

“Cierrale!” Building on Latino Values and Traditions to Fight Climate Change – and Strengthen Chicago’s Neighborhoods in the Process

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What is climate change?

Climate change refers to shifts in weather patterns over long periods of time. It has the greatest impact on those lacking the resources to adapt. Learn more at: climatechicago.fieldmuseum.org/learn.

Over the past five years, Chicago has gained international attention for its efforts to address climate change, as laid out in the Chicago Climate Action Plan, released by the City of Chicago in fall 2008. In particular, Chicago has been recognized for involving a broad swath of stakeholder groups in the Plan’s implementation. In May 2012, Chicago was one of three cities awarded the prestigious Siemens Sustainable Community Award for its “multi-disciplinary approach to sustainability” bringing together “businesses, advocacy groups, philanthropists, utilities, government offices, museums, and restaurants.”

Chicago’s multidisciplinary approach is succeeding in large part because it links climate action to improving quality of life. Diverse groups across the city are getting on board because they see that particular climate actions—like installing rain barrels or native plant gardens or weatherizing homes—will also positively impact other issues residents care about, like flooding, health, and saving money.

Latino organizations are playing a key role in Chicago’s climate action efforts.

They are mobilizing their communities to address the strategies of both the Chicago Climate Action Plan and the area’s other major plan, the Chicago Wilderness Climate Action Plan for Nature. And they are strengthening community life in the process.

Chicago Climate Action Plan: 5 Strategies for the City of Chicago

- 1 Energy Efficient Buildings
- 2 Clean and Renewable Energy Sources
- 3 Improved Transportation Options
- 4 Reduced Waste and Industrial Pollution
- 5 Adaptation

Learn more:
chicagoclimateaction.org

Climate Action Plan for Nature: 5 Strategies for the Chicago Region

- 1 Climate-Friendly Gardens and Lawns
- 2 Water Conservation
- 3 Monitoring
- 4 Stewardship
- 5 Climate Change Education

Learn more:
climatechicago.fieldmuseum.org/learn#capn

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For example:

- The Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO) helped lead the successful fight to close down the Fisk and Crawford coal-fired power plants, a major source of pollution and carbon emissions in the Latino neighborhoods of Pilsen and Little Village since the early 1900s.
- Other organizations in Pilsen are installing and running gardens, to grow food, provide more green space for play and socializing, improve health, and store carbon. Many gardens are working together through La Alianza Verde, which is leading an effort to plant milkweed throughout the community to turn Pilsen into a Monarch sanctuary. Like many of the Michoacanos who live in Pilsen, Monarchs migrate between Michoacán and Chicago. They serve as a cultural symbol and as a powerful symbol of the ability to freely cross borders. The most recent garden installed in the neighborhood is the Mary Zepeda Native Garden, a collaboration between Casa Michoacán, The Field Museum, PERRO, and the daycare center El Hogar del Niño. It serves as a play space for the daycare and an outdoor learning classroom for the community. (See “More Than a Garden: A Reflection of Hope.”)
- Latino organizations comprise 15% of the Energy Action Network, a city program that provides funding to community organizations across the city to sign up residents for home weatherization and engage them in energy conservation, to save money, reduce carbon emissions, and improve health.
- On the Southwest Side, the Academy for Global Citizenship charter school draws on their Latino families’ traditions of reuse and outdoor socializing to bring them together for a variety of climate action-related activities including a very popular community-wide rummage sale.
- The Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) participates in national and international climate justice efforts and leads local environmental justice campaigns that also link to climate action, including public transit, water, clean power, and open space.
- Chicago’s Latino residents have a proud history of entrepreneurship, and a number of small businesses are incorporating climate action into their business models. For example:
 - In 2007, a group of Pilsen immigrants laid off from their jobs founded Workers United for Eco Maintenance, which uses only green cleaning supplies.
 - An entrepreneur in Pilsen collaborated with a local baker to create a *Chalupita*, an edible dough bowl for the ice cream he sells, precisely to eliminate waste.
 - In South Chicago, entrepreneurs have been engaging in climate action for a long time—without thinking of their work as climate action. The *junqueros* are homegrown recyclers, collecting cast off metal items and selling them to reclamation centers. This practice is complemented by repair shops owned by Mexican community members that fix small electronic appliances that would otherwise find their way into landfills.



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The Field Museum

Latino heritage provides key building blocks for local climate action.

The effort described above to turn Pilsen into a Monarch sanctuary provides one example of a growing trend in Chicago: engaging immigrant and other ethnic communities in environmental and climate action by drawing on their environmentally-friendly strengths, including cultural values, traditions, and practices. This trend is being led in large part by The Field Museum and by the Chicago Cultural Alliance, a collaboration of over 25 community museums and cultural centers—including Casa Michoacán—that draws on cultural heritage to effect social change.

