

**STATE OF ILLINOIS
ILLINOIS COMMERCE COMMISSION**

Commonwealth Edison Company)	
)	
)	Docket No. 22-0067
Petition for the Establishment of Performance)	
Metrics Under Section 16-108.18(e) of the)	
Public Utilities Act)	

**DIRECT TESTIMONY OF RYAN O'DONNELL
ON BEHALF OF CITIZENS UTILITY BOARD
AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND**

CUB/EDF Ex. 3.0

April 6, 2022

1 **I. INTRODUCTION**

2 **Q. Please state your name and address.**

3 A. My name is Ryan O'Donnell and my business address is 4626 N Magnolia Ave, Chicago
4 IL 60640. I am a resident of Chicago, Illinois in the Edgewater neighborhood.

5 **Q. By whom are you employed and in what capacity?**

6 A. I am owner and founder of FAOU (For All Of Us) Strategies, LLC. I also serve as part of
7 the leadership of the Chicago Westside Branch of the NAACP in an unpaid position as the
8 chairperson of the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee; opinions expressed in
9 this testimony are my own and not necessarily reflective of that organization.

10 **Q. Please describe your educational and professional background.**

11 A. I double majored in Physics and Mathematics, with a minor in Economics at Howard
12 University. I have served in various roles throughout my career. I have always studied
13 strategy, but I have been drawn away from pure quantitative and scientific fields to mainly
14 strategic organizing and/or activism. I have worked in youth programs, sales and
15 marketing, political and policy campaigns, state government, and strategic consulting.
16 Throughout my life and career, I have been involved with numerous causes about which I
17 am passionate, including environmental work, racial equity, LGBTI+ equality, animal
18 rights, and vegan activism. In my community-level canvassing and organizing for those
19 causes, I have utilized my sales and marketing experiences and experiences from several
20 odd jobs as an executive or personal assistant to anticipate issues, tap into the issues people
21 have, and get people interested in a possible solution. I have learned that one of the most
22 important parts of supporting community is listening, whether it is the scientific
23 community, a queer community, a Black community, or a White community. A big part of

24 that is meeting people where they are to understand what they care about and why they
25 care about it and to help inform them of issues and opportunities. Many times, that means
26 listening to things I am not interested in or do not care about and learning to care about
27 them. Even if I think I already have a solution—even if I do already have a solution—it is
28 almost always necessary that I listen and learn in order to find common ground and where
29 our interests align to provide a solution that will not be rejected.

30 **Q. Are you a customer of ComEd?**

31 A. Yes.

32 **Q. What are some of the challenges you have seen in “meeting people where they are
33 at?”**

34 A. I have worked with and for many under-represented communities, including Black
35 communities. I know first-hand that activating and recruiting community members from
36 areas that face numerous other challenges is more difficult. Topics like energy or the
37 environment that are a pressing concern in areas are not necessarily as high of a priority
38 for people in those areas with other visible, daily struggles such as poverty and criminal
39 justice. It can be difficult for many marginalized people to see the importance of
40 environmental and energy policies because they struggle to see past other injustices in their
41 communities through the lens of poverty and past diversions offering more immediate
42 payoffs. It can be equally challenging to communicate about the opportunities, such as job
43 creation, because so many Black communities have been left out of those opportunities for
44 so long that we at times may be jaded. Often times, even jobs and programs that are
45 identified as entry level are not really entry level, and those that are still needlessly require
46 some formal education locking many marginalized people out of entering. There are

47 numerous barriers to raising awareness of both environmental issues and environmental
48 opportunities, like those created via energy decarbonization.

49 **Q. Based on your experience, what are some effective ways to increase community**
50 **engagement from historically underrepresented communities, particularly related to**
51 **the workforce?**

52 A. There are several important elements. First, it is important to understand disparities in
53 resources and opportunities in Black and brown communities as compared to majority-
54 white areas for things like formal education, certified businesses, and exposure to or
55 awareness of environmental and energy career paths. A lot of times, hiring decisions or
56 contractor selection is based on formal experience, including formal education. Those are
57 not necessarily good indicators of someone's abilities. Historic and compounding
58 discrimination, even minor forms and even when unintentional, can have a very repressive
59 impact on someone's work history.

