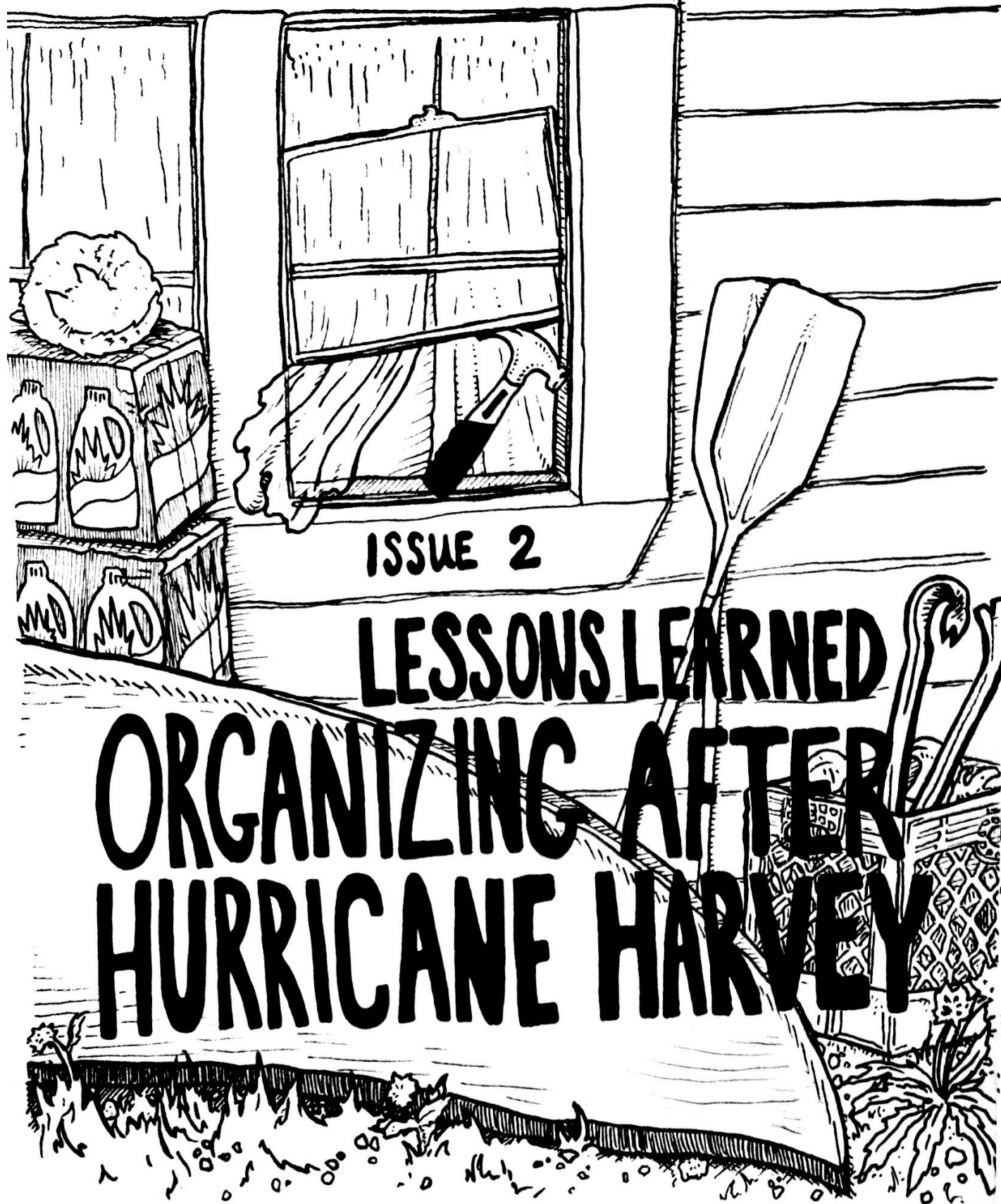


a Window Propped Open



ISSUE 2

**LESSONS LEARNED
ORGANIZING AFTER
HURRICANE HARVEY**

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*Contributed to by the members of West Street Recovery
Compiled by Leah Ayer
April 2018*

Flyers WSR Distributed cont.

Cleaning your house of mold and toxins

Protect you and your family. Mold spores, lead paint dust, asbestos and bacteria and viruses from flood water can cause serious illness.

Protect yourself while cleaning! **Wear an N95 grade mask** and avoid skin contact.

Steps for cleaning out mold and toxins:

- 1 Discard all porous surfaces** (drywall, carpets, insulation, particle board) that touched flood waters. Even if dry, they'll retain fungus and bacteria. Remove cabinets that are not solid wood and remove drywall behind them. Although more expensive to replace, they're not worth the health problems later.
- 2 Clean any remaining visible mold using soap and water.** If you can't see or smell mold you don't need to wash down studs. ****Bleach does NOT help with mold or contaminates on studs.****
- 3 Make sure walls and studs are dry** before putting insulation and sheetrock back in. Clean corners of debris where moisture may be trapped and use fans to circulate air.
- 4 Get rid of as much dust as possible.** Dust contains mold spores, lead, and likely asbestos. Use a brush to release dust from the studs and walls. Vacuum if possible.
- 5 Clean nonporous surfaces, then disinfect.** If a nonporous surface (tile and cement floors) came in contact with flood waters, first clean with soap and water then disinfect with bleach. Disinfecting only work if you clean first! Usually disinfectants need to remain on the surface for some time to disinfect - read the instructions on the bottle. Disinfectants are dangerous to your body so only use when necessary.

Optional: You can optionally spray walls with an anti-fungal chemical to prevent mold growth but this is not required. ***It is more important that your walls are fully dry before putting insulation and sheetrock back up. Mold can only grow with moisture.***

LAST 6 MONTHS



A month after Hurricane Harvey, the people that made up West Street Recovery (WSR) were looking around at each other wondering how we were going to transition from the exhaustive triage work we were knee deep in toward a sustainable long term recovery effort. It's now been seven months since Harvey drenched Houston, and, although we're operating at a much saner pace, we've really done anything but slow down. The recovery work in Houston is far from over, but in the last six months we've learned a heck of a lot.

Despite being a cozy group of about a dozen members, we have spent the last six months on three distinct efforts that have required a lot of attention, communication, and decision making; a case management effort, an advocacy effort, and a rebuild effort. Meanwhile, we've had to dedicate attention to developing our own group's processes, learning how to create a healthy and equitable internal environment for each other, and making decisions about how to fund and balance our efforts.

