



## 2023 Year in Review West Street Recovery Houston Texas

**Overview:** This packet lists the successes of each working group this year and provides a more in depth look at major victories or exciting initiatives that deserve special consideration and celebration. The packet also highlights areas of growth for next year and the organizational structures that make our work possible.

### Our Team and Working Groups

At the beginning of the year we brought on two permanent staff who had long worked with us in a volunteer and contractor capacity, Brenda Tijerina and Tracy Hamblin. This brought our total “day team” to 9 (Including Cavanaugh Nweze who sits on our board and, with his firm Nweze Financial Services, manages our books). In January 2024 Beth Lumia, who was our spring intern and then summer contractor, will join our staff on Disaster Prep and Organizing teams.

To help manage the growing number and scale of our projects, the “operations” working group facilitated scheduled check-in meetings on progress towards goals. As our team gets bigger and our organizational aims more ambitious, it’s so important to keep building culture and remaining aligned. This year we implemented several team-wide “sprints”, periods in which the entire team focuses on one area of programming to pool our skills and knowledge. We restarted reading groups to think deeply through the systems we come up against daily in our work: the privatization of public infrastructure, the climate crisis and capitalism, and the role of nonprofits in social movements. This was also our first year in the 20 North Sampson office space which is amazingly growing into a campaign center and movement hub for Houston.

Team	Core	Specific non core Roles
Comms	Alice, Ben, Doris	Felix, Barley

<b>Disaster Prep</b>	Alice, Becky, Brenda	
<b>Finance</b>	Nweze Financial Services, Ben, Felix	
<b>Fundraising</b>	Ben, Alice	Barley, Doris
<b>Home Repairs</b>	Felix, Barley, Tracy	Alice, Becky
<b>Operations</b>	Ben, Becky, Brenda	
<b>Organizing &amp; Research</b>	Ben, Becky, Alice, Doris, Felix, Brenda, Barley	

**Research:**

WSR’s research formalizes community knowledge so that it can impact policy and empower community members to document risk, unequal investment, and injustice in their communities.

This year we:

- Developed a [drainage survey](#) that community members can use to record problems with infrastructure in their communities.
- Finished a years long investigation (with the help of Mike Morris and Rachel Shuetz of the Houston Chronicle) into how the City of Houston assesses its drainage tax, and showed that over the last decade the city has diverted over \$200 million from restricted drainage funds to the general operating budget<sup>1</sup>
- Co-designed an international research project facilitated by Dr. Raj Patel about the “polycrisis” and how collective care is critical to building political and cultural power to resist economic inequality, climate crisis, political repression, deepening neoliberalism and racist and imperial violence.
- Launched a pilot research project on sewer laterals, health impacts and financial stress in collaboration with Bayou City Water Keeper.

In 2024 our research on drainage and city governance will be integrated into our organizing workflow, and we will deepen our polycrisis work. We are also developing a plan with the University of Houston to investigate the mental health impacts of repeated disasters.

*National Academy Of Sciences Proceedings:*

In April, WSR and the National Academy of Sciences Gulf Coast Research Program brought together scholars and practitioners from around the gulf south with NAC members to discuss flood risk in Northeast Houston, examine how to better communicate to and mitigate risk for marginalized communities and envision a set of solutions that would work in the context of structural racism and environmental injustice. This event built on four years of collaboration between WSR and the NAS

---

1  
<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/drainage-fund-shorted-build-houston-forward-18173571.php>

which has included community led surveys, focus groups, randomized household studies and expert panels. During the proceedings we learned about the shocking levels of lead and PFAS in NE Houston and explored the potential and limitations of green infrastructure to mitigate flooding and toxics. We found out that the non random survey of 52 people WSR did about flood risk was broadly representative: our results were verified by NAS's more scientific 500 household survey that showed, if anything, we had slightly underestimated flood risk.

A paper about our collaboration will be published in the *proceedings of the national academies of sciences*. Hopefully, the prestige and legitimacy of the proceedings will bolster our impact. We're still frustrated that the NAS has not fully acknowledged intentional racist policies, or named bad actors in their studies. We aim to push the powerful institution in that direction.

## Home Repair:

Home repair is where West Street started 6 years ago, and remains at the center of our political and organizing strategy. Despite the fact that most agencies in the city have closed Harvey repair programs we continue to meet and assist homeowners who have not yet fully recovered. At this point distinguishing the impact of Harvey from disasters that preceded it (such as Ike and Alison) and that followed it (such as Imelda and Uri) is increasingly difficult and we think unnecessary. All people deserve safe, sanitary, and dignified housing.

