



# UPHOLDING DEMOCRACY

A CONVERSATIONAL GUIDE  
TO PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY  
FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

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How to talk to elected officials and community leaders about protecting our communities from pollution, toxins, and toxic chemicals, and making public health a priority for all.

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### INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that one in two women and one in three men in the U.S. will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives, and research points to chemicals in our environment as important – and preventable – risk factors. At Cancer Free Economy, we work to promote healthy environments where no one gets sick because of toxic chemicals where they live, learn, work, and play.



You have a right to expect city, state, or federal officials to take action on environmental exposures to the toxins that threaten our health. We created this guide to assist you in holding them accountable for decreasing and preventing harmful environmental exposures in your community.

#### **WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR:**

For individuals and organizations that want to bring this message straight to their elected officials and community leaders, find out how those leaders are protecting community health, and urge them to take action. (Hey, 501(c)3 organization, this guide is safe for you to use too!)



#### **WHERE TO USE THIS GUIDE:**

Public forums, town hall meetings, city council meetings, online forums, elected officials' social media channels, or website submission forms (anywhere you can start the conversation!).

#### **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:**

Start a conversation about toxic chemicals and environmental exposures with leaders or elected officials in your area using the questions below. Choose the suggested questions that are the most relevant to your community, adapt them, if needed, and share your personal experience.



**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE ISSUES,  
GET INVOLVED OR SUPPORT OUR WORK:**

**VISIT [CANCERFREEECONOMY.ORG](http://CANCERFREEECONOMY.ORG)**





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### ENVIRONMENTAL AND RACIAL JUSTICE:

- ① Racial and economic disparities in illnesses such as cancer, asthma, and COVID-19 are related to environmental exposure to pollution. *How do you plan to address these inequities in our state/city/community?*
- ② The federal government has not done nearly enough to address the exposure to pollution, including cancer-causing chemicals, of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities. *What will you do to strengthen and enforce environmental justice and civil rights laws to ensure that communities of color and low-income communities have as much of a chance to live a healthy life as anyone else in this country?*
- ③ Communities of color and low-income communities are often more exposed to polluting facilities without their consent, due to systemic racism present in our laws, processes, and practices, leading to higher rates of illness and death. *Will you support a state law to take the cumulative impacts of multiple sources of pollution into account when making decisions about whether a new facility opens in a particular community or a facility can expand?*
- ④ Local governments receiving federal funds are required to make sure that their policies and decisions - including zoning and siting decisions - don't have a racially disproportionate impact. *What are you going to do to make sure that permits and other decisions you make don't continue to cause racial disparities in environmental exposure?*
- ⑤ Farmworkers and their families are exposed to toxic pesticides every day, and workers on the West Coast bear the added burden of working in unhealthy air caused by the wildfires, which are now an annual occurrence. *What will you do to protect these workers and their families who put fresh food on our tables every day? For example, will you support policies that require farmers to have "pollution insurance" so that workers who fall ill can file claims? Will you increase enforcement of requirements around protective gear?*



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### DISCLOSURE OF TOXINS/CANCER-CAUSING CHEMICALS AND BRINGING SAFER CHEMICALS TO COMMUNITIES:

- 1 Plastic production produces dangerous air and water pollution. Microplastics are now turning up in our seafood, our fruits and vegetables, our soil, and our bodies, and plastic not only contains dangerous chemicals that can be ingested if food containers are exposed to heat or used repeatedly, but it also has a rapidly growing carbon footprint. *How are you going to ensure and enforce that our state/community relies less on plastic and more on renewable, accessible resources?*
- 2 Cancer is the leading cause of death by disease among children in the United States, and the rate of children being diagnosed with cancer has actually increased by 34% since 1975. Leading scientists, health professionals, business leaders, and advocates are calling for a greater focus on prevention to turn the tide on childhood cancer. *What are you doing to prevent childhood cancer? Will you increase funding for prevention research? Will you support policies that regulate known and suspected cancer-causing chemicals and toxics, such as a National Childhood Cancer Prevention Plan? (Learn more in our [Childhood Cancer Prevention Plan](#))*
- 3 Due to the need for distance learning, laptops and hotspots are being loaned or given to students across the country. These families are getting a doubly dangerous dose of wireless radiation while their child's brain and organ systems are still developing. *Will you support distributing ethernet cables, adaptors, and instructions to decrease wireless radiation exposure to children? What additional actions will you take to decrease exposure to constant non-ionizing radiation?*
- 4 Toxic chemicals are found in many everyday products because there is no law requiring comprehensive testing of product ingredients, such as fragrances, preservatives and stabilizers, before bringing them to market. While some states have passed laws requiring the disclosure of specific chemicals in products, these laws are constantly under attack by corporations that put profits over public health. *Will you support protecting and advancing local, state and federal laws that require ingredient disclosure so that consumers have access to information they need to protect their health?*