One of the first big steps we made toward the realization of a sustainable effort was to provide stipends for a few of the folks in West Street. This was a scary decision to make initially and it continues to present unique challenges. We now have six people who are receiving stipends. There is no way, by any stretch of imagination, WSR would have done what it has without the focus those people have brought to its day-by-day recovery process.

We've found that the ways WSR can be most helpful as a small grassroots group in supporting residents through their recovery processes continues to change. Our goal since the beginning was to fill gaps in Houston's recovery process and it's always a little painful when the role we perform changes. We've had to continually situate our efforts and projects within the context of a recovery that involves government actors at all levels, massive charitable groups, grassroots community organizations, and volunteer pools.

Early on, veterans from the crises of Sandy, Hurricane Ike, and floods in Louisiana advised us of a typical recovery timeline, which has proven to be both accurate and important to understand as we try to grapple with the constantly changing landscape around us. The first couple months of recovery were flush with optimism; in the knee-jerk reaction to crisis, volunteers poured into the city, locals took time to help affected residents, and philanthropic donations flowed to recovery efforts.

However, the period between three and six months after Houston's disaster was much more difficult. Many affected residents began suffering from chronic exhaustion and despair at the lack of progress, the band-aid solutions we found so key to meeting people's immediate needs began to show their deficiencies, and private monies dwindled before government funding arrived. Moreover, residents without resources were receiving little help in doing the hard work of finding materials and rebuilding their homes to a livable condition. But at the six

month mark, we noticed things have started to look very different; governmental funding has started to roll in and institutional agencies and government programs have begun serious rebuild efforts.

Today we know that \$5 billion, in the form of Disaster Community Development Block Grants, will be allocated for replacing housing, flood mitigation projects, and building new infrastructure. Elders have told us that the disbursement of this money will be a big fight, but on the other hand it is a huge opportunity for communities to receive investment they have been excluded from for decades. Moving forward, WSR envisions itself focusing more and more on organizing with residents and coordinating advocacy efforts with underserved and historically marginalized residents in Northeast Houston. In addition, we aim to begin working on supporting resident-driven emergency preparedness and neighborhood self sufficiency efforts in advance of the next flood.

WSR is aware that disasters will increase in frequency. In our ad hoc response to this crisis a lot has worked out well enough, but there are a number of ideas we wish we had thought of a few weeks earlier and a few lessons we wish we could have learned faster. This zine is an effort to catalog the main things we learned over the past six months of organizing a grassroots recovery effort in hopes that it will make itself into the hands of another group of friends that springs into action when disaster occurs.

For each phase of the flood disaster, we used different sets of tools and resources. A lot of this information is obvious, but there are some gems in here we wish we had thought of sooner. In any case, after a disaster people will be reaching out asking what to donate and it's hard to think through what you'll need for the next step of things when the step you're on requires all your focus. (One quick note about all the supplies and materials you'll need through a recovery process: Beware of disaster capitalism, which is using the disasters it creates to harvest more profits. When buying supplies and tools for a recovery, advocate purchasing from locally, POC owned businesses and encouraging people looking to donate to your effort to do the same!)

Tips for cleaning out your house

First steps

1. Take pictures of damage for the adjuster. Create a list of *everything* that's damaged. Keep damaged materials for proof of your loss if possible.
2. If mold is present, wear a (N95) respirator that can filter mold spores during clean out. Wear gloves, eye protection and boots.
3. Before entering: Don't enter a flooded home until the power has been shut off and gas lines have been turned off.
4. Remove damaged furniture and debris.
5. Remove water as rapidly as possible. Ventilate. Use fans if possible.
6. Cut holes in wallboard to drain uninsulated walls. Discard all wet fibrous insulation.
7. If your home has flooded, black mold will likely be an issue and can cause serious lung and brain damage. If at all possible, you should try to stay out of your home until repairs are made.

Preparing for an insurance adjuster:

- Begin cleanup, salvage and drying asap - don't wait for the adjuster. Take photos for use as an inventory first then clean the house so the adjuster can see the damage.
- Leave a phone number where you can be reached for when the adjuster arrives if you're not staying at your house.

Furniture

- Remove all furniture, bedding, and carpeting to outdoors to be dried or discarded.
- Flooded carpet, upholstered furniture and mattresses should be discarded.
- Dry carpet and subfloor as quickly as possible.

Walls

- Flooded walls should be opened even if they appear undamaged to prevent mold, odor and structural decay later.
- Remove the interior surface of insulated walls to a point above water height. Undamaged paneling can be reinstalled later but flooded drywall should be discarded.

Proposal of Services

Owner/renter Address: _____
Owner/renter Name: _____
Proposal Date: _____

Services (indicate scope for each item: bedroom, kitchen, etc)

Drywall: _____

Insulation: _____

Framing: _____

Minor home repair:

Exterior: _____

Other: _____

These actions will be completed as volunteers and materials are available. Our goal is to install them as quickly as possible, but our speed depends on donations and volunteers.

Liabilities:

The homeowner/renter is not liable in case of an injury to a volunteer.

West Street Recovery is not responsible for any damage done to the home during work onsite.

Responsibilities:

- West Street Recovery is responsible for informing the homeowner, to the best of our abilities, the schedule of services.
- West Street Recovery will take no actions beyond the scope of this contract without consulting the homeowner.
- Homeowner will notify West Street Recovery if a third party will be working on aforementioned areas.
- Homeowner will notify West Street Recovery immediately if they no longer wish to receive our services.
- West Street Recovery is a diverse group of individuals who come together with mutual respect to provide mutual aid. Volunteers and the people we serve include people of all races, gender orientations, belief systems, and identities. We don't ask for money, but we do ask for the homeowner's respect of those we work with. Similarly, West Street Recovery and its volunteers are also responsible for treating the homeowner with the utmost respect.
- Both West Street Recovery and the homeowner have the option to cease rebuild work activities should the agreement for mutual respect not be adhered to by either party.

Photographs (check to agree)

West Street Recovery is permitted to use photographs of our team and work in the home (with identifying information redacted) in organizational materials and on social media.



Tools:

- Boats – 2-person kayaks and canoes will do, but if water is deep enough motorized flat bottom boats provide better and faster access.
- Ropes, life jackets, carabiners, and even harnesses – Serious climbing ropes that can hold some weight. These are the tools the professionally trained swift water folks showed up with.
- Hot coffee/tea, snacks, dry clothes and towels for rescuees

Tips:

- Before the radio channels were up and running, we found most addresses by putting out calls for rescue needs on Facebook and Instagram. The app Zello was used in Houston to organize rescues over radio. The Cajun Army also had an app.
- Before dispatching, remind rescuers that no one needs to be a hero and that the intense situation shouldn't be a breeding space for machismo. Support an environment where Womyn and Trans folk feel comfortable participating in the effort.



