



STREET RECOVERY

WEST STREET RECOVERY AND OUR COMMUNITY

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GLOSSARY

Popular Education is a method of both teaching and organizing based on understanding of class, privilege, political struggle and social transformation and is rooted in the idea that everyone has dignity and expertise that comes from their life experience. It emphasizes building trust, compassion, and mutual understanding.

Marginalized communities/ people: WSR uses the term marginalized to indicate groups or individuals who have been excluded from economic and political power and advantages. We prefer this term to disadvantaged or underinvested, because it indicates that exclusion is intentional, ongoing, and multidimensional.

Simultaneous interpretation is real-time interpretation that enables people to communicate in the language that is most comfortable to them. It's part of our greater goal of language justice.

Consensus Decision Making is a dynamic way of reaching agreement between all members of a group. Instead of simply voting where the majority of the group gets their way, a consensus group is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports – or at least can live with. (Definition from Seeds for change UK)

Facilitator/ Facilitation: A facilitator helps a group of people to understand their common objectives and plan how to achieve these objectives. To best aid the group, the facilitator refrains from taking a position in the discussion. (wikipedia)

Just Recovery is a mode of recovery that centers the goals of marginalized people and understands the impact of natural disaster within the capitalist, racist, and sexist world. It orients recovery towards addressing the root causes of injustice. (Movement Generation)

Non Hierarchical/Horizontal: WSR uses this term to indicate that no one is above anyone else.

Undocumented People are individuals living in the United States without citizenship or other legal status. There are over 11 million undocumented people in the USA, and over 400,000 undocumented people in Harris County.

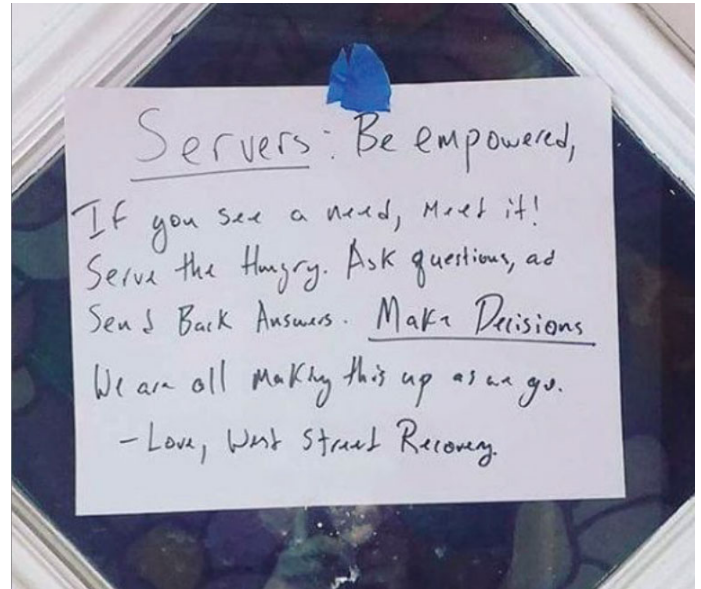
Mucking: The removal of all water-damaged and unsalvageable materials after a flood from a home.

Social Bonds: Connections between people, or between groups of people, including relationships of friendship, kinship, love, mutual obligation, or support. Theorists say that social bonds promote empathy and sympathy and contribute to people supporting each other.

Social Actors: Any person that takes on a social or political action. WSR uses the term to indicate the development of people who consciously use interactions to engage in transformation or advocacy. Everyone who is part of WSR is a social actor, and we work to strengthen our capacities to be effective social actors.

Who is WEST STREET RECOVERY

West Street Recovery (WSR) was formed during Hurricane Harvey by a group of people who came together to perform rescues, distribute food and water, and meet the needs of flood survivors. Since then, WSR has grown into a horizontally-structured and worker-directed disaster recovery nonprofit, which uses Hurricane Harvey home repair and community engagement to build more broadly towards social justice and an equitable recovery.



The sign captures the ethos of those first weeks and the foundational ideas of WSR.

