

THE ROLE OF GRASSROOTS  
ORGANIZATIONS IN RESPONDING  
TO ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS



CLIMATE

RESILIENCE

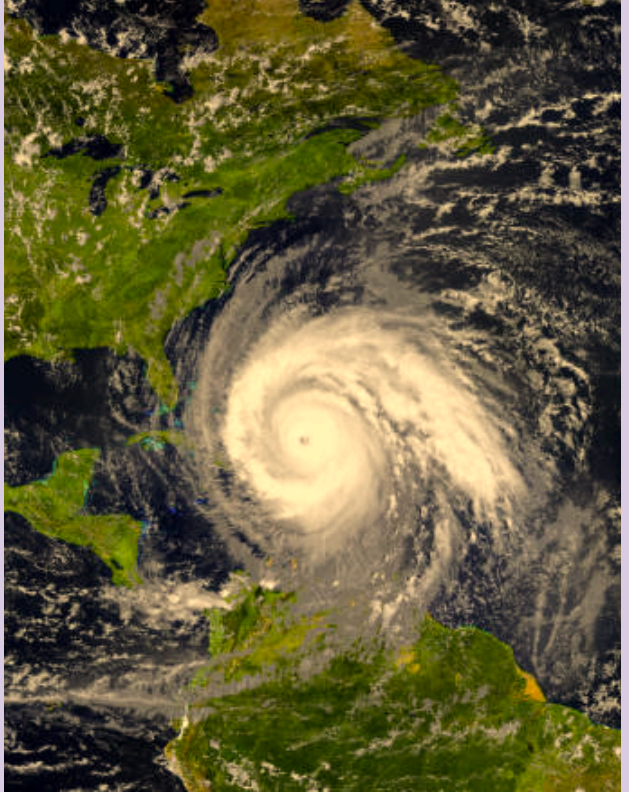
2024

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# MUTUAL AID RESPONSE

In the face of increasingly severe climate emergencies, mutual aid collectives have emerged as critical actors in providing immediate relief and fostering long-term community resilience.



By mobilizing local knowledge, resources, and collective action, mutual aid networks are not only filling the gaps left by other interventions but are also reshaping how communities prepare for and recover from climate disasters.



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# EXISTING LITERATURE

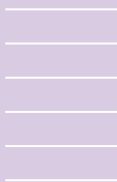
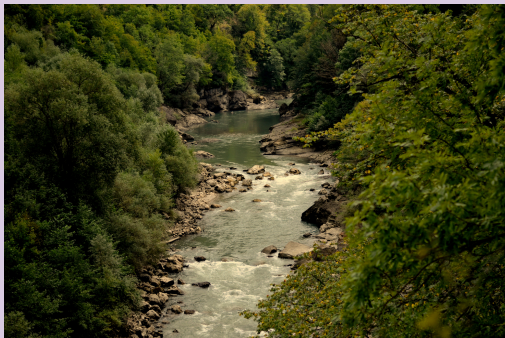
*Book: Grassroots Environmental Action: People's Participation in Sustainable Development*

Written in 2019 by a collection of professionals, affirms that grassroots resilience could improve global equity and thereby address long-standing problems while resolving climate challenges.

*Thesis: Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid in Natural Disaster Relief* by Zoe Kenney

Reflects that climate emergencies have disproportionately affected marginalized individuals, including those living in poverty, undocumented migrants, victims of domestic abuse, and people who are trans. FEMA will not provide aid to undocumented individuals in these emergencies including emergency shelter, and a lack of clarity around benefits for households with mixed statuses. After hurricane Katrina, a mutual aid organization called Latino Memphis, delivered food, water, and supplies to immigrants who were in apartment complexes that were full of water and moldy, yet they had no other option or they were too scared to ask for any other help.

