

Subcommittee on Energy of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology Hearing

“Building Technologies Research for a Sustainable Future.”

TESTIMONY—Jacqueline Patterson, NAACP

People have been surprised to hear why the NAACP, as a Civil Rights organization, has a program that focuses on the energy sector, much less the sustainable buildings sector.

However, as one considers the extreme disparities in quality, safety, and health of the places where African American communities especially live, learn work, play, and worship, one must examine the differentials through the lens of a complex set of intersection individual, familial, community, and societal factors and systems intersectional with social, economic, political constructs. And all of these factors are tied to our civil and human rights.

In our nation, that means who you are and where you live matter to one’s relationship with each and every one of these systems and factors:

For African Americans, historic social, political, and economic disenfranchisement has been detrimental to generational wellbeing while culture, brilliance, and sheer survivalist grit have been protective factors.

This all intersects with the building sector in myriad ways.... It has been 400 years since the start of since the first enslaved Africans arrived after making the TransAtlantic journey as commoditized cargo in the hulls of ships. Though emancipation came in 1863, enslavement takes many forms. And in many, institutionalized ways, structural racism continues to exploit and oppress every second of every minute, of every hour of every day and that extends to the places we call home, work, school, faith houses, critical service hubs, and recreational centers....

In 1861 and 1862 the United States government passed the Morill and Homestead Acts, which were intended to give land grants to white Americans for colleges and those seeking land to farm. These acts were also accompanied by offers of subsidies to facilitate the acquisition and use of the land. As slavery was not abolished in the United States until 1865, many enslaved and free blacks were unable to benefit from these acts.^[1] Lack of legal services meant that African Americans who managed to acquire land couldn’t even write legally binding wills that would facilitate legalize inheritance of property

Overall economic insecurity has resulted in extreme income and wealth differentials that persists over centuries. Even now, at \$171,000, the net worth of a typical white family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family (\$17,150) And for black single women headed households, the average family net worth is \$5

At 44% African Americans are least likely to be homeowners versus 75% for white Americans and 65% overall for the nation.

Historic and modern-day redlining practices impact everything from whether we own homes, where we own homes, and the quality of the homes and other resources to which we have access. Also impacted is the quality of the infrastructure in our communities such as levees that protect our homes and property values that finance our schools, which also affects the quality of the buildings in which our schools are housed.

Siting of our communities in flood plains, urban heat Islands, near toxic facilities, and supported only by crumbling Infrastructureall of this put our communities at compounded risk.

Quality buildings/structures in our communities mean that our communities are inundated by energy burden which challenges our finances, indoor air pollution which sickens our families, and poor housing stock which renders us vulnerable to disaster impacts.

African Americans have the highest energy burden which means that the amount of income that goes towards energy in the buildings we occupy is the highest of any other racial and ethnic group. African Americans are also more likely to have our energy shut off for non-payment, too often with fatal impacts as we pay the price of poverty and racism with our very lives when a candle or a space heater, or carbon monoxide has taken the lives of too many seeking to heat or light our homes when our finances can't meet the demands of our bills.

Yet, we're more likely to suffer from the pollution being emitted from energy production as we are more likely to live near coal fired power plants, oil and gas refineries, waste to energy incinerators, etc. and we pay the price with our health. We are also more likely to bear the impacts of climate change that results from emissions from buildings.

We also know that energy improvements (weatherization, retrofits, solar, etc.) are tied to homeownership and credit ratings which are compromised by the historic and current factors I've already described.

COVID 19 means we are in buildings more due to remote working, and due to the need for isolation which means we are using more energy and are also more exposed to indoor air pollution

With 2020 being the hottest year on record and it's part of a progression of increasingly hotter years, as well as greater weather extremes, our ability to cool our homes and heat our homes reliably and affordably becomes increasingly more critical.

YET communities and populations most impacted by these disparities are under-represented in the building sectors and professions including those working on Building Standards Orgs, Architects, and beyond. For example, .03% certified architects are black women

Key steps to right the historic and present-day wrongs include: 1) campaign finance reform so that monied interests don't have their thumb on the scales of the change we need to have energy justice for all; 2) dismantling the "Weapons of Math Destruction" including the formulas that tie property values with quality of infrastructure and services at the local level; 3) increasing investments in BIPOC education and leadership in STEM; 4) resources for job and business opportunities for BIPOC communities; and more.

In 2018, the NAACP launched the Centering Equity in the Sustainable Buildings Sector Initiative with the following goals: Diversifying leadership and decision making in the buildings sector; Equity based principles and standards; and Shift investments to infrastructure and buildings in low income/low wealth communities and BIPOC communities. To achieve its aims, the Centering Equity in the Sustainable Building Sector Initiative consists of sustainable Building organizations, architects/landscape architects, affordable housing professionals, public health workers, educators, energy advocates and others,

Practices and measures of the CESBS include training and education, design charrettes, model projects in communities, equity-based community participatory research, score card projects for evaluation of progress towards equity, and policy change, including equity-based building codes.

When it comes to centering equity in the building sector, we must get out of a scarcity mentality. It is possible to design our buildings to be regenerative and to be based on biomimicry so that we are living in harmony with nature. It is possible for us to reduce the amount of energy that we are using and stop wasting 45% of the energy we generate. It is possible for us to generate the energy we need from natural sources such as wind and solar. It is possible for us ALL to have buildings where we live, learn, work, play, and pray that are energy efficient, safe, and healthy.

What we need is the radical imagination, innovation, investment, and the bold action to make these possibilities reality at scale.