



DEFENDING JUSTICE IN A "CLIMATE REFUGE CITY"

CASE STUDY

# PUSH Buffalo and Justice for Migrant Families







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## CASE STUDY

A former industrial city, Buffalo, New York's population peaked in 1950 at 580,132 and continually declined over the next seven decades. Immigration, including by those who have migrated due to climate-related crises, is helping to reverse this trend: In the 2020 census, Buffalo recorded its first population growth since 1950, with 278,349 residents, up from 261,275 in 2010. The city was designed for 600,000, but the number of residents is currently less than a third of that.

Buffalo is already becoming a "Climate Refuge City." It is the second-highest most resettled mid-sized city in the U.S. Buffalo is filled with refugees from equatorial countries that have experienced political and economic destabilization that are direct results of climate change. And looking to the future, it could be a safe haven for people migrating from other countries, as well as those moving internally within the U.S. Buffalo is away from the coast, has cool temperatures, renewable energy, and lots of fresh water. While no place is immune to the effects of climate change, some cities like Buffalo may experience fewer changes and at a slower rate.


There is much work to be done, however, to create the infrastructure and the culture that both invests in existing communities and welcomes an influx of climate-related refugees. This is the work of two central community organizations in Buffalo: PUSH Buffalo and Justice for Migrant Families.





PUSH BUFFALO AND JUSTICE FOR MIGRANT FAMILIES

# Building Green Infrastructure and a Regenerative Economy



**“The inequities here are deep, they’re systemic, they’re generational.”**

**Jennifer Connor**  
Executive Director  
Justice for Migrant Families

PUSH Buffalo and Justice for Migrant Families are together investing in the local community to achieve a just transition, and a community-rooted, regenerative economy that includes all residents, no matter their immigration status.

Justice for Migrant Families and PUSH Buffalo are at the frontlines of ensuring that Buffalo today, as well as in the years to come, achieves climate justice. Their approach is to develop solutions that sit at the intersections of racial, immigrant, economic, and environmental justice. They work to ensure that all communities in Buffalo, including immigrants and refugees, have access to affordable, green housing and good paying jobs.





PUSH Buffalo owns about 130 parcels of land on the Lower West Side of Buffalo, which is where most immigrants and refugees have lived since the late 20th century. PUSH Buffalo also has about 100 apartments for rent and five commercial buildings for small businesses to utilize. They see green infrastructure as a way to address combined sewer overflow and heat island effect, with tools like urban farms, rain gardens, and living roofs to mitigate the risks of more frequent storm surges and high-heat days to community residents and the environment.

**“The impacts of immigration in a region include an influx of creativity, unbelievable richness of creative problem solving... This is why we’re defending different spaces, so that people can share their voices, and to speak out. Those are the narratives I want to see.”**

**Jennifer Connor**  
Executive Director, Justice for Migrant Families

PUSH Buffalo also builds renewable energy projects to mitigate high costs of heating the second oldest (and coldest) housing stock in the country, built before insulation was invented. “We think of every single one of these projects as a workforce opportunity,” says Rahwa Ghirmatzion, Executive Director of PUSH Buffalo.








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# Taking Immigrants' Lead in Addressing the Climate Crisis

**I don't think it's an accident that the Lower West Side of Buffalo is reviving the way it is. There are business incubators that are from emerging groups. We know that they are a huge economic engine, but also bringing innovative, ingenious ideas that are rooted in practices that are about care for human beings, but also the natural world around us"**

