JUST RECOVERY:

HOW COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE TEXAS 2021 WINTER STORM ILLUSTRATES THE WORLD WE NEED
"Each disaster has its own recovery, but for some reason we never recover at the same rate as everyone else. There is no equity."

-Doris Brown, Community Researcher-
This paper is the conclusion of a much longer report evaluating the response to Hurricane Harvey which will be released later this year. As the response to the Texas Freeze sputtered and governments were reduced to giving tips and tricks and corporations unleashed a cascade of freezing homes and shattered pipes, mutual aid networks sprang into action. This piece unpacks what a Just Recovery is and explains how a storm response that delivers rapid repairs lays the foundation for a more equitable society rooted in collective care and love.

This paper is a product of the work of West Street Recovery, The Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus, Northeast Action Collective and all of our co-creators and co-conspirators, be they individuals or organizations.
A just recovery means making America both believe and believe in these communities, and acknowledge their ability for self discovery, determination and leadership.

After three years of working on the Hurricane Harvey recovery, as survivors, as organizers and as disaster recovery professionals, our most fundamental conclusion is that it is impossible to have a just recovery to play out within an unjust society. At the same time, the steps taken to help communities recover from specific storms such as the recent 2021 Texas Freeze can be the building blocks to a more just society that would make storms less dangerous and reduce the inequity of their impact. Just recovery is not just a conceptual framework, it is a set of material outcomes that can only be reached through new processes within the disaster recovery apparatus, and which can only be won through pressure applied by new and renewed coalitions committed to environmental justice and anti-racism, and which takes place within a more just and democratic society writ large.

A just recovery rebuilds neighborhoods free of pollution with clean air, earth and water, and repairs homes so that they protect community members instead of endangering their lungs and elevating their stress levels. Justice driven home repair programs will require changing eligibility standards, so that Black and Brown people are not further marginalized through the legalese echoes of past race based exclusion, and where dignified housing is prioritized above ruthless efficiency and “pre-storm conditions.” Building healthy and dignified neighborhoods will guarantee access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, create job opportunities that are fulfilling and attainable. These future neighborhoods must include gathering spaces, and locally owned businesses and institutions that anchor neighborhood life and where intergenerational exchange of knowledge, traditions, and skills can flourish. A just recovery requires expanding our collective imagination to believe that the world we want to live in is possible.

As co-author Doris Brown says, “I want to be able to look up and teach my great grandsons the constellations; and I want to take their hands and walk down the street. All these buildings that used to be full of happiness are boarded up and deserted like a ghost town. I want to turn these abandoned buildings into beautiful housing, move the petroleum units and Family Dollars out, and turn it all to green. We have to teach each other about the beloved community and help the younger generation believe it’s possible.”

As the response to the Texas 2021 Winter storm unfolds, it is sobering but necessary to accept how very far we are from delivering the recovery we know we need. Marginalized survivors are well aware of the structural inequality the recovery apparatus currently reflects and reproduces, and use well known Houston neighborhoods to articulate how policies amplify the racial wealth gap. One study respondent explained about the Harvey Recovery:
“Be fair. I mean, don’t go to memorial area and rebuild them five, six hundred thousand dollar homes that people already got insurance on that people are already making money off of, and neglect the people that are living here from day to day.”

The increases in wealth levels of white communities following disasters found by Elliot and Howell 20181 debunks the idea that poor neighborhoods struggle to recover because the total pot of recovery money is insufficient. Instead, an honest account concludes that Disaster Recovery is a terrain in which white supremacy, in this case materialized in housing stock and economic wealth, is fortified and further entrenched. In this way, for people in NE Houston and other neighborhoods like it, disasters do not represent a cataclysmic disjuncture but an inflection within previously established arcs of injustice.

To arrest this trend and begin building the foundations of a just recovery we must immediately begin enacting the here-and-now solutions that marginalized disaster survivors demand2. As these changes are made, the recovery apparatus should always ask the big structural questions: Are we making changes that undo racism and counteract the anti-poor biases that characterize recovery? Are we centering the needs of impacted persons or the momentum of bureaucracy and institutions? If we do not reflect on our own processes and their impacts with radical honesty we will continue to “treat the symptoms but not the problems.”

Survivors of the Texas Winter Storm, many of whom also survived Harvey, are living in an ongoing disaster not confined to these extreme weather events. Unfortunately disaster recovery as a profession and practice does not yet accommodate this interpretation. The unwillingness to do so is captured in standards recovery to “pre-storm conditions” which assume previous conditions were acceptable or what residents “deserve,” and eligibility standards that create barriers for families who hold property in ways that do not reflect white middle class norms. The story arc of a sudden event and recovery that frames recovery work

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2 A full set of changes to Disaster Recovery processes are outlined in the set of recommendations below. They were developed by a team of Community researchers and WSR staff between February and November 2020
doesn’t match the reality of long running neglect, constant environmental risk, health stress and financial pressure that characterize people’s lives. As Doris Brown explains, 

“we’re living in disaster all the time. We have learned how to exist in disaster. We never really recover. Pollution, methane gas. It’s gonna take a lot for us to ever “recover”, to have a more equitable community. We need to solve those underlying problems.”