After Hurricane Harvey, around 25 percent of the hurricane-impacted individuals failed to secure government aid

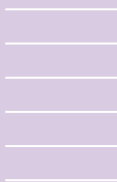


# EXISTING LITERATURE

After the 2018 Hurricane in Puerto Rico, the response, or lack of response, became a well known and highly criticized point in the political sphere. Some of the most prominent aid collectives that were formed included the Puerto Rico Sourcing Project and Generator Collective. Both grassroots organizations addressed foundational vulnerability issues and offered community autonomy in the face of the federal government's ineffectiveness to offer viable aid.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), a grassroots organization providing natural disaster relief rooted in the principles of mutual aid and autonomous direct action. MADR was established after hurricane Katrina in 2005 and also in response to hurricane Sandy in 2012 by two groups called Common Ground and Occupy Sandy.

The individuals in these groups were already involved in activism and mutual aid in their communities. MADR grew over time and became modeled all over the country. Their structure is decentralized and horizontal where everyone involved shares in organizing and development of the collective. They encourage a shift away from the reliance on capitalism, the state and the industrial non-profit sector by placing a focus on mutual aid. They focus on more than disaster relief by emphasizing long lasting social change. Now they have over 60 organizations as "co-conspirators".



# STUDY



CONDUCTED IN 2024 —————



# METHODOLOGY

A SURVEY WAS CREATED TO GAUGE HOW COLLECTIVES HAVE RESPONDED TO EMERGENCY CRISIS EVENTS. THE PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY IS TO GATHER DATA THAT WILL CAPTURE THE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES OF THE COLLECTIVES. THE SURVEY WAS SENT TO MUTUAL AID COLLECTIVES IN APPROXIMATELY 63 DIFFERENT COLLECTIVES IN 25 STATES WITHIN THE US. THERE IS A MIX OF REGISTERED NON-PROFITS AND PURELY COLLECTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS. THE POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS WERE IDENTIFIED BY UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA, A WEBSITE [HTTPS://WWW.MUTUALAIDHUB.ORG/](https://www.mutualaidhub.org/), AND THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S OWN KNOWLEDGE OF DIFFERENT COLLECTIVES,

EACH PARTICIPANT WAS PROVIDED WITH INFORMED CONSENT ABOUT THEIR VOLUNTARY STATUS AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF THE RESULTS. ANY INFORMATION PROVIDED IN THIS ZINE IS WITH PERMISSION OF THE INDIVIDUAL.

# RESULTS



TWELVE COLLECTIVES FROM SEVEN STATES COMPLETED THE SURVEY BASED ON THEIR EXPERIENCE RESPONDING TO EMERGENCY CLIMATE EVENTS.

55% OF RESPONDENTS ARE NOT A REGISTERED 501C3 OR FORMAL NON-PROFIT AGENCY.

THERE IS A VARIETY OF LENGTH OF SERVICE BETWEEN THE COLLECTIVES. THE MAJORITY HAVE BEEN ACTIVE IN THE COMMUNITY FOR 3-9 YEARS.

