



Mutual Aid Disaster Relief

WELCOME PACKET

Although we enthusiastically encourage autonomous action by, with, and for disaster survivors, when people volunteer with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, we ask that they thoroughly orient themselves with our *Welcome Packet*, covering strategies and philosophy, group decision making, health and safety, and other considerations for living and working in a disaster zone which helps prepare them for Mutual Aid Disaster Relief activities and actions.

Introduction	What to Expect	Code of Conduct
Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Guiding Principles	Our History/Organizational Structure

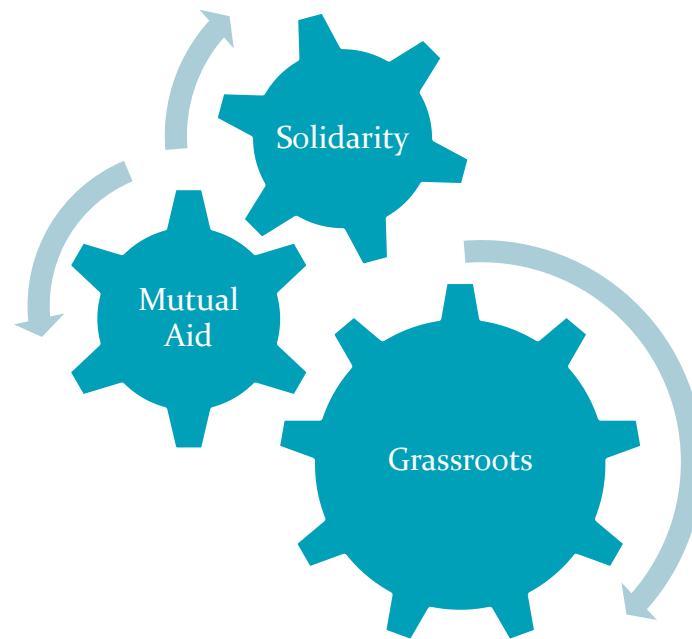
For questions, concerns, or to help us improve this packet contact
mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com

in solidarity,
Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Training Committee



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	pg. 3
What to expect	pg. 4
Affinity groups	pg. 5
Flood response safety	pg. 6
More in depth health and safety information	pg. 7
Code of conduct	pg. 7
Consent	pg. 8
Cross-cultural respect	pg. 9
Healing spaces	pg. 9
Property destruction	pg. 9
Free association	pg. 9
Building a culture of compassion and respect	pg. 10
Mission, vision and core values	pg. 11
Mission	pg. 11
Vision	pg. 11
Core Values	pg. 11
Guiding Principles	pg. 12
Our History	pg. 14
Organizational Structure	pg. 16
National Network	pg. 14
Steering Committee	pg. 14
Working Groups	pg. 15



INTRODUCTION

With coming climate change and the extreme weather that will accompany it, we come face to face with our own vulnerability. Super storms like Katrina and Sandy will most likely become far more prevalent.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is a decentralized network and organization that people can plug into, facilitating the ability of people to give and receive aid based on a grassroots, mutual aid and solidarity model borrowed from social movements that has been proven time and again, from New Orleans to Occupy Sandy to OpOK to Occupy Boulder Relief to be more effective and efficient in responding to disasters and crisis than a top-down approach.

Hierarchical relationships, based on class and race, forced into light by a disaster, are only reinforced by charitable institutions unless they address privilege and power. Self-determination and agency are critical in this process. People impacted by disasters have more of a stake in their own survival and well-being than well-intentioned paternalistic givers of charity, and will firmly grasp the tools to participate in a communal recovery given the chance.

Survivors of disasters look for accomplices who can assist them in achieving this communal recovery without imposing the stigma of receiving assistance. This is what we are here to facilitate.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief responds in a flexible, responsive and effective manner by not assuming everybody's needs are the same or that we know best what a community needs, but instead acts humbly, asking, listening, and responding. To us, disaster survivors have a right to be part of a communal recovery. We recognize survivors' rights to determine what their needs are and how best others could assist them and we utilize the knowledge, skills

and networks gained from our background in social movement organizing to respond from below, with direct action and no bureaucracy or red tape. This mutual aid, solidarity-based, grassroots approach to disaster relief, in addition to meeting the self-determined needs of disaster survivors more effectively, has the added benefit of building bridges, serving to unite disparate elements of social justice and liberation movements and build power from below.

Whether future disasters become focal points for the powerful to further entrench policies that uphold their privilege and political, social, and economic disparities or whether they become opportunities to build more empowered and resilient individuals and communities and strengthen our movements for radical social change is up to us and the choices we make.

