future currents

Building Power Through Mutual Aid: Lessons From the Field

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Letter From Future Currents

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people stepped up to make sure that their friends, families, and neighbors had what they needed to survive. Many people mobilized mutual aid efforts to deliver groceries, sew masks, raise money for the newly unemployed to stay housed, and provide free child care for essential workers.

In the face of this historic crisis, progressive base-building organizations also started mutual aid programs, many for the first time. We set out to better understand these experiments and explore whether mutual aid is a strategy that more organizations should embrace as a way to strengthen ties, engage new people, and build power.

Organizations told us over and over again that how we show up for people matters more than our policy proposals. The pandemic mutual aid programs were essential to help volunteer leaders stay afloat, to hold communities together, and to practice our values. Not a single organizer we spoke with was worried that mutual aid programs let the government off the hook by filling in the gaps in social services that should be public programs' responsibility. Rather, they told us that mutual aid created the space and conditions to demand those public programs.

More surprising was the impressive diversity of programs, many of which led to unexpected outcomes:

- **West Virginia Can't Wait** now centers mutual aid in its strategy. An experiment in 2020 with mutual aid as a tool to increase voter turnout was wildly successful, increasing participation by 20% in some groups of voters. The organization built on this experiment with a new "Hometown Heroes" program that gives a financial award and technical assistance to people running mutual aid programs. Six of these leaders subsequently ran for office, and many more launched new organizations — including the state's first shelter for LGBTQIA+ residents — that have deepened and expanded the progressive ecosystem.
- **People Organized for Westside Renewal (POWER)-LA** launched a citywide mutual aid hub during the pandemic that provided groceries, supplies, and other support to Los Angelenos. It had a surprising benefit — the mutual aid program identified, trained, and developed community leaders who were then hired into the city government in remarkable numbers. Now the organization has a true inside-outside strategy, working with the new city workers who share a commitment to get things done.
- **The National Domestic Workers Alliance** provided cash assistance to 50,000 domestic workers, almost all of whom were ineligible for government assistance. The program showed elected officials what was both possible and needed — and helped spur the cities of Tucson, Arizona, and Philadelphia to create their own funds for excluded workers during the pandemic.
- The **Texas Organizing Project** (TOP) and **Organizing Resilience** (OR) both have integrated mutual aid into their advocacy on disaster relief, with TOP providing immediate cash assistance as they conduct a community assessment and with OR raising and driving funds to local advocacy groups positioned to provide aid and then connecting people to campaigns to ensure systemic relief. These groups and others are more intentionally contesting for relief funds that might otherwise go to groups without a power-building agenda and without the community ties to know where funds are most needed.

- **KC Tenants's** pandemic fund was targeted to support its member leaders so that they could sustain their advocacy. The group has distributed more than $100,000 to 100 leaders since its start during the pandemic — aid to meet people's survival needs that has strengthened the group's resilience. This support is what enabled their leaders to keep organizing through the early days of the pandemic.
- **The Campaign for Southern Equality** leads efforts to ensure access to gender-affirming care for young people in states where it has been outlawed or restricted. To help families most impacted in these hostile climates, the organization established an emergency fund to help those families travel to states where care is still accessible. To date, the group has supported 1,000 families, providing a critical lifeline to young people under attack. Many of these families have become involved in the group's advocacy work, sharing their stories in the media and joining legal cases.

Mutual aid is not a slam dunk — during the pandemic, many organizations struggled to convert aid recipients into leaders and activists. Other mutual aid programs required outsized resources from the organization, dwarfing advocacy efforts. A number of groups decided to end their programs as the crisis passed, although all reported that they would do it again when an acute need arose.

What's curious to us is how mutual aid remains so little understood, even as it has such a rich history in our movements from Black liberation struggles to the LGBTQIA+ movement to the fight for abortion rights. Time and again, our modern-day organizers are reinventing the wheel — creating their programs largely on their own, developing excel spreadsheets to track resources and needs, and writing policies to guide how to ethically disburse aid.

This report is an invitation to rethink whether and how mutual aid can play a transformative role in our organizing. Even if your organization was not inclined to consider mutual aid during the height of the COVID-19 crisis, the twin crises of democracy and climate may motivate you to take a second look. About half the states in our country are under increasingly authoritarian, repressive, anti-democratic control — generating ever-more need for community care. As climate catastrophes increase in frequency, our movements will have a choice: Show up for people in crisis or let far-right groups occupy that terrain.

The top recommendations that came out of our conversations and analysis are:

- Embrace experimentation.
- Create spaces for sharing skills, tools, and other learning.
- Create new shared tools.

This report is also a request to work together to make it easier to embrace mutual aid by building a community to consider and build on these learnings and recommendations.

Connie M. Razza
Executive Director

Introduction

To shape the future and achieve our goals, we must be able to focus beyond what's right in front of us and prepare for the unknown. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020, it spurred what one activist described as a "grassroots explosion of organizing"[1] — hundreds of mutual aid groups sprang up all around the country, fundraising and organizing with the goal of meeting people's basic and urgent needs at a time when our government was failing to do so.

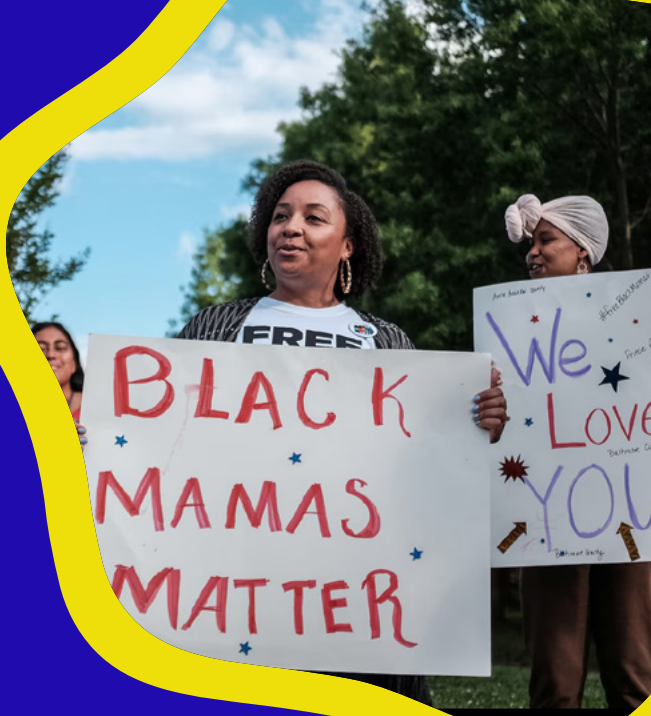

Photo: National Bail Out, Michael A McCoy

Moments of crisis are moments of political realignment, where people and communities are up for grabs and can be drawn to join social movements. While the pandemic was, for some, the first introduction to mutual aid, there is a long history of mutual aid networks — both formal and informal — supporting long-term community resilience and survival, especially among Black, Indigenous, queer, immigrant, and poor and working-class communities. And there's an equally long history of mutual aid in organizing and liberatory political projects.

Our current-day movements, too, are practiced in mutual aid and other forms of direct support and assistance — unions have long had strike funds and other means of supporting their members, and more recently, abortion funds have expanded in response to increased right-wing attacks on people's reproductive freedoms. Bail and bond funds, which have a history stretching back decades, are increasingly being used in the service of protest movements and as an integral part of campaigns to end pretrial detention and reform the immigration system. Many organizations have, for years now, engaged in providing mutual aid and direct aid and assistance, especially in the wake of climate emergencies as well as in harm reduction. The pandemic was the latest inflection point, calling even more people into an exciting period of experimentation.

Despite the rich history of mutual aid's role in building long-term power, it remains an underutilized strategy and not well understood. Some question whether mutual aid, much like social service provision, distracts from the need for government action and a more robust public social safety net. While much has been written about mutual aid as a way to meet people's survival needs or prefigure the society that we want, less has been written about how and why progressive, mass-based organizations are incorporating mutual aid as a strategy in building long-term political power. And even less has been written that drills down into the real experience of organizations on the ground.

[1] https://apnews.com/article/immigration-coronavirus-pandemic-7b1d14f25ab717c2a29ceafd40364b6e

What is mutual aid? A note on terminology.

What do we mean when we say "mutual aid"? For the purposes of this report, we're using "mutual aid" as an all-encompassing term for **projects that provide direct and collective aid to people as a form of solidarity, often with an expressly political framework and the goal of long-term social change.**

Law professor and activist Dean Spade has defined mutual aid as "a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable."

Some also use the term "collective care," described by Deepak Bhargava and Stephanie Luce in their book "Practical Radicals," as "efforts by an oppressed group to meet its own needs for survival and safety, often when the state fails to meet urgent human needs."[2]

What undergirds all of the mutual aid projects we're focusing on is the idea of "solidarity, not charity," a frame that comes from the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who once said, "I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people."

There is reason to take a fresh look at whether and how to better integrate mutual aid into power-building: the growth in support for authoritarianism in the U.S., an escalation of state repression; the increase in both the number and intensity of climate change-related emergencies; and the continuing economic precarity and an ever-fraying social safety net. These interlocked crises demand that we show up for people in need, even as we move toward structural solutions.

For this report, we interviewed dozens of organizers at base-building groups around the country that have embraced or tested, either temporarily or long term, a form of mutual aid and direct assistance as a key organizing strategy, to better understand its role in movement-building and to learn from our peers and practitioners in the field. This report is primarily intended for organizers and people working in organizations in the progressive ecosystem that are building a base and membership as a means of building political power and who might be curious about the potential of mutual aid as a strategy.

[2] https://www.advocate.com/voices/lgbtq-organizing-time-anxiety

Methodology

Future Currents interviewed more than 30 organizers and leaders at organizations around the country, focusing on the ways that community organizers and base-building groups are using mutual aid and direct service. We did not look at how service organizations can themselves engage in advocacy efforts, which is also worthy of exploration, nor did we interview groups that focus solely on mutual aid.

The report includes 12 case studies:

- Maine People's Alliance
- POWER-LA
- National Domestic Workers Alliance
- KC Tenants
- Miami Workers Center
- WV Can't Wait
- Campaign for Southern Equality
- VOCAL-NY
- National Bail Out and the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund
- People's Action Institute
- Texas Organizing Project
- Organizing Resilience

In selecting which groups to profile, we aimed for a sample that is reflective of the progressive left, along race, class, and geographical lines. We also aimed for diversity in the kinds of organizational formations, interviewing organizers from local groups, state-based organizations, and national alliances.

This report is based on the experience of all of those groups. We also reviewed recent academic literature on the role of mutual aid in movement-building.

This report is not meant to offer prescriptive solutions — rather, we hope it will kick-start a much-needed conversation and generate new (if old) ideas on what it will take for all of us to win together.

How Organizations Have Incorporated Mutual Aid in Recent Years: An Overview of the Field

In 2020, the prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba explained the goal of mutual aid, as experiments in community care were flourishing all around the country. "It's not community service — you're not doing service for service's sake," she said. "You're trying to address real material needs," Kaba said, but it went beyond just that — doing that work, she noted, allows you to "build the relationships that are needed to push back on the state."[3] Kaba was making an argument for mutual aid as an explicitly political vehicle and a key organizing tool.

Others like Maurice Mitchell, the national director of the Working Families Party and one of the founders of the group Black Men Build, have also been making that argument. To Mitchell, ignoring mutual aid "is a gap in the broader movement." Mitchell believes that combining mutual aid that meets people's material needs with political projects is a necessity. "In the future, we're going to need a lot more of these projects. The reality of life under capitalism is that there will be ruptures, there will be all types of foreseen and unforeseen crises," he said. "And in those moments, a lot of people are going to have very pressing, urgent needs. And then outside of the crises, there are slow-moving crises that most people are experiencing. If we want to organize people, we have to pay attention to that."

Dean Spade has also argued that mutual aid has a critical role to play. He writes, "In the current political moment in the United States, defined by climate crisis, increased border enforcement, attacks on public benefits, expansive carceral control, rising housing costs, and growing white right-wing populism, leftist social movement activists and organizations face two particular challenges that, though not new, are urgent. The first is how to address the actual changing conditions that are increasing precarity and shortening lives. The second is how to mobilize people for resistance." To Spade, "expanding use of mutual aid strategies will be the most effective way to support vulnerable populations to survive, mobilize significant resistance, and build the infrastructure we need for the coming disasters."[4]

During the pandemic, many groups who had never before engaged in mutual aid projects took on that work for the first time. That work took many different forms, ranging from running mutual aid hubs that connected people with a variety of needed goods and services and gave people an opportunity to volunteer to starting up dedicated funds to provide financial assistance to funding other individuals and organizations, seeding the mutual aid ecosystem. Some of the pandemic-related projects either ended or were always meant as temporary stop-gaps; other organizations have made them a permanent component of their work. This highlights an obvious, if necessary, point: Not all mutual aid efforts are the same, and the form that projects take is highly dependent on political context, the type of organization, and its priorities. And to be clear: Mutual aid will not be a good fit for every organization.

[3] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/18/what-mutual-aid-can-do-during-a-pandemic

[4] https://www.deanspade.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Mutual-Aid-Article-Social-Text-Final.pdf

Some, like the **Maine People's Alliance (MPA)**, launched their own mutual aid hub when the pandemic hit, open to anyone who needed aid and assistance or who wanted to volunteer. Jennie Pirkl, MPA's organizing director at the time, explained the organization's thinking: MPA leadership knew, she said, that "people are going to need mutual aid — people are going to be not at work, they're not going to be paid, they're not going to be able to go out and get what they need." MPA also knew that it was in many ways ideally situated to lead a statewide mutual aid effort. "There's something to be said for how organizations like MPA in those moments are, in many ways, the best equipped to do that rapid response support. We have a lot of the skills," Pirkl said.

For more, see a case study on Maine People's Alliance.

