

Transcript

Virgil

Why do you think environmental justice is important to you personally?

Lucy

I believe all people are entitled to a safe living environment, one free of harm. I think any entity or being that threatens that right must be held accountable. The Environmental justice movement has helped create an avenue for those that may be voiceless or have limited ability [access] to implement change due to different social constructs and exploitive practices. While pursuing environmental justice, other discriminatory social structures that disproportionately impact certain populations and communities, they're also challenged, which is great. So, it's not just a win for environmental protection, but also health equity.

Virgil

I agree, that's pretty solid take. Well, seeing that environmental justice is such a really important idea for society as a whole, what do you think has been some highlights or key points in NIH's past with environmental justice as a topic? Because, not to brag, but the NIH has definitely had a hand in helping towards this.

Lucy

(laughter) I'm hesitant on this one just because I'm not the authority. But I do think, in line with the NIH mission: NIH research is dynamic, rapidly evolving to address threats to human health and well-being, which can be seen through the establishment of NIMHD, NIEHS, NICHD and so forth. And the recent executive orders, 14057 and 14096, have helped unify this effort, and bring light [to] a lot of the great work being done, and help advance and also mobilize resources for communities disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards and stressors.

Virgil

It's good to see that we have a pretty solid past and I know we're moving forward with more things with environmental justice and NIH, but we're in a pretty peculiar position as an agency. What do you think are our current strong areas and areas of improvement when it comes to environmental justice?

Lucy

I have to give credit to the NIEHS Environmental Career Worker Training Program led by Sharon Beard, which is also a part of the White House Justice 40 Initiative, which aims to deliver 40 percent of the overall benefits from Federal investments in climate change, clean energy, workforce development, and pollution remediation to disadvantaged communities. We should probably better define the WTP and Justice 40... I'm sure you can do that in your own text?

[The Environmental Career Worker Training Program (ECWTP) provides comprehensive training for individuals from disadvantaged and underserved communities to obtain careers in environmental cleanup, construction, hazardous waste removal, and emergency response.]

All Justice40 covered programs are required to engage in stakeholder consultation and ensure that community stakeholders are meaningfully involved in determining program benefits. Covered programs are also required to report data on the benefits directed to disadvantaged communities.]

Virgil

Yeah, yeah!

Lucy

But I think that's definitely our current strong [suit] if you had to pick one action or one activity. It fully encompasses the concepts of environmental justice, empowering communities and preventing future hazard and harm.

And [for] improvement, I think we are looking at capturing all that goes on and making that information more widely available . So, putting research to action and finding ways that we can better serve as an agency.

Virgil

I think that was a pretty good overview of what we're doing agency-wide. If we zoom into you and your position, how do you hope to impact NIH's environmental justice commitments in your role specifically? And could you clarify your role as it pertains to environmental justice as well?

Lucy

Yes. First I'll say: I hope to really shine light on the great work being done and further connect the NIH mission with the environmental justice movement, ensuring NIH operations do not disproportionately impact communities that have been historically marginalized or further contribute to legacy pollution, and also delivering research to not just prevent harm, but also correct and adjust the different impacts experienced. My role in terms of environmental justice: as a member of the ORF Division of Environmental Protection, as an Environmental Protection specialist, I help facilitate the implementation and full incorporation [of] environmental justice into the NIH's operations with consideration to climate resiliency and operational continuity. If I had to define it.

Virgil

Very cool!

Lucy

And communicating all that goes on as a liaison between NIH and HHS, so that the White House is fully informed of ongoing efforts and what work is being done to address the requirements put forth of the various executive orders.

Virgil

Excellent! Before we move on, I'm going to throw you a little bit of a curveball.

Lucy

OK!

Virgil

Just for an example, since both you and I understand how the NIH possibly could impact marginalized communities with some of its actions, but maybe our readers might not. Could you give [an] example of how, in the past, some of these legacy pollutions might have impacted marginalized communities, just as a point of reference?

