Fighting for Equity in a Changing Louisiana

Convergence Partnership

PolicyLink

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PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

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On the Coast

"I grew up in Lucy, Louisiana, on the mighty, mighty Mississippi," recalls Ivy Mathieu. "It's a rural area. My father and uncle did some sugar farming on the side. You ate food seasonally; you worked with the earth." The family house was raised on stilts, to prevent damage in case of flooding.

Now retired, Mathieu lives near her girlhood home, in the town of Laplace. She sits on the St. John Parish Coastal Advisory Committee, and on its Local Advisory Group, which makes recommendations to the parish government on community issues. She's also part of Keep St. John Beautiful, and on the board of the Louisiana Recycle Coalition.

Citizen input. Beautification. Recycling. Those might sound like anodyne activities, but not when you look at the bigger picture. "St. John has nearly the worst air quality in the state," she says. "And we're in Cancer Alley"—an 85-mile stretch of land between New Orleans and Baton Rouge that is home to about 150 fossil fuel and petrochemical plants. Seven out of the 10 census tracts with the highest cancer risk in the nation are located in this deadly corridor. It is no surprise that the place is home to mostly low-income communities of color.

Cancer is just one threat. Further south, wetlands are being lost at the rate of a football field every hour, due in large part to climate change and—no coincidence—drilling and dredging for oil and gas. Land loss means a loss of food sources and jobs and a protection against flooding further inland. That all means the forced migration of potentially hundreds of thousands of people still further inland to Cancer Alley, among other places.

"The large petrochemical industries aren't being held responsible," says Mathieu. These injustices are what led her to take part in LEAD the Coast, a leadership training program for residents wanting to take action on coastal issues. "It was eye opening," she says of the program. "It brings forgotten people to the table. It taught us how to lead. How to make our voices heard. How to build engagement with other citizens. How government works so we can make change."

LEAD the Coast is the latest iteration of the Leadership, Engagement, Advocacy, and Development (LEAD) program, in place since 2013. Run by the Foundation for Louisiana and supported from the beginning by the Convergence Partnership, the LEAD program equips citizens at several sites throughout Louisiana to fight for equity in health, housing, and other areas.

Another participant in the 2019 LEAD the Coast class was Angela Chalk. She is the fourth of five generations to live in a family property in New Orleans. "I came to this work through a conversation with my grand-niece a few years ago, when she was about 13 years old," says Chalk. "She told me about how her school playground was flooding." People in New Orleans are familiar with flooding, but this was a peculiar case. There began Chalk's personal research into sea level rise and climate change.

"This was all foreign to me at the time," she recalls. "I'm retired after 31 years working on public health with the state government, and this is not what I thought I was doing in retirement. But in the African American community, we believe to whom much is given much is required." She studied the problem more deeply, got an airboat tour of the wetlands, and even testified before the US Congress on climate change, land loss, and citizen response. Even after working in government her whole career, "I never saw a process like this, where the community figures out what it wants and organizes and gets it."

LEAD is the first of three components in an annual cycle of a larger program called the TOGETHER Initiative. First comes training in equity issues and advocacy skills with LEAD. Second is an Equity Caucus that brings together the most active LEAD participants and community-based partner organizations to develop strategies to push for policy change. Third is a grant cycle during which the Foundation for Louisiana invests in the strategies created during the second phase.

After the training program, Chalk and several other participants created an urban storm-water strategy, where in 18 sites they have projects to prevent flooding from storms. "We're adamant about leaving a tangible asset with the community—not to just learn and leave," says Chalk.

Mathieu and Chalk are just two of the participants from the most recent LEAD the Coast group—some of the deepest grassroots organizers tackling the toughest challenges in their area. "People living in coastal communities are exhausted with having government contractors or people from 'up the road,' 'up the river,' or 'up the bayou' come and tell them what to do in their own communities," says Alfredo Cruz, former vice president of programs and special initiatives at the Foundation for Louisiana. "That's why nurturing local leadership is so important. The Foundation recruits LEAD participants from the Black and Indigenous communities most impacted, so that leaders and decisions in the coastal and climate space better represent the state's diverse population."

