Creating a Vision for a Just and Healthy Future

At PSR-LA, 2021 has been marked by both challenges and growth. Like so many others, we have been continually adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed our world in more ways than any of us could have ever foreseen. We are grateful to all of you who make our work possible, and we want to share a special note of appreciation to the PSR-LA staff who have worked with tireless optimism and dedication over the last year to navigate a rapidly changing, uncertain world.

Right now, our communities are facing compounding crises like never before. The pandemic has ravaged millions and exposed systemic health disparities. The United Nations is reporting that global warming is at ‘code red’ levels for humanity. The risk of nuclear war is as high today as it has ever been, according to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. And toxic pollutants in our air and land are poisoning low-income communities of color across Los Angeles and the world.

As we face an unprecedented turning point in the future of human health and the environment, PSR-LA is pushing forward with urgency and resilience. While challenges are all around us, we remain focused on the opportunities this crisis presents to advance community-driven solutions and policies that are grounded in public health and social justice.

In 2021, our commitment to collective action and our determination to fight for a just and healthy future has led to some tremendous advancements that we are excited to share with you. The victories outlined in the pages that follow are just a handful of examples that show how PSR-LA works in deep collaboration with coalitions, impacted communities and health professionals to advance public policy that protects the health and safety of our most vulnerable communities.

Thank you for your contributions to our work. We appreciate all the ways our community engages with us, and your continued support grounds us in hope and commitment to our vision for a future where everyone can thrive regardless of race or income status. Please use the enclosed remittance envelope to make a tax-deductible gift to PSR-LA today. Together, we can create a safer, healthier and more just world.

Reflecting on 2021’s Victories

This year, PSR-LA forged forward to secure multiple advocacy accomplishments across environmental justice and nuclear disarmament.
• The California Geologic Energy Management Agency issued a momentous draft rule banning the permitting of oil and gas wells within 3,200 feet of homes, schools and hospitals.
• The California Air Resources Board voted unanimously to select the community of South LA for an AB617 Community Emissions Reduction Plan and Air Monitoring Plan.
• The state of California issued a temporary ban on water shut-offs during the COVID-19 crisis.
• PSR-LA continued to demonstrate innovative leadership in Back from the Brink (BftB), a national grassroots campaign to fundamentally change U.S. nuclear weapons policy through local organizing and advocacy.
• PSR-LA provided leadership for BftB’s successful event in March, Ending Nuclear Weapons Before They End Us, with our partners at the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.
• PSR-LA staff and board members were featured in an award-winning documentary film about the Santa Susana Field Laboratory.

All of us at PSR-LA are incredibly grateful to our members, allies, partners, individual donors and grant funders who made these advancements possible. We especially want to acknowledge the health professionals who have stayed committed to a vision of justice and health during a challenging year that kept them on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Health professional members bring innovative leadership in Back from the Brink (BftB), a national grassroots campaign to fundamentally change U.S. nuclear weapons policy through local organizing and advocacy, and we could not do this work without you.

Welcome New Staff

This year, we welcomed four new staff members to our team: Development Associate Maki Tohmon, Air Quality Program Assistant Giovanna Tyndale, Communications Associate Emily Jo Wharry and Administrative & Finance Associate Rose C. Apel.

Thank you for supporting PSR-LA. We are grateful for all the ways our members contribute to this critical work. Find us online via social media to stay in touch throughout 2022.

To donate, please use the enclosed remittance envelope or donate online at: bit.ly/psrla_2021EOY

For more information about PSR-LA, contact Membership Coordinator Rahel Kemal at rkemal@psr-la.org.

PSR-LA’s work is solidified at the intersection of social justice and public health to protect the wellbeing and safety of the most vulnerable communities. Our Health Ambassadors and members have always been a vital part of our work, and the advancements we are making is a testament to that.

Over the past year, we’ve connected with and trained hundreds of new health professionals and medical students on environmental justice and health issues through four virtual Health Ambassador Program (HAP) trainings. PSR-LA’s HAP trainings build issue knowledge and advocacy skills, and health professional participants go on to help make critical advancements in public health by participating in activities such as publishing op-eds on environmental health issues and joining PSR-LA staff to testify and provide public comment at city hall hearings.

We are also excited about our partnership with Kaiser Permanente Bernard J. Tyson School of Medicine, whom we worked with to engage over 50 health professionals and medical students in a virtual “Toxic Tour” of hazardous sites in the Los Angeles region. Participants also took part in a virtual classroom hosted on Gather, which created an interactive online learning experience.