POWER-LA also responded to the pandemic by launching a mutual aid hub for all of Los Angeles.[5] Bill Przylucki, the group's executive director at the time, noted that the organization had already put together a plan for rapid response mutual aid during crisis moments, such as an earthquake or a wildfire. "That's how we knew that a mutual aid approach was what was appropriate for us to do in a moment like that," Przylucki said, explaining POWER-LA's decision-making process. He added, "There was a need and an opportunity for us to use our power to address something. That's the kind of contract we have with our communities; that's why we're here." POWER-LA ultimately raised about $3 million for its mutual aid work.

For more, see a case study on POWER-LA.

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Both MPA and POWER-LA shifted their strategy as the acute phase of the pandemic came to a close. In the case of MPA, the group decided to shut down its mutual aid hub after several months. POWER-LA handed off the hub to a separate organization, which runs it to this day, and also began resourcing other existing mutual aid formations as a way to sustain the work long-term.

Other groups took a different approach, focusing on direct cash assistance. These funds were especially important for organizations whose members were undocumented or had more informal work arrangements, given their exclusion from many government aid programs. National groups like Movimiento Cosecha,[6] the National Day Laborer Organizing Network,[7] and the **National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)** raised millions of dollars, almost all of which was disbursed to immigrant workers in the form of cash assistance.

NDWA's fund was born out of intense need as well as a recognition that if NDWA wasn't going to do something, then no one else would. "Most of our members lost 100% of their work pretty early on or lost significant percentages of their work," said Anna Duncan, NDWA's senior organizing director. "It was pretty clear early on that we needed to do something, because people were just in really dire straits financially." In summer 2020, the group launched the Coronavirus Care Fund, a national effort that ultimately raised more than $30 million that NDWA, largely via its affiliates and chapters, then distributed to 50,000 domestic workers around the country.

For more, see a case study on National Domestic Workers Alliance.

[5] https://web.archive.org/web/20200630122440/https://www.mutualaidla.org/

[6] https://movimientocosecha.medium.com/how-movimiento-cosecha-operates-a-covid-19-fund-by-and-for-undocumented-immigrants-4199c6678afd

[7] https://prospect.org/coronavirus/mutual-aid-for-and-by-undocumented-immigrants/

Local organizations also took up similar work during the pandemic, albeit on a much smaller scale, usually focused on supporting their member leaders. In the case of **KC Tenants**, its mutual aid fund had the primary goal of keeping the group's member leaders housed during an unprecedented crisis, out of the recognition that tenant leaders wouldn't be able to participate in the organizing work if they couldn't pay their bills. "We made the decision to establish our mutual aid fund for leaders in our union to ensure that their basic needs were met while we organized for broader protections for tenants," said Maya Neal, who was a member leader at the time and is now a housing organizer with the group. To date, the group's fund has raised roughly $100,000, which has enabled it to support 100 member leaders, and the organization has decided to make the fund an ongoing component of its work.

For more, see a case study on KC Tenants.

For the **Miami Workers Center**, the pandemic was also the catalyst to launch a permanent mutual aid program for its member leaders, which began in 2021. Known as the Sisters in Struggle Mutual Aid Program (SISMAP), it is a year-round, ongoing program that offers financial assistance and essential supplies to members; the group also holds monthly women's circles meetings and throws regular block parties. "Mutual aid just was natural for us to move into, to make sure that the people we're building with, feel supported in the care that they need," said Kathlyn Belizaire, the group's gender justice and member services program manager. "We know that needing things is not a personal failure. We live in a very unequal society without safety nets. And so we wanted to ensure that if folks needed support, if some of our leaders are going through a crisis — like they're getting evicted or needed rent help or needed help paying a bill, their lights were shut off — we were allocating funds in our budget to ensure that our folks feel supported," she said. In 2023, the SISMAP program distributed almost $10,000 in funds to its member leaders.

For more, see a case study on Miami Workers Center.

The pandemic also encouraged some groups to experiment further with mutual aid. **West Virginia Can't Wait** integrated forms of mutual aid into its 2020 electoral program and, buoyed by its success, decided the next year to launch a project called Hometown Heroes, in which it would give small monetary awards and other kinds of logistical support to individuals already engaged in the work of community care. This ecosystem approach to mutual aid, said Stephen Smith, the group's co-chair, was "a bet on long-term political infrastructure." "The guess we made is that funding one year of an organizer to do a bunch of mobilizing that wouldn't last, was not nearly the power-building that could come from investing in people who are already organizing and encouraging them in what they were doing," Smith said — and that bet, he said, has more than paid off.

For more, see a case study on WV Can't Wait.

During the pandemic, the **Campaign for Southern Equality** had expanded its emergency grant program, ultimately giving funds to 2,000 individuals, most of whom are people of color, trans and gender-nonconforming, of low income, and rural LGBTQIA+ southerners. Based on that experience and as more and more states banned gender-affirming care for youth, in early 2023, the group launched what is now known as the Trans Youth Emergency Project (TYEP). TYEP provides direct support, including emergency grants and travel assistance, to the families of trans youth in states where bans are in place, so that they can travel to states where care is accessible. TYEP was born out of a recognition that crisis moments require a crisis response. "It's so obvious that this is what we should be doing right now," TYEP Program Manager Carolyn Jones said, adding, "This is a true emergency."

For more, see a case study on Campaign for Southern Equality.

While the pandemic spurred many organizations to take on mutual aid projects for the first time, groups organizing against the war on drugs and to end cash bail and mass incarceration have long relied on mutual aid, collective care, and service provision as a key organizing strategy.

One of them is **VOCAL-NY**, which has long provided harm-reduction[8] services as a core strategy of its work to end the war on drugs. In 2023, the organization was able to dramatically scale up those services via both a partnership with a large hospital system and its move to a larger office. Jawanza Williams, VOCAL-NY's organizing director, explained the group's rationale: "We can't build a movement if our people are dead. So, simultaneously, we need to have direct services that are going to immediately mitigate or eliminate premature death." Expanding the services that VOCAL-NY provides, Williams said, has led to "an uptick of people that come in to access direct services joining the political organization. There are a set of participants who have become member leaders in our drug users union that definitely have increased."

For more, see a case study on VOCAL-NY.

And since 2017, the group **National Bail Out**, which emerged out of the initial flowering of the Black Lives Matter movement, has worked with local organizations to bail out Black mothers and caregivers on Mother's day as a way to highlight the "specific ways Black women and femmes experience the impacts of incarceration" and to build momentum for a movement to abolish pretrial detention systems and end mass incarceration. As Yabsera Faris, National Bail Out's communications director, put it, "One way we can actually change the material conditions of folks is just bailing folks out." But it's just one piece of their bigger political project, Faris said.

More than 800 people have been bailed out as part of these actions, and National Bail Out's work has led to new organizations, like the **Philadelphia Community Bail Fund**, which formed in 2017 for the express purpose of holding a Mama's Day Bail Out. The Philadelphia Community Bail Fund has since expanded its bailouts to occur year-round, and the fund also assists people it has bailed out to pay for food, rent, bills, and other expenses. "We realized that a lot of the people we were paying bail for were on the edge of that poverty, if not in poverty, and that being in prison even just a couple days put people over the edge, in terms of their housing and everything else," Candace McKinley, the bail fund's lead organizer, said. "So, we were like, we need to do something more."

For more, see case studies on National Bail Out and Philadelphia Community Bail Fund

[8]As defined by the National Harm Reduction Coalition, "harm reduction" is "a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use" such as "safer use, managed use, abstinence, meeting people who use drugs 'where they're at,' and addressing conditions of use along with the use itself." This can include naloxone distribution, safe syringe programs, and other methods.

Other groups have recently experimented with mutual aid in service of a specific campaign goal. In 2022, **People's Action Institute (PAI)** launched its Care Over Cost campaign, an organizing effort led by its member groups and supported by the national alliance to work with individuals to fight denials of needed health care by their insurance companies and build public pressure campaigns around those denials. "Our theory was, okay, we want to find and help people win individual cases, because we think that the public pressure campaigns will bring a lot of people off the bench who want to stand in solidarity with somebody who's suffering. That'll move a narrative, because we'll do it in public, in the media, and on social media," Ryan Greenwood, PAI's senior strategist for its Health Care for All Campaign, explained.

For more, see a case study on People's Action Institute.

Groups that tackle climate change have also in recent years engaged in mutual aid, especially in the immediate aftermath of climate change emergencies like hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods.

The **Texas Organizing Project (TOP)** has long engaged in mutual aid work in the wake of climate disasters, including funding in its budget every year for rapid response work. "We are very aware of the fact that climate disasters are going to be a continued reality throughout the state of Texas. We just always assume that that is going to be something that occurs however many times throughout the year," Alysa Guerrero, TOP's statewide lead researcher, said. This year, TOP decided to expand its rapid response plan to include partnerships with existing mutual aid groups in Houston and the rest of Harris County, funding existing groups to do post-storm relief, with the eye toward broadening their impact. Guerrero explained the group's thinking in regard to this ecosystem approach to rapid response work: "We are just well aware of the fact that [existing groups] have been doing mutual aid year round, and they've been doing it longer, and they probably might even know how to do it better than us. So, if we can lend some resources to them, that's just a no-brainer, because we want to be able to have folks have their needs met, but we then also want them to be a part of the movement, whether that be through us or through other organizations."

For more, see a case study on Texas Organizing Project.

Organizing Resilience (OR), a climate change emergency fundraising and strategy hub for the grassroots left, is working to — as the group's lead strategist Ginny Goldman put it — disrupt the way disaster philanthropy typically happens: turning it from a top-down, slow process where most funds that are raised don't go to directly impacted individuals into a nimble, fast one that not only prioritizes the hardest-hit communities but also ultimately supports and strengthens grassroots organizing. "The premise behind Organizing Resilience is really straightforward — power is contested in these moments, and we have to be organized in order to leverage that power into real, big wins and systemic change," said Goldman. Since its founding, OR has raised $10 million in rapid response funds, all of which has gone to grassroots organizations on the ground that are both engaged in relief work and long-term organizing. As Goldman noted, "We only support formations and coalitions that have a power analysis and a long-term power-building strategy."

For more, see a case study on Organizing Resilience.

A Snapshot of Mutual Aid in Movement History

Mutual aid has a long history in our movements. Many of the organizers we spoke with referenced the long history of mutual aid in supporting the resilience of their communities when they were under attack.

Allison Scott, the Campaign for Southern Equality's interim executive director, noted that mutual aid was a key feature of the early days of the LGBTQIA+ movement: "It all began in our community, stepping up and taking care of each other when nobody else will. Before laws were being challenged, or anything else, that's the first place we started — taking care of each other. Our movement is rooted in this, and this is a moment for us to go back to our roots. It's a fundamental piece of who we are — we take care of our community first, and then we know we can all get to the bigger win together." And National Bail Out's Faris placed the work of bail funds in the long lineage of mutual aid in Black communities. "Mutual aid societies have existed in African American communities for centuries, even in the continent of Africa," she said. "We align our work based on that history, and understanding that our ancestors bought each other's freedom through mutual aid."

As Jessica Gordon Nembhard detailed in her 2015 book "Collective Courage," "In every period of American history, African Americans pooled resources to solve personal, family, social, political, and economic challenges," forming mutual aid societies, often led by women, that took care of essential community needs. That mutual aid included, she noted, "sav[ing] what money they could and pool[ing] their savings to help buy their own and one another's freedom."[9] The Underground Railroad, too, can be understood as a project of collective care, mutual aid, and abolitionist organizing. The success of enslaved Americans gaining their freedom via the Underground Railroad did not just depend upon their individual courage but on a collective effort of a network of abolitionists, most of whom were, as the historian Eric Foner noted in "Gateway to Freedom," free Black Americans who fundraised, offered safe harbor, and provided other forms of aid. (As Foner wrote, "The 'underground railroad' should be understood not as a single entity, but as an umbrella term for local groups that employed numerous methods to assist fugitives, some public and entirely legal, some flagrant violations of the law...By far the greatest credit for successful escapes goes to the fugitives themselves. Few, however, succeeded entirely on their own.")

Perhaps the most famous example of mutual aid in movement-building in the U.S. is that of the Black Panther Party (BPP). During its height, the BPP instituted free social programs — ranging from health clinics to offering rides to seniors to its much-vaunted breakfast program — that the group described as "survival pending revolution."[10] These programs were, as the group wrote, "meant to meet the needs of the community until we can all move to change the social conditions that make it impossible for the people to afford the things they need and desire."[11] They were "not answers or solutions" in themselves; rather, the group wrote, "they will help us to organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their situation."

[9] https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/2/monograph/book/31238

[10] https://the1313.law.columbia.edu/2024/02/12/flores-a-forbes/

[11] https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/hilliard-ed-the-black-panther-party-service-to-the-people-programs.pdf

The most well-known example today is the group's free breakfast program for children. By 1969, it was in 19 cities[12] and was so popular that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover wrote in a memo that the program "represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for."

While the federal government was already engaged in a free breakfast pilot by the time the BPP began its program, scholars point to the BPP's program as one of the (many) reasons[13] for the dramatic expansion of free breakfast to schools around the country.[14]

But that was not the program's only goal. As the Kairos Center's Director of Partnerships Noam Sandweiss-Back notes, "What is forgotten is the political orientation of the breakfast program, which moved beyond the realm of mutual aid as we often understand it." It was not just about feeding people but had an explicit political purpose as well — "to actively and purposefully demonstrate the failures of [President] Johnson's War on Poverty" and "to build a movement that could spark larger political change."

To law professor Spade, "effective social movements always include elements of mutual aid." And indeed, almost all movements for social change have incorporated some form of mutual aid. Explicitly, feminist movements have long used mutual aid as a strategy, helping people obtain abortions at a time when they were illegal pre-Roe[15,16] and now, after Dobbs, continuing the work of previous generations of feminists via abortion funds[17] and organizations that offer practical support to abortion seekers. In the years before Roe v. Wade, the Jane Collective — an underground network of women in Chicago — connected others with abortion providers and learned how to perform abortions themselves. Many estimate that in a four-year period, it performed about 11,000 abortions[18]; the group also created a loan fund[19] and engaged in political education. Today, abortion funds play a crucial role in the dozens of states where, post-Dobbs, abortion is banned or access is severely curtailed. The National Network of Abortion Funds reported that in the year after the Dobbs decision, there was a 39% increase in requests made to abortion funds and that funds across the country financially supported more than 100,000 abortion-seekers, giving out almost $37 million in funds, $10 million of which went to cover travel costs such as transportation, lodging, and child care needs.[20]

"Effective social movements always include elements of mutual aid."