Every year, the Foundation, with support from the Convergence Partnership, is deepening grassroots leadership in racial and health equity.

Up North

The need for local leadership is palpable throughout the state. LEAD, and the larger TOGETHER Initiative, are also at work in Monroe, in northeastern Louisiana. "There are really two Monroes," says Cruz. "One is wealthier and Whiter, the other is primarily low income and African American."

On the south side, where much of the population is low income and African American, you can find Eva Dyann Wilson, who has a family history of activism. "My mom was part of a community organizing group, starting back in the Civil Rights era. They would say, 'We didn't just get a degree in politics from the university, we lived community organizing every day.'" The organization, called SCIA, or Southside Community Involvement Association, went into hiatus many years ago. But then, in about 2010, Wilson and some neighbors decided to resurrect it. They do clothing drives, host candidates' forums, advocate around blight, and support neighborhood schools. "I love being engaged," she says.

Wilson took part in LEAD in 2019. She was one of 20 participants who met weekly for seven weeks, discussing such topics as race, power, privilege, policy, advocacy, organizing, and partnering with the government. Her interest in the LEAD program was "to have more boots on the ground." A lot of the participants knew each other already—the circle of activists in the community is small—but, she says, "we met some new people, and we made a stronger net."

One of the younger participants in LEAD was Tyree Hollins. "My mom was on welfare, and she couldn't afford to buy a home, and even rent was hard to make. I had anxiety and depression at a young age. When I was 12, I was probably at the darkest place in my life that I've ever been. I got involved in the community centers; that kept me out of trouble. Enrichment programs, baseball, football, soccer—you name it." Hollins even went on to play professional ball at the Canadian Football League for four years.

Now age 27, Hollins is a mental health specialist, providing psychosocial services in Monroe and surrounding areas. He also founded an organization called the Free Me Association that provides sporting events for kids, after-school programs, family fun days, classes in parenting and financial literacy, and more. Hollins is part of a younger generation of community activists and says more are needed. He got involved in LEAD because "I wanted to advocate more for my community, so I needed to know the ins and outs."

The LEAD program helped equip Hollins and other participants with practical tools, such as understanding land use and how decisions about urban development are made. They met with Monroe city officials, one of whom was Ellen Hill, head of planning and urban development. "We're working on both sides of the problem," says Hill. "On the one hand, tearing down blight or bringing it up to code, and on the other hand creating new housing."

With a background in community organizing, Hill tries to get Monroe residents involved in the work of her office. A "blight boot camp" teaches residents about how blight harms the community, and how to help the city enforce housing codes. A housing initiative helps residents become developers. Monroe needs community activists as much as the people need government, says Hill. "Since I've been here, I've looked at how we engage the community in a different way, as partners," says Hill. "If we're going to develop, the community has to be part of it."

In her session for the LEAD program, Hill talked about her department, showed participants the city's comprehensive plan, and did an exercise in community planning using the city zoning map. The LEAD program helped participants understand how "they can be part of the change," says Hill. Some LEAD participants are working constructively with government officials—"engaged to get results."

Indeed, after the LEAD program, the group decided to collaborate with the city to create programs at the community center, such as a new paint job, expanded hours of service, and new programs such as a reading program for seventh and eighth graders. In other words, Hollins says, "We're recreating the resources that helped me so much as a kid."

Grassroots Generations

In each site where the LEAD program operates—be it the Gulf Coast, Monroe, or in earlier years New Orleans—the Foundation for Louisiana stays with LEAD participants after they graduate, helps them develop policy strategies, and makes grants to carry out the highest-potential strategies. They've been doing this since 2013. That means the bench of local grassroots leadership is getting deeper wherever the Foundation works, and their impact is getting wider as the years pass.

Consider the example of Tyrone Casby, a participant in the 2014 class of LEAD, which that year focused on the cultural economy of New Orleans. Casby is known as the Big Chief of the Mohawk Hunters, a tribe of Mardi Gras Indians—one of the most storied and treasured aspects of the city's culture. Mardi Gras is an African American practice that combines African culture, French American traditions, and homage to Native Americans, who helped enslaved people during the antebellum period. Mardi Gras Indian chiefs—or the more longstanding "Big Chiefs," such as Casby—spend nearly all year creating elaborate beaded costumes that they wear during Mardi Gras, parading around the city streets.