WHAT TO EXPECT

During disaster relief work, volunteers on the ground should, ideally, brief each morning on community-vocalized needs and organize response based on affinity groups, number of volunteers available, resources available, and/or group needs and assessments before heading to work sites.

More in depth weekly meetings can be organized by volunteers on the ground to address mobilization efforts, update on resources as well as resources needed and how to organize their procurement, working group or affinity group updates and any other organizational and/or emotional processing that is needed.

It is very difficult to do long periods of intense solidarity work without feeling emotionally exhausted. Injustice hits you in the face again with every new case - each new personal tragedy. Since grassroots solidarity requires a genuine emotional engagement with those we're supporting, it also exposes us to their suffering. We may always dismiss it as trivial in comparison, and while it's true that we may not be the ones experiencing the real violence or loss, we are susceptible to the cumulative effects of exposure to story after story. However, it is also possible to help others through crisis while limiting vicarious trauma and gain a new sense of what is possible through the process. We ask that even in times of crisis, you take time to make your physical and emotional well-being a priority by practicing self-care and giving yourself adequate time to rest, recover, and process.

Although there will be people attempting to help facilitate and coordinate logistics on the ground, just like in major demonstrations, it is better to come with your own plans and connect those affinity group plans with a larger picture/strategy once you get on the ground. You most likely will not be assigned a role like in other organizations. Although if you need more direction, we will try to accommodate. The good side of that is there's lots of space to jump in, find a need and fill it. As the Zapatistas say, we are "asking while walking". We don't have everything figured out. We just know that volunteers are not cogs in a capitalist or non-profit industry machine. We are all co-decision-makers and each one of us brings unique talents, history, experience, skills, and knowledge. So if disaster survivors you meet need something (and we hope you are asking and listening), you are empowered to assist them in meeting that need with honesty, creativity, solidarity, and integrity. Only with empowered volunteers can we contribute to the empowerment of disaster survivors.

For Baton Rouge flood relief efforts contact volunteer coordinators: Suncere Ali Shakur at (512) 750 4812 or Rain at (813) 340 3808. If you will be staying in the area for two weeks or longer and want to help with volunteer coordination, let one of the other volunteer coordinators know or email us at mutualaid Disasterrelief@gmail.com

Affinity groups

An affinity group is a small group of people who come together to prepare for and take direct action. Affinity groups are organized in a nonhierarchical and autonomous way, there are no leaders and everyone has an equal voice and responsibility. Sometimes, these groups are formed just for one action, but often they are ongoing groups that organize and take part in actions over a number of years. Affinity groups work best when people have something in common (the 'affinity' bit). This affinity might be based on prior friendships and connections, where you live, the issues you want to campaign on, the tactics you want to use or a particular skill you have to offer (e.g. Street Medics, Cleaning Crews, Aid Distribution, Tool Lending Library, Environmental Response, Documenting and intervening in police abuses, Animal Rescue, Community Kitchens and Community Media Centers), or a mixture of all of these.

Another important aspect of affinity groups is their autonomy – all important decisions are made within the group even if you are participating with others in a larger action. By working closely with a small group of people you can work out what's important for you, and then go out and make it happen. Your affinity group may be part of wider campaigns and networks, but ideally you only need to depend on yourselves. This is especially the case if you work at building up skills within your affinity group, so you can cover your own needs. Affinity groups make good use of resources. Usually 10 groups of 10 people can achieve more than 100 people acting on mass. Because affinity groups can make decisions autonomously on actions, they can react quickly and creatively if the situation changes. Having a group of people looking out for one another before, during and after an action or during a long and tiring campaign is a useful way to make sure everyone is cared for. Stress, police repression, doubt, fear and campaign setbacks are all dealt with much more easily as part of a group than on your own. Debrief thoroughly, learn from mistakes, socialize and share workloads and skills. Be realistic about what you take on. Take time to celebrate your successes, no matter how small. Look after yourself and encourage everyone else to do the same. Above all, support each other through stressful times and watch out for signs that people may be suffering from burnout. If you are worried about someone, be ready to ease their workload even if it means you get less done as a group.

Joining a mass mobilization can pose a problem of how to maintain your group's autonomy. It can be difficult to plan and act independently, and report on your own actions. This is often caused by relying too much on the overall organizers for information and infrastructure. Affinity groups can come together for mass actions and coordinate their activities via a spokescouncil. Each group sends a representative (often called a spoke) to the spokescouncil meeting, where issues such as tactics, overarching action guidelines and logistics are discussed. What the spoke is empowered to do is up to their affinity group. Spokes may need to consult with their group before discussing or agreeing on certain subjects. The spokescouncil does not take away the autonomy of each individual group – consensus on each proposal has to be achieved not only within each group but also among

all groups together. And remember, with consensus the operative question in consenting to a proposal can be: “can I live with this?” rather than “is this perfect and do I agree completely?” These modes of organizing offer a liberating way of organizing – anti-hierarchical, participatory, supportive, directly democratic, empowering, sustainable, creative... Liberating because you work as equals, and liberating because of the things you can achieve together. This is all about creating a world where we don't need leaders and laws. It's about direct democracy. If you also use affinity organizing to plan and carry out effective direct action, you'll be a good step along the way to creating a better world, inside and outside of your group. If you don't have an affinity group, that's ok too! You can buddy up with somebody or plug in with others once you get here.