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### DECREASING OUR EXPOSURE TO PFAS FOREVER CHEMICALS:

- ① PFAS is a class of human-made “forever” chemicals that are everywhere in our environment, and I’m concerned about it. They have been used in a host of consumer products worldwide since the 1950s. The CDC recognizes that higher levels of PFAS exposure may cause cancer and other diseases and reduce resistance to infectious diseases, but research is needed to fully understand the health effects of PFAS exposure. *Will you support funding for additional research to understand the impacts of PFAS exposure? And, will you support regulating the full class of PFAS chemicals following a precautionary approach?*

#### WHAT IS THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE?

One definition of the Precautionary Principle was developed by participants at a convening in 1998. “When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the precautionary principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action.”

— Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle, Jan. 1998

- ② In addition, I am concerned about the disposal of PFAS, how they get into the air and water, and the health impacts for those exposed at high levels, which are often communities of color and low-income communities. *What are you going to do to stop the incineration of PFAS and to finally stop the use of PFAS for everyday items? Now that PFAS-free certified firefighting foams are available, will you support the use of these safer alternatives to PFAS?*
- ③ The Toxics Substances Control Act, passed by Congress before the current administration took office, was meant to enforce stronger toxic chemical regulation to protect our communities. Instead, it has been resisted and watered down so companies continue to profit off of people’s exposure to cancer-causing chemicals. *What will you do to ensure that the United States develops a strong program to protect the health of the country from toxic chemicals?*



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### COVID-19 RECOVERY AND PREVENTION:

- 1 The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the need for a strong public health approach and funding for the prevention of disease due to toxics in our environment. COVID has also exposed the gaps in protection for essential workers. *What will you do to strengthen worker protections?*
- 2 Farmworkers are contracting COVID-19 at disproportionately high rates and face a host of underlying health conditions due to pesticide exposure, including cancer, asthma, and developmental and reproductive harms, that make them more vulnerable to the virus. In addition, pesticide residue is left on non-organically grown produce and worse, it is intentionally grown into our food to make it weed resistant. Glyphosate for example has been banned in Europe, and is classified as a possible carcinogen. *What will you do to keep the workers who pick our fruits and vegetables safe. What will you do to insist that pesticides be tested for our safety before being put into use?*

### BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE, HEALTHY, AND JUST FUTURE

- 1 The economic and public health impacts of COVID-19, the climate crisis, and institutionalized racism underline the need to rebuild an economy that is sustainable, healthy and just, for all. *What are you doing to ensure that the communities most impacted - frontline workers and fenceline communities - are engaged in the development of policy solutions to transition the U.S. to a sustainable, healthy and just economy?*
- 2 Due to the lack of enforcement of environmental laws and misdirected subsidies, our economy incentivizes profits over public health and environmental protections. *How are you working to support investments in green chemistry and sustainable business practices to prevent exposures to toxic chemicals across the lifecycle of products? How are you working to incentivize and support a transition from pesticides and harmful industrial farming systems to organic, local and sustainable food systems for all?*



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### NEXT STEPS

To keep these issues at the forefront of elected officials' minds, we have to push them to not only recognize the connection between industry, pollution and public health, but also to take bold action to remove toxic chemicals where we work, live, and play. Continue to use this guide to hold elected officials accountable after they're elected.

For more information visit  
[CancerFreeEconomy.org](https://CancerFreeEconomy.org)

For updated information,  
additional voting guides, and more conversations  
you can have in your community on these issues  
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