

Environmental Justice Committee

Member Biographies

Abdullahi Jama – Community Liaison

Abdullahi is currently an independent consultant on East African community issues focusing on research, at-risk youth, economic disparity, strategic planning, and leadership training. He has a long history of organizing and community building in the East African community.

Abdullahi worked with the City of Seattle's Office of Immigrants and Refugee Affairs in 2012-2013 to lead the Save Community Conversation between the SPD and African immigrant populations in Seattle. In his home country of Somalia, Abdullahi taught human rights law at the Somali National University and worked with the Government of Somalia negotiating peace treaties. Abdullahi served on the Community Partner Steering Committee that led to the creation of the Equity & Environment Agenda.

Amanda Lee – InterIm CDA WILD

Amanda Lee is an environmental educator and facilitator who currently works with InterIm CDA's Wilderness Inner-city Leadership Development (WILD) youth program. They hold a B.A. in Global Environmental Studies and M.A.Ed. in Urban Environmental Education. For the past ten years, they have worked nearly all facets of the field from venturing in forests as a research assistant to doing habitat restoration and leading backcountry trips. Amanda also serves as a consultant and facilitator of social justice and equity workshops, particularly for environmental organizations. They are committed to creating career pathways in the environmental field for youth of color, as well as queer and trans* youth, and shifting the culture of the environmental movement.

César García-García – Community Liaison

Born and raised in Mexico, César García-García lived in different environments before moving to beautiful Seattle in 2003. He went from Mexico City, one of the largest cities in the world, to the tropical Caribbean in the Yucatan Peninsula, then to the arid region of Baja California. It is here in the unique Pacific NW where he has found his call of helping his community.

César works as an interpreter, an activity he considers very rewarding because of the impact created when two people understand each other. He also likes to read about the history and current affairs of this region and is always eager to contribute to his community and this city he now calls home.

Debolina Banerjee – Puget Sound Sage

Debolina comes to the EJ Steering Committee with a deep commitment towards socially equitable, environmentally sustainable and just development for communities whose voices are not heard in the mainstream. Her experience ranges from research on the environmental impacts of unorganized industries, transit-oriented development, anti-displacement, affordable housing, and project management for real estate development to extensive community based work with grassroots activists and marginalized communities in India organizing for social justice and human rights around food, sustainable agriculture, clean environment, community development and women's empowerment. She holds Master's degrees in City Planning as well as Applied Environmental Studies in Planning, and has a Bachelor's degree in Architecture. Grounded in Puget Sound Sage's mission to advance racial equity, strong democracy, good jobs, clean environment and thriving communities, she works as Climate Justice Policy Analyst, performing research-based analysis of climate policies and providing support to climate justice campaigns and coalitions.

Dennis Comer – Community Liaison

Dennis Comer is a retired military officer and co-owner of Brown Sugar Baking in the Central Area of Seattle. He is a member of both the Central Area Land Use Review Committee and the Central Area Collaborative, two community groups comprised of residents and business community stakeholders who work to ensure commercial vitality and a collaborative approach to development in the Central Area.

Dmitri Groce – Washington Low Income Housing Alliance

Dimitri finds pride in knowing every nook and corner in Seattle. Raised by a single-parent, he has committed himself to being part of the movement to advance opportunities for low-income people and communities of color to successfully assert their place in the fabric of the city. Dimitri credits local community-based organizations like Puget Sound Sage and Got Green in helping him develop an analysis of Environmental Justice as a vehicle to create inclusive, equitable policy spaces to build strong communities. He currently works as an organizer for the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance, and spends a lot of his free-time wearing earbuds, running shoes, and/or aprons.

Jill Mangaliman – Got Green

Jill Mangaliman is a queer Filipino-American community organizer and writer, born and raised in Seattle. They prefer gender neutral pronouns. Thanks to Federal Pell Grants, Jill graduated from the UW as a student of Human Geography in 2003. For 6 years, they organized in local and national campaigns involving health care equity, immigrant rights, and protecting social services. In 2009, they joined Got Green as part of the City Weatherization program. Here, Jill stepped into leadership from founding board member to lead organizer, instrumental in the formation and strategy of the Food Access Team. Jill is a member of GABRIELA Seattle and a contributor for the Seattle Globalist, the Fil-Am Herald, and the International Examiner. In their spare time, they enjoy singing karaoke and making things. Jill served on the Community Partner Steering Committee that led to the creation of the Equity & Environment Agenda.

Nancy Huizar (Mentored by Jill Mangaliman) – Got Green

Nancy Huizar was born and raised in Beacon Hill. In 2015, she graduated from the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences at the University of Washington. As a young professional, Nancy interned and worked for many environmental organizations. Most of the organizations she worked for looked at environmental issues in one dimension: how humans affect the environment. By serving on the Environmental Justice Committee, Nancy looks forward to working within different dimensions and intersections of the environmental issues we face and supporting communities that are disproportionately affected by them.

