

# NOTES

ON

# MUTUAL AID

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Organizing doesn't happen in a vacuum. New mutual aid projects may fly under the radar in their starting stages, but no project can evade the eyes of the watchful neighborhoods surrounding them indefinitely. Establishing a presence can attract new participants and allies, but not everyone will appreciate the work.

This zine is the second in a series that explores and critiques the budding movement of mutual aid groups around the Pacific Northwest. Our own experiences, observations, and research are synthesized with accounts gained from networking with other groups near and far.

Inside this volume we examine the social web of politicians and police, churches and chambers of commerce, and other pillars of present society. How do we navigate or subvert them as we strive for new forms of living?



VOLUME 2 – FRIENDS, FOES, AND  
WOLVES IN SHEEPS CLOTHING

# WHAT IS THIS PROJECT?

In Spring of 2022 we were rejected by our anonymous friends at PugetSoundAnarchists.org. The site admins declined to publish a report-back submitted by a long-running project working with local mutual aid groups. They reasoned that the project in question wasn't really mutual aid and thus not relevant to anarchism. In true anarchist fashion, the only solution that came to our minds was to write thousands of words telling them why they're wrong...and why we were also a bit wrong.

This project comes out of our hopes and frustrations working with local mutual aid and anarchist projects for some years. The recent proliferation of groups taking the name "mutual aid" has led to an explosion of new and valuable organizing. It has also spurred confusion over what exactly mutual aid is, and how its radical potential profoundly differs from charity.

This zine is the second in a series that explores and critiques the budding movement of mutual aid groups around the Pacific Northwest. Our own experiences, observations, and research are synthesized with accounts gained from networking with other groups near and far. The first zine explored mutual aid's history and theory, while this zine will dive deeper into the various enemies and allies mutual aid crews may encounter. A collection of helpful tips, tricks, and firsthand knowledge will follow third. The final entry will provide more detail on various mutual aid groups as well as thoughts and hopes for future organizing. We hope it will provide both practical information and food for thought.

Thanks to everyone who shared our first volume around, and who provided edits, critique, and comments.

**Notes on Mutual Aid**  
**Volume 2: Friends, Foes, and Wolves in Sheeps Clothing**  
February 2024

This zine as well as past and future issues available at  
[mutualaidnotes.noblogs.org](http://mutualaidnotes.noblogs.org)

We welcome your comments and complaints at  
[mutualaidnotes@riseup.net](mailto:mutualaidnotes@riseup.net)

**Organizing doesn't happen in a vacuum.** New mutual aid projects may fly under the radar in their starting stages, but no project can evade the eyes of the watchful neighborhoods surrounding them indefinitely. Establishing a presence can attract new participants and allies, but not everyone will appreciate the work. When you support your marginalized community and build power outside the state and capitalism, you'll inevitably anger those who benefit from existing oppression.

The right-wing has successfully transformed the years long "Homelessness State of Emergency" into another front of the "War on Drugs." Seattle mayor Bruce Harrell has found himself in rotten company pushing for a return to broken windows policing, stop-and-frisk, incarceration via compelled treatment, and an eternal struggle against graffiti. City attorney Ann Davidson was propelled into office by spewing vile rhetoric against homeless people and drug users and has since destroyed community and drug court programs while ramping up police involvement in every aspect of service-provision. We've learned from decades of police violence and militarization that claiming to eradicate homelessness while outright defending the root causes can only result in a war on homeless people.

Fascism finds fertile ground in this sort of climate. Targeting folks on the street has given fascism an ideological beachhead in Seattle in ways that the Proud Boys and other militant far-right street groups could not. NIMBY fearmongering reaches across the political aisle. It is clear to everyone that there is a problem in this city. The more tech capital flows in, the more people end up on the streets. Shoveling tens of millions into highly-restricted private landlord subsidies or top-heavy nonprofits is a small band-aid on a gaping wound that can simultaneously be attacked as "government waste". But where is the money going? Far from

being wasted on or even provided directly to its citizens in abject poverty, this money instead funds the extravagance of property management conglomerates in their efforts to attain some of the highest market rate profit in the world.



From all corners, people cry for solutions. Even those well-invested in the current state of the world are confronted by the in-your-face consequences of their wealth. But even if they see the problem, they are wholly unwilling to give an inch of their hoarded privileges to solve it. For them, the solution must be removing what, in their eyes, is the problem: the human beings who the system has shut out. They must simply be made to vanish, whether or not they have somewhere to go.

Until recently, this current lacked a "positive" message, as well as any sort of unity. They found it in increasingly numerous, and deeply interconnected, groups of self-declared "upstanding citizens," like Safe Seattle and Speak Out Seattle. These groups project an image of a non-existent perfect Seattle of the past to return to. For several years, a

milieu of NIMBY (“Not in my backyard”) activists rooted in Seattle’s sprawling suburbanese neighborhoods has grown through Facebook pages, Nextdoor groups, and small in-person meetings. This “law-and-order” coalition of business owners of all stripes, homeowners, rank-and-file cops, local conservative radio hosts and wannabe politicians slowly built a base and tested the rhetoric now being blasted by right-wing media on the national stage. They continue pushing the boundaries.

Vile reactionaries are not the only threat to visions of wider liberation. Nonprofits, politicians, poverty pimps with an investment in making sure things don’t change too much... all will seek to steer any vibrant effort into their fold. Effective tactics for those in power vary, including buying off organizers, supporting ‘moderate’ or more controllable voices, or jailing them and propping up sympathetic but manageable interest groups when the former prove impossible.

