



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/FAQ

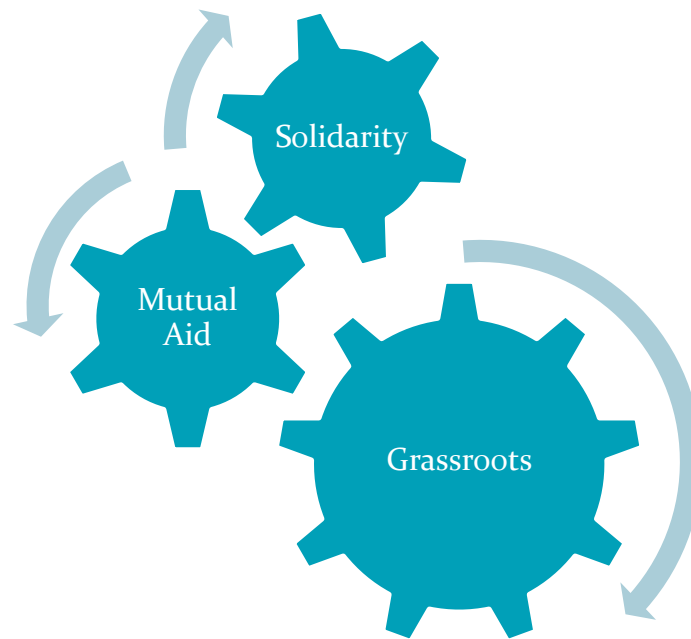
For questions, concerns, or to help us improve this packet contact mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com

in solidarity,
Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Training Committee



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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, 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

While Mutual Aid Disaster Relief strives to create safe and accessible spaces for people wanting and willing to participate in disaster relief, it is wise to consider your emotional, physical, and mental capacities and limitations prior to deciding to deploy to a disaster zone. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief strives to find accessible housing, spaces, and projects for people with disabilities, those with personal safety concerns, and any other concerns with regards to emotion, mental, or physical capacity. However, disaster zones are inherently unsafe and traumatic. Also, when attending to the needs of disaster survivors, particularly in spaces we may be unfamiliar with, we cannot speak for, or vouch for, the knowledge of locals with regards to certain sensitivities and material realities. Often our movements work in relatively safe microcosms, familiar activist milieus. With this type of work, in contrast, we are engaged with a much broader population, some of whom may not be familiar with things we take for granted. This presents a lot of opportunity for consciousness-raising, but also presents many challenges as well. We encourage individuals and affinity groups to be proactive in attempting to carve out safer spaces for things such as awareness of gender, neuro-divergence, and so forth when traveling to somebody else's community to do relief work. But there is no way to guarantee these spaces will arise as much as we hope that they will.

Additionally, while engaging in disaster spaces, we'd encourage you to think about the level of emotional wellbeing and capacity you have. When we are in these spaces, we want to take care of ourselves, our comrades, and address any conflicts which arise, so that we can do this work sustainably for the long haul. At the same time, we also want to prioritize the survival programs we are doing on the ground for impacted communities and those affected by the disaster. So while we are wanting to help people involved work through interpersonal conflicts, we strongly encourage affinity groups to take on the work of resolving conflict within their squad as much as possible. Remember, compromise is essential to consensus. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief wishes to prioritize the wellbeing of volunteers and integrate healing justice in all aspects of our work. We also are limited by time and resources and encourage you to think about your abilities and capacities honestly. None of us want to be a drain on resources to those affected, and so, at times, it may be more strategic for some individuals to sometimes find other ways to engage in supporting people's survival and self-determination in the context of disasters without being physically present. If you are curious and interested in offering behind the scenes support roles, email us, and we can plug you in!

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.

Although we do work cooperatively and attempt to accommodate, self-reliance, and self-sustainability is encouraged. Some people come with everything they need, including their sleeping quarters, in their vehicle. Housing options depend on the mobilization, but often is a

cot or pallet on the floor at a local community space or volunteer's home. If you need certain comfort items (air mattress, French press, etc.) or have special dietary needs, it's best to bring those items. We generally eat what we share with the community

Take pictures and video! (widescreen and respectfully). Important incidents require video footage. Reach out about sharing pictures, updates, and similar things from your relief efforts on the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief social media accounts.

We want you to feel empowered to meet critical emergent needs of disaster survivors, with the knowledge that Mutual Aid Disaster Relief will back you up. We expect volunteers to get on site using their own finances, thereafter expenses can be reimbursed. Receipts are always required. We currently rely on small donations and have a shoestring budget so any private fundraising for individuals' or affinity groups' relief efforts is encouraged. Send receipts to MutualAidDisasterRelief@gmail.com

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.