Tools:

- Big pots
- Large aluminum foil pans
- Serving utensils, disposable plates, to-go containers (find a restaurant to donate), and forks
- These ingredients in bulk: onions, garlic, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, rice, pasta, veggies
- Large kitchens of friends, churches, community halls, etc.

Tips:

- See if there is a food coop located conveniently to residents and talk with the owners about opening a tab with donated money that allows affected families to charge a certain \$ amount worth of groceries to it.
- Put a call out for volunteers who can take ingredients to their homes to cook.
- Ask big grocery stores for food donations, especially food that's about to be thrown out.

**Tools:**

- Hammers, crowbars (all sizes), wonderbars, and sledgehammers
- Utility knives
- Lg heavy duty trash bags
- BIG dustpans/scoops
- Wheelbarrows (a city trashcan works almost as well)
- Fans to dry out homes
- Protective gear: gloves, N95 grade masks or better, safety goggles, good boots, first aid kit

Tips:

- Take out drywall out ~1ft over flood water line and at 2' increments to make rebuild more material efficient. When sheetrock is hung horizontally, it is fairly simple to break off the sheetrock at the 4 foot mark. Ask around to be shown this.
- Remove all porous materials except solid wood; plywood or laminate in the floor can trap moisture and mold. Make sure to remove ALL drywall that got flood water, even tiny sections. Solid wood cabinets, doors, and trim can be saved but need to be treated. Outlet covers and nonporous countertops can be saved.
- Timing is critical in this step. Opening walls and putting in fans in the first few days after the storm prevents mold from starting to grow and greatly lowers the amount of rebuilding required. More time = more mold and more sheetrock that has to be removed.
- Consider organizing groups to go door to door, block by block to ensure all homes have sheetrock and insulation removed in a timely fashion. This task has a low barrier to entry, as it doesn't require much skill, so this is a great way to leverage volunteers.
- Safety: Be cautious of gas lines and electric wires in the walls!

Some group excercises that helped us get organized:

Visioning Exercise for brainstorming vision: Each person writes down 3 things they wanted to see the group do on individual post-it notes. As a group take 5 minutes to organize all the post-its into similar categories on the wall and then divided into groups that are tasked with talking about practical ways to achieve the goals in a given category. At the end, each group shares what they had talked through and the group as a whole reflects.

Power Mapping Exercise for figuring out who our allies are and what members think our group should be doing: Everyone writes down 3 names of organizations or groups involved in the recovery effort on individual post-its. On a whiteboard draw two axes and label them with two differnet ways groups are working in. For us, that was "Immediate Relief" and "Power Building." As a group talk about where each organization/group on the post-its fell. Then talk about where members want the group to fall on that board and look at who allies might be in that work.

That's a message we've been really vocal about at institutional meetings and at least some of the big charities seem to be aware that we're talking in part about them and that our intention is to disrupt that status quo.

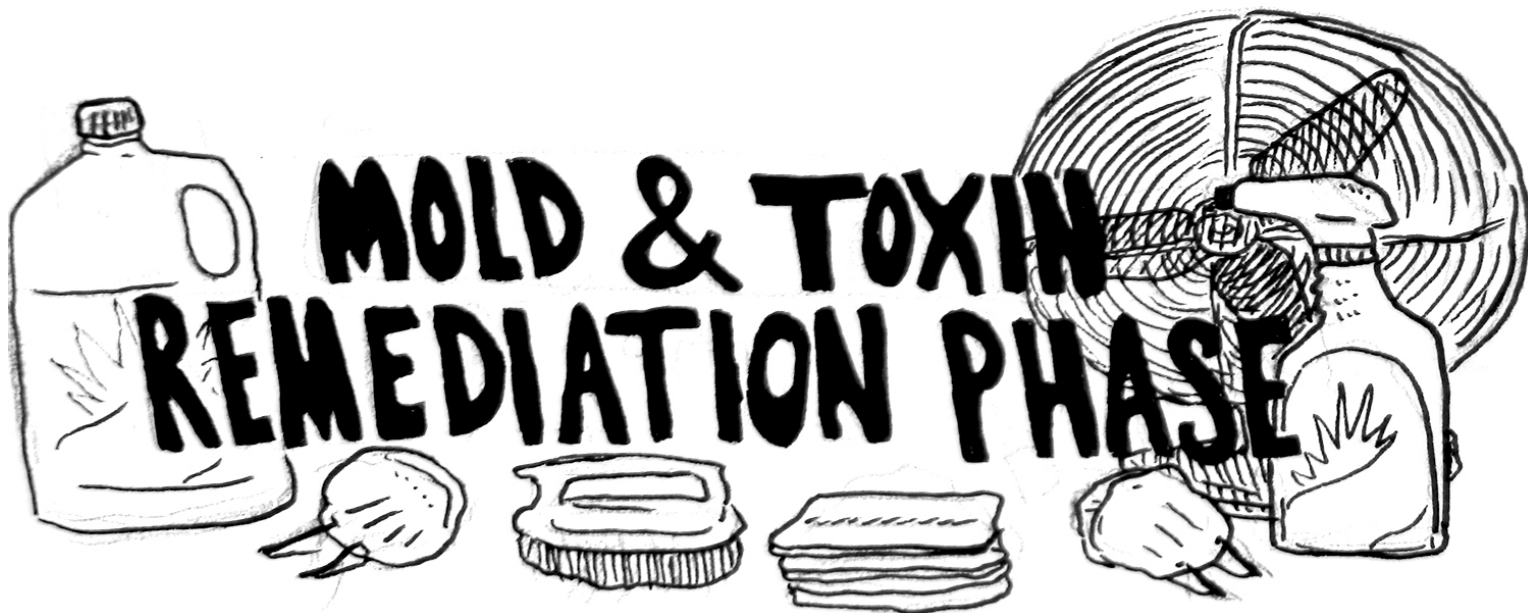
- There are very few groups organizing horizontally or using consensus processes among the relief agencies.
- In the NGO world, there's a pretty strong division between service oriented organizations and political, advocacy based organizations, a distinction that is reinforced by the tax code's designation between 501c(3) and 501c(4) organizations. Like some other organizations before us, we've really rejected the idea that you can be just one and many of our bigger picture discussions are around how to maintain a straddled stance on that line; residents' immediate needs call for a heavy focus on service efforts but reflections on past crisis response efforts has shown an unpolitical, charity-based effort creates the environment for an inequitable recovery where the status quo that caused the disaster is preserved.
- We've had to make ourselves legible to the bigger organizations and funders. Doing this means we can communicate our political agendas and visions in a comprehensible, (at times meaning palatable), way to institutions that believe the status quo and their role as providers of charity within it are acceptable and can't imagine an alternative or are aware that an alternative doesn't have a paying position for them in it.