WSR's community is composed of our distinct elements: founders and staff, flood-impacted residents, volunteers and allies, and construction contractors and workers. We're proud of what we've achieved in regards to our internal development, the number of homes we've helped repair, and the community organizing and advocacy we've engaged in. These accomplishments and the community we have built demonstrate that equitable disaster recovery is possible and that community driven organizations must be major players in making a more just world.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Organization Development

- Built caseload of 250 families
- Built volunteer network of 300 people
- Raised sufficient money to pay a staff of eight (though modestly), and sustain our work for over two years
- Founded WSR as a legal entity and 501c3
- Participated in and shaped the Houston Organizing Movement for Equity (HOME) coalition
- Successfully referred clients to organizations who have:
 - ◆ Completely repaired over 25 homes for WSR clients
 - ◆ Provided tax and utility assistance
 - ◆ Supported clients mental health
 - ◆ Collaborated in community research and organizing

Construction and Home Repair

- Removed flooded and damaged materials from 75 homes
- Partial repairs in over 65 homes
- Repairs from the studs up in 13 homes, with two in progress
- Worked on high-priority homes ineligible for assistance from other agencies
- Hired over 10 contractors and 25 day laborers
- Facilitated skillshares and trainings between contractors, staff, day laborers, volunteers, and community members
- Completed one fully flood resilient designed house
- Implemented flood resilient strategies: metal kitchen cabinets, muck ready walls, flood resilient flooring, rain gardens
- Rebuilt houses to higher quality than before Harvey, including new roofs, new electric, new plumbing and sewage, improved insulation and windows, and improved cooling

Community Organizing and Advocacy

- Developed an organizing methodology based in Popular Education
- Created bilingual community spaces that center language justice through simultaneous interpretation
- Helped community members form two organization, the Northeast Action Collective (NAC) and the Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus
- Hosted a drainage action day where residents led volunteers in cleaning neglected drainage infrastructure in order to bring attention to and demand action from the city on their failed drainage maintenance
- Led effort to hold the General Land Office accountable for unjust execution of PREPS program
- Worked with community members to provide public comment at Houston City Council and the Texas Intergovernmental Relations Committee and to provide public comment then host follow-up meetings with Harris County Commissioners Court
- Launched a resident driven campaign to improve the City of Houston Home Repair Program
- Supported partner environmental movements including the emergency response to the ITC Fire and campaign around the fifth ward cancer cluster from creosote contamination



OUR STRATEGY

WSR uses community organizing and recovery services as mutually reinforcing activities that build a network of people who can take care of each other, teach and learn from each other, and, building on the strength of the relationships we form, collectively fight for a better world. This strategy demands that we provide services in an atypical way, where relationships and working together are prioritized and where we conceptualize the services we provide as an entry point for sustained social engagement and support. We are always working to live out our values through this strategy, and we strive to balance working effectively within the stressful environment of disaster recovery with taking time to reflect and develop the abilities of every WSR member.

In order to both share our strategy and garner support to continue our efforts, this document explains how we have provided essential material assistance, built community power, and put our values into practice. There are many strategies that can be used to support a more equitable recovery, but we believe that our approach could be used much more widely by service providers and organizers to improve the outcome of their efforts.





COMMUNITY CONTEXT

WSR works in four high poverty, flood-prone zip codes with median family incomes below 60% of the National Level (see Table 1). The area is predominantly African American and Latinx and is at extreme risk of inundation. A total of 24,270 households in these four zip codes applied for assistance from FEMA following Hurricane Harvey. We believe this is a conservative estimate of how many people's homes flooded as undocumented people are often afraid to submit applications and many families do not apply because they anticipate rejection. Of those that did apply, few families were deemed eligible (see Table 2). This low level of assistance ripples through the NGO sector because most organizations have eligibility requirements that reflect FEMA standards. In sum, the area has very high levels of social vulnerability.