**Hierarchical power structures frequently utilize “charity” to launder their reputation.** Being “charitable” implies having access to resources that are distributed along a one-way street. Those whose privilege affords them more to give are applauded as virtuous for that fact, and use their ‘charitable nature’ as a shield (socially but also materially, through tax breaks and the like). Those with less are there to receive and are made to feel shameful and indebted for it. The reasons behind that inequality are left unquestioned, and in fact those with resources acquire new avenues through which to shape society. Executive directors and boards, corporate donors or high clergy make decisions that superficially appeal to those like them while being far removed from those they are “helping.” Breaking down such dynamics by supporting each other in our communities and building spaces for reciprocity is at the heart of mutual aid.



The road to a new world involves avoiding and sometimes confronting both co-option and reaction. The nature of this “opposition” can vary tremendously based on location and the prevailing political climate. Various places certainly share parallels worth exploring, but every locale has its own complex dynamics. A smaller town may have little to no social service infrastructure, little machinery to facilitate co-option, and hostile neighbors. But to their surprise the local police look the other way at someone lending a hand. A suburb might meet with intense pressure from organized NIMBYs and bored cops with nothing better to do than shuffling people towards the city nearby. Some city governments jump straight to repression and police harassment at the first sign of someone supporting their neighbors; others have bigger things going on than to worry about one or two more distros, instead utilizing the repressive apparatus for daily sweeps.

The political climate of a neighborhood or town shapes the language and emphasis of the opposition. Right-wing narratives often center fearmongering around drugs, crime, and a perceived individual laziness among homeless people.

Homeless folks are often derided as "transients" or "vagrants" to imply that they must all come from somewhere else and are all choosing to be homeless wanderers.

Liberal narratives have traditionally featured a veneer of compassion, but are similarly out of touch with the realities of those living and dying on the streets. Their narratives can be more insidious to counter as they talk a nicer game. Tents in parks make walks unsightly, just awful for a liberal yuppie's "mental health." A camp forced into the only accessible open space is decried as an "environmental hazard" to the nearby artificial lake or industrially-polluted canal.

Strip away the ideology, though, and homeless folks are often targeted in the same ways; NIMBYism cuts across the political spectrum and takes on more of a class character. Reactionary groups like We Heart Seattle have made headway pulling fucked up shit in ostensibly "liberal" Seattle by tailoring their language well. What boils down to a volunteer sweep brigade can be spotted patting themselves on the backs and pulling in wider support for "empowering" houseless folks and "helping them on their way."

**In categorizing neat groups below, it should not be assumed that these are distinct entities, nor should any group be seen as a monolith. Shifty politicians sometimes moonlight in hate groups, nonprofit outreach workers often maintain uncomfortable relations with police, and the toxic narratives put forward by top-down corporate media and grassroots hate groups often build on each other in a feedback loop.**

## **THE HOMELESS NON-PROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX** is the

outgrowth of decades of co-option and concessions with strings attached. A growing legion of nonprofit organizations join traditional religiously-affiliated groups such as the Salvation Army in letting off just enough steam from society's ills to keep the pot from boiling over. The underlying inequalities of the system are maintained.

In a small community there might only be one shelter or day center, if even that. The oppositional nature of mutual aid projects to nonprofit establishments becomes starkly clear in a smaller town like Aberdeen when that sole nonprofit provider has a board filled with local neo-nazis. In a larger city the complex can be quite sprawling. At least four thousand people in Seattle work across multiple agencies providing shelters, temporary or permanent housing, outreach agencies, case management, food and material resources, and day centers as well as employment and substance-use treatment agencies geared towards current and recently homeless folks. Among this legion of workers are hundreds of well-paid managers and executives whose jobs would vanish were the problem ever actually solved.

Seattle's non-profit complex is a vast labyrinth, large enough for visible factions to emerge between organizations. Over fifty of these groups are ostensibly united under the "Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness" to advocate for progressive policies around housing justice, but even within that umbrella group, various organizational philosophies, personal fiefdoms, and political and religious beliefs drive wildly different practices. Some SKCOCH members' programs like the Salvation Army are more aligned with those of Union Gospel Mission, which operates

independently and imposes harsh and often bigoted religiously-derived barriers on accessing its shelters and other programs.

Nonprofits and other “non-governmental organizations” taking on an increasing amount of the work traditionally viewed as the state’s responsibility is a key feature of neoliberalism. As anarchists, we aren’t calling for the state to expand, but calling bullshit on what the state chooses to nickle and dime so that bill-



ionaires pay no taxes and militarized police budgets balloon ever higher. Homelessness nonprofits receive state sanction and funding, but superficially function independently. Where Public Housing, for instance, was once run and managed by governments, funding is increasingly farmed out to private actors. Following the broken logic of “free-market competition,” distinct organizations with overlapping programs compete with one another for the same resources. Their funding is usually more reliant on projecting the appearance of success than actually solving deep problems.

