

Mom's Clean Air Force:

Why It Needs the Voices of African-American Mothers

By Gina Carroll

If you knew that someone's actions threaten the lives of your children every single day, would you be upset? If you knew that someone was sacrificing the well-being of your children for their own profit, would you put your butt-kicking boots on? If your child was chronically ill because of someone's purposeful disregard, would you be ready to act? If so, the Mom Clean Air Force wants you to know that African-American children have a:

- 260% higher emergency room visit rate.
- 250% higher hospitalization rate.
- 500% higher death rate from asthma, as compared with White children.

Coal-fired power plants are major contributors to African-American diseases. The pollution that coal-fired power plants emit is a concern for the general population; but it is a critical issue for African Americans because pollution impacts our children's health in profound ways:

- Coal-fired power plants produce 386,000 tons of hazardous air pollutants per year. They emit 84 different hazardous air pollutants that cause asthma, heart disease, cancer, and worsen sickle cell anemia and high blood pressure.
- Coal-fired plants are the primary source of toxic mercury pollution in the United States. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can harm fetuses and the developing brains of young children. Over 400,000 newborns are affected by mercury pollution every year.
- 68% of African Americans (compared to 56% of Whites) live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant — the distance within which the maximum ill-effects of the emissions from smokestacks occur.

The Mom's Clean Air Force began as a group of committed and influential bloggers whose aim was to create a new movement which would encourage and enable America's mothers and fathers to take direct action to protect the health and well-being of their

families. Mom's Clean Air Force wants every parent to know that the health of future generations is in peril and to understand the urgency of protecting the Clean Air Act. Those of us who've already joined Mom's Clean Air Force are confident that once African-American moms know the facts — they will want to sign on to our passionate ranks.

We, African-American mothers are no strangers to activism. We may shy away from the title. Some mothers say they want to make a difference, but they are not revolutionaries. Some mothers are more comfortable focusing their efforts on their own personal behavior and household choices, like driving less, reducing consumption and voting. But the truth is, each of us has likely taken up a cause on behalf of our children. And much of what we do as parents, whether intentional, has rippling effects that bring about change that is long-lasting and wider-spread than we know. In the tradition of Black activist mothering, such as Ida B. Wells and the Black Women's Club Movement, which initiated an effective attack on Jim Crow laws and lynchings and other social injustices until the early 1940's; African American mothers have always sought to address the social inequities and disparities that have adversely impacted our children and our communities.

Often, in our struggle to provide for and care for our families, we can forget the value of communal endeavor — that is, that we could shift

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some of our parenting energies toward collective efforts that address the same challenges for everyone. Asthma is a perfect example of this. Tending to the long and short-term health of an asthmatic child takes on an importance beyond making sure their inhalers are in their backpacks to include taking action to clean up the air in our communities.

Our daily demands have necessitated that we as African-American mothers learn to recognize those drop-everything-and-act moments when they arise. When it comes to African American health and air pollution, one of those critical moments is right now. The Environmental Protection Agency recently introduced the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards. This is the first-ever national policy created to reduce mercury emissions from the power plants. Among other meaningful benefits, the rules are estimated to prevent approximately 34,000 premature deaths, 15,000 non-fatal heart attacks and hundreds of thousands of cases of respiratory diseases like asthma, chronic pulmonary obstruction and forms of bronchitis. But Politicians in Congress, encouraged by irresponsible corporations and lobbyists, are trying to diminish and delay the enforcement of the new standards, which will be finalized in November 2011. We have four months to fight to keep the rule strong. The EPA, led by Lisa P. Jackson, an African American mother of two boys, needs to hear that we African American mothers support these rules.

The truth is, African-American mothers are activists, whether we shy away from the title or not. For the sake of our children, we must own our legacy of Black activist mothering and lend our voices to the clean air fight. ■

Gina Carroll is a member of the original team of Mom's Clean Air Force bloggers. You can read more of her blogs in the Houston Chronicle.

To learn more about Mom's Clean Air Force go to their website at www.momscleanairforce.org to learn easy ways to get involved!

For more information on the Mercury Standards and Toxics Rules, check out the EPA web page at <http://www.epa.gov/airquality/powerplanttoxics/> and to see how many coal-fired plants are in or near your zip code you can go to the Energy Justice Network's website <http://www.energyjustice.net/map/>

¹U.S. Dept. of Health, Office of Minority Health

²*Air of Injustice* http://www.catf.us/resources/publications/files/Air_of_Injustice.pdf

