

# "Breath to the People" Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution POLICY ADVOCACY TOOLKIT



UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST



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## INTRODUCTION

In a new report, *Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Air Pollution*, the United Church of Christ, in partnership with researchers at the Environmental Integrity Project, has identified 100 “super polluters” emitting toxic chemicals that put nearby communities at risk across the United States. The public health risk of these polluters cannot be understated, and the lack of regard they have for the communities living in their proximity is not just in violation of existing Clean Air Act standards, it is callous and it is immoral. As noted in the report, “Young children are often the most susceptible to air pollution because they breathe at higher rates and because their developing brains and bodies are more sensitive to certain types of pollution.” No one’s health should be at risk simply because of where they live.

This report is a continuation of the work done by the United Church of Christ in the environmental justice space, starting with the 1987 groundbreaking report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* released by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. The report was significant because it found race to be the most potent variable in predicting where commercial hazardous waste facilities were located in the U.S., more powerful than household income, the value of homes and the estimated amount of hazardous waste generated by industry.

This advocacy toolkit is a supplement guide for the 2020 report, “Breath to the People”: Sacred Air and Toxic Air Pollution, to help you and your congregation take action, urging Members of Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency to hold companies accountable and make sure people are protected. Advocacy in the United Church of Christ depends on congregations and their members. This policy advocacy guide includes helpful information for your congregation to organize and advocate for environmental justice.

As special thank you to Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (T.E.J.A.S.), the Children's Environmental Health Network and Earthjustice for their guidance and support for building the policy recommendations provided in this toolkit.



## REPORT KEY FINDINGS

- 1) 100 Plants in Populated Areas across the US are responsible for 39 percent of the toxic air emissions reported in 2018 yet they represent less than one percent of the over 15,500 facilities that reported toxic air emissions to the government.
- 2) An estimated 11,500 children live under the age of five within a mile of "The Toxic 100," while 112,500 live within three miles. Young children are often the most susceptible to air pollution because they breathe at higher rates and because their developing brains and bodies are more sensitive to certain types of pollution
- 3) Across the U.S., an estimated 169,654 people live within a mile of a facility on the Toxic 100 list and 1.6 million people, about the population of the city of Phoenix, AZ, live within three miles of one.
- 4) Within one mile of "The Toxic 100" facilities, forty-four percent of the population is low income, which is significantly higher than the national average of just under 33 percent.
- 5) At the national level, the percentage of people of color or Hispanics or Latinos, low-income residents, and children under five living within one mile of the Toxic 100 were all higher than national averages.
- 6) Nearly a quarter of the emissions from the Toxic 100 facilities came from leaks, which can go undetected for long periods with little to no pollution controls in place. Moreover, leaks are more likely to be inhaled at high concentrations by people living immediately downwind or just beyond a facility's property line.
- 7) The Houston metropolitan area experienced the highest amount of toxic air releases in 2018 with a total of 410 facilities around Houston releasing 288 million tons of toxicity-weighted air pollution. This accounts for 6 percent of the 4.8 billion tons of toxic emissions reported nationally. Ten of the Toxic 100 facilities are located in the Houston metropolitan area.



8) Overarching observation made possible by the report: Because of the rapid expansion of the chemical industry, because of the enormous impact of super-emitters, and because of the significant dangers presented by leaks, it is important to note that the current administration is decreasing environmental vigilance and protection at precisely the time when all the signs tell us that we should be increasing vigilance and protection.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based off of these findings we recommend the following measures to be taken by Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency:

### **HALT THE ROLLBACK OF IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION REGULATIONS BY THE EPA, ESPECIALLY REDUCTION IN MERCURY AND AIR TOXICS STANDARDS.**

Over the past few years the administration has rolled back a number of regulations that were enacted for public health by keeping our air and water clean. The Environmental Integrity Project has a comprehensive list of these rollbacks. The connection is clear in this report that these rollbacks will result in more people being impacted and harmed by toxic air. Rather than rolling back these regulations the administration and Congress should enforce them and work to engage with industry to protect public health.

### **STRONGER REPORTING REQUIREMENTS ON TOXIC EMISSIONS AND POLLUTERS, WITH STRONGER PENALTIES FOR NONCOMPLIANCE.**

A disproportionate amount of toxic air pollution comes from a small subset of plants, and a quarter of the Toxic 100 facilities were in violation of the Clean Air Act in 2018. Greater oversight and accountability need to be enforced, that specifically focuses on these “super-emitters.”