Copious data collection helps generate fancy numbers that often contrast wildly with the experiences of people on the ground-level. Contracted outreach workers in Seattle can offer forty people the same handful of beds at a roach infested shelter they know will get turned down, but as far as the data reported to government and rehashed in media propaganda is concerned, all forty people were “offered shelter.” Mean-

while the same shelter might be required by its government contract to leave those beds empty, potentially turning desperate folks away, in case the local cops decide to ever bring someone by. **This is often the source of the few open shelter beds that are constantly cited in disingenuous rhetoric claiming the city has a surplus.**

Many cities and counties operate a “homeless management information system” at the behest of the federal government, compiling data from various service providers. But virtual data points on a spreadsheet hardly do justice to the reality of people’s situations. A night to couchsurf away from the shelter becomes a “successful diversion,” ensuring an emergency shelter meets its county-set standards. We spoke with one worker who noted that at the end of a seasonal emergency shelter’s run, all residents must have been exited to somewhere, since they couldn’t have remained there any longer: “We told all the residents of at least one place to go, often unable to follow through and actually reach a staff member despite weeks of call after call. But in our end of year data, this was spun up and propagandized as ‘nearly all of our residents were exited laterally to shelter, or stepped up to transitional or permanent supportive housing.’”

The practical overlap between the work of some mutual aid groups and homeless nonprofits opens the risk that an autonomously organized group may drift into the latter sphere. Without hard work to ensure that the principles of mutual aid (as opposed to ‘charity’) remain at the core, a group risks falling into the vortex. This can come from within; individual members with differing ideas might push for funding grants from official sources, or seek more ‘legitimacy’ by incorporating. This does not always stem from personal ambition. A well-meaning but misguided belief that

it will enable the group to do bigger and better work can be enough. Barriers placed by the state encourage this process. Bank accounts and some funding sources, for instance, may well be reliant on official nonprofit status, which comes with strings attached.



When SHARE carried out its first successful occupations, the city government offered buildings as a concession only on the condition that a “fiscal sponsor” organization (LIHI) be established to oversee the new properties. (LIHI SUCKS.) Utilizing the political clout it had established over the years, LIHI strongarmed its way into a similar role for later grassroots organizations like the autonomously-organized Nicklesville encampments. When LIHI’s leaders sought ways to further expand their program reach, they leveraged their legal status as a fiscal sponsor to effectively seize sites and property. When some Nicklesville residents opposed the forced introduction of LIHI security and other staff, LIHI paid people to literally raid Nicklesville camps in order to violently take them over. Their “fiscal sponsor” status justified it all in the eyes of the city.

Many nonprofits directly exploit vulnerable people while earning accolades for their “charitable work.” Entire

industries would fall apart if everyone living in tents, shelters tiny-homes, and vehicles disappeared overnight. Seattle groups like Uplift Northwest (formerly Millionair Club) staff many warehouses, construction sites, restaurants, football games and other major events with underpaid homeless folks, expanding the precedent of better-known groups like the Salvation Army which runs unpaid “work therapy” or Goodwill that lobbies to pay more of its disabled workers less than minimum wage. Pioneer Human Services and other groups finding work and housing for post-release participants pat themselves on the back for underpaying and housing people referred directly out of the prison without questioning the carceral system that makes it hard for them to find a job or home in the first place.

There are undoubtedly some cool nonprofits out there doing solid work, but seeking sustainability for a project in this way requires walking a very fine tightrope to avoid cooption. Many Seattle mutual aid groups work with a handful of nonprofits run by wonderful folks like the People’s Harm Reduction Alliance. The best groups are generally founded and operated largely by those that have use for their services. But at the end of the day we can’t nonprofit our way out of deep problems. A worker’s cooperative might be a nice reprieve from the harsh realities of capitalism but it is rarely sustainable or functional at scale; good nonprofits find themselves in a similar bind.

Even nonprofits that start off deeply rooted in the community can easily drift over time as accountability to major funders becomes a bigger priority, while leaders eventually leave or let power go to their heads. The downstet shelter or supportive housing worker undoubtedly has stories of coworkers who brought a prison guard mentality in to work. Paid outreach workers with a critical eye towards the police always have a lot to say about the uncomfortable relationship their employer maintains with cops. The nonprofit structure

of hierarchical control and unaccountable boards and funders forms a straitjacket constraining liberation.

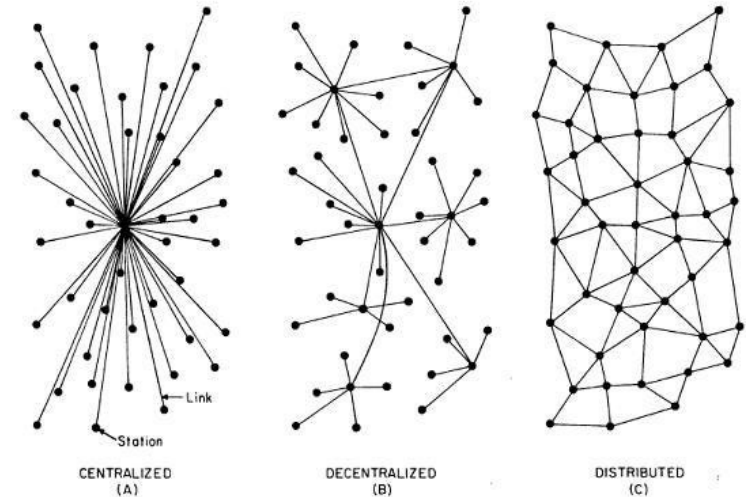
## POLITICIANS AND LIBERAL ADVOCACY

There are times and places where it makes sense to politically engage systems of power, but that road contains countless pitfalls. While the far-right builds a platform on anti-homeless hate, liberal politicians and advocacy groups spend more time trying to put on a friendly image and defusing the perception of conflict. The actual root issues are left unsolved, and liberal calls for compassion can easily serve as a demobilizing half-measure.

