MIDWEST EJ NETWORK

2025 IMPACT REPORT

THE CENTER WE HOLD

2025 WAS A CROSSROADS FOR REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

"As organizers, we are builders in the era of collapse. We have been building and continue to build worlds that are going against all odds. We build new worlds because we understand that in these spaces is where we find our joy. We build new worlds because we find the inspiration for our art, we find our voices again, and this is where we will find ways to live and care for each other. We're builders who build with care, who build with human connections and relationships. We build because we know we can only survive together."

Kim Wasserman, MWEJN Leadership Team Chair & Co-Founder

Where is the center of the world? Some wisdom traditions in the Midwest understand it as the crossroads, a place of change and becoming. Others describe the center as any place we make sacred by caring for the connections between the people, the land, and our more-than-human relatives who share it.

In the work of environmental justice, these are the lines we draw.

In 2025, the Midwest Environmental Justice Network gathered in Mni Sota Makoce (Minnesota), the homeland of the Dakhóta Oyáte (Dakota People). We were just a few blocks from the sites of both Owámniyomni (St. Anthony Falls) and Wíta Wanáği (Spirit Island), important places in Dakota geography and cosmology. The Dakhóta Oyáte are the original stewards of the sacred land and waterways of Minneapolis. These sites — like many others — were desecrated in the colonial project of Minnesota. Yet partners like **Owámniyomni Okhódayapi**[1] and **Waḳaŋ Ṭípi Awaŋyaŋkapi**[2] have been doing transformative work rematriating these places along the Ȟaȟá Wakpá (Mississippi River) to Dakota communities today.

1 https://owamniyomni.org/
2 https://www.wakantipi.org/

There's a direct thread from colonial takeover to the occupation by ICE that Minnesota has suffered over the last several months. We saw federal policy claw back hard-won protections for clean air and water, for climate, and for the most vulnerable among us to feed themselves and recover from disasters. In their place, corporations and corrupt politicians unleashed ICE, DOGE, and data centers on our communities, believing they could dominate the Midwest on the world stage. Instead, our neighbors came together and took care of each other. In defending where we live, work, and pray, we taught the world that place is power — a force that ripples far beyond our communities.

In our commitment to place, this is the circle we form.

As a regional intermediary, the role of the Midwest Environmental Justice Network has long been to strengthen the ties that power successful, place-based, relationship-first movements. Movements led by Tribal, historically redlined, immigrant, and working class communities. In a year when these ties were sorely tested, we were able to move capital and capacity to more than 60 frontline organizations across 12 states. We hope you're inspired by this report and can take away the same lesson we did from our grantee partners: Neighbors are the basic building blocks of power — the only power durable enough to build renewable energy systems, sovereign foodways, and a healthy democracy that can triumph over the polluters' playbook.

At the Midwest Environmental Justice Network, this is the center we hold.

In Solidarity,

Shalini & Eartha, *Co-Executive Directors of the Midwest Environmental Justice Network*

HOW THE MIDWEST MOVES ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FORWARD

Last year began with a deep retraction of federal funding and regulatory oversight across the agencies meant to protect us — protect our water, our land, our air, and our communities. As 2025 went on, so too did the attacks from the federal government on the most vulnerable in our society.

At the Midwest Environmental Justice Network, the year called us to remember what we have always known to be true: that our communities hold the solutions to the problems they are faced with, that relationships are the most powerful paths to sustain transformative change, and that we have weathered these storms before.

Both our funding and the work of our grantee partners follow in a long lineage of successful Midwest movements. Our ancestors understood that to mobilize people and place for collective power, we need to nurture our ability to **relate**, **respond**, **reframe** and **reclaim**.

Ujima STL Executive Director Nick Speed presents during the environmental justice story map exercise at the 2025 MWEJN Gathering.

WE RELATE

BUILDING MOVEMENT AND BELONGING

Relationships and reciprocity power every successful movement in the Midwest. We win when we see one another, when we share culture, and when we can strengthen what ties us together in our common struggles and solutions. From convening to mutual aid, the Midwest EJ Network and our grantee partners treat mutual care as critical infrastructure.

