Climate Change, Health, and Equity Initiative Grantee Convening
National Center for Civil and Human Rights
Atlanta, GA
February 10, 2010
Opening Remarks by Rip Rapson

Good evening, and welcome. We are absolutely delighted to the inaugural convening of the Climate Change, Health and Equity initiative in the presence of such extraordinary leaders of passion, knowledge, integrity, and creativity.

And we are honored to be here at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. There could be no more appropriate setting – in the home of an organization dedicated to creating a safe space for the exploration of the fundamental rights of all human beings and to connecting the American Civil Rights movement to today's struggles for Global Human Rights.

You'll hear probably far more than is healthy about the Kresge Foundation over these next days, but I wanted to frame up just a bit what has brought us to this work.

In the ancient history that was the era of Kresge Challenge grants, the Foundation adhered religiously to a rigid fundraising formula that dictated which building campaigns we would extend grants to. As long as it was a nonprofit and as long as they had their fundraising house in order, they were a fit. Their mission or their values didn't enter into the equation, hard as that is to imagine. We had one, and only one, exception: environmental sustainability. We gave an early boost to the green building movement by making planning grants to nonprofits committed to making their new construction and renovation projects green.

I mention this because it was a first, small break into the realm of values-based grantmaking at Kresge. More than a decade later, Kresge now orients all of our work toward ensuring that people with low-incomes have full access to pathways of economic and social opportunity, equity, and justice.

The initiative that brings us together embodies that approach. It is a testament to the powerful commitment of our Environment team – led by Lois DeBacker and supported with passion and skill by Shamar Bibbins, Jessica Boehland, Jalonne

White-Newsome and Kaniqua Welch – to centering their work in social justice and racial equity.

The team has developed the Climate Change, Health, and Equity initiative by joining with the energies of the Kresge Health team. You will hear tomorrow from our managing director of Health, David Fukazawa. David is, without question one of the most visionary philanthropic leaders in the health field. Joined by his remarkable program officers – Phyllis Meadows, Stacey Barbas, Katie Byerly, and Chris Kabel – David has advocated forcefully and strategically for the better part of a decade in favor of focusing our strategies upstream, on the social determinants that drive disparate health outcomes for people with low incomes.

Climate change is utterly and unequivocally central to Kresge's commitment to dismantling the structural obstacles to full economic opportunity and social justice in American cities.

The climate crisis has set in motion forces that will forever change the nature of life in America's cities. In exactly what form, in what magnitude of disruptive severity, and over what period of time is not entirely clear. But what ***is*** clear is that a foundation, or any organization, seeking to promote urban opportunity cannot ignore that dynamic.

- **Because . . .** climate change is a *civil rights issue*, falling with unforgiving and disproportionate burden on the backs of people with low-incomes, people of color, and otherwise marginalized populations;

- **Because . . .** climate change is a *public health issue*, determining whether our communities remain fit for habitation;

- **Because . . .** climate change is an *economic justice issue*, destabilizing virtually every dimension of how our economy works and determining whether we either genuinely advance inclusive growth or whether we are content to simply perpetuate, and therefore exacerbate, existing disparities in employment, wealth creation, and economic mobility;

- **Because . . .** climate change is a *social justice issue*, screaming out for those of us in the privileged perch of philanthropy to support organizations that serve as our society's moral thermostats – organizations that activate in the presence of suffering, injustice, or callous behavior.

The scale of the challenge can easily overwhelm one's sense of agency – what can we possibility do when international climate conventions are being dismantled . . . when Charles Koch weaponizes his web of influence to gut environmental regulation . . . when the hills of Southern California burn with terrifying ferocity and regularity . . . when the streets of Miami are under water on even the sunniest of days . . . when heat waves kill hundreds of vulnerable people every summer . . . when crops and animal species are disappearing faster than we can respond . . . when Gulf Coast acidification threatens the livelihoods and way of life of fishermen all along the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts?

This numbing list of horribles provides a tempting invitation to give up on national policy, advocacy, and resistance. We can't, of course. We must continually reaffirm our constancy of purpose.

But we must also hitch to those efforts an environmental-health ground-game – a ground-game that reaches into every city and town of America to deconstruct stale . . . and . . . unproductive . . . and harmful practices and policies in favor of **proof points** demonstrating that it is possible to strengthen the health and environmental integrity of communities through practices and policies that are people-centered, data-driven, and grounded in racial equity.

Proof points that signal that we are not tinkering in the moment, but are instead steeling ourselves for the long-term.