During the earliest days of the AIDS crisis, organizations like Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) prioritized collective care in their work, creating the foundation "for the emergence of more militant action later" and political victories, as Deepak Bhargava and Stephanie Luce detail in their book "Practical Radicals." In their writing about GMHC, Bhargava and Luce focused on the group's "buddy program," a program "where ten thousand volunteers were placed with total strangers in their homes to provide practical daily help,

[12] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/17/black-panther-party-oakland-free-breakfast-50th-anniversary
[13] https://equitablegrowth.org/how-black-activists-spurred-the-u-s-government-to-expand-school-meal-programs-addressing-child-hunger-and-boosting-future-productivity/
[14] https://www.eater.com/2016/2/16/11002842/free-breakfast-schools-black-panthers
[15] https://daily.jstor.org/abortion-birth-control-before-roe-v-wade
[16] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/14/us/illegal-abortion-janes.html
[17] https://abortionfunds.org/abortion-funds-post-roe/
[18] https://www.npr.org/2022/05/04/1096149129/abortion-underground-jane-collective-heather-booth-scotus-roe-wade
[19] https://www.cwluherstory.org/jane-documents-articles
[20] https://abortionfunds.org/abortion-funds-post-roe/

compassionate care and emotional support." That support included everything from picking up groceries to visiting people at hospitals. Bhargava and Luce describe the impact of the buddy program in their book:

> *Being a buddy "was not merely, 'I'm here to help this person, I'm doing this charitable service'; it was 'I'm here to help myself, get through this time, by finding a place where I can feel useful and safe.'" Tim Sweeney, the Executive Director of GMHC from 1989 to 1993, talks about the buddy program as a radicalizing force in the community, enabling people to "build trusting relationships and take big risks."*

As Bhargava and Luce write, mutual aid is "an important but often unacknowledged glue in movement infrastructure" and "strengthens solidarity by building trust and relationships that can be harnessed for political action." They continue: "When care is embedded in the culture of an organization, it increases the capacity of ordinary people to engage in struggle and of organizers to stay in the movement for the long term." Providing mutual support and meeting urgent needs, they write, not only allow more people to participate but ultimately create new openings for social change — but only, they stressed, if that work "has a consciously political dimension."[21]

Political scientist Erica Chenoweth, whose work focuses on nonviolent civil resistance movements both at home and abroad in the face of authoritarianism, has also noted that building "communities of care" is an important component of a broader strategy in combating rising authoritarianism.[22] By creating "alternative institutions" rooted in mutual aid that "meet community needs that the existing system does not," Chenoweth writes that movements can "build legitimacy and authority — before they have fully 'won.'"[23]

Chenoweth expanded on that idea in a 2022 paper co-authored with Zoe Marks (emphasis ours):[24]

> *A second element of the strategy is to continue building community power through alternative institutions, which can ultimately render authoritarian institutions and forces irrelevant and illegitimate in day-to-day life. The more opposition groups are able to establish and maintain political autonomy, prevent the local enforcement of unjust laws and policies, and provide services directly to their communities, the more obsolete authoritarian forces will become relative to pro-democratic ones.* ***Here, the primary work of pro-democratic forces will be to gradually yet decisively build alternative institutions — such as economic cooperatives, fresh food and public health provision, mutual aid, community safety, strike funds, and other forms of cooperation — that dramatically reduce the reach, harm, and pseudo-legitimacy of the authoritarian state.***

"Effective organizations," Chenoweth and Marks note, "build community power, meet people's immediate needs, and occupy governance vacuums where they exist." Chenoweth and Marks point to the example of Chilean organizers who, during Augusto Pinochet's regime, incorporated mutual aid in a variety of forms in their opposition movement:

[21] "Without a consciously political dimension, collective care isn't strategic because it can't get to scale or address the roots of a problem in structures of oppression. In fact, some activists practice mutual aid or launch cooperatives as a strategy to escape rather than transform systems of oppression. Our view is that if collective care is not embedded in a larger vision for social transformation, it will inevitably be marginal or captured by the dominant system — as in the case of cooperative living arrangements run by privately owned companies for profit."

[22] https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/pro-democracy-organizing-against-autocracy-united-states-strategic-assessment

[23] https://www.google.com/books/edition/Civil_Resistance/

[24] Future Currents supported this research. The paper is here: https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/pro-democracy-organizing-against-autocracy-united-states-strategic-assessment

> *Despite widespread repression against organized opposition parties, labor unions, and leftist political organizations, pro-democratic forces built a coalition of families of the disappeared, striking workers, clergy, small business owners, and independent political groups. Rather than march in the streets, they banged pots and pans within their homes; built mutual aid networks, legal assistance, strike funds, and support for families of the disappeared; engaged in work stoppages and slowdowns; developed communications networks and political education; and waited for opportunities to oust Pinochet from power.*

To Bhargava and Luce, collective care is "a vastly underappreciated but essential element in social change":

> *We have come to the view that collective care has always been essential to the success and durability of social movements but has been underemphasized in both scholarly and popular accounts, which privilege the more dramatic and militant aspects of movement work. Care work may be even more important today, as compounding crises foster a sense of despair and impotence among people who care deeply, but aren't sure how to get involved or what will have an impact. Changing the composition of the Supreme Court, passing major federal legislation, or taking on huge corporations can feel too distant or difficult to animate mass participation. Paradoxically, by giving people confidence in their ability to make change at a more intimate and human level, collective care is a path to unlock the power needed to challenge those seemingly impregnable systems.*

This is not an analysis that many of those in our sector agree with, which the two acknowledge: "Some have been skeptical, arguing that collective care is a support [for] other strategies rather than a model of its own, or questioning whether mutual aid projects amount to transformational change." But they argue that "if care infrastructure is built with a political goal in mind, it can seed transformational change."

Takeaways on Mutual Aid as a Strategy for Movement-Building

Mutual aid falls outside of the typical campaigning and power-building work that many of us are used to. For a set of community organizers, mutual aid projects are not organizing projects. As that kind of thinking goes, running a mutual aid project does not shift or build power and is more akin to charity.

Yet, that mindset is shifting, which is a welcome development. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded many of us of the important role that mutual aid can play, kicking off a period of experimentation that, coupled with the experience of organizations that have long prioritized mutual aid, feels healthy and necessary. The organizers we spoke with for this report reflect a growing awareness that long-term organizing and mutual aid are not mutually exclusive and that the latter can strengthen the former.

Mutual aid is not the magic bullet that answers all of the challenges of organizing, but what is clear is that by incorporating mutual aid into our work, our movements may be able to more effectively reach the people we need to and in the numbers we need.

Mutual aid is an important strategy during crisis moments.

We're entering a phase of predictable emergencies, and in the coming years, it will be increasingly necessary to deploy mutual aid during crisis moments. Those moments can be times of fast-moving emergency that require a rapid response, as with the COVID-19 pandemic and climate disasters, or moments of repression, as with abortion bans and bans on gender-affirming care. At times, as with the case of state repression against mass protest movements, they are both.

As OR's Goldman noted, these crisis moments are times when power is contested. Meeting people's immediate needs via mutual aid in those moments is one way to perform a political intervention.

The urgency of those moments demands it. Many organizers told us that, during the pandemic, they and their organizations felt a deep responsibility to show up for their members and communities in some way, and they recognized that not only were they the best equipped to engage in rapid response but that no one else would.

As TOP's Guerrero told us, mutual aid helps ensure that people "have the means to be in the long run with us. It's a stepping stone toward our long-term goals." She added, "It's just a reality that people need to, in some way or another, have their burdens eased to be able to do this sort of work with us long term, whether that be through getting food and water out to them, or getting them a little bit of funds so that they can be able to take care of themselves. People cannot be a part of the movement if they're so weighed down."

Mutual aid can take a variety of forms — there's not one way to do mutual aid.

As with organizing, there is a diversity of tactics when it comes to mutual aid, and there is not one particular method of mutual aid that will be required.

Organizers at local organizations like KC Tenants and the Miami Workers Center and state-based organizations like TOP expressed that the support they provide to member leaders and community residents has been a powerful strategy, one that strengthens both organizational resilience and community resilience to take on long-term campaign work.

For groups that have incorporated mutual aid into their work year-round, one common reason was the need to support existing member leaders in a practical way so that they can continue to remain engaged. "We have leaders who are knocking on doors. We have leaders who are facilitating meetings. We have leaders who are phone banking and pouring so much into the organization," the Miami Workers Center's Belizaire said. "Part of really seeing our people, seeing the dignity of our people, is also seeing their current struggles and barriers to participation and barriers to leadership development. Maybe it's not being able to pay this bill, you know, 'I can't come to this meeting. I can't facilitate this. Actually, I'm in crisis.'" The SISMAP program, Belizare said, "is our invitation to be in this struggle with us." KC Tenants also has a similar purpose for its mutual aid fund, which has now also become a permanent part of the organization's work. "When people's basic needs are taken care of, that's when we can organize and build power and win radical campaigns for our city," KC Tenants Member Leader Christina Ostmeyer noted.

One intriguing emerging strategy that we'd like to particularly highlight is the ecosystem approach — partnering with and funding outside mutual aid projects that then become important components of a network that can be deployed when necessary, as both TOP and POWER-LA have both done. The example of WV Can't Wait in seeding and elevating independent mutual aid projects, in which it acts as a sort of funder and technical support organization, is notable as well, as is the example of OR, which is attempting to bring the lessons of electoral organizing and campaigning to climate response.

Groups that have embraced more of an ecosystem approach to mutual aid, like WV Can't Wait and POWER-LA, also shared that it has transformed local conditions. "The number of leaders that we identified, trained, developed, and then eventually — in some cases — hired through this process, was unreal," POWER-LA's Przylucki said of the impact of the mutual aid hub that POWER-LA organized. Thanks to the work of the mutual aid hub, Przylucki added, "Government entities were able to hire from this space of people, and now we have people inside who have the same attitude of, 'All right, let's figure out how to get this done.' We have people who are both on the inside and the outside, collaborating to take versions of programming that we figured out how to do in the mutual aid space and do them from inside the government."

WV Can't Wait's Smith noted that the Hometown Heroes program has had an outsized impact — it has seeded new organizations in the state's movement ecosystem, expanded the group's leadership pipeline for political candidates, and brought new leaders into the organization. It has been so transformational that the organization's leaders decided to root much of the work of WV Can't Wait in mutual aid, a shift that one of the group's member leaders described as "more Black Panther Party, less Working Families Party." "When we started it, it was kind of a side project, a nod to the fact that, like, politics is about more than just running people for office and governing alongside them," Smith said. "It is now the center of our work."

Not every organization needs to incorporate mutual aid — it will be dependent upon time, place, and conditions, like all of our work. But we know that this kind of experimentation is work that must be done, as we confront the interlocked crises of our time.

Mutual aid is a powerful strategy — but not a slam dunk.

Mutual aid projects at times have not led to the outcomes that groups hoped for. Groups like the MPA and the NDWA expressed that one of their goals for their pandemic mutual aid work was an expanded, politicized base. They believed that by highlighting the gaping holes in the social safety net, people who received aid would be energized to then take part in campaign work. NDWA's Duncan noted that via the fund, NDWA wanted to "reach workers who are not already part of our local organizations, knowing that there are hundreds of thousands of domestic workers who are not connected to a local organization already, who are in places where there is no local organization." She added, "We had an organizing interest in doing this, to build our base long term and become a trusted place that domestic workers around the country know they can come to." MPA's Pirkl shared a similar sentiment: "I think we had this vision that, because of all these new people coming in, that we would be able to connect the dots for people. Like, the reason this was such a crisis, so quickly, was because our social safety net was so frayed. We wanted to try to connect the dots between immediate needs and policy."

But the pivot from service provision to organizing, Pirkl said, was "really hard." "The people who were super engaged in outreach and providing help to people who needed help, a lot of them did not make that pivot. They were like, 'What do you mean, you're not doing this anymore?' Transition was hard for people," she said. MPA ultimately made the decision to end its mutual aid hub after a few months.

Duncan shared a similar reflection on NDWA's fund for domestic workers, which was always meant to be a one-off project. The fund was successful in distributing cash aid to workers, but the question NDWA and its affiliates and local chapters grappled (and continue to grapple) with, Duncan said, is "How to translate folks who came into the organization for emergency assistance into members of the organization and how to plug them into the organizing." She added, "That's the goal and the vision, and if it's done well, then the mutual aid supports the base-building and organizing. But I think in reality, that's been challenging."

Both Duncan and Pirkl shared that they wished they had incorporated more explicit political analysis and education into their mutual aid work. "We didn't really do that," Pirkl said. "We were just like, ' We're here to help'."

"We talked a lot with our affiliates and with member leaders from our local organizations about how this is a role that government should be playing, and we were advocating at the federal level and then at the state level for these programs. But we didn't directly connect that organizing message, that agitational message, with folks who were receiving the cash assistance," Duncan said. "We were doing both of those things at the same time, but they weren't necessarily connected."

When engaged in mutual aid work, it can also be easy to lose sight of the broader mission. The Philadelphia Community Bail Fund's mutual aid work takes up an outsized amount of time of the fund's small number of staff, said its lead organizer McKinley, to the detriment of the fund's long-term work. She said: "Our goal, our mission, is supposed to be ending cash bail and pre-trial detention, but we've never really gotten able to get our heads above water enough to really do the community organizing work and to make the turn of making our mutual aid efforts part of our organizing efforts." McKinley added, "You can't fix everything all by yourself, and your organization will just burn out and be overwhelmed if you try. You need to be realistic about what you can do."

