



## COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

237

## The West End Revitalization Association (WERA)'s Right to Basic Amenities Movement: Voice and Language of Ownership and Management of Public Health Solutions in Mebane, North Carolina

Omega R. Wilson<sup>1</sup>, Natasha G. Bumpass<sup>1</sup>, Omari M. Wilson<sup>2</sup>, and Marilyn H. Snipes<sup>1</sup>

(1) West End Revitalization Association (WERA); (2) Land Loss Prevention Project

Submitted 20 September 2007; revised 11 April 2008; accepted 16 May 2008.

### Abstract

The West End Revitalization Association (WERA) cultivated strategies for assessing environmental hazards, managing stakeholder participation, and implementing corrective actions in three low-income African American communities in Mebane, North Carolina. The community voices evolved into language to drive WERA's "Right to Basic Amenities Movement" as a way to address health, legal, and quality-of-life disparities. The sustainability of this movement depends on communicating a solutions process with funding equity. Disparities are a way of life for impacted residents: dusty dead-end streets, contaminated drinking water, failed backyard septic tanks, and putrid odors. WERA organized on "common knowledge" for effective use of public health statutes and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. WERA's

board, staff, and volunteers exercised their voices in the language of government, public health, university research, and legal agencies. WERA's best practices and lessons learned may influence public policy in comparable communities in North Carolina and throughout the nation.

### Keywords

Basic amenities, historic pattern of discrimination, environmental justice community, collaborative problem-solving (CPS) model, community-owned and managed research (COMR), community-based participatory research (CBPR), environmental hazards, health risks, National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC)

This article is written as the community perspective for two recent articles published by *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*: (1) "Use of EPA Collaborative Problem-Solving Model to Obtain Environmental Justice in North Carolina,"<sup>1</sup> and (2) "The West End Revitalization Association's Community-Owned and Managed Research Model: Development, Implementation, and Action."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this community perspective paper is to focus attention on how activities of community-based organizations (CBOs) can translate common knowledge of health disparities in low-income, minority communities into effective ways to address environmental hazards and encourage effective policy changes.

For 14 years, WERA has been an activist for basic amenities in Mebane, North Carolina's historic African-American communities, primarily West End, White Level, and Buckhorn/Perry Hill. The language "we have the problem and we own the solution" had to be voiced to transform public health, legal, and quality of life disparities into WERA's "Right to Basic Amenities Movement."

WERA's successes are demonstrated through an innovative leading-edge community-facilitated model for reduction and removal of environmental hazards via legal compliance by local, state, and federal government agencies. WERA's credibility increased due to: (1) the development and use of its community-owned and managed research (COMR) model;



(2) establishing collaborative problem-solving (CPS) partnerships; (3) numerous presentations of research data and results in North Carolina and the country; and (4) policy recommendations on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) National Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

**IDENTIFYING ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS**

Mebane’s African-American residents have identified public health disparities for decades—dusty dead-end streets (asthma), contaminated drinking water (*E. coli*), failed backyard septic tanks (fecal coliforms), and putrid odors of the sewage treatment plant—within the West End community without access to sewer services (denial of basic amenities). It has been a way of life to be exposed to at-risk drinking water, and sewage in backyards, ditches, and streams, without cor-

rective actions by local government or public health agencies.

In 1994, when the plans for the construction of the 119-bypass/interstate<sup>3</sup> through the West End and White Level communities were made available, African-American residents became aware that federal laws prohibited the use of federal money to destroy houses, churches, and cemeteries in low-income minority communities without fair compensation. Those communities already had been denied basic amenities—safe drinking water, safe sewage disposal, and clean air. Toxic petroleum leaking from underground storage tanks that threaten well water and ground water has yet to be cleaned up. WERA organized communities against the planned 119-bypass/interstate that would compound public health risks. The challenge was to (1) produce complaints with