What types of support have larger and more experienced organizations been able to offer WSR?

- Acting as a financial sponsor to receive grant monies while we wait for 501c3 status.
- Providing space to store donated bulk materials.
- Sharing their rolodexes.
- Writing recommendations and advocating for us for grants.

Some other notes on what made WSR what it is:

- We have a diverse group of interracial and interclass people with a lot of energy, a similar ethos and politics, and a lot of motivation.
- WSR isn't a closed group but we have been intentional about the small group we've formed. Our group has required a lot of emotional buy in that's not necessarily sustainable.
- We could probably benefit from someone leading us through a workshop on making decisions through consensus. External facilitators have been valuable for some meetings.
- Much of our efforts are life consuming and would not have been possible if we didn't pay people who were willing to sustain themselves and their families on such small stipends.
- We were glad we made a list of the local community centers, school and religious programs and advocacy groups and contacted them early on. Today we have relationships with community elders and organizers that have felt comfortable advising us and working with us because we made that first contact. They've been influential to our development and effectiveness.

**Tools:**

- Scrub brushes
- Rags
- Concrobium mold spray
- Sprayers
- Bleach and detergent soap (eg, pinesol) to disinfect non-porous surfaces like tile floors. (NOT to be used on walls.)
- Fans
- Vacuum

Tips:

- Mold and toxin remediation is a task most residents can do themselves if you provide them with the supplies and how to info. Make sure they have the safety gear they need, including extra masks.
- Everyone should wear N-95 or better masks when doing this work.
- Scrub the studs and bottom plates to help get mold off.
- Use a HEPA vacuum to clean out wall cavities. This prevents mold from being blown around in the house.

**Tools:**

- These materials in bulk: Insulation, drywall, drywall nails (for walls), drywall screws (for ceiling and walls), mud, drywall tape, corner bead
- Utility knives and extra blades
- Staple guns
- Hammers
- Drywall screw setter drill bit
- Putty knives and trays
- 4' T squares
- Drywall saws
- Measuring tapes
- Circular saw for cutting trim

Tips:

- Measuring moisture of walls is essential before installing drywall. Moisture meters will indicate whether a given material's moisture is too high. 17% or lower is the target moisture content. Moisture can vary foot to foot. If they're still wet, use fans and keep house open. Dehumidifiers can help as well.
- Outlets (aka duplexes) that were flooded will need to be changed or they'll eventually rust and not work and become a safety hazard.
- #3 mud is softer and physically easier to apply. All Purpose mud is physically harder to apply, but can reach a smooth finish easier.
- Mold resistant greenboard is needed for bathrooms and kitchens and around any plumbing.
- Paper tape is nice for mudding corners. Fiberglass tape is easier for flat wall surfaces.
- There are many types of corner bead, try them and find out what works easiest for your team.

- When WSR got together we were in crisis mode and that meant we were all already in motion and making decisions. That made us effective and efficient and, thanks to our good group chemistry and affinity, we think most people felt empowered and represented in the group's work even though we lacked formal processes for ensuring buy in. The longer we work together, the more we recognize the need for and have the opportunity to develop better processes.
- We have so many efforts going on among a small group of people; we have about 4 distinct working groups across a group of about a dozen people; Case Management, Rebuild Management, Advocacy and Partnerships, and Financial. The Case Management and Rebuild Management teams have to make important decisions daily and we had to figure out how our processes supported them. Our approach has been to slowly allocate more responsibility to working groups on an as needed basis.
- We've had to figure out how much detail each working group is expected to communicate about their work to ensure people across our group could stay up to date on the important stuff.
- We use email and the Slack app a lot to communicate. We put together a communication agreement that lays out where we make proposals, how long people have to give input, limits the use of group texts, etc.
- The premise of horizontal organizing is that everyone has input and a voice. It can easily feel like everyone is responsible for having an informed opinion, which means members need to know what everyone else is doing and that's impossible. The solution we keep landing on is to continue refining the responsibilities of our working groups and build greater trust between members.

Some interesting questions we're still working through:

- How much autonomy should a working group have to make decisions, especially when spending money? How much group time should we use to make these decisions collectively? When input declines as a result of too many decisions to make, what is adversely affected when you start delegating responsibility away from the entire group?
- How does consensus work for making a decision on something that's already happening? Sometimes we've gotten involved in efforts or relationships with other organizations that didn't really need consensus at first but at some point a member ended up feeling uncomfortable with the state of it. How can the consensus process accommodate check-ins? How do we not just get in the habit of seeking consensus when someone is uncomfortable with an ongoing effort or relying too heavily on that person to bring it up to the group?
- What does it mean to organize horizontally AND equitably when everyone in the group has different capacities and communication styles and carry with them different lived and historical experiences?

How does WSR's work diverge from the more institutional organizations involved in the recovery effort? How has WSR been affected by its work with these organizations?

- We believe the same structures that created this disaster can't be the ones to fix them.

This section is a bit of a hodgepodge of abstract things we've learned about developing organizational processes, creating allyships, and sharing resources with other organizations, and showing up as an advocate for affected residents in more institutional spaces.

Because we were created as a collective in a time of crises, many decisions about how we operate were made on a de facto basis. We've found, however, that processes for making decisions, communicating and getting shit done as a team are essential. To develop and agree on those processes you have to set aside time.

One of the primary ways we found our organizational identity developing was through collaborating with other organizations which were working in the complex and nuanced landscape of aid and relief post-disaster. This effort began with us showing up to meetings.

There are two main types of meetings we've found ourselves attending; those that are either coalitions made up of community organization members or are community based in both their membership and focus and those that are more institutional and hierarchical where local involvement is minimized.

In the former, we attend in a spirit of solidarity and contribute in supportive roles when helpful. Here we take the opportunity to learn from elders, experienced organizers, and community members. Their support and direction has been instrumental to our growth.