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 action 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, and liberating because you work as equals, and because of the things you can achieve together. This is all about creating a world where we don't need leaders and laws. 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.

Safety considerations

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

- Risk and insurance: Volunteers serve at their own risk. Primary insurance coverage is the volunteer's own health insurance.
- Homeowner consent: Volunteer work is to be conducted with the consent of the homeowner.
- Age: 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.
- Clothing: Wear boots, long pants and work gloves. Tyvek suits are best for mold removal.
- Face protection: For insulation or sheetrock removal, wear dust masks and goggles. If you are gutting a house, you'll probably need a respirator.
- Chain saws: Chain saws should be used only by experienced adult operators. Face shields and ear protection should be worn.
- Electricity: Before working in homes with wet or damp floors, or when removing sheet rock, be sure the electricity has been turned off.
- Mold: When working with mold, wear an N-95 Respirator, goggles, gloves so that you don't touch mold with your bare hands, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and boots

or work shoes. Spray moldy surfaces with a solution consisting of one cup of bleach per one gallon of water. After working with mold, wash hands with soap or hand sanitizer.

- Asbestos: In some older homes, asbestos may be contained in tiles or insulation. In insulation, it may resemble shiny, lightweight gravel, brown or gold in color. If you think you may have encountered asbestos, leave the home and notify the homeowner.
- Generators: Do not use generators inside homes. Generators should only be run outdoors or in well-ventilated areas.
- Sharp objects: Beware of nails, broken glass or other sharp objects. Tetanus and other needed immunizations should be current. Treat wounds with soap, clean water, and, if available, antibiotic ointment.
- Lifting: 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.

See <http://MutualAidDisasterRelief.org/resources> for more extensive health and safety information.

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 Mutual Aid Disaster 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 Mutual Aid Disaster Relief support.

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.

Mutual Aid Disaster 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 Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces and activities and will be asked to leave Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces and activities. Sexual violence by a volunteer is grounds for immediately ending the volunteer's relationship with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief.
- A perpetrators' presence should not hinder survivors' participation in Mutual Aid Disaster Relief activities. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief invites survivors to contact Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Advocates Stephen Ostrow at (727) 452 5710 or Ellen Zitani at (646) 600 1039 to discuss how we can support you.

**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.*

Relationships

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 Mutual Aid Disaster 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.

Drugs and Alcohol

We know people self-medicate in different ways, but recreational drugs and alcohol have the potential to cause harm to the organization's reputation and increase the risk of sexual violence. Especially at a location offered to us by people of faith, be mindful of behavior that you might find normal in your everyday life back at home, but could burn bridges for Mutual Aid Disaster Relief if you engage in it in this setting. Please respect our hosts and do not use recreational drugs and alcohol at Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces.

Inclusion

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces are community centers. People come in for the first time very often. We know you will probably be very busy with very important work in these spaces. We ask that if you are at a mutual aid disaster relief space, please make an effort to extend warm greetings to people who come through the doors or look like they may need assistance. Our model is more effective because it is participatory and inclusive. But it depends on everybody to keep that inclusive spirit and extend it outward. Often times people expect aid that comes with stigmatizing, and bureaucratic hangups. It's up to all of us to carve out an alternative, truly liberatory space.

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 Mutual Aid Disaster 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, Mutual Aid Disaster 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.*

Etc.

Mutual Aid Disaster 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.

Mutual Aid disaster Relief volunteers may not accept money, gifts, services, sexual relationships, or any other form of coercion or exploitation in exchange for assistance.

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 Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces, activities, and resources.

- Volunteers and community members have the right to leave situations where they feel threatened. Mutual Aid Disaster 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 Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces, including volunteer housing, distribution points, work sites, or other operating spaces.
- When possible, Mutual Aid Disaster 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 Mutual Aid Disaster Relief guidelines.
- In extreme cases, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief may refuse support to people whose behavior harms or threatens harm to others.

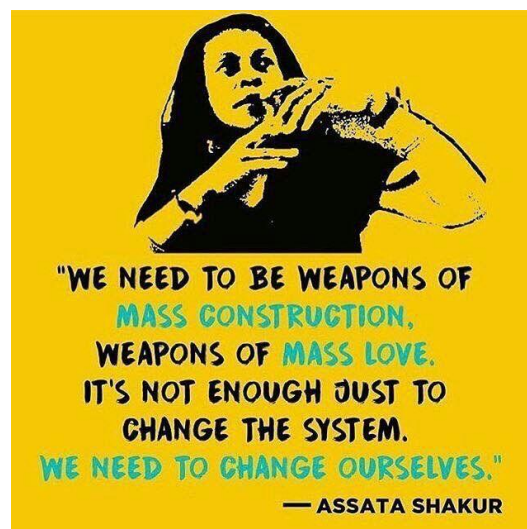
Building a culture of compassion and respect

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 all 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.