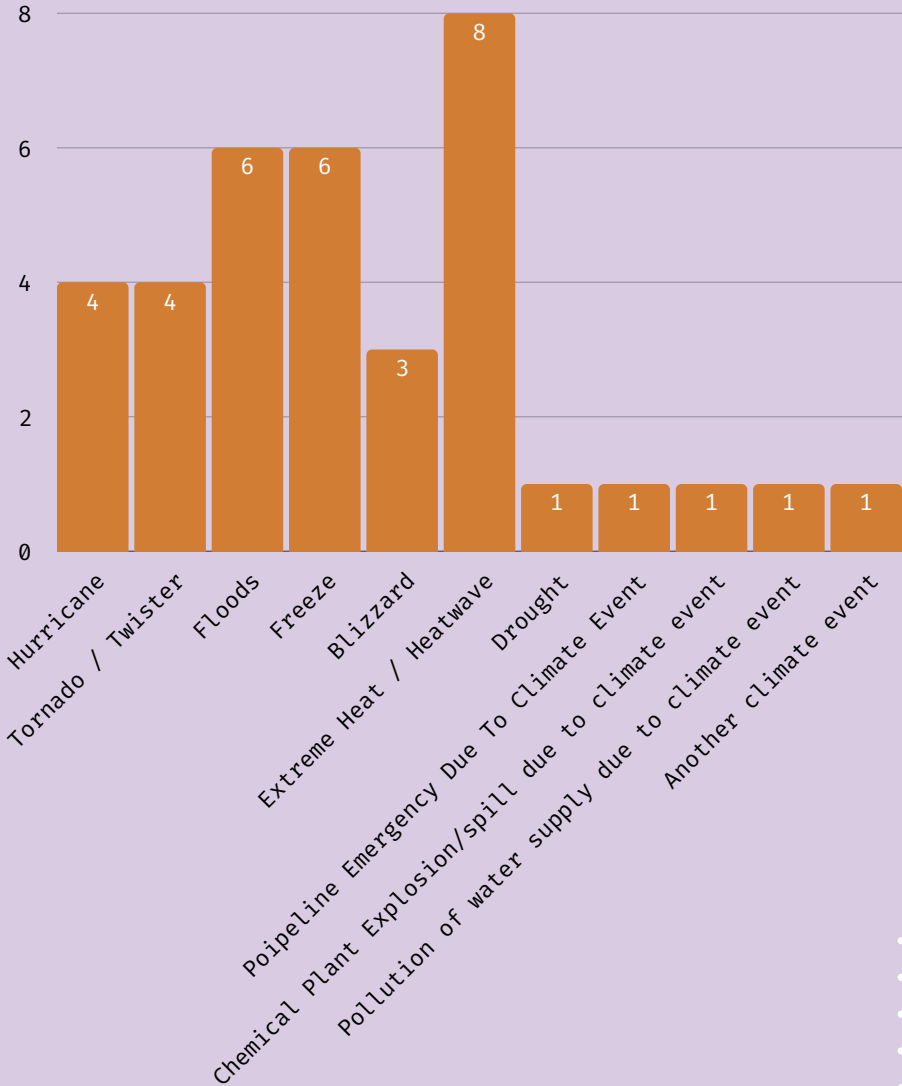
THE MAJORITY WERE ALREADY ACTIVE BEFORE THEIR MAJOR CLIMATE EVENT.

THE MAJORITY CAN ONLY RESPOND TO LOCAL NEEDS.





## THE TYPES OF CLIMATE EVENTS THAT THESE COLLECTIVES RESPONDED TO:



## WHAT IMPACT DID THE CLIMATE EVENT(S) HAVE ON THE COMMUNITY?

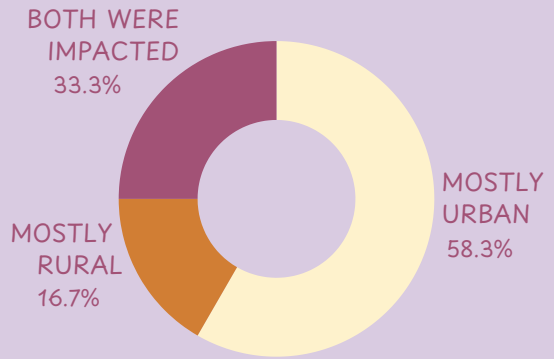
Locals Lost homes	7
Locals lost fertile farmland / cattle / farm animals	7
Locals lost small businesses	7
Locals lost non-profit site / supplies	7
Locals lost religious site	5
Locals lost food supplies	10
Unhoused locals faced great hardship due to the climate event	12
Grocery stores / supermarkets were not functioning	4
Area had no running water	6
Area had no drinking water - boil advisory	6
Loss of internet and regular phone use	5
Roads were not drivable by car or common trucks	7
Bodies of water were contaminated	4
High number of people died, injured, and in need of attention	4
High number of animals died, injured, and in need of attention	3
Factory workers were left in dangerous factories during climate event by order of their superiors	4
Incarcerated individuals were abandoned in jails and prisons by order of their protocol	4
Elderly individuals were left without care inside of elder care facilities	3
Children were separated from their parents due to death or missing parents	2

THE LENGTH OF TIME THESE CONDITIONS PERSISTED VARIES FROM 1-10 DAYS (42%) TO MORE THAN 4 MONTHS (17%).

