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**Houston hurricane survivors meet with rescue & recovery agencies, present new report outlining inequitable response and recovery for Black and brown communities, offer recommendations for just recoveries**

HOUSTON — Northeast Houston survivors of 2017’s Hurricane Harvey — hardest hit by the storm and least supported in its aftermath — are meeting virtually with local, state and federal rescue and recovery agencies and nonprofit organizations to offer new insights and recommendations for just emergency response and recovery. The survivors interviewed — all of whom are Black or brown, and lived in under-resourced communities, and many of whom still have homes that remain uninhabitable or badly damaged — detail their firsthand experiences with rescue and recovery agencies in a new report, [*Survivors as Experts: A Community Evaluation of Disaster Recovery in Northeast Houston.*](http://www.weststreetrecovery.org/research)

**“**Each disaster has its own recovery, but for some reason we never recover at the same rate as everyone else. There is no equity," said Doris Brown, a community researcher and longtime resident of the Scenic Woods neighborhood who is speaking with the agencies at today’s virtual meeting. The public is invited to listen in from noon to 1 pm CT at [**https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\_aFqimcrZTn-KT8ieDtQexA**](https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_aFqimcrZTn-KT8ieDtQexA)**.**

The *Survivors as Experts* report focuses on a just recovery via disaster preparedness, emergency response, and rebuild programs for Black, brown, and under-resourced communities like Northeast Houston. A just recovery would make events like Harvey less dangerous and reduce the inequity of their impact. The report combines peer-reviewed research findings about disaster response and recovery with key findings on the Harvey response and recovery, survivor testimonials, and recommendations from survivors. Each element of the report brings into focus the inadequacies of the response to Black and brown communities and highlights how inequities are at the center of many of the policies and practices followed by emergency-response agencies and disaster-relief programs.

"When it came to the recovery, they pushed the low-income clients — working class or Black — they pushed us to the back of the line,” said Violata Anthony, whose experience mirrored that of many of the other survivors who contributed to the report.

Research continues to suggest that [FEMA aid has flowed more freely to white individuals and communities](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/climate/FEMA-race-climate.html) than it has to people and communities of color.

In counties with FEMA disaster declarations between 1999 and 2013, the median [wealth of white families increased](https://academic.oup.com/socpro/article/66/3/448/5074453) by an average of $125,000 over the following decade. In comparison, Black and Latinx families saw their wealth decline by an average of nearly $30,000. The survivors who participated in the *Survivors as Experts* report don’t think that level of inequity can happen by accident; rather, they believe it happens by design.

[**West Street Recovery**](https://www.weststreetrecovery.org/), a nonprofit grassroots disaster recovery organization, organized the virtual meeting, inviting officials fromFEMA, the Texas GLO, and the Houston Housing Department. The organization also supported the creation of the Survivors as Experts report.

Select key findings in the report, which was supported by the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder:

* Survivors have experienced sustained and severe physical and mental health impacts from Harvey, including depression, anxiety, and recurring trauma — and most have not received professional care for these ailments.
* For those with pre-existing conditions, symptoms are worse because Harvey displacement and recovery made healthcare access more difficult, or even impossible.
* Survivors report draining their savings, taking on debt, or borrowing money from family or friends in order to pay for basic necessities like food and shelter in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.
* Largely left to fend for themselves, survivors report depending on help from neighbors, family, friends and civilian responders in the midst of Harvey and in its wake.
* While free or donated supplies accumulated downtown, Northeast Houston survivors in this study had difficulty accessing critical needs like food, clothing, cleaning supplies, and beds.
* Road closures and broken supply chains caused a general shortage of goods in Northeast Houston after Hurricane Harvey.
* Years of frustrating applications for aid have borne few positive results. Most survivors in this study have not received recovery assistance — either because they could never find an organization giving the aid they sought, or because they were repeatedly deemed ineligible and denied the assistance they needed.
* A lack of temporary housing forced many to stay with family or friends for an extended period.
* Fifteen of 21 survivors still consider their homes not yet completely fixed, and some are still living in badly damaged homes.

“Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of disasters, and Black and brown communities and low-resource neighborhoods are suffering the worst immediate, short- and long-term impacts,” said Alice Liu with West Street Recovery. “The agencies survivors are meeting with today have the power to support solutions and contribute to a just recovery. The survivors are offering them a roadmap.”

The *Survivors as Experts* report offers recommendations for agencies on making emergency communication and evacuation plans, meeting the immediate needs of disaster survivors, improving the application process for aid and recovery, providing temporary housing, and assisting with home repairs. The report also includes recommendations about structural barriers to recovery — including class, race and geography — and offers a roadmap for reducing those barriers. Finally, *Survivors as Experts* offers solutions that agencies can adopt at the neighborhood level, like flood prevention, risk reduction, and hiring recovery staff that live in or have strong ties to the communities they serve. The full recommendations can be found [here](http://www.weststreetrecovery.org/research).

The report concludes that a just recovery cannot play out in an unjust society. However, steps taken to help communities recover from specific storms can become building blocks to a more just society that would make events like Hurricane Harvey less dangerous and reduce the inequity of their impact.

“In a mass emergency, first responders, doctors and nurses know that you triage the patients and treat the critical victims first. We are the critical victims, but we were told to wait. And we are still waiting, dressing our own wounds, and setting our broken bones the best we can,” said co-author Brown.

West Street Recovery has stepped in to fill the gap left by the current public recovery apparatus by helping rebuild or repair over 60 homes damaged by Hurricane Harvey, restoring water access to over 100 homes after Winter Storm Uri, providing over $300,000 in cash assistance to Northeast Houston residents, and providing case navigation and advocacy services. In addition, West Street Recovery supports the Northeast Action Collective and the Harvey Forgotten Survivors caucus.

***West Street Recovery*** *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 nonprofıt, which uses Hurricane Harvey home repair and community engagement to build more broadly towards social justice and an equitable recovery.*

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