## MORE STRINGENT LEAK PREVENTION.

Meaningful measures need to be taken by companies to reduce leaks and fugitive emissions. For example, companies that use or process ethylene oxide or benzene (both carcinogens) should be required to install fence line monitoring systems to detect leaks and provide monitoring data to the public, first responders and regulators so that proper measures can be taken to reduce health risks. Oil refineries are already required to install fence line monitoring systems for benzene. It is not unreasonable to expect that these leaks should be halted considering the damaging effect they have on public health.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STANDARDS FOR NEW PROJECTS.

The well-being and fair treatment of residents of surrounding communities need to be the top priority when considering approval for expansions or new construction of facilities that produce toxic byproducts. This is especially important in areas where communities are surrounded by several toxic pollution sources. Information should be provided to communities in clear language with translations for non-English speaking communities and professional interpretation services provided at public meetings. State, local and Federal officials in their decision making process should consider the impact on communities and vulnerable populations first, not last in the decision process. Sites near schools, child-care facilities, homes, parks, playgrounds, elder care facilities and other places with vulnerable populations should be given special consideration, and the proximity of these industries should be prevented.

## EXPANSION OF THE TOXICS RELEASE INVENTORY (TRI) REPORTING REQUIREMENTS.

This valuable but limited dataset should be expanded to include the many other industries and types of facilities that currently are not required to report, making it difficult to assess where communities might be exposed to some of the most dangerous toxins. Municipal waste incinerators and gas processing plants, for instance, should be required to report to the TRI, as evidence from other sources like state emission inventories which suggest that they would meet reporting requirements.



## ROBUST FUNDING FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY.

We cannot expect that the EPA will oversee the implementation of policies and regulations without the funding that provides them with the staff and infrastructure to do so. Congress must protect funding for the EPA for it to conduct the oversight and enforcement needed.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Beyond these concrete steps listed above we urge Congress to consider and integrate the principles submitted by environmental justice organizations to the EPA as part of crafting the “Environmental Justice 2020 Action Agenda.” The agenda also includes key commitments that have not been enacted by the current administration and the significant agreements included have been dismissed or have only received lip service with no meaningful action to protect communities’ health. It represents a base level of what we should be doing as a country to support those most impacted by environmental harm. In order to effectively address the needs of the Environmental Justice communities, stronger and more inclusive action must be taken.

We are also encouraged by the passage of the “Green New Deal” resolution by the House of Representatives and as the United Church of Christ [endorsed](#) the resolution. (Want to learn more about talking about the Green New Deal [click here](#)) But the action cannot stop there. We urge Congress to integrate these recommendations into the infrastructure for Green New Deal legislation. This report shows clearly the devastating public health impact that unchecked and unregulated toxic air emissions have on young children and other vulnerable communities. While we focus on toxic air here, the larger picture is clear, the more we care for creation the healthier we are.



## NEXT STEPS + TAKING ACTION

All of this information might seem overwhelming, but there are concrete steps to take action, get people talking about the report and share it with decision makers. Here are some ways you can take action!

### WAYS TO TAKE ACTION

#### SCHEDULE A VISIT TO TALK TO YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

This is a chance for you to share this report with your member of Congress and their staff, ask them about the recommendations and what they are doing to make sure your community is being protected from toxic air emissions. In the appendix is a “one-pager” that you can bring and leave behind that highlights the reports findings as well as suggested recommendations. If possible, it is a good idea to practice or role play your visit ahead of time. If you’re traveling in a group, decide who is going to speak about what - ie, give an introduction to the UCC’s new report on air toxicity, any relevant facilities in district, any personal stories, and the call to action. As the faith community we have an important role to play in uplifting the voices of those affected, either you or those in your congregation and community. Taking the report to Members of Congress creates an opportunity to build relationships, while also highlighting the need for environmental protection and regulation in your own community.

Helpful tip: Check the congressional recess calendar to find out when members of Congress are likely to be in their home districts. This is a good time to set up a visit with a member or a staffer in their district office.

A proposed agenda may look like this:

- Introduce yourself and the group, and explain you are here to talk about the findings of a recent United Church of Christ report on toxic air pollution.
- If possible, make a connection by thanking the Member of Congress for positive votes on support on environmental issues in the past.



