

The People's Call for Justice in Florida

A synthesis of central themes and action items from the People's Hearing in Miami, Florida, prepared by the Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School.

Introduction

Across Florida, communities are facing heightened threats to their safety, health, and civil rights driven by social and environmental injustices, attacks on democratic principles, and a worsening climate crisis. As climate change intensifies, Florida is increasingly susceptible to extreme weather and climate disasters, such as wildfires, hurricanes, and extreme heat, which can increase exposure to harmful contaminants and impact the public health of residents. Rising authoritarianism, immigration violence, and attacks on public institutions are compounding the threats, falling hardest on Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and immigrant communities throughout the state.

To speak out against these interconnected issues and build a collective vision for a safer and more equitable future, the fourth *Speak Easy, Speak Free* People's Hearing was held on April 29th, 2026, in Miami, Florida. Organized by the People's Environmental Justice Advisory Council (PEJAC), the Florida Immigrant Coalition, and People's Action, the event convened over 400 social and environmental justice organizers, activists, and frontline residents. Throughout the day, 47 attendees provided public testimony during three public testimony sessions, while Florida-based racial justice and immigration support organizations staffed tables outside the main room to connect and highlight ongoing advocacy efforts. The public testimony sessions were interspersed with dance and musical performances, as well as remarks from elected officials, community leaders, and the PEJAC members. With organizers from across the state and from a variety of sectors offering testimony on the intersections of environmental justice and democracy, the hearing laid the groundwork for policy solutions that centered on community safety, dignity, and resilience.

Community Testimonies

Climate Resilience and Environmental Justice

During the hearing, residents across Florida documented the growing impacts of climate injustice experienced by their communities. Testifiers spoke about the threats of climate disasters such as hurricanes, wildfires, extreme heat, and flooding, and the impacts that these disasters can have on public health. Dr. P. Qasimah Boston from the Tallahassee Food Network and The Teranga Experience described how industrial activity, wildfires, and brush fires had increased air pollution levels in their neighborhood, recalling how their son was admitted to the emergency room with an asthma attack due to the poor air quality.

Dr. Boston also highlighted how extreme temperatures and unpredictable weather conditions are impacting Florida's food production, explaining how disasters such as wildfires, hurricanes, and deep freezes have increased the cost of produce and limited access to healthy food for families across the state. They emphasized that "the food system as it is, is not working for all people," underscoring the need to build equitable and resilient food systems that are accessible to all.

Other attendees drew attention to land erosion and ecosystem degradation accelerated by climate change. Aminata Traore spoke to the broader regional impacts of coastal erosion, describing how it is threatening cultural memory, identity, and practices of the Gullah Geechee people, specifically regarding a waterfront in Sunbury, Georgia. They described how the shore is a place "where people fish, harvest, celebrate, and stay connected to their culture. But that same shoreline is disappearing. That space isn't just land, though. It holds memory, identity, and a deep relationship to the waterways." They recalled "watching the land wash away," and emphasized that this issue is personal, cultural, and connected to community survival and the environment.

In the context of these climate injustices, residents highlighted economic conditions that have made community resilience and stability increasingly difficult. Several testifiers described how the affordability crisis threatens the health and safety of many communities during heat waves, with rising electricity costs forcing families to choose between cooling their homes and covering basic needs such as rent and groceries. Michi Ceard recalled growing up in a household where air conditioning during Florida summers was often avoided out of fear that the electricity bill would become unaffordable or lead to utilities being shut off. They explained that “in Florida, electricity is tied to our survival. You cannot opt out. You can’t even shop around. You either pay, or you sit in the dark, in the heat, in a home that becomes unlivable.”

A few residents also spoke to housing instability and growing displacement that is being exacerbated by climate change. Trinise Bryant, from Struggle for Miami’s Affordable and Sustainable Housing (SMASH), described how rising housing costs and the redevelopment of public housing are displacing lifelong residents into unfamiliar and unaffordable areas. Additionally, testifiers who had immigrated to the United States reminded the audience that many immigrants are forced to move from their home countries due to unsafe or unsustainable climate conditions, drawing a direct line between climate migration and local displacement.

Rising Authoritarianism, Immigration, Civic Power, and Human Rights

Florida residents also testified to a broader range of concerns than at previous hearings, including civic power and engagement, rising authoritarianism, immigration violence, and access to education and healthcare. These issues, taken together, deepened the picture of environmental injustice and the fight for people-centered policies and power across the state.

