

a window propped open, issue 3:
REFLECTIONS ON TWO YEARS OF
HARVEY RECOVERY WORK



Two Years After Harvey, By Some Miracle

TWO YEARS AFTER HARVEY, BY SOME MIRACLE

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There's a sign still hanging on the front door of the house on West Street where West Street Recovery (WSR) launched a week of boat rescues from as Hurricane Harvey passed over Houston.

"Severs: Be empowered. If you see a need, meet it! Serve the hungry. Ask questions and send back answers. Make decisions. We are all making this up as we go."

Ben hastily scratched the sign out after Harvey hit when the house was being inundated with people who wanted to help and kept asking for our direction. But since none of us really knew what we were doing, we were trying to encourage people to take initiative and figure it out with us.

By some miracle, two years after Harvey that sign is still hanging by the same piece of tape on the door. It blends into the clutter of papers, drywall mud, and donated furniture, and then one day you'll notice it again as you walk out the door and remember how the trajectory of our work over these two years has felt just as miraculous. It's always been a challenge to see very far ahead; we had to make up most of it along the way, and funding to make a lot of it possible was never gaurenteed. But despite how much we had to learn and all the chances we took along the way, when we reminisce about the first months of WSR, we realize that a number of things that are coming to fruition now have their roots in the ideas we dreamed up in those first months between triaging crises and scrounging for resources.

Our biggest dream has always been to find ways to pass the power we generated in our work into the hands of the community we served. In the first year, we made various small efforts in the spirit of this goal as we figured out what that transfer of power actually meant and if it was practical and desired by the community. It wasn't until the second year after Harvey that we had the wherewithal, capacity, and relationships to start meeting regularly with a group of residents we'd been working with in the hopes of creating a foundation for their community power to build off of. The residents gradually took ownership of these meetings, a beautifully inspiring thing to witness, and ended up forming their own organization, the Northeast Action Collective (NAC). It continues to bloom into a powerful force and we're so glad to now be figuring out how to reshape WSR's role in their neighborhood as we move into a position of support.

We've also always known that Harvey wouldn't be this coastal city's last flood, so our early dreams also included supporting Northeast Houston's resilience in the face of future crises and improving our communities' ability to respond to the next disaster.

CONTRIBUTED TO BY THE MEMBERS OF WEST STREET RECOVERY
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MAUD TRIST MORGAN | COMPILED BY LEAH AYER

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We made an important step toward that goal by starting to design some resilient construction solutions, (plans can be found at www.weststreetrecovery.org/flood-resilient-design), which we now offer to residents as we're helping reconstruct their homes. Just after Harvey's two year anniversary, we were able to put our response capacity to the test as Tropical Storm Imelda drenched the city, reflooding the homes of many residents still in the midst of their Harvey recovery.

Imelda wasn't nearly as bad as Harvey; 4,000 structures in Harris County were damaged as opposed to Harvey's 120,000, and many residents received a foot of water as opposed to five. But it was painful to contend with how little the city had accomplished in those two years; the most underserved areas of Harris County had been left in the same situation as before Harvey. All the funding that poured into Houston hadn't been used to construct new retention ponds or improve alert system or start maintaining the drainage ditches in these neighborhoods. On top of that, the smaller size of the storm correlated with less people going out of their way to support those who were impacted.

But tellingly, at the grassroots and neighborhood level we responded to Imelda with a clarity and strength that would have been impossible to imagine two years ago. WSR, other organizations, and residents knew what to do, had the tools and volunteer pools to do it. We got to work quickly. The trust WSR had built in the neighborhood facilitated our ability to make new relationships with people who needed aid. We deputised the local residents who'd been helping us with rebuilds to lead work days. Their shared language, similar lived experiences, and long-term investment in their neighborhoods allowed them to provide a different quality of support to their neighbors than WSR's core members were able to during Harvey.