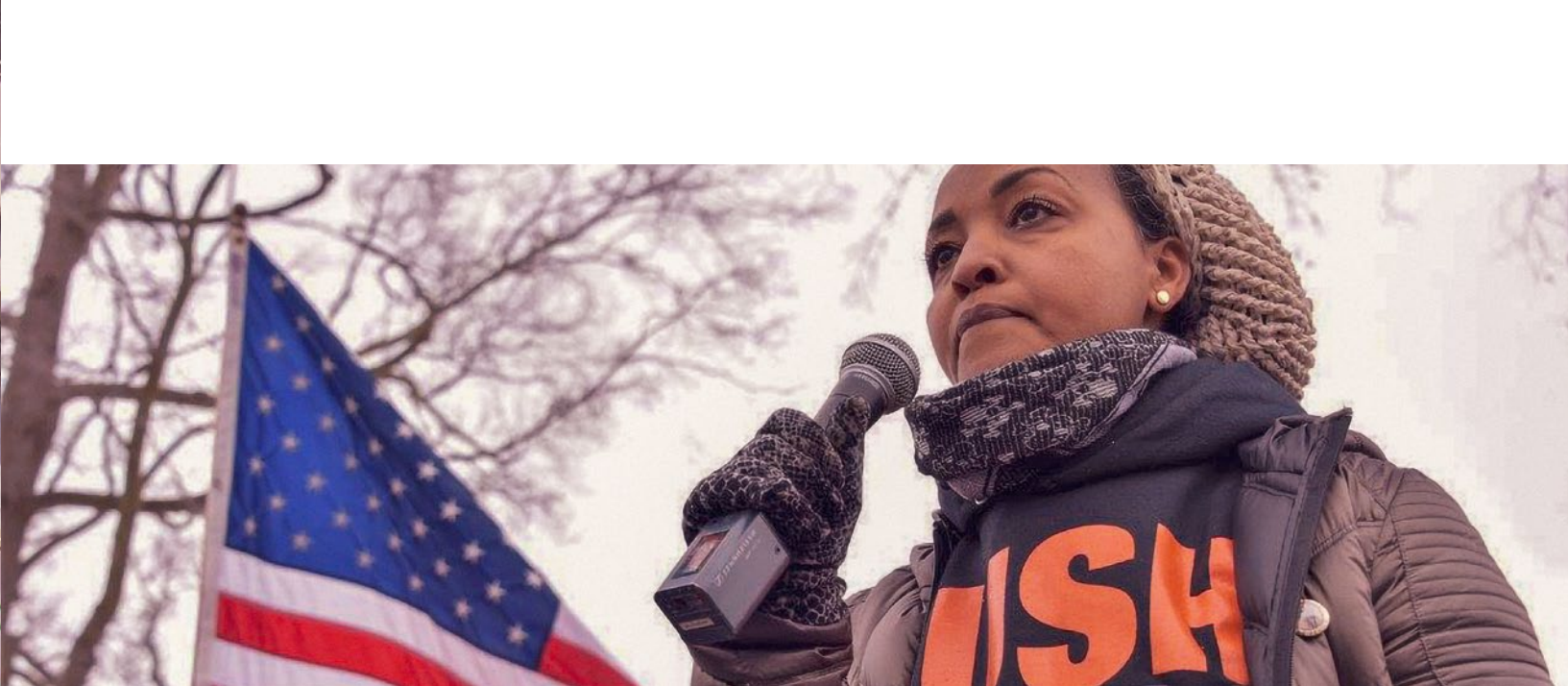
**Rahwa Ghirmatzion**  
Executive Director, PUSH Buffalo



"About 25 years ago we started to see this huge influx of immigrants, refugees primarily from Burma and Somalia at the time, and there were a lot of cultural conflicts," says Ghirmatzion, herself an Eritrean refugee. "Now you just see a community that's much more informed and has a global perspective. Whereas other parts of Buffalo are still very insular, very segregated." Most of those immigrants and refugees have settled on the West Side of Buffalo.

Ghirmatzion says that immigrant and refugee residents are teaching the community new ways of addressing the climate crisis. Residents from Burma, Indonesia, and Africa are leading community farms. "They practice vertical farming on these very small plots of land where they can grow an incredible amount of food, harvest several times a year, and feed very large families."





PUSH BUFFALO AND JUSTICE FOR MIGRANT FAMILIES

# Bolstering the Leadership of Climate Migrants + Winning Policies

**We build renewable energy projects, like weatherization and green efficiency programs, because we have the second oldest housing stock in the country. We think of every single one of these as a workforce opportunity because the two things that people said that they really needed assistance with are quality green affordable housing, and good paying jobs.”**

**Rahwa Ghirmatzion**  
Executive Director, PUSH Buffalo

As a border city, Buffalo holds immigration courts and immigrant detention centers for all of New York State, north of the Hudson River. Many of the community members who PUSH Buffalo and Justice for Migrant Families engage are people who have migrated due to climate disasters in regions around the equator. They are giving these individuals a support network to become activists and leaders in the community. Both organizations combine direct services with advocacy and organizing.

“We have seen a huge amount of growth in the people who we’ve developed relationships with being able to advocate for themselves,” says Connor. “There are people who we have come to know in immigrant detention who live in Buffalo freely again and who have been able to build their lives.” People can only get to that point, and to organize and have a voice, if they’re no longer worried about “where food is coming from tomorrow, or whether they have a roof over their head, or even whether they feel safe,” says Connor.





Climate refugees are having a direct impact through both city and state organizing. PUSH Buffalo is part of the NY Renews coalition of over 300 frontline environmental justice, community, labor, faith, and environmental organizations committed to advancing a sweeping climate justice agenda for New York. In June 2019, after the coalition's successful advocacy efforts, the New York State Legislature passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), hailed as the most comprehensive and equitable climate state legislation in the nation. PUSH Buffalo members organized using many tools, including traditional legislative advocacy and trips to Albany, as well as arts activism, community forums, and direct action.

Both organizations are preparing now for future climate migrants. "People who will come will have money and political power," says Connor. "Justice for Migrant Families and PUSH Buffalo being able to co-organize is extremely important because we won't have solutions for people who are here now, if we aren't thinking about what is coming next." Ghirmatzion adds, "We want to create the conditions for the people that are already here to not only survive here and stay in place, but also to thrive."





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