Earth Month: a moral obligation to prioritize people over profits

By Geran Loraine

Becoming a father has forever changed the way I look at the world. It has created a growing sense of urgency. I see the impact my current decisions will have on my children's future as I watch them barrel down the sidewalk on their bikes. On a day last month, they were complaining it was too hot and they need to go inside to catch their breath. This might make sense in the middle of July, but it was only March and it was 88 degrees outside. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, we were trapped by the fear of spreading a deadly virus and unseasonable heat.

Yet, my family has the privilege of working from home with access to clean air, an affordable electric bill and air conditioning. However, this is not the case for the 10.7 percent of Virginians who live in poverty.

There are many communities that are disproportionately impacted by the “energy burden” (percentage of household income allocated for electricity costs) and the placement of fossil fuel infrastructure in low-income neighborhoods. Communities of color on the frontlines are exposed to more pollution and suffer disproportionately higher levels of asthma. The dirty fuels we use to power our society are severely burdening our communities in more ways than one.
A recent report by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy reveals that both communities of color and lower-income households have a higher energy burden than the national average. There are a few ways to address these harmful impacts: Mandate energy efficiency programs for lower-income households to lower electricity bills and give state agencies oversight to regulate utility companies to ensure they are not overcharging consumers.

Yet, a bill (HB 1132) introduced by Dels. Jay Jones, D-Norfolk, Lee Ware, R-Powhatan, giving back to the State Corporation Commission of Virginia the power to oversee Dominion Energy's rates, was voted down in the 2020 General Assembly. The change in party leadership did little to help those most impacted by the energy burden. Instead, Dominion Energy continues to overcharge Virginia residents with no repercussions and no refunds.

Communities of color also suffer from harmful working conditions caused by climate policies. The agriculture, manufacturing, and construction industries are deeply impacted by global warming as workers are being exposed to increasingly dangerous and more frequent heatwaves. All of these industries have higher percentages of Latinx workers who are exposed to life-threatening environmental hazards such as toxic chemicals and air pollution. The Virginia General Assembly also failed to pass laws to protect these workers during this past legislative session.

Given the disproportionate harm that these communities must endure, it is vital that they be at the forefront of environmental justice policy decisions. However, energy decisions are made by legislators, most of whom don't live in neighborhoods with polluting factories and energy infrastructure. Communities of color have little or no power to stand up for the health of their families or advocate policies that would ensure their children can breathe clean air. Simply riding bikes down the street can put our children's health at risk.

This Earth Month, I encourage you to work with organizations, houses of worship and community groups like Virginia Interfaith Power & Light to demand that your state legislators take action on climate issues. While climate change is a global problem, we must act in our own local communities.

Pope Francis' Laudato Si is a call to bring people together in church to discuss the spiritual imperative to care for Creation. He says by caring for creation, we care for one another. In the midst of the current pandemic, Pope Francis circled back to our connection to the earth saying, “nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick.”

What can you do? Sign Virginia Interfaith Power and Light's declaration calling for decreasing the energy burden. Demand action that protects both vulnerable
communities and the earth. As an activist and a minister, I feel strongly that people of faith must speak out against these injustices.

We must not allow communities of color to bear the burden of this state's energy consumption. As we witness the horrific number of infections and deaths and the economic devastation of this pandemic, we cannot move forward with business as usual. By addressing Virginia's issues of disproportionate energy burden and worker safety, we will help those who will are being disproportionately impacted by this virus.

We have a responsibility to ensure a safe future for those who will come after us. We should be able to watch our children bike down the street without worrying if the air they breathe is harming them, or if the worker who repaired the sidewalk suffered from heat exhaustion. We must prioritize people over profits. It is our moral obligation during this pandemic to advocate policies that reduce the environmental harms impacting Virginia's most vulnerable communities.

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Guest Column
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