As for the NAC's reaction to Imelda, its membership watched the familiar sight of their clogged drainage ditches overflowing and decided they'd had enough. NAC quickly organized a strategy for making demands on the county's commissioner court and eventually succeeded in having some of them met. Their urgency to take action spoke to the autonomous power they'd found in this group as well as the more general potential for how residents already gathering to discuss neighborhood power can be activated by disaster to escalate their work in dynamic ways.

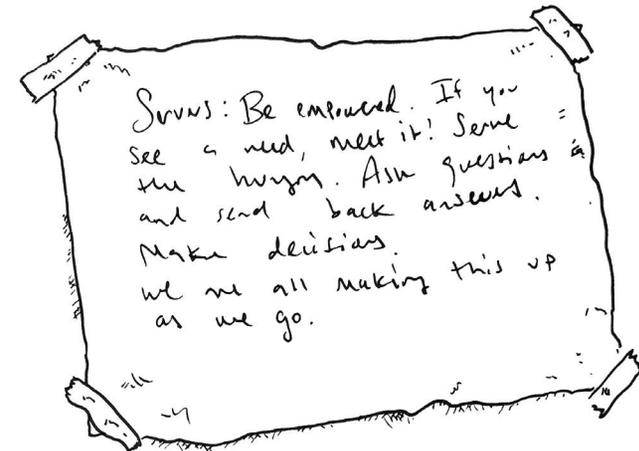
So as we explore the future of WSR's role in Northeast Houston and wonder if we're going to find another chunk of grant money to sustain our full-time work, we've been marveling at the trajectory of these last two years. Building power with residents, implementing flood resilient building options, and developing capacity to better respond to future disasters were all things we riffed on in the first months after Harvey. They felt like dreams, out of reach and abstract. But we kept walking in a spirit of honesty and solidarity with residents. Combined with the trust and passion residents met us with, it laid the ground for what's taking root now. We're still finding out what's growing, so we'll look forward to sharing more news of it in a fourth zine.

In this third zine, we touch on a few more of the efforts we've been engaged in: the formation of the NAC, how we understand our responsibilities as an outside group supporting marginalized communities' recovery, how we've negotiated our role as

an advocate within the non-profit industrial complex, and the ways in which we've developed our horizontal structure.

We also wanted to take a few pages to explore the values that we've nurtured and challenged. We've learned that it's one thing to express an intent to organize horizontally while working alongside a community in the spirit of solidarity and mutual aid, but it's another to actualize that intention on the ground. Where are some of the stress points where those values meet the road along the way? Which values and goals get prioritized when two or more of them are in tension? We've had a lot of hard conversations and given each other a ton of patience and support while we reflected on these kinds of questions, and we want to speak to how important it is to continually be assessing how the values we preach actually translate in the concrete work we do and to constantly create more room for the ways in which the expression of those values can be influenced by the communities they aim to serve.

For groups coming out of acute disaster response efforts deciding whether they should form more permanent infrastructure, we want to advocate for the dynamic roles long-form recovery groups can play in unequitable recoveries if they stick around. Wary of the typical non-profit trajectory, which does little to seek opportunities to transition power, our goal since the beginning was to work ourselves out of a job in favor of the Northeast Houston's residents being able to lead their own recovery. But along the way, we've also recognized that our role as a grassroots, activist organization has provided meaningful support and stability to residents as its acted as a bridge of privilege to resources and knowledge. So we continue to take time to validate how we fit into the desires and needs of the community we serve while feeling gratitude for what's supported us in getting this far.



We're still finding our way, we're still making this up as we go. But we're doing it in the best of company, and we're proud to find ourselves right where we dared to dream of being two years ago.

Our Values in Practice

These are the values we've developed as our ground points and some examples of the ways we've applied them in our work.

Our work demands Patience to be Meaningful -

When responding to crises, it's tempting to try to operate primarily on the metric of efficiency. But over time we've learned that patience is essential in so many aspects of this work. To respect residents' power and dignity, we have to curate relationships and trust. To support a resident who's struggling to put their life back together while dealing with so many oppressive forces and barriers to wellness, we have to prioritize care work. To learn the skills necessary to rebuild homes and manage families' cases, we have to accept the long learning curves we encounter and have a willingness to make mistakes. In favor of doing this work patiently and with extra care for the people it affects, we've often had to allow the ideal of working efficiently to take a back seat, and that's something we've grown more comfortable with over time.