FLOOD RESPONSE SAFETY

Working in flood affected areas have numerous health and safety considerations. The following are safety guidelines for careful review:

General safety

Volunteers serve at their own risk. Primary insurance coverage is the volunteer's own health insurance. Volunteer work is to be conducted with the consent of the homeowner. Youth under 16 are discouraged from participating in work crews. People under 18 should seek parental accompaniment or written permission from their guardians if possible. If you have any respiratory sensitivities, please let organizers know so that we can locate more appropriate work environments for you to support long-term relief.

Always lift with your legs, with knees bent, to minimize back strain. Volunteers with pre-existing health conditions should only perform tasks that are within their limitations. Beware of nails, broken glass or other sharp objects. Tetanus and other needed immunizations should be current. You can get a free tetanus shot at the East Baton Rouge Health Unit located at 353 N. 12th Street in Baton Rouge. Treat wounds with soap, clean water, and, if available, antibiotic ointment. Always assume standing water includes biological and chemical toxins such as lead, asbestos, raw sewage, solvents, and petroleum-based substances. Chain saws should be used only by experienced adult operators. Face shields, eye protection, and ear plugs should be worn. Do not use generators inside homes. Generators should only be run outdoors or in well-ventilated areas. Before working in homes with wet or damp floors, or when removing sheet rock, be sure the electricity has been turned off. If a home has ovens or fireplaces that run on natural gas, be sure that the gas is also turned off before attempting to move the units in order to get behind them and removed molded sheetrock.

Clothing

Wear rubber boots, long pants, long-sleeve shirts, and rubber work gloves that extend past your elbow or are taped down so that no air or debris carrying mold spores or fiberglass can get inside. Fiberglass will make your skin itch and black mold can cause short and long term health problems. For outer clothing protection, Tyvek suits are best for mold removal. The materials listed are necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) for volunteers when gutting flooded homes.

Mold

Mold will begin to grow in some climates as soon as 24-48 hours after flood waters have begun to recede. When working with mold, wear an N-95 or N-100 Respirator, goggles, rubber gloves so that you don't touch mold with your bare hands, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and rubber boots or work shoes that you are comfortable discarding after your volunteer time is done. Spray moldy surfaces with a solution consisting of one cup of bleach per one gallon of water only after the area has been completely dried. Do not use an excessive amount of the mixture on surfaces. Damp the surface down, but do not saturate them as water that remains can also act as a host for mold's continued growth. Be aware that bleach does not kill mold spores and should only be considered effective when used on hard materials such as hard woods, hard plastics, tiles (not linoleum). If you are cleaning something, use a scrub brush, not a sponge. If you are damping down, discard rags and change the water-bleach solution regularly so you do not spread mold spores and prevent contaminating other areas.

After working with mold, and before entering another home or vehicle, remove Tyvek suits outside the building, spray down boots and then wash in a bleach-water solution. Place boots outside to dry out before using them again to work on another home. Remove outer layer of clothing and place in a plastic bag to transport to a washing station. Clothes should be washing in hot water with some bleach. Go immediately to the shower and be sure to wash hair to remove dust which may have mold spores. You do not want to carry spores into other areas (cars and homes).

Asbestos

Asbestos: In homes built prior to 1978, asbestos may be contained in tiles or insulation. The most common forms of asbestos resemble shiny, lightweight gravel, brown or gold in color. If you think you may have encountered asbestos, leave the home and notify the homeowner. Be sure to let Mutual Aid Disaster Relief organizers know about the encounter and the residence at which it was discovered so we may see about having it properly and professionally removed. Do not work in the area. Asbestos causes mesothelioma.

More in depth health and safety information

Environmental Protection Agency's: [Flood cleanup booklet](#)

Environmental Protection Agency's: [Mold remediation tips](#)

Center for Disease Control and Prevention's: [Guide to mold cleanup after disasters](#)

National Center for Healthy Housing's: [Field guide for clean-up of flooded homes](#)

Common Ground's: [House gutting manual](#)

CODE OF CONDUCT

Disaster sites have the potential to be inherently unsafe. They may contain physical threats to health and body, emotional traumas, and strained or fragmented social relationships. We ask everyone involved in Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MAD Relief) projects—local and non-local volunteers, coordinators, and participating community members-- to be proactive in creating a supportive atmosphere where both the physical and emotional safety of others is ensured and validated.