60 However, just because someone has not been paid to do something in the past does
61 not mean that person cannot do it or learn to. It is often more a lack of opportunity or a lack
62 of exposure than a lack of ability, but if compounded over a person's career, it can develop
63 into a learned helplessness or a lack of qualifications. If someone does not even know that
64 a certain career path exists or does not see it in daily life, that person may not see those
65 opportunities as important or practical. Even for the members of marginalized communities
66 who get into environmental and potentially-lucrative fields, if they are not supported with
67 higher levels of professional exposure, they may struggle to understand the potential of that
68 career or business path. And in the specific case of Black people, this is usually
69 compounded by a weak network to help because of the burdens of inter-generational

70 poverty and cultural and systemic legacies of oppression. So, when companies or
71 governments are hoping to make their workforce or contractors more diverse, equitable,
72 and inclusive, they have to recognize and address that historical lack of exposure and
73 opportunity.

74 **Q. What are ways to address those disparities?**

75 A. First, companies should recognize that Black people tend to be very creative and
76 entrepreneurial. There is a culture that has been built out of oppression to typically hold
77 multiple jobs and to have at least some entrepreneurial side-hustle. Systemic barriers have
78 often limited or altogether shut us out from traditional career paths, and then when we have
79 built new career paths and industries—I think especially about Black men here—we have
80 been punished and criminalized for them. This is not only true with the cannabis industry;
81 this is true with environmental causes and many industries. Giving people with fewer
82 opportunities, greater stakes, and more drive and grit a robust opportunity to contribute
83 is not a matter of charity; it is a matter of minimizing further injustice and making a system
84 where everyone benefits, including utilities but more importantly society. That creativity
85 and entrepreneurial spirit is perhaps greater in Black people than any other race in spite of,
86 and perhaps even in part because of, the oppression that has kept us from reaching our
87 potential in professional and business endeavors. Companies can reap incredible benefits
88 if they recognize that drive, make hiring and contracting decisions that acknowledge and
89 address those barriers, and use more diverse contractors and a more diverse workforce.

90 I think there are two important elements to addressing that: increasing exposure and
91 reducing barriers. First, on exposure, as I mentioned, it is not fair to base a decision about
92 someone based solely on their previous experience or formal education. Past experience is
93 not necessarily an indicator of intrinsic ability or innate faults. It is very much a result of

94 systemic barriers, resources, and opportunities, or lack of those things. Increasing exposure
95 includes seeking out and lifting up entrepreneurs and job trainees who have great potential
96 but have not been exposed to the same opportunities. Then, companies should reduce
97 barriers for them to participate.

98 Many requirements for starting and growing a business are far out of reach for
99 Black business owners, like insurance and cybersecurity requirements. Even just getting
100 proper certifications or a business license in Chicago can be a complicated and relatively
101 expensive barrier. These may seem like minor things individually, but in totality, they have
102 a repulsive effect on many businesses that would qualify as Equity Investment Eligible
103 Contractors. Some of those are addressed in the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA).
104 Putting resources toward addressing those barriers so that local entrepreneurs can grow
105 into full-fledged, expanding businesses would have individual, community, and utility
106 benefits.

107 The Energy Transition Barrier Reduction Program and related Navigators in CEJA
108 are thoughtful and comprehensive approaches barrier reduction. I recommend utilities use
109 those programs as a model for their own supplier diversity initiatives. Entrepreneurs who
110 have not had equitable opportunities need education, resources, and mentorship in order to
111 thrive, and to be judged based on their potential, not just their past experiences. The
112 supplier diversity metric should include performance on addressing barriers to access and
113 supporting subcontractor development through mentorship programs, both of which are
114 important, holistic supports for growing the diversity of their contracting pool.

115 **Q. Does that complete your direct testimony?**

116 A. Yes.