In November of 2025, more than 50 leaders gathered in Minneapolis from MWEJN's partner organizations to remember what grounds and connects us in the work of environmental justice. Thread by thread, we linked our origin stories and watershed victories from one community to the next. What took shape was the map of a movement: united, undaunted, and never alone.

COPAL and community members gather in support of immigrants and to protest ICE in Rochester, Minnesota.

WE RESPOND

FUNDING RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

When polluters move in next door, communities in the Midwest rise up to protect. When politicians break their promises, community organizations step in to provide. The Midwest EJ Network moves funding and expertise to these groups so that they can respond to local needs in a time of major upheaval.

In 2025, MWEJN's Frontline Fund awarded 60 groups a total of $1.8 million in flexible, multi-year, general operating grants to stabilize their work across the Midwest. We mobilized an additional $239,700 in rapid-response support to help communities address urgent threats. Beyond direct funding, we built ongoing partnerships with researchers, attorneys, and communications experts to help groups strengthen their campaigns. By weaving local resistance into regionwide strategy, our partners grow smarter and stronger with every fight.

Community members attend a public meeting with a sign from Just Transition Northwest Indiana's Community Over Big Tech campaign.

WE REFRAME

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

Storytelling shapes what's possible. Across the Midwest, communities are telling their own stories that frame up real solutions and unleash the alternative futures within reach. Working closely with our grantee partners, the Midwest EJ Network builds power to deploy their stories in more ways and in more places, disrupting narratives that mislead and divide.

In 2025, MWEJN entered the third year of our communications accelerator, providing over 65 hours of pro-bono, tailored communications support to our 60 grantee partners' regional storytelling projects. In partnership with the Samara Collective, we delivered one-on-one support to partners who needed everything from logo redesigns to campaign platform support and youth media training. This added boost in communications capacity was designed to uplift partner stories and narratives, while easing the capacity strain on small-but-mighty grassroots orgs.

A Red Circle hosting the Juneteenth Volunteer Day at the Healthy Flavor Community Garden in 2025.

WE RECLAIM

SHAPING NEW FUTURES

Here in the Midwest, we turn abandoned lots into grocery stores, church roofs into solar arrays, and food pantries into voter registration centers. We know how to transform even the least of our resources into strongholds of community power. The Midwest EJ Network moves in that same spirit to activate new and creative sources of capital so that organizations can scale solutions that compound our well-being.

Last year marked our first year investing in local organizations through the Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program. This federally funded EPA initiative awarded $60 million to the Great Lakes region over three years. Together with the Minneapolis Foundation, RE-AMP, and NDN Collective, MWEJN successfully challenged federal attempts to roll back the program, and moved funding to projects that addressed a wide range of community needs — from healthy food access and affordable, clean energy, to emergency recovery and environmental health and safety.

60 GROUPS

funded by MWEJN's Frontline Fund across 12 states.

$2M+

in flexible, multi-year general operating grants, including **$239K** in rapid response support.