Recovery work is connected to race, Class, and environmental inequity and justice -

The impact of our work is correlated with our ability to address not only the effects of Harvey, but also the ways that the chronic disasters of capitalism, colonization, racism, and classism marginalize people and make them more vulnerable to acute disasters like Harvey and less able to make a full and timely recovery. As we engage with other organizations and officials, we work to connect the dots between these systems of oppression and residents' barriers to recovery. We've developed our social-political analysis and built the confidence to articulate it, and as we engage with residents, volunteers, and new members, we nurture new political actors.

Big agencies and the state refuse to provide aid for a lot of families because of issues that predate Harvey. But in acknowledging the conditions that disadvantaged people in advance of the storm, we work to not give up on families, even when their cases are complicated or they're difficult to work with. This means we've made decisions to spend the extra time to help a hoarder go through their belongings so they can move on to the rebuild phase or fix someone's deed issues so they can qualify for other assistance.

Remain adaptable and fluid -

At the case level, no two families' recoveries are the same, so we aim to support people in ways that are unique to their individual desires and encourage them to help us shape the ways we're supporting them. Tailoring services significantly slows our processes for providing aid, but in standardizing aid across cases, big agencies are less able to support transformative recovery. We recognize that many agencies use application processes that are consistent with disqualifying people for aid, but by customizing our support for each family, we're setting people up to qualify for the aid we can offer.

Being flexible also means meeting residents where they're at while making the most of the resources we have access to. When a resident just wanted to get back into their home as quickly as possible, it made sense to use a group of white volunteers from a church who we didn't share politics with to help with the rebuild labor. Other times using local contractors from the neighborhood has been important to a resident.

In the larger landscape of recovery, adaptability has meant recognizing the changing nature of the recovery process, continuing to look out for which gaps are forming and which are suddenly getting filled in by other agencies. Even when we feel like we're just getting the hang of a role we've been playing, we want to be looking for the ways changing needs can prompt us to strategically redirect our efforts.

Meet residents at their tables rather than expect them to show up at ours -

We've heard a lot of organizations ask how to get people from marginalized communities to their tables to influence the aid they're providing. But there's plenty of reasons residents don't feel comfortable in those environments or have the ability to attend meetings downtown during the 9-5 work schedule. Instead of expecting residents to meet us or attend coalition meetings to gather their point of view, we go to their tables, as in the ones in their living rooms and kitchens, where we make time to have lunch with them and talk about what else is going on in their lives. And in organizing the Northeast Action Collective community meetings, we're supporting residents creating their own collective table that we can insist other organizations go to and learn from.

Empower our team members and Prioritize their wellbeing -

Internally, we've spent a lot of time figuring out processes for communication and decision making and developing trust so that our team members are empowered in meaningful ways. For instance, each member has the ability to go speak as WSR at other organizations' meetings and we've developed processes that make it possible for individual members to efficiently make decisions about using funds. This is possible because we've developed a shared understanding of our group's values. We support members taking initiative on their own projects, which allows for a lot of experimenting and requires understanding for inevitable mistakes. With so many big decisions to make and systems of oppression to break down within and by our group, we've also learned how healthy conflict that allows people to feel comfortable acknowledging their disagreements contributes toward solutions built on meaningful consensus.

We also respect the responsibility we have to take care of ourselves and each other through this exhausting work. We've gone through enough cycles of burn out in the last two years to know that neglecting our personal wellbeing never does residents or the team any good. We're getting better at communicating when we're on the verge of burnout and looking out for each other by checking in to make sure people are getting paid what they need and aren't overworking themselves. We value everyone tending to the other areas of their life by crafting flexible contracts that support members' ability to participate in other unpaid organizing work and pursue their unique interests.