For an inexperienced or demoralized group, it might be appealing to attach to state initiatives or local progressive election campaigns. Candidates run yearly electoral campaigns, often telling their activist friends they just want to use the race to do some radical networking. Projects like the recent Seattle ballot initiative for social housing will require years of work to potentially get a slightly more accountable alternative to the Seattle Housing Authority. Especially when isolated from a broader radical network and a long history of struggle, electoralism can seem an attractive way to make change and build connections. It's all too easy, though, to find yourself a long way down the wrong road with a lot of time, sweat, and tears gone to waste. We've seen countless activists and orgs fall into this trap, only to find themselves burnt out with nothing real to show for it.

Acting alone, individual mutual aid groups may be unable to bring about the deep change needed. In a small town a single vocal, dedicated group might make a splash, but in a larger city it becomes necessary to work with other groups. There is

immediate practical value in building ties with like-minded crews doing direct mutual aid or community defense work, perhaps in different neighborhoods or focusing on particular needs. Building a strong network of mutual aid amplifies the reach of any individual group, which is something we will expand on in future volumes. But that network must be built on solid principles, which is much harder to accomplish after-the-fact.



**Questions will inevitably arise over who else might make for a valuable coalition partner.** Just as radical survival programs are pushed to become cogs in the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, a web of nonprofit advocacy organizations run by paid staffers mediates grassroots political action in many cities. Such groups may be useful partners in certain limited situations, but their support will only follow so far, and often comes at a hidden price. These groups may use radical sounding language and be staffed with well meaning people, but won't support solutions that threaten their funding avenues.

If an issue is brought to the forefront of broader consciousness, parachute activists and brand-new puppet



orgs are also known to follow. Be aware of mysteriously well-resourced activists or groups suddenly appearing when radical ideas gain significant traction. These can come from a variety of sources; wealthy interest groups, existing entrenched nonprofits, political networks, and even various state-socialist groups with little previous interest in the cause. You can't trust everyone with a bullhorn.

Outreach may come from sympathetic but at times rogue elements of the state. Historically, low-level Public Health employees provided under-the-table support for early harm reduction movements in the face of genocidal Reagan-era policies. Today, successful harm reduction groups may be seen by state Public Health workers as useful partners for outreach. The resources attached may be invaluable, but **care must be taken to ensure that groups do not become simply another adjunct of a divided state apparatus.**

Shit may look different in a small town where your mutual aid group could well be capable of personally bullying the mayor to meet demands, as opposed to a large city where the mayor gets multiple police escorts to work. The only way to get lifesaving resources like Narcan in a small community with no nonprofits may be to work with the small county public health office. At the end of the day, many "cool" nonprofits in urban areas that mutual aid groups might want to work with source from the state themselves. Try to maintain clear boundaries and lines in your organizing, and be aware of the pitfalls of co-option.

Seattle is infamous for the so-called "Seattle Process" in which demands for change become lost in an endless labyrinth of committees, viability studies, and compromises behind closed doors. Parallels to this process may be familiar in other places. It often takes a veritable uprising to even

force a radical idea onto the agenda.

2020's riots in the streets forced the Seattle City Council to explore decreasing the local police budget, including the money directed towards sweeps. Likewise, a 2017 occupation of City Hall forced the question of stopping all sweeps onto the table. As these mobilizations slowed and energy filtered into electoral channels, the respective demands were undermined and co-opted for other purposes. In 2017 groups like Socialist Alternative jumped on a growing interest in "Stop the Sweeps", only to leave actual homeless folks out in the cold at a city hall campout protest, before "compromising" the demand to stop sweeps into their failed "Amazon Tax" that came to allocate more money to sweeps. 2020's proposed cuts to police were quickly subverted, the dismantled sweep team was renamed and expanded months later, and now a law-and-order regime calls for a new war on drugs. Left in the hands of politicians and paid advocates, change will never come.



Bear in mind that the most important fights often start off deeply unpopular. It can be very tempting to water down your demands for broader acceptance; political and non-profit groups will almost inevitably demand it as a condition of working closely with them. It's fucked up that "we should stop killing people" is a radical demand, but appealing to

mainstream approval is not going to make the dying stop when the killing is itself in service of maintaining the illusion of mainstream comfort. When you stop saying anything meaningful, you can get a lot of people to agree with you!

It usually makes more sense to be openly hostile to the progressive limits imposed by the liberals and their pet politicians. Making demands that the state is unwilling or unable to deliver on can help us chart a path forward. The injustice and inadequacies inherent in the existing system are revealed, opening the desire for something better. Even from a cynically reformist perspective, firmly demanding the impossible is generally the process that results in more mild reforms actually becoming palatable enough for implementation in the first place.

## CHURCHES AND FAITH GROUPS

When many people hear "church" its easy to get drawn into abstractions around theology and forget that religious congregations serve the practical function of centers for community organizing and socialization. For some it is their only meaningful social outlet. They even have built-up infrastructure, from social infrastructure like childcare and educational courses, to financial resources and the ability to mobilize people. Their physical assets like meeting spaces, kitchens, and vehicles may be the only "free" or affordable options in an area. But the specific dynamics in churches can vary so wildly that some could potentially be a mutual aid group's worst enemy even while others become useful.