Lucy

Legacy pollution refers to persistent pollutants that entered the environment through [previous] anthropogenic activity, such as mining sites or industrial parks, and impose harmful health and environmental effects. While some processes took place before there was widespread awareness of the potential impacts, many industries advantageously sought out jurisdictions with little or no environmental monitoring or regulation as public knowledge began to grow of the dangers associated with living nearby. Communities became burdened by [and still face] groundwater or soil contamination, toxic emissions, land subsidence, and overall habitat degradation – further complicating overall quality of life.

Virgil

Yeah, just [looking] for reference for how the NIH has [had] concrete improvements with environmental justice. What [are the] legacy pollutions or other activities we're pursuing to ensure that we don't impact these marginalized communities?

Lucy

NIH has a dedicated role and, specifically ORF DEP, with implementing the National Environmental Policy Act process throughout all of our operations, which ensures consideration is given to potential environmental impacts as well as EJ impacts, ensuring we're making the best decision and actions, given possible restraints.

As a response to these executive orders and the Biden Harris administration's prioritization of EJ, we're also reassessing the areas that our operations could be impacting. [A] big area for consideration is waste, [we know] Waste must go somewhere. But, while we're limited to restricting that flow of waste, there's further considerations into: what can we do to potentially address or at least further support communities near waste disposal sites,

Waste encompasses construction, operations, demolition, decommissioning; so ensuring everything that does leave this campus is decontaminated or properly identified [for] potential toxicants and hazards is imperative. And provides informed decision making [and] awareness for those that are in those surrounding areas where our waste [is disposed or our] energy is procured. Keeping that line of communication open, [ensuring] everything's transparent, [promoting] community awareness for those that could be impacted.

Virgil

Well, that's good! You also answered my next question here about the future of NIH. But if you wanted to dive deeper into that one, how do you envision environmental justice changing the future of NIH?

Lucy

Consideration to EJ leads to a more informed and socially aware workforce. Hopefully this will be reflected in NIH research and influence how staff interact with their workplace, creating a more conscientious environment. Also, empower[ing] others to be fully aware of what they're contributing each day and bridging the gap between this disconnect that could be seen between our daily operations for research and the human experience.

Virgil

Interesting! This has been very informative at a pretty broad and general level as well. We've reviewed the past, the present, and the future of environmental justice. You've given us some pretty good insights as to what the NIH is dealing with. But, whenever I do these interviews, I also have to recognize that I come from a limited perspective, and I can only ask the questions that I know to ask. So, is there anything else around this topic that that you'd like to share with us?

Lucy

The NIEHS Division of External Research and Training facilitates many great programs and centers benefiting environmental health disparities and environmental justice so I would recommend exploring their resources. There's also the NIEHS Environmental Health Disparities and Environmental Justice (EHD-EJ) Faculty so I'd like to highlight them also as a great resource to learn about how the NIH is working to advance EJ The NIH-wide Climate Change and Health Initiative and Working Group is also a great platform for researchers to connect and learn how climate change research is connected to human health, disparities and opportunities to further integrate EJ into research and IC activities. [the working group] also helps create a more dynamic solution [for], or at least [a better] understanding of, how our changing world could potentially further impact historically marginalized communities or create new communities of disproportionate burden.

Virgil

That concludes all of the questions here. If you're willing, I have one more curveball question if you'd like...

Lucy

Sure!

Virgil

I really like how you summarized the way that NIH as a whole is tackling these environmental justice mandates and why it's important to go after them. I was wondering: do you think there is any way the average NIH employee might be able to help with any of these initiatives? Whether it's something that they could do concretely and physically, or if it's just like a change in perspective that they could have. But how could our reader help out in all this?

Lucy

By being informed on the topic. Acknowledging your [certain] privileges, and how basic rights are not as easily accessible or even available to others. Consideration to where we are and [where] each individual

is on their own. Once someone has given this consideration, maybe this will help expand how the issue of environmental justice can be further integrated and even connected to work being done here. That might help open avenues to explore how EJ can be further supported at work and beyond. '

Virgil

Perfect. Thank you so much for your time.

Lucy

Thank you for having me!