

This past summer, I had the pleasure of working at WE-ACT for Environmental Justice, a community-based environmental justice nonprofit in Northern Manhattan. WE-ACT has a thirty-year history of grassroots engagement with, and advocacy on behalf of, the residents of Harlem, Washington Heights and Inwood, communities that are disproportionately affected by air pollution, discriminatory zoning practices and toxic exposure.

Primarily, WE-ACT's work expanded my understanding of what environmental justice can mean, particularly in an urban setting. Not only is environmental justice concerned with air, water and food—it also encompasses issues of housing security, emergency preparedness and even language justice.

I worked with WE-ACT's energy justice team, which seeks to empower local communities by strengthening their access to and control over renewable energy systems. One such system is a rooftop solar micro-grid, a configuration that is carbon neutral and which has the potential to be more resilient in the event of a disaster like Hurricane Sandy. By encouraging legislation that enables communities to take control of their energy systems, our team hoped to support the transition to a carbon-neutral economy, and to do it on the terms of urban communities most affected by climate change.

Specifically, I conducted legislative research and drafted legal language on the subject of local hiring, a practice that WE-ACT hopes to codify in renewable energy legislation. Our belief was that the transition to a renewable energy infrastructure ought to create jobs in communities most threatened by environmental harm. However, a number of existing laws (including the US

Constitution) make such a practice difficult. Accordingly, I researched case studies of local hiring practices across the country, most of which took place at the level of cities or municipalities, rather than states.

The nature of a small NGO like WE-ACT is that there's always more to do. I also helped the climate justice team conduct audits of cooling centers during a heat wave in August, collecting data that will be combined with community requests to create legislative proposals for more robust emergency preparedness measures in New York City. This experience in particular demonstrated to me the importance of language justice—some of the residents I interviewed at the various cooling centers spoke only Spanish, and their access to emergency heat relief was entirely dependent on the presence of Spanish-language signage and information.

My summer with WE-ACT taught me that just transformations operate at every scale: in legislative chambers in DC and Albany, at neighborhood meetings and through interpersonal relationships. I'm grateful to the WE-ACT team for showing me that inspired, dedicated environmental justice work can be both fulfilling and joyful, and to the Liman Fellowship for the wonderful opportunity it has given me.