At the latter, we've found our responsibility is to be critical and, at times, disruptive to their tired, inequitable systems. We aim to constructively call their systems into question, speak truth, reflect their stated missions back to them, and advocate for residents in a space where they usually don't have the opportunity or skills to engage.

We feel some meetings are not even meant to be effective; Instead they are just demonstrations that the biggest organizations are "getting everyone together." However, we've learned our ability to advocate for residents has often been dependent on us showing up, being patient, and delicately raising points of contention at strategic times, even if the meetings feel like a time suck. By playing it right, we believe we've sometimes been successful in gracefully redirecting these types of meetings toward different outcomes.

Grant writing is also a big effort that takes a lot of time. But in addition to bringing in the money our work required, we also found that writing grants ends up being a helpful exercise for creating actionable plans and goals. Our mission and vision statements also developed through the exercise of writing grants.

Below are some thoughts from Ben, who's been at the center of a lot of WSR's grant writing and development of organizational relationships, and Leah, who has had some opportunity to reflect on organizing structures:

What have we learned about developing processes around the work we're doing, specifically using consensus as a decision making process?

- We didn't have a lot of members that were experienced in consensus and we didn't take much time to talk about what it meant to be a consensus based group and get group buy in. It's one of our core processes but we've had to learn about why we believe it's important to our work and how to enact it as we went.

Things residents may need after a flood:

Was the flood within the last two weeks?

Non-perishable food and hot meals, hand sanitizer, personal hygiene supplies, diapers, pads, tampons, basic cleaning supplies, basic medical supplies (tylenol, aspirin, antibiotic ointment, bandaids), tents

Do homes need gutting?

N95 masks, basic cleaning supplies, trash bags, snacks

Do homes need mold/toxin remediation?

Scrub brushes, bleach, floor detergent, mop, broom, rags, concrobium anti-fungal spray

Is it cold outside?

Blankets, throat lozenges, cough medicine, warm hats/gloves, space heaters

Getting information to residents:

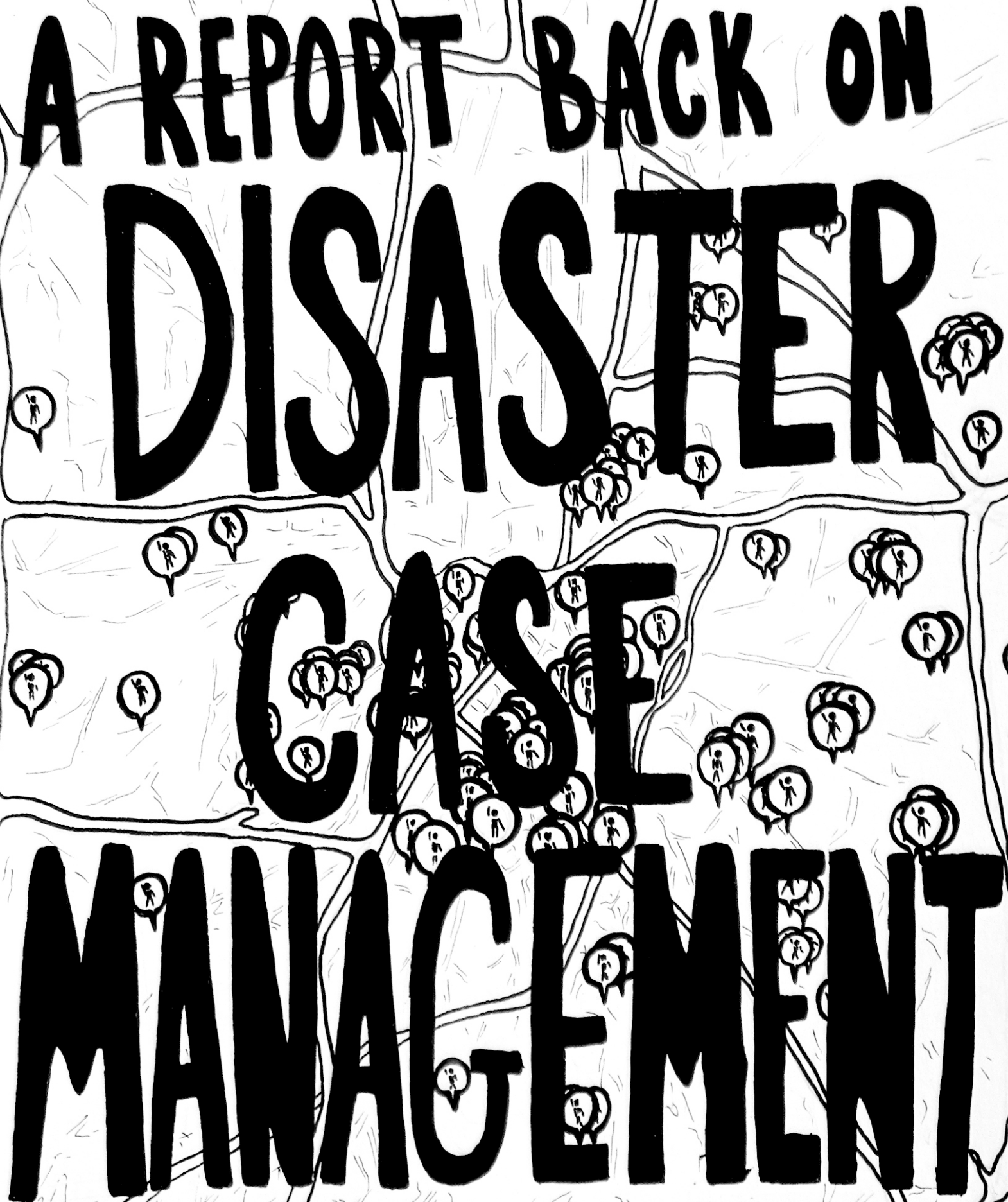
Types of information residents may find useful:

- Pointers for applying/repealing FEMA
- How to remediate mold and toxins
- Available resources: FEMA appeal assistance, wage theft assistance, free/discounted medical services, bill reduction offers, charity events, rebuild aid, opportunities for residents to share their concerns and stories with the city/aid organizations
- Do's and don't's of hiring contractors

Tips

- We had a lot of people calling and asking how they could help. Researching and gathering text for a flyer is a good task for someone out of town/working independently to do.
- Any crews going out can be loaded up with flyers to pass out as they're in the neighborhoods. As they share information, it's also a good time for volunteers to gather information from residents about their situation and other neighbors that need a hand and report back.

