

**Title:**

*Author:*

**Occupy Climate  
Change (OCC!)**  
*Grassroots initiatives  
entry*



FORMAS



# **The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice**

*Andrew Craig*

## **Where is this grassroots initiative implemented?**

This initiative is headquartered in New Orleans, Louisiana, but operates throughout the Gulf Coast Region of the United States.

## **Who are the promoters? Who are the actors involved? What is their background?**

The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ) was founded in 1992 by Dr. Beverly Wright with support from other community organizations, like the United Church of Christ Environmental Ministries and regional universities like Texas Southern University. Dr. Wright won the 2008 EPA Environmental Justice Achievement Award in 2008 and was selected to serve on President Joe Biden's White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council in 2021 (Parker, 2021).

The Center has partnered with New Orleans area community-based organizations to coordinate Climate Action Equity Project. The Climate Action Equity Project is a partnership with Partners for Places, the City of New Orleans and the Greater New Orleans Foundation (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Climate Action Equity Project, 2022).

Since 2011, the DSCEJ has partnered with Dr. Robert Bullard at Texas Southern University; the Center also organizes the annual HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium Project which brings together Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) and community-based organizations from the Gulf Coast region to find solutions to climate justice. The community-based organizations include: Achieving Community Tasks Successfully (ACTS), Clean Health Educated Sage and Sustainable (CHESS), and the Lower Nine Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development. The HBCU's associated with the consortium include: Alabama A&M University, Dillard University, Florida A&M University, Jackson State University, Texas

Southern University, and Tennessee State University (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, HBCU-CBO Gulf Equity Consortium, 2022).

In 2021, the DSCEJ received a \$4 million grant from the Bezos Earth Fund to support its Activating Justice 40 project (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, 2021).

**How this initiative engages with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?**

The initiative engages with climate by tackling both mitigation and adaptation. The Center works with communities of color that have been disproportionately affected by pollution and climate vulnerabilities to build the capacity of communities like those found throughout Louisiana to prepare and respond to environmental threats and hazards.

Partnering with academic institutions, the Center trains citizens to monitor hazards in their neighborhoods, understand the risk of toxic exposure, find environmental data online, and develop strategic advocacy for policies to remedy unsafe environmental conditions. The Center also provides technical assistance through its partnerships with universities to prepare environmental justice analyses and reports on proposed or existing urban and industrial development projects requiring environmental permits. In partnership with citizen-scientists, the DSCEJ collects toxicological and epidemiological data, advises communities on effective environmental remediation, assists in community relocation when necessary, provides expert testimony in legal cases, and conducts community health surveys, community mapping using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and community environmental health profiles (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Community Engagement, 2021).

Since 1995, DSCEJ has run an Environmental Career Worker Training Program to identify, train, and mobilize citizens to facilitate the clean-up of hazardous materials and assist with disaster recovery both locally and nationally. The training program provides instruction in construction, weatherization, lead abatement, asbestos abatement, hazardous waste worker training, mold

remediation, and OSHA certification (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Worker Health and Safety Training, 2022).

### **What are the main objectives? What are the main values?**

The DSCEJ's main objective is to provide opportunities for citizens, scientific researchers, and decision makers to collaborate on projects that address the health, jobs, housing, education, and a general quality of life of communities of color that are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental pollution. It works to develop leaders in communities of color throughout the Gulf region that are disproportionately harmed by pollution and climate change: communities that are capable of promoting their right to be free from environmental hazards.

The Center applies the Communiversality Model in preparing residents of communities to have a voice on critical issues, which begins with listening to community concerns first and then providing research, education and training on identified issues. (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Worker Health and Safety Training, 2022).

The Center operates on a "communiversality" model developed by Dr. Wright that emphasizes a collaborative partnership between universities and community-based organizations. The Center's "communiversality" has been put into action through the formation of its Community Advisory Board which consists of grassroots community leaders, non-profit organizations, academics, and government officials from municipalities along Louisiana's Mississippi River Chemical Corridor. (Wright, 2007).

### **Which limits does it encounter?**

In the past, the DSCEJ was an affiliate program of Xavier University, and later Dillard University. In recent years, the center has become an independent non-profit and removed itself from the umbrella of university systems. According to their website, the DSCEJ saw its association with academic bureaucracies as a limiting factor in its activism. Recently, the DSCEJ became an

independent nonprofit in order to better tackle the challenges of climate injustice in the American South. (Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Our Story, 2022).

**Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?**

The DSCEJ's worker training program can be seen as one of the problematic issues arising from its implementation. Instead of putting the responsibility of cleaning up hazardous waste and reducing pollution in communities of color in Louisiana on the corporations that produce these environmental injustices, the worker training program places the responsibility on the communities affected. While this provides economic opportunity for these marginalized communities, these jobs might further marginalize some of the population and does not address larger systemic issues associated with climate change. Through the worker training program, members of marginalized communities are still put directly in contact with the hazardous waste that has to the potential to harm their health.

**How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?**

This initiative could be replicated in other settings by implementing the DSCEJ's "communiversity" model. In urban settings across the globe, the opportunity exists for activists and community-based organizations to partner and collaborate with local or regional universities to train citizens to monitor their local environments and other citizen science projects as well as strategically plan and respond to the climate change.

**Is this initiative conducive to broader changes (law, institutional arrangements, long-term sustainability or community preparedness, etc.)? If yes, which?**

This initiative is conducive to broader institutional changes. Not only does this initiative specifically work to foster collaboration with HBCUs and community-based organizations to develop a new institutional arrangement to address climate justice in the Mississippi River Chemical Corridor, the DSCEJ also helps the communities of color in this region prepare to deal

with effects of climate change and trains them to mitigate the effects of hazardous pollution in their communities.

## References

Parker, H. (2021, March 31). This New Orleans-based activist is now a White House environmental justice adviser. *The New Orleans Advocate*.  
[https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article\\_39895a52-919e-11eb-8d5e-5bc9f4af414c.html](https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_39895a52-919e-11eb-8d5e-5bc9f4af414c.html).

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (2021, September 8). Deep South Center for Environmental Justice Receives \$4 Million From Bezos Earth Fund to Support Justice40 Initiative. <https://www.dscej.org/the-latest/deep-south-center-for-environmental-justice-receives-4-million-from-bezos-earth-fund-to-support-justice40-initiative>

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (2022, April 29). Community Engagement. <https://www.dscej.org/our-work/community-engagement>

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (2022, April 29). Climate Action Equity Project. <https://www.dscej.org/our-work/community-engagement>

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (2022, April 29). HBCU-CBO Gulf Equity Consortium. <https://www.dscej.org/our-work/hbcu-cbo-gulf-equity-consortium>.

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (2022, April 29). Worker Health and Safety Training. <https://www.dscej.org/our-work/worker-health-and-safety-training>.

Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (2022, April 29). Our Story. (<https://www.dscej.org/our-story>)

Wright, B. (2007, July 25). Testimony of Beverly Wright, Ph.D. Director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University before the Subcommittee on Superfund

and Environmental Health of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee regarding Environmental Justice. [https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/9/2/92ff035f-3a58-4baa-a5f8-4923f2597176/01AFD79733D77F24A71FEF9DAFCCB056.drbeverlywrighttestimony.pdf](https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/9/2/92ff035f-3a58-4baa-a5f8-4923f2597176/01AFD79733D77F24A71FEF9DAFCCB056.drbeverlywrighttestimony.pdf)