

Council Member Letitia Plummer At-Large 4

# NEWSLETTER

## Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit

5005



# Special Edition







Dear Friends and Neighbors,

I am happy to present you with a special edition of our newsletter. In April, my At-Large 4 office organized the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit, a remarkable three-day event that brought together residents, government officials, advocacy groups, and experts. This summit stands as a powerful testament to the strength of collaboration and the urgency of collective efforts in addressing the critical issue of cancer clusters in the Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens areas.

The summit represented the culmination of years of work initiated by my team and me back in 2020. I must emphasize the pivotal role played by my exceptional At-Large 4 team in orchestrating this event. Their unwavering commitment to research, tireless meetings, and relentless policy work established the foundation of the summit. It is through their dedication that we can confidently anticipate a lasting impact in the fight against environmental injustice in the Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens areas.

The success of the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit would not have been possible without the unwavering dedication of the stakeholder groups who have been at the forefront of this fight since 2015. Their tireless advocacy efforts laid the groundwork for the crucial testing that has taken place thus far. It is their hard work and unwavering dedication that have compelled the City of Houston, the County, and even the Environmental Protection Agency to become actively involved, seeking further investigation into this pressing matter.

On this note, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our special guest, Dr. Stephanie Miles Richardson from the Morehouse School of Medicine. Her invaluable expertise enriched the summit, and she announced some incredibly exciting news that will undoubtedly leave a profound impact. I encourage you to continue reading to learn more.

As we move forward, there is a wealth of news and updates from April that our office eagerly awaits sharing with you in our next Newsletter. We strive to keep you informed and engaged as we work towards a safer and more just community.

Sincerely,

Council Member Letitia Plummer, DDS





## BACKGROUND

# Fifth Ward Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit Brings Together Experts and Stakeholders to Address Community Health Concerns

The Fifth Ward Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit took place from April 24-26, bringing together a diverse group of experts, government officials, stakeholders and special guest, Dr. Stephanie Miles-Richardson, Morehouse School of Medicine, to discuss the issue of cancer clusters in the Fifth Ward community.

Over the past few years, the Fifth Ward and Kashmere Garden communities has been grappling with a high incidence of cancer cases that has raised concerns about factors that may be contributing to this trend. As a result, the summit will provide a platform for dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, including community leaders, health professionals, environmental experts, and policy makers.

The summit features keynote speakers, panel discussions, and interactive sessions that covered a range of topics related to cancer clusters, including environmental health, community engagement, and policy solutions. Stakeholders and residents had the opportunity to share insights, best practices, and innovative ideas that could help us better understand and address the issue of cancer clusters in the Fifth Ward community.

Special guest, Dr. Stephanie Miles Richardson of Morehouse School of Medicine, who is an expert in environmental related health issues, particularly Cancer, was invited by Council Member Plummer to join the Summit. A distinguished researcher and academic in the field of public health, Dr. Miles Richardson has dedicated her career to advancing health equity and reducing health disparities. Her contributions have been recognized through numerous awards and honors, including the prestigious National Institutes of Health Director's Award for her work on reducing disparities in cancer outcomes.



## PARTICIPANTS



Coalition of Community Organizations shares resources to address social inequities and injustices. Their climate, health, and equity work is most focused on supporting environmental injustice, disaster recovery, and fair housing in Houston and Harris County, Texas.



Community Lattice is a social enterprise that helps communities understand and optimize land revitalization programs, like EPA Brownfields, as a pathway to environmental and climate justice.



Environmental Defense Fund's mission is to preserve the natural systems on which all life depends. They work to solve the most critical environmental problems facing the planet, in concert with other organizations — as well as with business, government and communities.



Impact is a community organization made up of current and former residents of Fifth Ward Neighborhood who advocate for the robust cleanup of the creosote contamination plume that originates at the Union Pacific Railroad Site on Liberty Road in Houston, Texas.



