

April 8, 2022

The Honorable Zellnor Myrie  
188 State Street., Legislative Office Bldg.  
Room 903  
Albany, NY 12247

RE: Gentrification in our communities, access to mental health, and how it affects people of color

Dear Senator Zellnor Myrie:

Our names are Alisha Scott, Rashid Thigpen, Danielle Nicole Kerr, Jenna Chambers, Zamane Haynes, and Dylana Bourne and we are social work students at Adelphi University. We are also a part of a Social Action Initiative that focuses on increasing environmental justice for the BIPOC community who reside in New York.

As we fight for social justice to receive equity in our BIPOC communities, we must also address the environmental injustice within our BIPOC communities across the United States. For centuries, the BIPOC communities have been pushed aside, relying on each other for help and support. However, with limited access to resources like obtaining access to mental health resources in the BIPOC communities, we are now facing the injustice of gentrification. BIPOC communities must receive accessible food sources, breathe in pollution-free air, and not be poisoned from using basic toiletries to help us thrive. As we fight to have a safe environment to thrive in, we now face having our community's culture threatened. According to Equity for Flatbush, gentrification is regarded as an intersectional issue that is inextricably linked to how racism, classism, sexism, gender bias, physical and mental capability, and other factors affect individuals and communities.

Environmental justice is not only about fixing up a community's aesthetic values, but also includes the creation of a fair and equitable distribution of environmental benefits. Seeing the environment changes can potentially affect the emotional stability of the communities, more specifically BIPOC communities. We ask that you protect and provide support to those communities. It is not equitable to uproot and displace historical BIPOC communities to make quick money. The bill "Environmental Justice For All Act" can play an essential part in improving mental health, gentrification concerns, and the environmental injustice in BIPOC communities. This bill will help to address and focus on establishing healthy environments helping to provide support to our communities.

In the BIPOC community, we see that gentrification can affect mental health and access to treatment in a multitude of ways. Gentrification has caused many members of our community to feel isolated, ostracized, and hopeless when they are seeing active changes, especially without their voices being heard. In interviews that we have conducted, many members of the community have stated feelings of losing their culture and childhood, because of gentrification which has affected their mental health and financial stability. When asked about mental health resources in the community, they feel like it is non-existent or too expensive for proper care. Interviewees ranging from teenagers to adults show common trends of disappointment and frustration from the inability to access affordable resources due to gentrification. Although access to mental health resources may be available (clinics, facilities, therapists, etc.), finding culturally competent people is difficult.

In a majority of interviews, it was stated that when some interviewees found services they felt either unheard, unseen, or uncomfortable. When they continued to actively look and found something better, it was too expensive for the quality of care they needed. Because of these trends, many have decided to quit seeking support and try to self-manage even when the services are desperately needed. Access to mental health resources in our community should be just as important as preventive care and access to urgent care facilities.

The stigma of mental health in the black community, especially black males, has hindered their opportunities and affected them over generations. In one interview a black male stated:

*“As a black male, I feel like I have to eat my problems. It was a norm around my family and was always taught to be the man of the house and to brush off my problems. I feel like people can’t always help because they judge you for it. I don’t think people want to hear about my problems because they assume I can just take care of myself but that’s not always the case”.*

Although the idea of gentrification and mental health go hand in hand, it can look different for everyone, the stigma associated with both are the same. One woman interviewed stated:

*“I feel like the black community as a whole may find it difficult to find the right therapist that would fit them. I believe as a community it is slowly changing but as a whole, it is very much not supported. I opened up to my family about my anxiety and the only option given was to pray it away, but I’m thinking that is not how that works. But in my community as a whole, I am not familiar with any resources except for searching for them online to hopefully find the correct support for myself.”*

As discussed previously, the Environmental Justice For All Act would be an essential factor in the improvement of overall environmental justice in BIPOC communities. As social work students advocating for justice, we ask that you consider using your platform, voice, and power to pass this bill and make much-needed changes. With your help, this bill will make a

difference in BIPOC communities because the Environmental Justice for All Act embodies what it means to have environmental justice in today's society. This bill allows advisory bodies, programs, and people to address disproportionate health and environmental effects.

As members of the community, we see firsthand the impact of environmental injustice, specifically on mental health and the resources surrounding us. As our advocacy focuses on changing environmental injustice and mental health among this population, there are much-needed crucial changes that should be made. For this change to be made, we believe it is important to create affordable mental health clinics and other resources in communities of color. Both officials and professionals must be culturally competent when creating programs and resources in BIPOC neighborhoods. By providing opportunities and mental health resources in areas like clinics, recreational centers, and schools tailored to community needs, healthier environments can be created for BIPOC populations.

As a Brooklyn native, we hope you see how advocating for social injustices in Brooklyn is important, and we believe that you are a vital component of our social action initiative. Thank you for taking the time to read our letter and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Alisha Scott, Rashid Thigpen, Danielle Nicole Kerr, Jenna Chambers, Zamane Haynes, and Dylana Bourne