Social Vulnerability Index Map

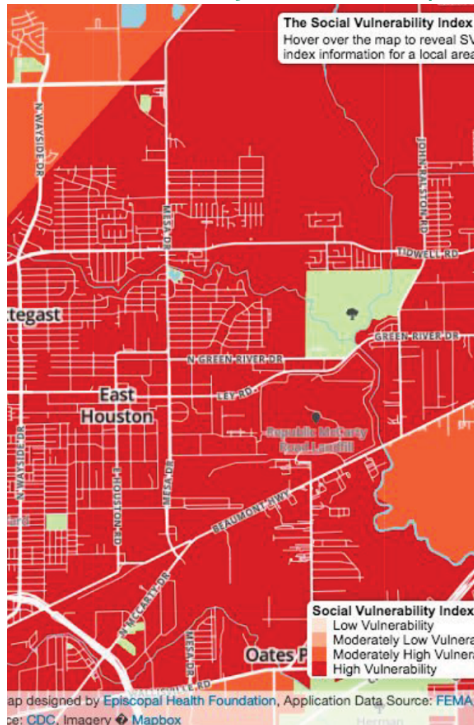


Table 1

| Zip Code | Poverty Level | Median Household Income |
|----------|---------------|-------------------------|
| 77078 | 22.9% | \$32,040 |
| 77028 | 23.6% | \$29,272 |
| 77026 | 34.7% | \$25,354 |
| 77016 | 21.1% | \$31,949 |

Table 2

| Zip Code | Total Applications | Total Eligible | Eligibility Rate |
|----------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| 77078 | 7017 | 864 | 12.31% |
| 77028 | 6407 | 1528 | 23.85% |
| 77026 | 6097 | 1915 | 31.41% |
| 77016 | 4749 | 1838 | 38.70% |

¹There is virtually no evidence to support the existence of a large number of fraudulent applications.



WEST STREET RECOVERY'S BASE

By providing essential services, such as home repair, financial assistance, and case management, to flood survivors, WSR helps to develop bonds between people of different backgrounds, and these relationships are the building blocks of our interclass and interracial community. This network is oriented towards both improving people's lives materially and building political power for residents of northeast Houston. Our community is made up of four overlapping elements who work together to govern WSR and deepen our own leadership abilities, repair homes, build community power and develop social actors from within the neighborhood who can effect the changes needed for an equitable Harvey recovery, and to make the world more just and humane.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF WSR'S BASE

FOUNDERS AND STAFF

WSR was founded as a community-level response to Hurricane Harvey and continues to be democratically led by this group of 12-15 people who make strategic decisions through consensus. Eight of these core members are the staff of WSR.

FLOOD-IMPACTED RESIDENTS WHO RECEIVE SERVICES

WSR has a caseload of 275 households, about 100 of who are in close contact with WSR, and over 100 of whom have received significant material aid, in the form of home repair, mucking and gutting, or direct financial assistance.

