

(Editor's Note: In the September Florida Journal of Environmental Health we reported on awards PACE Programs had received recently. This included the West Wabasso project, which won the Jim Parker Memorial Award. The award is offered jointly by ASTHO, the Association of State and Territorial Local Health Liaison Officials, and NACCHO to recognize and encourage initiatives that create or improve collaboration between state and local health departments. This year, the PACE EH collaboration between the Division of Environmental Health and the Indian River County Health Department (IRCHD) earned the award. To date, the PACE EH process has resulted in over \$1,000,000 dollars of completed and planned public improvements to the Wabasso community. Indian River County Health Department (IRCHD) PACE EH Project Coordinator Julianne Renk Price and CHD Administrator Jean Klein accepted the award.)

In My Opinion: West Wabasso PACE EH Assessment Project Update

Julianne Price

According to the 2000 census figures, West Wabasso consists of approximately 115 residents, 86 percent of which are black with a median household income of \$6,250. West Wabasso sticks out as an island of poverty in one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. I began working in the indigent community of West Wabasso in January of 2004. Residents repeatedly asked me why they should believe that my involvement in their community could be beneficial. They said they had been promised things before, but nothing ever materialized. This was apparent as I toured the community; however, I did not understand their mentality until I immersed myself in the struggle to improve the third-world living conditions that existed for some residents. The obstacles the residents of West Wabasso had encountered were appalling and there was a definite need for an environmental health evaluation through the Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE EH). I had high hopes that PACE EH could make a huge difference in improving the quality of life for these people.

This led me to ponder the issue of whether we have an obligation in such communities to improve environmental health issues - regardless of whether or not they are part of our programmatic structure. Some people argue that issues such as abandoned houses, drug trafficking, lack of affordable housing, street lighting, lack of paved roads and sidewalks, etc. are not environmental health-related issues; however, I have seen first hand how all these issues are related to environmental health.

For example, lack of paved roads and sidewalks make it difficult for people to go out into their neighborhood and exercise. Street lighting makes people feel safer, and has decreased the amount of drug trafficking. Demolishing abandoned and/or condemned homes decreases safety hazards.

An example is that we have demolished six homes in West Wabasso. Two were crack houses. A few harbored rodents which can be vectors for disease. The rest were unfit to live in, so we demolished them and got residents involved in programs to rebuild new houses. I helped organize a group of 350 teenagers from all over the country called "World Changers" to come to West Wabasso in July to perform minor exterior repairs to homes. The end result was that the neighborhood was beautified, but this benefit was compounded by the pride that residents felt in their homes. Other residents were inspired to clean up their yard and the media frenzy from the event brought a lot of aid to the housing situation in West Wabasso.

After almost two years of fighting in the trenches alongside the residents of the West Wabasso community, we have opened communication lines with the county through monthly community meetings. The open communication lines, combined with tours of the area have resulted in an \$825,000 grant that the Indian River County Utilities department wrote to connect and run water lines throughout the community so that residents will not have to live with "brown" water from shallow wells. The number one issue that the community identified was safety,



and they identified streetlights as a solution. Earlier this year they received streetlights. Septic problems plagued this community for fifty years, the area was segregated and a local man crafted septic systems for residents. These ancient, homemade septic systems are literally crumbling and some are in close proximity to potable wells. During October, we received official news that we had secured a \$40,000 grant that will replace the ten worst systems that have been identified. Other issues identified and addressed were drug trafficking, lack of paved roads and sidewalks, abandoned homes, park improvements, and lack of affordable housing. Now, stakeholders from the community have specific action plans to tackle each issue and if you drive through this community you can easily see the improvements to the area that have resulted from the PACE EH process. The bottom line here is that we do have a role in improving the environmental health in communities and we CAN make a difference in improving the

quality of life for people. Through grants such as PACE EH we have a vehicle to work and think creatively with communities towards this goal.

For more information on the department's PACE EH project can be found at <http://www.myfloridaeh.com/programs/PACE-EH/PACE-EH.htm>)



About the Author:

Julianne (Renk) Price is an Environmental Specialist at the Indian River County Department's division of Environmental Health. She was previously with the Washington State Park Recreation Commission as a Park Ranger Assistant at Millersylvania State Park, and also worked for Raytheon Technical Services, Inc., in Hohenfels, Germany, as an Operations Administrator. She is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Asheville with a B.S. in Natural Resource Management from the Environmental Studies program. She currently serves as a PACE EH coordinator and her responsibilities also include inspections and permitting for Florida Department of Health. She identifies her most challenging and rewarding experience as working with the PACE EH in West Wabasso community



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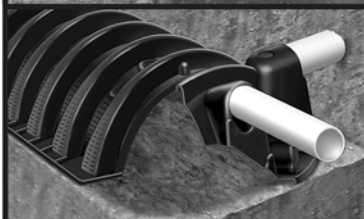
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