This year, we also launched and completed our first ever Health and Justice Webinar Series, where we collaborated with researchers, educators, public health experts, and community leaders to discuss deep-rooted public health issues, such as capitalism and racism. This series allowed us to dive into the issues we work on and flesh out the ways our program areas intersect with one another. We found that intersectional issues require intersectional solutions.

Our goal for this upcoming year is to fully engage our members in all aspects of our work. We established a members-only Facebook group, Health Voices of PSR-LA, to encourage engagement around PSR-LA campaigns and spur discussion between our members, PSR-LA staff, and board members. Through this new platform, we hope to create a virtual space for conversations that build knowledge and power.

In addition, we will continue to create engaging education and training opportunities for health professionals who want to build advocacy skills and learn more about how environmental justice issues impact public health. A preview of our 2022 education series is included here, and you can contact our Membership Program Manager, Rahel Kemal, to ask questions and learn more about our HAP program, at rkemal@psr-la.org.

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PSR-LA’s Air & Climate Justice Program had a breakthrough year. The centerpiece of our work remained our partnership with grassroots organizations rooted in South LA’s Black and Latino working class communities. Despite the obstacles, our coalitions — Stand Together Against Neighborhood Drilling (STAND-LA), South Central LA Project to Understand the Sources and Health Impacts of Local Air Pollution (SCLA-PUSH) and Voices in Solidarity Against Oil in Neighborhoods (VISION) — advanced precedent-setting policies on oil and gas drilling while modeling community-driven capacity-building. PSR-LA is proud to be a co-founder and active member of STAND-LA and its sister coalition, VISION. These coalitions cultivate close partnerships between PSR-LA staff, our health professional members and low-income Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities living close to oil and gas extraction.

After years of organizing, STAND, VISION and other partners had two major wins. In September, we succeeded in getting the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to vote unanimously to phase out oil and gas drilling in unincorporated areas of the county. The board also moved to convene a first-of-its-kind task force focused on equitably transitioning fossil fuel workers and impacted communities to a new, oil-free economy, as well as developing a program for plugging and cleaning up inactive oil wells. Then, in October, Gov. Gavin Newsom’s administration proposed precedent-setting public health rules for oil and gas sites, including a prohibition on new wells within a 3,200-foot buffer zone between oil and gas facilities and schools, homes and other sensitive areas.

Additionally, the SCLA-PUSH project continued to build the capacity of South LA residents to become Air Quality Ambassadors, Radical Scientists, Creative Mappers and Community Researchers. We engaged over 160 South LA residents through our “My Air, My Health” webinar series focused on air quality regulations, environmental hazards data collection and air quality policy engagement.

On Feb. 25, the California Air Resources Board voted unanimously to select the community of South LA for an AB 617 Community Emissions Reduction Plan and a Community Air Monitoring Plan. This success would not have been possible without the support of our SCLA-PUSH project and our dedicated and experienced Air Quality Ambassadors, who are now serving their community by participating in the AB 617 South LA Community Steering Committee, which PSR-LA and South LA organizations are co-leading. This model was developed to ensure community voices are leading the process of identifying air quality priorities and strategies.

Through our work, we have identified the need to create co-learning spaces that amplify co-governance in the decision-making process. The SCLA-PUSH coalition will continue to focus on advancing community-driven, clean production solutions by expanding our Air Quality Academies and AB 617 community engagement to produce a road map for cleaning up South LA’s toxic air. This work will be done using creative technology solutions and innovation rooted in environmental justice and a new approach to environmental justice. We are instead advocating for strong energy justice framing in their plans around reducing emissions from buildings. PSR-LA is working with statewide groups in the Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to ensure that Californians see tangible emissions reductions, and that the state’s climate policies are re-focused to ensure that those most impacted are protected.

Lastly, PSR-LA is one of the key anchor groups that has successfully created a statewide coalition and local alliance of environmental and social justice groups working to redefine how we address the issue of natural gas in homes. Our goal is to ensure that renter’s in low-income communities are protected, and that they also reap the benefits of improved air quality indoors.

We are engaging with policy at the state and local levels to push our community-driven vision of energy democracy, in which the most impacted communities have a voice in developing climate policies as California transitions to a clean energy future.

The centerpiece of our work remained our partnership with grassroots organizations rooted in South LA’s Black and Latino working class communities.
PSR-LA’s Nuclear Threats program kicked off 2021 by celebrating the entry into force of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons on January 22. This historic treaty was signed by 122 nations and bans nuclear weapons under international law, just as biological and chemical weapons are banned. PSR-LA is especially excited about the treaty’s provisions that address past injustices, such as requiring environmental remediation of contaminated nuclear sites and assistance to victims of nuclear weapons use and testing.