"My great uncle started the Mohawk Hunters in the 30s and 40s. At four years old, the drumbeats caught my passion," says Casby. The Mardi Gras Indians are hugely meaningful for New Orleanians, and they also contribute to the city's $8-billion-a-year tourism industry. The problem is, the Indians themselves see almost none of that money.

"The LEAD program enlightened me," says Casby. "It taught us how to write a proposal, a business plan, articulate your goals, your work, your outcomes." That was important, he explains, because, "being from the street, a lot of those technical skills weren't there." Thanks in part to what he learned from the LEAD program, and with ongoing support from the Foundation for Louisiana, Casby was instrumental in working with the Mardi Gras Indian Council in securing a $500,000 ArtPlace America grant to create a Mardi Gras Indian campus, a place for the Indians to tell their own story through exhibits, workshops, and performances, and to reap some of the financial benefits from the city's tourism industry.

Another participant in the 2014 LEAD program was Andreanecia Morris, who had experience in government and with community development corporations. She joined the LEAD subgroup focused on housing equity as a community-based housing expert. In the years after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005 and the levees broke, flooding the city, "it was inconceivable how bad it was with housing," says Morris. "People couldn't get building permits, there was impossible red tape."

Morris and the other LEAD participants agreed that New Orleans needed an affordable housing plan. After the program, she and selected others did six months of data analysis, and eight months of community education and engagement with "the unusual suspects"—including "not in my neighborhood" associations. In time, that work turned into Housing NOLA, an organization that works to increase affordable housing in New Orleans. Morris is now that organization's executive director.

Housing NOLA released an affordable housing plan in 2015, and every year since then has issued a housing report card for the city. "We're telling voters who is and is not doing their work," Morris says, and that provides a solid basis for holding officials accountable, and doing advocacy campaigns.

Morris says that housing work is intersectional. "You have to have an address if you want to register to vote. If you get out of prison, you're more likely to reoffend if you don't have a home where you can get services. Education, too—you can't learn if you're homeless," she explains. "We're continuing to put pressure on our public officials."

The Pace—And Priorities—Of Community

From Andreanecia Morris and Tyrone Casby in 2014, to people such as Tyree Hollins and Ivy Mathieu in the most recent classes of the LEAD program, the Foundation for Louisiana is training and supporting generations of grassroots leaders throughout Louisiana.

"Support from the Convergence Partnership has enabled the Foundation to accomplish many things in partnership with community leaders," says Cruz. Although Cruz left his role at the Foundation for Louisiana in December 2019, he continues to work with cities in central and north Louisiana to help address issues of affordable housing and racial disparities.

"Convergence funding has allowed us to talk about the role of racism in creating inequities in the areas of health, housing, and the impacts of climate change—and to develop strategies to address those inequities," says Cruz. "Convergence funding has allowed the Foundation to move at the pace of community." That's on top of practical, financial matters—positioning the Foundation and its community partners to secure other funding, such as the ArtPlace America grant for the Mardi Gras Indians campus, and a $5 million grant in the works to create a plan for equitable neighborhoods. Some LEAD alumni are now in positions of leadership, championing ways to achieve greater equity. What's more, says Cruz, "they're taking more and more ownership of the LEAD program by working with foundation staff to help design future cohorts and participate in fellowships created for them. The Foundation is here to support them."

In January 2019, the City of Monroe lost one its fiercest community leaders—Berna Dean Jones remained active as a city planning commissioner and as a leader in the community group SCIA until her death at age 86. During her funeral service, many people spoke of her legacy and dedication to the southside community. Monroe city council members spoke at a regular meeting of her legacy. One of them asked others to step up and continue the work she had led to improve the southside. He scarcely needed to ask; many others had already taken up the call.

Cruz agrees, saying, "Mrs. Jones left some very big shoes to fill. But many community residents have realized 'we need 20 Mrs. Jones.' In Monroe and throughout Louisiana, we're working to create new generations of leadership to champion racial equity and justice."

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