Mutual aid is not in tension with the broader aims of progressive movements.

The vast majority of organizers we spoke with believe that mutual aid projects strengthened their ability to push the government to enact structural solutions. WV Can't Wait's Smith sees no tension between, as he put it, "doing the work that our government refuses to do" and building the long-term power needed to create a government in West Virginia that serves all of its people. "Speaking of our long-term strategy, the hunch we have is that the most powerful, threatening challenge we can make to establishment power, authoritarian power in West Virginia, is to help people essentially do the work that government fails to do — that that is actually a more aggressive, powerful, impactful strategy than only running people for office, considering that the powers that be in West Virginia have a pretty tight grip over the electoral structure here."

Smith added, "Over the last few years, the authoritarian threat has risen, as more and more of our people and the work they care about has been criminalized by our state government and as the prospects for our candidates, in some ways, look bleaker and bleaker at the state level. We think that shift away from traditional campaign tools to things like mutual aid and defense and governance is the shift that we're going to need even more of, as authoritarians get more power in America over the next 10 years."

Others also saw mutual aid as its own necessary form of alternative institutional building. As VOCAL-NY's Williams put it, "What we need to be building is loving and caring infrastructure that takes care of people, that helps us produce the kind of society where we can realize abolitionist visions," he said. National Bail Out's Faris agreed: "In a lot of these movement spaces, we're talking about abolition, and abolition is not just about tearing down these systems — it's also, at the same time, building institutions. And I think mutual aid is that second part." She added, "I think left organizations have a responsibility to build power in communities, and I think they can do that through mutual aid, because you're building trust in those communities, and you're showing people that a world can be a better place now and the fact that the future doesn't just appear." Those alternative institutions, she said, both meet people's needs and highlight what needs to change. "I think folks are realizing that when people are depending on bail funds and mutual aid, they're proving that communities don't actually need more cages. They need more care. They need more resources," Faris said.

POWER-LA's Przylucki believes (much like Bhargava and Luce) that mutual aid, if organized intentionally as a political project, can build capacity and resilience for movements and opens up new terrain for political fights. Mutual aid, he said, can "build a certain type of community that is much more organizable and ready to fight for more and ready to consider, 'Okay, we're here taking care of ourselves now. How is our government helping? How is our government hurting? How is our government failing to do something that we'd be able to do, or how are they doing something that's really impeding our ability to do our main job of taking care of each other?'"

While NDWA's Duncan shared that the fund for domestic workers did not lead to a dramatic increase in membership, she said that it allowed many member groups to launch successful campaigns around expanding the social safety net, pushing local governments to launch their own funds for excluded workers. Rather than becoming a replacement for government action, it instead highlighted what the government should have been doing all along. That organizing led to some big local victories — NDWA worked with the cities of Philadelphia and Tucson to help set up their own funds for excluded workers. "Being able to provide that example, that it is possible to do this at scale, that there's ways to do this and create innovative models to do this, that helped to lay some of the groundwork for public funding," Duncan said. "Sometimes we first need to show it can be done."

Recommendations

This report was born out of a recognition that there is something potentially fruitful happening in the mutual aid space that has not been adequately understood. These tactics may be increasingly important in states and communities under anti-democratic control, where marginalized communities are increasingly under attack.

And these tactics may also be critical as climate-related catastrophic events happen with increasing frequency. We heard repeatedly from organizers that how we show up for people often matters more than our proposals for structural change.

Some key recommendations emerged from the dozens of conversations we had with organizers. We recognize that mutual aid may not be a path for every organization. But for those who are interested in exploring mutual aid, both at their organizations and as a field-wide strategy, we offer these recommendations as a way to strengthen the field.

Embrace experimentation.

As we have noted, there is no one way to do mutual aid, and not all efforts are the same. What is clear from our interviews is that the nature of each organization's project stems from the political context in which they operate, the form and type of the organization, the resources it has available, and its priorities.

For some, it may make sense to think about integrating mutual aid into a campaign or as a base-building strategy. For others, especially local organizations, it may make sense to consider mutual aid as a way to support member leaders. Many organizations may want to consider the ecosystem approach — partnering with existing mutual aid organizations rather than setting up their own projects.

No matter the shape or form the work takes, organizers we spoke with stressed the importance of clear goals and evaluating progress against those goals. A few organizations found that recalibration is necessary to ensure that the program serves the advocacy goals and that the organization is not overwhelmed with the demands of running a mutual aid program. Without a power-building lens, the mutual aid program can often begin to morph into mere social service provision and feel like charity.

We hope that funders will also embrace experimentation. Mutual aid projects may not meet the typical metrics used to determine success but could help strengthen organizing by deepening member commitment, strengthening ties in a community, and helping build resilience in times of crisis.

Create spaces for sharing skills, tools, and other learning.

There is much to be learned from our collective experiences, both past and present, in running mutual aid projects. For example, the Campaign for Southern Equality modeled its fund for trans youth partly off of the work of abortion funds.

Yet, one common refrain we heard from organizers is that they were often building the plane as they were flying it, with few practical examples from others to guide them on how to best create and structure a mutual aid program in the context of a base-building, power-building organization.

Organizers shared that in running their mutual aid programs, they often confronted thorny questions. For groups providing financial assistance, for example, a constant challenge was deciding both who would receive support and how much. Some groups struggled with how to measure "success." Many groups shared that they had engaged in deep conversation with their membership on the role of mutual aid — pointing to a need for shared curricula on the topic.

But in general, we note that there is a lack of shared road maps, guidelines, principles, and other practical tools that groups can employ in integrating mutual aid into their work — and make it easier to experiment with different kinds of mutual aid.

There are plenty of models from which to pull and learn, from union strike funds to the aforementioned abortion funds to harm reduction to COVID-19 relief and the base-building projects profiled in this report.

Much like there are forums, group email lists, and conferences for organizers to come together and share their experiences, we suggest creating spaces where organizers can come together to share their experiences with mutual aid and learn from one another to both better prepare for future moments and strengthen long-term organizing work.

And much like there are guides, trainings, and best practices for organizers on everything from how to identify, structure, and run a campaign to how to facilitate meetings, we believe that creating similar guides and trainings on how to run a variety of different types of mutual aid projects will enable organizations to more easily and seamlessly create and adopt mutual aid projects of their own.

Photo: National Bail Out, Michael A McCoy

Create new shared tools.

Another consistent theme we heard from organizers was the lack of tech tools to facilitate mutual aid projects. Much like innovations in electoral organizing, there is a need for similar tools when it comes to the mutual aid space to both streamline and make it easier for organizations to launch mutual aid projects.

Organizers who set up mutual aid hubs and financial assistance projects shared that they often began with spreadsheets, an unwieldy and inefficient system that required significant staff time to manage. Many of the groups that ran or are running funds created in-house systems to handle the administrative work of managing and tracking payments.

In general, there is a need for off-the-shelf tools that organizers can easily deploy when necessary, raising an intriguing possibility for partnerships with organizations that focus on movement infrastructure and technology, as well as with organizations outside of our sector.

This report is our attempt to kick-start a conversation about the role of mutual aid in organizing and power-building. It's a conversation that we believe needs to continue and deepen, and we are excited about the opportunities for our sector to grapple strategically with how we can build the caring infrastructure that we will need to not only weather future crises but also build power. **We hope you will join us.**

Photo:
Miami Workers Center

Photo:
Miami Workers Center

Appendix A: Case Studies

Maine People's Alliance

CASE STUDY

Maine People's Alliance

In the week leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown in March 2020, the staff at MPA began having conversations about what the group should do in response to what they knew would be a major emergency.

As Jennie Pirkl, MPA's organizing director at the time, recalled, they asked each other, "What do we think people need right now?" MPA leadership knew, she said, that "people are going to need mutual aid — people are going to be not at work, they're not going to be paid, they're not going to be able to go out and get what they need." They also knew that MPA was in many ways the best organization to step in and organize to meet people's needs. "There's something to be said for how organizations like MPA in those moments are, in many ways, the best equipped to do that rapid response support. We have a lot of the skills," Pirkl said.

Over the period of a weekend, Pirkl and the MPA leadership team came up with a plan to launch a rapid response emergency mutual aid hub for the state, which MPA would run. They quickly created a website, Mainers Together, where people could go to both sign up to volunteer and also to request aid, and that Monday, they launched the project. (Note: The website is no longer active.) "We set up the website, and we had no idea what the response to it would be, but the response was immediate, and the response was urgent," Pirkl said. "On the first day, hundreds of people reached out. People were saying, 'I missed two days of work and now I can't afford formula for my kids.' Or 'I need diapers delivered, but my kid is homesick, and I don't feel like I can go out.' People were in dire economic straits because they missed a couple of days of work already, and it only got worse as time went by."

Even established organizations like the YMCA wrote to MPA, wondering what to do in response to the pandemic and looking to MPA for guidance. "That was the first moment I freaked out. I was like, Oh, God, I have to tell the YMCA what to do right now, and they are supposed to be better at this kind of stuff than I am," Pirkl said.

"We were building it as we were flying it," Pirkl said. "We were just learning what mutual aid is." But Pirkl and her MPA colleague learned quickly how to run a mutual aid program, coordinating with other MPA staff who took the lead on connecting volunteers with those who requested aid — from wellness checks to grocery deliveries, the costs of which MPA fundraised for.

MPA ran its rapid response mutual aid program for several months. But as the immediate pandemic crisis moment passed, staff reassessed the need for the mutual aid program and whether it fit into MPA's mission. "We got to the point where we were like, we can't keep doing this, and we're no longer needed. The Band-Aid that we were providing was no longer needed because the government has caught up, the service industry has caught up," Pirkl said. "And how does it fit with our mission? Our mission is to make government and society work for everybody, and in our vision, that's not through unstructured mutual aid or even through nonprofits stepping in to fill the gap. We're not a service provider. We really need to focus our energies on making sure that if something like this were to happen again, that our social safety net is better. So, then we pivoted back toward pushing on policy change to make our whole system work better for everybody."

> **"I was really proud of us for being able to turn all of our resources over into what our community needed at the moment."**

One of the factors that informed MPA's decision, Pirkl said, was the fact that fewer people had joined MPA via the mutual aid program than the organization had originally anticipated. "I think we had this vision that, because of all these new people coming in, that we would be able to connect the dots for people. Like, the reason this was such a crisis, so quickly, was because our social safety net was so frayed. We wanted to try to connect the dots between immediate needs and policy, but when we started to do that, people immediately started dropping," Pirkl said. "And how do you pivot from service provision to organizing? We just found it to be really hard. The people who were super engaged in outreach and providing help to people who needed help, a lot of them did not make that pivot. They were like, what do you mean you're not doing this anymore? Transition was hard for people."

One takeaway, she said, was that at the very beginning, they should have incorporated more political analysis and education into their mutual aid work. "Looking back on it, I would do things differently. I would set it up in a way that was more explicit around, 'Yes, we'll help you. And here's why this crisis happened,'" Pirkl said. "I think we would have done more of the, 'How did we get here' and 'why' upfront. We didn't really do that. We were just like, 'We're here to help.'"

Pirkl also shared that certain tech tools would have made the mutual aid coordination run more smoothly — "a more sophisticated website, or some sort of app, to help connect people in the region to people who needed help," she said, would have been helpful. "We were putting together some awesome Excel spreadsheets, but I'm sure there must be a cleaner way to connect people."

But whenever another mass emergency hits, Pirkl said, MPA is ready to once again run a mutual aid program. "I was really proud of us for being able to turn all of our resources over into what our community needed at the moment," she said. "We had the skills that we had and the resources that we had, and that was such an unprecedented moment; it did make sense for us to do what we did. We would totally do it again if we had to." •

POWER
People Organized for Westside Renewal

CASE STUDY

POWER-LA

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, the Los Angeles-based group POWER-LA was more ready than most to respond — the group already had a plan for how to engage in rapid response mutual aid during crisis moments, having prepared for anything from wildfires to earthquakes.

Because of that planning, which the group's members had pushed for, "that's how we knew that a mutual aid approach was what was appropriate for us to do in a moment like that," said Bill Przylucki, POWER's executive director at the time. "When it became clear that we were going towards the lockdowns and all this stuff, we were basically already teeing up that pivot." He added, "There was a need and an opportunity for us to use our power to address something. That's the kind of contract we have with our communities; that's why we're here."

By the time the lockdown came, POWER and its 501(c)(4) group, Ground Game LA, had already set up a website, mutualaidla.org, in English and Spanish. Because they responded so quickly, Przylucki said, POWER unintentionally "ended up being the most visible organizational leadership in the whole mutual aid response to the pandemic" in Los Angeles. It became a much more expansive project than POWER had initially imagined, widening beyond just the organization's membership base. "I thought maybe, you know, our members will help each other, and we'll just help build some infrastructure for our members to facilitate taking care of each other," said Przylucki. While the website wasn't limited to just POWER members, "that's the kind of the footprint I was initially thinking of," he said. "I was just working off the assumption that we were going to be doing what we needed to do, and everyone else would be too. And then by the second week, I'm looking around like, 'Oh shit, we're the place everyone is coming to because we have a thing ready. Now everyone's here.'"

The group ultimately ended up raising $3 million to fund the COVID-19 mutual aid work, mostly in the form of individual donations and, then later, in the form of grants from larger funders. Przylucki described how the project worked: "We just resource-mapped ourselves — who knows how to do the tech, who knows how to do the logistics. I was basically like the finance guy. I know how to run a nonprofit, so I'll handle the money." POWER converted its office into a warehouse, and the logistics were organized, Przylucki noted, "by a guy who had worked at a pizza place, because pizza places are really good at moving shitloads of inventory very fast. He turned out to be the person who was like, 'I know how to do this' and just created a workflow for a defined, physical space that made sense for the volume that we were working with."