Grow at the speed of trust -

WSR's core team hasn't grown much because we've taken the challenge of creating and maintaining good communication processes and actualizing our values within our small group really seriously. Adrienne Marie Brown articulates this principle as "moving at the speed of trust." Now that we've got our footing, expanding our core group requires catching people up to speed on our values and inner workings.

This value also speaks to the importance of not making promises we can't keep. When we started WSR, we dreamed up big ideas of what we could do to support recovery, but we didn't go around telling residents we would one day rebuild their entire house or help create and transfer power into a community-led organization. Rather, we showed up, listened, tried to do what was needed, and if we didn't know how to do something we tried our best to learn. We've been very intentional in how we've communicated the commitments and limitations of what we can follow through on in a neighborhood where NGOs have earned distrust.

Work iteratively -

Instead of getting paralyzed by our lack of experience, we've found it helpful to start efforts off by taking on small projects expecting to learn from them and adapt our approach the next time around. If you've raised \$50,000 and don't know how to best spend it, you'd likely learn more and do more good spending \$5,000 ten times instead of figuring out the perfect way to spend the whole \$50K. This approach requires processes for evaluating work and adjusting accordingly. It requires more deliberation, but reduces the stakes of each disagreement, and allows for testing new ideas and strategies. Ultimately, it creates room for multiple perspectives rather than concentrations of power and reduces the desire to sit around and theorize by placing the onus of taking action on the people proposing an idea.

We've actively worked to find ways residents can influence our and other agencies' work as directly as possible. Rather than trying to represent residents' voices, we've encouraged residents to speak for themselves and their neighborhood at meetings and events and similarly directed media and politicians to speak directly with them. We've restructured our general all hands meetings to make them more accessible for residents to participate in. And we've nurtured close relationships and trust with residents so we can understand their experiences and better represent them when necessary.

Remain Community Centric and engage residents in their own recoveries as much as possible -

Mutual aid isn't an equal or balanced exchange of services or effort. Rather it calls us to consciously create opportunities for people to participate in defining the work that needs to be done, actually doing that work, and sharing what knowledge and resources they have in the process. On the one hand, when people are used to being forced onto the receiving end of charity programs, encouraging them to participate in solidarity-oriented work can be a challenge, and on the other, people with more privilege can struggle to create an environment in which someone with less privilege feels comfortable exercising their skills and resources. It's important that we work in ways that dissolve these rigid roles of givers and receivers, and that often requires patience, creativity, and the building of trust.

On Paying our team members -

We made the initial decision to pay people very cautiously, and, each time we've added someone else to the payroll, the decision has required long conversations. There's an obvious tension between taking on the very serious responsibility of being the primary source of someone's income while we also consider how we want to work ourselves out of this job generally speaking. Meanwhile, grant funding can come with requirements and strings attached that can affect our ability to maintain autonomy and fluidity in our work. Finally, we want to ensure we're avoiding the creation of hierarchical structures and rigid roles in our group. We've developed some principles that ground us while we make decisions around adding new people to payroll and how much to compensate them.

Never Commit to more than we have in the bank account:

We limit our contracts for team members to the amount of money that's already in the bank account and dedicated to staff. Even if we've been granted funding, until the money is in the bank, we don't make promises for using it. Everyone on staff participates in monthly finance meetings to understand the minimum amount of time WSR could provide work for.

Strive to pay a livable wage:

When we first started paying people we had very limited funds, and for over a year we paid some people more than others based on their privileges and needs. With more funding, we were eventually able to start paying everyone the same amount: \$20 an hour (for 20 to 35 hours of work a week, depending on the contract), which accounts for people having to cover their own taxes and health insurance.

Opinions don't effect Payment.
Payment doesn't equal Power:

Regardless of who's getting paid what, everyone's input is equal, and no one's pay is in jeopardy because they have an unpopular opinion. Likewise, just because someone is getting paid doesn't mean their input is weighed differently than someone who isn't.