65+ HOURS

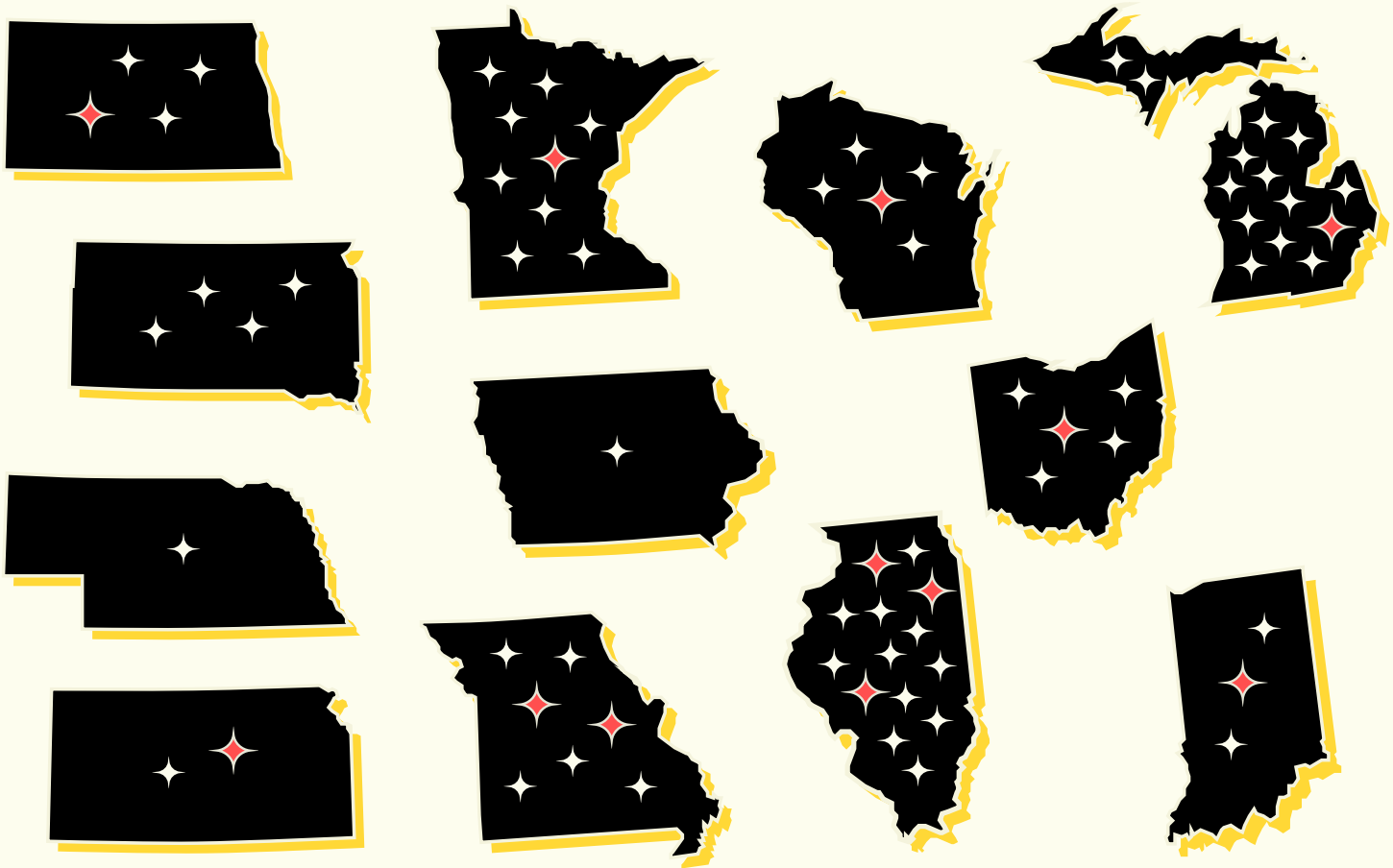
of tailored, in-kind communications support for regional narrative work.

$60M

federally funded EPA program to the Great Lakes region over 3 years.

FROM FLYOVER STATES TO GUIDING STARS

Midwest EJ Network's grantee partners work at the intersection of several pressing issues in their communities. From clean air and drinkable water to local food systems and energy democracy, members of our 12 state network follow every possible avenue to meet local needs in the face of generational injustice. Here we highlight our partners' primary issue areas, but most, if not all, organizations work on several issues at once.



LEGEND

- 2025 MWEJN Featured Grantee
- 2025 MWEJN Grantee
- Pollution & cumulative impacts
- Food justice & food sovereignty
- Water protection & drinking water
- Energy democracy & infrastructure
- Tribal sovereignty
- Just development

COPAL and community members gather in Minnesota for the ICE Out of Minnesota March and Rally.

MINNESOTA

COMUNIDADES ORGANIZANDO EL PODER Y LA ACCIÓN LATINA (COPAL)

Since 2018, COPAL[3] has served Latine communities in Minnesota, using grassroots powerbuilding to create a vibrant member-based organization that is now nearly 50,000 people strong. Members have long taken a holistic approach to improving life for Latine residents, but this mission has taken on new urgency with ICE raids on immigrant communities. Fortunately, COPAL was poised for action, with initiatives like the Immigrant Defense Network[4], a coalition of more than 100 labor, faith, and legal organizations, providing frontline aid to immigrants throughout Minnesota. Other grantees working in this space include the League of United Latin American Citizens[5] in Iowa and Tamales y Bicicletas[6] in Minnesota.

