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Contact: Sam Law, FracTracker Alliance
sam.law@fractracker.org

Mon Valley's Qiyam Ansari receives national Community Sentinel Emerging Leader Award

The executive director of Valley Clean Air Now was honored Thursday in New Orleans.

HOMESTEAD, Pa. — Qiyam Ansari, 30, of the Mon Valley was honored Thursday night in New Orleans with the 2026 Community Sentinel Emerging Leader Award. The Community Sentinel Award for Environmental Stewardship is a national award, presented since 2015 by FracTracker Alliance and Halt the Harm Network, that honors frontline community leaders in the environmental justice movement who are standing up to extractive industry.

"This is my first professional award, so I'm pretty honored to be here, especially with so many other awardees that have done so much in their careers," Ansari said in New Orleans on Thursday.

Ansari is the Executive Director of Valley Clean Air Now (VCAN), an environmental justice nonprofit fighting for clean air in Pennsylvania's Mon Valley, home to U.S. Steel's Clairton Coke Works. A community organizer rooted in the region, he has worked since 2019 to help residents hold industrial polluters accountable and assert their right to clean air under Pennsylvania's Environmental Rights Amendment.

With Clean Water Action, he led the campaign that won Pittsburgh's plastic bag ban, helped secure EPA rule changes that reduced toxic emissions from coke oven batteries through fenceline benzene monitoring, and spearheaded a Community Health Assessment with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

"When I was 16, I actually ended up dying because of an asthma attack during an inversion where I didn't have access to an inhaler," Ansari said in an October interview with Halt the Harm Network. "I was life-flighted in a helicopter. My lung collapsed. I was in a coma for two weeks."

He got involved in 2019, when he met a group of community members who were fed up with the air quality. "We're just a group of residents with a name and a mission," he said of those first months. "We got to see the need firsthand that it wasn't just us who were dealing with this problem."

Asked what he has learned from the work, Ansari said: "I know there's a brick wall there. I know my face is going to bleed when I run into it, but it's like we don't have any other choice but to run through the wall, because eventually it will fall or we'll get a crack and maybe we'll see the light on the other side."

In his acceptance speech, Ansari described how Valley Clean Air Now began after a 2019 fire at the Clairton Coke Works. "We recognized that no one was coming to save us and we had to save ourselves," he said. A first grant of $50,000 from the Heinz Endowments paid for air purifiers for 200 people, and 1,000 had signed up. "That's when we realized this problem was a lot bigger," he said. "This year alone we did over a thousand households in the Mon Valley with air purifiers."

He was introduced by Natisha Washington, a 2024 Community Sentinel from the Mon Valley.

Ansari has raised more than $4.5 million for grassroots groups in Allegheny County and serves on the Allegheny County Air Pollution Control Advisory Committee.

Ansari was one of five people honored this year. The others are:

- Loice Malvo of Lake Charles, Louisiana, founder of Fisherville Environmental Action Now
- Zulene Mayfield of Chester, Pennsylvania, chairperson of Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living
- Eboni Neal Cochran of Louisville, Kentucky, co-director of Rubbertown Emergency ACTion (REACT)
- Karen Feridun of Berks County, Pennsylvania, co-founder of the Better Path Coalition and No False Climate Solutions PA (Community Choice Award)

This was the first time the Sentinel Awards have been held in the Gulf South. The region has long borne the brunt of pollution and toxic industry. It is also home to leaders who have done the seemingly impossible, defeating some of the largest corporations in the world to protect the health and well-being of their communities.

"The Sentinel Awards are a time to celebrate and lift each other up," said Shannon Smith, executive director of FracTracker Alliance. "Our communities face many challenges in the face of powerful, polluting industries. The Sentinel Awards remind us that when we confront these challenges together, we are all stronger."

The ceremony included music by New Orleans musician Bruce "Sunpie" Barnes and a keynote by Jo Banner of The Descendants Project in Louisiana's St. John the Baptist Parish.

About the awards: Established in 2015, the Community Sentinel Award for Environmental Stewardship honors those who work to stop the harms of the fossil fuel industry on their communities and their environment. The 2026 program is at fractracker.org/sentinels-program.

About FracTracker Alliance: FracTracker Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that maps, analyzes, and communicates the risks of oil, gas, and petrochemical development. To learn more, visit fractracker.org or connect with us @FracTracker.

Photos attached (credit: Sam Law, FracTracker Alliance): Qiyam Ansari with his 2026 Community Sentinel Emerging Leader Award, Nov. 12, 2026, in New Orleans; and, from left, Loice Malvo, Qiyam Ansari and Eboni Neal Cochran with their awards.

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