



AMERICAN CLIMATE
LEADERSHIP AWARDS

GreenRoots

greenrootschelsea.org

This guide offers a successful and stepwise model for you to replicate in your community. It is part of a series featuring the award-winning programs from the finalists of the American Climate Leadership Awards 2021 by ecoAmerica.

PURPOSE

Connecting densely-populated environmental justice communities, the highly industrial Chelsea Creek poses numerous climate and public health threats. However, frontline residents on the Creek's shores see opportunity and community power. Resident-led GreenRoots centers BIPOC leadership to effectuate lasting climate resilience, environmental justice and improved public health. We engage community in meaningful and just ways; we empower fellow neighbors as we learn side-by-side; and together we implement innovative, dynamic and inspiring campaigns and projects.

DESCRIPTION

Generations of immigrants have made Chelsea and East Boston home. Meanwhile, redlining, proximity to Boston and years of structural racism and oppression led to the full industrialization of our waterfront, impacting health and environment for decades. GreenRoots has worked over 25+ years to upend the status quo, address serious environmental injustices, make businesses accountable, and create a more accessible waterfront while improving air, land and water quality. This was born from resident engagement and empowerment, fighting back against big industry and oppressive structures, for a chance at a just environment. Our largest accomplishment is our authentic, diverse and powerful movement.

TARGET AUDIENCE

GreenRoots focuses on engaging those who are traditionally excluded and marginalized: immigrants, people of color, those with limited English proficiency, youth, LGBTQ+, low-income individuals and isolated elders. Our targets for change include industries and businesses, state and federal regulators, elected and appointed officials and others who work to oppress people.



GOALS

1. Engage Community. Real change only happens when those affected create the solutions. GreenRoots builds community across ethnicity, race, gender expression, income level, immigration status, age, religion, and languages spoken. We engage residents through: phone-calls, door-knocking, flyering, community meetings, fun events, hands-on activities, trainings and connection to community resources.
2. Empower Community to Become Vocal and Strong Leaders. We believe in the value of lived experience. GreenRoots knows that solutions to our challenges must come from community, regardless of educational attainment. In all our projects: we learn side-by-side, engage experts as equals, and collectively strengthen our voices and leadership.
3. Implement innovative campaigns. Our work focuses on implementing innovative, replicable, frontline, community strategies. These include: community-owned energy microgrids, a community land trust, community based participatory research, grassroots organizing campaigns, transforming vacant lands, holding businesses accountable, working in coalition, marrying organizing with legal action, creating legislation, all while having fun and building relationships.

PRIMARY
COMPONENTS
OR ACTIVITIES**1. Fighting Archaic Infrastructure and Fossil Fuel Burning**

GreenRoots works towards a just recovery from reliance on fossil fuels. We fight archaic, polluting industries in our EJ neighborhoods such as diesel power plants, ethanol freight trains, electrical substations. We promote renewable, resilient energy like a community owned microgrid and energy efficiency for homes, businesses and municipalities.

2. Addressing Sea Level Rise and Flooding

To prepare our frontline communities for catastrophic weather, we implement green infrastructure including rain gardens, bioretention areas and stormwater tree pits; restore urban salt marshes; work in coalition on climate resilience measures; and hold industries accountable for climate readiness. Moreover, we work to ensure our community is not displaced by “climigration.”

3. Addressing Air Pollution, Greenhouse Gases and Increasing Green Spaces

Addressing toxic emissions is critical. We replaced and retrofitted 132 diesel engines eliminating 2,000 tons of annual air pollutants; advocated for citywide air quality monitors and home air filters; planted thousands of trees; converted parcels into green spaces and built 5 growing spaces. We build off of these projects yearly.



4. Addressing Extreme Heat and Urban Heat Islands

We implement community-based research to better understand heat effects on health. We installed hydration stations throughout neighborhoods; advocated for cooling centers; identify demonstration projects for green, cooling areas; and research policies and practices to cool neighborhoods. We will continue to implement measures until our neighborhoods are no longer heat islands.

5. Increasing Mobility while Addressing Congestion

In our transit-dependent communities, achieving climate benefits through vehicular traffic reduction means 1) ensuring public transportation is affordable and reliable; 2) increasing access to multimodal pathways; and 3) engaging residents in walking groups to introduce them to parks, walking paths and waterfront access areas.