THE MAJORITY OF COLLECTIVE MEMBERS WERE DIRECTLY IMPACTED BY THE CLIMATE EVENT (75%).

ONE COLLECTIVE DIRECTLY FOCUSES ON CLIMATE CHANGE / EVENTS.

ONE COLLECTIVE RECEIVES GRANTS / FUNDING SPECIFIC TO RESPOND TO CLIMATE EVENTS.



100% REPORT THAT THEY TYPICALLY RESPOND TO MUTUAL AID NEEDS.

100% **INDIRECTLY** FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE / EVENTS.



IN RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY,  
EACH COLLECTIVE SELECTED THAT THEY  
PROVIDED THE FOLLOWING:

Food and water distribution	11
Temporary shelter	3
Housing Assistance (coordinating housing, building housing, etc)	3
Financial assistance directly to those impacted	6
Medical supplies/ First Aid/ Wound care/ Checking in	9
Evacuation assistance	1
Counseling or emotional support	1
Transportation assistance for those impacted	5
Labor for tree removal, cooking, debris cleaning, packing supply boxes, etc.	9
Coordinating resources by being a point of contact	9
Logistical services for procuring/ moving/ storing material resources	7
Legal Assistance	1

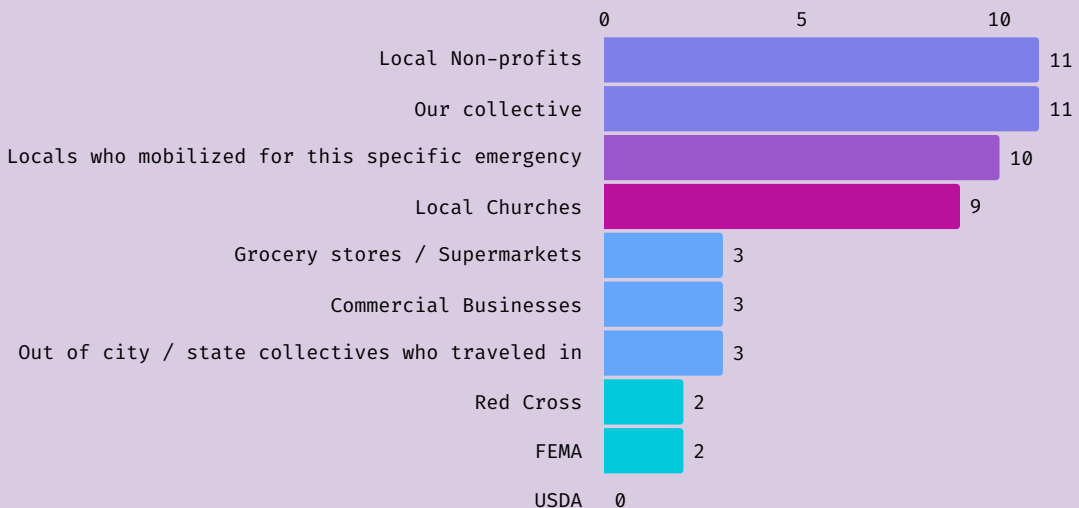


ALL COLLECTIVES  
COORDINATE WITH OTHER  
LOCAL MUTUAL AID  
GROUPS TO NAVIGATE  
THE CRISIS RESPONSE.

92% RESPONDED THAT  
THEY MAKE AN  
INTENTIONAL EFFORT TO  
FOCUS ON MARGINALIZED  
AND DISENFRANCHISED  
COMMUNITIES.

75% REPORT THAT LOW-  
INCOME AND  
MARGINALIZED  
COMMUNITIES **DO NOT**  
HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO  
THE SAME AID PROGRAMS  
THAT OTHERS IN THE  
COMMUNITY HAVE ACCESS  
TO.