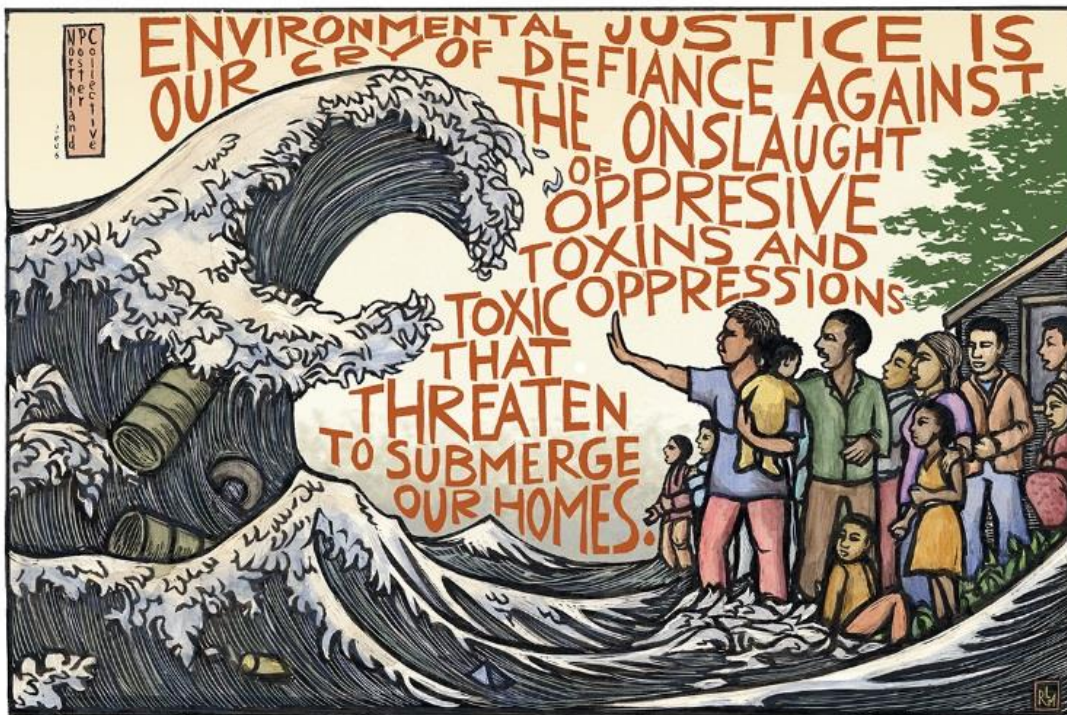
MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES

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.

OUR HISTORY



Early in the morning of September 19th, 1985, a major earthquake hit off the Pacific coast of Michoacán. Mexico City was devastated. At least 5,000 people lost their lives. 800,000 people were made homeless. As soldiers and police largely stood by, neighbors fed and sheltered each other, formed clean-up crews and relief brigades. These brigadistas, as they were called, dug people out of the rubble and students laid down in front of the bulldozers so the search for survivors could continue. Damnificados, as the newly houseless were called, won housing rights. Seamstresses, after witnessing owners salvage machinery before people, started a woman's union, people organized collectively in popular assemblies. These experiences led many to question why they needed a centralized state that did not care for the well-being or survival of its people. With this understanding, Mexican civil society was awakened.

On September 11th, 2001, two planes hit the World Trade Center. Another hit the Pentagon. A fourth plane crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania after a struggle between passengers and

hijackers. What most people know about the aftermath of 9/11 is the elite's history: the curtailing of civil liberties, the war in Afghanistan (and later Iraq), the targeted persecution of Muslims and Arabs by the State and others. But New York City had a different experience. Similar to the exceptional courage of the people on the 4th plane, people in the twin towers and surrounding areas helped each other to safety. Pedestrians directed traffic at almost every intersection so the ambulances could get to the wounded. Impromptu kitchens popped up everywhere. Regular people stole yachts to rescue others from falling debris and smoke. People temporarily commandeered a pier to act as a decentralized non-bureaucratic supply distribution hub and volunteer headquarters. And over a thousand people offered to volunteer to accompany Muslim women who wore hijab who felt unsafe walking in public. In the words of hip hop artists Jay Z and Alicia Keys, it was a "concrete jungle where dreams are made of".

