

LETTER FROM THE CONFERENCE STEERING COMMITTEE

Welcome to the *2020 Southeastern Regional Environmental Justice Conference*! We are pleased that so many environmentally conscious citizens could join us to participate in this significant forum. More importantly, we are pleased for the input of the community voices, so essential to the important work that our vulnerable populations in the Southeast region deserve.

This conference is an effort to respond to the quest of regional students for greater understanding of Environmental Justice, given the existential threats of environmental and health crises facing the nation and its vulnerable populations (i.e., "people of color" and "low-income communities"). At the heart of Environmental Justice is "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement" of people of color and low-income communities in policy and budgetary decisions affecting the health and environment of their communities. These communities have historically been over-burdened, intentionally or otherwise, by the disparate impacts of environmental pollution, suffered significant health disparities, and lacked the monetary, political and social capital to protect themselves from the ravages of climate change.

Only in the last twenty years have we seen academia embrace the plight of these compromised communities and begin to insert Environmental Justice in curricula and research. We are especially pleased to see the educational and research emphasis on causes and effects of the disproportionate, negative impacts on health, welfare, and the environment in underserved communities. However, as well intentioned and notable as these research efforts may have been, few have included one essential element; meaningful involvement and engagement of representatives from the communities being researched. Researchers must remain mindful of a central tenet of Environmental Justice communities; "We speak with our own voice."

To that end, we have invited faculty and students to engage with local grass-root communities in exploring and recommending ways forward in promoting new research projects to address these disproportionate and negative environmental and health impacts. It is also the goal of this conference to promote Environmental Justice, Climate Justice, and Health Disparities education and advocacy in academia and communities for the development of future "Environmental Justice Champions."

This conference intends to promote and establish inclusive, collaborative processes between local grass-root communities and academia in research while building "trust" amongst these stakeholders. Such trust partnerships are critical in order to truly and effectively redress the disparate health impacts of pollution and climate change on vulnerable communities.

The Conference Steering Committee wishes to take this opportunity to thank the Rollins School of Public Health and the Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing for hosting the Conference. We also wish to thank the Leadership of Emory University for their support of this historical event. Special thanks to our Presenters, Moderators and Panel Members for their expertise and inspirations. To all of our partners and sponsors, our sincere gratitude. A special acknowledgement is due to the students for their hard work in planning and executing the conference and whose interest was the genesis for our efforts. Finally, and most importantly, we are grateful for the enthusiastic support of participating community members; the success of this conference would not be possible without you.

On behalf of 2020 Southeastern Regional Environmental Justice Conference Steering Committee:

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