Churches have the potential to be socially insular institutions, but are rarely entirely disconnected from trends in the

broader community. A conservative congregation can do the interpersonal work of building a "reactionary community" with a strong internal consensus that can work with cops, throw around resources, and pressure the state or local companies. This can provide a veneer of respectability for some heinous shit, and a powerful ideological shield since it can be hard to argue against someone's "faith." Many right-wing US Christian groups subscribe to "prosperity gospel," the utterly nonsensical idea that Jesus Christ loved rich people and that their ill-gotten gains are blessings from god. The pernicious other side of this coin is the ideological demonization of poor and homeless folks who are seen as being divinely punished for perceived transgressions.

Churches in the US have tremendous institutional rights and legal cover, frequently beyond even secular nonprofits. Religious organizations are deeply intertwined within the broader Homeless Nonprofit Industrial Complex. On the conservative side, many organizations like Union Gospel Mission require their employees to sign a narrow "statement of faith," and most like the Salvation Army have deeply restrictive, often exclusionary, and even outright bigoted rules on who can access their services. This can be a big issue in smaller cities or towns where such groups are often the only service providers.

But the powerful shield wielded by churches can be turned towards good. Mutual aid groups facing intense police harassment for publicly feeding folks have sometimes found churches willing to join them on



the frontline, arguing that *their* faith requires them to help the poor and hungry. When fascists once tried to march in Seattle's queer neighborhood, one of the local churches let their building be used as a literal sanctuary during the successful counter-demonstration, doors protected by armed antifascists. When looking for allies, don't neglect such rad congregations.

Also, remember that Christians aren't the only religious groups out there. Mosques, synagogues, temples, and covens can all potentially be rad, and show up in ways that Christian congregations might not. As a fairly straightforward example, a local mosque goes out of their way to cook excellent meals for local shelters on the Christian holidays like Christmas that often get neglected while congregants are celebrating. On the occasion of a local fascist anti-muslim protest, a local synagogue and a muslim advocacy org were some of the most eager contributors towards the bail fund for antifascist protesters arrested defending against the chuds.

Broader political trends within different denominations change over time. The reactionary turn that led to the conservative so-called 'silent majority' dominating many religious bodies took decades of concerted effort by far-right activists, and has not entirely won-out even within the christian sphere. US Protestant churches are about the only group more infamous for splitting than leftist organizations. The broader politics of a religious body can come from on-high, enforced by a rigid hierarchy, or from below, fostered in an entirely independent local congregation. **Don't let yourself get too caught up in Church politics any more than electoral ones, but don't entirely write off faith groups as co-conspirators towards a better world.**

## BIG BUSINESS AND CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

Business wants it both ways: ridiculous profits from exploitation and speculation, and a fantasy world where those knocked down in the process simply aren't a problem. For their purposes the latter can be achieved not by helping people but by dividing them up while repressing the worst-off to the point where they simply can't fight back. Good- and cold-hearted business owners alike close ranks as the "crisis" reaches its current fever pitch. Thus we see the heads of local Seattle businesses like Ivar's and Uwajimaya join executives from Amazon or Starbucks fronting their capital, platforms, and local prestige for the war on homeless people.

Businesses are not unaware of the value of a positive image. Large corporations might provide token support to nonprofits under their thumb, such as the relationship between Amazon and the family shelter Mary's Place. Meanwhile they vigorously oppose any deep social or political changes that might cut into their profits. When the city of Seattle proposed a tax on high-earners to build affordable housing in 2018, Amazon threatened to stop all construction in the city and even roped construction labor unions into repealing the initially successful bill.

In a climate where homeless folks have already been deeply dehumanized, many businesses will have few scruples targeting them. Neighborhood and small town business associations and chambers of commerce are often nodes of organized opposition to mutual aid work. It is important to remember these organizations were historically founded as vehicles of class warfare, "unions against (working class) unions." Chambers of commerce, "associated industries,"

"citizens alliances" etc. were organized to maintain control of local and regional economies by a small class of capitalists. They hired strikebreakers, gun thugs, and spy services. Those businesses which "scabbed" by agreeing to work with unions were punished via boycotts by fellow businesses and banks denying loans and services. **While these groups may seem benign today, it is because they essentially won their war and now exist as coordinating and promotional bodies for local capitalism.** Challenge the status-quo and a violent face is easily revealed.

Business associations often maintain direct relations to local police, using them to push for sweeps, bans on camping, and other repressive policies. They might even take matters into their own hands; many Seattle business have illegally filled numerous vacant parking spaces with concrete "eco-blocks" to prevent people living in cars and RVs from having places to stay. While the city continually sweeps vehicle-dwellers, the same government looks the other way regarding these eco-blocks. Business associations also frequently hire private security or more benign-seeming "neighborhood ambassadors" to harass homeless folks who dare to hang out



in visible areas.

There is some limited potential in cultivating allies and skimming resources among the business class. A friendly cafe may be willing to host a donation barrel or meeting space, a progressive small retailer might be willing to lend their voice or resources in support of Mutual Aid efforts, a chill restaurant owner may be willing to donate extra food. Such opportunities should certainly be pursued. There is also some value in wedging apart the business class' internal solidarity. It may be worth organizing outreach or canvassing to assess the stances of local businesses. But always be wary as this support will usually only go so far. **Be careful that a group of ostensible allies doesn't come to dictate how your group operates.**

## GRASSROOTS HATE GROUPS

Not every neighbor is friendly. Most people who have been homeless long enough have stories of lone wolves and vigilante groups targeting homeless people with harassment, assault, arson, and more. In recent years such violent reactions to those beaten down by capitalist society have become more organized. Targeted anti-homeless hate has become a primary grassroots organizing platform for the far-right across countless communities.