Przylucki noted that much of POWER's membership was already well aware of the power of mutual aid — some had been members of the Black Panther Party, Indigenous members had experience in mutual aid in their tribal communities, and immigrant leaders had long relied on mutual aid networks. And the website was intentionally designed to reflect a more horizontal power dynamic, asking volunteers whether they had any needs and vice versa: "When we launched, one of the very important things was not to create a dynamic between having resources to give and needing something. It was just, I'm part of this. We were actually challenging everyone to think about how to answer both parts of that survey question, what can you offer and what do you need, and we were asking literally everyone who walked in the door to answer both questions. We were really trying to make sure it didn't end up as a charity project. That was all just really crucial from the very beginning and was baked into the design."

POWER created a team of about a dozen people to manage the mutual aid program, mostly members and volunteers who stepped up to lead the work. "There wasn't really a distinction between staff and members in this space; it was just like, here's the team of people who are doing it. We were drawing on the various different types of expertise, and folks were slotting into roles, kind of regardless of professional titles," Przylucki said.

"We were actually challenging everyone to think about how to answer both parts of that survey question, what can you offer and what do you need, and we were asking literally everyone who walked in the door to answer both questions. We were really trying to make sure it didn't end up as a charity project. That was all just really crucial from the very beginning and was baked into the design."

As for the aid that was provided, POWER had only one explicit rule, Przylucki said: "It was that we were not going to pay the landlords. We weren't going to give people rent money, because we felt both confident that we could protect people from eviction, and we felt that, politically, it was necessary to lean into that contradiction." That was one way the group explicitly built political education into its mutual aid program, he said: "We would just flip it around in the community, and be like, 'No, we're not paying landlords right now the landlords don't need us. We need us, and these resources need to go help meet direct needs that are more urgent.' Like, if this person's phone gets shut off, if this lady's car gets towed, that's real right now, and you're not going to lose your home. All you have to do is join the tenants movement."

By the end of 2020, POWER began to transition away from managing the central mutual aid hub and toward, as Przylucki put it, using the funding they had received to "resource formations that were more sustainably situated within neighborhoods, within existing formations of relationships." The mutual aid hub still exists but has been passed on to a different organization.

Today, POWER still builds mutual aid into its organizing work. The group does food distributions in public housing complexes, run by members who live there. "Those are recruitment and political education sites, and that's just baked into the organizing," Przylucki said. The group also organizes with unhoused residents: "With that constituency there, it's really hard not to have a strategy that meets their direct needs to go along with the organizing. Because to organize people, you have to know where they are, and to keep people where they are, you need to charge their phone; you need to make sure that if they're going into housing, you're helping to get them into somewhere stable."

To Przylucki, what mutual aid does, if organized intentionally as a political project, is "build a certain type of community that is much more organizable and ready to fight for more and ready to consider, 'Okay, we're here taking care of ourselves now. How is our government helping? How is our government hurting? How is our government failing to do something that we'd be able to do, or how are they doing something that's really impeding our ability to do our main job of taking care of each other?'"

He pointed to some of the impacts of POWER's mutual aid hub. "The number of leaders that we identified, trained, developed, and then eventually — in some cases — hired through this process was unreal," Przylucki said. And it's made an impact on local governance. Thanks to the work of the mutual aid hub, he added, "Government entities were able to hire from this space of people, and now we have people inside who have the same attitude of, all right, let's figure out how to get this done. We have people who are both on the inside and the outside, collaborating to take versions of programming that we figured out how to do in the mutual aid space and do them from inside the government."

"It speaks to the transformative potential of engaging in this type of work, because what we're doing is we're collectivizing the responsibility of care," Przylucki said. "Taking collective ownership of each other's fundamental well-being and primary needs, that's an end into itself, from a political education piece. What we were doing was politicizing that collectivized responsibility." •

NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

CASE STUDY

National Domestic Workers Alliance

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020, groups that organize domestic workers — child care workers and nannies, house cleaners, and elder care workers — knew that it would be, as Anna Duncan, the senior organizing director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) put it, "financially devastating." Their workplace was other peoples' homes and continued to be largely informal, with few benefits like access to unemployment, and many workers were undocumented, meaning they were unable to access many federal programs.

"Most of our members lost 100% of their work pretty early on or lost significant percentages of their work," Duncan said. "It was pretty clear early on that we needed to do something, because people were just in really dire straits financially."

So, NDWA decided to step in — in spring 2020, the group launched the Coronavirus Care Fund, an ambitious national effort through which the group ultimately raised more than $30 million that was then distributed to 50,000 domestic workers around the country. "It was very clear that no one else was going to play this role for domestic workers if we weren't doing it," said Duncan. In addition to providing much-needed financial relief, she said, NDWA also believed the fund would allow both the national organization and its local chapters and affiliate organizations to grow their membership bases. In addition to supporting members of the alliance's affiliates and local chapters, Duncan noted that via the fund, they wanted to "reach workers who are not already part of our local organizations, knowing that there are hundreds of thousands of domestic workers who are not connected to a local organization already, including in places where there is no local organization." She added, "We had an organizing interest in doing this, to build our base long term and become a trusted place that domestic workers around the country know they can come to."

The Care Fund distributed funds in two rounds, in the form of gift cards — one initial $400 payment and then a $250 payment. The first step was creating the tech infrastructure needed for what was essentially a stimulus program for domestic workers. "We started out with Google spreadsheets," Duncan recalled. "We pretty quickly realized that that was not going to cut it if we were trying to send this to 50,000 workers." The "gamechanger," Duncan said, was leveraging NDWA's existing relationships with tech partners and previous innovation work done by NDWA Labs to utilize technology in service of the domestic worker movement. NDWA partnered with Google.org, which provided

seven fellows who worked full time for several months to build out the tech infrastructure for the Care Fund, from the application website and database to a system for generating codes that would be used by people applying to the fund. Running the Care Fund also required additional infrastructure — NDWA contracted with a gift card processing company that mailed out the payments and also handled any troubleshooting questions related to the cards. And the organization hired a team of 13 customer service specialists to field calls — which numbered about roughly 100,000 per month — from domestic workers. All told, the administrative costs of running the fund was about $1 million.

Then there was the question of how to ensure that the funds were distributed solely to domestic workers. "The main thing was creating a system that would be accessible and not onerous, that would be easy for people to use, but that still had sufficient vetting. We needed some way to actually confirm that the people asking for funds were, in fact, domestic workers facing financial hardship because of the pandemic," Duncan said. NDWA came up with a hybrid system, where local organizations connected to NDWA distributed codes to domestic workers in their network and where NDWA vetted those who were not connected to a local organization. "It was very challenging to do that vetting on the national level," Duncan said. "So, we ended up limiting how much we promoted access to the fund to general audiences, relying primarily on the local organizations who were already reaching domestic workers in their area." The majority of those who received aid were connected to NDWA affiliates, but affiliates also brought in new workers to their organization through this process; in October 2020, the national alliance experimented with outreach to domestic worker employers to identify new workers, ultimately connecting with about 8,000 domestic workers.

"The main thing was creating a system that would be accessible and not onerous, that would be easy for people to use, but that still had sufficient vetting. We needed some way to actually confirm that the people asking for funds were, in fact, domestic workers facing financial hardship because of the pandemic."

All of the local affiliates and chapters now have much bigger contact lists of domestic workers in their cities, Duncan noted. But if the fund was successful in distributing cash aid to workers, the question NWDA grappled (and continues to grapple) with, Duncan said, is "how to translate folks who came into the organization for emergency assistance into members of the organization and how to plug them into the organizing and campaign work." She added, "That's the goal and the vision, and if it's done well, then the mutual aid supports the base-building and organizing. But I think for some groups, that's been challenging." She noted that most NDWA affiliates had a lower contact-to-member conversion rate for people who received support via the fund when compared to traditional outreach methods. "It's been a challenge to fully realize the potential of the list growth experienced as a result of providing the cash assistance," Duncan said.

One takeaway from operating the fund, Duncan said, is the importance of building in an explicit political education piece that ties mutual aid efforts more directly to organizing campaigns. "We talked a lot with our affiliates and with member leaders from our local organizations about how this is a role that government should be playing, and we were advocating at the federal level and then at the state level for these programs. But we didn't directly connect that organizing message, that agitational message, with folks who were receiving the cash assistance. We were doing both of those things at the same time, but they weren't necessarily connected," she said. One challenge, she noted, is that much of the communication with people

who applied to the fund was via text message, a medium that's hardly conducive to deep political education. Still, "that feels like a missed opportunity. I would want us to think more about how to do that if we did something like this again," Duncan said.

Still, many NDWA member groups successfully pivoted from the fund to launch campaigns during the pandemic around expanding the social safety net to include domestic workers, undocumented workers, and other excluded communities, Duncan noted. "I think that has been a really effective way to involve people who came to the organization because they didn't have access to the safety net, and they needed it and were able to get their head above water because of emergency assistance from the organization," she said. "And then there was a pathway for them to say, 'Okay, now we need to be demanding that this is actually something that the state should be funding by expanding the social safety net.'"

That organizing, coupled with, as Duncan put it, how the fund "set an example of what government should be doing," led to some big local victories — NDWA worked with the cities of Philadelphia and Tucson, Arizona, to help set up their own funds for excluded workers. "Being able to provide that example, that it is possible to do this at scale, that there are ways to do this and create innovative models to do this that helped lay some of the groundwork for public funding," Duncan said, while also noting that none of those victories would have occurred without active campaigning. "Sometimes we first need to show it can be done." •

KC TENANTS

CASE STUDY

KC Tenants

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in spring 2020, the Kansas City, Missouri, tenant union KC Tenants was just coming off a successful campaign to pass a tenant bill of rights. But it quickly pivoted to rapid response mutual aid work, recognizing that all levels of government were, as KC Tenants Housing Organizer Maya Neal put it, "failing to provide resources needed for our people to survive in a global pandemic." "We paused and did everything to keep leaders in their home," Neal recalled. "We recognized this was a global emergency and that we needed really swift action."

In March 2020, the group launched a mutual aid fund for the organization's member leaders, out of the recognition that tenant leaders wouldn't be able to participate in the organizing work if they couldn't pay their bills. The goal was to ensure that member leaders could remain part of the organization. "We made the decision to establish our mutual aid fund for leaders in our union, to ensure that their basic needs were met while we organized for broader protections for tenants," Neal said.

At the time, Neal, who became a staff organizer in 2023, was one of the group's member leaders, and she was able to draw from the fund herself. "Having this mutual aid fund during the pandemic meant the difference between whether I eat every meal in my car or my house," she said. "It kept me able to organize through the early days of the pandemic." She added, "The mutual aid fund is why many of our folks are still here. I would not be here without the mutual aid fund."

As of March 2024, the fund's GoFundMe has raised more than $100,000 from mostly small donations (the average donation is $230), which has allowed it to support almost 100 member leaders. Currently, there is no cap on how much financial support a member leader can receive. And now, KC Tenants is establishing plans to make it a permanent part of the organization. "When this fund was created, it was always intended to support organizing and building power. That hasn't changed," Neal said.

The mutual aid fund has become an important part of KC Tenants' work building long-term power. "Organized money plus organized people can equal power," Christina Ostmeyer, a KC Tenants leader, said. "We don't mean that in a

capitalistic way by any means, but we know that, in the world as it is, folks need a roof over their head. They need their basic needs met. They need living wages. And when we have those elements, when people's basic needs are taken care of, that's when we can organize and build power and win radical campaigns for our city." Ostmeyer also noted that raising money for the mutual fund can be its own kind of community-building. KC Tenants has held fundraising concerts, community events at local art galleries, and giveaways and raffles to raise money, all of which, Ostmeyer said, "solve two needs — bringing people together and raising money for mutual aid."

In making the fund permanent, KC Tenants is planning to integrate it throughout the organization, treating it in essence like another organizing project led by member leaders. In the early days of the pandemic, the fund was run by one staff member, who was in charge of distributing funds. Now, said Ostmeyer, the idea is to make it "sustainable for the long term." "Our mutual aid fund sprung out of just deep, deep crisis, and it sprung up real quick, and we raised tens of thousands of dollars really quick to keep folks in their homes," she said. "Years down the road, things are a little bit more stable, and now we're like, what can we do to make it have more structure?"

The proposal currently before KC Tenants members is a structure where "leaders will be in charge of our mutual aid fund, not just solely one person on staff," Neal said. The group's fundraising team, known as the Dollar Divas, would lead efforts to raise money for the fund, and then another team made of member leaders would be in charge of dispersing funds. And the idea is that much of the fundraising would come from leaders and their networks. "We have to be willing to ask our friends and do what we can to fundraise. We have to have the willingness to say, 'I'm gonna make money asks of people in my life, because I have a clear self interest,' and I think that they understand the power that we're building too," Ostmeyer said.

> **"To me, mutual aid is the concept of, 'We have us and we're holding us.' It comes from our community, and it goes back into our community."**

To Neal, mutual aid goes beyond just supporting the organizing work. "To me, mutual aid is the concept of, 'We have us and we're holding us.' It comes from our community, and it goes back into our community," she said. "These systems that exist, that often extract resources from us, that's not mutual aid. Mutual aid is the ability to show up for one another so that we can continue to organize for our own liberation and community, with one another." •

CASE STUDY

Miami Workers Center

Photo: Miami Workers Center

The Miami Workers Center has long provided emergency disaster relief, offering needed supplies to community members in the wake of climate disasters, and during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization turned its warehouse into a hub for personal protective equipment and other supplies.

"The pandemic really was a catalyst for us to ensure that mutual aid should always be available for our people who are building with us and simultaneously going through different crises and might need support," said Kathlyn Belizaire, the group's gender justice and member services program manager. "The pandemic showed us that we actually need this important organizing work. We don't see a world where mutual aid is not a part of organizing."