Immigration enforcement emerged as one of the most urgent and recurring themes throughout the day. Specifically, the adoption of 287(g) agreements across Florida has generated intense fear among students, immigrant communities, and organizers alike. Ana Maria Hernandez, an organizer with the Florida Immigrant Coalition, explained, “[287(g) agreements] allow local police to act as ICE agents...This blurs the line between protection and persecution...That is injustice, and that is fear.” Students from Florida International University spoke to the specific dangers facing international students when these agreements are implemented on college campuses, including fears of visas being revoked or being detained and deported, as well as broader concerns about political influence in university governance and equitable access to education.

Testifiers also described the immense toll of ICE detention. Several recounted the detention of friends or family in facilities such as “Alligator Alcatraz,” sharing allegations of abuse and the lasting emotional impact on detainees and their families. Arianne Betancourt from Immigration Detention described how their father spent six months in ICE detention, four of them at Alligator Alcatraz. In the time since, Betancourt has connected with over 100 families of detainees, gathering testimonies and documenting abuses. They explained, “They don’t want you to see what’s happening in there because it goes against everything that human rights are supposed to stand for. This is the greatest violation on humanity that this country has ever proudly and openly committed.”

Attacks on civic power, including corruption, disenfranchisement, and increasingly authoritarian policies, were another major theme throughout the day. Advocates of all ages voiced the importance of voting as a foundational act of resistance, while emphasizing that the fight starts, rather than ends, at the ballot box. Sheena Rolle from Florida Rising described how “We are redistricted out of power. We are legislated out of power. They put forth efforts to take away our voting rights. And I want to be clear that all of these things are intentionally interwoven to keep us broke, to keep us silent, and to keep us from using our power... [Our solutions] will not see the light of day if we don’t take back democracy. And that includes not just voting our way out of it, but really strong national partnerships and intervention to stop authoritarianism in the state of Florida.”

Threats to public education and healthcare were also well documented. Advocates from the Jacksonville chapter of the National Organization of Women highlighted the proliferation of fake reproductive care clinics (so-called “crisis pregnancy centers”) that withhold life-saving abortion services and contraception, dispense inaccurate medical advice, employ untrained staff, and yet receive \$30 million from Florida’s state budget. Other speakers recounted systemic discrimination in healthcare, citing examples of care being denied, medical providers downplaying symptoms reported by Black patients, as well as inadequate care and treatment for transgender patients. On education, Ana Sofia Pelaez from the Miami Freedom Project explained that Florida’s “public education system [is] no longer accessible... with a curriculum that has been under attack from any kind of truth and honesty and accountability,” while Damaris Allen with Families for Strong Public Schools called attention to the state’s decision to divert \$5 billion from public school funding into private school tuition.

Policy Demands and Solutions

Alongside the over 400 Florida residents, organizers, students, and advocates in attendance, the People’s Hearing brought elected officials and community leaders into the space to bear witness. Miami-Dade District 2 Commissioner Marleine Bastien, former State Senator Jose Javier Rodriguez, and North Miami’s City Clerk Vanessa Joseph each offered brief comments before listening to the testimonies. Joseph set the tone, asserting, “Testimony is power and community is power... We need to leave here knowing that every single policy that touches our lives is something that we have the right to question. We have the right to shape that policy. We have the right to challenge that policy, and we have the right to change that policy.” The following recommendations, drawn from the testimony throughout the day, reflect the community’s collective vision for systemic change.

Immigration

Testifiers called for defunding and abolishing ICE and ending all 287(g) agreements with county officials and universities across the state. Guerly Adonis from Change My Community recommended “a network of community-based accredited immigration representatives... rooted in the communities they serve, who speak the languages, who understand the culture, and who can provide real legal help at little or no cost,” for those targeted or harmed by immigration enforcement. Adonis also called for increased funding for “community legal access, nonprofit immigration programs, [and] accreditation pipelines,” and “[making] legal representation a right in practice.” Several speakers voiced the importance of holding “know your rights” trainings and campaigns, and Yareliz Mendez-Zamora from the American Friends Service Committee noted the importance of volunteer networks to accompany families to detention processing centers, “making sure that individuals were checking in for their appointments and have access to information and dignity.”

Healthcare

Advocates called for multi-sectoral healthcare networks rooted in science, education, and community engagement – acknowledging that many community-based organizations are already filling healthcare gaps in their communities but require adequate resources, funding, and decision-making power to do so sustainably. Reverend Madison Hilt argued that providing transgender individuals with appropriate identification documents is a concrete step toward improving healthcare access and health outcomes, and recommended a comprehensive bill of trans rights. Jennifer Hall from Onyx Culture proposed implementing “Medicare for All,” advocating for the restructuring of healthcare as a public good rather than a for-profit industry, and “[establishing] channels to challenge care decisions for every patient so people have a path [to] justice when they face bias and prejudice.”