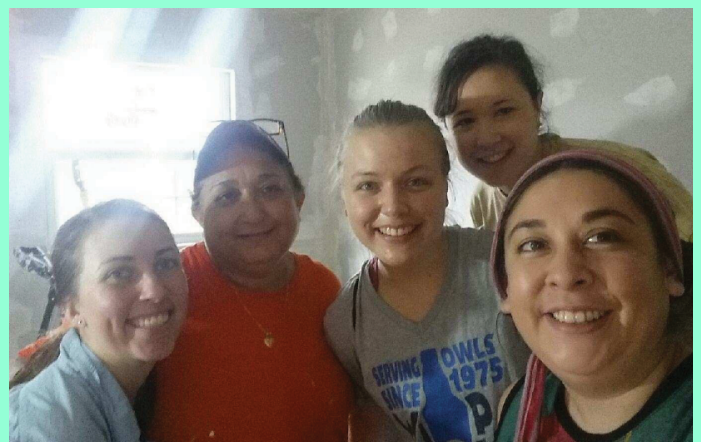
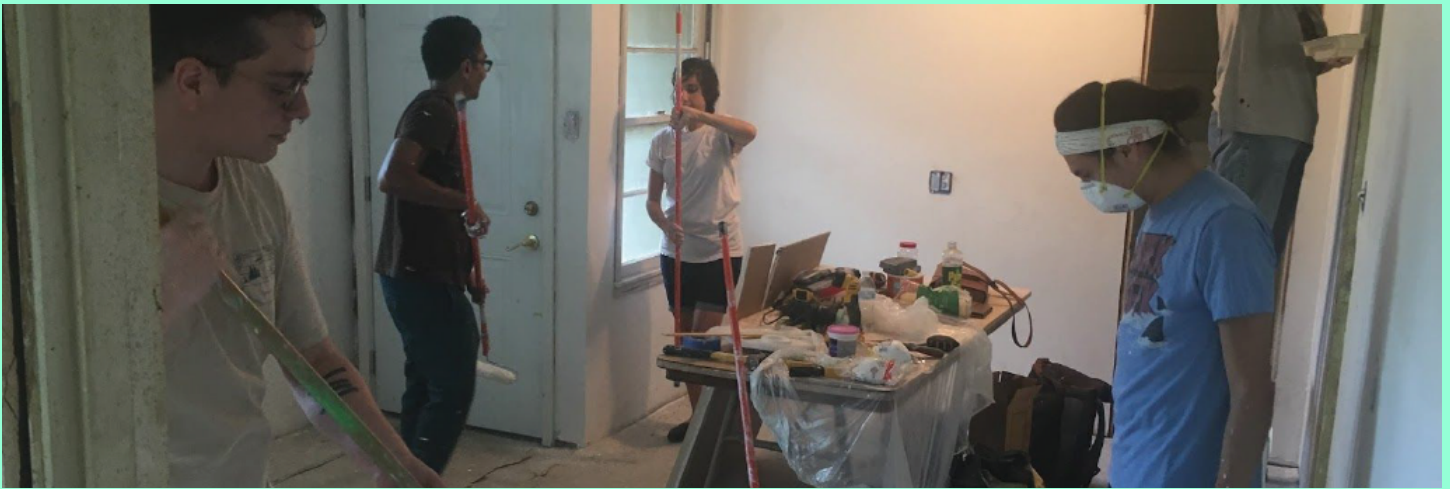
VOLUNTEERS AND ALLIES

WSR has worked with over 400 volunteers, and has a core group of approximately 35 volunteers who have invested significant time into the organization. We also work with many closely allied advocacy and organizing groups with whom we have relationships of mutual support.

CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTORS AND RESIDENT WORKERS

WSR has 5-10 consistent contractors and 25 day laborers that help shape and lead our rebuild work. We focus on hiring people who live in the neighborhoods where we work, friends and families of clients, and those who were also affected by the hurricane.





Contractors, volunteers, and home owners work on rebuilding homes across NE Houston. Contractors Johnny and Rolando have helped shape the WSR rebuild program over the last 2 years and taught the rebuild team much of what we know.

FROM VALUES TO PROCESS

WSR's founders and staff are composed of people who share a social vision, and, motivated by the idea that a better world is possible, came together to help marginalized communities recover from Harvey. Founders and staff are organizers fighting for immigrant rights, Food Not Bombs members, Black Lives Matter activists, urban farmers and environmentalists, public health and policy professionals, and community leaders. The entire staff began as volunteers. Over time, we learned that to be as effective as we desired, we needed people who were consistently available, and so we began by paying three members of our team on a six week contract. Today, of eight members who receive regular compensation, three are black, three are white, one is South Asian, and one is Latinx. Of the group, four have graduated college and one has an advanced degree. This core team meets once a week and uses consensus-minus-one decision making and rotating facilitation to make decisions about day-to-day operations of the nonprofit.



CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

For WSR, consensus decision making involves a process where members deliberate on proposals for actions until everyone agrees that it is good for the organization to proceed. We use consensus minus one to ensure that any person has the space to record serious disagreement without derailing the group, but in two years we have never made a serious decision with a member in strong opposition. On the other hand, "stand asides" where members can abstain, but trust the wisdom of the group, are very common.

Consensus and rotating facilitation are systems that open space for everyone in WSR to influence each other and ultimately shape the decisions we make. Sharing power in such a diverse group requires processes that alter standard patterns of conversations, and our discussion based process helps us to iteratively advance mutual understanding. This is critical because understanding each other is a necessary precondition for the trust that enables us to share power effectively. We believe that these procedures and structures are an effective impediment to replicating the same hierarchies (based in, for example: wealth, race, age, gender, or disability) that we see in the world around us, and which are, in many ways, the roots of the problems we seek to solve.