On August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. More than 1,800 people lost their lives. In the apocalyptic atmosphere of New Orleans, a few days after Hurricane Katrina, 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. Malik Rahim, Scott Crow, and other early cofounders new each other from political prisoner solidarity work, supporting the Angola 3: Robert King Wilkerson, Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace. Together they formed Common Ground.

In a few weeks' time, volunteer street medics named for their work as medical first 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, anarchist, and other 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, provide free medical care, engage in building takeovers to prevent their destruction, and more. 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. People's 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 opposition. The experience and wisdom gained from mass mobilizations against globalization melded with the legacy of the Black Panther's 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 movements for liberation 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. Common Ground was not an activist utopia. Despite anti-oppression trainings and other limited attempts at stemming oppressive behavior, racism and sexism still were

present. In addition, one early leader of Common Ground, Brandon Darby, who later was revealed to be an FBI informant and agent provocateur, used his position of leadership to take advantage of young women, and alienated many people by his domineering misogynist tendencies, militant posturing and other oppressive behavior. When volunteers insisted that this problematic behavior be addressed, those people rather than the perpetrator were pushed out of the organization.

The problems also extended far beyond one individual. Similar to how in disaster capitalism, the economic elite take advantage of the situation to further entrench their privilege and power and introduce neoliberal economic reforms, in disaster patriarchy, which was on full display in Common Ground, the sense of crisis and urgency was taken advantage of by people who used it as an excuse to bypass their principles for expediency. Valorization of hard and constant physical labor, a crisis-laden environment, militant posturing, minimization or degradation of emotion and basic human needs – these were all red flags that painted a toxic and unsustainable organizing culture and were not appropriately addressed. It takes a constant organizational self-awareness and willingness to critically reflect in order to not fall back into the trap of patriarchal, colonial, or other oppressive modes within organizing efforts. These examples of Common Ground not living up to its ideals should not be glossed over or ignored. They are, in fact, critical to acknowledge and learn from. At the same time, it does not undo the critical, groundbreaking disaster relief solidarity work that Common Ground pioneered. It is often not a matter of whether manifestations of hierarchical power arise in our social movements and organizations, but when. When this does happen, it is critical to name it for what it is, and that this power be contested, opposed, and composted for something new to grow in its place.

Additionally, Brandon Darby was clearly part of the modern-version of COINTELPRO, the same counter-intelligence forces that infiltrated and caused the deaths and imprisonment of many people with the Black Panthers, American Indian Movement, and other movements for collective liberation. Common Ground can be thought of as a mediating organization linking the traditional revolutionary organizing style of the Black Panthers and the diffuse leadership or horizontalism of Occupy Sandy. All three didn't share decision-making power within their organizations equally, but all three did share power with the communities they were in support of, listening, asking, and responding to people's needs, while articulating support for radical social change. Similar to what took place a decade and a half earlier in Mexico, after Hurricane Katrina, civil society was awakened. Rapper Kanye West famously went off-script on a mainstream media nonprofit fundraiser, saying, "George Bush doesn't care about black people". But beyond one single person, the whole white supremacist, settler-colonial State doesn't care about black people, or indigenous people, poor people, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people, people experiencing homelessness, or anybody outside of their religion of Power and Greed. It began to dawn on many more people in New Orleans and throughout the so-called United States that the government does not care. And, we the people, must help each other.

Many people who participated in mutual aid after Hurricane Katrina focused again on building other movements like the International Solidarity Movement, No Mas Muertes, Food Not Bombs, Earth First! Rising Tide, Rain Forest Action Network, 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. On January 12th, 2010, a devastating earthquake struck Haiti, causing at least 100,000 deaths. Some people reconnected temporarily 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 took nonviolent direct action to shut down Wall Street and raise awareness about issues of economic injustice and inequality. Occupy Sandy grew out of Occupy, the next year, 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. Smaller decentralized mutual aid disaster response mobilizations took place in Oklahoma (OpOK), and Colorado (Boulder Flood Relief). The examples are numerous and clear: mutual aid and solidarity is far more effective and efficient than top down approaches to disasters. 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. In 2015, on the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Common Ground Collective had a reunion at Malik's house in Algiers, during which people reflected on the beauty, heartache, and trauma of the Common Ground experience. The better world that we knew was possible and had tried to help midwife in New Orleans after Katrina seemed stillborn.

