GEJ Global Environmental Justice Documentaries

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Cooked: Survival by Zip Code

2018 • 54 minutes • Directed by Judith Helfand • Distributed by Bullfrog Films

Cooked: Survival by Zip Code is a story about a severe example of environmental injustice and the people most affected by it. In the summer of 1995, Chicago experienced an unthinkable disaster triggered by extremely high humidity and a layer of heat-retaining pollution that drove the heat index to more than 126˚F (52˚C).

Cooked revisits this tragic heat wave in which 739 citizens died over the course of a single week, most of them poor, elderly, and African American.

Behind the shocking headlines filmmaker Judith Helfand finds a long-term crisis, a "slow-motion disaster" fueled by poverty, economics, social isolation, and racism.

Viewer advisory: This film includes news footage from 1995 of emergency personnel moving victims in body bags.

CURATOR

Rajashree Ghosh

Affiliated Scholar, Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University

WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Throughout the film *Cooked: Survival by Zip Code*, filmmaker Judith Helfand argues that there is an inextricable connection between environmental injustice and racism as she explores the impact of the 1995 Chicago heat wave that caused hundreds of deaths. The people most affected, she finds, often live in zip codes that are underserved, under-resourced, and ill equipped to deal with extreme events like heat waves, hurricanes, forest fires, and, more recently, pandemics. An examination of these disasters reveals structural inequalities that make poor communities and communities of color vulnerable to these events. The film is an important teaching tool and will promote critical classroom discussions about how social location, privilege, and disadvantage intersect to create very different impacts and experiences within society.

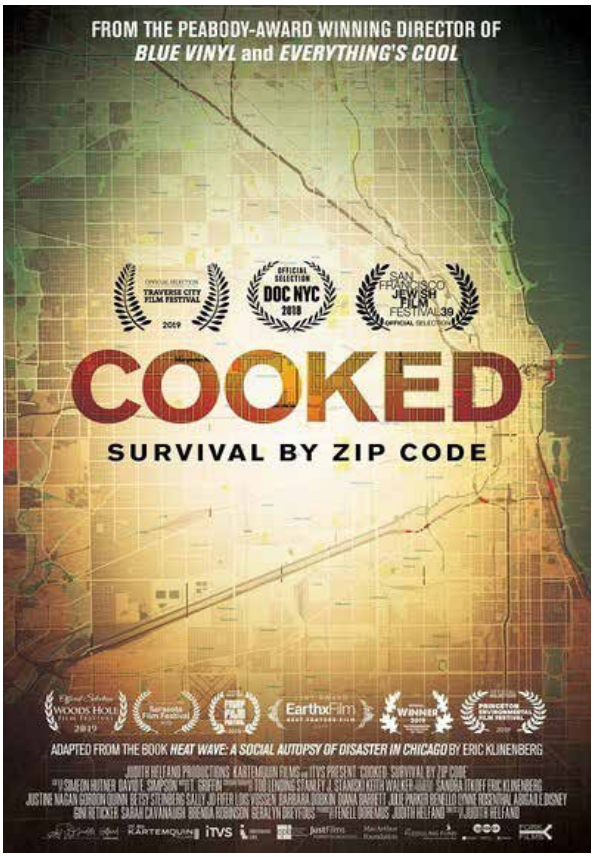
SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

African American Studies
Environmental Justice
Environmental Sciences
Epidemiology
Gerontology
Management Sciences
Medicine
Meteorology
Political Science
Social Policy
Sociology
Urban Economics and Planning

> *"This film is searing, smart and insightful… [it] asks important questions with humor, humility, and humanity. This film can be used in a wide range of classrooms with social and ethnic studies and health policy as well as in public contexts of churches, community groups, and other venues.*
>
> **Julie Sze,** Professor, American Studies, UC-Davis

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS

The film was inspired by Eric Klinenberg's book *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, which examines the July 1995 heat wave. Klinenberg and filmmaker Judith Helfand both make the case for environmental health equity as they point out the damage to communities inflicted by racially restrictive covenants, redlining by banks, a lack of safety, exclusion from political engagement in land-use planning, and inadequate health care, all of which contribute to a slow-motion environmental and social disaster created by humans and driven by systemic racism.