All members carry out essential tasks like helping flood survivors pick up materials and community organizing.

To enact our values as we interact with partners and flood impacted residents, all staff and founders lead essential activities of the organization, such as meeting with clients, leading construction, community organizing, political advocacy, fundraising, administration, and volunteer recruitment. While we work on discrete projects and do have specialties, sharing decision making power means that each member must practice both explaining the work they are doing and collaborating with others to improve outcomes. This practice allows all members to represent WSR and articulate our perspective to external actors, which expands our ability to influence other organizations, be nimble and responsive, and to raise the funds needed to assist the residents for and with whom we work.

Nonhierarchical cooperation with people who are different from ourselves is a value that we also strive toward. This ideal has shaped how we nurture our **volunteers and residents**, building them up into volunteer leaders, community organizers, contractors, and even staff members. By considering everyone’s perspective, taking the ideas and input of newcomers seriously, and empowering everyone we interact with to share their unique talents and knowledge, we have been able to expand our network and build our community’s capacity (and the capacity of all the individuals who make it up).



WSR’s sub-committees - rebuild, operations and fundraising, case management, and organizing — meet between All Hands meetings to make day to day decisions about our projects and cases.



WSR staff, community members, and volunteers discuss ideas and vision at our monthly “all hands” meeting.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH BUILDING HOMES

Our rebuild work began with teams of volunteers and community members mucking out homes, educating about and conducting mold remediation, and connecting building materials, tools, and volunteers to flooded residents. Since then, we have developed two home repair programs, one of which provides small repairs, such as new roofs or repairing a bathroom, to families who are stuck in their recovery process, or who have gotten help but whose homes are not yet finished, and a second program that fully repairs homes from the studs up.

In our construction projects, we empower residents to make the most important choices about what will happen with their own homes, and, when they have skills and knowledge they want to share, we learn from their expertise. We learned how to install drywall, insulation and do basic plumbing from the first homeowners we worked with. When we do high skill work or tasks that require licensing, we hire experienced community members, many of whom survived Harvey themselves. Because repairing homes is essential, and because we are still building our knowledge and skills, we incorporate these **contractors** into our work by asking them to advise us on construction projects, allowing them to train new employees on our sites, encouraging them to refer clients to our organization, and inviting them to join our decision making process. In addition to hiring



Raul Cervantes led us in rebuilding his family home and taught us many of our first construction skills. Raul's still teaching us, new volunteers, and other residents new tricks and he and his children have helped on countless other homes.

Header Image: *While we were working with the Cervantes family to rebuild their home, we'd often stay to hang out and enjoy Petra's cooking. Two years later we still stop by the house to share a meal and Petra often cooks for work days and community events.*

experienced contractors and their crews, we hire enthusiastic resident volunteers to work on their neighbors' homes. We complement this hyper-local hiring by recruiting volunteers from more privileged backgrounds, religious groups, and allied **advocacy organizations**. These volunteers labor alongside worker-residents and set the stage for both groups to learn from each other.

Marginalized people leading mostly middle class volunteers is an inversion of the typical dynamics in providing aid and reflects our attempt to disrupt traditional hierarchies in how our work is carried out. As volunteers and residents work with us, we train each to lead others, which both develops our capacity to deliver services, and expands the network of friendships and relationships which make up the WSR community. At each stage of involvement, older members encourage newcomers to participate more and more.



On the top left, Waylon, and on the top right, Margarita lead construction work. Both were flooded, and met WSR through organizing work and WSR later helped with rebuild of their homes. On the bottom left, Xilali, local immigration organizer and Quentin, a friend of WSR member Doris Brown and now construction lead, help rebuild Doris's home. Quinton and Margarita are also core members of the NAC. On the bottom right Tracy, a lead volunteer and now contractor leads volunteers from the Episcopal Church, one of our major supporters and funders.

