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Houston, We Have a Problem: Still Fighting Against Environmental Injustice

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Refineries and train tracks in Manchester, Texas.

As my dear friend Maria Jimenez often has stated, the stories of the neighborhoods of Manchester and Galena Park in Houston are examples of environmental racism. And having read the recent report “[Double Jeopardy in Houston](#)” makes it perfectly clear that she is without a doubt correct in her remarks. Manchester and Galena Park are predominantly Hispanic and low-income East Houston communities. Compared to two primarily white and wealthier West Houston communities, these neighborhoods not only face disproportionately high levels of toxic air pollution, they also contain more high-risk facilities. The east Houston communities also have a higher proportion of their population living closer to these dangerous facilities. These communities are forced to suffer disproportionate health impacts which are amplified by lack of access to public transportation, health care, and healthy foods. There are no other words for this than environmental racism.

[The Executive Order on Environmental Justice](#) was signed on February 16, 1994. This seems like a long time—and it is—yet we need to ask, what have we done to help communities like Manchester and Galena Park? Environmental justice (EJ) should not be something we write about to solely point out EJ communities in our midst. It should be, as this report indicates, a call to action by placing emphasis on the [recommendations](#) for what our decision makers can and should do to address these issues. Growing up, I remember family, friends, and teachers telling me, “Where there’s a will there’s a way”. Surely, those empowered in the political arena, at the national, state, and local levels should be able to enforce environmental laws and regulations in support of EJ communities. Of course, many of our decision makers in Houston, and Texas overall, don’t see eye to eye on environmental rules, regulations, policies, guidance, and/or standards, with the national Environmental Protection Agency. But the way forward is not to figure out who to blame, but to figure out who is going to help these communities and others in similar circumstances.



So where do we go from here? Do we remain silent on addressing environmental justice issues for communities such as Manchester and Galena Park? No. We must move forward with the courage and political will to address major environmental issues affecting communities of color in low-income areas. Manchester and Galena

Park are just two communities, in the Greater Houston metro complex living under similar circumstances—and there are many others across the nation. In Houston, we have a problem with environmental racism—and the time to do something about it is now.

Juan Parras is the director of [TEJAS](#). He has been organizing environmental justice communities since the signing of executive order 12898 in 1994. Juan was an original member of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, and has served on many other boards such as the Gulf Restoration Network, National Childhood Lead Prevention Program, and the Center for Health and Environmental Justice (CHEJ). He is currently an environmental justice Ambassador for the Gulf of Mexico Alliance. Juan received the CEC Synergy Award in 2008 and the Sealy Center for Environmental Health & Medicine HERO Award in 2009.

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