They are the third largest service provider of free legal aid in the United States. They provide services to the community and cover many practice areas, including consumer, landlord tenant, foreclosure, public benefits, environmental justice, disaster recovery, tax relief, fair housing, family law, domestic violence, sexual assault, crime victim rights, veterans benefits, and more.



The mission of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.



The Robert D. Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University was launched to address longstanding issues of systemic inequality and structural racism that cause disproportionate pain, suffering and death in Black and other people of color communities.



Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM), located in Atlanta, Ga., was founded in 1975 as the Medical Education Program at Morehouse College. In 1981, MSM became an independently chartered institution. MSM is among the nation's leading educators of primary care physicians and was recently recognized as the top institution among U.S. medical schools for our social mission. Their faculty and alumni are noted in their fields for excellence in teaching, research and public policy.



The mission of the Houston Health Department is to work in partnership with the community to promote and protect the health and social well-being of Houstonians and the environment in which they live.

## Council Member Letitia Plummer, Organizer of the Summit



We were honored to bring together such a distinguished group of experts and community leaders for this

important event. Our goal was to foster dialogue, build relationships, and inspire concrete actions that can make a real difference in the lives of the people of the Fifth Ward and Kashmere Garden communities. I have been working on this issue since early 2020, and my team and I have put in many hours to converse with community members, elected officials, and experts behind the scenes. Our efforts include over a thousand hours of calls, research, and policy drafting. We established a partnership with the Morehouse School of Medicine, which has led to the participation of one of the most renowned experts in the field of cancers and environmental issues, Dr. Stephanie Miles-Richardson. It was honor for us to have such an esteemed expert bring her expertise to our city.



# Council Member Plummer and Local Leaders Discuss Cancer and Environmental Justice in Fifth Ward

## PRESS CONFERENCE

On April 24th Council Member Plummer, elected officials, experts and a group of local leaders addressed the media regarding the issue of cancer and environmental justice in Fifth Ward. The three-day summit aimed to listen to residents, understand the challenges they face, and work together to develop a path forward.

Council Member Plummer began by acknowledging the significant emotional toll cancer takes on individuals and families. Anxiety, depression, and uncertainty about the future are just a few of the many challenges those diagnosed with cancer face. Moreover, financial stress is also a factor due to the impending medical bills and other expenses related to cancer treatment.

Next, County Attorney Menefee discussed how multiple people in a single household had been diagnosed with cancer. This was happening in too many households, and he emphasized that if this were the case in River Oaks, a solution would have been found by now. Attorney Menefee's office is focused on fixing the contamination issue.

Special Guest Dr. Miles-Richardson of Morehouse School of Medicine spoke about getting justice for the residents. Dr. Richardson stressed the importance of finding a way to compensate the community for their suffering and providing resources for those who have been affected by this issue.

Dr. Robert Bullard from the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University gave a powerful speech about the importance of justice. He emphasized that justice delayed is justice denied and that too often and too long,

black communities, brown communities, and poor communities have to wait for justice. He stated that companies often play a waiting game, hoping that people will die, leave, or be forgotten.

Kathy Blueford Daniels, HISD trustee, and resident of Fifth Ward spoke about the impact on children, especially students. She stressed the importance of finding a solution quickly to protect the children and give them a safe and healthy environment in which to learn and grow. Latanya Payne spoke about wanting justice for her 13-year-old son who passed away from cancer. She stated that his opportunity to live a full life was stolen from him when cancer cut his life short.

Reverend James Caldwell, founder of the Coalition of Community Organizations, stated that he had spent over six decades as a resident of Fifth Ward and could remember the smell. He emphasized the need for sensible solutions for the residents and the importance of holding the responsible parties accountable.



Barbara Beal, who was diagnosed with lung cancer, said that the area needed to be cleaned and revitalized. She emphasized that this issue needed to be addressed as soon as possible to prevent further harm.

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee stated that the cancer cluster was a growing issue and the boundaries of it are unknown. More areas may be contaminated, and more residents impacted than originally thought. She promised transparency to the people through the investigation that the Environmental Protection Agency has asked Union Pacific to conduct.

