

6/15/16

Today marks the end of my second week at WE ACT. My work has been concentrated on the Environmental Health Report Card for Northern Manhattan. The report card is version 2.0 of a previous Health Report Card that WE ACT released in 2011. The goal for the 2011 report card was to highlight the environmental conditions that led to negative health outcomes for residents of Northern Manhattan, as well as to demonstrate inconsistencies between data the city collected on the community's health, and the lived realities of the residents of Northern Manhattan.

Myself and another intern (Joanna) have been collaborating on redesigning the report card. In the original report card, WE ACT staff assigned the grades for the city data without a consistent system. After considerable discussion around the format of the original report card, Joanna, myself and David (our supervisor) decided that we wanted to bring the focus of the report card to community testimonies gathered through focus groups. We also agreed that we should make use of survey data that WE ACT collected in 2015 through information maps. I have been creating maps using ArcGIS to display survey responses overtop of city data for East Harlem, Central Harlem, West Harlem and Washington Heights/Inwood. In working on these maps, I am growing more comfortable with ArcGIS - a powerful tool for displaying data that I will be able to apply in diverse contexts. Joanna and I have also begun to plan focus groups for residents of Northern Manhattan.

Aside from the Environmental Health Report Card, I have been helping with coalition outreach, WE ACT's monthly membership meeting, and other tasks around the office. Last week I called members of the Coalition for Asthma Free Housing (CAFH) and encouraged them to attend a coalition meeting held on Wednesday at the Urban Justice Center. The meeting focused on the steps needed to get a hearing with the city council and city agencies concerning the passage of Intro 385b, a law targeted at increasing landlord responsibility for eliminating asthma and allergy-inducing agents in their buildings, particularly if their residents are affected by allergies or asthma. This last weekend was WE ACT's monthly membership meeting, where I met some of WE ACT's community members. They were holding elections for WE ACT's vision committee, which will consist of community members, and will work to develop and enact initiatives for the community alongside WE ACT's full time staff and interns.

I am one of at least 10 interns here at WE ACT. The intern community is of mixed age and experience, with one other student in my year, and several masters and PhD students from Columbia. It's a welcoming atmosphere, and interns share their projects with one another, with topics including energy democracy, the Environmental Health and Justice Leadership Training, and the Northern Manhattan Climate Action Plan. In particular, I've learned a great deal about efforts to establish micro-grid energy systems in Northern Manhattan using solar technology. The goal is part of the larger Northern Manhattan Climate Action Plan, and aims to provide

tenants with a self-sustaining energy source, so that they can maintain power during climate related disasters, and reduce their dependency on ConEd – the energy company with a monopoly on NYC’s power grid. It’s a complex initiative, as fire code restricts what companies can build on apartment rooftops. Additionally, because WE ACT wants to give control over the energy system to the residents of the apartments in which it is used, there has been debate about how to best transfer this control once units are constructed. Cooperative energy systems are one possible path. In energy co-ops, wealthy investors would pay for the installment of solar panels on apartment roofs and gain a tax-incentive from their investment. Then after five years, the solar panels would change hands to the apartment tenants. This system has its own legal complications.

The complexities of non-profit work are becoming increasingly evident to me. WE ACT is a part of dozens of coalitions, each consisting of organizations with slightly different goals, and ideas about how to get there. Even within WE ACT, different staff members vary in their visions for change and action plans. This is healthy, but it leads to a good deal of politics. I have also found that WE ACT relies heavily on interns. WE ACT has many initiatives, so staff are always off to meetings or conference calls, and interns are left to handle many of the informational projects (like the Environmental Health Report Card). This allows plenty of time to explore some of the issues facing the communities of Northern Manhattan.

Looking forward to my remaining six weeks at WE ACT, I will continue to work on map creation, and prepare for the focus groups. Part of the preparation for the focus group will involve training on how to lead focus groups. I look forward to this and other side projects in the coming weeks.