Consent

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief volunteers and community participants work together on the basis of mutual, active consent. We are resisting disaster capitalism and those responsible for climate chaos in large part because it acts without accountability to or consent from the people it rules over. We cannot replicate the domination and abuse that we're claiming to oppose. In the volatile, high-stress context of disaster, where people meet outside normal social relationships, it is easy to misunderstand each other. Therefore, it is essential to be *more explicit and more careful* in assuring all of our relationships are consensual.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief works in communities that invite and participate in Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, according to impartial need, not religion, race, gender, political affiliation, or any other basis.

- Individual participation in MAD Relief projects is up to whatever extent of each community members' desire and abilities. No person is required to nor should be pressured to accept or participate in MAD Relief support.
- MAD Relief volunteers must not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of fraud, harassment, discrimination, physical or verbal violence, intimidation, favoritism, or exploitation of community members or each other.
- MAD Relief volunteers may not accept money, gifts, services, sexual relationships, or any other form of coercion or exploitation in exchange for assistance.

All volunteers and community participants must respect the physical and sexual boundaries of other people.

- Ask for explicit verbal consent before touching someone. Consent includes asking, listening, and respecting; it does not include coercion, expectations, or assumptions.
- Never assume consent, especially if drug/alcohol use is involved. Highly intoxicated people are always considered non-consenting.

It is the unfortunate reality of being impacted by a disaster alone that might separate a Mutual Aid Disaster Relief volunteer from a community member. Disaster survivors constitute an eclectic mix of human beings who have endured different experiences, and there is no reason why their status as a disaster survivor should determine what kind of relationship you have and how close you get to a given individual. However, it can be unwise to get involved in a sexual relationship with someone who has just endured a particularly traumatic experience. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief participants do need to be acutely aware of the myriad reasons why relationships might develop. Aside from genuine attraction, this might be triggered by grief (of dead, missing or missed relatives or partners); an irrational sense of awe for those who show kindness in an otherwise hostile environment; the perception that MAD Relief participants are a passport out of misery, etc. With these factors taken into consideration, volunteers need to be cautious about what kind of responsibility and power they might have over a person and act accordingly.

MAD Relief is survivor centric and survivor oriented, and violence, abuse, sexual assault and discrimination will not be tolerated.

- Perpetrators of sexual violence and harassment are not welcome in MAD Relief spaces and activities and will be asked to leave MAD Relief spaces and activities. Sexual violence by a volunteer is grounds for immediately ending the volunteer's relationship with MAD Relief.
- A perpetrators' presence should not hinder survivors' participation in MAD Relief activities. MAD Relief invites survivors to contact MAD Relief Advocates Stephen Ostrow at (727) 452 5710 to discuss how we can support you.

Turn to each other for emotional support, but check in with people before sharing.

- The impacts of trauma and secondary survivor trauma can be cumulative and shifting, so it's not always obvious how much someone has been through and how much they are currently prepared to hold.
- Try to follow the "ring theory of support": comfort those more impacted than you, seek support from those less impacted.

**Sexual Assault - any non-consensual sexual interaction. Sexual assault happens, and it happens in activist and radical communities as much as anywhere else. Sexual assault is a tool of domination, of taking power, and can rob someone of their self-respect, self-worth, and autonomy. Silence, passivity, and coerced acquiescence do not qualify as consent, nor do body movements or non-verbal responses necessarily constitute consent. Further, if someone is intoxicated, they may not be in a position to give you consent. Consent includes asking, listening, and respecting; it does not include coercion, expectations, or assumptions.*

*** Sexual Harassment - Sexual harassment is unwanted comments, gestures, and/or actions forced on a person without their consent and is directed at them because of their actual or perceived sex, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Harassment includes unwanted whistling, leering, sexist, homophobic or transphobic slurs, persistent requests for someone's name, number or destination after they've said no, sexual names, comments and demands, following, and flashing. Sexual harassment is an interaction that makes one feel sexualized, intimidated, embarrassed, objectified, violated, attacked, or unsafe. It is an interaction that restricts one's movement or makes one modify their behavior in an attempt to avoid the possibility of being verbally and/or physically harassed. No form of harassment is ever okay; everyone should be treated with respect, dignity, and empathy.*

Cross-cultural respect

We acknowledge the difference in choice and power between someone impacted by a disaster and the volunteers and organizations that respond with assistance.