A major incubator for this trend are neighborhood groups meeting in-person or through apps like Nextdoor, Facebook, and Reddit. The names of such groups often appeal to "cleanliness" or "safety"; the cringeworthy "Save Our Aberdeen Please" has "SOAP" as an acronym to represent their attempt to "clean up" their community. Meanwhile they

feature dehumanizing, sensationalized horror stories and pictures of messy encampments that may not even be local. Other groups wear this outrage-porn on their face, with names like facebook's "Seattle Looks Like Shit" and reddit's "seattlehobos." They frequently claim that drug addiction is the sole cause of the current crisis, while calling for heavy-handed police intervention over any other solution. Mobilizing neighbors to amplify calls for police intervention against campers is a common tactic. Some groups are rife with explicit calls for vigilante action, others keep up a more respectable face or urge political engagement, others still blur the lines. Talking points are often drawn from right-wing media, though grassroots groups can also influence that media narrative in return.

Many of these groups form from genuinely local sentiment, but it isn't uncommon for their grassroots to involve a bit of astroturf. The administrator of the long-running hate page "Safe Seattle" is intimately tied to major right-wing political donors and organizations like the libertarian union-busting Freedom Foundation. "We Heart Seattle," essentially a fake mutual aid group, was established by a few individuals. They frequently announce "cleanups" of camps with no consent from the residents. They commonly wait until residents are away, then enter their spaces and trash their belongings and



even steal their animals. Members also claim to "assist" with referrals, but **making a phone call for someone to a public hotline anyone can reach then doing nothing to follow up is frankly worse than useless.** Such isolated cases, often without real results, are then hyped to oblivion on their social media and in sycophantic propaganda news. They almost immediately received generous business donations including multiple free office spaces, but continue to promote themselves as a plucky, independent group.

The Austin, Texas-based Cicero Institute has emerged as a national coordinating body for right-wing anti-homeless dark money and policy. The institute advances several unifying proposals such as a demand that any services may only come after mandatory drug treatment; the opposite of "housing-first." Alongside money, language on these proposals and propaganda campaigns are workshopped and shared with numerous partners around the country, including both Safe Seattle and We Heart Seattle.

It is necessary for mutual aid groups to consider how they will counter this organizing. Depending on the local situation, you may have to help organize community defense networks in the face of violent attacks. Appropriate tactics will vary widely based on the community and the activities of the group. Running informational counter-propaganda or parodies of their rhetoric can be effective. Social Media can be time-consuming, but utilizing it may be necessary to counter-organize. Events or panels may be worth disrupting with coordinated protest. The worst offenders might be outed to the community if it will gain sympathy. **Be strategic and intentional when presenting research and documentation;** don't just provide an un-curated list of social media screenshots.

# THE MEDIA

Capitalist investment in maintaining the oppressive status-quo incentives all commercial media to focus on individual 'failings.' Poverty Porn is profitable. Systemic issues and reality-shaping decisions by the powerful are deliberately ignored or spun in a positive light. But many conservative and far-right media outlets utilize outright fascist tactics to mobilize hatred against homeless folks.

Right-wing radio, tv, and political personalities have long peddled malicious narratives painting homeless people as utterly inhuman. One can find endless local news clips featuring housed neighbors complaining about messy encampments and crime while the voices of people sleeping rough are heard only when their words can be twisted. Camera shots of a pile of trash, a close up on a few needles, ever-amplifying calls for the city to force people out. The same repetitive, dehumanizing points find their way into countless neighborhood blogs and national TV spots. Hacks like Seattle's Jonathan Choe have built significant individual followings showing up to camp after camp, sweep after sweep to produce such content.



Anti-homeless narratives are frequently utilized as a gateway into the broader world of far-right discourse. Jonathan Choe lost his more mainstream job at Sinclair Broadcasting's local ABC affiliate KOMO 4 after producing a neo-nazi metal-backed hype video for literal Proud Boys, but continues a high-profile career as an "independent journalist" backed by the wealthy right-wing Discovery Institute. Seattle-based filmmaker Christopher Rufo also exemplifies this. His right-wing filmmaking career launched highlighting the supposed 'evils' of harm-reduction work in Seattle and Vancouver, BC. Rufo's next ludicrous film ignited and gave talking points for US-wide fascistic fear-mongering against Critical Race Theory, before he turned towards manufacturing hysteria around trans-rights in schools.

Mutual aid groups doing effective work will inevitably receive some media attention. An email from a local right-wing radio personality like Jason Rantz or local news station inviting someone for an interview must be treated with extreme care, and frankly we can't think of any good reasons to talk to Jason Rantz or those like him. There can be a strong temptation to try to appeal to a broader audience the group might not already reach, and the opportunity is sometimes worth it. But without a strong media background and experience of how to effectively spin an interview, this can easily turn into a disastrous trap. **Media outreach should be on your terms, with outlets you can trust not to twist your words against you.**

There can be value in utilizing the media, but tread carefully. News stories can bring new attention and participation. They can also be effective at pressuring governments and companies to ease off from, say, a sweep if the message is spun right. Identify potentially friendly local outlets, but be careful to keep journalists at arms length; liberal and

mainstream progressive outlets often differ from right-wing sources **more in style rather than substance** when it comes to issues like homelessness.

Consider establishing an independent news blog or other source (like Sabot Media) to give the real story of the work going on. Build relationships with those that already exist. (shout out to local counter-info site Puget Sound Anarchists) This should be done as part of a wider campaign; don't rely on the media alone to change anything and ideally you shouldn't be making these decisions alone but with a wider community or groups of invested people.

