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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Air Quality in SWPA Still Threatens the Health of Our Most Vulnerable Residents**

**PITTSBURGH** – The American Lung Association "2022 State of the Air (SOTA)" report released today shows that while air quality in SWPA improved during the years 2018-2020, a period that includes industrial and traffic reductions, air quality advocates and residents remain concerned that vulnerable communities throughout Allegheny County and Greater Pittsburgh continue to suffer from unhealthy levels of short-term particulates and ozone levels.

The Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton 12-county region received its first, barely-passing grade in the history of the SOTA report for the year-round average of fine particulate pollution. While this progress is recognized, the region continues to receive failing grades (Fs) for the daily measure of particle pollution and ozone. Short-term spikes in particle pollution and ground level ozone (known as smog) inflict serious health burdens on people, causing asthma, cardiovascular damage and respiratory diseases.

"This American Lung Association report shows that short-term spikes in pollution continue to be a problem in our region, especially in the air that is breathed in our most vulnerable communities," said Matt Mehalik, executive director of the Breathe Project. "No one can be proud of an F grade for short-term pollution impacts."

Pittsburgh remains one of the most challenging places to live with asthma in the country. Children living near smokestack pollution sources in communities like Clairton, Woodland Hills and Allegheny Valley have as high as a 1 in 4 rate of having asthma. An additional 10 percent of children are at risk of developing asthma, according to [a study published in the Journal of Asthma](#) by Dr. Deborah Gentile in 2020, a period that coincides with the latest data in this American Lung Association report.

Improvements in the region that offered the passing grade for fine particles on an annual average basis are partially explained by the reductions in traffic in 2020 and industrial slowdowns during the pandemic from the region's largest pollution sources, such as the U.S. Steel's Clairton Coke Works, one of the largest emitters of particles in the region. This trend did not hold true overall nationally. Regardless of the shutdowns in early 2020, there was no obvious air quality improvement overall nationally, the American Lung Association said. Changes in the rankings were influenced by large increases in wildfires out west. The Lung Association reported that 9 million more people experienced high levels of particulate pollution from the wildfires, which are exacerbated by climate change.

The report's findings do not capture many other dimensions of pollution problems that exist in Allegheny County, such as ongoing problems with Sulfur Dioxide and Hydrogen Sulfide emissions. [Group Against Smog and Pollution](#) reported that our region's air has violated the state's Hydrogen Sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) standard more than 54 times in 2021, giving the air a rotten egg-like stench from coke oven emissions.

The American Lung Association report also includes the period of a major fire at the Clairton Coke Works on Dec. 24, 2018 that resulted in 100 days when the plant operated without pollution controls and sulfur dioxide exceedances were monitored. A recent [peer-reviewed study](#) showed a near doubling of the number of acute outpatient and emergency room visits for asthma exacerbations in the time following the Clairton Coke Works fire, as compared to the period before, due to PM 2.5 particle pollution exceedances. For SO<sub>2</sub> exceedances during this period, the rate of total asthma visits increased 60%, and for H<sub>2</sub>S exceedances, the rate of total asthma visits increased by 86%.

The concerns (and complaints) surrounding our region's historically poor air quality have been a source of serious environmental advocacy for decades with long-standing nonprofits fighting this pollution and the creation of technologies to capture data and report poor air days as well as rallies, marches and more lately six grassroots-led air quality town halls.

Between 2018 and 2020, the same period as the ALA report, Carnegie Mellon University's [CREATE Lab SmellPGH](#) App submitted 46,119 smell reports in Allegheny County logged by an average of 2,537 unique users per year. SmellPGH allows users to report smells on any given day on a 1-5 rating system.

Six Southwest Pa. Resident-led Town Halls on air quality were held over the last year, bringing together more than a thousand people, many residents of environmental justice communities, to discuss the impact

of pollution on their health and well-being. The most recent April 5th session featured current or former steelworkers, or those who grew up with relatives who worked in the mills operated by USS.