- We ask MAD Relief volunteers to commit to centering the needs, experience, and cultural values of people in communities in which we are invited to work. Respect people's opinions, beliefs, experiences and differing points of view.
- We encourage all volunteers to educate themselves on local histories and cultures, on post-traumatic stress, and on the privileges they bring with them as part of their work.

Healing spaces

While ultimately our goal is to support collective responses to build diverse, connected community, MAD Relief acknowledges the need and right, at times, to define exclusionary healing spaces and decision-making bodies to center, elevate, and protect the voices and experiences of particularly vulnerable people aligned around identities of race, gender, sexuality, faith, ability, relationship to disaster or place (i.e. disaster survivors or local volunteers), parent/guardian status, or other need.

Property Destruction

We recognize autonomy, decentralization, and the necessity of direct action to support disaster survivors, and we respect people's choices to determine the tactics that they believe are most likely to strengthen our movements for collective liberation. *However, people and groups do not engage in property destruction under the name Mutual Aid Disaster Relief.*

Free association

Failure to respect these guidelines and other egregious violations of volunteer or community safety may result in "free dissociation" of the violating person from all MAD Relief spaces, activities, and resources.

- Volunteers and community members have the right to leave situations where they feel threatened. MAD Relief will work with people to try to find alternatives in which they feel safe, if possible.
- Violators of this Code of Conduct may be asked to temporarily or permanently leave MAD Relief spaces, including volunteer housing, distribution points, work sites, or other operating spaces.
- When possible, MAD Relief seeks to resolve conflicts through de-escalation and mediation, including seeking alternative spaces or roles for people, especially disaster-impacted community members, who have violated MAD Relief guidelines.
- In extreme cases, MAD Relief may refuse support to people whose behavior harms or threatens harm to others.

Building a culture of compassion and respect

Although this code of conduct is critically important to our work and ensuring the wellbeing of all participants, it is just a stepping stone. We don't want to simply avoid disasters, whether personal or collective. We want to prefigure the world that we know is possible and are attempting to create. This applies to how we relate to each other interpersonally as well. We are all in this together with the same good intentions of making the world a better place and creating safe and inclusive environments for patrons, donors, volunteers, and any others who find themselves participants.

But the dominant culture teaches us to use violence, coercion, competition, individualism, and commodification to minimize the potential for collective action. It also conditions us to believe that individual greed will somehow lead to a fair and efficient system. It teaches us to vote our preference without considering the whole, not to expect good decisions, and to focus on rules and mechanical procedures instead of spirit and attitudes. Developing open and honest communication through patience and collaboration is essential to unlearning those patterns and creating new and alternative ways of working collectively. Practice the following tips as much as you are able in order to build an organizational culture of compassion and respect. Remember, we don't have to wait until after the revolution to embody and exemplify the type of society we want to create, we can imagine it into being in the shadows of this one.

- Don't build up resentment. Please talk with the appropriate participant(s) before anything gets out of hand. When you do critique, critique inappropriate behaviors, not the person. If you see a behavior that is inappropriate, intervene. Don't wait for someone else to address it – especially around issues of oppression. Be open to critique or challenges of ideas, patterns, or behaviors and attempt to avoid defensiveness. None of us are perfect, and we need each other to become who we dream we could be.
- In addition to “calling out” when necessary, consider “calling in” and challenging oppressive behavior in a way that helps people grow. Ngọc Loan Trần on [Black Girl Dangerous](#) describes calling in as *“a practice of pulling folks back in who have strayed from us. It means extending to ourselves the reality that we will and do fuck up, we stray, and there will always be a chance for us to return. Calling in as a practice of loving each other enough to allow each other to make mistakes, a practice of loving ourselves enough to know that what we're trying to do here is a radical unlearning of everything we have been configured to believe is normal.”*
- Be aware of the collective vibe. Notice who is angry or uncomfortable and address it early on. Allow for all voices to be heard. Make it a point to involve people who are less vocal and find alternative ways for those who want to add to the conversation to

do so. If you traditionally remain quiet or struggle to articulate yourself, be courageous and try to trust your fellow participants. Alternatively, if you know yourself to be more outgoing and verbal, take time to consider how your participation may silence others.

- Each person has experiences and information to share, each person has a piece of the truth, and each person can learn, especially when we compassionately listen to each other. This may mean taking an hour, a day, or a week to really think through and ask questions of the other or others in the conversation. This also means taking into account cues from people in the communities you are working with both when you are interacting with them and when you are not.
- Pay attention to language, especially your own use of profanity and its impact on those around you. Be aware that others might not understand your acronyms and could feel alienated by too much activist jargon that they don't understand. Don't use alcohol, drugs or weapons in places where they can endanger people, but instead be mindful of appropriate times to use alcohol or drugs.
- Be respectful of the value of others' time, keep confidentiality when appropriate, and be aware of the effects of your actions on others and communities around you.
- Respect the work and ability of others. A note of encouragement or complimenting somebody on a job well done can brighten up their day and make the stress and heartache we may experience more bearable.

MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES

Mission

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is a grassroots network whose mission is to provide disaster relief based on the principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and autonomous direct action. By working with, listening to, and supporting impacted communities, especially their most vulnerable members, to lead their own recovery, we build long-term, sustainable and resilient communities.

Vision

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief envisions strong, vibrant, resilient, connected, and empowered individuals and communities as part of an awakened civil society that will restore hope following crisis, and turn the tide against disaster capitalism and climate chaos, in favor of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

Core Values

Mutual Aid: Voluntary, reciprocal, participatory assistance among equals and being with, not for, disaster survivors.

Solidarity not charity! Disaster survivors themselves are the first responders to crisis; the role of outside aid is to support survivors to support each other. The privileges associated with aid organizations and aid workers—which may include access to material resources, freedom of movement, skills, knowledge, experience, and influence—are leveraged in support of disaster survivor's self-determination and survival in crisis, and their long-term resilience afterwards, ultimately redistributing these forms of power to the most marginalized.

Self-determination: Individuals and communities impacted by disaster have the agency, ability, and power to make their own decisions and choices about their lives, recovery, and long-term resilience, without interference or coercion from outside forces.

Mandar obedeciendo and Subsidiarity: The Zapatista principle of *mandar obedeciendo*-- leadership from below-- teaches that those who command positions of power, wealth, and influence should obey the direction of those with the least. The Catholic principle of subsidiarity teaches that the most effective decisions and actions take place at the level of those closest to the problem or most impacted by the solution. By embracing and applying these principles, disaster responders have a responsibility to center and elevate the leadership of disaster survivors, especially those in the most vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Participation and Horizontality: Decentralization and sharing of power within groups and communities reduces hierarchies and power imbalances within and between groups of people, enabling disaster survivors and responders to participate fully in rebuilding a better world together.

Autonomous Direct Action: Saving lives, homes, and communities in the event and aftermath of disaster may require taking bold action without waiting for permission from authorities. Disaster survivors themselves are the most important authority on just action.

Intersectionality: Historical and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination work together to make some people and groups more vulnerable to different types of disaster and during the rebuilding process. A just disaster response acknowledges, adapts to, and addresses the different needs, priorities, and perspectives of diverse disaster survivors.

Sustainability: Sustainable disaster recovery encompasses a respect for the intersectionality of all living systems, community norms and practices, as well as the distribution of knowledge about ecologically-sound and economically viable systems designs, which provide for their own needs and do not exploit or pollute. Skills training and upskilling are shared within the community and people are empowered to create or regenerate diverse, resilient communities that meet immediate ecological, economic, and social needs while increasing the health of human bodies, relationships, and the ecosystems in which they are embedded.

Dual Power: A strategy for the bottom-up transformation and replacement of existing institutions and mechanisms of society with self-organized counter-institutions. Disaster response that simultaneously opposes oppressive and exploitative structures while building alternative, pre-figurative structures for collective liberation and resilience unites disparate elements of revolutionary and reformist movements and meets unmet needs without waiting until “after the revolution”.

Collective Liberation: In the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free”. All struggles are intimately connected and movements must work together and share knowledge, power, and resources in order to bring about a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world free of any kind of unjust oppression of others or the earth.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

*We are engaged in a horizontal, multidimensional and multidirectional process that contributes to the liberation of everyone involved, not charitable acts. This means we share resources, skills, experience, knowledge and ideas without perpetuating relationships based on hierarchical power.

*We seek as much as possible to break down the barriers between givers and receivers of aid. Everyone has something to teach and something to share. And we all need assistance at times. We seek to acknowledge, challenge and subvert perceived and actual power imbalances, and use any privileges we have—including access to material resources, freedom of movement, skills, knowledge, experience, and decision-making influence—to support people’s self-determination and survival in crisis and their long-term resilience afterwards, ultimately bridging the gulf between ourselves and “others”.

*We recognize that “natural” disasters are different in degree, but not in kind from the ongoing experiences of social inequality inherent in a capitalist, racist, colonialist, and patriarchal society. Therefore, we oppose and seek to confront and dismantle these and all other systems of domination and oppression within our society and within ourselves.

*We recognize disaster survivors’ rights to determine what their needs are and how best others could assist them. We therefore commit ourselves to acting humbly, asking, listening, and responding, while embodying in our current actions the future society we want to create. We believe in creative grassroots organizing and action that prioritizes and highlights the voices and power of marginalized individuals and communities and furthers their capacity to take action on their own behalf.