FLOOD-RESILIENT DESIGN

We rebuild homes because everyone needs a safe place to live. Frustratingly, future flooding in the homes we have worked on is likely, and some homes we repaired after Harvey flooded again during Tropical Storm Imelda. Observers (most of whom do not know people living in danger of flooding, or are not living in Houston) have remarked that rebuilding homes that will be damaged by inundation is a waste of resources. But we believe that failing to provide rapid repairs to those living in dangerous housing or without homes altogether is inhumane, especially considering that there is no alternative available to residents. Motivated by this tension, staff, contractors, and families have created resilient designs so future recovery will be quicker, less expensive, and less wasteful. Flood resilient design reduces the recovery time and cost for families going forward, inhibits the growth of mold in homes, and represents a small reduction in the production and disposal of building materials. This has improved resilience of the homes where we have worked, and has even spurred the creation of a resilient design sub-group within the Harris County Long Term Recovery Committee.

Helping families return home to structures that are healthy, dignified, and more flood resilient, is crucial to a just recovery. However, because the scale of our material impact is limited, we also organize with the families we have met to demand improvements to Houston's flooding and drainage infrastructure, housing system, and climate-change contributing industries.



Metal Kitchen Cabinets



Easy-Muck Walls



Rain Garden



Flood Proof Floor



Shiplap - "No Drywall House"



External Insulation



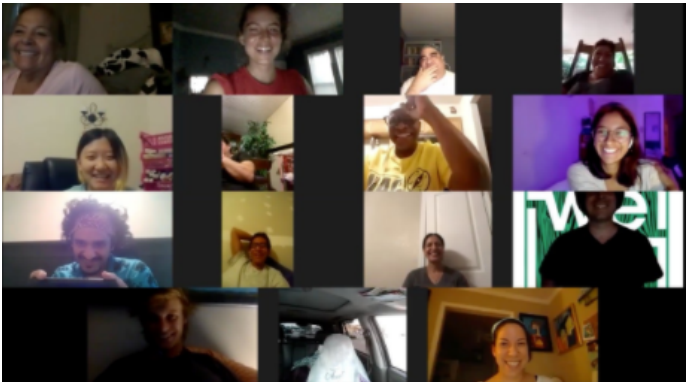
FROM SOCIAL BONDS TO POWER

NORTHEAST ACTION COLLECTIVE/ NORESTE ACCION COLLECTIVO

Over the last year, a group of about 15 residents and four WSR core staff have formed a distinct community group, the Northeast Action Collective (NAC). The NAC is organizing around quality of life and public health issues in their neighborhood. The group meets twice a month, holds events or actions about once a quarter, and responds to sickness, flooding, and each other's needs in a community WhatsApp channel. Our initial efforts have focused on drainage issues in northeast Harris County. All meetings and communications are fully bilingual; the NAC uses simultaneous interpretation during meetings and collectively interpret in our group message. One goal of this group is to train all participants as facilitators and group leaders. This has been pursued through a strategy of accompaniment from more seasoned members and support from the entire group for those who are trying new things. The NAC's participants have a wide range of experiences, but they work actively to distribute power and the responsibility of the group's administration.

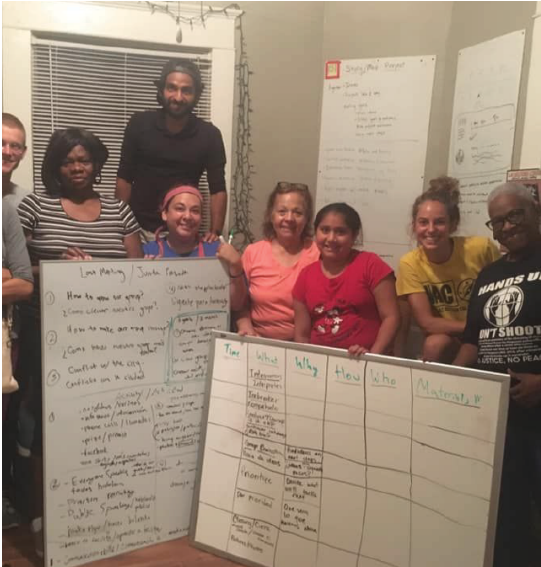


NAC meets at members' homes and the local civic club. Between meetings, members' meet with WSR members to develop skills like making flyers or preparing speeches.