Many of these strengths have been documented through rapid research studies conducted by Field Museum anthropologists between 2008 and 2012 in nine communities across Chicago, including in the predominantly Mexican community of Pilsen and in two other areas with large Latino populations, South Chicago and the Southwest Side.

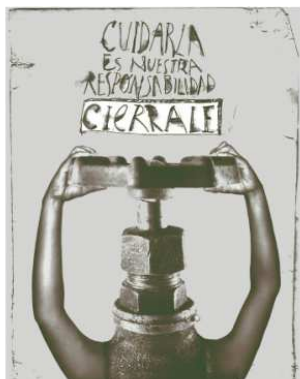


Image courtesy of
The Field Museum

These studies reveal a strong environmental consciousness among Latinos, particularly Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, developed partly through familiarity or personal experience with water scarcity and droughts in Mexico. Residents told the anthropologists different stories related to this issue. One woman said that in Monterrey you can only use your hose on certain days, and people are careful not to leave water running. Another Pilsen resident recalled the “*Cierrale!*” water conservation campaign from the 1970s, which he claimed became a household phrase, like “Got milk?” Another resident from South Chicago reported a popular phrase in a rural Mexican village where she worked: “*Gota a gota se agota el agua.*”

A number of residents who grew up in rural areas developed close connections with nature and the land—connections that they miss in Chicago. One man in Pilsen reminisced about his mother and aunts in Mexico grinding fresh corn using a *mano* and *metate* and recalled one year in which his family persisted almost entirely on food that they grew. Some residents try to recreate these connections and pass them down to their children through gardening. A young staff person at Pilsen’s Orozco School said that neighborhood parents have been very supportive of the community garden and spend time with their children talking about gardening practices from their childhoods. Another Pilsen family reported keeping chickens in their Chicago garage and collecting fresh eggs every morning with their children.

Residents also spoke about changes in weather patterns and the negative impacts on Mexico of recent extreme weather events—a key marker of climate change. One South Chicago resident from Cuernavaca said that it always used to feel like spring, but now her friends and family are buying winter coats. A community organizer in Pilsen made a direct link to climate change, explaining that it exacerbates migration. Referring to a recent hurricane and subsequent flooding in Mexico, he said that lack of development combined with environmental disasters like earthquakes, mudslides, and volcanoes will keep pushing Mexicans to migrate to Chicago.

Think global, act local.

One of the key findings of The Field Museum’s research, across all of the research communities, is that many Chicagoans care about climate change—but don’t know what it has to do with Chicago or their lives and don’t know what they can do to make a difference. The research findings from the studies in communities with strong Latino populations suggest that cultural values, traditions, and practices provide a strong platform for making climate change personal. For this reason, they provide a platform for engaging residents in climate action programs, such as water and energy conservation, green design, climate-friendly gardening, and waste reduction.

The findings also demonstrate the value that a transnational perspective brings to understanding and motivating people to act on climate change. The studies of Latino and other immigrant communities—West Ridge (South Asian) and the far northwest side (Polish)—all suggest that immigrant families may possess a particular global awareness of climate change that makes the issue feel personal even if they haven’t yet seen its impact on the Chicago region. Among the Polish and Polish-American research participants on the northwest side, for example, many people have been involved over the past decade in helping family, friends, and communities in Poland deal with severe flooding.

This transnational perspective can lead to important transnational action programs and campaigns. For example, in the Polish community, the Polish American Chamber of Commerce is planning to take a delegation of Polish contractors from Chicago to Poland to learn about the Polish green building industry. In 2011, another organization in Chicago, the Council of Islamic Organizations, organized the “Green Ramadan” campaign to promote green living and climate action among Chicago region Muslims as part of a long-term solution to social disasters in Africa, including drought and famine in Somalia.

These transnational understandings and campaigns are key because they make climate change a personal issue without making it an insular one. We live in a global world—and Chicago’s immigrant communities are pointing the way for global-local climate solutions that build on our collective knowledge and rich, interconnected lives.

Learn more



The Chicago Community Climate Action Toolkit presents over 60 multimedia tools to help communities develop and carry out local climate action projects that build on community strengths and improve quality of life. It was created based on The Field Museum’s research studies, in collaboration with four of the research communities, including Pilsen, and over 40 partners from throughout Chicago. The Mary Zepeda Native Garden was installed as part of the Toolkit project. Watch a video documentary about the garden and download other tools at: climatechicago.fieldmuseum.org. Materials are available in English and Spanish.