A REPORT BACK ON DISASTER CASE MANAGEMENT

The background of the page is a hand-drawn map with a grid of streets. Numerous small stick figures are scattered across the map, each enclosed in a speech bubble. The figures are drawn in a simple, sketchy style, and the speech bubbles are also hand-drawn. The overall aesthetic is that of a grassroots or community-based report.

**A REPORT BACK ON
BECOMING AN
ORGANIZATION AND
WORKING WITH OTHER
ORGANIZATIONS**

On spending money and resources:

- We expect rebuild team to communicate to the group which projects are being given priority and how much money is being spent on each.

- We've agreed that every house on our case list can have an allowance of up to \$500 where anyone in the group can make the decision to spend up to that amount without needing consensus from the whole group.

- We prioritize projects at houses whose residents are elderly, disabled, pregnant, POC or have children. Our primary goal is to "unstick" residents, that is, get them the funds or materials they need to make a meaningful move toward the next phase of their recovery.

Rebuild and Case Management protocol:

Developing a process that coordinates rebuild projects between our case managers and rebuild managers was something we had to take time to do but was essential to successfully managing the effort. Here's a quick overview of the process we used between three and seven months after the flooding:

1. Case Management notes cases that need rebuild assistance. Case Managers will explain that someone from the rebuild team will do a walkthrough of their house to see if we can get them resources and/or offer advice. No promises for services are made.
2. Someone from the rebuild team does the walkthrough to check what professional help the house will need (e.g., plumber, electrician, etc.). Depending on required skill level and cost, they take note of any projects WSR could take on. They make sure not to promise services to the resident.
3. Rebuild team returns to the WSR group with a proposal for a project/s at the house, including a cost estimate. The group approves/amends the project. (The group has agreed up to \$500 can be spent at a house before requiring approval so that requests for spending approval are not needed as frequently.)
4. Rebuild team provides residents with proposal for services that both WSR and the resident signs. (Copy of proposal on page 22.)
5. Rebuild team consults with the group and the resident before taking on other projects/costs not in original proposal.

WSR's case management effort began like almost everything else at West Street; accidentally and based on unmet needs. WSR, Black Lives Matter (BLM) HOU and Stand Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) started collaborating on mucking efforts in Northeast neighborhoods, and, after chewing through a list of addresses collected while distributing supplies and food, SURJ and BLM HOU started providing volunteers with forms and the effort to find houses still needing mucking became a canvassing effort. Within a week, they were holding a stack of about 150 filled out forms, realizing these families would need a lot more than mucking.

The forms ended up at the West Street house and we entered them into an online database. As we mucked houses, we started collecting more details on each case. This family had health problems. Another family was still living in an unmucked home. And another had children who needed clothes and school supplies. At the same time, WSR was collecting a ton of information about the different resources being made available to affected residents and was struggling to efficiently communicate this information to all the people who needed it most.

Deanna and Jade, two individuals who jumped into action following the storm, suddenly found themselves without social work experience but doing just that. They joined up with WSR and took on the task of expanding their focus to an effort of managing these 150 crisis cases.

Since Harvey, they've spent many early mornings and late nights working to stay in contact with these cases as often as possible, triaging emergencies, prioritizing an endless list of unmet needs, and never forgetting to be compassionate. The rest of WSR supports their work by relaying information about resources and opportunities to them, running errands, making deliveries, and helping check in on residents. But their days are long; they've balanced running to-do lists that only grow, the emotions of supporting residents through their individual crises, and their own personal lives and families while still being available by phone and email to emergencies that arise for residents.

We've found it difficult to keep in contact with all 150 addresses on a regular basis and the level of attention varies a lot across cases. It's extremely difficult to not get sucked into supporting a narrow set of cases. For some residents, an intimate, highly-involved approach is what they need the most to make progress in their situation. This work includes helping residents fill out, submit, and follow-up on applications, sitting on hold with FEMA for two hours to navigate their phone system, and driving residents to appointments or to get materials. How people on our team want to contribute to the case management effort has also varied; some people find it most effective to work from the computer and phone, while others prefer to be driving around the neighborhoods and developing relationships with residents in person.

Despite how time-consuming this style of case management has been, the relationships developed through this effort have been incredibly important to the advocacy work we've been able to do for the underserved areas of Houston that were affected by the flood. Moreover, these relationships have had a huge impact on our understanding of what it means to survive a crisis and any future projects we work on will be infused directly and indirectly with what people who were most affected by Harvey shared with us. As we have moved forward, it seems that the families who still need help need a deeper level of attention and care. Often they need financial assistance or construction help far beyond what we can provide. As we write this zine, shifting our process to accommodate these

changing needs is being discussed, new strategies are emerging, and new workflows are being established.

Here are some of the things Deanna and Jade have taken away from their experience:

Why does WSR do case management when so many other agencies with bigger resources and more experience are also working on this effort? How has our effort been different from theirs?

- Most case managers are specifically working for their particular organization and are very limited to the processes and focus set by that organization; Some may only do rebuilds, while others only offer appliances or furniture. Our case managing is different as we have changed with the residents needs. We found food hubs at one point, then connected folks with groups that were mucking, then helped navigate thru some FEMA questions, and are now looking for help in rebuilding and getting beds and appliances for families to move back home. We look for organizations and figure out what it is they offer and how to get it.
- Some case managers in bigger agencies have their hands tied if someone else is working on a resident's case. In contrast we work with clients even as other organizations help to assist them, and even work to ensure that residents get what they need from well resourced organizations.
- We don't have application processes. We focus on connecting folks to the resources they need.
- We take note of trends, (such as how long a service group is taking to provide services), as we work with affected families so that we can relay that information to other families. Families also become engaged with our effort and give us leads that we can turn around and share with others.
- Taking the time and care to keep up with family details has supported the establishment of trust and friendship, which has a big impact on how effective we can be as case managers in the long-run and contributes to our ability to work in solidarity rather than charity.

What factors help you determine who needs priority assistance? What does it mean to give residents priority attention?

- Whether the residents are elderly, disabled, POC, pregnant, have children or health problems all factor into whether we consider them a priority case. The amount of damage and the lack of progress on a residence is also a factor we consider. At this point, six months out from the flood, if a house hasn't been mucked yet it automatically goes to the top of the list.
- People in recovery have good reason to be skeptical of whatever you say you can offer; A lot of organizations and groups may have made promises to provide services and failed to follow through by the time you contact them.
- Don't make promises you can't keep. Be clear about the difference between making your best effort to find resources for them and promises to provide services.
- People may not want your help and that's ok. Don't pressure them.