PSR-LA plays a leading role in Back from the Brink (BfB), a national grassroots campaign to fundamentally change U.S. nuclear weapons policy. To date, over 380 organizations have endorsed the campaign, and resolutions supporting its policy solutions have been adopted by 54 municipalities and 6 state legislative bodies. This year, BfB partnered with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons to co-host a policy briefing, “Ending Nuclear Weapons Before they End Us.” Over 600 people from 28 countries participated in the event, which featured an expert panel that included PSR-LA Associate Director Denise Duffield and was followed by a series of workshops for activists. BfB recently organized a letter signed by over 300 local, county and state officials representing 41 states, calling on President Biden and Congress to eliminate the threat nuclear weapons pose to their communities and the world. BfB also launched a Social Media Collaboratory, a shared space where nuclear abolition activists can create and share social media strategies and content. To learn more, visit preventnuclearwar.org.

PSR-LA continued our decades-long efforts alongside communities near the Santa Susana Field Laboratory to ensure that the site’s nuclear and chemical contamination is fully cleaned up. PSR-LA is proud to have been featured in an award-winning documentary film about Santa Susana and its impact on local families. MSNBC acquired the film, “In the Dark of the Valley,” which aired nationwide on Nov. 14. PSR-LA also contributed to a peer-reviewed study published in the Journal of Environmental Radioactivity which found that radioactivity from SSFL did migrate during the Woolsey Fire, which started at the site. The study analyzed samples of dust, soil and ash that were collected by community volunteers coordinated by PSR-LA. The study’s findings counter claims by CalEPA that there were no toxic releases from SSFL during the fire. PSR-LA is deeply troubled that CalEPA’s Dept. of Toxic Substances Control has entered into secret negotiations with SSFL site-owner Boeing and is pushing proposals that would vastly weaken the cleanup. PSR-LA is working with community members, ally organizations and federal and state elected officials to demand CalEPA enforce agreements for a full cleanup.

PSR-LA’s Nuclear Threats program is also pushing back on false solutions to climate change, especially nuclear power. PSR-LA joined over 240 organizations in a letter to Congressional leaders telling them to reject the $50 billion nuclear power bailout in the federal infrastructure bill to prop up aging nuclear reactors for the next decade. We must move away from the extractive economy and facilitate a just transition to truly safe and renewable energy. Moving forward, we are exploring ways in which the movement for nuclear weapons abolition can partner with the just transition movement for a fair and sustainable future.
It is no coincidence that residents living in environmental justice communities also face great challenges securing and maintaining safe, stable, healthy and affordable housing. Discriminatory land use policies and practices have led to a disproportionate overconcentration of pollution and toxics in low-income and BIPOC communities. These same drivers have also fueled today’s housing crisis and left thousands of vulnerable Angelenos houseless. The very communities bearing the brunt of pollution and toxics in the environment must also endure the cumulative impacts of housing and economic insecurity, contributing to disproportionately greater negative health outcomes.

In the second year of this project, we’ve begun to translate our research into more digestible and practical tools and materials. Additionally, we’re beginning to build a coalition of advocates to brainstorm and discuss policy solutions to improve the brownfield remediation process and its accessibility, especially on the heels of the county and state's oil disaster rule. Finally, PSR-LA launched a new collaborative initiative focused on the life cycle of plastics, in partnership with Just Transition Alliance, Pacoima Beautiful, Esperanza Community Housing and East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, to address the links between climate change threats and plastics.

Throughout the pandemic, PSR-LA’s Water Program advocated for California residents to have access to safe, clean, affordable drinking water, regardless of their employment status or financial insecurity. PSR-LA and allied water advocates ensured that at least $1 billion would be dedicated to utility debt assistance in the 2021-2022 California state budget to alleviate financial burdens for families. PSR-LA also worked with a number of training sessions for our South and Southeast Los Angeles community partners and their community members. These training covered a broad range of topics, including water contaminants and their impact on health, as well as COVID-19 financial impacts in Southeast Los Angeles. You can view our comprehensive breakdown of decision-makers and adequately address the links between climate change threats and plastics.

In 2021, PSR-LA co-chaired the Californians for a Healthy & Green Economy (CHANGE) coalition. We worked alongside stakeholders to build alignment on climate and toxics policy intersections through educational workshops that spanned topics such as climate policy false solutions, toxic chemicals in consumer products, and climate links to systemic and environmental racism. PSR-LA also worked with the Environmental Justice Health Alliance for Chemicals Reform network to uplift a national platform for change, engage in the redesign of the Louisville charter for chemicals reform and support advocacy for the EPA chemicals disasters rule.

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We’re excited to share our 2021 achievements with you.