Proof points that hold the potential to transform our collective health, environment, and equity practices from the local level up:

- **Because** . . . it is at the local level that we can hold and own the implications of our actions . . . feel the benefits of investing for the future . . . and forge a civic agenda that defines what the community is trying to achieve and how best to achieve it;

- **Because** . . . it is at the local level that we can construct, over time, enduring networks of trust and mutual support, building the kind of shared history, accomplishments, norms, and aspirations that crystalize into an inclusive civic culture.

- **Because** . . . it is at the local level that we can witness clearly and directly how our health, community development, and environmental systems

interweave in ways that reflect the life patterns of real people – their social networks, their opportunities for economic mobility, their political alliances.

This is not to say that working at the local level is easy. It is anything but.

Reflect for just a moment, for example, on the mind-bending complexities presented by the recurring cycles of more violent and destructive storms – Katrina, Sandy, Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Maria:

- **These disasters** underscored the near paralysis that sets in when communities and decision-makers wrestle with whether relocation is preferable to rebuilding;

- **These disasters** cast in bright relief how fraught conversations are about how to construct sea walls or engineer other precautions necessary to avoid the shut-down of subway and other transportation systems;

- **These disasters** drove home the reality that it is almost impossible to come up with the money necessary to upgrade wastewater treatment infrastructure or the electric grid in ways necessary to prevent the suspension of service over extended periods for people without alternatives.

- **These disasters** reminded us how easy it is to gloss over the fact that low-income people have fewer financial resources to secure adequate property insurance or to ensure their ability to evacuate, rebuild, or relocate following disasters.

And beyond these gnarly infrastructure issues, these disasters – and fires, and heat deserts, and drinking water vulnerabilities – have laid bare the heightened public health costs that climate change inflicts on those of greatest vulnerability:

- **For example**, . . . even five years after Katrina, one-third of New Orleans' low-income mothers were still suffering psychological distress or post-traumatic stress symptoms.

- **For example**, . . . because people of color are more likely to live in places subject to the urban heat island effect and less likely to have access to air-conditioning, heat-related deaths among African-Americans occur at two-times the rate as for Whites.

- **For example**, . . . as climate change exacerbates the conditions that trigger asthma attacks, it will elevate a public health crisis among African American children, who are hospitalized for asthma at twice the rate of Whites and die of asthma at four-times the rate.

The climate-deniers in Washington have somehow created an intellectual and emotional bubble that seals them off from these realities. But real people in real places cannot. Nor can you.

And that is why the Climate Change, Health and Equity initiative is so terribly, terribly important.

We **have** to draw the necessary connections among the social, economic, ecological, health, and political challenges that people sitting in the comfort of the Senate ante-room cannot.

Climate change is not like an infection cured with an injection. It is a chronic disease requiring corrective treatment by a team of skilled healers.

That would be you.

If you will bear with me for a moment longer, I wanted to relate a story from my past that underscores how community engagement can bear powerfully on local decisions affecting climate and health. It traces back almost twenty-five years ago to when I was serving as the Deputy Mayor of Minneapolis.

Hennepin County, within which Minneapolis sits, had proposed creating a "garbage transfer station" in the Phillips neighborhood, Minneapolis' most racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood, and one of its poorest. The county operated a huge trash incinerator in downtown Minneapolis. It proposed creating a way-station in which garbage collected from all over south Minneapolis could be hauled by truck to a repository, where it could be stored and then trucked to the downtown incinerator. County officials believed that this intermediate stop would be more efficient than taking the trash directly to the burner, permitting loads to be assembled in larger batches, resulting in fewer runs downtown.

The residents of Phillips weren't pleased. The prospect of garbage trucks from all corners of the city running through neighborhood streets all day and night long struck them as not only an environmental affront – with the inevitable noise and diesel pollution, the potential for groundwater contamination, and the safety risks of trucks barreling through streets filled with real people – but also as a wacky

distortion of what actually would make the most sense. Why would you make countless trips on residential and commercial streets instead of direct hauls downtown on the city's freeways? And it would be the kind of institutional presence that didn't exactly signal neighborhood livability.

A coalition of neighborhood residents approached the Mayor's office asking if we might give them a hearing. This was a little tricky – City Hall and the County Board were independent of each other, with the County, not us, controlling the disposition of garbage. But I was able to convince the County Board member who represented South Minneapolis to give us some time to see whether we might generate some alternatives.

I agreed to convene community meetings every three or four weeks in the police precinct station near where the proposed transfer station would be located. We gave the effort the elegant title of the Garbage Transfer Station Task Force.