Mutual aid disaster relief is a radical approach to disaster relief and to social movement organizing. It is an organization, a network, a tactic and a movement. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, the collective/organization/network, started in its current iteration in 2016, when several veterans of past liberatory disaster relief mobilizations came together and laid the groundwork for a permanent network to respond to disasters, from below.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief acknowledges failures of the movement for solidarity-based relief in the past and seeks to learn from those mistakes, build on lessons learned from decades of community-led disaster response from which we take inspiration, and ensure that best practices, relationships, and resources are ready to be deployed to support communities impacted by future disasters. Since then, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief has continued the legacy of autonomous, decentralized, and liberatory disaster relief by responding to historic floods in Baton Rouge, flooding in West Virginia, Hurricanes in the U.S. southeast and gulf coast, tornadoes in Tennessee, Standing Rock, Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Puerto Rico, West Coast fires, the coronavirus pandemic, and more – building wellness centers, providing life-saving medication, cleaning debris, gutting flooded homes, distributing supplies, distributing masks and other personal protective equipment, assisting with sustainable rebuilding efforts through water purification and solar infrastructure, tarping roofs, advocating for incarcerated prisoners, amplifying other liberatory mutual aid relief efforts, engaging in direct action, and many more activities to support people's survival, empowerment, and self-determination. Instead of supplanting or replacing spontaneous manifestations of mutual aid, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief partners with and supports local, spontaneous manifestations of mutual aid and uplifts the efforts of frontline communities leading their own recoveries in the wake of visible crisis moments, and the invisible, ongoing disasters of capitalism, colonization, resource extraction, gendered violence, white supremacy, and ableism, among other forms of domination. Inspired by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the Zapatista's Other Campaign, in 2018, we traversed diverse bioregions, and learned so much about what mutual aid is, and disasters as varied as hurricanes, blizzards, and chemical accidents to pipelines, white-supremacy, and gentrification.

On this popular education tour, we emphasized cooperation and self-determination, rather than waiting for aid to swoop in from above. Our workshops began by acknowledging disasters as much more than the acute catastrophes of climate chaos or sudden ruptures of infrastructure. We live in the disasters of colonization and capitalism every day, and it's these systemic disasters we spend our time responding to after the embers have gone cold or the waters clear. Earth's natural cycles aren't the problem. The disaster is the way institutions capitalize from and create inequality. It's the power structure that holds a monopoly on aid, but refuses to distribute it to those in most dire need. In defining "disaster" this way, we casted a broad net, met with communities that had different levels of preparedness, and brainstormed the logistics of an intersectional approach to organizing that learns from the past and builds survival programs for the future. We spent a lot of time with our new friends discussing hopes and fears, the collective work of grief, and how necessary it is to move forward at the speed of trust – to create a commons of care rather than a culture of burnout. A major theme we shared was that our "audacity is our capacity." We constantly refined the content and narrative of our lessons to evoke more magic in our conversations. Our intimate team supported each other to make quick decisions, plot logistics, craft Instagram posts, drive long-distance, and manage funds, all while providing each other constructive feedback and making occasional time to stop in nature. This work is heavy, but, we joined tour with a whole lot of heart, and, as we traveled thousands of miles, we were replenished with so much care and inspiration by the people who invited us into their communities.

In common, we're all witnessing the crises of gentrification, lack of affordable housing, vanishing public infrastructure, a white supremacist movement, and an increasingly toxic environment. Many people we communed with, similarly had witnessed the State fail to respond in the wake of acute

disasters, and were also seeking ways to take direct action. Despite such a daunting landscape, we found people preparing their communities for responses to acute disasters while organizing mutual aid efforts that seek to collectively address the ongoing ones, too. After our tour stops, some communities continued meeting around the topic of preparedness to build upon pre-existing trainings, resource-sharing, and relationships of solidarity in advance of crisis.

From many angles, it seemed like we had been losing ground. We were told it was too late; that humanity was forgone. We watched dark clouds loom over communities. But, on tour we met with countless organizers who were walking forward to meet the bright alternatives they've been imagining. One of the best parts of the popular education tour was hearing people express gratitude for the opportunity our stops opened to gather with people across their regions and hold a little space for each other to talk about the nightmares that keep them up at night, and the dreams that keep them going. We encountered daunting challenges, but we persevered and worked together to find solutions thanks in large part to everyone who fed, housed, and cared for us along those epic journeys. It was a powerful experience to connect more intentionally with our network. We went deeper with existing relationships, began to create exciting new possibilities, and we made a practical impact on local projects too, utilizing our resources and free time to haul housing structures into a pipeline blockade camp in Minnesota, to fetch drywall for an elder in need of house repairs in New Orleans, and to provide start-up medic kits to the Wolfpack Gunshot Response Team in Cleveland. We also assisted Water Protectors fighting the Bayou Bridge Pipeline at L'eau Est La Vie Camp in Louisiana, and rallied with Flint residents demonstrating against the state's closing of free bottled water distribution while allowing Nestle to double their theft of water resources in Michigan. Reconnecting with such gestures, buried under years of normalized life, is the only practicable means of not sinking down with the world while we dream of an age that is equal to our passions.