The importance of buy in:

- We always strive to provide residents the opportunity to take the lead or step into whatever role they feel comfortable in for the rebuild process. Different families have different levels of experience and confidence. For some residents, we default to their opinion when trying to figure out how to best support them. Others have asked us to make the decisions for the best way to move forward on projects. Some residents aren't necessarily doing things the "right way" at their houses but are leading the effort to repair their own home so, unless we have a safety concern or have a technique that might save a lot of time, we follow their lead.
- After a few issues, our agreements with residents and volunteers now include clauses about our requirement for mutual respect for all races, gender orientations, belief systems, and identities from everyone we work with. If residents or volunteers make racist, sexist, homophobic, or other prejudice remarks, group members are expected to articulate our requirement for mutual respect and report back to the group.

Some thoughts on partnering with other groups:

- Working with other groups has been essential to our ability to work efficiently. Some groups have supported us by researching topics we knew little about, providing spaces to store bulk building materials, and connecting us to contractors in their networks.
- Finding a group that could take over the mucking effort while we started focusing on rebuilding was hugely helpful. DSA stepped up here for us and now that mucking needs have decreased, they are now joining us on rebuild days so they can take on similar projects.
- Because of liability concerns and stricter standards for which cases they work with, partnering with larger, more institutionalized groups was usually less fruitful initially than working with smaller groups who were more eager to be flexible.

Some thoughts on issues of liability:

- We've found legal requirements are followed to different levels by different people. We've seen a number of groups paralyzed by liability concerns. Every recovery group is going to have to take some time to go through discussion of what they're comfortable with. We are still having conversations about how to navigate liability today.
- We've had to grapple with the fact that almost every house we've worked in isn't up to current building codes; There wasn't money to bring houses up to code before and there certainly isn't now. We try our best to inform homeowners about safety issues so they can make the best decision for their situation.
- For many liability concerns, we've opted to finding local contractors of color to hire the work out to. For instance, we made the decision to not fuck with electricity. It's dangerous and expensive to fix and many homes we've worked on are old and have electrical issues predating the flood. But a lot is at risk if electrical work isn't done properly.
- Having a liability agreement with residents is important for both the homeowner and the group and can be a pretty simple document (see page 22 for our Proposal of Services). We also have volunteers sign an agreement. It's important to us that the agreements we ask people to sign are easy to make sense of, not too legalistic, and protect everyone involved.

Despite the 40 or so homes we've been able to lend a hand on, we're relieved the professionals are finally taking over rebuild projects in our case list's zip codes. When you have limited experience and financial resource, rebuilding is time consuming and the logistics of assessing and coordinating projects, running inexperienced volunteer crews, and taking on both legal liability and the responsibility of providing a healthy home for a family to return to made this an intense, high-stakes experience for WSR.

We plan to continue taking on small rebuild projects since our support here is still relevant in some cases. Additionally, one of the main benefits this work has brought is its potential to build relationships and trust with residents. But we're glad we can start stepping back to a more appropriate role of advocating for families to receive assistance, helping them through application processes, and monitoring promises for progress made by these organizations.

In hindsight we think some of the most helpful work that can be done after gutting is helping dry out homes and remediate mold and toxins in preparation for the larger rebuild efforts.

As scary and stressful as it was, we think our rebuild effort has been meaningful and wouldn't discourage other groups from doing something similar when the big agencies are having trouble getting their shit together.

Becky and Andrew have been working long hours coordinating WSR's rebuild effort. Here are some of their thoughts:

What are some of the biggest lessons you've learned?

- Most of the time there isn't one right way to do something, although five different contractors will tell you their way is the only right way. We feel our responsibility is to educate residents the best we can on their options and let them make decisions as they feel comfortable to.
- Communicate with residents about everyone's expectations before beginning work.
- We've learned about the emotional strain rebuilding causes, especially for residents whose houses have flooded before. Even when some residents had the skills and materials, we sometimes found they preferred to make progress when we were there or help out on somebody else's house with us.
- To build mutual respect, it's important to both take time to listen to residents when they want to share their story and do the actual work. A lot of charity groups only do one or the other.
- Having a skilled contractor (or two, or three) willing to help do walkthroughs to provide a professional opinion and train volunteers in new skills is near essential.
- Everything feels urgent in the months following the storm and that caused us to try to work at a very fast pace. Looking back, it seems worth it to make decisions a little more slowly. It's important to find a middle ground that allows for progress while reducing duplication of work in the future.

What strategies have you found most useful for communicating with residents?

- Most residents can receive texts so we use an SMS service (Expert Texting) that allows us to mass text our list of 170+ phone numbers for a fee. We've sent out information about FEMA hotel voucher extensions, free clinics, legal aid, and other resources this way.
- We collect emails and will send out information if it's longer that way. But sometimes residents don't have text or email and you have to pick up the phone and call.
- Language barriers adds complexity; the more multilingual people on the team the better.

What resources have been hardest to find for residents?

- Kitchen appliances
- Any contractor worth their salt is booked.
- Financial assistance has been disappointing to say the least.
- Temporary housing

What do you put most of your time into?

Helping residents in emergency situations. Both Deanna and Jade say they start their days with to do lists and usually end up focused on going down a dozen different avenues to help one or two cases.

What have been the more difficult aspects of case management?