The NAC and its members are slowly but surely building power. Their first action was to host a Community Cleanup Day where NAC members led neighbors, volunteers, and politicians in manually clearing the drainage ditches and demanding drainage justice from the city.

Since, they've testified to and met with the Harris County Commissioners Court as part of an ongoing campaign to improve flood-control infrastructure and control new flood-inducing development, helped to launch another group to fight for better execution of the city's home repair program (formally called CDBG-DR: HoAP), and joined WSR's "All Hands" decision making body.



Through months of organizing NAC selected drainage as their priority, planned the Cleanup Day, canvassed to recruit participants, and collectively led the day.



On the left NAC, while waiting to testify at Harris County Commissioners Court, met with county officials, worked on grant applications, and strategized for the year ahead. On the right, NAC holds a press conference outside the county courthouse.

HARVEY FORGOTTEN SURVIVOR'S CAUCUS

As we have written this document another community group, Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus came into being. Its members are demanding fair treatment from the city of Houston's Home repair program. The caucus has been a truly cooperative effort between WSR and Texas Housers, but has been driven and shaped by flood survivors themselves.



Their first action was a public tour of the Hester family's house showing the consequences of the failed city program. The group has already won an audience including the Houston Housing department director,, city councilors, state and federal representatives.

Exerting community power often requires points of entry, and WSR facilitates this by connecting residents, workers, volunteers, and the NAC to media and policymakers as a way of helping residents exert leverage. We encourage community members to work together to shape messages, and we accompany residents as they speak in spaces that are intentionally unwelcoming to people like themselves. WSR uses deep listening and story sharing to identify common concerns and works collaboratively to articulate demands and fears. Part of our effort to develop community members as social actors is to connect residents to other organizations that have expertise and trainers who can help them develop their own messages. Finally, as we work with organizations, we hope to influence their understanding of the issues they work on by having residents talk to them directly.



On the left, NAC and HFSC members Ann Weston and Barbara Herndon practice interviewing each other as part of a community research project aiming to educate policy makers from the perspective of flood survivors. On the right Mal Moses speaks to the National Low income Housing collaborative's "Reimagining Disaster Recovery" conference.



CONCLUSIONS

Over the past two and a half years, WSR has shown that horizontality and consensus can be operational strategies to make work more efficient and more socially sustainable. This flies in the face of the notion that groups who focus on process and emphasize soft infrastructure and social bonds won't get much done in a material sense⁵. To the contrary, our organizing and base building efforts have been essential to forming our pool of volunteers, contractors, and community advocates who make us excel and enable us to deliver home repair services. By prioritizing deep relationships over narrow efficiency, we have sustained our recovery work far longer than most organizations. In 2017 we were one of over 50 home repair agencies in Houston, but sadly, as 2020 begins, we are one of only seven. Our approach has also allowed us to keep the money we spend in the neighborhoods that we serve, increase the earning potential of our clients, and build resilience.

Through helping households recover from Hurricane Harvey and Tropical Storm Imelda, WSR has concluded that focusing on building relationships, expanding networks of support, and cultivating social actors who strive to make the world a better place is the best strategy for an organization like ours to make a just recovery a reality. Most underfunded organizations working in stressful conditions such as disaster recovery have high rates of burnout and turnover. But sharing leadership and consensus provides a process through which no member has to do work that isn't aligned with their values, and this makes it possible to sustain our work in an extremely difficult context. Rotating meeting leadership and horizontality are systems that promote leadership development for WSR members and spread power within our team, and, having more leaders distributes work and responsibility overtime.

⁵Monty Python's "Constitutional Peasants" sketch epitomizes the common impression that those who use terms like "autonomous collective" and have procedures based in political philosophy never achieve enough to get out of the dirt. It's a risk we take seriously. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2c-X8HiBng>

At the moments of greatest stress and tension, an effort to more evenly distribute responsibilities and obligations has helped increase our productivity and improved relations within the group. Our commitment to empowerment and trying to work non-hierarchically has created pathways where clients can become volunteers, and volunteers can become staff, and contribute to the ongoing conversation about our mission, vision, and tactics. This has allowed us to continually expand our ability to make material changes for the residents we work for. Last but not least, mutual and reciprocal education within the group has allowed us to better understand each other and increase trust, allowing us to hold each other accountable in a way that is about support and growth. It is our goal to continue building the WSR community that can both pressure the state and large private organizations to enact policies that promote justice and equity, and take care of each other in the here-and-now world that continues to disadvantage neighborhoods like those in Northeast Houston.



