

The People's Environmental Center (PEC) addresses environmental health and justice issues exposed by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. By giving people direct access to information about environmental conditions, PEC helps people make informed decisions as they rebuild and re-establish their lives.

The Need for a People's Environmental Center

Flood waters from the hurricanes picked up and redistributed a variety of contaminants in all areas that flooded. The EPA and independent NGOs have undertaken a large-scale sampling and testing effort, and all agree that elevated levels of contamination are present in the soils and sediments. The most pressing environmental concerns are sediment contaminated with arsenic and diesel fuel compounds (throughout New Orleans), as well as other heavy metals, petroleum, pesticides, industrial chemicals, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) (in select areas), and molds. These contaminants carry a variety of health risks from long and short term exposure. Testing of EPA samples in residential New Orleans neighborhoods reveals soil contamination that is tens and even hundreds of times higher than state and federal screening levels.

Despite the large-scale sampling efforts already completed, no systematic sampling or testing is being conducted at the level of individual households, schools, daycare centers, etc., and there is no household level guidance on what to do when contamination is found. This means that residents do not have the information they need to take proper precautions and make informed decisions about moving back to their homes, rebuilding, and working in the area. Residents are left wondering if they are exposing themselves and their families to environmental health risks. People need

information about the environmental conditions they live in and they need technical assistance in deciding what to do if contamination is found.

Residents are actively seeking environmental testing of their property, but when they find out the cost of the laboratory work they give up because it is unaffordable. Local NGO's working in New Orleans communities also need access to a non-profit laboratory to assess the extent of household contamination and to monitor the long-term effectiveness of a range of remediation and restoration practices, including conventional techniques (e.g., material removal, scrubbing) and experimental techniques (e.g., phyto- and bio-remediation) at sites they have already established.

To address these complex environmental challenges, a new strategy is needed: community-based environmental centers that provide education, testing, and remediation directly to people. This new approach will strengthen and complement existing environmental institutions by extending their reach into isolated and marginalized communities. A People's Environmental Center gives people direct access to environmental information that affects them and increases environmental literacy on a widespread scale, including access to technical advisors.

Mission Statement

The People's Environmental Center is a community-based organization created to provide residents and environmental organizations with

- 1) direct access to non-profit environmental laboratory testing;
- 2) household level inspection and remediation assistance to help people remediate any contamination that is

discovered, restore their property, and monitor the results over time; and
3) workshops and training about how to inspect one's house, proper respirator use, how to take samples, safe work and cleanup practices, understanding environmental testing results, and environmental health impacts.

A Collaborative Beginning

The PEC began as a conversation among a group of academics, environmental professionals, and activists. The primary partners in this collaboration included members of the following organizations (in alphabetical order):

Advocates for Environmental Human Rights
Alliance for Healthy Homes (Wash., DC)
Common Ground Bioremediation Project (NOLA)
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice
Louisiana Environmental Action Network
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Boston)
Natural Resources Defense Council (Wash., DC)
9/11 Environmental Action (New York)
People's Hurricane Relief Fund (New Orleans)
Physicians for Social Responsibility (Louisiana)
State University of New York (Albany)
Subra Environmental (Louisiana)
Ujamaa Community Development Corp. (NOLA)
Virginia Tech University (Blacksburg)
Wentworth Institute of Technology (Boston)

As a direct result of receiving a Gulf Coast Ecological Health and Community Renewal Grant from Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, the PEC was able to obtain approximately 2000 square feet of space in Ujamaa Square, located in the historically African American neighborhood of Tremé, New Orleans. This is a centralized location that is accessible to residents of the New Orleans area. By being easily accessible and providing testing for individual homes and sites, PEC hopes to better understand the city's environmental health risks

and to help communities defend themselves against further degradation.

PEC's strong community orientation is achieved by collaborating directly with grassroots organizations, by hiring local residents, and by working side-by-side with other community-focused organizations such as People's Hurricane Relief Fund, New Orleans Survivor's Council, Common Ground Bioremediation Project, Replant New Orleans, and the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, among others. Several of these organizations will be using PEC office space to facilitate our joint work and to enhance the presence of a central environmental center in the community. PEC provides ongoing opportunities for student involvement by developing internship programs and volunteer opportunities. PEC has reached out to several local and national universities, including historically black colleges and universities in the New Orleans area.

Organizational Profile

PEC is a 501(c)(3) non-governmental organization sponsored by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) and directed by Dr. Earthea Nance, a professor of urban environmental studies and a licensed environmental engineer. PEC's programmatic activities are guided by an advisory board made up of environmental engineers, health professionals, environmental chemists, environmental lawyers, architects, professors, community leaders, and environmental activists.

PEC Projects

PEC strives to accomplish its mission through a project-oriented approach. Our first project, which took place over summer 2006, was the Returning Safely Workshop Series co-

sponsored with Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This series included workshops on environmental remediation, safe home cleanup, and public housing issues. PEC's second project involves working with the Natural Resources Defense Council to take samples from the New Orleans drinking water system and interpret the results. PEC's third project will involve taking soil samples from the Lower 9th Ward and working with residents to interpret the results and develop an appropriate action plan.

Sources of Support Received to Date

In early summer 2006, PEC received \$37,000 from the Gulf Coast Ecological Health & Community Renewal Fund, the largest such grant given to a grassroots organization. These funds cover Phase 1a of our start-up plan. Widespread interest in the establishment of the PEC in New Orleans is reflected in the donations that have already been received. Perkin Elmer, Inc., one of the world's preeminent laboratory instrument companies, recently donated a flame atomic adsorption instrument valued at \$25,000. In September 2006, PEC received over 35 boxes of donated laboratory equipment from a microbiology laboratory in New York. In summer 2006, five urban studies graduate students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) donated their time and expertise to PEC, organizing and implementing workshops on environmental education, designing PEC's website, creating a mailing list, and developing PEC's community outreach program. Over 150 undergraduate architecture students from Wentworth Institute of Technology donated their time and expertise to PEC last spring semester and this fall semester. These students are laying out PEC's laboratory, workshop, and office space and are designing an environmental remediation garden on PEC's lot to be installed in January 2007 and used as a

community demonstration site. Many more students, faculty, grassroots groups, and community members are expressing interest in becoming part of PEC's mission.

How to Contribute

The People's Environmental Center welcomes you to join the mission to empower New Orleans' communities to learn about the environmental conditions in their neighborhoods, to gain access to non-profit environmental testing services, and to obtain technical advice about remediation in cases where contamination is discovered. Please contact PEC directly or send contributions to:

IFCO / PEC
418 West 145th Street
New York, NY 10031

Contributions can be made using a credit card in person or by calling 212.926.5757.

The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) is proud to serve as fiscal sponsor for the People's Environmental Center (PEC). IFCO is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that has worked to advance the struggle for racial, social, and economic justice since 1967. Your donation to IFCO/PEC is fully tax-deductible.