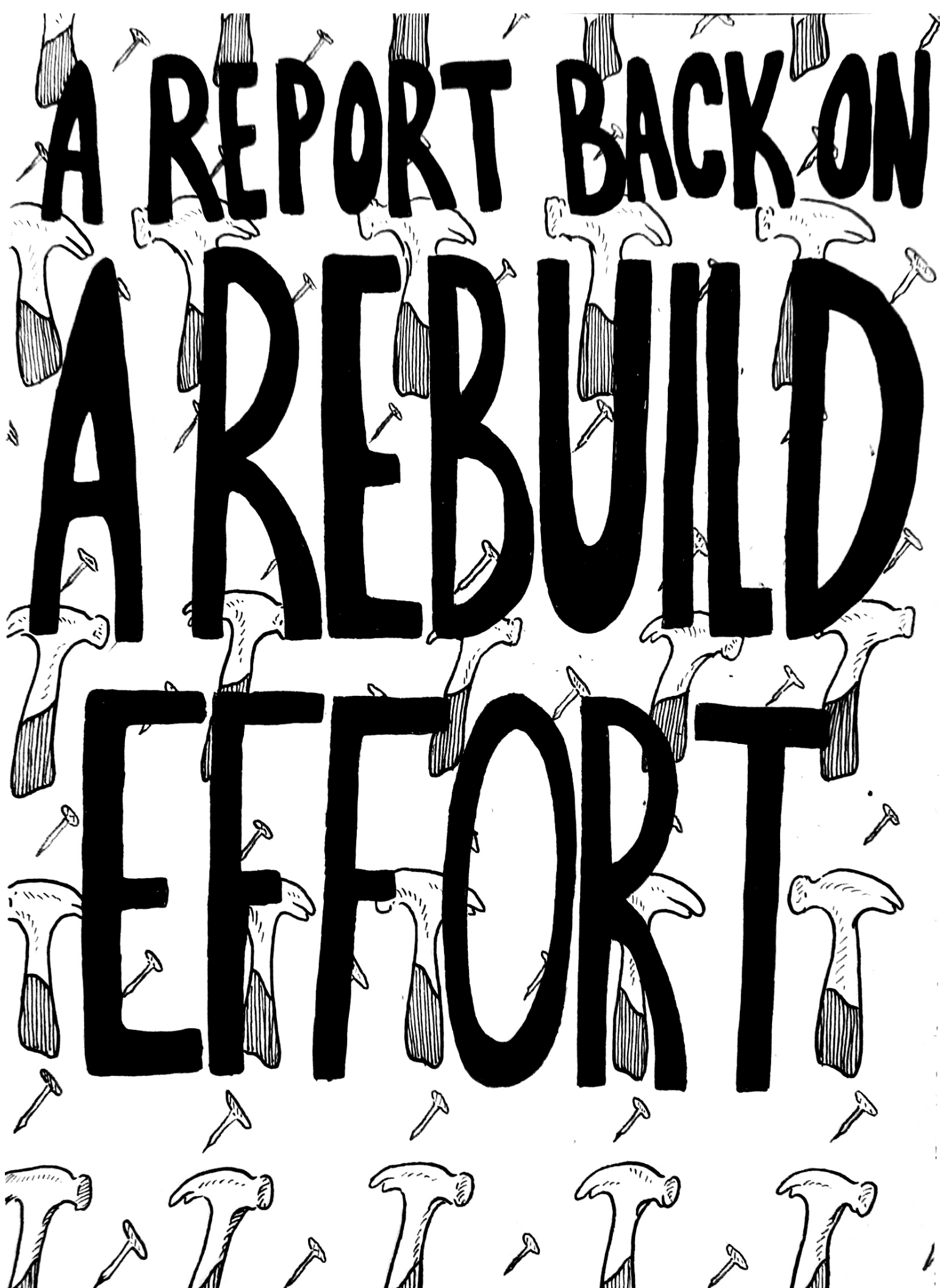
- Wondering if we've really helped people. Sometimes it's really obvious but other weeks you're not so sure.
- Not taking on more cases than we can handle. We agreed to not add more cases to our load if the addresses were located outside of the area we've chosen to focus on. And with good reason; If we're already overwhelmed with the cases we have, it doesn't make sense to spread ourselves even thinner. But it's hard to not invest time in helping anyone who reaches out to us.
- It's hard to not carry it home. It's hard to create time to process the emotional weight of the work. It's easy to feel like everything is urgent and needs to be addressed right away.

What are ways you've found are effective in building trust with residents?

- Sometimes it takes some persistence in contacting people. (Note there's a difference between being pushy and persistent.)
- Some of the strongest relationships with residents are those where emotional support has been part of what the resident has needed.
- Although we stress to residents that they can always contact us if they have an unmet need, people rarely contact us unless we've already established a good relationship with them and come through on a few promises.

How many cases can one person take on per week?

Jade and Deanna agree that about 5 to 10 cases a week is a manageable, realistic number of cases they can focus on in a given week. Some of those are just helping people with a single need, like getting them in contact with a resource. But others require a lot more attention and multiple follow ups.



WSR spent the whole of October and November mucking homes, working with Houston chapters of Black Lives Matter (HOU and HTX), Stand Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and various church groups. We tapped into our networks to find contractors, and after learning some handy gutting techniques, we found having a single contractor (read: someone with construction experience) at volunteer days was sufficient. Gutting a house doesn't require much skill. We were able to coordinate up to four teams working at four addresses a day. The closer the addresses, the easier it was to share tools, the contractor, and lunch.

We had assumed if we focused on mucking, rebuilding would be taken care of by the professionals; money to pay contractors from FEMA would start rolling in and the larger organizations and charities would have had time to coordinate their rebuild efforts. But FEMA wasn't getting people money fast enough and both their expiration dates for the hotel vouchers and the fact that winter was fast approaching loomed over residents' heads. So slowly, cautiously, with everything to learn, we started a rebuild effort.

Before we started putting walls back in, we spent a few weeks stressing about how to remediate mold and toxins, and talking to contractors about permits and listening to them stress the "one right way" to do something. (See page 24 for flyer on remediation steps we landed on.)

The first two houses we worked on were homes of families who were not receiving any other help but whose situation living outside their home was unsustainable for the winter and dangerous to their health. Both these families also included members who were experienced in construction and were eager to teach our volunteer-based teams some skills. Moving onto other houses, we were very direct in explaining how inexperienced we were and we took on projects with residents who were comfortable with us essentially practicing construction skills on their homes. Because of this, their buy in on the work was always the most important aspect of our projects. But even now that we are feeling more comfortable in the skills we've learned, residents' involvement in their home's rebuild process has continued to be the most rewarding, healthiest, and successful aspect of this work.

The way each family participated in the experience of recovery we were aiming to support looked different but the common theme in the strongest relationships we found ourselves in was a strong sense of mutual aid. A handful of affected residents have joined our work crews or taken the time to teach us skills to be used on the next project. Others cooked lunch or made coffee for volunteers working at other houses. Some took time to work with us on our Spanish. Some helped us do flyering in their neighborhoods or shared information with neighbours. We found the spirit of unsolicited mutual aid was far more common than not.

We spent a month researching before picking up a hammer and another month slowly making progress at those first two houses. In January we started feeling a little more comfortable and picked up the pace. Currently, two WSR members, Andrew and Becky, work full time on the rebuild effort and have recruited the help of a handful of contractors, some who are local residents of color and who we pay and some from outside the communities who volunteer their time. In a given week, they can juggle various rebuild projects on a maximum of 5 houses with volunteers. They also spend a good chunk of time getting residents materials so they can move forward on their own projects as well as provide information about the next steps residents can take by themselves.