In 2020 came the biggest disaster capitalist shock yet: COVID-19. Millions of people were killed. But community mobilizations for mutual aid and medical solidarity formed in as many spaces as the new coronavirus had spread. From continent to continent, people innovated and navigated through information suppression, governmental inadequacy and unpreparedness, an attempted entrenchment of global authoritarianism, as well as supply shortages in panic-economies while the stock market crashed. Prisoners were forced to work for little to no pay to make masks and hand sanitizer. At the same time, prisons, jails, detention centers, and juvenile detention facilities were incubators of disease and widespread medical neglect, causing untold numbers of incarcerated people to lose their lives.

Many in positions of Power were consistently doing the work of delegitimizing their own positions and the State's response to the coronavirus crisis. The political and cultural sphere was rife with the specters of xenophobia, racism, and ableism. Inclusionary public health information, gradually proliferating online was an antidote and critical to our community safety and public health. While people in the highest places of government downplayed the crisis and ignored the needs of the people, it is in these conditions where there emerged a beautiful outpouring and blossoming of community sourced mutual aid to deliver supplies to immunocompromised persons, street level organizing in neighborhoods across the globe providing medical support, food and water distribution to neighbors with various vulnerabilities, resource and information-gathering and vetting of the copious levels of incoming data from day to day to help support the health of communities as we faced the new and strange ways that a global disaster could stunt the system, leave catastrophe in its wake and impacted communities to fend for ourselves and each other. Mutual aid networks formed and grew to keep us safe and cared for in perilous times. The words of Audre Lorde echoed in us, "We were never meant to survive". When bosses (or poverty) forced people to come into work sick, it highlighted the necessity for a fundamental transformation of our economic system. The vaccine apartheid laid bare the genocidal contradictions of global politics.

Radical solidarity in every corner of the world continues a compassionate and informed Covid-19 response to build access, resources, and power for all people in all places. The people of the world are crying out from the deepest places within them for no return to "normal". Neoliberal Capitalism, Settler-Colonialism, and the State have been and continue to be threatening life as we know it. We are at a crossroads: one way is annihilation, the other is liberation. Malik Rahim always told us that our generation would be known either as the greatest generation or the most cursed generation that squandered life on this planet as we know it. Those who don't learn from the past are

condemned to repeat it, but those who create the future are the ones who can see it. The future, from here, is unwritten. We invite you to write it with us.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

National network

Our national network is made up of many eco-activists, social justice activists, global justice activists, street medics, herbalists, permaculturalists, mutual aid organizers, black liberation organizers, 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 across the so-called United States, 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, valuing both collective decision-making and autonomy. We are deeply moved by the Black Panther survival programs which served the aim of satisfying immediate needs while simultaneously raising people's consciousness. We uplift and support the efforts of frontline communities leading their own recoveries in the wake of visible crisis moments, and the invisible, ongoing disasters of capitalism, colonization, resource extraction, gendered violence, and white supremacy among other forms of domination. 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.

Spokescouncil

Growing from the seeds of the autonomous, anti-authoritarian, global justice, and occupy movements, the spokescouncil is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's main organizing body. Also referred to as "all hands", "general assembly", or "general circle", participants work collaboratively and horizontally to move Mutual Aid Disaster Relief closer to achieving its mission and vision. Depending on size and capacity, either all people affiliated with the ongoing organizing, or just delegates from affinity groups and working groups, coordinate and collaborate to share updates, make decisions that affect Mutual Aid Disaster Relief as a whole, set the general direction with the input of all involved, and help to coordinate activities between the different affinity groups and working groups. When seeking consensus/consent, rather than asking ourselves, "Do I agree with this 100%?" the operative question is "Can I live with this?" This approach, combined with our practice of devolving decision-making to the localest scale possible, minimizes conflict and fosters an environment that is conducive to both sharing decision-making power and respecting autonomous action.

Steering committee

The steering committee is made up of a dynamic group of about a dozen individuals from around the country. Many Steering Committee members have been involved in previous liberatory, solidarity-based disaster relief projects. Steering committee members educate, organize, and mobilize support around Mutual Aid Disaster Relief projects in their respective communities, regions and networks. Working with a light touch, they 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, affinity groups, and the spokescouncil 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 location specific organizing or a solidarity brigade during a specific disaster. Other working groups are more permanent, such as medic/wellness, media/communications, and financial accountability. Working groups communicate via conference calls, emails, list-serves, signal, 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, prefiguration, 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, whenever possible, we strongly encourage the formation of affinity groups that can maintain their self-organization and autonomy, while simultaneously connecting and working with ongoing Mutual Aid Disaster Relief organizing.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief and what does it do?