In conclusion, the leaders emphasized the need for justice and accountability for the residents of Fifth Ward. They stressed the importance of finding a solution quickly to prevent further harm and give the community the safe and healthy environment they deserve. The three-day summit provided a platform for residents to voice their concerns, and the leaders committed to working together to develop a path forward.

# Leadership Events

## LEADERSHIP LUNCH KICKS OFF CANCER CLUSTER COLLABORATIVE SUMMIT FOR FIFTH WARD AND KASHMERE GARDENS

A leadership lunch was held on April 24th to introduce stakeholders and community leaders to Dr. Stephanie Miles-Richardson, a key speaker at the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit. The luncheon provided an opportunity for the attendees to discuss the challenges surrounding the cancer cluster in Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens and the impact it has had on the residents in the area.

It was an excellent opportunity for the attendees to meet Dr. Miles Richardson and learn more about her work in the environmental health and justice space. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee also joined the luncheon to learn more about Dr. Miles Richardson and her work in the field.

The attendees stressed the importance of finding a solution quickly to prevent further harm and give the community the safe and healthy environment they deserve. They also emphasized the need for justice and accountability for the residents of Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens.

The leadership lunch was a crucial first step in bringing together stakeholders and community leaders to discuss the cancer cluster issue in the community and was a perfect kick-off to the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit.



## LEADERSHIP BREAKFAST CALLS FOR A UNITED APPROACH

The leadership breakfast was a critical event for community organizations focused on addressing the Cancer Cluster.

One of the key takeaways from the meeting was the importance of collaboration among the organizations. Council Member Letitia Plummer, who created the framework for organizations to collaborate, stressed the importance of sharing knowledge. She emphasized that for far too long, organizations had worked in silos, and there was power in partnerships and collaborations. By working together, the organizations could leverage their respective strengths, share resources, and ultimately achieve more significant impact.

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee's presence at the meeting was a significant boost for the community organizations. Her support for their work, coupled with the funding that is available for such organizations, provides hope for the future. She reiterated her commitment to environmental justice and pledged to do all within her power to ensure that the organizations receive the necessary support to complete their work in an impactful manner.

Overall, the leadership breakfast was a great opportunity for community organizations to come together, share their experiences, and chart a way forward in the fight against environmental injustice.



# Exploring the Rich History and Environmental Challenges of Houston's Fifth Ward

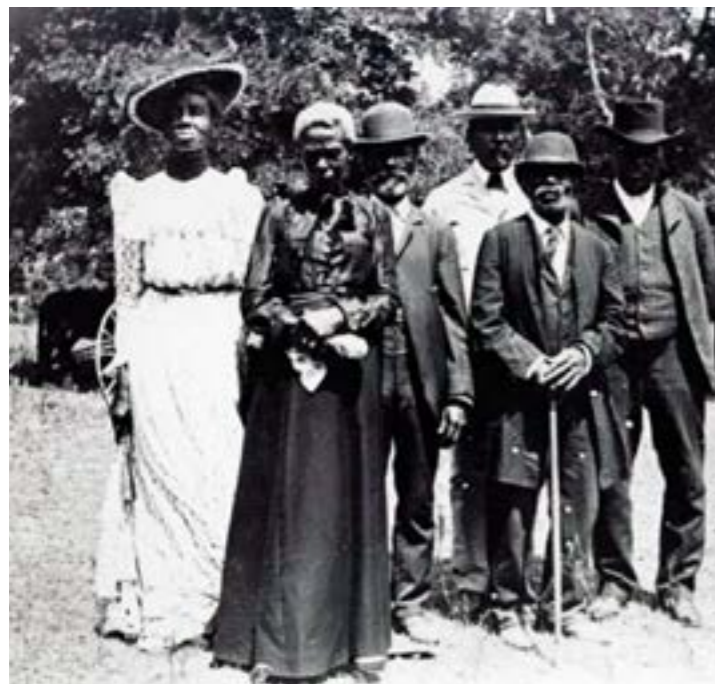
The Fifth Ward, a vibrant neighborhood in Houston, Texas, boasts a fascinating history shaped by waves of settlement, economic booms, devastating fires, and a flourishing African American community.

