Reducing Energy Burdens: Tackling Energy Inequity in Dekalb County
United States, Georgia, Decatur
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Energy Inequity in Atlanta, Georgia
The Greater Atlanta area ranks third in the number of energy burdened low-income homes in the United States. Energy inequity, which describes the unfair distribution of energy consumption and production, disproportionately impacts low-income communities and communities of color, particularly African Americans and Latinxs in the Metro Atlanta area.

Most recently, Georgia Power implemented a new rate case which will, ultimately, raise energy costs for bill payers. Households that use about 1,000 kWh will see an increase of at least $6 in 2020, and additional costs from escalating monthly fees. With this in mind, low-income households and older, less-efficient homes will feel the heaviest impact from the rate hike.

Energy inequity translates to reduced disposable income for low-income households, a key measure of financial stability and peace. When households are forced to choose between keeping the lights on and paying healthcare bills, families and individuals become more susceptible to the distress produced by economic insecurity. Building an energy affordable future not only provides household members greater freedom to maintain peace with their health, professions, and livelihoods, but also stimulates global energy efficiency, a key component of reducing the risks and impacts of climate change.

The Atlanta Youth Energy Corps (AYEC)
The Atlanta Youth Energy Corps was created to address the issue of energy inequity in the Metro Atlanta area. Founded in 2018, the AYEC believes in making the Metro-Atlanta community a more equitable place by implementing energy efficiency programs, centering racial justice, and engaging youth leadership. The organization, comprised primarily of women of color, aims to bridge the gap between energy equity, youth leadership, and workforce development.

Project Description & Overview
The objective of this project is to reduce energy inequities through educational workshops and energy retrofitting. The recent rulings of Georgia Power’s rate case are not well-known, and the implications of their projected revenue goals will be heavily shouldered by residents in the form of, in part, environmental compliance fees, nuclear recovery cost fees, and access fees. Out of all residents, low-income bill payers will be most disproportionately impacted by the increased energy costs. Given the high burden placed on residents, the workshops will be centered around educating homeowners and tenants about methods that can reduce energy costs such as retrofitting, political engagement with the Public Service Commission, and energy equity advocacy.

By using the Neighborhood Nexus mapping tool, the AYEC identified several zip codes within Dekalb County that face energy burdens. AYEC is primarily comprised of students from Agnes Scott College, so working within Dekalb allows us a “home base advantage.” We believe in working in the communities we are most familiar with, and that we most identify with.

To build community trust, the 2020 spring semester will be spent establishing relationships with local neighborhood leadership, such as the Hidden Hills Civic Association and the MLK Service Project at the Community Center of South Decatur. Once community partnership is developed, the AYEC will begin planning a series of educational workshops in collaboration with community leaders. These workshops will kick-off at the beginning of summer and throughout the workshop series, interested community members will be provided the opportunity to sign up for additional energy consulting and retrofitting.

The latter portion of the summer will be spent providing energy analyses and “simple” retrofits (basic upgrades like LED light bulbs and air sealing) for interested community members. For this phase, AYEC volunteers will coordinate with household members to organize an energy analysis and subsequent retrofitting sessions. Retrofitting materials will be purchased at no cost to participants of the program.

In addition to reducing energy inequities, the AYEC has the objective of developing youth leadership with an emphasis on community building, on and off campus. We believe that students who
show a vested interest in building holistic communities are the same students whose skills can best grow in a tangible, real-world setting. This project will teach current and new members of AYEC important skills in project management, community engagement, strategic planning, analysis, legal policy, and much more. Ultimately, participating in the Project for Peace will grow the capacity of the AYEC to continue meaningful work with, for, and by young people.

Goals for Sustainability
Throughout the entirety of this process, homeowners or tenants will be invited to be active participants at every stage. This way, the tools used to identify energy inefficiencies and implement upgrades are accessible and understood by household members. Of these tools, rebates and air sealing are two imperative aspects. Of the several energy upgrades a house can undergo, air sealing is one of the cheapest and simplest upgrades. Although the purchasing costs of retrofit materials will be covered by the project, the AYEC will ensure that household members not only learn how to perform air sealing techniques but also understand the low costs associated with such an upgrade. Rebate programs can offer large savings from efficiency upgrades, but may go unnoticed by energy-burdened communities and can be culturally inaccessible. To address this, resources will be provided to those who may most benefit from the numerous rebate programs offered by Georgia Power.

The AYEC intends to partner with additional organizations that have direct connections to energy equity and/or with the communities where we will be doing outreach. We have had an initial meeting with one of the regional leaders in this field, the Partnership for Southern Equity. They have expressed strong support for AYEC's intended programs, and are a potential partner to this project. Given that the AYEC is seeking various means of funding and applying for several grant opportunities, we will confirm additional partnerships once this project is funded.

Future Impact & Measurable Outcomes
At a cost of around $60 per retrofit, this process will result in decreased energy burdens, lower energy costs, and subsequently, greater disposable income. Previous retrofits performed by AYEC have resulted in energy savings of at least $80 per year for small, single-resident homes. We expect these savings to increase for larger homes with more residents. Of these savings, additional funds could prove instrumental towards other aspects of a household’s life such as education, healthcare, or transportation.

In this project, we expect the following key results:
- **Develop youth leadership**: The main student leader will complete a pre- and post-project survey. The survey will include questions that collect information about the skills they’d like to develop.
- **Develop and strengthen the agency of tenants and homeowners seeking to improve their energy burdens**: Before and after every home is retrofitted, residents will be asked to complete a short survey regarding their knowledge around energy equity.
- **Obtain data and gain insight on resource accessibility**: Measures of accessibility will be used to develop and strengthen connections between residents, community resources, and partners.
- **Complete seven home retrofits by the end of the summer**: AYEC will perform a 6-month and 1-year post-retrofit check-in to measure financial savings, carbon savings, changes in energy burdens, and resident satisfaction of retrofit education and services.

Energy Equity is Peace
Peace is often defined as “freedom from disturbance.” If residents are forced to choose between paying the light bill or paying for groceries, a disturbance is surely felt. No household should have to worry about the basic necessities of electricity: it is a basic human right for all, not reserved for the privileged and wealthy. However, this is the reality for many households at the brunt of unfairly distributed energy, and this reality disproportionately impacts the lives of people of color nationwide. The AYEC is committed to breaking this cycle of injustice through the work of home retrofitting. The co-benefits of energy efficiency upgrades may include healthier and safer residential environments, reduced displacement, avoided gentrification, economic stimulation, and increased resilience for our climate future. We believe that simple acts of energy efficiency will create a positive effect that trickles out into the community at large. This is only the beginning and, surely, a small but scaleable step towards peace. With lights shining bright, so will the future.