SYNOPSIS

Cooked: Survival by Zip Code tells the story of a tragic heat wave, the most traumatic in U.S. history at the time, in which 739 citizens died over the course of a single week, most of them poor, elderly, and African American.

The film questions existing policy as it explores a slow-motion disaster that continues to disrupt and shorten the lives of Chicago residents in neighborhoods like Englewood, a district ravaged by pernicious poverty, social isolation, and racism. This is a place where one resident says, "It's easier to buy a gun than a tomato." One epidemiologist concludes that 3,200 people die each year from preventable illnesses in such Chicago neighborhoods. The filmmaker comes to question policies that ignore these kinds of ongoing disasters while preparing, at the same time and at great expense, for rare events like earthquakes.

The film does find reason to hope for change because of two community-based initiatives that address current inequities. Sinai Urban Health Institute actively reaches out to residents, and an organic farm that grows vegetables for residents of Englewood calls itself a "human emergency plan."

Filmmaker Judith Helfand

Cooked raises key questions: Can we realign our social priorities? Can we expand the definition of "disaster" to include socially patterned deprivation? Would doing so allow us to address the slow-motion disasters that kill people every day just because they live in the wrong zip code?

KEY LOCATIONS

Westchester County, New York
Englewood, Chicago, Illinois
Cook County, Illinois
New Madrid Seismic Zone, Tennessee
New Orleans, Louisiana
Paducah, Kentucky

> *"As the planet heats up, we are faced with one natural disaster after another.*

PEOPLE FEATURED

Valerie Brown – granddaughter of Alberta Brown, who died in the heat wave

Richard Daley – mayor of Chicago from 1989 to 2011

Dr. Edmund Donoghue – chief medical examiner, Cook County

Jim DuPont – President, RescUSA, Illinois Urban Search and Rescue

Maureen Finn – forensic scientist, Cook County Medical Examiner's Office

Geraldine Flowers – church elder, Sweet Holy Baptist Church

Oreletta Garmon – community health worker

Shirl Gatling – Gatling's Chapel and Funeral Services

Judith Helfand – film director

Brigadier General John Heltzel – director, Kentucky Emergency Management

Sadhu Johnston – chief environmental officer, City of Chicago

Eric Klinenberg – author of *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*

Michele Landis Dauber – author of *The Sympathetic State*

Reverend Joseph Ledwell

Mike McReynolds – medical examiner, Cook County Medical Examiner's Office

Dr. Linda Rae Murray – medical officer (ret.), Cook County Department of Public Health

Andy Nebel – reporter at ABC

Toni Preckwinkle – board president, Cook County Board of Commissioners

Colleen and Jeremiah Scott – residents of Englewood

Celevia Taylor – community health worker, Sinai Urban Health Institute

Bessie Trotter – Action Coalition of Englewood

Steve Whitman – chief epidemiologist, City of Chicago

Orrin Williams – community organizer, Englewood, Chicago

VIEWING TIME

Cooked: Survival by Zip Code was originally released as an 82-minute feature-length film and a 54-minute educational version. The 54-minute version, included in this collection, was broadcast by PBS on the Independent Lens series.