"The steelworkers spoke about a company unconcerned about the health impact on their employees, neighboring communities and the greater Pittsburgh area that are a result of slipshod maintenance and failure to update aged facilities that have been in need of improvement for generations," said Howard Rieger, convener of SWPATHS. "It is beyond time for civic, corporate and health leaders to develop a model for a healthier future for all of the residents of our region."

Beaver County, which faces a future that includes carcinogenic emissions from the Shell Petrochemical Plant, has shown improvement in recent years for ozone smog, progressing from an "F" to a "C" in two years. Similarly, the year-round measure of fine particle pollution improved as well. The daily measure for particle pollution, however, showed that more days exceeded the daily standard and was the worst it has been since the 2011 "State of the Air" report, said Kevin Stewart, director of environmental health for the American Lung Association. For all three measures, Beaver County is second worst after Allegheny County in the 12-county Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton metro area.

### **Comments from Air Quality Advocates:**

#### **Germaine Patterson, Clairton resident**

"I am not surprised that Southwestern Pennsylvania continues to rank among the worst for air quality. Residents continue to suffer no matter what the level of pollution. As a resident of the Mon Valley, I know air pollution is to be awakened at 3 a.m. with the smell, suffer with a headache a sore throat and have your outdoor exercise be cut short because of heart palpitations."

#### **Patrick Campbell, executive director GASP**

"The American Lung Association's annual report does show some air quality improvements, but the bottom line remains the same: There is no safe level of air pollution exposure - especially exposure to particulate matter. The most vulnerable among us are still regularly impacted by local short-term air pollution episodes. It's also important not to lose sight of air pollutants of concern that aren't addressed in the report that negatively impact our region's health and quality of life - like all-too-often sky-high concentrations of hydrogen sulfide in the Mon Valley."

#### **Mark Dixon, Blue Lens**

"I see the proliferation of low-cost air monitors (100+ PurpleAir monitors in our region) and SmellPGH app complaints (60,000+ since 2016) to be a reasonable proxy for how disturbed our community is with regional air pollution. By these measures, communities are sick and tired of the pollution, the industrial stench, and the related headaches, nausea, asthma, and premature death. Considering how persistent, vocal and legitimate demands for clean air seem to carry less political weight than the profits of local polluters, I'm not ready to celebrate just yet. We still have lots of work to do. A better American Lung report does not make for a healthy region."

#### **Dr. Deborah Gentile, Community Partners in Asthma Care, pediatrician**

"Getting a D for long-term PM2.5 exposure should not be misinterpreted as meaning that we no longer have an air pollution issue. Recent large studies show that harmful effects of long-term PM2.5 exposure

occur below the current EPA threshold of 12 ug/m<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the World Health Organization has set their threshold for health-protective effects at 5 ug/m<sup>3</sup> and the EPA is expected to lower their threshold to 8-10ug/m<sup>3</sup> in the near future."

**Dr. Ned Ketyer, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Pennsylvania President**

"The good news is air quality is ever-so-slowly improving. But it's like going from a 2 packs-per-day cigarette habit to 1 and 1/2 packs per day. It's better, sure, but no doctor is going to say you've cut down enough. Your health is still at great risk."

**Jay Ting Walker, advocacy coordinator with Clean Air Council**

"Allegheny County residents, especially frontline communities living close to large industrial sources, remain impacted by harmful air pollution. We must change the benchmark for grading air quality in the first place. The majority of experts on an EPA advisory committee recommend lowering both the annual and daily federal standards for particle pollution, which would force decision makers to take action to improve air quality in the region."

***About the Breathe Project***

*The Breathe Project is a coalition of citizens, environmental advocates, public health professionals and academics using the best available science and technology to improve air quality, eliminate climate pollution and make our region a healthy, prosperous place to live. Learn more at [www.breatheproject.org](http://www.breatheproject.org).*

*Information about our Breathe Collaborative partners can be found [here](#).*