Part of the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit was for people to understand Fifth Ward's rich history. Led by Reverend Caldwell, a respected figure in the community, a tour of the Fifth Ward provided a glimpse into its past and shed light on the environmental challenges faced by its residents, particularly concerning the alarming incidence of cancer cases in the area.

Before the Civil War, the Fifth Ward was sparsely inhabited, with few residents calling it home. However, following the emancipation of enslaved individuals, freedmen sought new opportunities and settled in this area. In 1866, the community elected an alderman to represent them in the Houston city government, and thus, the Fifth Ward came into existence.

The 1880s marked a period of growth for the Fifth Ward, triggered by the establishment of repair shops for the newly built Southern Pacific Railroad. This development brought employment opportunities and attracted new residents to the area. Unfortunately, the ward faced setbacks in the form of devastating fires. In 1891, the Phoenix Lumber Mill fire struck, followed by another destructive fire in 1912 that ravaged numerous houses, boxcars, oil tanks, plants, and even St. Patrick's Catholic Church and school.

## ECONOMIC BOOM



Over time, the Fifth Ward's demographic makeup underwent significant changes, with the African American population becoming the majority. In Frenchtown, a neighborhood within the ward, around 500 individuals of French and Spanish descent from Louisiana formed a close-knit community in 1922. Black-owned businesses thrived in the area, including pharmacies, dental offices, an undertaking parlor, theaters, and barbershops. Lyons Avenue became a bustling hub for commerce, housing over forty black-owned enterprises by 1925.

Working-class African Americans found employment opportunities within walking distance of Fifth Ward, primarily in industries such as the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Houston Ship Channel. Phillis Wheatley High School, located within the Fifth Ward, emerged as one of the largest Black high schools in America during the 1920s, with thousands of students and numerous educators.

**1930s WITNESSED** the emergence of additional businesses, including printing plants, photography studios, and the renowned Club Matinee, later known as the Cotton Club of the South. These establishments not only contributed to the local economy but also added to the cultural vibrancy of the Fifth Ward.

## FLOURISHING OPPORTUNITIES

# PAST

# PRESENT



Unfortunately, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Fifth Ward experienced a decline marked by economic hardships and diminishing opportunities. However, Reverend Caldwell shed light on a pressing issue that plagued the community in recent years—the prevalence of cancer among residents. Families within the Fifth Ward began noticing a disturbing pattern of multiple members suffering from this debilitating disease. They recognized that the nearby rail yard could be a potential link to the alarming cancer rates.

The Fifth Ward in Houston, Texas, carries a rich history shaped by the resilience and contributions of its residents. From its early settlement by freedmen to the flourishing African American community and the challenges faced in recent years, the Fifth Ward has weathered numerous storms. Reverend Caldwell's tour not only highlighted the historical milestones but also shed light on the pressing environmental concerns impacting the community. Efforts to address and mitigate the cancer rates in the area are vital to ensure a healthier and prosperous future for the Fifth Ward and its residents.

## DIMINISHING



## CANCER



## DISTURBING



## DEBILITATING





# The Cancer Cluster Collaborative Townhall: A Forum for Environmental Justice

On the evening of the 24th of April, residents of the city's Fifth Ward gathered for a town hall meeting to discuss a pressing issue in their community: environmental contamination and its potential link to a cluster of cancer cases.

The event featured a panel of experts from a range of disciplines, including Dr. Miles-Richardson, Stephen Williams, Dr. Grace Lewis, Amy King, Danielle Getsinger, and Reverend James Caldwell. Each speaker brought a unique perspective and expertise to the conversation, providing valuable insights into the complex issues at play in the Fifth Ward.