IF TIME IS SHORT

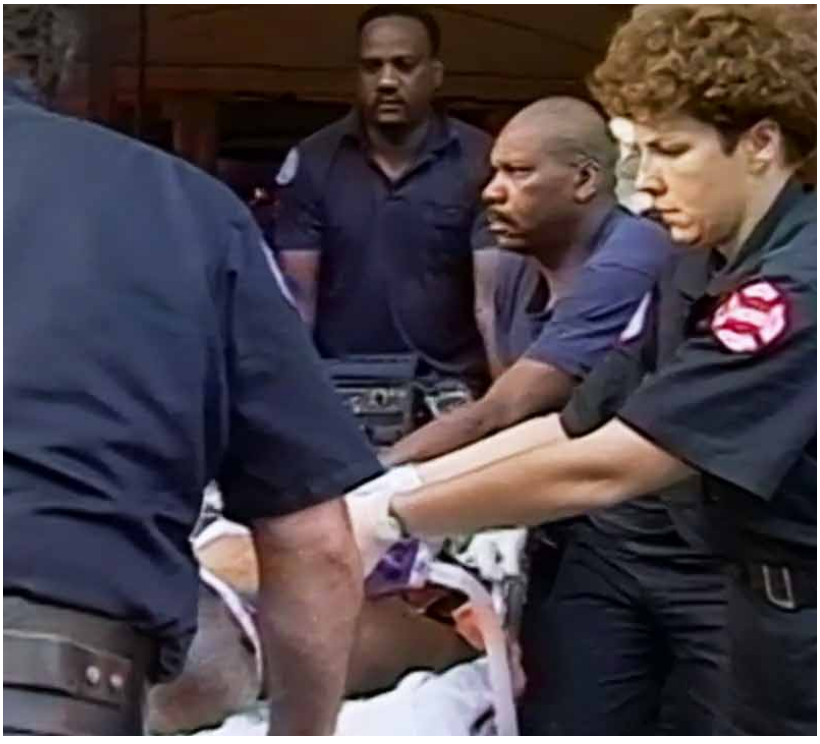
Where viewing time is limited, five excerpts with a combined length of 27 minutes could be assigned for viewing or screened in class. See **page 10** for a description of these excerpts.

OUTLINE OF THE 54-MINUTE VERSION

Opening: "Disaster through lens of privilege" (00:00–04:09)

Filmmaker Judith Helfand and her family are preparing for Hurricane Sandy. They are well supplied with generators, flashlights, tools, and even a boat. She's confident that her family will be secure and safe as the storm hits.

Reflecting on her position of privilege in the face of a disaster, Helfand sets out to explore the story of the catastrophic but largely forgotten heat wave that killed hundreds of Chicago residents in 1995, as documented by Eric Klinenberg in *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Retracing that disaster takes Helfand to its epicenter in South Chicago (opening title).



Non-violent deaths?
(04:10–13:50)

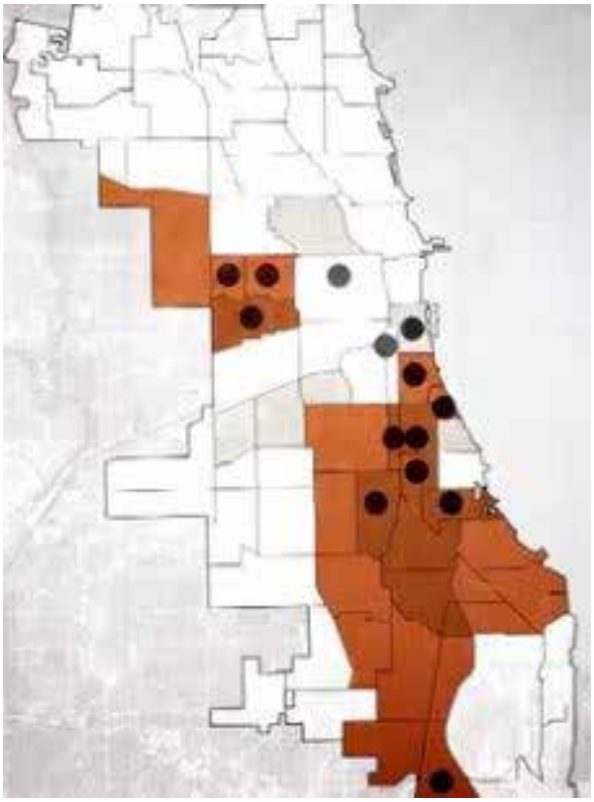
As temperatures rose to 104˚F (40˚C) on July 13, 1995, the residents of Chicago tried to cope. Mayor Richard Daley downplayed the danger even as hospitals were overflowing with patients suffering from heat-related illnesses, and people began to die.

Valerie Brown recalls trying to reach her grandmother on the phone. Her grandmother was found at home, in bed, deceased. Her windows had been nailed shut. As the death toll climbed, refrigerator trucks were brought in to store bodies.

> *The health inequities that exist are not accidents. They are created by people.*
>
> **Linda Rae Murray,**
> medical officer, Cook County

The Medical Examiner's Office couldn't keep up. "It was like a war zone," forensic scientist Maureen Finn said. On Saturday morning there were 87 bodies. The next morning there were 83 more, and then another 117 the following day.