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 strive to build long-term, sustainable and resilient communities. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief responds to disasters, educates about community organizing as disaster preparedness and collaborative neighborhood crisis response, collects and disseminates lessons learned in the field, and supports and provides a connective tissue between other grassroots groups doing response work.

How does Mutual Aid Disaster Relief relate to the larger grassroots, autonomous disaster relief movement?

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief sees itself as a swiss army knife within the larger toolbox of the autonomous, mutual aid-based disaster response movement. Our network includes multiple projects, including on-the-ground response work, networking and relationship building across the movement, and educational programs that seek to grow the use of mutual aid as a framework for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. But we also recognize and strive to support other initiatives and projects with similar aims as we believe that only a movement of movements can help us survive the spectre of climate devastation looming on the horizon.

We recognize and celebrate that the *movement* of grassroots, liberatory, solidarity-based, autonomous disaster response is so much larger than Mutual Aid Disaster Relief and is made up of many diverse individuals, collectives, organizations, and networks with their own identities. Part of our mission is to support this interlocking web of people who are inspired to act during disaster, regardless of what they call themselves.

Additionally, we don't see ourselves as a vanguard or central authority on disaster response. Other groups with varying beliefs and structures have and will continue to respond to crisis. People all over the world are engaging in disaster relief from a mutual aid perspective every day, and we want to encourage and learn from this important and affirming work. We did not choose the name Mutual Aid Disaster Relief because we want to co-opt these movements, but because we want to constantly uplift this tactic and this perspective, and to provide a home

for any others who, like us, find profound meaning in orienting their lives around community disaster preparedness and DIY crisis response.

What is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's decision making structure?

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is currently made up of many semi-autonomous working groups with different scopes of work. The direction and activities of each working group is largely set by the working group itself. While working groups have a fair degree of autonomy to carry out activities that fall within their scope, they are all accountable to a larger circle. The working groups sometimes bring proposals to the general circle for ratification, particularly when it's a matter of concern for the full organization, like amending our internal policies.

The general circle is made up of people who have expressed and shown long-term commitment to the project and meets regularly to help share information between working groups and make decisions that need everyone's input. Program, operational, and ongoing mobilization working groups meet as frequently as needed. Increasingly, *we try to devolve decision-making to the 'localest' scale possible ("Subsidiarity")*, meaning more decisions are made within smaller working groups, by those closest to the problem and most impacted by the solution, rather than the general circle. Consent is the operative word. We try not to vote, but arrive at a mutually satisfactory outcome for all participants. If one is not comfortable with a decision, they identify and propose new alternatives. Rather than the question, "Do I agree with this 100%", often the question is "Can I be ok with this?" Just as important, an effort is also made to share decision-making power with affected disaster survivors when at all possible.

Another element of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's decision-making is the Steering Committee, which fulfills its duty of care by closely monitoring the activities of the organization, regularly reviewing financials and operational matters, and intervening in decisions it believes to be harmful, overly risky, threatening to Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, or contrary to the mission, but otherwise works in tandem as co-decision makers. 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.

We also strongly encourage the formation of affinity groups and, if needed, spokescouncils, to promote self-organization and autonomy within Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, especially in the event of a large disaster response mobilization.

This multi-pronged approach has enabled us to remain fluid, dynamic, and responsive to the needs of disaster survivors, and to combine collaborative, participatory decision-making with respect for autonomy.

How does Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's disaster response work relate to local response work?

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief strives to support locally rooted groups in their response and inspire more affinity groups to act, more collectives to form, and more organizations to coalesce. We don't want to supplant or replace spontaneous manifestations of mutual aid and we don't undo the need for emergent groups to form. Instead, we seek to build relationships with, learn from, and listen to locally rooted groups in our on-the-ground response work.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is opposed to disaster colonialism. The real first responders are the people most affected on the ground, and we respect this in our analysis and approach. Other groups with varying beliefs and structures have and will continue to respond to crisis. We want to make clear that we support and want to amplify local emergent response groups, (such as the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo, West Street Recovery, etc.) but we certainly don't speak for

them or any other autonomous, independent disaster response or mutual aid efforts. We aim to speak and live out our truths while lifting up the voices of those doing similar work.

How can Mutual Aid Disaster Relief support my local mutual aid group that's responding to a disaster or doing recovery work?

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief may be able to help in a number of ways. We can publish lists of needs, fundraisers and news to our national audience. We may be able to put you in touch with groups that have experience organizing response and recovery work if you're looking for counsel or inspiration, or provide this advice or mentorship ourselves. We may be able to direct an Amazon Wishlist to you. We may be able to direct volunteers or supplies your way. Being an all-volunteer network, our capacity varies. But we are flexible and fluid and, just like we do with individual disaster survivors, we prioritize asking and listening to emergent disaster response efforts. So, if you have a need or request, even if it's different than what you just read here, please reach out.