After the first year anniversary of Harvey, WSR started organizing meetings to create the foundations for a resident-led organization in Northeast Houston. We'd been talking with residents we had relationships with to feel out their interest and capacity for participation for a while, and about 20 residents came to the first meetings. Our mission in creating the group was to support the building of community power while addressing some of the neighborhood's issues that exacerbated Harvey's effects.

During our first meetings, we created agendas and activities that would help expose residents to different ways they could organize themselves, make decisions, and work towards solutions. The majority of the residents didn't have any experience in grassroots organizing so our goal was to pass off the knowledge we had as experienced organizers and create a healthy foundation for the group to grow out of without inadvertently becoming leaders of the space.

We had to find a balance between guiding this new, malleable group while leaving room for the residents to take ownership of the group's direction themselves. We provided a list of agreements to start each meeting and offered opportunity for the attendees to make changes or additions to them. When talking about different decision making methods, we decided to craft activities that clearly showed the pros of consensus processes while pointing out the downfalls of hierarchical structures. On the other hand, we limited the number of WSR members who attended these meetings so that the residents were in the strong majority. We used popular education strategies to establish an environment where residents were being asked to bring their own ideas to the conversation and facilitate the voices of those who tended to take up a lot of space to encourage participation from the shyer folks without singling them out. Often we went around the room to allow everyone to share their thoughts, broke into smaller groups, and role played situations. The attendees included a lot of non-english speakers, so we paid for simultaneous interpretation at each meeting. We intentionally protected the space from other organizations' involvement because we wanted to ensure the residents had a chance to create something uniquely rooted in their own needs and visions and we didn't want to introduce jargon and opinions that could alienate people as they learned what organizing meant to them.

Once we had set out this foundation for the group we started doing activities to help the residents brainstorm what changes they wanted to see in their neighborhood and world. When they collectively prioritized these goals, they decided that working on the neighborhood's drainage issues was most important and feasible to address. It took half a year of monthly meetings before we got to this point.

The residents decided the best way to start tackling drainage issues was to hold a neighborhood clean up day and the event served as a huge milestone for the group. They decided on a name, the Northeast Action Collective (NAC), and door knocked to get other neighbors out to help. WSR helped print shirts and supported residents in designing flyers and writing up a press release to get the media out. NAC members kicked off the event by sharing their group's message: their neighborhood had been neglected by the government for too long and a new group of residents was forming to make sure things changed, either by their own hand or by forcing the hand of the politicians.

NAC's members came out of this event with a new sense of ownership over the group and an understanding of the group's collective potential. At the subsequent meeting the discussion was full of energy as they discussed how to get more neighbors involved and how to encourage other neighborhoods to organize their own groups to start a movement of neighborhood councils.

At this point, WSR started transitioning the work of organizing the NAC meetings into the hands of the residents. We held separate meetings with those who were interested in taking on these responsibilities, walking them through how to create agendas and activities and how to facilitate.

A second action to make demands at the County Commissioner's Court was organized primarily by NAC, and so far it's forced the county to take care of a ditch

that has caused residents' houses to flood three times since Harvey. NAC is currently figuring out the county's pressure points to get its other demands met.

For WSR to be less hands on in NAC's organizing, there's still a lot of work and sharing of knowledge to be done. But with NAC members getting more involved with WSR and helping shape its relationship to the community it's representing, there's a lot of good work on our horizons. We'll be excited to share more news about the ways this group has developed its foundation and power in the next zine.

Supporting Marginalized Communities' Recovery

by Alycia Miles

Nonprofit and government agencies have continuously failed vulnerable communities during recovery because they act reactively to disaster and see their role as temporarily alleviating the crises they coincidentally helped create in advance of the disaster. It's essential then that in aiding a community's recovery after disaster, grassroots groups understand that it is not their job to provide band-aid solutions to the community's problems. That's how you become a low-budget version of the city's program; if you're rendering a community dependent on your organization and its services, you're leaving a community worse off than before. Rather, grassroots groups' responsibility is to equip the members of the community they're serving with the tools they need to repair their lives and combat future problems. It might take longer, but instead of temporarily filling a wound, you're supporting a community learning how to suture and heal the wound the governmental and capitalist systems and disaster have left them with. To truly make a difference, grassroots recovery groups must work themselves out of a job by working with the community, not for them.