### ORGANIZATIONS WHO PROVIDED AID DIRECTLY TO LOW-INCOME AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES DURING THE CLIMATE EVENT:



EACH COLLECTIVE PROVIDED A NARRATIVE RESPONSE ABOUT WHAT SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES WERE AMPLIFIED DURING THE CLIMATE EVENT.

THEIR ANSWERS WERE PRIMARILY CENTERED AROUND HOUSING ISSUES AND THE CITY'S LACK OF CARE AND COORDINATION.

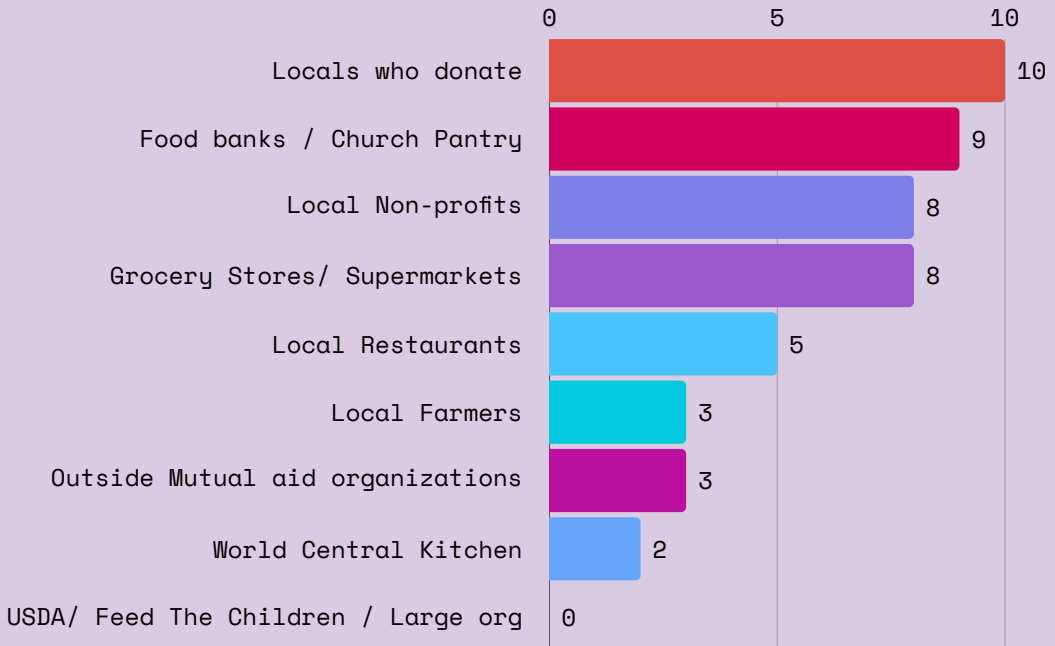
A MEMBER OF COMMON FIRE IN PORTLAND, OREGON REPORTED:

*"The city and county and not prepared for these events. They seem to prepare last minute or as the event occurs and never respond robustly enough to support all communities effected. Mutual aid groups and local orgs are always left to fill in very large gaps in services/resources."*

OTHER ANSWERS TALKED ABOUT THE LACK OF SUPPORT FROM FEMA, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE IN RURAL SETTINGS.



## WHERE COLLECTIVES SOURCE FOOD AID TO DISTRIBUTE:



THE SURVEY ASKED THE PARTICIPANTS TO SELECT FROM A LONG LIST OF ANSWERS THAT BEST DESCRIBE THE STEPS THEIR COLLECTIVE TOOK TO RESPOND TO THE CLIMATE EVENT.

## THE MAJORITY OF RESPONSES REFLECT:

COLLECTIVE MEMBERS WERE STAYING IN CONTACT MEMBERS TO ENSURE THEIR SAFETY DURING THE EVENT.

COLLABORATED WITH LOCAL NON-PROFITS

AID ITEMS WERE PROCURED BEFORE AND AFTER THE EVENT TO DISTRIBUTE TO THOSE IN NEED.

