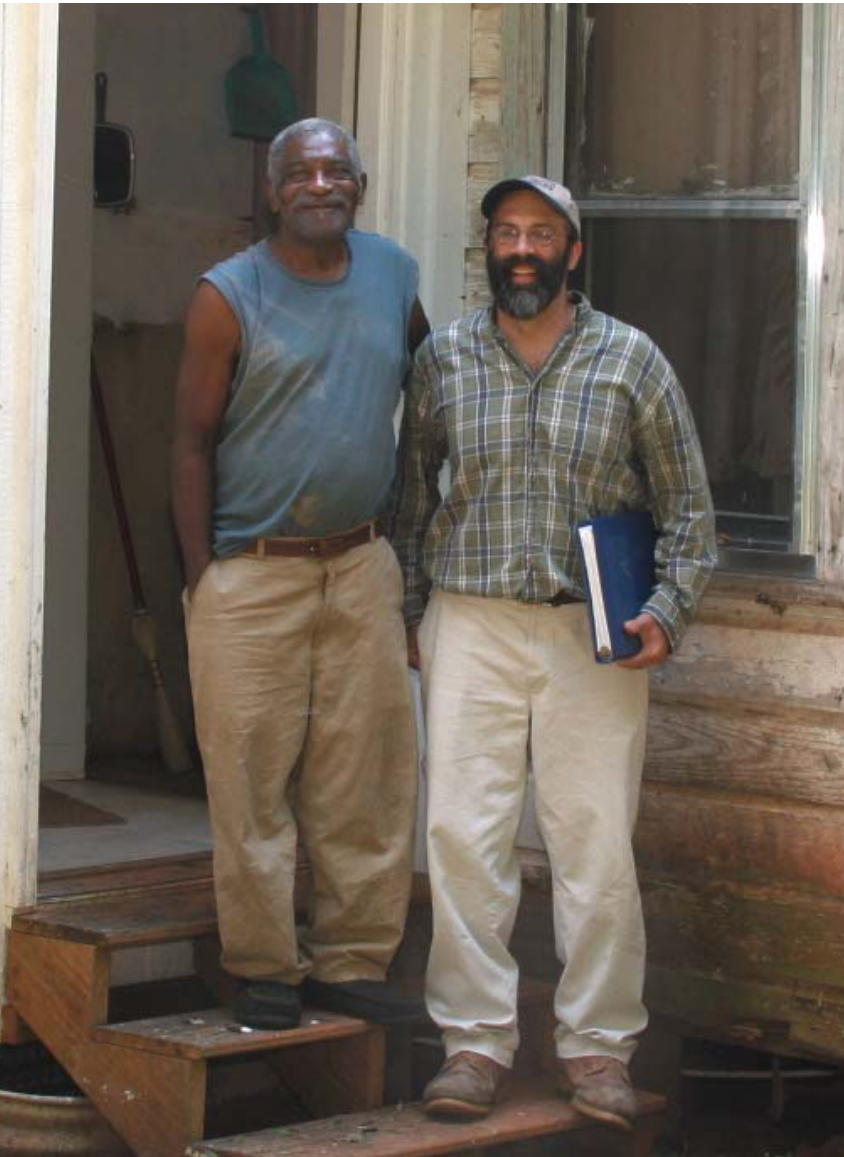


Grassroots organization takes on rural North Carolina's most daunting challenge: substandard housing



N.C. Rural Communities Assistance Project Executive Director Peter Kittany, right, checks on Stephen Harris at his Pittsboro home. The organization's Safe Housing Initiative provided a bathroom and running water for the Harrises.

Stephen Harris carefully navigates his 76-year-old body down the well-worn steps of his Pittsboro home, his right hand ready to grasp that of the man who has become a frequent visitor the last few years. "Hey, I've been looking for you," he says, and with a lithe turn that belies both Harris' age and recent maladies, Peter Kittany is welcomed once again into one of poorest homes in Chatham County.

It's hard to imagine the conditions that Harris, a retired mill worker, and his wife, who suffered a major stroke 15 years ago, live in. It's harder still to know that the Harrises raised five children in this four-room house, which until last spring had no indoor plumbing. And it's unsettling to realize that this poverty, which Kittany calls 'the worst of the worst,' is just down the road from the million-dollar homes of the Governors Club.

Kittany is executive director of the N.C. Rural Communities Assistance Project, which works with low-income rural communities across the state to address water quality and waste disposal issues. Closer to its Pittsboro office, the grassroots organization runs a Safe Housing Program in Chatham and Randolph counties to remedy the dangerous, unsanitary conditions often found in substandard housing. Because of the program, the Harrises now have a working bathroom and clean running water in the kitchen, features Harris is proud to show visitors even now, nearly six months after the project was completed.

