

# Engaging New York Communities and Policymakers in Solutions for Extreme Heat



## Mission:

*Build healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low-income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices.*

As a grant-funded partner in the Climate Change Health and Equity (CCHE) network, WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) has been working to address extreme heat in New York and New York City through community-driven policy and advocacy to ensure energy security and safety for vulnerable populations. Their efforts align with the overall [CCHE Theory of Change](#) as part of Strategy 3.

WE ACT has been an active network partner in the CCHE initiative since 2018, building on longstanding efforts to expand political participation among communities of color and low-income residents to impact equitable environmental planning and decision making. Through their suite of CCHE-funded activities, known as the Heat and Health Equity Initiative (HHEI), WE ACT has accelerated action on community-driven policy and advocacy to ensure key decision-makers and legislators understood the importance of extreme heat, the risks to the area's most vulnerable populations, and that community members themselves develop civic engagement skills for impactful engagement and advocacy. HHEI had two key components operating at the state and local levels: improving New York State's Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and NYC's Cooling Center Program, both of which were vital for ensuring low-income residents had access to cool spaces on hot days in New York (NY) and New York City (NYC). This work led to demonstrable impacts, including greater issue awareness among City and State officials, more community members taking precautions against extreme heat, and more community members actively mobilizing to undo racist policies and advocating for change. For a high-level overview of WE ACT's CCHE-related efforts, see their 2022 CCHE theory of change ([slide 29](#)) and described in detail below. Key partners in WE ACT's CCHE-funded work are listed at the end of the document.

# Policies, Activities, and Initiatives Advanced During the CCHE Initiative

**Improved LIHEAP through community-driven policy recommendations to increase access and expand its capabilities and funding.** In summer 2024, WE ACT, in collaboration with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), published a policy brief that examined LIHEAP's role as a health-protective program in the face of hotter and deadlier summers. The brief made strong recommendations including maximizing LIHEAP funding to keep pace with the climate crisis, lowering eligibility barriers that exacerbated inequities, improving the public participation process, and implementing holistic heat resilience plans at all levels of government.

**Improved the City's Cooling Center Program through community-driven policy recommendations to expand hours, accessibility, awareness, and funding.** To enhance the cooling center program so that more at-risk community members can be served, WE ACT worked with partners to increase community usage and secure funding for facility improvements. WE ACT reintroduced a bill that would codify cooling centers in the city charter and would help address the access issues highlighted in the City's Comptroller report, "[Overheated, Underserved: Expanding Cooling Center Access](#)", that showed varying access in high heat vulnerable neighborhoods. WE ACT advocated to make maps of cooling center locations available year-round on a website, versus only sharing this information during heat emergencies. Through a public audit process they led, WE ACT responded to the need to create more wayfinding signs around NYC in multiple languages and in large font to make centers easier to find. This work built on previous efforts with research and government partners that demonstrated the impact of heat intervention programs and pushed for improvements in implementation. WE ACT was a significant partner in developing the City's Get Cool program during the COVID-19 pandemic, which distributed 74,000 free air conditioners to vulnerable households across NYC, 22,000 of them specifically going to public housing residents. In 2023, WE ACT partnered with the Department of Health, the Public Housing Authority, Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice, and Columbia University to study the impact of the program and found that the program helped participants—low-income residents and primarily people of color—stay home safely during hot weather. Their findings [were published in the Journal of Urban Health](#).

**Helped pass NYC's Urban Forest Master Plan to help cool communities and improve air quality.** As a longer-term ongoing heat mitigation strategy, WE ACT advocated for passage of New York City Council's Urban Forest Master Plan in 2023 that put NYC on track to reach 30% urban canopy cover using a heat and vulnerability index as the driver to determine where more trees were needed. So far there have been over 15,000 new plantings, all in high heat vulnerability index neighborhoods.

**Consulted on a 2024 bill to establish a maximum indoor air temperature, a key bill in WE ACT's Extreme Heat Policy Agenda.** Resiliency Coordinator Caleb Smith was featured in a [New York Times story](#) on a new bill in July 2024 that established a maximum indoor air temperature. Similar to the existing law that requires landlords to provide heating in the winter, this bill required landlords to cool homes down to at least 78 degrees Fahrenheit when the outside temperature reached 82 degrees Fahrenheit.