*We engage in and encourage autonomous direct action, an alternative to bureaucracy and red tape, including the creation of new, alternative projects in line with these principles to assist people’s self-determination, acquisition of additional resources, and to increase their resilience. At the same time, we believe in democratizing knowledge, sharing experience, and engaging with technical experts when needed to ensure safety and quality of work.

*We believe in a participatory, horizontal, decentralized movement-building model of social change from below. This requires shared leadership and decision-making in an environment that is safe and inclusive for all participants. We, therefore, strive to integrate these principles into our organizing and decision-making processes.

*We recognize that disasters are times of localized upheaval and suffering, but are also opportunities for the rich and powerful to consolidate power and to take advantage of shocks in order to institute economic reforms that further reinforce their privileged status. We oppose this disaster capitalism and affirm our commitment to environmental, social, economic, and climate justice. Instead, we see the sense of community and mutual aid that develops in the wake of crisis as fertile ground to merge social movement theory and praxis by supporting and enabling community members to help themselves and each other.

*As natural disasters increase in intensity and frequency, we recognize that our hope for a livable future rests in developing resilient preparation for and response to crisis as individuals and communities, while simultaneously opposing intensive resource extraction and other root causes of climate change. We support community resistance to resource extraction, environmental injustice, and poverty, and community-led adaptation to climate change, as governments and other large institutions have not responded to climate change with the urgency, gravity, or support required to avert climate chaos.

*We believe in being accountable to the communities and people we serve as well as ourselves. We therefore recognize, honor and respect the differences across cultures, traditions, and religions in regards to experiences, languages, food, clothing, personal space, relationships, and other differences even if we do not agree with them. In recognition of this, we listen and support rather than prescribe solutions based on our own personal or cultural values, while still staying honest and authentic to ourselves and our principles.

Everyone who shares the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief vision and principles is welcome to join, and can choose “Mutual Aid Disaster Relief” or any other name for the independent efforts that inspire them.

OUR HISTORY



New Orleans, a few days after Hurricane Katrina. In this apocalyptic atmosphere, here and there, life was reorganizing itself. In the face of the inaction of the public authorities, who were too busy cleaning up the tourist areas of the French Quarter, protecting shops, and responding with automatic rifles to demands for help from the poorer city dwellers, forgotten forms of community solidarity were reborn. In spite of occasionally strong-armed attempts to evacuate the area, in spite of white supremacist mobs hunting and killing unarmed black community members, a lot of people refused to leave the city. For those who refused to be deported like “environmental refugees” all over the country, and for those who came from all around to join them in solidarity, responding to a call from Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther, self-organization came back to the fore.

In a few weeks’ time, volunteer first aid first responders, called “street medics” for their work as first aid providers at protests, formed the Common Ground Clinic. From the very first days, this clinic provided free and effective treatment, including holistic, alternative, and western medicine to those who needed it, thanks to the constant influx of volunteers. The clinic, Malik’s house, and other newly formed Common Ground sites like the volunteer housing of those who came to clean and rebuild flooded homes became bases of daily resistance to the clean-sweep operation of government bulldozers, which were trying to turn parts of the city into a pasture for property developers.

People came from global justice, anti-war and other anarchist movements that survived state crackdown on dissent. Individuals from Food Not Bombs, Indymedia, Veterans for Peace, street medic and housing rights collectives, all joined together to set up popular kitchens, street medicine, building takeovers to prevent their destruction, and the construction of emergency housing. Despite the presence of at least one misogynistic agent provocateur, Common Ground created additional health clinics, a legal clinic, built community gardens, operated a women’s shelter, distributed aid, established a tool-lending library and radio station, gutted houses, cleaned up debris, documented police abuses, created community media centers, bio-remediated the soil, and replanted wetlands to build a barrier against the next storm.

Our willingness to engage in direct action found a new context in defending public housing, re-opening shuttered school doors, delivering much needed supplies past checkpoints, and helping community members maintain their historic centers of worship despite the opposition of church hierarchies. The experience and wisdom gained from mass mobilizations against globalization melded with the legacy of the Black Panthers survival programs. This practical knowledge accumulated in the course of several lifetimes of social movement practice all found a space where it could be deployed.

The devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina gave the North American anarchist movement and others devoted to social transformation the opportunity to achieve an unfamiliar cohesion and unity that transcended the tired old divisions based on ideology or tactics. Street kitchens require building up provisions beforehand; emergency medical aid requires the acquisition of necessary knowledge and materials, as does the setting up of pirate radios. The political richness of such experiences is assured by the joy they contain, the way they transcend individual stoicism, and their manifestation of a tangible reality that escapes the daily ambience of order and work

Whoever knew the penniless joy of these New Orleans neighborhoods before the catastrophe, their defiance towards the state and the widespread practice of making do with what's available wouldn't be at all surprised by what became possible there. On the other hand, anyone trapped in the anemic and atomized everyday routine of our residential deserts might doubt that such determination could be found anywhere anymore.

Fast-forward several years and an earthquake has just devastated Haiti. Most of us have left New Orleans and Common Ground and focused again on building other movements like the International Solidarity Movement, No Mas Muertes, Earth First! Rain Forest Action Network, Engineers Without Borders, Mountain Justice, the Beehive Collective, what became the Occupy Movement and countless others. But finding each other through acting directly and in concert with people affected to achieve their survival and other needs, besides giving us a heightened sense of inner power and fertilized imaginations, also built bonds that survived the years. Some of us reconnected under the name Mutual Aid Disaster Relief in Haiti and sent several teams into Haiti providing medical care, supplies and assistance.

Many of us helped shut down Wall Street, however briefly, as part of the Occupy Movement and participated in local encampments. Occupy Wall Street began in New York's Zuccotti Park in 2011, where a number of protesters attempted to take nonviolent direct action to shut down Wall Street and raise awareness about issues of economic injustice and inequality. We also participated in Occupy Sandy, the grassroots disaster relief network that emerged out of Occupy to provide mutual aid to communities affected by Superstorm Sandy. Occupy Sandy programs included medical assistance, construction, a tool lending library, volunteer mold removal, free meals, distribution of aid, free legal help, a free store, educational services, and more. OpOK, Boulder Flood Relief, the examples are numerous and clear. Mutual aid and solidarity is far more effective and efficient than top down approaches. Even the Department of Homeland Security, ordinarily diametrically opposed to the work of anarchists, anti-authoritarians, anti-capitalists, and other dreamers of a better world, concedes the superior effectiveness of this horizontal, decentralized, network model compared to the top down command and control one.

Mutual aid disaster relief is a radical approach to disaster relief and to social movement organizing. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, the organization and network, builds on lessons learned from decades of community-led disaster response to ensure these best practices, relationships, and resources are ready to be deployed to support communities impacted by future disasters.

Reconnecting with such gestures, buried under years of normalized life, is the only practicable means of not sinking down with the world. The time has come when we take these up once more. Extreme storms are increasing in intensity and frequency. Climate change is threatening life as we know it. The time to build a permanent network to respond, from below and from the left, to these and other disasters is now, and we welcome you to help write that history with us.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

National network

Our national network is made up of many eco-activists, social justice activists, global justice activists, permaculturalists, community organizers, and others who are actively organizing around supporting disaster survivors in a spirit of mutual aid and solidarity. It is a decentralized network, defined by the character and creativity of a multitude of communities and drawn together by our collective commitment to stand in solidarity with those impacted by disasters and turn the tide in favor of climate justice. We build our network through education and action. We are deeply moved by the Black Panther survival programs which served the aim of satisfying immediate needs while simultaneously raising people's consciousness. Rooted in our history and experiences of social movement organizing we see our disaster relief work in the context of social struggle and believe that we must simultaneously address people's immediate self-determined needs for survival and organize for fundamental shifts in the way we relate to each other and the earth.

Steering committee

The steering committee is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's main organizing body, comprising a dynamic group of about a dozen individuals from around the country. Many Steering Committee members have been involved in other mutual aid disaster relief projects including Common Ground Relief and Occupy Sandy. Steering committee members educate, organize, and mobilize support around Mutual Aid Disaster Relief projects in their respective communities, regions and networks. They also provide Mutual Aid Disaster Relief with long-term organizational continuity and sustainability, work to build leadership within the national network, and work closely with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief working groups to ensure continuity with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's campaigns, needs, and processes.

Working groups

Semi-autonomous working groups exist within the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief network to help drive certain aspects of our work forward. Some working groups are temporary and are formed around specific needs such as campaign research or location specific organizing. Other working groups are more permanent, such as supplies distribution, medical, animal rescue, environmental/permaculture, and media/communications. Working groups communicate via conference calls, emails, listservs, and/or on the ground and are a point of access where anyone in the network can become more involved in shaping the direction of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief. To get involved with a working group, or to start a new one, contact us at mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com

In addition, we believe in horizontalism, decentralization and that the most effective decisions and actions take place at the level of those closest to the problem or most impacted by the solution. Therefore we strongly encourage the formation of affinity groups and, if needed, spokescouncils, to promote self-organization and autonomy within the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief network, especially in the event of a large disaster response mobilization.