**Table 1. Title???**

The Occasion	The Voices	The Language Created
1. Anger and Frustration: Informal city parties on church grounds, at dinners, funerals, family reunions, in grocery stores, on the phone.	White people are going to do what they want anyway. They will come in here and kill all of us! I am tired of eating off the back porch like a dog! Don’t stir up trouble because we got enough problems as it is. What are basic amenities anyway? I am tired of green flies and sewage in my backyard.	Identified those willing to help plan and organize on their streets; confronted fears of racial retaliation; find leaders, organizers, supporters, and speakers.
2. Planning and strategy: Meetings every Tuesday evening for months to organize that are now quarterly board meetings	Can we do it? Don’t we need a lawyer to do this? How do you file an administrative complaint? Let’s file a lawsuit. Call the NAACP. I’m going to lose my damn job if I sign this! I am tired of coming to meetings. What choice do we have? Who’s bringing refreshments for the next meeting?	501(c)3 nonprofit; grants for capacity building and technical training; partnered with attorneys and university researchers.
3. Residents speak out: Participation—city council, planning meetings and transportation public hearings.	Why was the 119-bypass planned through black communities? How long has this been going on? Would white people want their houses destroyed by the bypass? Are you saying that if we don’t support the highway project we can’t get sewer services?	Civic engagement as WERA issues became a part of agendas for meetings; changed the pattern of whites speaking for black communities.
4. Challenging the culture of health disparities: Residents interviewed for newspapers articles and submitted editorials.	Slavery has been abolished in the U.S.; however, racism still creates an economic gain for those who choose to take advantage. <sup>18</sup> The terrorists in this case are the North Carolina Department of Transportation, and Mebane. <sup>19</sup> Did you see the article in today’s newspaper where a city councilman said our communities were like prisoners on death row?	Addressed question of discrimination causing health disparities; recruited support; and challenged elected officials to correct problem as an election issues; WERA website.
5. Celebrate positive outcomes: WERA annual awards dinners, strategy sessions with attorneys, local/national workshops and seminars.	Our pro bono attorneys have been invaluable. We would like to thank the students and faculty of the School of Public Health and City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. WERA’s research studies were funded by a grant from the U.S. EPA.	Collaborative problem solving; COMR model; scholarly research papers; and published articles.
6. Input on public policy: “Community Perspective” member of U.S. EPA NEJAC and “Goods Movement Workgroup.”	We need (1) local government compliance to public health statutes; (2) new language to promote management parity and funding equity in research grants for environmental justice communities; and (3) research that serves site-specific low-income minority communities and tribal territories.	Recommendations on federal policy to reduce diesel emission to improve air quality in environmental justice communities at ports and transport corridors.



documentation based upon public health statutes, (2) encourage community participation in public meetings that residents have been kept out of for over 15 years, (3) understand the difference between the U.S. EPA Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Water Act, and (4) learn how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects “black folks” rights when public health disparities result from disproportionate and adverse environmental hazards.

WERA’s board, staff, and impacted residents learned from officials at the U.S. Department of Justice that “a way of life” was actually the “denial of rights to basic amenities” of African-American citizens and taxpayers due to “historic patterns of racial discrimination.” WERA and residents had to translate “common knowledge” into a list of public health disparities and draft formal administrative complaints at the U.S. Department of Justice.

### OWNING THE FEAR FREES ENERGY FOR CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

It did not take long for African-American homeowners to realize that construction of the 119-bypass through west and north Mebane would mean destruction of their homes, churches, and cemetery. Anger, fear, and rage deteriorated into fearful “pity parties” on the church grounds, during anniversary dinners, at family reunions, and even at funerals (Table 1, Item 1).

How did WERA harness the energy of anger and rage to make the fuel for solutions? Frightened and frustrated residents found refuge initially in small gatherings with little structure, but that later grew into formal meetings of 90 to 100 residents. African-American homeowners and church-goers spent 4 years trying to “make friends” with local and state government officials by inviting them to WERA community dinners. A small group of residents met every Tuesday evening for several months to vent, organize, and plan strategy.