COPAL's efforts include work on pollution and cumulative impacts.

3 https://copalmn.org
4 https://immigrantdefensenetwork.org
5 https://lulac.org
6 https://tamalesybicicletas.weebly.com

Community members gather in Chicago, IL for the Stop Poisoning Pilsen campaign organized by PERRO.

ILLINOIS

PILSEN ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS AND REFORM ORGANIZATION (PERRO)

The Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago has long been home to a vibrant, close-knit Mexican-American community, but it has also suffered from disproportionate environmental health harms. A truly resident-based organization, PERRO[7] has been about neighbors helping neighbors to make Pilsen a safer, healthier place to call home since 2004. But with ICE targeting Chicago neighborhoods, PERRO has expanded its focus from fighting for clean air and water to helping residents fight against ICE's occupation. Another community-based grantee fighting for just transition is Original United Citizens of Southwest Detroit in Michigan [8].

PERRO's efforts include work on pollution, cumulative impacts, and clean water.

7 https://pilsenperro.org
8 https://originalunitedcitizensofsouthwest.org

Community members attend a public meeting with a sign from Just Transition Northwest Indiana's Community Over Big Tech campaign.

INDIANA

JUST TRANSITION NORTHWEST INDIANA (JTNWI)

Indiana is known for cornfields and family farms, but the northern part of the state, along Lake Michigan, has long been an industrial area and sacrifice zone. Ensuring the just transition of this space to one rooted in a regenerative economy is JTNWI's[9] mission — and in recent days, that work has become more urgent as data center developers move quickly to take advantage of northwest Indiana's industrial zoning. JTNWI has mobilized a rapid-defense "Community Over Big Tech" campaign to fight back against these new facilities that lower property values and drive up consumer costs while polluting air, land, and water. Other grantees working in this space include Soulardarity[10] and People for Community Recovery in Illinois[11].

JTNWI's efforts include work on energy democracy and infrastructure, pollution, cumulative impacts, and just development.

9 https://www.jtnwi.org/
10 https://soulardarity.org/
11 https://www.peopleforcommunityrecovery.org/

Young dancers at North Dakota Native Vote's *Stand and Vote* concert.

NORTH DAKOTA

NORTH DAKOTA NATIVE VOTE (NDNV)

North Dakota Native Vote[12] has been advocating for Native representation, enfranchisement, and self determination since 2018, when a voter-suppression bill threatened to stifle Native voices. Since then, NDNV has been building a voting bloc to uphold the sovereignty and representation of Native communities at all levels of government, from county to federal, to ensure they have a say in the decisions that affect Native rights, health, and safety. Key programs safeguard fair districting; help tribal members register to vote, learn about issues, and access polling stations; work with Rural Electric Cooperatives to impact governance and decision making; and develop protocols for data management, voter tracking, and election analysis. Other grantees working on Tribal sovereignty and cultural reclamation include Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians[13] in Wisconsin and Owámniyomni Okhódayapi[14] in Minnesota.

NDNV's efforts include work on Tribal sovereignty, energy democracy, pollution, and cumulative impacts.

12 https://ndnativevote.org/
13 https://www.badriver-nsn.gov/
14 https://owamniyomni.org/

Karen Nickel and Dawn Chapman, Co-Founders of Just Moms STL.

MISSOURI

JUST MOMS STL

The story of Just Moms STL[15] is a story of the power of mothers and neighbors banding together against overwhelming odds. In 2012, two moms investigated strong odors from a fire at the West Lake Landfill in St. Louis, MO, and discovered that radioactive waste and other toxic materials from a uranium plant used for the Manhattan Project were present on a floodplain just 1,000 feet away from the landfill fire. In the past year, Just Moms STL scored a major victory, expanding eligibility under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act to include 21 Missouri zip codes—winning over $8 million for affected residents. Other organizations fighting against toxic pollution include Community Members for Environmental Justice[16] in Minneapolis and Black Hills Clean Water Alliance[17] in South Dakota.