Civic Power

Voting was consistently named as a foundational component of civic power. Organizers encouraged community members to register voters, push for same-day voter registration, maximize early voting turnout, and join local poll-monitoring efforts on election days. Alfred Patino, an organizer with Beyond the Bars, emphasized the need to diversify organizing spaces across race, class, and ideology to ensure that canvassers and organizers respect and connect with the communities they are entering. Speakers also called for election finance reform and reducing the influence of large corporations and wealthy interests in state and local elections. They also recommended investing time, energy, and support into third-party movements and local organizations doing the daily work of community organizing rather than mobilizing only during election cycles.

Housing

Testimony about housing policy centered on affordability and stability. Speakers called for affordable housing development, strong tenant protections including rent stabilization, and expanded pathways for homeownership. Trenise Bryant, from SMASH, recommended community land trusts (CLTs) as a mechanism to “help families [who] are being pushed out... families and people that grew up in communities [could] stay in their communities. And there’s a [path towards] homeownership, collective ownership.” Keisha Guyton, also from SMASH, highlighted the links between housing stability and mental health, proposing that mental health services be integrated into housing support programs. Residents raised concerns about state preemption undermining housing advocacy, referencing an Orange County rent stabilization measure that passed but was then quickly overturned by the Florida state legislature. To defend against these preemption measures, speakers recommended pursuing tenant protections through statewide ballot initiatives in addition to local organizing efforts.

Education

Several speakers called for stronger investment in public education. Proposed policies included reduced-cost school meals, adequate resources for schools serving low-income communities, preserving historically and scientifically accurate curricula, and ensuring safe learning environments for students of all backgrounds and immigration statuses. Many speakers demanded that public funding be divested from private school vouchers and reinvested back into public school infrastructure. Others went further, calling for free education at all levels, including universal pre-K.

Climate Resilience

Many speakers proposed climate resilience policies, including integrated, community-driven planning. Nayda Bobonis Cabrera from Firms, Unidos y Resilientes con la Abogacía (FURIA Inc), recommended investing in community education and technical training at the outset of any planning process, noting that “for our communities to engage in planning, they must understand what is happening and what is supposed to be happening.” For implementation, Cabrera proposed cross-sector collaboration among “local federal and civil society... composed of technical experts, community leaders, and government representatives with binding authorities.” Other residents put forward concrete measures to improve climate resilience: job training in clean energy fields, applying pressure to the Public Service Commission to reject utility rate increases, especially during times of extreme heat, and coastal ecosystem restoration using marsh grass, native plants, and oyster reefs to combat erosion. Speakers from the Tallahassee Food Network also called for the creation of an “Office of Good Food Justice,” networks that provide access to healthy and affordable food close to home, and protected funding for community farms that offer space for intergenerational community building and growth.



Conclusion

The Miami hearing was the fourth stop in an ongoing effort by PEJAC members, formerly of the White House Environmental Justice Council (WHEJAC), to meet frontline communities across the U.S., bear witness to the environmental and democratic injustices they face, and elevate community-led solutions. It followed People's Hearings in Greensboro, North Carolina; Tucson, Arizona; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Throughout the day, PEJAC members heard testimony and reflected on the energy and passion of Florida organizers, residents, and communities. Angelo Logan, a former WHEJAC member with the Liberty Hill Foundation, reflected on the "power and the amazement in this room, the energy and the spirit," recalling that "most of what I heard today is y'all uniting and coming together so that we can end our forms of oppression to fight this regime. And I want to encourage that, but also encourage that not just here in Florida, but across the country. And just keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities to connect across regions. And we're here to help do that as well."

The final testimony of the day came from Miaisha Mitchell of the Tallahassee Food Network, who offered a pointed observation, "I tell people all the time, if you want to know what's going on in the country, watch Florida." In a period of rising authoritarianism and anti-democratic governance, Florida is often dismissed as a state resistant to change. Yet, the People's Hearing in Miami told a different story, underscoring the energy, power, and passion behind Florida-based movements that are not only resisting but actively building toward a better future. With organizers and advocates seated beside local officials, the hearing amplified frontline voices, spotlighted community-driven solutions, and forged the collective power needed to address both environmental and democratic injustices.