So, in 2021, the Miami Workers Center launched its Sisters in Struggle Mutual Aid Program (SISMAP), a year-round, ongoing program that offers emergency assistance and supplies via the group's warehouse to members. MWC also holds monthly women's circles meetings and regular block parties. (In recent years, the group has undergone a strategic reorientation to intentionally deploy a gender lens to the issues of racial and economic justice, prioritizing building a membership base of Black and brown women and gender-nonconforming people and tenants, domestic workers, and undocumented immigrants.) "Mutual aid just was natural for us to move into to make sure that the people we're building with feel supported in the care that they need," Belizaire said. The goal of the SISMAP program, as she put it, is to cultivate "a beloved community where people know that we have your back." She added, "Care was something that we were trying to center our work around."

In 2023, the group distributed about $10,000 in funds to its member leaders. Currently, the money for the SISMAP fund comes from membership dues as well as the organization's budget, though Belizaire said the group is experimenting with fundraising specifically for the mutual aid work. "We know that needing things is not a personal failure. We live in a very unequal society without safety nets. And so we wanted to ensure that if folks needed support, if some of our leaders are going through a crisis — like they're getting evicted or needed rent help or needed help paying a bill, their lights were shut off — we were allocating funds in our budget to ensure that our folks feel supported," she said. Members helped shape the guidelines for how the fund would be run (it's only available to active members, for one), and there are caps set for how much cash aid can be distributed, based on the need. The

fund has been used for everything from assisting members in paying electricity bills to covering rent to paying for the cost of moving and, in one instance, to helping the daughter of a member who passed away travel to Miami for the funeral.

The supplies offered via SISMAP are also a critical component of the mutual aid program, Belizaire said. The warehouse is stocked with items like diapers and baby wipes as well as other supplies and goods donated by members and community residents. "Some folks are dropping off furniture; some folks maybe need furniture," Belizaire said. "We don't want people to think that the mutual aid is one-sided. It's a practice that we're committed to as a form of solidarity. And we're constantly trying to experiment, seeing how we can pull our resources together. Who has gifts that they can offer?" Another key component is the SISMAP quarterly block parties, which are planned and led by members and include a member marketplace, as well as activities like medical wellness services, healing circles, voter registration, mutual aid supply distribution, and arts activities. "Having that provides a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of relief to keep us going when the fight can feel so hard, especially in the political climate in Florida," Belizaire said.

SISMAP has had some tangible impacts, helping member leaders stay housed and remain active in the organization. "We have leaders who are knocking on doors. We have leaders who are facilitating meetings. We have leaders who are phone banking and pouring so much into the organization," she said. "Part of really seeing our people, seeing the dignity of our people, is also seeing their current struggles and barriers to participation and barriers to leadership development. Maybe it's not being able to pay this bill, you know, 'I can't come to this meeting. I can't facilitate this.Actually, I'm in crisis.'"

To Belizaire, mutual aid is not separate from organizing. "I think that the pandemic showed us how we actually need this important organizing work. Our dream is that everyone has what they need, everyone feels supported, everyone feels cared for, and folks are housed, and there's public housing and funding, and there's emergency rental assistance. But right now, that's not our current reality," Belizaire said. "Though we're not yet in that dream world where all of our needs are met, this is how we can support folks in the interim until we get there, ensuring that we're keeping our eye on where we're headed and our eye on our North Star." She added, "Part of the reason why we're organizing is because the systems right now are failing our people and are not meeting our needs. The systems right now are harming us, and so this is our offering as a community, our invitation to be in this struggle with us."

"Mutual aid is an act of love."

Ultimately, Belizaire said, "mutual aid is an act of love." "I think a lot of us who do this organizing work, that's the value that we hold. It's the way we love our people, and it's the world that we're dreaming of, where we all are caring for each other." •

Photo: Miami Workers Center

Photo:
WV Can't Wait

CASE STUDY

WV Can't Wait

In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the statewide grassroots governance organization WV Can't Wait decided to integrate mutual aid efforts into its get out the vote efforts. In addition to providing voter information, 397 volunteers were trained as "neighborhood captains" to provide practical support, such as picking up groceries for people, helping people access unemployment benefits, and get their electricity turned back on.

"It was a completely integrated political campaign and mutual aid effort," Stephen Smith, the group's co-chair, said. He added, "It was also wildly successful in terms of increasing voter turnout, especially among low-frequency voters." Among some groups of voters, he noted, voter turnout increased by 20%. "In hindsight, it seems obvious," Smith said. "When you show up and treat people like human beings and you're like, 'By the way, there's an election coming up,' that works better than spamming them with horrible political ads."

In the course of that campaign, they also met West Virginians who were already doing the work of serving their communities and challenging those in power. That experience taught the group that, as Smith put it, "there was so much existing activity and so much appetite for work that was locally rooted, mutual aid-oriented, unapologetically combining helping people out where they were and politics." The question then became, he said, "How can we continue to invest in this way?"

So, in 2021, when WV Can't Wait received an infusion of cash, it decided that rather than launch a traditional electoral campaign, it would do something radically different — create a program, called Hometown Heroes, that would give financial awards and support to individuals who were already, as Smith put it, "doing the work that government fails to do, regardless of who's in office."

"The guess we made is that funding one year of an organizer to do a bunch of mobilizing that wouldn't last, was not nearly the power-building that could come from investing in people who are already organizing and encouraging them in what they were doing," Smith said. In addition to helping build out and strengthen West Virginia's progressive ecosystem, WV Can't Wait also believed the award program could help the organization identify people who could run for political office. It was, he added, "a bet on long-term political infrastructure."

WV Can't Wait spent much of 2021 laying the groundwork for the Hometown Heroes program — holding dozens of one-on-one meetings with people already engaged in mutual aid work to build relationships, out of which emerged a leadership team that would guide the program and the nomination process. For the latter, Smith said, "We were very clear that we are looking for people who are doing brave anti-establishment work, supporting their communities while also challenging those in power. We drew a very clear distinction between charity or service work, which we think is good and positive, and mutual aid, which we see as community helping itself and a willingness to challenge those in power who are hurting that community."

When the group launched the nomination process later that year, that leadership team then combed through the more than 100 nominations and met with nominees to winnow the list of awardees to a group of 40 people and community groups, each of whom would receive a $2,000 award, recognition as a Hometown Hero, access to mental health and safety services in times of crisis, fiscal sponsorship (if necessary), and ongoing coaching and leadership development.

The impact of the Hometown Heroes program has far outpaced what WV Can't Wait expected, particularly given the relatively small investment in funding — seeding new organizations in the state's movement ecosystem, expanding the group's leadership pipeline for political candidates, and bringing new leaders into the organization. Six people involved with the program, either as Hometown Hero awardees or as part of the leadership team, have been trained by the group to run for political office and mounted campaigns, and many awardees have become WV Can't Wait leaders, deepening the group's base and expanding its reach. Several Hometown Hero awardees have started their own organizations with WV Can't Wait's support, including two awardees who met through the program and decided to open Rainbow House, West Virginia's first shelter for LGBTQIA+ residents. "The shelter now exists in part because we said to people who normally don't get money or recognition, 'Here's some money; here's some recognition; we believe in you. Here's a little bit of fiscal sponsorship; here's a little bit of fundraising help; here's a little bit of grant writing help. Let's meet once a month to talk strategy and board development; come to our organizing trainings, come to our community defender training and learn how to stay safe,'" Smith said.

Two years after the official launch of the program, Smith said, "the work of identifying and supporting Hometown Heroes or mutual aid organizers has become, in some ways, not the only but the primary thing we do." This decision came out of a clear-eyed assessment of both the political conditions in West Virginia and an analysis of what is needed in this moment in the state — for WV Can't Wait, a shift that one of its leaders described as "more Black Panther Party, less Working Families Party." "Over the last few years, the authoritarian threat has risen, as more and more of our people and the work they care about has been criminalized by our state government and as the prospects for our candidates, in some ways, look bleaker and bleaker at the state level," Smith said. He added, "We think that shift away from traditional campaign tools to things like mutual aid and defense and governance is the shift that we're going to need even more of as authoritarians get more power in America over the next 10 years."

Smith sees no tension between, as he put it, "doing the work that our government refuses to do" and building the long-term power needed to create a government in West Virginia that serves all of its people. "Speaking of our long-term strategy, the hunch we have is that the most powerful, threatening challenge we can make to establishment power, authoritarian power in West Virginia, is to help people essentially do the work that government fails to do — that that is actually a more aggressive, powerful, impactful strategy than only running people for office, considering that the powers that be in West Virginia have a pretty tight grip over the electoral structure here." Smith added, "All of this is a recognition that by actually doing things for people and challenging what the government does by doing what they should be doing, that is our most powerful position, even electorally." •

CAMPAIGN FOR SOUTHERN EQUALITY

CASE STUDY

Campaign for Southern Equality

In 2022, as states throughout the country began ramping up their efforts to pass bans on gender-affirming healthcare for transgender youth, the Campaign for Southern Equality (CSE) knew it had to act to meet the moment.

In January 2023, the group launched the Southern Trans Youth Emergency Project to provide direct, rapid response support, including emergency grants and travel assistance, to the families of trans youth in Southern states where bans were in place so that they could continue to get the care they needed in other states. In July 2024, the program, now called the Trans Youth Emergency Project (TYEP), expanded nationally to serve families in any state with a ban on care for trans youth.

CSE's long-term goal is to build a South with lived and legal equality for LGBTQIA+ Southerners, but as Allison Scott, the group's interim executive director, put it, "we also recognize that if people aren't getting what they need right now, then those wins are not going to come soon enough." Crisis moments require a crisis response, said TYEP Program Manager Carolyn Jones. "It's so obvious that this is what we should be doing right now," Jones said, adding, "This is a true emergency."

CSE modeled TYEP in part off of the work of abortion funds. "We built TYEP with lessons learned from reproductive rights fights — people were going to need to access healthcare," Scott said. The group was also building off of its long-standing work providing grants and emergency funds to individuals and grassroots groups, work that it both accelerated and streamlined during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, CSE launched its COVID-19 Rapid Response Grant Program, which prioritized granting emergency funds to people of color, trans and gender-nonconforming people, individuals of low income, and rural LGBTQIA+ southerners. "The pandemic changed a lot in the world, and we took a look at the way we were operating and recognized that we had to pivot and fundamentally shift the way we were giving out money to be, first of all, more flexible and, second, to prioritize the people who are being most affected," said Scott. "We made it easy to access and made it a trust-based system. So, we went from giving out a few hundred grants a year to, during the pandemic, giving out over 2,000 grants."

In the 1.5 years since TYEP launched, thousands of families have reached out to the group for advice and assistance on how to navigate bans in their states, and CSE has given out grants totaling a half million dollars to more than 1,000 families, all of whom they've worked with to ensure their child can continue to access gender-affirming care in access states.

CSE began TYEP in Tennessee and Mississippi — states where the group already had deep relationships with grassroots organizations and healthcare providers — and has since expanded nationwide. Similar to abortion funds, which have relationships with abortion providers, CSE has built out a network of doctors, hospitals, and clinics in states that continue to provide gender-affirming care to youth, which is information that can be difficult for families to find on their own. "A lot of these places are not advertising that they're offering gender-affirming care to youth, even in safe states, because they're at risk of getting doxxed or being attacked online," Jones noted.

When a family reaches out for assistance, Jones or one of CSE's patient navigators will then schedule a one-on-one with them. Often, families are looking for referrals to new providers so that their child can continue to receive uninterrupted care, Jones said. "We make sure to really tailor suggestions to folks' situations — the age of their child, what they need, how close they are geographically to a new provider, but also whether they have family in a certain state that it might be easier to travel to," she said. That latter criteria points to an important distinction between TYEP and abortion funds. "The key difference between this and abortion care is that, typically, abortion care is a one-time appointment," Jones said. "But this is a long-standing relationship with a provider that, for families with younger kids, may require regular travel for the next several years."

For families that need financial assistance, CSE also offers $500 grants, which the group gives families every six months, as well as free air travel provided by the organization Elevated Access, a network of volunteer pilots who transport people to either abortion or gender-affirming care appointments. CSE has also set up patient care funds at clinics to help families pay for the cost of care itself.

Running the program requires dedicated staff time — in addition to Jones, CSE has a part-time patient navigator who works with families, and other staff regularly pitch in when needed — as well as infrastructure and systems to handle everything from making payments to families to booking flights. "There's not software that you can buy to do what we're doing. We've created all of that in-house," Scott said. She added, "We've also baked in security concerns from day one, because we've seen hospital systems provide patient information to overzealous out-of-state attorneys general. So we've thought about all that — we keep all of our information in another country that keeps it all protected. It's things like that that people don't think about."

It also requires financial resources, especially given the fact that their aid to individual families is both ongoing and will likely need to be continued for several more years. "Nationally, funding for LGBTQIA+ work is dropping, and that's not a feeling — that's a documented fact," Scott noted. "LGBTQIA+ organizations are seeing a cutback in their funding from national funders and family foundations. And the impact of that is, it makes it harder to do this work, because it's not a one and done."

"Nationally, funding for LGBTQIA+ work is dropping, and that's not a feeling — that's a documented fact."

While TYEP is first and foremost a program meant to address an immediate crisis and offer direct and practical support to families and trans youth, CSE also sees it as a way to involve directly impacted families in CSE's advocacy work. Many families who have received support from TYEP have gone on to share their story in the media or in a legal brief designed to document the burdens of these bans. "We are constantly checking

back in with the families we work with, not just about their healthcare needs but seeing if they want to get involved — do they want to tell their stories? Do they want to be part of an amicus brief? Do they want to potentially seek legal action in their state?" Scott said. "We're always leaving the invite on the table for people, and we also recognize that it doesn't always fit for some people, because they have to consider their safety and their family's safety."

To Scott, this mutual aid work is a continuation of the heart of the LGBTQIA+ movement. "It all began in our community, stepping up and taking care of each other when nobody else will. Before laws were being challenged or anything else, that's the first place we started — taking care of each other," she said. "Our movement is rooted in this, and this is a moment for us to go back to our roots. It's a fundamental piece of who we are — we take care of our community first, and then we know we can all get to the bigger win together." •

Photo: VOCAL-NY

CASE STUDY

VOCAL-NY

For the New York City-based group VOCAL-NY, organizing with people of low income who are directly impacted by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration, and homelessness has meant that providing services has always been intertwined with their work.

