

Transcript

Virgil

You are the senior POC for environmental justice as it relates to mandates from EO 14057. What does environmental justice mean to you personally and how has it influenced your research?

Dr. Archer

Personally, I think environmental justice is really about fairness. We all recognize that there are lots of events that influence how we're able to live our lives. Exposure to certain environmental conditions, hazards, dumps, toxic waste sites, industrial sites – those are not equally distributed across the population. Environmental justice means that we really want to have everybody treated fairly and that their treatment should not be influenced by social factors such as race or ethnicity, color, national origin, income, where you live. You should have access to fair application of all the relevant environmental laws, regulations and policies.

It's about making sure that there is truly equal treatment and so that no particular communities or groups are subjected to, for example, unusually significant amounts of pollution, whether they come from an industrial source or from a natural disaster, such as a hurricane. How people [are] responded [to] and how they are treated, that is important. Environmental justice is all about trying to make sure we have fair access to what's good in the environment and protection from what we considered deleterious or bad.

Virgil

This is a very important and crucial thing to take into consideration. With that in mind, according to my notes, it says June 20th, 2023, is when the [news] came out about you being the senior POC for this initiative. How did that make you feel, receiving that news and knowing that you'd be spearheading this initiative?

Dr. Archer

(laughter) Yeah! First of all, the requests to the Health and Human Services Secretary, Secretary Becerra, was to all of the various operating divisions within HHS to identify who they referred to as the “senior leader point of contact”. [This person] would be responsible for overseeing the generation of a set of initiatives on environmental justice. I was, of course, honored to be tasked to take this on, but also daunted, realizing it was a very short timeline on which they wanted us to come up with a set of initiatives. More importantly, this was a mandate that came without a budget.

Virgil

Right.

Dr. Archer

Our ability to be able to propose and execute a set of initiatives would, of course, be even more challenging, with that lack of a budget. But I think the reason for my selection comes from the fact that our institute, the Environmental Health Sciences Institute, has had a long history of involvement in

environmental justice and a very strong commitment to those principles over many years. For myself personally, I've had a strong commitment to issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion. [I've also] spent some time as one of the initial coaches of the UNITE Initiative, and I think that put me on the radar for NIH leadership; Dr. Tabak and Dr. Schwetz at the time. I think the logic of NIEHS and my involvement is what ended up giving me this opportunity to lead this initiative.

Virgil

You're well-qualified! It's a cool and extensive history.

Dr. Archer

Yeah!

Virgil

You were coming into this with a lot of prior experience but, as we know, time flies and a lot can happen in just one year. What do you think are some of the interesting things that you've learned over this past year in your role or things that you'd really want the NIH staff to know that were accomplished in just under a year here?

Dr. Archer

One thing I'd really want to emphasize is that this has been a collective effort. While I've been designated as the POC, the work has really been done by many of our colleagues across the NIH, spearheaded in part by some of my local colleagues at the NIEHS. We have had a very extensive history and a reactive faculty group that works in environmental justice and health disparities. We were able to collaborate with colleagues from more than 20 ICs and more than 70 individuals at one time. [This collaboration helped] to generate the three initiatives that we have proposed and begun to do some work with.

What [this has] reminded me [of] is how dedicated our staff and colleagues at NIH are with things that they're passionate about and their ability to do the hard work. [They even] find the time outside of our normal duties and jobs to really work on something that we think is important for NIH and the nation.

Virgil

Absolutely yes. Like you said earlier, with this collaboration with a lot of different NIEHS resources, you all have had environmental justice as a part of your history. It's not something new. A lot of people might see EO 14057 and think it's a new initiative, but I believe [this] went back to the Clinton Administration with EO 12898. How have you seen the environmental justice movement evolve over these past couple of decades since the Clinton Administration?

Dr. Archer

I wasn't around at the Clinton Administration!

Virgil

Ah! (laughter)

Dr. Archer

(laughter) I don't have that extensive experience, but our institute has. That initiative you mentioned came out in 1994. In '94, NIEHS, under the direction of Dr. Ken Olden, led to one of the first summits on this area, bringing together expertise from across the country to develop ideas and principles and to begin supporting research. NIEHS and other NIH institutes have been supporting research in environmental justice from the mid-90s. What we have seen over those 30 years or so is a significant uptake and appreciation across many of the institutes like Cancer (NCI), Child Health Development (NICHD), and of course Minority Health (NIMHD), which was stood up after the 90s.

Where we've grown is [in] an appreciation [of the fact] that environmental justice is really a part of all the biomedical research we do. There are aspects that come into play when we think about how we deal with [issues] as consistent as cancer to more recently the COVID pandemic. [The pandemic] really illustrated some of the ways the health disparities and environmental justice lead to communities being disproportionately affected. We can feel really excited about the work that's gone on, but the work that's also ongoing and the work we'll do in the future is where the real potential lies.