West End residents’ incorporation of the WERA as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 1995 moved some community voices to the language of “control your own destiny.” This helped to move people away from begging local government and transportation officials to please be fair, please treat black people like white people, and please comply with civil rights laws and public health statutes<sup>4</sup> (Table 1, Item 2).

In 1997, WERA became the first community development corporation in Alamance County, North Carolina. Community

development corporation technical assistance and capacity-building focused on building new houses for low-income minority residents. However, WERA’s primary focus grew from building a few new houses to saving hundreds of existing homes, churches, and land of residents who could document family ownership for over 100 years. The preservation and restoration of existing community property led, in 2000, to WERA’s training to become the first community-based environmental protection organization in central North Carolina. The U.S. EPA framework and guidelines for a community-based environmental protection involved improving public health by eliminating environmental hazards of established low-income and minority communities. “Environmental justice becomes the new battle cry” for WERA, according to *The Raleigh News and Observer* newspaper.<sup>5</sup>

WERA’s incorporation and maturation helped some residents to exercise a less emotional tone during personal verbal exchanges that began to emerge at formal public presentations at local government and transportation public hearings. In 1999, WERA began to exercise voices of grassroots strategy, the language of written documentation rather than verbal discord. What Mebane City Councilmen had called “accusations of racism” was supported with research necessary to file legal complaints under Title VI of the Civil Right Act of 1964 and Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898 of 1994<sup>6-9</sup> (Table 1, Item 3).

Organizing impacted residents from five African-American communities in two counties resulted in a “stakeholders’ board” that was not organized based on political correctness or diversity. Survivors of slave ancestors, in segregated places of worship, from redlined communities considered it a leap beyond reality to structure WERA’s board to include white businessmen, government officials, or blacks who do not “represent” the interests of impacted homeowners. Many blacks, like whites, did not want to deal with the sensitive “race card.”

Community-based selection and approval of technical, research, and legal partners uncovered more institutional barriers. After several failed attempts at developing politically correct alliances, WERA’s board, staff, and residents began to use their community “gut” intuition and “common sense,” then accepted or rejected collaborating partners based on their commitment to help change disparities in the face of racism



and vicious retaliation rather than just write about them. We fought our way through prestigious research professors who wanted black “guinea pigs” to support major government grants and income-producing publications. WERA wrote a formal letter to “uninvite” a research professor to the annual award dinner when, after a year, it became clear that data control, publication rights, and an opportunity to generate major research grants was his primary goal. WERA successfully identified well-known epidemiologists and planners who adjusted to community-based facilitation and management of research grants, and WERA maintaining control over data. The University of North Carolina at (UNC) Chapel Hill graduate students extended 6-week research projects into 7-year partnerships and acted as co-presenters at major academic and community workshops.

Several grant applications were rejected because WERA’s mission of preservation, stabilization, and revitalization for low-income minority residents involved “racial disputes.” A formal letter rejected WERA for not being an “environmentalist” organization that looks to address the greater environmental good for the world. WERA could not ignore the well-documented fact that numerous air, water, and soil pollutants flow from many environmental justice communities and then contaminate streams, river basins, and oceans “downstream.”

WERA’s partnerships were expanded with the support of an EPA Environmental Justice Small Grant from Region 4 (\$15,000 in 2001 to 2002)<sup>10</sup> and a U.S. EPA CPS grant (\$100,000 from 2004 to 2007) and other public and private grantors (N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, Environmental Support Center, Fund for Southern Communities, Next Generation of African American Philanthropists, and the N.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission). Memorandums of Agreement helped to establish committed collaborating legal, technical, and research partners.

WERA developed a COMR model that provided more effective results for implementation of solutions than the community-based participatory research method or the traditional university-led approach. The COMR approach allowed more parity in management, equity in funding, and confidentiality than the university-driven community-based participatory research model. COMR requires a CBO that is willing to develop the capacity to take charge with attorneys,

government officials, public health consultants, and research experts in the room.