As the number of deaths mounted the mayor hedged, saying it was not certain that the deaths were due to excessive heat but allowing that the number of "non-violent" deaths were increasing. Examining old footage and exploring the cause of the deaths, Helfand realizes that people had to make an agonizing choice between staying safe and staying cool. The death rate is the greatest in poor neighborhoods on the West and South Sides.



"Everything is about race." (12:50–17:32)

Medical examiner Mike McReynolds, intake supervisor at the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office, recites a saying that in Chicago, "Everything is about race." Helfand asks about the disproportionate number of deaths among Blacks.

Mayor Daley blames family members of senior citizens who died all alone and accuses the Medical Examiner's Office of exaggerating the number of deaths. Resident Geraldine Flowers points to a lack of compassion as a cause. The bodies of 41 unclaimed victims are buried. The death toll rises, especially in under-served poor neighborhoods.

Mapping heat and social conditions (17:33–21:52)

Steve Whitman, chief epidemiologist for the City of Chicago, presents a key map showing communities with high poverty rates, with an overlay showing where heat-related deaths occurred.

The mayor creates a task force and an emergency plan, but the plan does not address the issue of poverty or the social fault lines that leave some neighborhoods at the mercy of the heat wave. Whitman says what is needed is "a social evil remedying plan."

The slow motion disaster
(21:53–24:45)

Police tell children to "back off" as they shut down the spray from a hydrant. Meanwhile, across town by the lakeshore, the Buckingham Fountain puts on a spectacular display. Author Eric Klinenberg worries about the collective failure to address these everyday crises, calling them "disasters in slow motion." The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans provides further evidence of systemic denial and neglect.
The discussion pivots to uncomfortable topics, including the impact of generations of racism and denial. The recovery plan for New Orleans, with its focus on physical repairs to the dikes, is an example.

The impact of entrenched racism and denial (24:46 – 35:45)

In Chicago, the mayor's climate action plan will develop a "green roof" for city hall. In South Chicago, community organizer Orrin Williams laments the continued erosion of a once-vibrant and safe neighborhood after it was cut off by redlining by the banks. With gradual disinvestment, he says, communities were "left out" and "forgotten."

Chicago epidemiologist Steve Whitman demonstrates that the differences between Black and white communities in measures of health are growing. Life expectancy in Black communities is 65 years. For whites, it is 81 years. Whitman goes on to say that 3,200 people die in Chicago from health inequities due to racism every year. If the same number of people died from terrorism, Helfand suggests, it would be a national tragedy; but dying predictably, from readily treatable diseases, is not treated as a disaster.

> *3,200 people die from racism each year.*
>
> **Steve Whitman,** epidemiologist

Disaster-prevention/preparedness (35:45–45:12)

Judith Helfand attends disaster preparedness exercises in Cook County and in Kentucky, two of many exercises in a rapidly expanding national industry. Helfand finds expensive resources standing by in preparation for fire, earthquakes, or floods. Could these resources instead be applied to communities struck by unnatural disasters? In Kentucky, the exercise director agrees that emergency management plans don't address poverty issues because they are not thought of as disasters.

Finding help, and hope, in communities (45:13–50:05)

Vulnerable communities rely on their ingenuity and meager resources. With help from the Action Coalition of Englewood, residents line up to receive a $150-a-year subsidy on heating bills. Community health workers from Sinai Urban Health Institute reach out to women to alleviate their health issues. Growing Home, an organic farm in Englewood, sees itself as a "human emergency plan" and a sign of hope.