## THE POLICE

The police are only accountable to those with property, and they will always be the enemy of those without it. City-based mutual aid groups might run into the occasional sympathetic cop. Small-town dynamics might even lead some of the police force to look the other way from people helping out hard-up members of a tight-knit community. But at the end of the day most cops enthusiastically take to the work of brutalizing homeless folks. Those that don't still take orders from above to dispense brutality. When the city orders a sweep, cops will be there.

Mutual aid groups are frequent targets of police repression. A weekly supply distro in a major city like Seattle may be left alone or see the occasional cop drive-by. Groups working in suburbs or smaller cities more often face direct harassment. They might be told they aren't allowed to set up where they are, or that giving strangers food violates city ordinances. Cops may directly target, ticketing vehicles of participants and even arresting folks bringing supplies or

people showing up to get help who have bad luck with warrants. Some cities like Everett have even criminalized sharing resources in the parts of the city people might feasibly hang out.

Creative thinking, for instance advertising an event as a potluck for friends while firmly standing ground can often win the day. Heavily publicizing state retaliation might bring a wave of support to a mutual aid group. Don't back down just because you encounter resistance from the police, but be smart about how you respond to their repression. Being public is often the best response, but sometimes it makes more sense to regroup, go mobile for a bit, change up your tactics if necessary to keep supporting folks and maintain existing relationships. Don't isolate yourselves when you face the boot of the state.



Seattle Police Officers have increasingly built a political platform on bringing down that boot. Their union president, Mike Solan, happily took part in a 2019 Republican Party panel demonizing homeless folks that featured the administrator of the Safe Seattle facebook hate page, an anti-LGBTQ think

tank, and Jason Rantz. In 2021 Solan hosted We Heart Seattle for a friendly chat on his podcast. Rank-and-file officers frequently feature in propaganda documentaries starting with the infamous *Seattle is Dying* to push the common reactionary drug-war narrative against homeless folks.

The 2020 uprising led to temporary hesitancy among many in cities like Seattle to push for an obvious increase in policing. In the meantime city officials began amplifying the law enforcement powers of several other arms of local government. "Soft-cops" can now be found in the form of Parks and Recreation "Rangers" and dedicated sweep enforcement teams under Seattle Public Utilities and the Seattle Department of Transportation. They usually don't carry a gun, but this growing legion of enforcers works intimately with uniformed police (not to mention private security) to make life miserable for folks on the streets.

**We feel the need to emphasize that SOFT COPS ARE BAD and not just a form of "defunding police," which is also not enough!**

Policing of our everyday lives, of every waking hour is intensifying. The DoT and Parks and Rec taking on police powers is a part of this trend, just as electronic incarceration has "progressed" via reform from fairly hands-off phone check-ins to ankle monitors to apps that potentially surveil everyone parolees interact with. Striking calls to Abolish the Police in the days after Minneapolis' 3rd precinct burned were quickly



undermined by a legion of nonprofits and advocacy groups hopping on the more milquetoast train of Defund the Police, who were in turn outmaneuvered by the police state shell game of simply shifting budget lines around, ending up with more money for cops for "training" and more city departments aiding the police in their everyday jobs.

Local police departments often establish dedicated task forces to handle sweeps and target homeless folks. Before the pandemic, Seattle ran the "Navigation Team" combining SPD officers and contracted outreach workers from the agency REACH. The latter frequently expressed that they were used as props by the cops to claim "services were offered" that didn't meaningfully exist, providing cover for their sweeps. This model was copied by cities like Bellingham, Olympia, and Vancouver, Washington.

Following the 2020 uprising, Seattle's Navigation Team was ostensibly dismantled. Heralded as a great victory for defunding the police, this concession rang hollow when an even bigger sweep machine was assembled months later. **More cops including soft cops, more lucrative private contracts, unprecedented numbers of sweeps amid unprecedented deaths.** In 2022 Seattle counted 943 sweeps of folks in vehicles, tents, or lacking any shelter whatsoever. A few hundred sweeps received a few days notice, generally if they had a few people. Most had no warning before cops and contractors arrived to dispose of all their belongings.

REACH workers refused to participate in sweeps starting in 2019, so the city established in-house outreach in the form of the HOPE team, adding a city-run layer to the messy web of publicly-funded private outreach. REACH management has since strongarmed its outreach workers into both providing



support to HOPE team and participating in various projects “serving” highly swept areas. This includes city initiatives like the “Third Ave Project” as well as the statewide pilot Right of Way project receiving funding under Governor Inslee’s direction. Superficial harm reduction and diversion programs are integrated with heavy-handed policing under higher and higher jurisdictions.

The poster child for the deep integration of cops into alleged alternatives to policing and incarceration is Seattle’s “LEAD” program, or “Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion.” Designed to strip attention and funding from other potential avenues, LEAD is sold heavily as a policy solution to other municipal governments across the continent. The program is authored by friends of cops to allow cops to take center-stage in the referral and provision of services. This makes cops the central if not only access point for any sort of support, treatment, housing, etc. Cops get LEAD leadership on speed dial, while no one else can make referrals into a program that takes an ever-greater share of resources. All while the actual services receive a pittance in comparison to the funding received by the cops themselves.

