



Waterkeepers Chesapeake 2021 Water Warrior Award Natasza Bock-Singleton

Natasza Bock-Singleton is a firm believer that our environment shapes our existence and we have a responsibility to the younger generations to foster good stewardship of our inherited space. She came to Baltimore City in 2001 and has been a strong voice for change in her community ever since. Natasza's work on sewage backups in Baltimore City began in 2015, and has been instrumental to the progress that has been made on this issue.

In Baltimore City, thousands of residents experience devastating sewage backups into their homes each year. Over 7,000 backups were recorded by the Department of Public Works in 2020, which is likely a vast underestimation of the true number of backups plaguing City residents. These sewage backups are closely linked to the sewage overflows that pollute Baltimore's local waterways, as they are ultimately caused by the same cracked, leaky, undersized pipe system that suffers from chronic disinvestment. Sewage backups pose an immediate risk to people because raw sewage carries dangerous bacteria and pathogens that can cause a multitude of health problems like gastroenteritis, staph infections, hepatitis, respiratory infections, and more. These events are also costly, traumatic, and data from Johns Hopkins shows that they are occurring more often in neighborhoods with higher percentages of Black residents.

As a plaintiff-intervenor in the Modified Consent Decree for sewage backups between Baltimore City, the Maryland Department of the Environment, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Blue Water Baltimore has been closely tracking the legal agreement and advocating for a stronger response to the issue of sewage backups for years. Prior to 2016, sewage backups weren't accounted for at all in the Modified Consent Decree. But ever since the City began closing off antiquated structured overflow points in the system to comply with the 2002 Consent Decree, the problem of sewage backups has gotten even worse for residents.

Lacking a coordinated response from the city, Natasza took matters into her own hands when her neighbors began experiencing sewage backups into their homes in 2015. She organized emergency responses to sewer-related issues in the Violetville and Saint Agnes Communities and surrounding areas, coordinating teams of residents to help their neighbors clean out and disinfect their homes after hundreds of sewage backups. She developed proactive measures with DPW Storm Water Engineers to limit sewage backups, mapped

underground streams to perform a comparative analysis of the sewage backups and proximity to waterways, and tracked sewage backup related data as reported to the city and as reported to community resources. Using this information, Natasza worked with the engineers to identify “storm drains and culverts of concern” that would impact consistent water flow into and out of the communities, potentially contributing to system capacity events during wet weather. Residents took stewardship of “storm drains of concern” and “stream culverts of concern” near their homes and proactively cleaned the accessible areas, reported blockages when they occurred, and requested full cleanings of the areas of concern by DPW whenever two inches of rain was forecasted. Areas with this program experienced up to 90% reduction in sewer backups into buildings and up to 75% reduction of street flooding during “wet weather events.” All of this work was done on her own time, simply because she cares for her community and is an environmental warrior in every sense of the word. Natasza’s organizing efforts resulted in measurably stronger, cleaner, more resilient neighborhoods in Baltimore City.

Unfortunately, as a homeowner in Baltimore City, she also experienced a sewage backup into her own home and one rental property. It wasn’t until community advocates like Natasza came forward with their first-hand accounts of sewage backups that we saw significant progress on the issue, and we owe her a debt of gratitude for moving us closer to an equitable response to this public health crisis in Baltimore City. Based on her compelling testimony in front of the Maryland Department of the Environment and the Baltimore City Council, a new program for assisting homeowners has been developed by Baltimore City: the Sewage Onsite Support (SOS) program, which provides direct cleanup assistance to residents who experience a sewage backup caused by wet-weather capacity problems in the collection system. Natasza’s advocacy elevated this issue for lawmakers, and her story empowered them to act on behalf of their constituents.

Where there are sewage backups, there are also sewage overflows into our nearby waterways – whether we know it or not. Natasza’s on-the-ground work directly resulted in fewer sewage backups into her community, and almost certainly reduced the amount of sewage released into the Gwynns Falls stream. By speaking truth to power and amplifying the voices of her neighbors, she helped us push for a City-wide program that will prevent countless residents from making the excruciating decision between shelling out thousands of dollars for a private cleanup crew to come to their house after a backup, risk being dropped from their homeowners’ insurance, or cleaning up the raw sewage themselves and exposing their family to a whole host of sewage-borne pathogens. We still have a long way to go – there are significant improvements that need to be made to the program, and millions of gallons of sewage still flow into Baltimore’s waterways every year. But we wouldn’t be where we are today without Natasza, and if you told me 5 years ago that we’d see this kind of progress on the issue of sewage backups and overflows in Baltimore City, I wouldn’t have believed it was possible.