- Talk about the policy recommendations stemming from the report and ask for the Member of Congress' support.
- Listen and ask good questions.
- Be respectful of time. End on a positive note and thank them for their time. Leave behind a short written summary of your position (Provided in APPENDIX)
- Follow up your visit with a thank you letter or email.

## ORGANIZE A LOCAL TOWN HALL WITH YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

If you are in a district with one of the Toxic 100 you could ask your Member of Congress and their staff to tour the facility, or ask the EPA to conduct oversight and meet with local groups who are working on environmental protection. Congressional recess is also a good time to organize these events.

## HOST AN INFORMATION SESSION AT YOUR CHURCH

Use coffee hour, a youth group meeting, or schedule a separate time to conduct an education session, using the report and findings to learn about toxic air emissions and their impact on public health, especially for young children. While you are gathered together, consider using this event to also send a note, make a call, or send an email to your Member of Congress. This is a great opportunity to engage with your local environmental justice community!

## MAKE A CALL OR SEND A LETTER OR AN EMAIL

You can use the action alert provided to the Justice and Peace Action Network to send a note to your Member of Congress ([CLICK HERE for action alert](#)). It is important to personalize your message; why does this matter to you? Use a story to illustrate the impact of toxic air pollution in your community.

If making a call, ask to speak to the staff member who covers issues around environmental justice or public health in their portfolio and identify yourself as a constituent and a person of faith.



Let them know you are writing or calling to address the level of toxic air emissions impacting vulnerable communities. You can share that it is critical for Congress to speak out against the rollbacks of critical environmental protections by the administration, conduct meaningful oversight over violations of existing toxic air standards, and support robust funding for the Environmental Protection Agency. Specifically this means:

- Stronger reporting requirements on toxic emissions and polluters, with stronger penalties for noncompliance;
- Effective oversight and monitoring for toxic leaks;
- Community engagement standards for new projects; and
- Expansion of the Toxics Release Inventory reporting requirements.

Know the political landscape and know your audience. Is your Member of Congress engaged on environmental issues? Are they active around issues pertaining to children's health? Where can you reinforce what your Representative or Senator has done? Where can you point out new opportunities?

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can play a significant role in strengthening your advocacy messaging and engaging your elected officials. Social media posts can function like a letter to the editor, making it possible for you to communicate directly with your officials, while publicly going on the record about your concerns with your friends and neighbors. Social media also provides a helpful tool in connecting with other advocates or local journalists. Using relevant hashtags and telling your story can promote your advocacy efforts by establishing yourself or your congregation as thought leaders and potential spokespeople on environmental justice in your community.

[Click here to access the Social Media Toolkit for the Report](#)



## SAMPLE TWEETS

- @[memberofcongress] A recent report by the @UCC notes, “Over 112,500 children under age five in our nation live within three miles of the 100 super polluting facilities identified and over 11,500 live within a mile.” This is unacceptable.
- @[memberofcongress] According to a recent report by the @UCC, the Top 100 polluters in the U.S. are located in places where they disproportionately harm the most vulnerable populations. This cannot continue. #BreathToThePeople
- @[memberofcongress] A @ucc report on toxic air pollution shows 45% of the people living within one mile of America’s top 100 polluters are low income. That’s significantly higher than the national average at 33%. Congress must pass legislation that protects those most at risk from toxic air pollution.
- @[memberofcongress in Houston/TX or LA or OH] The @ucc’s report: “Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution” shows Houston, Cancer Alley in Louisiana, and the southeast coast of Lake Erie are home to the top polluters in the U.S.

