, and training for remote schooling, remote consultation with doctors, and virtual programs to stay organized, connected and uplifted through community engagement.
- Develop an Integrated Multimedia Cultural Organizing Toolkit through El Puente's GLD framework to ensure continued mobilization of people and resources as local community organizations, activists and artists grapple with adapting to staying at home during times of crisis, collaborating and being able to engage diverse and intergenerational groups of residents, often without internet connections or adequate technical expertise.

ACT NOW!

Join El Puente Green Light District’s “Our Air! / ¡Nuestro Aire!” campaign by signing on to this 5-point Action Platform, which includes strategic policy recommendations that need to be implemented with urgency.

Our petition has already received more than 1000 signatures. We as a community have the power, knowledge, and creativity to change this situation.

We need our elected officials and city agencies to immediately come on board, take action and commit resources to solving the underlying issues that have made Los Sures and Bushwick so vulnerable to public health emergencies.



Celebrating El Puente's 37th birthday at the Our Air/ Nuestro Aire campaign launch event

CONCLUSION

In sum, the Our Air/Nuestro Aire project in its first phase has met and exceeded our own expectations. We have successfully completed our youth-led air monitoring, are in the process of preparing our data to share with the community, have engaged academic partners to develop a set of policy and urban design solutions, compiled these recommendations into a 5-point policy platform, engaged diverse community members through events, forums, and workshops, developed multiple plays and numerous visual arts pieces to promote the campaign, and engaged our elected leaders and partners to build support for Our Air/Nuestro Aire. From smaller events like workshops, forums, direct actions, meetings and virtual events, to larger events like WEPA, Three Kings, and our project launch we estimate that we have engaged upwards of 6,000 community members.

Now that we have collected our data, developed our solutions and informed our community and other stakeholders, we begin the critical work of mobilizing the thousands that we have engaged in Phase 1 to enact change in Phase 2. In Phase 2, we will activate our advisory committee, breaking up members into working groups, with each focusing on specific parts of our 5-point platform that they can commit to implementing. As previously mentioned, we will continue and expand the work of mobilizing our community, doing outreach and events to create a strong grassroots movement to demand change. As part of this outreach we will not only present our 5-point platform, but also the results of our air quality monitoring, with analyses and visualizations. These results and analyses will also inform our 5-point platform, which will become even more focused and refined with continued work and input from our advisory committee and community members. Supporting our quantitative air quality data will be qualitative data, in the form of interviews with community members. These first hand accounts of living with air pollution are necessary to demonstrate the effects of environmental racism in our community, on a personal level. In concluding Phase 1 and beginning Phase 2, our most important finding is that the moment we find ourselves in, a moment of crisis, reckoning, and ultimately transformation, makes our work, of environmental justice, health, and community development, all the more essential.

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