Because communities like Northeast Houston cannot recover through the set of programs and within the time frame created by “disaster recovery” we need to adopt a different approach which integrates disaster recovery into a broad array of ongoing services, mutual aid networks and efforts to build democratic community power.

The ongoing response to the Texas 2021 winter Storm carried out by mutual aid networks, including WSR, shows that programs rooted in: deep democratic governance, anti-racism, language justice, disability justice, and radical gender and sexuality inclusion, can and do deliver a more just recovery. But these norms are challenging to enact, and we have been building our capacity to do so over three years of organizing, hiring contractors, working alongside disaster survivors and learning how to share power, ideas and responsibility. This is not just about thinking and ideas, it is a set of material practices. Members of the WSR family were repairing each other’s homes and providing each other food and water before any formal responses began. Within days, WSR was making repairs that require technical sophistication and highly specified knowledge both in terms of construction and organizational process. But, the strategy we have adapted is one that governments with sufficient political will and courage could enact.

A just society would have programs to support dignified housing all of the time, and after a disaster a program such as this could be intensified and build on long running relationships of trust to assist survivors. This type of intervention would speed repair efforts and make disaster recovery more manageable since housing would start from better overall condition. The Harvey stories of families evacuating through toxic water that eventually kills them, shows that a just recovery requires improving environmental quality by closing dangerous facilities and more effectively regulating pollution. A just recovery also demands addressing the rapidly worsening climate catastrophe.

It will take years to build a just economy and eliminate climate injustice, but beginning work right away will demonstrate that the state and society writ large cares. Our research team believes this will go some way to address the widespread mental health crises that Harvey, Imelda, COVID and the Texas Winter Storm have caused. Community
As Karren Bakker (2006) argues in regard to water commons, "community requires exclusion." National health experts fear that the toll of increasing disasters might lead to a national mental health crisis. The damage of past disasters and subsequent neglect cannot be erased, but the lack of response or systemic change continues to cause harm. If the city, state, and civil society were more honest about the horrors of evacuation, loss of water access, and living without heat for days, widespread destruction, and dangerous living conditions that have persisted for years, maybe the political will could be generated to change these conditions, improving lives and limiting future injury through investment and programming.

This vision of ongoing social supports relies on imagining an effective, well-financed, and caring set of authorities from the government, non-profit sector, and civil society more generally, but little in survivors' experiences indicates that this is imminent. As Community Researcher Myrtala Tristan explained, "we can't depend on the city because they are never going to pay attention to us." The government and non-profit authorities are inaccessible, out of touch and illegible; as Community Researcher Mal Moses explained, "most people I interviewed have no idea of working with the government or city or non-profits, of how things are organized. They actually don't know." The only way to change this dynamic is for the government to be in ongoing reciprocal conversation with their constituents and adopt policies or create programs that ensure a baseline of health and stability from which all people can pursue having fulfilling and meaningful lives free from systemic risk. Following this most recent disaster, there have been steps in this direction that can give us hope. For example, Houston Council Member Dr Letitia Plummer has helped to coordinate rapid response mucking and County Commissioner Rodney Ellis has connected community organizations with thousands of liters of drinking water. However, the tension between the need for a massive increase in social programs and government support, and the lack of belief that this can ever occur on the part of survivors, is one that we cannot brush away.

Another tension is between centralization and decentralization. Centralization of recovery coordination, risk assessment, and mitigation, and regulation is clearly needed. Decentralization is the only viable way to increase responsiveness and program design specificity, but in no way guarantees sharing power. Decentralization through privatization reduces the (albeit limited) capacity to hold leadership accountable through elections or even public pressure. Community control is more promising, but most people do not belong to only one community and it's unclear how the boundaries of community would be drawn and enforced. We conclude that we need both central

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3https://publicintegrity.org/environment/hidden-epidemics/disasters-mental-health-crisis-wildfire-hurricane-flood-climate-covid/?fbclid=IwAR2YHq3hxxzVyk18M2iqeP0LfY3Kntv7c-pwBwS68Q-Vrjykwr7xwwjQ

4As Karren Bakker (2006) argues in regard to water commons, “community requires exclusion.”
and diffuse processes that lead to community control in the long run. As Doris argued, “If communities had our own supplies and own tools, we could take care of ourselves. People know what we need. If the city did their job, we’d be able to do ours.”

Disaster survivors know that all sectors of society will need to join in a broad coalition to build a just recovery. Because “there are no easy grounds for solidarity” building alliances rests on open dialog, trust and iterative improvement. As the abolitionist and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore says “Solidarity is something we must do again and again.” Business leaders, nonprofits and governments all have a role to play, but communities must be given the power to shape recovery. This is why, as we build towards the just world we envision, survivors argue that it is strategic to fight to improve each agency, program, process and department as much as possible and through whatever political and cultural tactics available. Focusing on eliminating disposability and building communities of mutual care will ensure that we are making these piecemeal changes in a way that aligns with a just recovery. We believe that piecemeal changes to disaster recovery which enable neighborhood based systems and include more and more people can build our collective capacity for, and broader application of, democratic governance and cooperative economic and care systems.