Just Moms STL's efforts include work on clean water, pollution, and cumulative impacts.

15 https://justmomsstl.org/
16 https://www.cmejustice.org/
17 https://bhcleanwateralliance.org/

Monica Lewis-Patrick, CEO of WPD speaks out against Detroit's water shutoffs at a Water Is A Human Right protest in 2014.

MICHIGAN

WE THE PEOPLE OF DETROIT (WPD)

Access to drinking water is a necessity, but in Detroit, residents have for years contended with water shutoffs, skyrocketing rates, and a public health epidemic prompted by unsafe water supplies. We The People of Detroit[18] has created a strong network of community volunteers who have expanded their scope from organizing for equitable, affordable clean water access to holistically addressing quality of life for Detroit residents using data-informed advocacy. In the past year, We the People of Detroit has teamed with Detroit vs. Everybody to launch the Water for Everybody campaign[19] to drive awareness and advocacy. Other grantees working on clean water access include The Junction Coalition[20] in Ohio, Milwaukee Water Commons[21] in Wisconsin, and Flint Rising[22] in Michigan.

WPD's efforts include work on clean water.

18 https://www.wethepeopleofdetroit.com/
19 https://planetdetroit.org/2025/01/detroit-vs-everybody-water-affordability/
20 https://www.junctioncoalition419.org/
21 https://www.milwaukeewatercommons.org/
22 https://flintrising.com/

Ujima STL urban farm project at George Washington Carver Farms.

MISSOURI

UJIMA STL

Ujima STL[23] is a mutual-aid organization serving greater St. Louis, an area that has been impacted by decades of food apartheid, environmental racism, and unemployment. Through outdoor education, teen mental health training, clean ups and tree plantings, and distribution of food and supplies, Ujima provides vital community support. A perfect example of neighbors helping neighbors, Ujima STL teamed with Action STL and others to raise money, organize volunteers, and provide direct aid for those affected by last spring's tornado. Other grantees working on just development and food sovereignty include Rustic Roots Sanctuary[24] in Missouri and Dream of Wild Health[25] of Minnesota.

Ujima STL's efforts include work on food justice, food sovereignty, and just development.

23 https://ujimastl.com/
24 https://www.rusticrootssanctuary.org/
25 https://dreamofwildhealth.org/

THE FUTURE OF POWER IS PLACE. NOW IS THE TIME TO REINVEST.

2025 proved that national change can be won at the local and regional level. At a moment when major philanthropies withdrew and federal power was weaponized against us, our grantee partners showed that it's our unwavering commitment to home and one another that makes us unstoppable. As a mover of resources, the Midwest Environmental Justice Network has built that commitment into the very blueprint of our work for 2026 and beyond. **Reinvest Midwest**[26] is our promise to invite increased philanthropic support and activate our region's potential with new forms of capital and capacity. **It's our call to you to help us renew a movement that uplifts us all.**

STAY CONNECTED

Visit MWEJN.org and follow us on social media.