"We always have been at the intersection of responding as a public health institution and as a political powerbuilding organization at the same time, and I think that that informs us in a very unique way," said Jawanza Williams, VOCAL-NY's organizing director. Williams added, "We can't build a movement if our people are dead. So, simultaneously, we need to have direct services that are going to immediately mitigate or eliminate premature death."

In 2023, VOCAL-NY moved into a new and much larger office and also began a partnership with the Mount Sinai hospital system, both of which allowed the group to dramatically expand its harm-reduction services, which are open to all — not just the group's members. "Thanks to that funding from Mount Sinai, the drop-in center has a staff of nine people. "A unique thing about VOCAL is that organizing and services live together and are very much intertwined," Graciela Razo, VOCAL-NY's drop-in and syringe exchange program manager, said. The ground floor houses the group's drop-in center, which offers showers, laundry, free clothing, a syringe exchange program, a safe space to use drugs, harm-reduction supplies for drug users, on-site drug checking, as well as other health care services like care coordination and a medical clinic. "We want to treat participants in our community as a whole and not just address substance use and address overdose risk," Razo said. "We want to make sure all are clothed, fed, have access to showers and laundry services, and also [have access to] not just harm-reduction programming, but wellness programming and opportunities for creative outlets and community building."

Unlike many other drop-in centers, Razo said, VOCAL-NY intentionally made the drop-in center a welcoming and comfortable space. "I really wanted to create something more comfortable, more cozy, more like a living room, where people can really feel comfortable and safe to hang out. People who want to just take a nap or watch a movie can do that," she said. "As harm reductionists, we don't make a whole lot of space to see people holistically and also can sometimes forget to prioritize that. Community building is a part of overdose prevention. And community care is a part of recovery, whatever that looks like for somebody."

And while there is no expectation or requirement that people who access VOCAL-NY's services get involved in the group's campaigns or join as members, the organization intentionally builds in opportunities for people to become engaged. One of the weekly group meetings held at the drop-in center is what VOCAL-NY calls the Social Justice Power Hour. "It's political organizing and education, and so that's where organizers host a group for participants, and that's where they get to engage participants and explain, this is what we're working on; this is how we're working on it; this is how you can get involved," Razo said.

For Williams, who joined VOCAL-NY as a member in 2013 while he was experiencing homelessness and is also living with HIV, one of the benefits of the group running a robust service program — aside from addressing a very real need — is that it lets the organizing be informed by what is happening on the ground. "It helps us keep our finger on the pulse," he said.

"As harm reductionists, we don't make a whole lot of space to see people holistically and also can sometimes forget to prioritize that. Community building is a part of overdose prevention. And community care is a part of recovery, whatever that looks like for somebody."

It also, he said, helps organizers engaged in outreach reach more people than they would be able to otherwise: "I remind organizers, for instance, you're actually not a service provider. You are building political power. You're helping develop leaders who know how to use that political power responsibly. There's a lot of political education that has to happen, a lot of skills training, and we have to cast wide nets."

Providing a central, safe space for people also builds trust and relationships, which is particularly important given VOCAL-NY's base. "If you're a heavily stigmatized and criminalized population, you're probably more apprehensive to talk to people, especially to exchange information, like your full name or your phone or your email," Williams pointed out. "A lot of our membership base, because they're extremely low income or no income, are often very transient. There's a lot of dimensions of things that we have to deal with because of that, in terms of our base-building." The expanded services, he said, have led to "an uptick of people that come in to access direct services joining the political organization. There are a set of participants who have become member leaders in our drug users union that definitely have increased."

To Williams, coupling political organizing with direct services is a necessary component of any movement to end the drug war. "What we need to be building is loving and caring infrastructure that takes care of people, that helps us produce the kind of society where we can realize abolitionist visions," he said. "Ending homelessness, ending the drug war, it means we need institutions like overdose prevention centers," because drug users need to be a key part of that movement. "Any kind of liberatory future that we're building has to include them," Williams said. He added, "I think that's sometimes a missing dimension of the popular conversation, and I think that our organization fills a really critical niche, because we're providers, and simultaneously, we're organizers." •

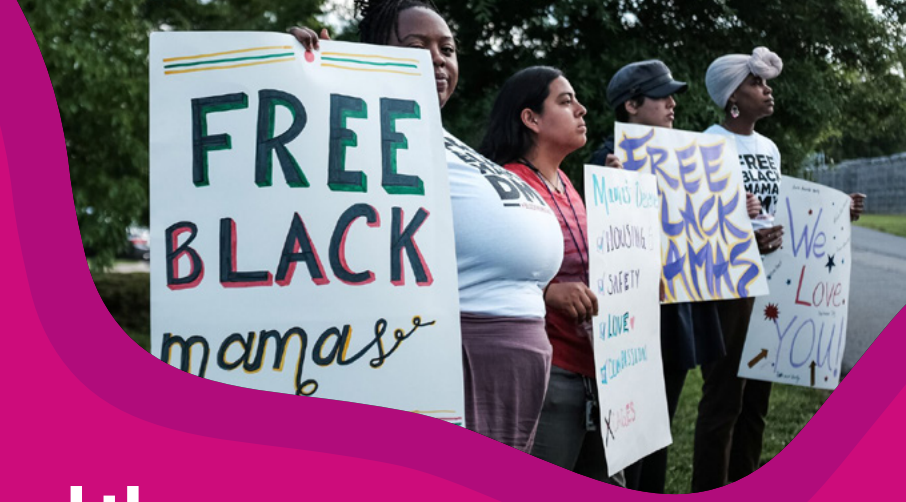

Photo: National Bail Out, Michael A McCoy

PHILADELPHIA COMMUNITY BAIL FUND

CASE STUDY

National Bail Out and the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund

In 2017, a group of Black organizers convened by the Movement for Black Lives Policy Table, Law for Black Lives, and Color of Change came up with the idea of holding a mass bail out specifically for Black mothers and caregivers as a way to highlight the "specific ways Black women and femmes experience the impacts of incarceration" and to build momentum for an movement to abolish pretrial detention systems and dismantle the prison industrial complex.

The Mama's Day Bail Out was born, and since then, the group that formed out of that meeting, National Bail Out, and its partner organizations have bailed out more than 800 people through their annual Mother's Day actions.

National Bail Out acts as a sort of national umbrella organization, funding local groups as well as providing logistical support. The Mama's Day Bail Out has several goals, the most immediate being offering mutual aid in the form of bail. As Yabsera Faris, National Bail Out's communications director, put it, "One way we can actually change the material conditions of folks is just bailing folks out." But this direct mutual aid, Faris said, is part of a bigger political project. "One of the criteria for partnering with us is having a larger campaign to end pre-trial detention and money bail," Faris noted. "Many organizations aren't just doing these bailouts; many of them actually do bailouts throughout the year. And they're not just doing bailouts; they also have a political strategy when it comes to ending pre-trial detention, because at the end of the day, that is our goal, as a step toward our North Star, ending the prison industrial complex."

One of National Bail Out's partner organizations is the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund, which formed in 2017 with the express purpose of holding a Mama's Day Bail Out. "I was there the first bail out day, when we bailed out 13 women," Candace McKinley, the bail fund's lead organizer, said. Initially, the bail fund was volunteer-run, with a team of 10 to 12 core organizers. The group soon expanded its work beyond the Mother's Day campaign, opening up the bail fund year-round. In 2018, the fund also expanded its mutual aid work to include helping people it bailed out pay for food, rent, bills, and other expenses.

"We realized that a lot of the people we were paying bail for were on the edge of that poverty, if not in poverty, and that being in prison even just a couple days put people over the edge in terms of their housing and everything else," McKinley said. "So, we were like, we need to do something more. Philly has lots of services and stuff, but it's

Photo: National Bail Out, Michael A McCoy

really disjointed and underfunded, and so a lot of people just really didn't have anywhere else to turn." When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, McKinley said, the fund "ramped up the mutual aid, because we knew there was such a big need," upping the cap for its mutual aid from $1,000 to $2,000 per person. That year, after the killing of George Floyd, $2 million in donations poured in from around the world. "We started putting aside a chunk of our donations to make sure we had enough money for mutual aid," McKinley said.

McKinley said that now the fund sets aside about $100,000 each year to fund the nonbail mutual aid that it provides people. To McKinley, the point of mutual aid is to give people the opportunity and ability to become leaders in the movement. "The idea is that you want to allow them enough space to be able to think about, like, organizing a new building, instead of having to always worry about the rent and how they're going to feed themselves."

And while McKinley recognizes the need for mutual aid, she cautions against losing sight of the broader mission. "We're not a social service agency, which is something that we had talked about from the beginning when we first started doing aid. And so it was supposed to be a small part of what we do. Dollars-wise, it is still a small part," McKinley said. But the mutual aid work takes up an outsized amount of time of the fund's small number of staff — to the detriment of its long-term work. Now, she said, "we're trying to be limited, because our goal, our mission, is supposed to be ending cash bail and pre-trial detention, but we've never really gotten able to get our heads above water enough to really do the community organizing work and to make the turn of making our mutual aid efforts part of our organizing efforts."

It's important, she said, to have clear policies and procedures on how to handle the mutual aid work as well as to keep it manageable, she said. "You can't fix everything all by yourself, and your organization will just burn out and be overwhelmed if you try. You need to be realistic about what you can do." She also stressed the importance of making clear that rather than being charity, providing aid is part of community power-building. "You need to be really clear in your communication about what you are, who you are, and communicate that to people over and over," McKinley said.

To McKinley, the point of mutual aid is to give people the opportunity and ability to become leaders in the movement.

National Bail Out's Faris agreed. "You need to make sure that once you bail folks out, once you provide the supportive services, you're also bringing them into your organization and allowing them to be politicized by this work," she said. "It's really important to have the folks most impacted leading the strategies for the solutions." To that end, many of the group's partner organizations are led by people impacted by mass incarceration. "Especially this year, the folks that are leading the bailouts have themselves been bailed out through this campaign, which is incredible," she noted.

To Faris, the work of bail funds is part of a long lineage of mutual aid in Black communities. "Mutual aid societies have existed in African-American communities for centuries, even in the continent of Africa," she said. "We align our work based off of that history and understanding that our ancestors bought each other's freedom through mutual aid."

She added, "It shows people that we don't need the government to keep us safe. And I think it also highlights how we don't need to depend on the state for the things that we need. I think folks are realizing that when people are depending on bail funds and mutual aid, they're proving that communities don't actually need more cages. They need more care. They need more resources."

"I think left organizations have a responsibility to build power in communities, and I think they can do that through mutual aid, because you're building trust in those communities, and you're showing people that a world can be a better place now and the fact that the future doesn't just appear," Faris said. "In a lot of these movement spaces, we're talking about abolition, and abolition is not just about tearing down these systems — it's also, at the same time, building institutions. And I think mutual aid is that second part." •

Photo: National Bail Out, Michael A McCoy

PEOPLE'S ACTION INSTITUTE

CASE STUDY

People's Action Institute

In 2021, when the grassroots national alliance People's Action Institute (PAI) examined the state of its health care justice organizing, members of the organization came to a realization: It had successfully pushed to expand coverage via the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and in many states, PAI had fought — and won — campaigns to expand Medicaid coverage, and yet it often seemed as if the status quo had not budged.

"We increasingly heard from people that they had insurance, and they were still getting prevented from getting the care they and a doctor said they need, or they were getting stuck with a massive bill," said Ryan Greenwood, PAI's senior strategist for its Health Care for All Campaign. "The problem wasn't getting people insurance — the problem was getting people health care. And the obstacle to care is the health insurance companies themselves."

And when it came to the group's long-term goal of universal, single-payer health insurance, Greenwood said, "We just realized, strategically, we're never going to get Medicare for All, one that improves on what we already have, unless we bust the myth that private insurance will be there when you need it."

Out of that was born the group's Care Over Cost campaign, a national effort that PAI member groups lead and that the national alliance supports to fight insurance companies' individual care denials and win people the care they need. The idea was to not only work with individuals to successfully get the health care they needed but to mount campaigns around each case that could generate a groundswell of support and media attention.

"Our theory was like, okay, we want to find and help people win individual cases, because we think that the public pressure campaigns will bring a lot of people off the bench who want to stand in solidarity with somebody who's suffering. That'll move a narrative, because we'll do it in public, in the media and on social media," Greenwood explained. PAI also believed that this work would strengthen its member organizations' capacity in the long term. As Greenwood put it, "One of our internal organizing principles is that this work actually has to build a base. It has to get more active members and leaders for the member groups."

Launched in 2022, the Care Over Cost campaign has already worked with dozens of people to fight care denials from their health care companies, many of which have generated local press coverage and helped fuel local campaigns, in addition to winning care for individuals. The campaign began in a small number of states where the alliance already had member organizations — Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. It has since expanded to other states, and as the campaign built up capacity, some cases are in states where PAI doesn't have a member organization. More recently, as PAI has worked with people who have been denied care by the same insurance companies, they have run media campaigns centered around those stories as well as directly engaged company executives from those companies. "We are working with people who have been denied care to develop state legislative agendas we will launch next year, to get our elected officials to force these companies to change," Greenwood shared.

But, Greenwood cautioned, it hasn't been easy — to do all of this successfully, he said, has required a willingness to experiment (and fail) with outreach methods as well as staff time to build out the infrastructure, including teams of volunteers, needed to challenge denials and run successful pressure campaigns.

"The problem that we ran into is that in developing a case, you have to have somebody who's willing to go public about their medical problems," Greenwood noted, which can be a high bar. (While PAI doesn't only aid people who agree to turn their case into a public campaign, that is the primary goal.) He added, "What we really realized in doing this work is that it takes a big funnel to find people with a case that are willing to fight back with you and go public, and that's really hard. The good news is that there are lots of people who want to stand in solidarity with those people."