This approach is not easy, but it is necessary if your group is committed to supporting transformative recovery. Each community requires its own unique solutions, but the point is to be creative in how you actively work to ensure community members are involved in their own recovery. WSR recognizes that one of its best assets was our

inability to financially fund our work since it forced us to look for creative ways to make the most of our “human capital”, and ultimately, it resulted in more feasible and creative recovery solutions that better involved community members. In our rebuild effort, we’ve worked to get residents involved in the projects on their home and the homes of their neighbors. Sometimes that’s meant hiring residents to help repair other neighbors’ houses. Other times it’s meant having them provide the snacks for volunteers working on their house; we may be buying the snacks and bringing them to the resident’s house, but they still have some involvement in the work day even if the responsibility is as small as setting up snacks and making sure that water is available. As case managers, we’ve looked for the most feasible ways residents can be involved in their own recoveries and taken the time to examine their concerns and brainstorm solutions with them. To build power, we’ve supported clients serving as their own advocates to access aid from other agencies. Logistically, this has meant working toward goals collaboratively; case managers can work with residents to create to do lists for meeting some objective and divide the work between the case manager and resident. For example, a resident may take on the task of emailing or calling the agency they’re trying to receive aid from a number of times in the next week. Ultimately, if we’re encouraging or empowering community members to explore their own potential to act for themselves, we’re doing our job right.

In working with residents, it’s also important that outside groups don’t assume that their perception of what is most important on the path to recovery will align with what the community thinks is most important. Instead, advocate groups should speak with residents to gain an understanding of what they prioritize in their recovery while also communicating what work the group is doing and how it perceives it’s supporting a community’s recovery. Including those who need aid in the design of the aid a group renders can be a powerful way to simultaneously build trust and real solutions. Groups shouldn’t be afraid to change along the way as they learn from the community, and whenever possible, groups should give up more seats at their table for those who are receiving the aid.

Advocacy in Inequitable Recovery

by Ben Hirsch

WSR has found itself uniquely positioned to work as an advocate for a more equitable Harvey recovery because we’ve worked incredibly closely with families and also had access to spaces where we can give input on recovery programs and policy. We recognize that as a small group, and in comparison to the scale of damage Harvey wrought, the number of families WSR can directly assist is limited. However, by putting effort into bridging the gap between what policy makers and agency directors and how marginalized and underserved residents are actually experiencing the implementation of these policies and programs, we’re striving to have a larger impact on the process as a whole. There are some serious limitations to advocacy’s ability to bring about the changes we know are necessary for recovery to truly be equitable, but nevertheless we believe it has been a strategic use of our time as a grassroots group.

For us, advocacy has meant showing up to countless meetings and summits where we’ve used the stories we’ve learned from residents to make sure what isn’t working is being talked about, asking difficult questions about why certain communities are being left behind, and naming actors who others in the room receive funding from and are hesitant to critique. It’s unlikely that the leaders of these meetings have taken our words or criticism seriously. But after two years of this work, it’s apparent that other smaller agencies in attendance have heard what we’ve shared as they echo our remarks after we’ve broken the ice, followed up with us to figure out how to assist clients more effectively, and eventually reached out to WSR to build productive, collaborative strategies and relationships with us and the residents we work with.

Recently, the main target of WSR’s advocacy efforts has been the City of Houston Housing and Community Development Department. This body is the most powerful actor in the official recovery process as it’s tasked with spending \$1.17 billion dollars from the federal department of Housing and Urban Development’s Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Relief (CDGB-DR) program to repair and replace homes damaged or destroyed by Harvey. According to the city’s action plan, the money should have begun to flow in January 2019 more than a year after flooding. Shockingly, by July 1, the city had only 8 families under contract, while the number of people who had begun the application for assistance is nearly 17,000.