## SAMPLE FACEBOOK POSTS

- An estimated 112,500 children under age five in our nation live within three miles of the 100 super polluting facilities identified in a recent @UCC report and over 11,500 live within a mile. Young children are often the most susceptible to air pollution because they breathe at higher rates and because their developing brains and bodies are more sensitive to certain types of pollution. We must act to protect the health and safety of our children. Call on Congress to address this crisis. [LINK ACTION ALERT](#)



- The administration has repeatedly rolled back vital environmental protections. This coming at a time when the rapid expansion of the chemical industry, the enormous impact of super-emitters, and the significant dangers presented by leaks seen in this report all tell us this is a crucial time to be increasing vigilance and protection. Congress must legislation to address this crisis and protect those most at risk of harm by toxic emissions. [LINK TO ACTION ALERT](#)
- 100 Plants across the US are responsible for 39% of the toxic air emissions reported in 2018 yet they represent less than 1% of the over 15,500 facilities that reported toxic air emissions. These polluters must be held accountable for their contribution to the climate crisis. #BreathToThePeople Congress must legislation to address this crisis and protect those most at risk of harm by toxic emissions. [LINK TO ACTION ALERT](#)

## WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR OR AN OPINION EDITORIAL

The opinion section and letters to the editor remain the the most widely read sections of the newspaper, providing an excellent way to expand your advocacy efforts by responding to an article or providing a differing view point.

Helpful tips to remember:

- Submit as soon as possible, preferably within twenty four hours and no more than three days after the article you are responding to appears.
- Refer to the article you are addressing by the title and date it appeared.
- Stick to one point, keep it short, use facts and firsthand experience. Find out your newspaper's requirements for submitting a letter.
- Sometimes you have to sign your letter and provide your address and phone number.

## WRITING AN OPINON EDITORIAL

If there are not existing articles to respond to, Opinion Editorials are a great option for spreading your awareness around toxic air pollution caused by chemical processing facilities and they harm they cause children and surrounding communities. When writing an opinion article take the following into consideration:



- Express your point of view clearly and boldly in the first paragraph.
- Use simple, short sentences and paragraphs.
- Avoid jargon.
- Include at least one memorable phrase for use as a pull out quote.
- Close on a strong note: A short, powerful, last paragraph should drive your point home.
- Make it person and provide accurate information. Identify the images and stories that best strengthen your message to make it powerful and concrete.
- Create a picture in the reader's mind.

## OP-ED TEMPLATE

Intro - Faith foundation for caring for neighbor and creation. Example: In the book of Isaiah, scripture reminds us, God, who created the heavens and all that is in the earth, gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it (42:4-6).

Urgency of situation/local impact (health issues, environmental justice, etc.). Example: The United Church of Christ recently released a report called “Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution.” With the help of the Environmental Integrity Project, the report found the top 100 facilities in the United States for the highest levels of toxic air pollution. The findings show a stark picture of toxic air emissions that result in dangerous and unhealthy living conditions and the development of illness in adults and children. If we do not hold these facilities accountable, vulnerable communities, including young children, in [geographic area] will continue to suffer from toxic chemical pollution.

Relevant Key Findings. Example: Out of the major key findings - which ones are particularly relevant to your community? Example: The report data demonstrates that over 112,500 children under age five in our nation live within three miles of the 100 super polluting facilities identified in this report and over 11,500 live within a miles. Young children are often the most susceptible to air pollution because they breathe at higher rates and because their developing brains and bodies are more sensitive to certain types of pollution. We have [x number] of children in our community, and we must do everything we can to ensure their safety and well-being.



Example (2): The report data shows that nearly a quarter of the emissions from the Toxic 100 facilities came from leaks, which can go undetected for long periods with little to no pollution controls in place. Moreover, leaks are more likely to be inhaled at high concentrations by people living immediately downwind or just beyond a facility's property line. In our community of [ x ], this is incredibly alarming because of the number of residents living nearby [ x ] facility.

Need for action now, Example: Report findings show in order to address the high levels of toxic air pollution, it is critical we call on Congress to speak out against the many environmental protections that have been repealed by the administration, conduct meaningful oversight over violations of existing toxic air standard and support robust funding for the EPA...

Lifting up moral call to action, Example: As a person of faith, I carry a deep commitment to upholding the moral call to care for creation and love our neighbor. Individuals, including young children, living near these toxic facilities are at significant risk of becoming sick simply because of where they live.

## SAMPLE OP-ED

In the book of Isaiah, scripture reminds us, God, who created the heavens and all that is in the earth, gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it (42:4-6). As people of faith, we are called to be caretakers of life and sustain the breath we have been given.

The United Church of Christ recently released a report called “Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution.” With the help of the Environmental Integrity Project, the report found the top 100 facilities in the United States for the highest levels of toxic air pollution. The findings show a stark picture of toxic air emissions that result in dangerous and unhealthy living conditions and the development of illness in adults and children. If we do not hold these facilities accountable, vulnerable communities, including young children, in our communities surrounding the Houston area will continue to suffer from toxic chemical pollution.