Redefining disaster (50:06-53:40)

The filmmaker calls for expanding the definition of disaster so that underlying conditions that are killing thousands of people each year in places like Chicago could be addressed. Lives could be saved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
For the 54-minute version

1. Why does Helfand feel privileged as Hurricane Sandy is about to hit her hometown in Westchester County, New York? How is her experience of disaster planning different from those of others who are less fortunate? (00:48–03:33)

2. What does Klinenberg mean when he says natural disasters are more "seen" and visible? Why is it different for unnatural disasters that are man-made? (04:08–05:15)
3. How does Alberta Washington's fate resemble those of several others who perished in the heat wave? (06:38–07:40, 15:37–16:20)
4. There was a media frenzy related to the heat wave in 1995 in Chicago. What did the media focus on at the time, and what was the underreported story? (10:54–11:22)
5. What is problematic in the mayor's statement that "all neighborhoods were impacted by the heat wave"? What is Klinenberg's opinion on that? (19:26–20:21)
6. What was the "heat emergency plan"? Why did epidemiologist Steve Whitman lack confidence in it? (20:31–21:52)
7. What does Klinenberg mean when he says he is "concerned with the collective failure to address the everyday crisis, the disaster in slow motion"? (22:37–23:25)
8. Following the discussion of Hurricane Katrina and its impact on New Orleans, the focus of the documentary shifts to an examination of the impact of generations of racism and denial. Why is this a pivotal moment for the filmmaker and the film? (23:35–24:45)
9. How did the practices of redlining and contract buying exploit families of color and affect their neighborhoods? (27:41–32:14)
10. Using Steve Whitman's research findings, how would you describe a Black neighborhood and the people's living conditions? (32:15–35:00) See also Whitman, Steve (2010), *Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities in Chicago*.
11. Note the variety of maps and overlays shown in the film. How do maps help us examine the health risk factors for African Americans and their relative vulnerability? Why does the map of heat deaths overlap with other demographic indicators? Discuss. (32:15–35:00)
12. Disaster preparedness is a well-funded industry. Explain. (35:10–43:35)
13. What is the difference between a disaster kit and a "get through the week" kit?
14. How do organizations like Sinai Urban Health Institute and Growing Home organic farm provide a sign of hope? (45:10–50:05)
15. How would an expanded definition of disaster help in realigning national priorities? (52:14–53:40)

> *Helfand's brilliance in* Cooked *is precisely the way she shifts and re-orients our entire social mentality and approach to thinking about racism, poverty, and disaster. She asks us to think about and redefine racism and poverty as, indeed, disasters.*
>
> **Tim Libretti,** *People's World*

Everything is about race.

Mike McReynolds,
Chicago medical examiner

WHEN TIME IS SHORT/OUTLINE OF EXCERPTS

If time is short, these five selected excerpts, with a total length of 27 minutes, can be viewed in class or assigned for viewing outside of class. Discussion questions and activities tailored for these excerpts are suggested below.

An unthinkable disaster: Chicago 1995 (00:00–11:22)

Filmmaker Judith Helfand investigates a catastrophic heat wave that killed more than 730 people living in under-resourced and under-served neighborhoods of Chicago in 1995 and uncovers the "unnatural" causes that caused the deaths of many people, largely elderly and Black. Many victims were "cooked" to death behind closed doors and windows. Chicago's mayor attempted to minimize the crisis, but as triple-digit temperatures continued, hospitals were inundated. "It was like a war zone," a medical examiner recalls.

Environmental injustice: Mapping a slow-motion disaster (15:37–18:10)

Unclaimed victims are buried. The final death tally is 739. Linda Rae Murray talks about the city's inappropriate handling of the heat crisis. Steve Whitman shows a map of Chicago that demonstrates heat deaths in areas with high poverty rates. Would these people have died had the heat wave not happened?

What happened to Orrin Williams' neighborhood in South Chicago? (25:40–29:55)

Community organizer Orrin Williams takes the filmmaker on a tour of a once-thriving neighborhood in southwest Chicago.

Englewood has seen redlining by banks, disinvestment, companies moving out, churches burned, boarded-up buildings, loss of services, and the development of a food desert. What was once a vibrant community disappeared as redlining and contract buying deliberately undermined homeownership by Black families. These were highly political decisions, Helfand finds, that allowed racism to thrive. Maps reveal the cumulative impact of generations of denial and deprivation.

Disaster is big business (35:00–38:18)

Filmmaker Helfand records natural disaster preparedness exercises in Cook County. On display is $47 million worth of equipment, including emergency vehicles and a "morgue on wheels;" extra food drills are practiced and ventilation units readied in case of earthquakes or fires. Could some of these resources be diverted to communities struck by unnatural disasters? Or could the definition of disaster be expanded to include the slow-motion disaster that is consuming neighborhoods like Englewood?