On the outreach side, said Greenwood, "We experimented a bunch with outreach tactics and found out a bunch of things that don't work" — including online outreach and street canvassing. Through trial and error, PAI finally landed on what did work — leaning on existing relationships with other organizations and institutions to surface individual claims and campaigns as well as outreach to, as Greenwood put it, "specific communities of people who are getting lots of denials."

"We are working with people who have been denied care to develop state legislative agendas we will launch next year, to get our elected officials to force these companies to change."

Then there's the work of actually helping people with their claims, which begins with a screening process to determine whether it's a case that PAI can assist with. (Greenwood noted that at times, people's claims are not with their insurance company but with their provider.) PAI put together a national appeals team made up of seven lawyers, medical workers and other volunteers who work on individual denials. "They run the appeals, and then we work with the member groups to run the public pressure campaigns," Greenwood said.

PAI has been so encouraged by the impact so far that it plans to continue to expand the campaign. Greenwood shared the story of one woman in Pennsylvania, Carly Morton, as an example of what the Care Over Cost campaign has been able to achieve. Morton, who was 29 years old at the time, was denied a necessary surgery by her insurance provider, UnitedHealthcare. Working with PAI, she successfully fought back and was able to get the surgery she needed and is now a leader in PAI's national fight for universal health care. "She went from like, I'm gonna die in the next five years, to now, eight months after the surgery, she can bench press," Greenwood said. Through this work, he said, she's "seen her own power and liberation." It's examples like Morton's that make Greenwood believe that, as he put it, "We're doing the exact right thing

that we need to right now." The next step, he said, is ramping it up to meet the moment. "We're far from scale," Greenwood said. "We can't take on all the incoming cases we get. We're at like, a 10 to 15% ratio, and that just feels bad. We're not going to start a revolution based on 30 cases a year. I think we need hundreds, and we're not there."

While funding is one part of the puzzle, Greenwood said, the other, more critical piece is building out the infrastructure necessary to mount a more robust campaign. Moving forward, PAI will be launching what Greenwood described as state-based infrastructure campaign committees to create the capacity to take on more individual cases and campaigns. Riffing off of the bronze, silver, and gold ranking system that the ACA implemented, he said that right now, the campaign infrastructure is at the "bronze" level. "You do need some pretty dedicated staffing in terms of the amount of time that you put on it, because it's not a thing where you can just be like, okay, this is like a quarter of this person's job and it's going to work because of the volume of outreach you need to do to get cases and the volume of work you need to do once you have a case," he said. "You need to be able to drop stuff and just be like, okay, we're doing rapid response. Because when people are in a crisis and you can't drop things and run with them, it's not going to work."

Greenwood shared some initial lessons PAI has learned with its Care Over Cost campaign. "Number one is you should have a couple year arc to test things," he said. "I would say our first year was wildly unsuccessful. We were just trying to figure it out, and we did a bunch of things that turned out to be a total waste of time." But it was necessary, he said, to experiment. "And within a year, we were like, this works. You can take somebody who you've never met, and you can beat their insurance company and get them a surgery that otherwise they would have died without. And you can get publicity doing it, and you can get people to join you in doing it," he said. "It just took time." Two, he said, is recognizing that staff will have to, as he put it, "build a new muscle"; and three is that it takes dedicated staff resources to successfully mount this kind of campaign.

But engaging in this sort of community care, direct aid organizing campaign is an important piece of successfully mounting an organizing revival, Greenwood said. As he put it, "Don't just organize people who are already with you ideologically — find people who are suffering, who may not be with you but who you can get into organizing, and politicize them." •

Texas Organizing Project

CASE STUDY

Texas Organizing Project

In May 2024, a severe storm known as a derecho hit Houston and the surrounding area, leaving 1 million people without power and thousands without water. The Texas Organizing Project (TOP), a statewide grassroots organizing group that has long engaged in climate disaster rapid response, immediately sprang into action, mobilizing staff and leaders to knock on doors in neighborhoods that were hit hardest by the derecho and distribute food, water, and other necessary items.

But this time, TOP had a new tool in its toolkit — earlier in the year, the group had decided to expand its rapid response plan to include partnerships with existing mutual aid groups in Houston and the rest of Harris County, said Alysa Guerrero, TOP's statewide lead researcher. TOP would fund existing groups to do post-derecho relief, with the eye toward broadening its impact. Guerrero explained the group's thinking: "We are just well aware of the fact that they have been doing mutual aid year-round, and they've been doing it longer, and they probably might even know how to do it better than us. So, if we can lend some resources to them, that's just a no-brainer, because we want to be able to have folks have their needs met, but we then also want them to be a part of the movement, whether that be through us or through other organizations." She added, "It's a way to make sure that as many people in Harris County are covered as possible" as well as a way to allow "our communities and members to take charge of their own neighborhoods during disasters." According to Guerrero, those partnerships allowed TOP to "widen the scope of mutual aid work in our counties."

For TOP, its rapid response work is a key part of its broader outreach and organizing strategy. "We are very aware of the fact that climate disasters are going to be a continued reality throughout the state of Texas. We just always assume that that is going to be something that occurs however many times throughout the year," Guerrero said. Due to that awareness, TOP earmarks funds in its budget every year for rapid response emergency relief work.

When a climate disaster hits, like the recent derecho or Hurricane Harvey in 2017, TOP begins with a community canvass. "For the folks who are able to make it in, they immediately start heading out into neighborhoods, doing a canvass and a survey, and seeing who needs items such as food and water," said Guerrero. In addition to basic and essential supplies, TOP also distributes gift cards. "Folks sometimes don't just need food and water," she said. For

those who "had direct damage to their homes or maybe a tree has fallen on their vehicle, we sometimes directly put the money in their hands, when that makes the most sense," she said.

And there is always an organizing ask in TOP's rapid response outreach, Guerrero noted. "We have an ask of, 'Will you join us for a post-storm town hall?' Something to gather folks so they can talk about their experiences and their grievances and hopefully, then use that opportunity to politicize them further," she said. "The long-term goal is to get them engaged in the movement. But, of course, the first step is just like, 'Okay, what do you need in this moment? What do you want to continue to feel safe where you are?'"

Those town halls, Guerrero said, are spaces "where we're like, okay, now that we have folks here, let's talk about what we're going to do next time that this happens, or let's talk about some of the things that we know that the county or the city is responsible to take care of, but that they haven't taken care of, and how does that make you feel? And what do you think should be done about it?" After those town halls, there's repeated follow-up to keep people engaged, she noted.

To TOP, the direct aid that the group provides people is a critical part of its base-building strategy. "It's just a reality that people need to, in some way or another, have their burdens eased to be able to do this sort of work with us long term, whether that be through getting food and water out to them or getting them a little bit of funds to so that they can be able to take care of themselves," Guerrero said.

> **"People cannot be a part of the movement if they're so weighed down. That's just always something that has just always been our organizing theory."**

She added, "You have to help people first, because there are some people who are going to be ready to jump into the movement, and that is great, and that is amazing. And then there are going to be some people who are directly impacted, who are just literally not going to have the capacity to do that unless there is something that is taken off of their plate."

This sort of aid, Guerrero said, ensures that people "have the means to be in the long run with us. It's a stepping stone toward our long-term goals." •

CASE STUDY

Organizing Resilience

Are extreme climate events opportunities for power-building? To Organizing Resilience (OR), a strategy hub for organizing leaders from the most climate-prone regions of the country, the answer is "absolutely." "The premise behind OR is straightforward — power is contested in moments of crisis, and we have to be organized in order to channel power into concrete, big wins and systemic change. The alternative is that our opposition will continue to seize these windows to set us back generations" said Ginny Goldman, its founder.

The origin story of OR can be found in Hurricane Harvey, which hit the Gulf Coast in 2017. When Harvey hit, Goldman, a longtime Texas organizer, worked with the Amalgamated Foundation to set up the Harvey Community Relief Fund. This was an effort with the goal of "disrupting the way disaster philanthropy typically happens" by making sure that funding went quickly and directly to the hardest-hit communities, Goldman recalled. Working with a variety of labor unions and community organizations, the fund ultimately raised more than $4 million for grassroots hurricane relief. In the immediate aftermath, funds were granted to community groups doing immediate cash assistance, delivering food and supplies, "mucking and gutting" homes to avoid lasting damage from mold, holding workshops and clinics to ensure families knew how to apply for Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance and appeal claim denials, how to avoid eviction and displacement as impacted tenants, how to navigate insurance claims and more.

Unlike typical philanthropy, 70% of those funds were spent on immediate relief. The rest—roughly $1 million—was used to support long-term organizing work, including to start the HOME Coalition, which, Goldman said, "then did really important organizing to change the way disaster recovery dollars were spent in Houston so that federal funds allocated for fooding and drainage infrastructure were spent equitably, directing millions to the hardest-hit neighborhoods, mostly Black communities that have been historically disinvested in for generations."

The next year, Goldman had another epiphany. "I was like, what if we treated hurricane season like election season? What if we dedicated as much resources, attention, pre planning capacity and expertise to prepare for the next hurricane as we did for this election. We don't wake up on Election Day and scramble; we have a plan and run the plan. However, it feels like every time a major climate event strikes, we're flat-footed and responding only as a

humanitarian effort with little power analysis as to who is responsible for the crisis and what systemic change is required to address it."

Through a fellowship from the Amalgamated Foundation, Organizing Resilience was born. Goldman contacted her counterparts — organizers who had been building power at the backdrops of hurricanes in Louisiana, Florida, Puerto Rico, and New Jersey — who all shared the urgency to build new organizing infrastructure that incorporated climate disasters into the strategy. Together, since Hurricane Ida ripped through 22 states in 2021 up until the most recent Hurricane Ernesto in August 2024, they've built a rapid response fundraising operation that has delivered over $10 million to power-building formations on the ground who engage in immediate care and relief as part of their long-term power shifting strategy.

> **"We're interested in supporting formations and coalitions that have a power analysis and a long-term power-building strategy. Sometimes that's a mutual aid network connected to a statewide affordable housing coalition in Florida," Goldman noted. All of the money OR raises via rapid response fundraising goes to organizations on the ground for immediate relief and long-term organizing efforts.**

Organizing Resistance has developed a number of rapid response teams that are ready year-round to spring to action and support local organizations when a climate emergency occurs, from a fundraising team to a communications team to what the group calls the on-call network. "We've built them out, campaign-style, to flank people on the ground," Goldman said. The teams stemmed from conversations with local organizers, who told OR what they needed and wished they had to support their emergency rapid response work, which included not only fundraising support but policy and campaign support, media pitching, and navigating the ins and outs of the federal disaster recovery system — as well as basic logistical support and coordination.

In particular, Goldman said, the on-call network aims to handle "anything that can be done remotely by people who are vetted, trusted, and aligned, outside of the directly impacted area, so that the folks on the ground can both handle their own personal needs and do the things that they're uniquely positioned and must do themselves." She added, "What most organizers on the ground want when the shock hits is somebody they trust who can serve as an air traffic controller for them, because when these disasters hit, everybody, everywhere says, 'how can we help?' And the person on the ground ends up managing so much incoming that it's overwhelming and distracting from what they need to focus on as humans and as leaders." In response to that need, Organizing Resilience has a bench of 10 campaigners, known as "activation managers," who are assigned and on deck to support different regions and are prepared to flank local leaders when called upon.

Goldman gave an example of this work in action during Hurricane Fiona, when Organizing Resilience first tested the "activation manager" model working with Xiomara Diaz, the head of the Maria Fund in Puerto Rico. The on-call network supported Diaz and her team to set up the infrastructure and coordinate the rapid response fundraising vehicle at the Amalgamated Foundation. The resulting "Fiona Fund" ended up raising $6 million that funded a formation of eight Puerto Rico organizations that covered the range of immediate needs from mutual aid, water and food distribution, cash assistance, and standing up generators and centralized kitchens to advocacy and communications to demand a just and fair recovery. Those resources continue to support an effective formation of Puerto Rico groups working together on housing and land justice.

"What started as a test is becoming a turnkey system — with a set of funders who will quickly form a host committee to pull a funder briefing together quickly and in alignment with organizing groups. It's like what we would have if it was a finance committee of a political campaign, just plug and play. Let's just take it off your plate and set it up in a way that's not extractive for groups on the ground but additive to their plans and visions."

> **"When you're in the middle of a crisis in your hometown you should not be filling out grant forms. You should not be setting up a Zoom so that funders can get an inside look."**

In the coming months, OR also plans on launching a national donation platform that, as Goldman put it, "can serve as an alternative for those looking to give beyond charity and the Red Cross." "It'll be where you can send money if you want to both help people and fight for people, and we'll get it to the ground for you," she said. "Most people in America, when a wildfire hits, they want to help and they don't have local connections in the place where the disaster struck, right? So, they give it to the Red Cross. We hear over and over again from people who want a bigger solution than funding charity, so we're building out a new platform to do so."

With all of this work, Goldman said, "we're driving money and we're driving talent into projects that build power in the wake of climate disasters. The reality is we have to adapt our power analysis and organizing models to face climate disasters as powerful opportunities to bring us together and drive forward big solutions." •

APPENDIX B:
Acknowledgements

Esther Wang was the lead researcher and writer for this report. She is a writer and journalist based in New York City. You can find her work at www.estherwang.com.

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In alphabetical order by last name:

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Maine People's Alliance

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About Future Currents

Future Currents creates the spaces for movement organizations to build resilient relationships, tackle pressing challenges, prepare for possible conditions, and map our way to the future we deserve.

We focus on the knotty, chronic, systemic, and often scary obstacles in our daily lives, including authoritarian threats to our democracy, the shifting economic paradigm, and the effort within movements to retool and reshape to meet changing conditions. Our mix of creative methods are key to sparking new understandings, analyses, and strategies that open up the potential for long-term change. Future Currents is a project of the New Venture Fund, a 501(c)(3) public charity. Future Currents Action is a project of the Sixteen Thirty Fund, a 501(c)(4) social welfare organization.

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