To react to this ridiculously low number properly, WSR’s idealism (or, some might say, our greenness or naivety), is one of our greatest strengths and demonstrates a key role for small outsider grassroots organizations in advocacy. At times it’s felt that we were the only organization appalled by this number as other organizations have reassured us that the recovery was going much better than after Hurricane Ike and remarked that the director of the Housing Department is receptive to criticism. Sometimes a historical perspective can make the inhumane seem like progress, but

by grounding our analysis in the perspective of the families we are currently working so closely with, we have been able to resist the allure of comparison in lieu of the reality that 8 of 17,000 is unacceptable, undermines the city's credibility, and calls into question the political calculus that makes this possible.

Currently, we're accompanying residents in moving their application along to access this funding. As we support residents in this process on an individual basis, we learn about the flaws, support the resident in their self-selected strategy for dealing with them, and then take what we've learned from their experience to reflect an analysis of the pitfalls of the city's process back to them. This has meant being in constant email communication with housing department staff, attending meetings and bringing up the absurdity of this failure, pestering journalists to cover the issue, and working to gather documentation for a more formalized effort in collaboration with Texas Housers, Texas Appleseed, and other allies.

While we put effort into advocacy, we also are aware that advocacy in it and of itself will not eradicate the problems that make disaster recoveries so inequitable. We recall the refrain "you cannot advocate your way to liberation." We want to encourage other small, grassroots recovery groups to think strategically about how they could play a similar role in other disasters' recovery processes, but in doing so, we also want to briefly touch on a few critiques of advocacy work that we've tried to ground ourselves in as we look to prioritize other strategies that are more transformative and liberatory:

1. Advocacy in many ways acknowledge and legitimize existing power structures. It's a valid argument that seeking to change how authority acts instead of building alternative sources of power lends both competence and democratic veneer to those in charge. Beware of how big organizations can work as gravitational forces, drawing in potential opponents through the allure of funding, influence, or scale, and causing the operations of small groups to revolve around the logistics of larger agencies.
2. Working as an advocate has required us to adopt the vocabulary of elite groups at their tables. As the vocabulary we use is extraordinarily powerful in shaping our understanding of the problems and opportunities we are describing, we must remain aware of how this adoption of language can cause us to think about problems in ways that are different from the communities we aim to advocate for.
3. Advocacy work can elevate those in a group who are the most privileged, who have the most formal education, or are the least threatening to the audience of the advocacy. Additionally, while the big players may talk about wanting to get more marginalized people to the table, they rarely are successful in nurturing environments that are comfortable or accessible for the people who are lacking the most support in their recovery. Despite the stated goals of any organization around inclusion, horizontality, diversity, leadership by BIPOC, or anti-classism, the desire to be effective advocates can undermine these other important goals.

So in keeping these downfalls of advocacy top of mind, WSR has not only sought to be effective at the tables of the powerful but to nurture the development of new

tables as well. Attending coalition and council meetings, we've met a number of other groups whose mission and values better aligns with ours and in nurturing those relationships and beginning collaborative projects with them, we are learning how to increase our impact while preserving our values and prioritizing the work we really want to be doing. Additionally, the formation of the Northeast Action Collective is the creation of a new table that we are excited to watch gain the social and political weight that will draw decision makers towards it.

Expanding Inclusion in Horizontal Organizing

by Becky Selle

Since its formation, WSR has aimed to organize horizontally for a number of reasons. As a principle, we're opposed to replicating the very hierarchical structures that oppress the residents we're serving. Rather, we want to remove barriers and divisions of power that impede residents from being directly involved with our work. In limiting the hierarchy in our organizing, we've wanted to nurture a welcome environment for more perspectives to be offered, which in turn would increase our ability to make a meaningful impact and create more holistic solutions and decrease the risk of causing harm. Additionally, we've envisioned that we could have a greater impact and work more sustainably if, instead of working with rigid roles and processes, we could support our team members working autonomously to initiate and lead multiple interconnected projects.

