



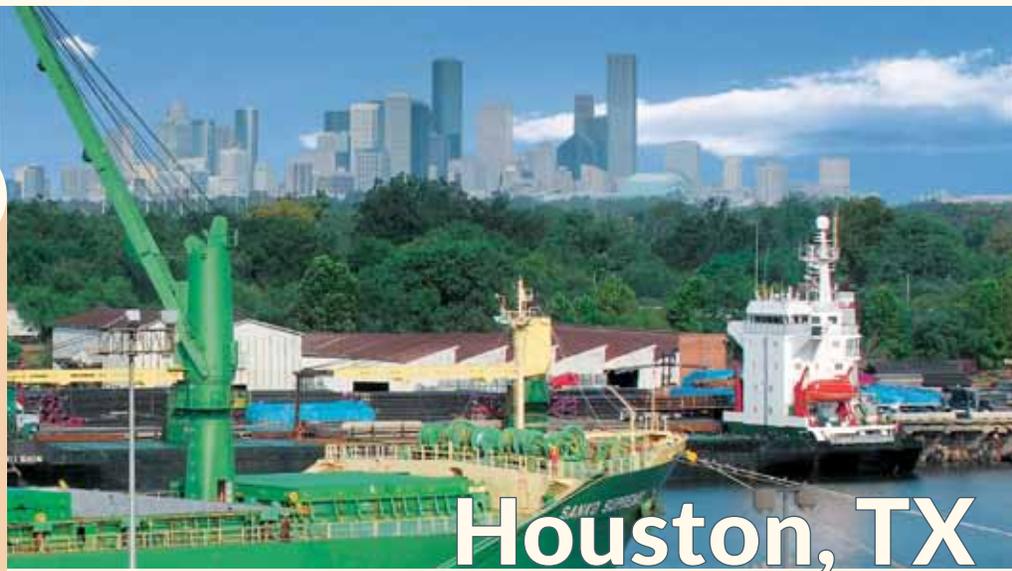
STAR
COMMUNITIES

SUSTAINABILITY
TOOLS FOR
ASSESSING &
RATING COMMUNITIES

Measuring Environmental Justice with STAR

What is environmental justice? The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to...environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” We will have achieved environmental justice “when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process.” To move this goal from aspirational to actionable, local governments can fulfill critical roles: monitoring conditions on the ground, coordinating resources to address the hazards, and helping to convene the people most affected by the pollution, especially since these populations may lack the time, resources, or language skills to engage in these issues using traditional government forums.

How can communities get started with environmental justice? The STAR Community Rating System™ (STAR) provides a sound methodology and resources to help communities that want to take a deliberate approach to addressing environmental justice issues. The two communities featured in this case study pursued STAR Certification to credibly and transparently track progress toward overall sustainability objectives such as environmental justice. Houston, TX and Burlington, VT were both part of the Spring 2014 Leadership Program and achieved STAR Community Ratings in April 2015. These environmental justice success stories were included in their applications for STAR certification.



Houston, TX

“Environmental justice means partnering with communities experiencing excessively harmful conditions to identify and provide resources to alleviate those burdens.”

–Lisa Lin, Sustainability Manager, City of Houston

As the nation’s second busiest port, the Port of Houston is constantly in motion as enormous cargo ships navigate the Houston Ship Channel, delivering petroleum from nearby refineries and other cargo to trains and trucks for transport to their final destinations.

The petrochemical industry and the port are major economic drivers for the region, but people in neighboring communities have complained for years about health problems stemming from diesel exhaust of the transfer trucks and ships, dust kicked up as the trucks roll through, and pollution from the refineries.

In 2013, citizens got organized. Residents from several low-income, predominantly minority communities teamed up with local air quality and environmental justice organizations to form the [Healthy Port Communities Coalition](#) (HPCC). The group surveyed almost 400 people and found that 27% suffered from asthma or another respiratory disease compared to the 6.8% average for adults in Texas. The cancer rate was also higher. While the HPCC acknowledged the survey was not purely scientific, it called public attention to the issue.