Ten of the Toxic 100 facilities are located in the Houston metropolitan area, and together emitted over 100 million tons of toxicity weighted pollution in 2018. The Dow Chemical Co. Freeport Facility, number 45 on the list, is the "largest chemical manufacturing facility in the Western Hemisphere" according to their website. Report data shows the facility released 83 different chemicals into the air in 2018, the most toxic being carcinogens like dioxins and ethylene oxide. The weighted toxicity of these emissions come to over 11 million tons. An estimated 1,827 people live within a mile of the Dow Chemical Co. Freeport Facility, and eighty-six percent are people of color. Furthermore, seventy-five percent are low income and 10 percent are children under the age of five. All of these percentages are higher than the state average.

Protections for these populations need to be established now. Exposure to toxic chemical pollution can cause devastating health impacts. Researchers note, "acute exposure can cause shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing, while chronic exposure can cause damage to the septum, bronchitis, decreased heart function, pneumonia, and other respiratory damage." For children, these risks are even higher due to their small, developing bodies. Report findings show in order to address the high levels of toxic air pollution, it is critical we call on Congress to speak out against the many environmental protections that have been repealed by the administration, conduct meaningful oversight over violations of existing toxic air standard and support robust funding for the EPA.

As a person of faith, I carry a deep commitment to upholding the moral call to care for creation and love my neighbor. Individuals, including young children, living near these toxic facilities are at significant risk of becoming sick simply because of where they live. I call on my Members of Congress to take action and hold these facilities accountable, and protect all residents, especially young children, in Houston suffering from toxic air pollution.



## Environmental Justice Partners

To learn more about our collaborative Environmental Justice partners, please consider visiting their websites and checking out their ongoing campaigns to combat climate change and environmental racism in communities around the country.

- WE ACT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE  
[www.weact.org](http://www.weact.org)
- TEXAS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY SERVICES (T.E.J.A.S.)  
[www.tejasbarrios.org](http://www.tejasbarrios.org)
- CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NETWORK  
[www.cehn.org](http://www.cehn.org)
- EARTHJUSTICE  
[www.earthjustice.org](http://www.earthjustice.org)
- CREATION JUSTICE MINISTRIES  
[www.creationjustice.org](http://www.creationjustice.org)
- MOM'S CLEAN AIR FORCE  
[www.momscleanairforce.org](http://www.momscleanairforce.org)



## APPENDIX

The document provided in the Appendix is a one-page leave behind for your congressional visits.

## Protect Children and Other Vulnerable Communities from Toxic Pollution



In a new report, *Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Air Pollution*, the United Church of Christ, in partnership with researchers at the Environmental Integrity Project, has identified 100 “super polluters” emitting toxic chemicals that put nearby communities at risk across the United States.

The report paints a stark picture of dangerous toxic air emissions and unhealthy living conditions that can make adults and children sick; Congress must take action now to protect children and other vulnerable communities. This

includes halting the rollback of critical environmental protections by the administration, conducting meaningful oversight over violations of existing toxic air standards, and supporting robust funding for the Environmental Protection Agency.

It is imperative that Congress writes legislation with the following protections so that all may have the opportunity to thrive:

- Stronger reporting requirements on toxic emissions and polluters, with stronger penalties for noncompliance. A disproportionate amount of toxic air pollution comes from a small subset of plants, and a quarter of the Toxic 100 facilities were in violation of the Clean Air Act in 2018. Greater oversight and accountability need to be enforced, that specifically focuses on these “super-emitters.”
- Effective oversight and monitoring for toxic leaks. The report says, “Over half of the emissions from the Toxic 100 facilities came from leaks, which can go undetected for long periods with little to no pollution controls in place.
- Community engagement standards for new projects: The well-being and fair treatment of residents of surrounding communities need to be the top priority when considering approval for expansions or new construction of facilities that produce toxic byproducts. This is especially important in areas where communities are surrounded by several toxic pollution sources.
- Expansion of the Toxics Release Inventory reporting requirements. This valuable but limited dataset should be expanded to include the many other industries and types of facilities that currently are not required to report, making it difficult to assess where communities might be exposed to some of the most dangerous toxins.