Amy Dinn, from Lone Star Legal Aid, spoke about IMPACT Fifth Ward, an organization that is supported by Lone Star Legal Aid. They represent and partner with them to support their legal fights. Amy Dinn spoke on the work that IMPACT does in the community. The goals of IMPACT are to address legacy contamination of groundwater and the soil related to the Houston Wood Preserving Works site owned by Union Pacific Railroad. Union Pacific has been seeking a Hazardous Waste Permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality that will provide a plan for cleaning up the site. IMPACT has been engaged on TCEQ Permitting process since its formation in 2018.



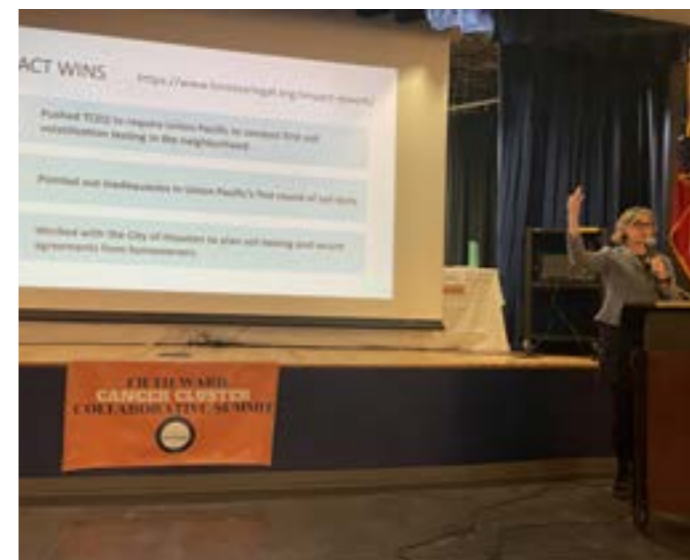
Dr. Grace Lewis, an environmental epidemiologist from the Environmental Defense Fund, discussed the work being done in the Fifth Ward to address environmental disparities and health inequities. After Hurricane Harvey, the low-income or neighborhoods of color faced disparities. These neighborhoods are most affected. The Environmental Defense Fund received funding from Houston endowment to start the data to action program to address these long-standing disparities and environmental issues. They work with community leaders and start various advocacy programs. Their Environmental Justice Community Action Plans address legacy pollution, climate hazards, food deserts, health disparities, disaster planning and response, education and more! Community-based organizations and community leaders define community priorities and how they would like to see solutions implemented. They make data actionable through collaborations with local public health and pollution control partners. Danielle Getsinger from Community Lattice showed the data they had collected in the area and how the data could be used for brownfields planning. Brownfields are abandoned, idled, or underused industrial and commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also presented



on the roles and responsibilities of federal, state, and local government organizations, as well as the major investigation work activities, including Neighborhood Vapor Intrusion Investigation, neighborhood soil sampling, and former HWPW site soil sampling. They discussed the timeline for the investigation.

Residents had the opportunity to ask questions and provide comments to the panel. Many expressed their frustration and exhaustion with the slow pace of progress and the lack of solutions. The event highlighted the urgent need for action to address environmental contamination and its impact on public health, particularly in low-income communities of color where residents are often most affected. The Cancer Cluster Collaborative and its partners continue to work towards finding solutions and ensuring that the voices of affected communities are heard and represented in decision-making processes.





# The Cancer Cluster Collaborative Breakout Session: A Platform for Community Engagement

The Cancer Cluster Collaborative recently held a Breakout Session in Houston's Fifth Ward, giving residents the opportunity to meet with stakeholder organizations and ask questions directly. The event was interactive and aimed at providing residents with clarification on the environmental contamination issue and the potential links to cancer cases in the area. The stakeholder organizations were instrumental in bringing the cancer cluster to light and forcing government organizations to pay attention to the area.

The organizations present had been fighting against Environmental Injustice for a while and, in particular, the Cancer Cluster. The Breakout Session provided a platform for residents to engage with these organizations, ask questions, and gain insight into the ongoing efforts to address the contamination issue.