**Most cities don’t see sweeps as frequently as Seattle, but they happen in every city, town, and sometimes far out there.** In the small city of Aberdeen cops force anyone trying to sleep on the downtown streets to move along to a couple quasi-permitted spots near the river. Even private landowners who let people set up tents elsewhere are threatened with fines. Even on the “allowed” sites the city demonstrates the pointless cruelty inherent in most sweeps: Aberdeen recently made everyone to move whatever they could away from the site for the day so the city could demolish the small shacks folks had erected and trash everything else in the process. Aided by literal neo-nazi non-

profit workers with cops as an ever-present threat, the city made people move across the railroad tracks for the day then let them move right back.



In Bremerton, an injunction prevented cops from overtly forcing people to leave the public parts of the main street on Martin Luther King near downtown where homeless folks often gather due to proximity to services, though many couldn’t access the city’s sole religious overnight shelter. Cops instead came by with a car or two regularly, while running larger “sweeps” with half a dozen or more officers once or twice a week. They trash stuff when folks aren’t near it, check people for warrants, etc. Sweeps are also often carried out elsewhere in the city with less scrutiny.

Cities and suburbs like Tacoma, Everett, and Burien have increasingly passed overt “camping bans,” also known as “no-sit no-lie” laws. Cops are given free reign to harass anyone throughout entire city limits, or else designated enforcement zones, who bothers to even sit down, to say nothing of setting up a tent. Others target homeless folks in new and cruel ways, like Federal Way’s new law threatening thousands in fines for having a shopping cart on public sidewalks.

Naturally, richly-dressed white families are unlikely to face such consequences, but all those already targeted by cops will face the pain of this hostile legal architecture. Many of these new laws just coming up for consideration also include penalties for distro work by mutual aid groups, such as fines for giving people food.

In an increasingly fascist inflected US, the perception of crime increases every year. Amid such a vicious cycle of money, media, copaganda and NIMBY fears, we can expect the attacks on our homeless neighbors to get worse. Whenever something bad happens, the easiest scapegoat is the nearest camp.

## SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

How can all of this information be utilized? We hope first and foremost that it can serve as a tool for inoculating you, the reader, as well as those you choose to share and discuss it with. When setting out to organize it's vital to be both aware of and realistic about the perils you might face. Organizing networks of mutual aid opens the possibility of overt state or vigilante violence, of media doxxing or legal issues, but also of recuperation by the very systems you're fighting against.

Inoculation goes hand-in-hand with agitating around the issues we face and educating on potential solutions. When you run into an obstacle, it helps to have considered the possibility beforehand. You might not make the same decision you planned, but you won't be left reacting without having considered the problem. When, say, the local public health service gets in touch with your group wanting to build a relationship, we hope this piece offers a better understanding of the complex dynamics at play. That arm of

the state may be offering resources, and after careful consideration they may be worth accepting or even requesting. But its vital to recognize that while the state may be internally divided, that arm is still one part of a single body, and it shares space with the cops that might destroy those same resources during a sweep.

We also hope this information, or more broadly the framework in which it's been presented, might be useful to groups as they make proactive plans. When launching any campaign it helps to know your terrain; consider mapping out your local dynamics. What is the local media landscape? Maybe there are friendly outlets, but maybe you'll have to make your own. What specific business owners are leading the charge demonizing poor and working-class folks? They have names and addresses. Many of the experiences laid out in this piece will ring true for your community, but everywhere is unique, and it is a valuable exercise to visualize your local social map together.

Small groups working together can punch way above their weight if they are serious and strategic. The systems we fight against deliberately seem complex and imposing, but it's always possible to break them down into smaller pieces to find what is feasible to tackle. When you have solid principles and those inform your goals, when you're doing the work, people see it and more often than not people will want to become involved.

# FURTHER READING

## Articles

“Stop the Sweeps, Stop the Fascist Creep!”

Indigenous Action, “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex: An Indigenous perspective & provocation” and “Voting is Not Harm Reduction: An Indigenous Perspective”

Sabot Media, “The Problem with Good Cops”

“Accounts of Police Brutality and Socialist Alternative Co-option at SeaTac #MuslimBan Protest”

el pinche simón, “Self Defense Against White Supremacy: Finding a Path Towards Community-Based Self-Determination”

## Zines

Sabot Media, “Aberdeen and the Nonprofit Industrial Complex”

“Dining with Vultures: Bristol Anarchists & the UK Media”

“Caught in the Web of Deception and Other Writings on Anarchists and the Media”

“Talking to the Media: A Guide for Anarchists”

## Books

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*

William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*

## Local Anarchist Media

Pugetsoundanarchists.org | Itsgoingdown.org | Sabotmedia.noblogs.org

## SOME LOCAL MUTUAL AID CREWS

**Aberdeen** – Chehalis River Mutual Aid Network

**Bellingham** – BOP Mutual Aid

**Bremerton** – Kitsap Food Not Bombs | Bremerton Bike Kitchen | Sabotage Noise Collective

**Eastside** – Crossroads Food Not Bombs (Bellevue) | Redmond Food Not Bombs

**Everett** – Punks in the Park

**Port Angeles** – Port Angeles Food not Bombs

**Seattle** – A Single Spark | A Will and a Way | Ballard Mutual Aid | Black Star Farmers | Broadway Aid | Casa del Xolo | Cold World Mutual Aid | Egg Rolls Community | Give a Damn | Lake City Lifeline | Long Haul Kitchen | North Beacon Hill Mutual Aid | North Seattle Neighbors | Seattle Food not Bombs | Stop the Sweeps Seattle | Subvert UD | Wednesday Freegan Grocery | West Seattle Mutual Aid Party

**Tacoma** – Tacoma Mutual Aid Collective | The People’s Assembly