IMPACT & OUTCOMES

GreenRoots' work is not traditional "climate" — we focus on people and how people are impacted by climate change. We measure our achievements through two lenses: community empowerment and physical environmental improvements.

Community Empowerment

- Grow, expand and deepen the power of a representative movement of diverse residents who are reversing years of structural racism and oppression.
- Engage new members and build leadership through: doorknocking; calls & check-ins; relationship building; monthly meetings and sub-committee meetings; trainings and peer-to-peer learning; multilingual information sharing.
- Ensure language justice for equitable information access and decision-making. Every meeting has simultaneous interpretation; written material is provided in up to 8 languages. We advocate for language justice at city, state and federal levels.
- Provide ongoing campaign-specific trainings, especially for legalese or technical language and governmental processes.

Physical Environmental Change

- Win campaigns to stop polluting industries.
- Remediate industrial lands into clean, accessible parks and open spaces.
- Maximize urban growing spaces.
- Increase and maintain tree canopy.
- Reduce fossil fuels and increase renewable energy.
- Create open spaces and revitalize parks.
- Design and construct green infrastructure.



- Reduce impervious surfacing annually.
- Defeat egregious and unjust proposals.
- Create and maintain strong working relationships with elected and appointed leaders.
- Hold developers accountable.
- Implement legal strategies as needed.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

1. Uplift Resident Voices & Ensure Language Justice. Our low-income, BIPOC, multilingual residents are the core of GreenRoots. Appreciate and value lived experience; make room for residents to lead; ensure they are engaged in meaningful ways and have equal access to information and decision-making – interpret (oral) and translate (written) everything; encourage and invite residents to speak the language of their heart.
2. Conduct outreach to residents to gather ALL opinions. Meet people where they are at: in their homes, at bus stops, online, grocery shopping, etc. Talk to everyone (with interpretation as needed). Support youth-led conversations with their peers. Gather input. And then gather more input.
3. Have fun while building community. GreenRoots hosts multiple creative (and FREE!) community gatherings that connect residents to the work and are fun. These include free kayaking days, pop-up parks, mural paintings, salsa nights and harvest festivals. We share lots of food, reflective of the many nationalities represented by our members. And we ensure children of all ages are welcome.
4. Allow residents' climate concerns to shape the work and targets. GreenRoots began 25+ years ago because residents spoke about losing parks to construction. Residents identified and led victories preventing siting of a diesel power plant, stopping ethanol trains, removing 2,000 tons of toxic air. Treat residents as the community experts that they are. Understand that "climate" in frontline communities is about where you live and how you are impacted, not about polar bears and sequoia trees.
5. Fight hard fights. Our low-income, BIPOC, multilingual, EJ neighborhoods have shouldered industrial burdens with public health consequences for too long. Polluting industries try to take advantage of our waterfront, our land, and our air, but we won't let them. With residents always leading, we work with technical and legal partners, advocate with decision-makers, organize, march, and speak out. We don't back down from the fight for our land, water, air, health and neighborhoods.



6. Create visible, positive, community changes. Our communities have limited greenspace, negligible waterfront access and densely populated neighborhoods. Every greenspace or beautification project makes a large impact. GreenRoots built and manages 4 community gardens and an Urban Farm; revitalizes parks annually; plants trees aggressively; paints murals; implemented water stations for hydration and cooling. These community improvement projects create huge community benefit and connect residents to our mission.
7. Maintain strong partnerships. We are better together. GreenRoots enjoys strong partnerships with other nonprofits, local businesses, the Cities, local politicians, and faith-based institutions. We convene coalitions and lift up the work of others. We lean on technical partners as needed.
8. Plan together. Give residents a genuine voice in creating the annual work plan. Each of our programs has a steering committee which truly shapes its own vision and path. Most of our work is rooted in the Chelsea Creek Vision Plan, first drafted by residents in 2001 and updated through an intense process in 2019. This plan articulates exactly how residents of Chelsea and East Boston would like their community and waterfront to be.
9. Base the work in science. GreenRoots enjoys strong, working relationships with many local universities and scientific allies. Staff and our ECO youth have participated as equals in many university-led research projects. As we engage in advocacy and change-making, we root it in the climate science.
10. Encourage trust-based philanthropy. GreenRoots actively engages with our funders. We host Environmental Justice tours for our funders, so they can see and understand for themselves the challenges faced by our communities. We keep conversations open and honest and trust that our funders will do the same.