### WERA FINDS ARENAS TO VOICE ITS RIGHT TO BASIC AMENITIES PRINCIPLES

The diverse voices of WERA’s board, staff, volunteers, and collaborating partners found credibility in successfully drafting documents for legal filings, writing grant applications, and designing posters and PowerPoint presentations on environmental hazards. WERA also facilitated intellectual exchanges at conferences, federal agencies, and universities.

WERA supporters religiously attended Mebane’s City Council meetings to voice concern over the impact of the planned 119-bypass, problems with sewer services, odors from the landfill, and a white developer’s plans to construct homes on top of the landfill. WERA initiated its annual dinners in November of 1995 and invited city councilmen, police officers, and other city employees. Dozens of uneasy family members gathered for fellowship, progress updates, and recognition of the positive efforts of residents as well as some Mebane city employees.<sup>11</sup>

During WERA’s November 1998 annual dinner, Mebane’s city manager interrupted the festivities and declared that the 119-bypass would be constructed as planned. Little progress came from 4 years of angry outbursts at city council meetings, transportation hearings, and visits to the North Carolina General Assembly, where many of our state representatives refused to speak with African-American voters. In February of 1999, WERA sought redress under constitutional law by filing administrative complaints, under Title VI of the Civil Right Act of 1964 and the Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898 of 1994, at the U.S. Department of Justice. The complaints caused a moratorium on construction of the 119-bypass and its environmental impacts on residents with substandard infrastructure, but initially did little to improve the disproportionate and adverse effects of existing environmental and health hazards.

Local public health officials and engineers would not document failing backyard septic systems that threaten drinking well and surface water. When WERA’s board members demanded, in 1995, paving of a dirt road in the section of the West End community that had been annexed into Mebane in 1988, a public works official incorrectly asserted during a city



council meeting that the road in question was already paved. That section of Jackson Street was finally paved over 5 years later with block grant funds. In February 2003, WERA launched its new website with the findings of leaking municipal sewer lines in addition to failed backyard septic systems that threaten drinking well water and contaminated community streams that feed into North Carolina's Cape Fear River basin.

On March 20, 2003, the front page of the *Burlington Times-News* newspaper reported that the United States had just bombed Baghdad, Iraq, and failing septic tanks in Mebane are “ticking time bombs.”<sup>12</sup> Very angry Mebane City councilmen, engineers, and attorneys called a meeting of African-American residents in the city council chambers in May 2003 and the city attorney declared that WERA's research results were “baloney.”<sup>13</sup> The City of Mebane submitted a 70-page rebuttal of WERA's research finding to the U.S. EPA's Office of Environmental Justice<sup>14</sup> (Table 1, Item 4).

The publicity around the controversy of Mebane's “historic pattern of racism” involving the denial of basic amenities prompted invitations for WERA's staff, board, and partners to speak at the North Carolina Environmental Justice Summit, the Department of City and Regional Planning, and the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. WERA provided annual progress reports on health disparities at the Annual Minority Health Conferences at the UNC-Chapel Hill. In May of 2003, WERA President and Project Manager Omega Wilson was invited to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, to be a presenter on “Promoting Community (Group) Rights in Research” at a national conference called “Dialogue for Improving Research Ethics in Environmental and Public Health.”<sup>15</sup>

At the 2004 and 2005 American Public Health Association conferences, WERA's staff and the UNC School of Public Health graduate students successfully presented a series of giant posters and workshops on the denial of basic amenities, related environmental hazards, the built environmental impacts, and research data representing only a small case study of third-world health disparities throughout much of the United States. In 2007, WERA's story of CPS and the COMR model was presented at public health forums in Paris, France, and Toronto, Canada, at the Community Campus Partnerships for Health Conference (Table 1, Item 5).

