Today, rather than walking to campus, I'm home learning the features of Zoom Conference to conduct meetings and classes remotely: UC Berkeley's campus is shut for its second day in a row, as Pacific Gas and Electric seeks to minimize risk of a wildfire (and associated liability) in the present high wind conditions. Even as I improvise my way through the work week, I'm aware that my climate inconveniences are minor: I'm healthy; my home is solar-powered; local weather is a balmy 72 degrees. Many Californians are not so lucky.

As colleague Ted Lamm aptly noted in this recent Legal Planet post, "[i]f planned shutoffs are an unavoidable reality, California leaders should attempt to maximize our communities' energy resilience and advance state climate goals as they minimize fire risks." He adds, rightly, that communities should in particular prepare to support "vulnerable residents," such as "those with life-sustaining medical equipment," for whom a blackout could mean death.

As or more crucial than aiding at-risk individuals: climate resilience planning must prioritize the needs of the communities most vulnerable to climate micro-crises, and with least financial and infrastructural capacity to adapt. In low income communities of color in the San Joaquin Valley, for example, there are entire zip codes of the "vulnerable," with nary a Powerwall in sight.

Addressing this critical need, our Environmental Law Clinic—through staff attorney Roger Lin and teaching fellow Heather Lewis—is engaged in multiple parallel proceedings at the state Public Utilities Commission to elevate in utility planning consideration of disparate climate impacts and associated climate justice concerns. One victory for vulnerable-community resilience came in a Commission decision last month to allocate $10 million in Self-Generation Incentive Program funds for battery storage systems in San Joaquin Valley communities slated for clean energy pilot programs—a result for which we helped our clients advocate.

This week, in a different proceeding focused specifically on climate adaptation, our Clinic filed comments on behalf of the California Environmental Justice Alliance and Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability that urged the Commission, in its resilience planning, to center the needs of (in PUC parlance) "disadvantages communities (DACs)." Our students wrote:

DACs and vulnerable communities suffer from disparate health and economic impacts from climate change. As one recent example of this climate gap, vulnerable communities in Northern California struggled on September 25, 2019 to adapt to

PG&E’s Public Safety Power Shutoff, already the second time that week PG&E implemented the shutoff to mitigate wildfire risk. Living in 90-degree heat, residents experienced an increased risk of heat stroke and diseases that came from a lack of access to air conditioning, food spoilage, lack of transportation options, and lack of access to well water, among other factors. Disadvantaged and vulnerable communities face larger adaptive barriers to climate change risks than the general population, and the definition of climate adaptation should address this explicitly.

There will be more “lights out, everyone’s home” days ahead. We must both up our game and increase our focus on equity to ensure that the most impacted and least resourced Californians have the illumination, water, cooling stations, and back-up energy they need to power on.