It is clear that these solutions will not occur without massive moral and cultural transformations. It is our belief that the best path towards these transformations is to give community members more power to envision and control recovery programs and then enact the dramatic changes they recommend, from closure of toxic plants to reparations. Following the recommendations of our community researchers, we should begin enacting these new strategies immediately, iteratively and at the greatest scale our capacity can accommodate as a way to build our societal ability to enact a just recovery on the scale which is truly needed in the future.

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5From a just recovery perspective, the city’s (which here stands in for governments in general) job is to protect communities and fund community efforts to take care of themselves and shape their worlds

Recommendations to Improve Disaster Recovery

**Evacuation and Preparedness**

*Emergency communications and evacuation plans should:*

1. Eliminate the need for people to encounter grave health risks in order to evacuate.
2. Include the development of local disaster warning system, shelters and neighborhood based evacuation points and networks.
3. Be well-practiced, tailored to different types of events and have built in contingency.
4. Meet the needs of specific and vulnerable populations.
5. Adapt to the specific needs of each neighborhood and build on the base of existing community assets.
6. Support communities and individuals to protect themselves in disaster.
   - Give clear and honest information - Honestly inform of the worst case scenario so residents have the ability to prepare and give clear recommendations.
   - Fund trainings in emergency skills.
   - Equip communities and individuals with supplies like boats, PPE, communications, high water vehicles, first aid, food, water, and clothing.

**Immediate Needs**

*Immediately after a disaster, resources such as food, cleaning supplies, PPE, and disaster response personnel should:*

1. Be deployed to the most vulnerable and most impacted neighborhoods.
2. Be easy to access at walkable predefined staging locations and available door-to-door to those unable to travel.
3. Require minimal or no application for access.

**Application Experience**

*The application process should:*

1. Be simplified & more accessible and oriented towards the goal of including as many people as possible:
   - Incorporate avenues such as door-to-door outreach that don't depend on technological access or social network connection.
   - Automatically approve baseline aid for those living in a flooded area.
   - Give aid in one, comprehensive amount.
   - Use information the state already has on income, home ownership, and address rather than placing the burden of proof on applicants.
   - Provide clear information and timelines.
2. Have intake staff and program managers understand the situations survivors are in by walking the streets and doing house visits.
3. Eliminate the main causes of denial by changing eligibility guidelines:
   - People with homes in heirship or with property debt should be made eligible for aid.
   - Aid must be given to people in the 100 year flood plain.
   - People should not be denied for deferred maintenance.
   - Aid must be accessible in any language and not require immigration status information.
4. Agencies must go beyond claiming universality to actively removing barriers to undocumented people.
**Temporary Housing**

*Temporary housing should:*
1. Be pre-planned, safe, dignified, accessible, and keep people close to their homes.
2. Be available until repairs are complete.
3. Not allow partial repairs to be substituted for temporary housing.

**Home Repair**

*The home repair process should:*
1. Make mucking and mold remediation services available quickly and coordinate with case management services including home repair intake.
2. Always be coordinated with temporary housing.
3. Always strive for a one-stage rebuild process rather than partial rebuilds.
4. Do partial repairs when they limit further damage or improve health.
5. Address issues predating the disaster.
6. Be part of ongoing home repair and maintenance programs.
7. Allow homeowners agency in the decision-making process.
8. Support the local economy through hiring from the neighborhood and buying from small, local businesses.
9. Make people who do self help eligible for reimbursement from HUD programs for their labor.

**Structural Barriers to Recovery: Class, Race, and Geography**

*The recovery apparatus should:*
1. Deliver more aid to poor and low income people & and do so more quickly:
2. Adopt an affirmative Anti-Racism and anti-poverty framework:
   a. Poor people and low income neighborhoods should be treated and seen to be worthy of the same services middle and upper class areas.
   b. Address historical and racial inequities through the capital made available in disaster recovery.
3. Be part of improving quality of life, home, and environment in low-income neighborhoods and eliminating ‘sacrifice zones’
   a. Build trust and disaster systems through more regular and open communication and support between governments and residents in non disaster times.
   b. Recovery must address pre-existing issues from historic disinvestment at the household and neighborhood level.
   c. Require industries and government responsible for causing and worsening disasters to finance recovery and change harmful practices.

**Place-Based Solutions**

*Temporary housing should:*
1. Recovery apparatus staff should live in or have a long running connection to the neighborhood in which they work in order to better understand applicant needs and experiences.
2. Locally hired staff must be empowered to reduce racial biases and lack of accountability in mass denials.
3. A just recovery requires flood prevention. Beginning at the scale of the neighborhood we should:
   a. Improve and maintain street drains & ditches.
   b. Improve and maintain bayous and flood water retention systems.
   c. Stop development that worsens flooding and contributes to climate change.
   d. Offer equitable buyouts.