Residents moved from table to table to ask questions of the experts. The Stakeholder organizations were seated at tables and were ready to engage with residents. The evening was filled with rich discussions around the map of the contaminated site. Residents pointed to locations where sick relatives lived, where former sick neighbors lived, and where they lived. Former railyard workers also shared their interesting stories and information.

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**One of the highlights of the evening was the solutions that residents identified.**

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While some residents expressed their desire to leave Fifth Ward and the contaminated area, there were others who wanted the area to be cleaned and made safe. This was their generational home, the only place they knew, and they did not want to leave. It was important to hear what solutions the residents wanted.

The Breakout Session highlighted the importance of community engagement and the need for stakeholders to hear from residents directly. The event allowed residents to voice their concerns and frustrations and provided an opportunity for organizations to understand the impact of the contamination issue on the community.

The Cancer Cluster Collaborative has ensured that the voices of affected communities are heard and represented in decision-making processes. The Breakout Session was an important step towards achieving this goal.





# The Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit: Building Trust and Creating Solutions for Environmental Justice in Houston



**T**he Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit brought together stakeholders, experts, and elected officials to address environmental justice issues in the Cancer Cluster area. The summit was a huge success, providing a platform for those affected by the issue to share their stories and solutions they wanted.

Council Member Letitia Plummer, At-Large 4, organized the summit with a specific goal in mind: to connect impacted communities with experts who could help them understand the technicalities surrounding the actions taken by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the City of Houston, and others. “My goal was to ensure that those affected had a voice and that their voices were heard,” said Council Member Plummer.

One of the key outcomes of the summit was the announcement of a collaboration between Dr. Stephanie Miles-Richardson, a renowned expert in environmental justice and cancer, Council Member Plummer, and grassroots organizations advocating for impacted communities. This partnership will harness the expertise of the Center of Excellence on Climate and Environmental Health at Morehouse School of Medicine, which is committed to working with Cancer Cluster Collaborative organizations to specifically address environmental justice in the Cancer Cluster area.

**“MY GOAL WAS TO ENSURE THAT THOSE AFFECTED HAD A VOICE,”**

Another significant development was the additional partnership between Texas Southern University’s Bullard School, which will play an important role in addressing historical inequities sensitively and rebuilding trust within BIPOC communities.

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee has pledged to maintain an active engagement with EPA Administrator Regan to ensure that residents in the Cancer Cluster are fully informed about the testing that will be carried out. She has also committed to bringing in additional resources to the area that will enhance the quality of life for the residents in whatever solution they decide is best for them.