"The Harrises' situation presented a real dilemma in terms of funding," said Kittany, who remembers Stephen Harris resorting to taking water from the outside spigot of a nearby church when the family's aging well became contaminated by their outhouse. "They couldn't qualify for a state-funded Community Development Block Grant because of the condition of the home, so in a sense they fell through the cracks."

Harris, a talkative, good-natured man who spends his days caring for his beloved wife and 24-year-old developmentally disabled grandson, is far from bitter, though life seems to have dealt him more than his share of harsh blows. He lost his left hand in a saw press one day at work in 1951, and he says a host of financial setbacks kept him from being able to finish off the simple clapboard house he bought a year later. What pains him most is that his children grew up and left home without ever knowing what it was like to take a warm tub bath or to use a restroom without having to trudge through the woods.

Lawrence Headen, a retired mill worker who lives two miles from the Harrises, says he, too, is enjoying his new bathroom, which was made off-site at Central Carolina Community College by students enrolled in a beginning home building course and fitted to the back of his modest home.

"It might sound strange, but living without running water and a bathroom was all I

was ever used to,” Headden said. “But let me tell you, it didn’t take any time at all to get used to having those things, no time at all.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Housing Preservation Grants Program provided funding to upgrade the Harris and Headon homes and nearly 30 others in Chatham and Randolph. NCRCAP often learns of the homes through referrals from other non-profit groups, social service organizations and state agencies. It’s those



Lawrence Headden stands before the bathroom NCRCAP added to his rural Chatham County home.

partnerships that underpin the work of NCRCAP, according to Kittany, who often calls himself and his five-member staff the “ground troops,” a reference to their propensity to go door to door in the rural communities they work with.

“The average person in North Carolina would probably be shocked to know how many people are still living in homes with no running water and with an outhouse in the backyard,” said Kittany, who would like to expand the program into other rural counties if he had the budget to do it.

The crux of the organization’s work in its 18-year history has been helping entire rural communities clean up health and environmental problems caused by failing septic systems and straight piping. Since 1987, the organization has worked closely with more than 160 communities in 70 rural counties across the state, primarily in unincorporated areas, helping them secure more than \$37.5 million in funding to finance water, wastewater, affordable housing and waste disposal projects.

Once the initial contact is made, NCRCAP provides outreach services including homeowner surveys that help gauge the extent of the problems, and community

meetings to ensure all residents have a voice in the process and know what to expect every step of the way. Next, the organization will help document the community’s public health issues, contract out the Preliminary Engineering Reports and complete any other forms required for infrastructure funding. Typically, NCRCAP will write the grant proposals for the project, and, if the funding organization requires it, will help the community form a unit of local government, as well.

As important as those technical assistance services are, Kittany and NCRCAP associate director Nina Baccanari say the organization’s greatest strength is its ability to open new channels of communication between rural communities, local and county governments, and other groups that have a stake in rural environmental and public health issues.

“You have to bring a lot of partners to the table, and that is often times a real challenge,” said Baccanari. “Sometimes before we get involved with the community there has been some miscommunication of some kind between the community and the county or their local government, so getting everyone together and moving forward is important.”

Delta City community leader Sylvester Reddick credits NCRCAP with helping break through longstanding communication issues between the 100-year-old Beaufort County community and county leaders, a stalemate that enabled major environmental issues to fester for far too long. Today, a \$1.23 million system collects wastewater from the community and pumps it to nearby Belhaven for treatment.

“Once the community started working with NCRCAP, it made a tremendous difference because we started listening to one another,” Reddick said. “Now, when my five grandkids come to visit I don’t have to worry about the quality of the water they’re drinking, I don’t have standing sewage in my yard. I have some peace of mind.”

N.C. Rural Communities Assistance Project



Peter Kittany

Mission: The N.C. Rural Communities Assistance Project provides outreach, advocacy, onsite training, and technical assistance focusing on water, wastewater, solid waste, and affordable housing issues affecting low- to moderate-income communities.

Roles: Created in 1987, the organization contributes to state and local policies regarding public health and environmental issues, supports activities that promote and sustain equitable economic and social systems in an environmentally sound manner in rural North Carolina, and educates state residents and organizations about water, wastewater, solid waste and related public health and environmental issues.

Leadership: NCRCAP is governed by a 10-member board of directors that meets quarterly.

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