

EPA is funding more community air-pollution monitoring in Colorado, but nonprofits struggle to roll it out

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The Black Parents United Foundation learned in late 2022 that it would receive nearly \$475,000 from the Environmental Protection Agency to

set up air monitors in Aurora to determine how much pollution residents in low-income neighborhoods were breathing.

Nearly a year later, there are no air monitors set up in the community to take samples of ground-level ozone pollution, [fine particulate matter](#) or methane. And the organization is nowhere close to getting started, said Nikie "NikieDay" Wells, director of Black Parents United's environmental justice program.

"Equipment costs a lot. Scientists cost a lot. Research costs a lot," Wells said. "It's a lot and the support is not there."

Last November, the EPA announced seven [local governments](#) and nonprofit agencies across Colorado would receive \$2.9 million to conduct [air pollution](#) monitoring, including in metro Denver and the northern Front Range—areas that are in severe violation of national air quality standards. The grants were part of President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act and were among 132 projects in 37 states receiving a total of \$53.4 million.

The EPA wanted to help communities figure out just how much pollution people are breathing, with a focus on disproportionately impacted communities where residents inhale noxious fumes in neighborhoods near industrial zones and interstates. But nonprofits listed to receive the grants are learning that air monitoring is expensive and complicated, and they are struggling to roll it out—if they choose to do it at all.

"The goal of these grants is to improve air quality monitoring in and near underserved communities, and to support local leaders who have developed plans to monitor their own air quality," said KC Becker, director of the EPA's Region 8, which includes Colorado.

Cultivando, a Latinx nonprofit based in Adams County, was listed as a grant recipient when the EPA announced the new programs in November. But the organization turned down \$500,000.

Cultivando already spent nearly two years monitoring the pollution around the Suncor Energy refinery in Commerce City and decided that the EPA's rules were too burdensome to make collecting more data worth the organization's time and effort, said Guadalupe Solis, the organization's director of environmental justice programs.

Plus, the organization's leaders felt like the data they already had collected was ignored by policy makers and did not lead to meaningful change.

"It's really time for us to come back to our community organizing and advocacy and doing what we need to do for our community rather than this treadmill of data collection," Solis said.

Others, however, are pleased with the increased air monitoring as Colorado tries to reduce air pollution, making its residents more healthy and doing its part to slow climate change.

On Wednesday, representatives from Adams and Jefferson counties joined Becker and Michael Ogletree, director of the Air Pollution Control Division at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, to roll out their air monitoring programs, which also were funded by the EPA.

Those monitors will feed a public data dashboard at clean.lovemylair.com, where people can go to learn in real-time just how dirty the air is.

"In the city of Northglenn, we recognize that air quality impacts

everyone's quality of life," Mayor Meredith Leighty said. "Through this partnership, the city will be able to leverage the EPA funding for air quality sensors and public access to the data dashboards to help inform, educate and create changes to improve our air in the city and region."

Ean Thomas Tafoya, director of GreenLatinos Colorado, cheered those air monitoring programs.

"We need local governments to jump in," Tafoya said. "Use their local resources to protect the community,"

In Adams and Jefferson counties, county health and environmental departments will run the air monitoring programs. They have bigger budgets and experts on staff who are equipped to do it, said Steve O'Dorisio, chairman of the Adams County's Board of County Commissioners.

But O'Dorisio said it's not the responsibility of local nonprofits to hold polluters accountable and do the government's work—although he said there is value in allowing community groups, who lack trust in corporations and government, to run their own programs as part of an overall system of checks and balances.

"Placing more burden on the backs of local nonprofits to do the work that government and industry should be doing is not acceptable," O'Dorisio said. "We need to leverage their strengths and not have them in the business of what others should be doing and that is monitoring and enforcement."

When the EPA announced grant recipients in Colorado in November 2022 there were three nonprofits on the list.

The third nonprofit, 350 Colorado, received \$498,537 to monitor

volatile organic compounds, ozone, methane and particulate matter near two public schools in Greeley that are close to oil and gas operations. That program also has not started.

'Deeply disappointed by the response'

Cultivando was the first nonprofit in Colorado to run an air pollution monitoring program. The organization was awarded the money in 2020 through a settlement between the EPA and Suncor after that company was penalized for continuous air pollution violations. That program ended in July.

Cultivando contracted Boulder Air to set up a monitoring station about 1.3 miles northeast of the refinery and began taking air samples to detect multiple toxic compounds.

In March, Cultivando hosted a meeting at the University of Denver to present its findings from a year's worth of data. No one from the EPA or the state health department attended, which offended Cultivando's team.

After the nonprofit reported that it had found more harmful pollutants in the air than people realized, state officials said Cultivando looked at short-term spikes of benzene and particulate matter and that those readings were snapshots of air quality conditions and did not comply with established standards for measuring [air quality](#).

"We are deeply disappointed by the response from government organizations like CDPHE and the EPA and the corporate partners like Suncor," Solis said. "When we came out with our data, it ranged from inaction to dismissal."

Still, Cultivando applied for the round of EPA air monitoring grants in 2022 and its application was accepted. Then the nonprofit started

learning about all the rules that come with a federal grant and decided not to take the money.

"Overall, it's an overly complicated and antiquated process that does not align with nonprofits. It places unnecessary burdens on us to create systems that are more relevant to large institutions and government agencies," said Olga Gonzalez, Cultivando's executive director.

Of the \$500,000, Cultivando would have kept just \$40,000 with the rest going to the company that provided the expertise to monitor the air.

The EPA wanted Cultivando to create a complex accounting system to track the money, Gonzalez said. The nonprofit had an established relationship with Boulder Air, but the EPA wanted a competitive, national bidding process to choose a company.

The grant was not worth all the work that was required, Gonzalez said.

"The \$40,000 was spent before any funds were even received," she said.

Becker, who leads the EPA's region that includes Colorado, told The Denver Post that she understood federal grants are complicated, especially for nonprofits that haven't received them before. But her agency has to follow the law.

"Getting a half a million dollars is amazing, but it doesn't come without strings," Becker said. "You still have to comply with federal government laws. That means developing a quality assurance program."

The EPA is focusing on environmental justice under the Biden administration, Becker said.

"One of the biggest priorities of the EPA is finding ways to connect

directly with the people we serve," she said.

The grants "reflect a determination to do more than just work behind the scenes, invisible and over the heads of the people we aim to protect," Becker said. "At the core of this approach is the idea that we do better when we inform, engage with and share our work with the people we serve."

'Air monitoring is not cheap'

The Black Parents United Foundation wanted to test the air in Aurora to inform residents whose children suffer from asthma, Wells said. She and her children have asthma and their breathing problems are exacerbated on hot summer days when ozone pollution is high, she said.

"It's affecting our communities and they deserve to know the information," she said.

But starting a program is proving more challenging than expected even with \$472,656 coming from the EPA.

The companies that are in the air monitoring business are expensive and almost all of the money Black Parents United received will go to them, Wells said. When the money runs out, her foundation won't own any equipment to keep testing the air.

"I'm sure in those scientists' warehouses somewhere there's an air monitor sitting and collecting dust," she said.

The budget from the EPA only goes so far, she said.

Black Parents United's members have talked to Cultivando to learn from that organization's experience. And the work to stand up a program

continues, albeit slowly, Wells said.

"It's hard. Air monitoring is not cheap at all," she said. "It's discouraging. It makes you want to give up. It's not fair to those who put in all the work or to the community who needs to see the work."

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