In 2007, WERA's President and Project Manager for COMR, Omega Wilson, was selected to represent the “community perspective” as a member of the U.S. EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council and add an environmental justice voice to the Advisory Committee for the Environmental Leadership Program—Southeast Regional Network. Wilson has been a member of the coordinating committee of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network. This includes serving as a resource person for training new U.S. EPA CPS awardees, giving a presentation at the EPA Region 9 Environmental Justice Air Quality workshop, in San Francisco, California. In the summer of 2007, AmeriCorps\*VISTA approved WERA as the only North Carolina sponsor site for volunteers with a focus on environmental awareness, monitoring, training, and fundraising to improve environmental health disparities impacting seniors, children, and low-income minority residents.

#### WILL WERA'S RIGHT TO BASIC AMENITIES MODEL FIND LONGEVITY IN INSTITUTIONALIZATION?

##### Outcomes

WERA's board, staff, community volunteers, and partners' combined efforts for 13 years transformed angry voices to community-facilitated strategies using the language of community organizing, transactional law rather than litigation, grant writing, and collaboration with research partners. Research data management and distribution encouraged the City of Mebane to apply for federal block grants for first-time sewer line installation in the West End.<sup>16</sup> The White Level and Buckhorn/Perry Hill homeowners have yet to receive safe drinking water or sewer services. Discontinuing the use of failed septic systems reduced human waste and *E. coli* in surface water and risk to drinking well water. Ditching and paving dusty dirt roads improved air quality, storm water management, and access for residents, school buses, and emergency vehicles. The moratorium on the construction of the 119-bypass and interstate highway has preserved millions of dollars in housing stock and century old churches and cemetery—priceless historic value from over 140 years—and inspired the effective use of the Civil Rights Act and public health statutes by disenfranchised African-American taxpayers and voters.



### Best Practices and Lessons Learned

1. Trained community monitors helped to review and rewrite questions for questionnaires, helping to replace scientific terms with more commonly used terms in WERA communities. We knew that a black neighbor knocking on the door asking about bad-tasting and -smelling drinking water and sewage in the backyard would get more positive responses than white college students “conducting an epidemiological survey on health impacts due to fecal coliforms and failed infrastructure.”
2. WERA staff members and university partners use a “tag team” approach for presentations. This level of community-based facilitation and solutions process management empowered grassroots organizers as experts not just research subjects. Collaborative production of posters, PowerPoint presentations, and graphics encourage a better understanding of written and spoken words that describe public health disparities and environmental risks.
3. Previously angry voices now serve on community advisory boards for block grants, transportation projects, and city planning. The highest compliment is having those unskilled voices and unclear languages grow into published documents that veteran and emerging public health organizations see as not only valuable, but innovative.
4. Innovation and successful outcomes created the opportunity for WERA’s COMR approach and CPS techniques to become a part of new policy recommendations for the U.S. EPA. In 2008, some of WERA COMR and CPS innovations were included in national environmental justice policy recommendations under “Community Involvement Plans” and “Community Facilitated Strategy” sections of the Goods Movement Workgroup, which addresses improving air quality by reducing diesel emissions in environmental justice communities near shipping ports and transportation corridors<sup>17</sup> (Table 1, Item 6).

### CONCLUSION: WERA’S “DAVID AND GOLIATH” STORY

The requests for WERA’s best practices and lessons learned are coming from grassroots leaders in large and small environmental justice communities, colleges and universities, law firms, and federal government agencies. WERA’s long-term strategic planning include two levels: (1) maintaining progress on local environmental justice issues, and (2) designing modules, publishing articles, providing technical assistance, and identifying major funding partners that will support a “Right

to Basic Amenities Collaborative Institute” in Mebane, North Carolina. WERA will be able to share with and train environmental justice CBOs throughout North Carolina and nationally. AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers are translating WERA’s diverse voices into written language, how-to manuals, and training modules as tool-kits for comparable communities with health disparities, researchers, and attorneys who seek groundtruthing and grassroots leadership in transactional law as alternatives to litigation.

Many collaborative partners believe that WERA’s effective methods in a small rural Southern city can also be as useful in large urban areas on approaches to translating health disparities and environmental hazards into living models for community-based learning, training, and development for more effective thinking and speaking out of the box.