A disaster hit, and me and my friends are forming a local mutual aid relief effort to respond. Are folks from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief available to help talk through some things?

Absolutely! Contact us at MutualAidDisasterRelief@gmail.com.

There are so many disasters in so many places, how do you decide on when and where to respond?

So much of justice-rooted disaster response work takes place before the disaster occurs as the local strength of collectives, affinities, and networks provide the nutrients for a vibrant people-powered response at the time of a crisis. Part of our work as a network then is to continually deepen and grow our connections with diverse people across the country in advance of disasters. When disasters do hit, these relationships between our network and other networks local to the disaster help guide us in our ability to respond in a supportive way.

We are a small but growing crew of volunteers who have limited personal and organizational capacity. In addition, we are committed to incorporating community care and healing justice into this work, instead of perpetuating disaster patriarchy. So we cannot promise to respond everywhere, everytime. When we do respond to a disaster, we do so where we are invited and when we have the capacity so that our work forms organically in relationship with the local response. We are continually growing our network, building and solidifying relationships, always imagining what we will be able to do tomorrow. And in the meantime, we do what we can, respond when we are able with integrity, respect, compassion, and care, in the spirit of mutual aid and solidarity. And we hope that you are inspired to do likewise.

Do you have local chapters?

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is currently not a chapter-based organization. We support affinity groups and collectives who continue being autonomous and working in their local communities, at the same time that they plug in to disaster response when they are able and willing. We encourage folks to work with others in their home community to form and grow locally rooted and diverse mutual aid programs, with their own names and identities. And then, whether as an individual or as a collective, leverage those relationships and resources when a disaster hits either locally, regionally, or farther afield. And of course, we are always looking to grow and welcome new volunteers. Please email MutualAidDisasterRelief@gmail.com and let us know the ideal ways you would like to plug in.

Do you all have 501(c)(3) status? Are donations tax-deductible?

Yes. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is a social movement rooted effort, and our ebb and flow of participation, affinity group model, non-hierarchical based organizing, and so much else about us doesn't fit neatly into a nonprofit model and we remain critical of the nonprofit-industrial complex. Nevertheless, we chose to access nonprofit status to help open doors and provide an element of continuity and permanence to the autonomous disaster relief movement. Donations are tax-deductible, and we can provide you a donation receipt upon request.

Can Mutual Aid Disaster Relief be a fiscal sponsor for my response group?

No. Sorry! But we aren't set up currently to be a fiscal sponsor for other organizations.

What can I expect as far as logistics if I were to be involved in a Mutual Aid Disaster Relief mobilization?

During a Mutual Aid Disaster Relief mobilization, as a general rule, to discourage disaster tourism, volunteers are expected to fund their own way to the site of a disaster. We expect volunteers to get on site using their own finances, thereafter we may be able to provide reimbursements for supplies that you purchase or other similar expenses related to doing the work. We want our volunteers to feel empowered to meet critical emergent needs of disaster survivors, with the knowledge that Mutual Aid Disaster Relief will back them up. Get in touch with us at MutualAidDisasterRelief@gmail.com or check in with a site coordinator to see if we can provide a reimbursement before making a purchase. Receipts are always required. We currently rely on small donations and have a shoestring budget so any private fundraising for individuals' or affinity groups' relief efforts is encouraged.

We recommend that you plan to come into any disaster situation as self-sufficient as possible. Many volunteers that have worked with us have their own vehicles that double as a place for them to sleep. Often we work with local churches, mosques, and other community centers to be able to have basic volunteer housing. Other times, camping or staying on a couch is the only option. We generally eat what we share with the community. If you have specific dietary or other needs, of course we will try to accommodate, but we advise you to bring what you need.

We meet sometimes formally, sometimes informally every day to discuss emergent needs and ways to meet those needs. It's totally normal to be nervous your first time. But we want to be a welcoming community, and will help orient you.

Can I get involved with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief?

Definitely! If you align with the core values and guiding principles, we welcome you to join us. We have a lot of work to do and we always want more people pitching in on our existing projects and scheming up new ones. Reach out to us to let us know your ideal way of plugging in: MutualAidDisasterRelief@gmail.com

We know this is a lot of information. But thank you for taking the time to go through it. There is a seat at our table if you care to join us. We know we need each other now more than ever. And we look forward to supporting disaster-impacted communities and turning the tide against disaster capitalism together. Please email us if you have any further questions!

- Mutual Aid Disaster Relief