I knew that the task force would attract long-time residents and business owners deeply concerned about the health and stability of their neighborhood. What I couldn't have guessed was the kind of talent, and wisdom, and commitment that would come to the table.

At the very first meeting, I suggested a process in which we might systematically identify the particulars of what the county was proposing, come to understand the economics and the efficiencies of their plan, and see whether there might be alternatives. But then a long-time neighborhood activist raised his hand and said, "I'm trained as an accountant, and I've run some preliminary analyses that suggest that the system the county is proposing is based on a false premise. Could we start there?" That sort of changed the tenor of the discussion – not so fast Mr. Deputy whatever.

Another community member then raised her hand. "I've just completed my urban planning master's thesis on the history of this neighborhood, and I'd like to suggest that City Government should take account of the long history of environmental racism that has displaced residents with freeways, located noxious uses in our backyards, and left our parks to atrophy. The entire scheme is completely backwards from the perspective of wise long-term land-use planning."

I was beginning to get the picture. Then a third person spoke up and pointed out that the neighborhood had just completed a comprehensive planning process as part of the city-wide Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program, which I

chaired. The Phillips NRP plan, she reminded me, was centered in constructs of lifting up and strengthening neighborhood assets, not in doubling down on exploitive environmental practices.

Others spoke up as well. A former industrial engineer. An artist. A small business owner. And lots of others who didn't necessarily have formal technical training, but who did carry the deep DNA of generations of neighborhood memory and wisdom. It was clear that the Garbage Transfer Station Task Force was going to be a serious piece of business.

And it was. We spent the next ten months deconstructing the county's plan, demonstrating – led by the first speaker's increasingly precise analyses of hundreds of truck routes to and from the proposed station – that the county would actually save time and money by hauling garbage from South Minneapolis households and businesses directly to the burner. We simultaneously opened the spigot of alternatives for how the land might be used. We produced a lengthy set of recommendations worthy of any private consulting firm – but prepared entirely by neighborhood volunteers.

The county commissioner who had given us a reprieve had the integrity – and political sense – to listen carefully. His name was Peter McLaughlin, and he now runs the Minneapolis-St. Paul office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation. He was able to convince his colleagues on the county board to scrap their plan, so to speak, and give the community the opportunity to develop alternative uses for the site.

That took us to the second half of the report, which outlined a pie-in-the-sky concept of building an environmental center where the transfer station would have been. It would house both a locally-owned and operated architectural salvage center – reclaiming and re-using wood, bricks, appliances, doors, windows, hardware, and other materials saved from demolished neighborhood buildings – and a green office park that would serve as an incubator for environmentally-conscious businesses and provide community space for classes and trainings about environmental sustainability. Remember, this was 25 years ago. Just thinking about the plan's audacity takes my breath away.

Well, that pie-in-the-sky concept became reality. It took a couple of years, but the Phillips neighborhood gave birth to the Re-Use Center and to the Green Institute. Both became fixtures in the neighborhood's powerful efforts to stabilize and reimagine their future.

It stands, in my view, as a testament to exactly the kind of work we gather to celebrate and strengthen: Seeing the imperative, and the power, of unifying environmental protection, public health enhancement, racial justice, and equitable community development.

So let me return to the question of what is our commitment at Kresge?

First, it is to contribute to the elevation of the voices, the wisdom, the interests, the stories, and the talents of residents of color and residents with low-incomes in combatting the climate crisis. To mobilize . . . To be at the table . . . To be heard . . . To be respected . . . To shape decision-making . . .

This is not someone else's movement. It is yours.

Our second commitment: to provide our financial, intellectual, and network resources to support the exploration of intersections between bodies of work too often seen as distinct and unrelated. The most powerful place to start is where we start tonight: at the intersection of climate and health in all its dimensions.

Which is inextricably intertwined with our third commitment: to acknowledge and elevate the reality that the kind of equitable, just, healthy, and economically stable communities that all of Kresge's other programs are trying to foster are the same kinds of communities that are most resilient in the face of climate change. There can be no daylight between our education, our community development, our human services, our arts and culture, our health, and our environment teams.

In one of his most powerful reflections, Dr. Martin Luther King observed: "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. [….] If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion . . . might without morality . . . and strength without sight. Now let us begin."

Dr. King was not describing the climate crisis when he spoke those words. But he could have been. Ultimately and surely, if you care about the future of cities, the bedrock conditions within them, and the opportunities they offer their most

vulnerable members, you must embrace Dr. King's advice. I know you do. And we thank you for it.

I hope the rest of your time together is enjoyable, affirming, and productive.

Thank you for listening.