This year we:

- Invested over \$400,000 into the housing stock of NE Houston.
- Completed one "full" home repair project from the studs up for Ms. Gibson, who takes care of her grandchild and was still living with mold and other serious risks since Harvey
- Completed two large scale home projects where we removed mold, repaired roofs and made electrical systems safe.
- Did work on over 50 unique homes.
- Restored water access to 32 families without water.
- Began contracting work to Margarita Arellano a long time day laborer as drywall expert

### *Christmas Eve 2022 Freeze rapid response*

On Christmas Eve 2022, Houston experienced a freeze event that once again shattered pipes and left families without drinking water. Unlike Uri this storm received very little attention and the philanthropic community did not raise money to support repairs. Despite that, WSR worked with our trusted contractors to restore drinking water to over 40 families. This effort, which began when we were all on vacation, salvaged a holiday season for a number of families and was a jolt into WSR life for Tracy Hamblin who had just joined our full time staff. The freeze also revealed the success of our 2021 plumbing repairs. None of those families faced breakages. This convinced us that switching to freeze resistant PEX piping was an essential strategy going forward. It also highlighted the frequency of unspectacular disasters, which can occur without much notice but have serious health and financial impacts. Going forward we remain committed to responding to these disasters and to making the homes we work on more resilient in the face of extreme weather.

## Communications:

This year we adopted a more deliberate and focused communications strategy that aimed to educate our viewers and readers, connect our work to global patterns of power and injustice and to make our work more visible. Our biggest accomplishment in communications was using press coverage and social media to build pressure in our budget campaign. We succeeded in getting the Houston Chronicle to endorse our budget amendment, worked with news reporters to uncover flaws in how the city levies its drainage tax and elevated the perspective of NAC members onto a national and regional stage.

You can see a full list of our media coverage here: [WSR in the news: Media Links](#)

## Organizing:

We continue to build collective knowledge about flooding, pollution and infrastructure. The ability of NAC members to advocate on these issues has greatly increased through public speaking, meeting with officials, strategizing campaigns and facilitating community conversations. We closed the year by reorganizing our work into two main working groups, the City team and the State Federal County team, and creating a liaison structure so that the NAC can be formally represented in more spaces where decisions are made. Here are some highlights:

- Hosted over 100 community meetings throughout the year
- Over 50 people gave public comment at city hall
- Held one on ones with over half of city council
- Organized 2 demonstrations at city hall
- Continued to push our Title VI complaint, former officials are being subpoenaed
- NAC membership this year grew to ~50 regular attendees with a total unique annual attendance of 118 members
- Joined the Water Equity and Climate Resilience National Caucus
- Launched a campaign to stop the privatization of the Southwest Water Treatment Plant
- Ran voter engagement calling campaign and made over 210,000 calls to eligible voters

### *City Budget Campaign*

Our city campaign won \$20 million of drainage investment and reversed a 22-year long racist city ordinance that led to unequal infrastructure provision. As a result of 3 months of intensive organizing (building on 3 years of drainage advocacy), the city will once again maintain drainage ditches on a regular schedule. Houston also passed a \$20M increase for the Local Drainage Program (LDP), which is focused on areas of highest need across the city. This is the start of addressing long-neglected open ditches, which are concentrated in BIPOC and high poverty areas of Houston.

The campaign grew political capacity within the NAC and among the Houston organizing community. We learned how to engage with the city government and budget process, how to use media to increase pressure and how to build a coalition.

## Disaster Preparedness:

A big focus of our disaster prep this year was building up 4 hub houses in NE Houston, which provide an infrastructure for truly resident-led and hyper-local disaster preparedness that is adapted to the needs of each community. Each hub house is led by a captain who has volunteered their home to be a safe haven during disasters for 10-15 other households in their neighborhood. WSR has equipped hub houses with alternative power (formerly generators, now rooftop solar + battery systems), heating and cooling, food and water, medical supplies, search and rescue equipment, and home repair tools. Hubs also strengthen social infrastructure - neighbors knowing and caring for each other - through hosting trainings and block parties. Next year, we're excited to add 3 more hub houses to the network, and also build out emergency water and communications systems.

### *Solar Panels and Energy Storage*

This year, WSR worked with Solar United Neighbors to install 5kW rooftop solar arrays on 10 homes in Northeast Houston at no cost to the homeowners. The solar arrays can meet most of the households' energy needs while the sun is out. For 3 hub houses, we also installed 13.5 kWh batteries that will provide essential power even in a power outage. Solar and batteries are still very expensive without financial assistance, and we're excited to exemplify the community control of power and transition away from fossil fuels that we dream of seeing on a larger scale.

### ***Beyond Hubs and Solar:***

- Spent \$28,400 to purchase 37 flood insurance policies for NAC members
- Helped people get trained up on disaster response skills:
  - 14 people CPR/ First Aid certified
  - Hurricane season preparedness day-long training for 50 attendees
  - 8-week long CERT course (Community Emergency Response Team) – 31 people attended and 17 people became CERT certified
- Distributed 65 disaster go-bags (year 4 of this program!)
- Maintained 35 solar-powered batteries and 16 generators for alternative power and medical needs, distributed to residents and WSR allied organizations

## Fundraising and Finance:

Total Raised as of Nov 30, 2023: \$1.44 million

Total Expenditure as of Nov 30 2023: \$1.11 Million

Major grant awards this year:

- TIDES Frontline Justice \$200,000
- Solutions Project \$155,000
- Houston Endowment, \$525,000
- Mitchell Foundation \$100,000
- Houston in Action \$85,000

Spending by program as of October 31, 2023:

Program	Amount
Admin + Org Development:	\$108,030
Organizing + Research:	\$107,800
Home Repair:	\$334,859
Disaster Preparedness:	\$94,722
Staff:	\$369,324
Rent:	\$13,938
Direct Assistance:	\$7,417