Both the City of Houston and the EPA took notice. The City is now providing [monthly 1-page summaries](#) of environmental complaints, investigations, and citations. It is also using fixed and mobile air monitoring sites to develop better data about pollution levels in the neighborhoods. The EPA [announced](#) an \$868,000 diesel-emission reduction grant to replace trucks at the port with older, dirtier engines with newer, cleaner trucks. The companies that own the trucks will provide a match to the grant, bringing the total commitment to more than \$2.5 million.

Community leadership has been a critical aspect of the HPCC’s success thus far. As Matthew Tejada, former director of Air Alliance Houston who took over as head of EPA’s Office of Environmental Justice, [told Yale Environment 360](#), “From the nonprofit side...[w]hatever you’re advocating for – whether it’s climate change or [controlling] industrial toxics or improved diesel engines or anything else – you have to start with that grassroots foundation.”

City officials agree. “The residents who live there know what goes on day to day,” said Daisy James, Houston’s Bureau Chief of Pollution Control and Prevention in the Houston Health Department’s Environmental Health Division. “We can help with information and tools to measure the impacts, and respond with new policies, programs, and enforcement to continue working towards improving the situation for the residents.”



Burlington, VT

In many parts of the country, old housing stock poses a major public health threat, especially for [children](#), due to the historic use of lead-based paints. The oldest homes in the United States are found in the Northeast. In Burlington, VT, [over 70%](#) of the houses were built before 1978, 60% of dwellings are rental units, and 40.1% of the population lives on less than 80% of the median income.

“Burlington, VT has an old housing stock and a relatively low-income population. The low vacancy rate leaves low-income families unable to “choose” safer housing, but rather are forced to take what they can get. In other areas of the country, rental units are vacant and available for days or weeks; in Burlington units are available for minutes,” says Jeff Tanguay, the Lead Program Coordinator for the City of Burlington.

This combination of factors has led to a situation where low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to lead paint hazards. Recognizing this as an environmental justice issue, the City of Burlington launched the [Burlington Lead Program](#) in 2003, with the help of a [HUD Lead Hazard Control grant](#). The program works with property owners to reduce the lead paint hazards at their properties; to be eligible, household income cannot exceed 80% of the median income.

The program utilizes grants and interest-free deferred loans awarded by the city to finance the lead hazard reduction work. In Burlington, \$6,907,648 has been spent to assess 696 units and remediate and reduce lead hazards in another 464.

In order to perform renovations that reduce lead hazards, individuals must receive proper training. The City’s Lead Program has trained 3,449 individuals to become certified in the [State of VT Lead Law](#) applying to pre-1978 rental units and 471 individuals in the [EPA Renovate, Repair and Painting Rule](#) applying to pre-1978 dwellings.

The program lessens the burden on already stressed families. “Watching the way our two-year-old and his pals play all over the place, it is comforting to know that our house is lead safe. The Lead Program was extremely helpful, managing the project and navigating all the permits and paperwork,” reported Kate, a participating resident who lives in the Old North End of Burlington.

How does STAR define environmental justice?

STAR’s Equity & Empowerment Goal Area includes an Objective specifically on environmental justice, which focuses on a community’s efforts to reduce polluted and toxic environments with an emphasis on alleviating disproportionate health hazards in areas where low-income residents and persons of color live. While the field of environmental justice is typically scoped very broadly, STAR’s Environmental Justice Objective focuses on indicators affecting the natural environment and impacts to public health. Other indirect social and economic impacts are addressed in other STAR Objectives, such as Equitable Services & Access, which focuses on reducing disparities in access to key community assets and services.

How does STAR’s environmental justice objective measure progress?

STAR Objectives contain both quantitative Outcome measures and qualitative Action measures. To measure Outcome progress, communities identify the environmental justice sites that will be evaluated in the Objective, which could include toxic/hazardous waste sites, air emissions sites/regions, water discharge sites, brownfields, or Superfund sites that are located in areas where low income residents or minorities are disproportionately affected. Then they demonstrate progress in reducing site-specific hazards.

Communities also receive credit for Actions, the things a community does to move the needle towards Outcome progress. STAR Environmental Justice Actions include incorporating environmental justice criteria into zoning and land use planning, creating community benefit agreements for projects and proposed developments with environmental justice concerns, implementing specific projects to reduce acute exposure to contaminants and risks, and more.



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Photos courtesy of the City of Burlington, VT and the Port of Houston Authority