## Select Resources and Media

- [LIHEAP Needs a Lifeline: A Call to Strengthen the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program in a Changing Climate.](#)
- [WE ACT Extreme Heat Coalition: 2024 Extreme Heat Policy Agenda](#)
- [Extreme Heat and COVID-19 in New York City: An Evaluation of a Large Air Conditioner Distribution Program to Address Compounded Public Health Risks in Summer 2020](#)

## Insights from CCHE Initiative

- **From WE ACT's perspective, government entities are beginning to change the way they talk about and address climate justice, including acknowledging redlining as a core source of today's heat and health inequities.** While institutional racism and racist policies are not yet commonly referenced in state and local government settings, WE ACT noted there have been steps in the right direction that will help establish more equitable policies in the future. For instance, one state agency, responding to calls for non-transactive community engagement, now compensates community members for their time and input. This agency also created a community benefits poll, allowing community-based organization to register as technical advisors and provide feedback. WE ACT attributed these changes to a shift from data reliance to emphasizing real stories, connecting people's

experiences with environmental racism to create a fuller picture of these issues. This approach not only engaged community members in advocacy but also helped legislators understand the harms of past racist policies and the need to avoid future ones.

- **A key challenge for any extreme heat agenda is keeping the issue top of mind during cooler months.** Legislative and budget seasons in local government typically occurred in fall and winter, requiring WE ACT to maintain high engagement with elected officials and staff year-round. A crucial factor in sustaining this pressure was WE ACT’s passionate membership base. Members regularly participated in WE ACT podcasts to share their experiences and advocated for upcoming bills. Additionally, WE ACT’s Climate Justice Working Group worked at City and State levels, fostering community leadership to support climate justice in Northern Manhattan.
- **WE ACT’s involvement with CCHE has helped attract additional resources to deepen their impact.** Because of their involvement in CCHE, WE ACT staff said they have attracted additional grant opportunities, including working with the Smart Surfaces Coalition (SSC) and the National League of Cities. WE ACT focused on quantitative benefits analysis, which will enable them to present a stronger fiscal argument starting in 2025. This will complement WE ACT’s existing emphasis on equity and health, highlighting the need for more green space and better access in low-income communities. Aside from Smart Surfaces Coalition, the Extreme Heat Coalition has grown to 16 members, offering perspectives informed by expertise in tenant’s rights, interfaith disaster preparedness, energy justice, climate education, affordable housing development, and many others.
- **To successfully organize and mobilize for equitable climate policy, it takes a lot of planning and attention to inclusivity.** Ensuring that organizing is as inclusive as possible is essential to WE ACT’s work. Prioritizing language interpretation and planning in-person events with considerations for transit and disability access are fundamental principles. Taking the time to understand the audience, eliminating barriers to participation, and making it easy and exciting for them to participate is central to all community-facing work, especially in climate resilience, where there are many competing concerns.

## Looking Ahead

In addition to continued work on extreme heat, WE ACT is focusing on developing policies that mitigate or eliminate the risk of displacement related to decarbonization and climate change resilience. A significant challenge has been ensuring that funding or legislation explicitly prevents rent increases when used for these purposes. This is crucial to ensure that disadvantaged communities benefit from investments rather than being displaced. WE ACT has been particularly attentive to the harsh landscape for tenant protections in New York, aiming to create safeguards that protect residents while advancing climate resilience initiatives.

## Key Partners

Organization	Type
Columbia University	Academic Partner
East Harlem COAD	Community Partner
Extreme Heat and Justice Coalition	Community Partner
Harlem Emergency Network	Community Partner
Hester Street Collective	Community Partner
Mayor's Office of Resiliency	Government Partner
Natural Resources Defense Council	Environmental Partner
NY Public Library	Academic Partner
NYC DOH	Government Partner
NYC Housing Authority	Government Partner

Organization	Type
NYC Nurses Association	Health Partner
NYC Office of Emergency Management	Government Partner
NY Department of Health	Government Partner
PUSH Buffalo	Community Partner
Residents in WE ACT Communities	Community Partner
Urban Systems Lab	Academic Partner
Yale Center on Climate Change and Health	Academic Partner
Yale School of Public Health	Academic Partner