What can you do in your neighborhood to reduce the dangers posed by storage and release of toxic chemicals? Several new reports, and some tactics developed by neighborhood activists, point the way.

Back in 1986—even before we had an effective federal right-to-know law—Carol Steinsapir and others at the Community Environmental Health Center at Hunter College in New York City began investigating chemical use and storage in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Their 1989 report, Hazardous Neighbors? is a model of careful research and useful recommendations. It shows how good research can provide a community with tools and weapons for protecting themselves.

Greenpoint-Williamsburg is a community of 142,000 people, 60% of them blue collar and semiskilled workers. Twelve percent of the property in Greenpoint-Williamsburg is zoned for manufacturing, and there are 778 industrial firms doing business there; the remainder is residential, public works, and roads. Homes and factories stand side-by-side in Greenpoint-Williamsburg, allowing people to walk to work or commute only short distances. This saves time, increases leisure time, and allows people to shop locally, which keeps money in the neighborhood economy. However, it carries risks as well because many firms use and store hazardous chemicals on-site.

A report like this one has many uses. People take it to their local zoning board and ask for the most dangerous chemicals (phosgene gas, for example) to be made illegal in heavily residential parts of town. They take it to public meetings when new chemical users try to move into the neighborhood; “Enough is enough!” they say—and they have the evidence to make a strong case. They use it as the basis for further investigations of hazards in the neighborhood. They use it to confront polluters directly, to demand the right to inspect facilities, to meet face to face with big chemical users to express their concern and to ask for detailed emergency response plans, and for phasing out the most dangerous chemicals. They use it to make alliances with local fire fighters who, after all, have their lives on the line when fighting chemical fires.

Since Ms. Steinsapir and her colleagues began their research, a new federal law has become effective. It is well known as “the federal right to know law” but it has features that many people still don’t know about. In addition to requiring big chemical users to reveal their storage and release of toxic chemicals (phosgene gas, for example) to be made illegal in heavily residential parts of town. They take it to public meetings when new chemical users try to move into the neighborhood; “Enough is enough!” they say—and they have the evidence to make a strong case. They use it as the basis for further investigations of hazards in the neighborhood. They use it to confront polluters directly, to demand the right to inspect facilities, to meet face to face with big chemical users to express their concern and to ask for detailed emergency response plans, and for phasing out the most dangerous chemicals. They use it to make alliances with local fire fighters who, after all, have their lives on the line when fighting chemical fires.

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In a letter to Martin advising him of the Congressional probe, Dingell and Bliley requested a raft of documents concerning the inspector general's office of investigations from 1984 through 1989.

Martin was first appointed EPA's Inspector General by President Reagan in October, 1983; he was reappointed to that post by President Bush in October, 1989. From 1981 to 1983 Martin was Assistant Inspector General for Investigations at the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: carol steinsapir; hazardous materials; statistics; ny; mobil; gasoline spills; local governments; rtk; cchw; john martin; william reilly; william sanjour; hugh kaufman; j richard wagner; nc; states sovereignty; jay hair; dean buntrock; wmi; epa;