WSR's response to Imelda highlights the deep network built in the 2 years since Harvey. As the storm came in people gave updates and checked on each other through our WhatsApp community group, and took shelter in each others homes. In Imelda's aftermath old volunteers, residents, contractors and allies from other organizations taught each other how to Muck homes, made new friends and took care of each other in a stressful and traumatic time.

THANKS

Thanks to the hundreds of volunteers who poured through the West Street House in the first months after Harvey and people powered us into existence. Thanks to Leah, Jess, Sofia, Pierce, Zoe and Jane who let their home be our office and warehouse for far too long. And to Paul, Michael, Sasha, Chris and Kiana, who let their home be a hub of late night debate and early morning meetings. Thanks to the Cervantes who taught us to hang drywall, fed us the best food and refused to let us not enjoy life. Thanks to Deanna, Jocelyn and Leah for having roles that continually change within WSR but an influence and level of support that are completely necessary to our continued existence. Thanks to Chris, Victoria, Skot, Phillipa and Dani who were essential to our founding and whose perspective has pushed us to resist the that being a formal organization can bring. Thanks to Pat Greer, Laughing Frog Farm, and Finca Tres Robles for local food donations early in the Harvey recovery days. You helped us share healthy food with many. Thanks to Black Lives Matter HOU and SURJ who lead the canvassing that lead to our caseload and to Black Lives Matter HTX who inspires us by continuing to do justice based work. Thanks to Juan, Kieth, Huey, Rev. Caldwell who have introduced us to many of our most engaged community members. Thanks to Rolando, Tracy, and David, who have closed difficult projects again and again, and in doing so, make our strategy of organizing through service, and producing high quality housing compatible. Thanks to Peace uv mine entertainment, all read radio, Thanks to Dori and Paul who are still considered by some residents as the most important people at WSR. Thanks to Jackie, Doris, Ann, Mal, Alisa, Anita, Connie, Boudreaux, and Barbara who have not been afraid to contribute to our organization and critique our construction work with love, empathy and encouragement. 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Thanks to Quentin, Mark, Margarita, Elvia and all the other construction workers we learned beside. Thanks to Lennie and Joe for doing an incredible amount of quality work in a short time in the early days of our rebuild program when we were short staffed and trying to find our way. Ya'll did a lot to support families in NE Houston. Thanks to Waylon and crew for being out in their own community doing the hard work of sharing resources in the NE community for months after the storm. Thanks to Mike for coming out to scope construction projects with us and provide countless hours of guidance as we learned home repair from basically nothing. Your years of experience were helpful in us making good decisions early on. Thanks to the local retailers who helped us root disaster funds into our community and to the reuse warehouse who helps reduce waste. 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Thanks to Hope, Marly and Mark and all the others at SBP who trusted us to build homes. Thanks to Suzanne and Stacy at the Episcopal Archdiocese who have funded much of our work, been incredible recruiters and leaders of volunteers, and have celebrated our approach. Thanks to Chris V for the communications help, and warmth. Thanks to the Houston Quakers and the Houston Zen Center for early financial donations that made such a difference is allowing us to be supportive to families soon after the storm. Thanks to the Dominican sisters of Houston who have enabled us to directly assist families in the most marginalized Houston communities. To Ann and Tri, Erwing, Ana, Allen, Grace, Lydia, Andrea, Mashal and the countless other volunteers who have stepped up to lead projects in ways that allowed us to expand our work and rest and care for ourselves. 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KC Goolds, Shape, Quakers, LOC, Finca Tres Robles, Waylon, Jackie White, Jose, Mike Adimson, Joe Ferrara, Alyssa, Clay Lydia Payton Andrea, Greg Brohl, Trevor Barnett, Lennie, Pat Greer, Nisha, Brooks Elliot, Tool Bank, Xiklali, Bahai center