Virgil

You hit on an interesting perspective I want to highlight here: environmental justice permeates through all different avenues of biomedical research. I've met a lot of people whose perspective is, "we work at NIH, we work in NCI, NIA, maybe we're an engineer, but how do we fit into the EJ equation?" What do you think would be one key take away or piece of info that all NIH staff should know about environmental justice?

Dr. Archer

One thing we should know is that [environmental justice] affects us either directly or indirectly every day, from the ways that we are exposed. For example, if you are unfortunate enough to [live in] a neighborhood where there is a major traffic thoroughfare that goes through there, you have increased exposure to particulate matters. You have increased exposure to noise. Whereas if you are fortunate to live in a more suburban area, you may have a much more positive [interaction] with the environment.

The ideas about justice really affect where we live and how we live, not only the work that we do. At NIEHS, much of the work that we do in the various types of disease centric and public health [spaces] really have important components of environmental justice. Think about the disproportionate impact of metabolic diseases, and those are, in part, due to perhaps food deserts or the unavailability of high-quality nutrition. That's something which I think we can all relate to because of the obesity pandemic, which is affecting not only the US, but really the world, [given] people not having access to good food. Those are parts of the environmental justice framework.

Virgil

It's interesting to see how all these different elements coalesce. I remember earlier you were talking about three different actions that you're really going to pour into. I know those things are moving along – I'm part of that EJ working group, so it's neat to hear those updates. Of everything that NIH is doing and NIEHS, what are you most looking forward to, out of all those different initiatives and actions?

Dr. Archer

I'm most looking forward to us actually engaging in the initiatives. Very briefly, the three initiatives involve:

Our renewal of our Environmental Health Disparity (EHD) centers, which is an ongoing collaboration between NIEHS, NIMHD, and NICHD. We have three centers across the country. One of the things that this initiative has done is identified new funding. We really hope to double the number of environmental centers we have across the country. I think that's going to have a huge impact.

The second is an approach to reach out to Environmental Justice Scholars from across the nation and bring them into the NIH on a visiting basis so that they can embed the principles of environmental justice [in our culture]. To the question you asked earlier, how do we understand how environmental justice affects what we do? This is an opportunity to learn from well-established and esteemed scholars from across the country who will come into the various NIH institutes, interact with the staff and faculty, produce lectures, have engagement, so that we emphasize that.

The third initiative is really working on building our capacity within our communities by what we call Environmental Justice Training. This is an opportunity to have interactions again with NIH staff at all levels and with the communities that are impacted so that we can understand, 'how do we have the proper training so everyone can have a fuller appreciation of what environmental justice can do?' and more importantly, how they can act to promote that. Again, fulfilling the mission of the NIH, which is to improve our human health and well-being.

Virgil

With all of this in mind, with all the different initiatives that we're pursuing in the NIEHS sphere and overall, as an entire organization – we zoom into the average Joe, the average Jane, your run-of-the-mill researcher or engineer. How can staff members [on my] level get involved and advance environmental justice?

Dr. Archer

There are a number of ways [and] some are about to come. For an example, we are about to launch an NIH Internet website which will make this information more broadly available to our colleagues. We have identified more than 70 individuals within the different ICs and centers who have been participating as part of this working group. We're asking those members to reach out to others in their individual ICs and units to make them aware of this project.

We actually have an open invitation to anyone who, for example, reads this article and is interested. You're welcome to contact me and then I could put them in contact with various individuals who are working on the initiatives or with the general working group itself.

Finally, a large part of what we think environmental justice is, is about community involvement. Particularly, we think of it as a collaborative model. Rather than we at NIH going to a community and saying, "we're going to fix this problem for you", what we want to do is encourage people to engage with their communities and understand the issues, then jointly design solutions that can address the problems. Often, the perception of the problem may be different from the reality on the ground, and we can only get that [reality] by engaging the community.

There's an opportunity for all of us as individuals and NIH colleagues to engage with our local communities and our IC leads on environmental justice to contribute to [these] projects. It's immensely rewarding because there are many problems which are very difficult and very intractable, but there are a number of things that we *can* do and there are examples where we can show that we can make a difference. That's really what we're trying to do with this set of initiatives.

Virgil

I'm excited for the future!

Dr. Archer

Absolutely.

Virgil

Is there anything else you wanted to share?

Dr. Archer

Again, I just emphasize that this has been a collaborative project across more than 20 of the institutes and centers. We've engaged with more than 70 different colleagues. Our people have been very dedicated in putting these efforts together. I really want to shout out to our NIEHS institutional leadership Dr. Rick Woychik. Our director has been a stalwart supporter of this, providing some initial 'seed' resources to develop the program.

Importantly, [I'd like] to recognize that even in these significantly challenging economic times, we have had ICs pledge more than \$9 million in funding to these initiatives going forward. We really are excited about this commitment that we've seen from NIH leadership and individual institute leaders by putting [down] money, which is really the currency that's going to make a difference.

Look out for the website that's coming up, and then we will be reaching out to the individual ICs to have them really engage with our staff members as we make this a truly NIH-wide activity.

Virgil

Excellent.