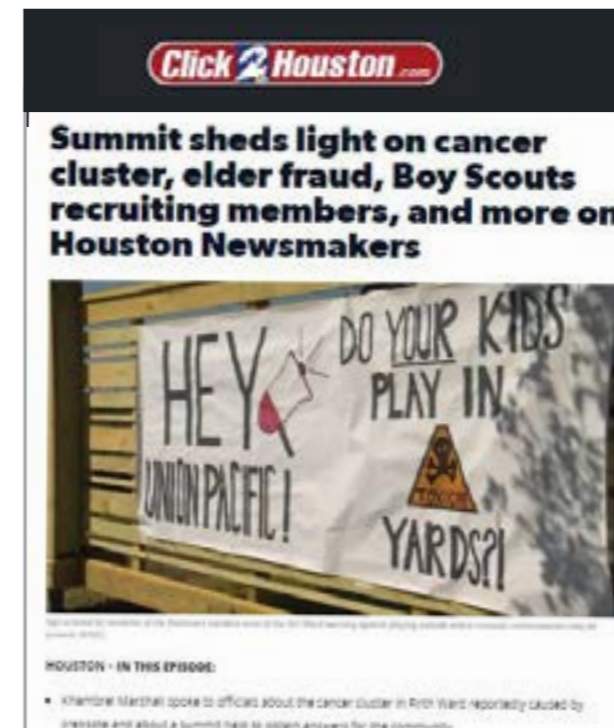
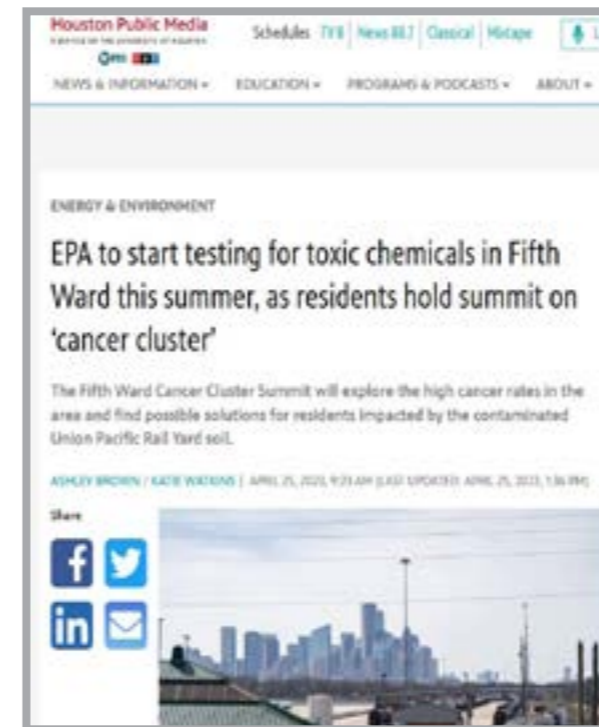
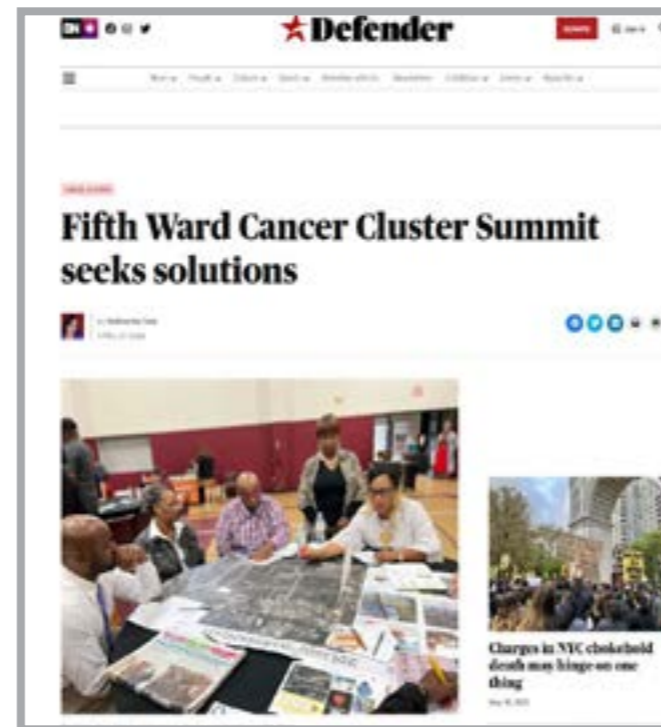
The EPA reiterated its commitment to focus on the Houston Wood Preserving Work site (HWPW) and the legal agreement it entered with Union Pacific in February 2023, which requires the investigation of site-related impacts in the surrounding neighborhoods. The EPA will track the contamination from the source and determine its extent in the neighborhood, assess the risk to the public, and determine if a clean-up is necessary.

The success of the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit highlights the power of collaboration and the commitment to creating a just and equitable environment for all. The ongoing work aims to develop real solutions for the impacted communities.

**The summit was a platform for building trust and relationships, and the work will continue to create and achieve goals. A report outlining the background, process, structure, and outcomes will be shared with policy makers within the next ninety days.**



# How the Cancer Cluster Collaborative Summit Reignited Attention on Environmental Justice in Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens



**Watch/read at:** [www.houstontx.gov/council/4/media.html](http://www.houstontx.gov/council/4/media.html)





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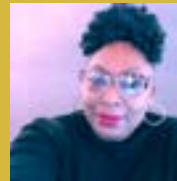
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