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Public Health Leaders Demand Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Department of Public Health Commissioner Allison Arwady Deny the Permit to General Iron

500 Health Professionals and 70+ Organizations Demand City of Chicago Follow Environmental Justice and Racial Equity Commitments in City's Own Health Plan

CHICAGO (Mar. 8, 2021) -- Over 500 public health and healthcare workers, students, community activists, and over 70 local and national organizations signed a letter demanding that Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Dr. Allison Arwady deny the permit to relocate the General Iron/Reserve Management Group (RMG) scrap metal recycling facility to the Southeast Side of Chicago. In the open letter to officials, they recognize that the proposed move of a heavy polluter from the predominantly wealthy, White Lincoln Park neighborhood to the predominantly Latinx, Black, and working class Southeast Side community is a textbook case of environmental racism—and will worsen health inequities.

Members of Chicago's public health community are supporting Southeast Side residents demanding rights to clean air and health. Mayor Lightfoot and Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) must follow through on their stated racial and health equity commitments. If the City were to permit the General Iron / RGM polluter, that would severely breach their commitments and result in increased chronic disease and premature deaths.

"Mayor Lightfoot and CDPH haven't learned the lesson of the pandemic, that we cannot continue to have racist public policies that cause a racialized distribution of the resources necessary for a healthy life. The Mayor and the Commissioner need to value Black and Brown lives," said Jim Bloyd, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County.

"Mayor Lightfoot's and Dr. Arwady's lack of support of Southeast Side Chicagoans demanding clean air contradict the Healthy Chicago 2025 plan, which commits to promoting antiracist policies and leaders and advancing health equity. The plan clearly says, 'Communities disproportionately burdened by pollution' can expect a future 'ideal state' of being able to 'Breathe clean air free of harmful pollutants,'" said Wesley Epplin, Director of Health Equity at Health & Medicine Policy Research Group. "They're violating the commitments they made in the City's own public health plan."

According to the City's 2020 Air Quality and Health Report, the Southeast Side is an area that "...should be prioritized for efforts to mitigate and reduce air pollution to better protect public health." Egregiously, if General Iron were to be relocated and permitted there, it would exacerbate health impacts, such as asthma, and worsen pollution.

The letter was delivered with a request to meet with Commissioner Arwady, who can and should advise the Mayor to deny the permit. Many letter signees contributed to the Healthy Chicago 2025 plan and its launch last September.

"An important component of public health is to stand against political decisions that hurt communities and to speak up for health equity," said Linda Rae Murray, MD, MPH, Past President of the American Public Health Association.