

7/15/16

A good deal has changed in my work at WE ACT since my first report. Most significantly, per the request of the directors at WE ACT, work on the Environmental Health Report Card has been stopped, perhaps indefinitely. Ultimately, the directors felt that the project was trying to accomplish too much with too few resources. The end result was that we were working on a report card that covered many health indicators, but failed to go into productive depth on any one of the indicators. After further discussion among those collaborating on the Environmental Health Report Card and the directors at WE ACT, we decided to focus our work on health indicators related to housing. This is in line with a larger campaign at WE ACT surrounding Healthy Homes, whose goal is to ensure “healthy and affordable housing for low and moderate income New Yorkers.”

WE ACT defines Healthy Affordable Housing as, “a home where low and moderate income New Yorkers live that is marked not only by the absence of health and safety threats in the built environment, but also one that supports physical, mental, social and environmental well-being.” To create and protect Healthy Affordable Housing, WE ACT is working on issues of lead paint and dust remediation, mold elimination, pest eradication and safe pesticide use, in addition to combating gentrification and construction-based tenant harassment. A particular of this work is coalition building, and WE ACT is a leader within the Coalition for Asthma Free Housing (CAFH). The CAFH is working to pass Intro 385B, a law to increase landlord accountability for ensuring asthma and allergy-free homes. There are several important meetings next week between the coalition, city departments and policymakers. I have been busy calling and emailing members of the coalition to ensure that we have a strong turnout for these meetings.

Next week I will be co-leading a Toxins and Treasures tour around Harlem for the City College Medical School pipeline program. The tour will introduce high-school students to environmental justice in Harlem. Joanna (fellow intern), David (supervisor) and I will also conduct our second focus group next week. With the shift in our focus to healthy and affordable housing, we’ve had to modify our focus group guides, which we had originally created for the Environmental Health Report Card. We held our first focus group around healthy homes this week. The turnout was smaller than we had hoped, but the participants gave valuable testimony. In addition, we were able to revise our focus group guide and questions after this initial focus group. During the focus group, I greatly enjoyed listening to the participants’ stories, and I now plan to take a class on journalism at Cornell.

I have learned some important lessons while at WE ACT, and my time here has certainly changed my view of social and environmental justice work. Last week I sat in on a meeting with WE ACT staff where they discussed the anatomy of social movements, and WE ACT’s place in the environmental justice movement. One topic that was repeatedly emphasized was the importance of institution building, either formal or informal. The Cornell Labor Institute was cited as an example of an

effective social movement institution, that brings together and trains labor leaders from around the country in collective bargaining, and movement building. This kind of unifying institution is missing from the environmental justice movement. I will be interested to see if WE ACT assumes this role in the coming years.

It's hard to believe that I only have two weeks left of my summer internship with WE ACT. I will be sad to leave the WE ACT community. The staff and interns share a common passion for social and environmental justice, while holding different perspectives on current events and structural injustices. I am looking forward to finishing up our focus groups, sitting in on CAFH meetings, and going to the first of WE ACT's summer movie series, which is a showing of the PBS Black Panther Party documentary.