Over the last two years, we've worked really hard to figure out what it means to truly organize non-hierarchically, and we've been surprised at the implications of our approach and matured our definition of this principle in action in a number of ways. Most importantly, like all the other values we embrace in WSR, we understand horizontality as something to be worked toward, not a given about our organization just because we define it that way.

Our initial approach to working horizontally meant we created almost no structure to work within. We avoided formalizing roles and responsibilities, had very few processes for holding each other accountable to the work we were taking on, and worked off the assumption that each person had the skills and experience needed to

self-manage their own work. We operated almost solely on the principle of trusting one another, and since we were still in the process of building that trust, it made it pretty difficult to offer each other guidance and constructive criticism without being afraid of or actually insulting each other.

However, we've learned that in our intensive, collaborative work, the mere absence of formalized hierarchical structure does not equate to the absolution of power structures. Instead, we've found that we must counter the hierarchy that dominates our society by intentionally building structures and processes that are supportive of everyone's voice being heard, that consistently create opportunities for people to get involved in different ways in our work, that meet each of us where we're at in our unique skills and experiences, and that prioritize the time and energy that's required to share our skills and experiences.

We've learned that a lack of accountability and management structure doesn't actually empower everyone in a meaningful way, and that there's a difference between acting as someone's boss and helping them manage their responsibilities. Management is a skill that takes time and practice to learn, so while some people with more experience in self management may feel more empowered to act without supervision, having an overwhelming amount of work and seemingly infinite options of what to do next can be paralyzing and cut away at someone else's confidence. We've worked to develop understandings of how each team member feels empowered, and, for some, this means having more management and guidance.

A lack of a system for offering constructive criticism and feedback has also limited our ability to improve and fulfill expectations, which has resulted in accomplishing less and, in some cases, a loss of trust from the rest of the team. To counter this, we've experimented with different ways to conduct routine check-ins on each other's work. Each working group now sets weekly goals and holds meetings to collectively assess them. Members external to a working group also help facilitate the definition of a group's roles and responsibilities and check-ins on their goals routinely. We've added in activities to encourage the sharing of feedback. For people newly added to our payroll, we now have onboarding and oversight processes.

We've consciously worked to avoid using judgements about the tasks a member has accomplished as a way to measure their value in the organization. This sounds simple, but when you're compensating someone for their work with grant money that could otherwise help rebuild someone's home, it's especially challenging to navigate. We understand that some accomplishments, such as a house getting fixed, are easier to measure or recognize than others, like a relationship being built. Additionally, different members have different experiences, skills, and privileges that predate their involvement in WSR, and there's no way to grow a diverse organization of people without acknowledging this. It takes extra time to mentor each other and cross pollinate our skills, and while we have to balance working effectively with this ideal, we also have to remember to be patient with each other as we prioritize that sharing of knowledge.

While we've always used a consensus process to make decisions, that process

in it and of itself is not enough to ensure people can comfortably participate in the decision making. People who have the privilege of being more assertive and confident end up having more influence in a group conversation setting. And in our case, with a core team of staff that works daily on our recovery efforts, gaps in understanding and knowledge can affect how accessible our work is to other people wanting to get involved at different capacities. So we've invested time into gathering input in a variety of different ways, such as supporting decisions being made in smaller working group settings and gathering input in one-on-one conversations in advance of larger meetings, helped keep less involved people up to date on WSR's work, and created more opportunities for participation that don't require as much time commitment.

If we pretend that our non-hierarchical ideals automatically absolve us of the power dynamics that require intentional work to break down, we're emboldening their existence. Instead, we've learned to seek out the ways they're cropping up in our work and counter them with alternative structures. We've learned that in respecting the diverse abilities and desires of each person engaged with this work, we are supporting an equitable and more accessible recovery effort, rather than trying to manufacture an equal one.