Jose Manuel Vasquez – Latino Community Fund

Jose Manuel Vasquez is the Director of Programs and Leadership Development for the Latino Community Fund of Washington. He is passionate about helping identify community needs and connecting our community to resources. He has spent many years helping build the capacity and leadership of future leaders through the Latino Community Fund, where he himself once started out as a student volunteer. An immigrant who grew up in South Seattle, Jose has many personal experiences of the needs of our local community. Jose served on the Community Partner Steering Committee that led to the creation of the Equity & Environment Agenda.

Julie Popper – Service Employees International Union 1199NW

Julie Popper began her career as an Environmental Justice Organizer in Southeast Washington, DC, where residents have historically carried an unjust burden of the costs of DC's functioning and it shows in the poor health outcomes in the community. Since then, she has worked as an organizer, communicator, and strategist in the LGBTQ rights, housing rights, and labor

movements. She currently works with nurses and healthcare workers in SEIU Healthcare 1199NW, staffing their Social and Economic Justice Committee, leading on healthcare is a human right, and building labor-community solidarity.

Karia Wong – Chinese Information & Service Center

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Karia completed her high school and college education in Toronto, Canada. From a young age, she witnessed and experienced environmental injustice and was conditioned to believe that only real estate developers and high government officials have the power to make decisions related to the environment.

Karia has found her involvement in the EJC a very inspiring and self-awakening experience- she worked in collaboration with the other members in the development of the framework for the Environment & Equity Initiative. She is currently a Family Center Coordinator at Chinese Information & Service Center (CISC), a community-based nonprofit organization located in the International District/Chinatown, which specializes in supporting immigrants to settle and thrive. She is a committed advocate of environmental justice for underprivileged immigrant communities. “Local issues, local voices, local leaders and local solutions.” Karia served on the Community Partner Steering Committee that led to the creation of the Equity & Environment Agenda.

Melissa Watkinson – Community Liaison

Melissa Watkinson is a Citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. She has lived most of her life in Washington State, and has been a resident of Seattle for the past ten years. She earned a master’s degree in Policy Studies at the University of Washington Bothell in 2015. As a graduate student, Melissa worked as a research assistant at UW with the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute to conduct community-based research with tribal colleges and with Washington Sea Grant on social indicator research for WA’s Marine Spatial Plan. Her capstone research employed cross-disciplinary research methods to better understand the impacts of historic and federal land policies and programs on climate change adaptation for tribal communities who are experiencing a loss of coastal land. She recently completed a Marine Policy Fellowship at The Nature Conservancy.

Currently, Melissa is working at the University of Washington on a community-based Tribal Climate Science and Health project. Melissa also brings experience from volunteering and collaborating with organizations that work to address the needs of communities who face multiple climate impacts.

Mergitu Argo – OneAmerica

Mergitu Argo is Oromo-American and currently working as a South King County Organizer for One America. For 16 years, Mergitu served the refugee and immigrant community as a Case Manager and Family Advocate for Refugee Women’s Alliance and Neighborhood House. For the past 3 years, she worked as an organizer for those organizations. Mergitu is also the chairperson for the East African Advisory Council in Seattle. She is a well-known activist for human rights and is passionate about working with underserved communities. Mergitu went to school for Family and Child Studies in Seattle. She is bilingual in the Amharic and Oromo languages and the mother of a beautiful girl.

Paulina López – Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition/TAG

Paulina López is a full-time volunteer, organizer, advocate, and the mother of three boys under the age of ten. She is originally from Ecuador, but has made Seattle her home over the past 13 years. Paulina demonstrates engagement in this community with advocacy for multiple important civic policies, including access to a safe, clean environment for our families. Currently, she works for the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition/TAG as a Community Engagement Manager where she oversees the Duwamish Valley Youth Corps Program.

For the last 10 years, Paulina has served as a volunteer President of the South Park Information and Resource Center, a grassroots community organization which endeavors to foster civic engagement in recent immigrants, with a special focus on women. Paulina has labored extensively to promote local social and environmental justice issues uniquely affecting our recent immigrant communities, such as the cleanup of the Duwamish River and health impact assessments. Paulina has a passion for outreach and community involvement for underrepresented communities on issues that affect them, as well as advocacy for human rights issues. She served on the Community Partner Steering Committee that led to the creation of the Equity & Environment Agenda.

Ximena Velázquez-Arenas – Service Employees International 775

Ximena Velázquez-Arenas is a social justice activist, political enthusiast, and artist. She organized her first action at the age of ten, blocking a public street in Mexico City to raise awareness about landfills and lack of adequate recycling facilities. After being forcibly removed and chastised by her parents, she decided to organize with the help of others and build power in numbers. Today, Ximena is the Political and Advocacy Organizer for SEIU 775, fighting to restore dignity and power to the working class. In her spare time, Ximena enjoys organizing with her neighbors, organizing with strangers, and disappearing into the mountains.