For more information about WERA’s Right to Basic Amenities Collaborative Institute, contact Omega Wilson, West End Revitalization Association, PO Box 661, Mebane, N.C. 27302; Email: wera1usa@earthlink.net; Phone: (919) 321-1296.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Omega R. Wilson is a member of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) 2007. Natasha G. Bumpass is Communications Manager, West End Revitalization Association (WERA) and WERA’s AmeriCorps\*VISTA Sponsor Site Supervisor. Omari M. Wilson is a Staff Attorney at Land Loss Prevention Project, Durham, North Carolina, and grew up in the Environmental Justice Community, West End of Mebane. Marilyn H. Snipes is a Founding Member and Board Chairperson of West End Revitalization Association (WERA) as well as a life long resident of Environmental Justice Community, West End of Mebane.

The authors express appreciation for dedicated service by board members of the West End Revitalization Association (WERA), community monitors, and supporting environmental justice community residents. WERA’s staff and board members express sincere appreciation to partners that provided funding, research, and technical assistance in the implementation of the WERA U.S. EPA CPS Project “Right to Basic Amenities Model” and WERA’s COMR model, including environmental hazards assessment, management, reduction, and reporting.



## REFERENCES

1. Wilson SM, Wilson OR, Heaney CD. Use of EPA collaborative problem-solving model to obtain environmental justice in North Carolina. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*. 2007;1(4):327-337-\*\*\*.
2. Heaney CD, Wilson SM, Wilson OR. The West Revitalization Association's community-owned and -managed research model: development, implementation, and action. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*. 2007;1(4):339-349.
3. Alamance county urban area thoroughfare pan – adopted April 4, 1990 and adopted July 18, 1994. Burlington (N.C.) Times–News. 1994 Oct 2;A6–7.
4. West End Revitalization Association addressing concerns of community. The Mebane (N.C.) Enterprise. 1995 March 1;1.
5. Fighting a bypass: environmental justice—a new battle cry. Raleigh News (N.C.) and Observers. 2000 Sep 13:1.
6. Citizens hold meeting with DOT (NC) to discuss 119 bypass. The Mebane (N.C.) Enterprise. 1996 Mar 27:1.
7. 119 bypass project raises new questions for affected areas: 'environmental justice' an issue for the city's West End. The Mebane (N.C.) Enterprises. 1999 Feb 24:1.
8. Buckhorn Road residents want water and sewer: city says services will have to come from Orange county. The Mebane (N.C.) Enterprise. 2000 Mar 8:1.
9. Black neighbors object to white builder's plans for business. The Alamance (N.C.) News. 2000 Aug 17:1.
10. Failing septic systems and contaminated well water: African American communities in Mebane, North Carolina. West End Revitalization Association. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Small Grant Study (1 Oct 2001 to Sep 2002).
11. West End Revitalization Group awards member contributions. The Mebane (N.C.) Enterprise Section. 1997 Nov 6:B1.
12. City-resident relationship murky after report: report is available to read at local libraries. Burlington (N.C.) Times–News. 2002 Jun 11:1.
13. West End residents discuss annexation: residents expressed frustration with septic tanks. Burlington-NC Times–News. 2003 May 9:C1, C5.
14. Mebane denies racism: city wants a retraction of federal report. Burlington-NC Times–News. 2003 May 26:C1–2.
15. Promoting community (group) rights in research. In: Dialogue for improving research ethics in environmental and public health conference [abstract]. Providence: Brown University; 2003 May 21–June 2.
16. Grants improving neglected West End: federal funding pays for sewer line. Burlington-NC Times–News. 2006 Dec 7:B1.
17. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [homepage on the Internet]. NEJAC meetings. Available from: <http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/nejac/meetings.html>
18. Wilson O. Racism, officially [letter to the editor]. *Psychology Today*. 2002 Aug.
19. Coble LP. City committing acts of terror [editorial]. The Mebane (N.C.) Enterprise. 2002 Oct 9.