@ MidwestEnvironmentalJusticeNetwork

@midwest_ej_network

@MidwestEJNetwork

26 https://www.mwejn.org/news/reinvest-midwest-2025

THANK YOU

2025 GRANTEE PARTNERS

A Red Circle
Advancement of Hmong Americans
Agriculture for Community Restoration Economic Justice & Sustainability
Black Autonomy Network Community Organization
Black Hills Clean Water Alliance
Blacks in Green
Calumet Collaborative
Centreville Citizens for Change
Cheyenne River Youth Project
Chicago Asian Americans for Environmental Justice
Citizens Resistance at Fermi Two
Community Members for Environmental Justice
Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Acción Latina
Dakota Wicohan
Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network
Dream of Wild Health
East Michigan Environmental Action Council
Environmental Health Watch
Fort Berthold POWER
Frogtown Neighborhood Association
Getting Grown Collective
Giniw Collective
Great Plains Tribal Water Alliance
Junction Coalition of Toledo OH
Just Moms STL
Just Transition Northwest Indiana
League of United Latin American Citizens - Iowa
Little Earth Residents Association
Little Village Environmental Justice Organization
Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition
Milwaukee Water Commons
Neighbors for Environmental Justice
North Dakota Native Vote
Original United Citizens of Southwest Detroit
Owámniyomni Okhódayapi
People for Community Recovery
Petty Propolis, Inc.
Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization
Rise4EJ
Rosebud Energy Service Company
Rustic Roots Sanctuary
Southeast Environmental Task Force
Skaʔnikú·lat, Inc.
Soulardarity
The Green Door Initiative
Tri-City CDC/Eden Park Project
Ujima STL
Urban Native Collective
Victory Garden Initiative, Inc.
Waḳaŋ Ṭípi Awaŋyaŋkapi
We The People of Detroit
We Want Green Too
Wisconsin Green Muslims/Michigan Green Muslims
Wisdom Institute

ISSUE AREAS

- Pollution and cumulative impacts
- Energy democracy & infrastructure
- Food justice & food sovereignty
- Water protection & drinking water
- Tribal sovereignty
- Just development

LEADERSHIP TEAM

Kim Wasserman *(2025-26 Leadership Team Chair)*

Kim Foreman, *Environmental Health Watch (2026 Leadership Team, 2025 Advisory Circle member)*

Carolina Ortiz, *Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Acción Latina (2026 Leadership Team, 2025 Advisory Circle member)*

Nicole Donaghy, *North Dakota Native Vote (2026 Leadership Team, 2025 Advisory Circle member)*

Gloria Lowe, *We Want Green Too (2026 Leadership Team, 2025 Advisory Circle member)*

Debra Taylor, *We The People of Detroit (2025 Leadership Team)*

Brenda Coley, *Milwaukee Water Commons (2025 Leadership Team)*

Roxxanne O'Brien, *Community Members for Environmental Justice (2025 Leadership Team)*

STAFF

Eartha Borer-Bell, *Co-Executive Director*

Shalini Gupta, *Co-Executive Director*

Gabriel Jones, *Resource Mobilization Director*

Anthena Gore, *Program Director - Urban Outreach, Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program*

Phoebe Young, *Programs and Communications Manager*

Devika Ghai, *Midwest Frontline Fund Facilitator*

Sofia Ledeneva, *2024-26 Tishman Catalyst Fellow*

Julia Peters, *2026-27 Tishman Catalyst Fellow*

OUR ADVISORY CIRCLE

Cicely Allen, *Wisdom Institute (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Alicia Renee Farris, *Tri-City CDC (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Tara Houska, *Giniw Collective (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Rosa King, *Ska?nikú·lat (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Monica Lewis-Patrick, *We The People of Detroit (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Maggie Lorenz, *Wakaŋ Ṭípi Awaŋyaŋkapi (2026 and 2025 Advisory Circles)*

Briana Mazzolini-Blanchard, *Urban Native Collective (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Taryn Randle, *Getting Grown Collective (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Alfredo Romo, *Neighbors for Environmental Justice (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Nick Speed, *Ujima STL (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Alicia Smith, *The Junction Coalition (2026 Advisory Circle)*

Ashley Williams, *Just Transition Northwest Indiana (2026 and 2025 Advisory Circles)*

Huda Alkaff, *Wisconsin Green Muslims and Michigan Green Muslims (2025 Advisory Circle)*

Beto Lugo-Martinez, *Rise4EJ (2025 Advisory Circle)*

Cheryl Johnson, *People for Community Recovery (2025 Advisory Circle)*

Nayyirah Shariff, *Flint Rising (2025 Advisory Circle)*

Sikowis Nobiss, *Great Plains Action Society (2025 Advisory Circle)*

2025 FOUNDATION PARTNERS

Argosy Foundation

Builders Initiative

Comer Family Foundation

Crown Family Philanthropies

Franciscan Sisters of Mary

The Joyce Foundation

The Minneapolis Foundation

McKnight Foundation

Mosaic Environmental Fund

Mott Foundation