Signs of hope (45:10–50:05)

Organizations like Action Coalition of Englewood and Growing Home organic farm are working in the community to address structural inequities. Helfand finds their work to be of critical importance in addressing inequities and providing people opportunities for a better life. By expanding the definition of disaster to include human emergency, the underlying conditions that are killing thousands of people each year could be addressed.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS TO ACCOMPANY THE SELECTED EXCERPTS

1. Discuss some of the conditions during the 1995 heat wave in Chicago.
2. What does the film title *Cooked* mean?
3. Why is the heat wave a forgotten event?
4. What do Steve Whitman's maps reveal?
5. Are specific neighborhoods more vulnerable to heat waves than others? Discuss.

6. How have race and economic class played a role in Englewood's decline?
7. What were some of the processes instituted by banks and other lenders that deprived Black residents of homeownership?
8. Can community action address the existing social fault lines? Refer to the sequence titled "Signs of hope."

> *The film challenges then-Mayor Richard Daley's description of heat-stroke fatalities as 'non-violent deaths', urging us instead to see this loss of life as part of a bigger story of structural violence against communities of color.*

Neil Singh, a primary care physician and senior teaching fellow at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (See review in Medical Humanities)

ACTIVITIES

A. Break into groups and reflect on different identities as well as diversity within and across groups. Explore assumptions and expectations from participants identifying with different racial backgrounds. Some topics that may be used for this exercise:

   – Vice President Kamala Harris, a woman and person of color, achieves political office. How does she describe herself? How would you describe her?

   – Juneteenth was made a federal holiday. Why do some call it the second Independence Day?

   – Comment on the CDC's guidelines to deal with extreme heat and explore how they impact different communities.

B. Write a one-pager about one of the following disasters, discussing the disproportionate impact on low-income people and communities of color as demonstrated by the government's response:

   – Louisiana's "Cancer Alley"

   – Flint, Michigan: lead in the water supply

   – The Dakota Access Pipeline and its impact on indigenous populations

   – Investigate the deadly heat dome in western Canada in 2021. How many people died and who were the most vulnerable? How was this disaster similar to or different from the Chicago heat wave?

   – Puerto Rico, a U.S. colony, was damaged by Hurricanes Maria and Irma in 2017. What was the role of race and racism in emergency response and recovery in the aftermath of these hurricanes? Or, more deeply, how did these storms and their aftermath expose colonial laws and practices resting on white racial superiority? See Carlos Rodríguez-Diaz and Charlotte Lewellen-Williams' Race and Racism as Structural Determinants for Emergency and Recovery Response in the Aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Puerto Rico.

   – Explore your state or provincial emergency response guidelines.

C. COVID-19, also a disaster, is disproportionately impacting environmental justice communities. In your state or province, what steps have been taken to ensure investments designed to help communities respond and recover from the pandemic are actually going to communities that need them the most?

> ***Environmental Justice*** *affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.*

One of the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice developed by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Washington D.C., 1991

D. COVID-19 in Chicago tells a story of social vulnerability and racial inequity. Download and discuss this paper.

E. Develop a map of your neighborhood, plotting density, income, education, housing, health (including COVID-19 levels, if available), and overall mortality levels.

F. Visit communities that were redlined. Meet with organizations working in those communities. Develop focus group discussions and interviews to understand inequity issues.
Read an article on redlining.

G. Explore resource hubs and geographic information system (GIS) applications that develop racial equity maps.

H. See the catastrophe from the perspective of residents, physicians, reporters, paramedics, politicians, and relatives of victims.

I. View Chicago's current heat emergency plan.

J. Discuss whether racial inequities are addressed in FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Plan: Chicago Tribune Article Highlights Significant Disparities in FEMA Disaster Relief Response Between White and Black Communities.

K. Find out about environmental justice communities in and around where you live. Map them according to location, health, education, and income indices.

L. Read about environmental racism.

M. View a panel discussion that includes filmmaker Judith Helfand and Cook County Board of Commissioners President Toni Preckwinkle.