COORDINATED LOGISTICS TO MOVE AID TO MOST NEEDED AREAS.

AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN WAS CREATED BEFORE OR AFTER THE EVENT.

## 0% REPORT:

COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OR FEMA TO RESPOND TO THE EVENT.

APPLYING FOR EMERGENCY GRANT FUNDING



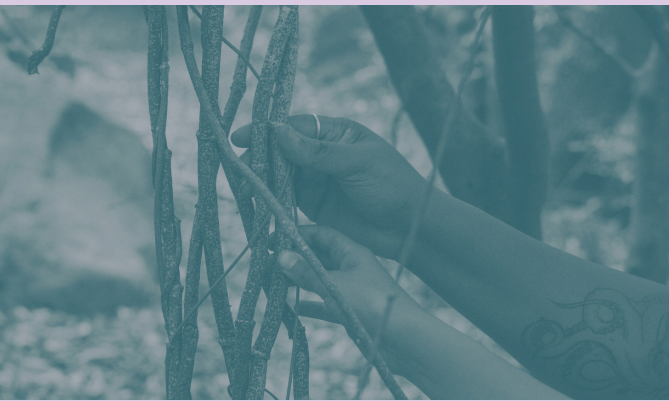


MUTUAL AID COLLECTIVES ARE ABLE TO PROVIDE UNIQUE RESPONSES TO EMERGENCIES BY HAVING ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE IN THEIR COMMUNITY. THEY ALREADY KNOW WHERE THE UNHOUSED ENCAMPMENTS ARE TO CHECK ON THEM. THEIR ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS SERVE THOSE WHO WOULD OTHERWISE GO UNSERVED OR FORGOTTEN.

A MEMBER OF FIDDLER’S GROVE IN LEBANON, TENNESSEE REPORTED:

*“Even though we lost buildings, our remaining considerably-sized facilities were very useful in housing an effective community response to the 2020 tornado. We were able to serve as a staging point for recovery efforts, as well as a hub for several small businesses that were affected.”*

OTHER COLLECTIVES ALSO SHARED HOW THEIR CRISIS RESPONSE IS MORE INTERPERSONAL DUE TO THEIR PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY. THEY HIGHLIGHTED HOW THEY ARE FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE TO EACH SITUATION.



42% OF COLLECTIVES REPORTED THAT THERE WAS A **RISK** OF ARREST, LITIGATION, CITATIONS, FINES, OR ANY OTHER NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS DUE TO THE WORK THEIR COLLECTIVE WAS DOING TO RESPOND TO THE CLIMATE EVENT/S.

33.3% REPORTED THAT THE RISK BECAME REALITY AND THEY HAD BEEN ARRESTED, TICKETED, OR SUFFERED ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCE.

TWO COLLECTIVES REPORTED THAT THEY WERE SPECIFICALLY THREATENED WITH ARREST, CITATIONS, FINES, AND POLICE BRUTALITY BECAUSE OF THEIR WORK. THEY TALKED ABOUT THE EXPERIENCES WITH ARREST AND POLICE INVOLVEMENT THAT OTHER GROUPS HAD FACED IN THE PAST.

A COLLECTIVE FROM KENTUCKY REPORTED THAT THEIR FLOOD RESPONSE VOLUNTEERS WERE PULLED OVER AND ACCUSED OF STEALING THE SUPPLIES IN THEIR VEHICLES, SUPPLIES THEY HAD PURCHASED THEMSELVES.

A COLLECTIVE MEMBER'S VEHICLE WAS ILLEGALLY SIEZED FOR 23 DAYS AND 72 ITEMS WERE STOLEN BY LAW ENFORCEMENT (STATE AND FEDERAL), THEY ALSO SPENT ONE NIGHT IN JAIL - YEARS LATER THOSE CHARGES WERE DROPPED.

A COLLECTIVE MEMBER WAS ARRESTED WHILE ENGAGING IN SUPPLY DISTRIBUTION EFFORTS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA. THEY SPENT ONE DAY IN JAIL.



# ACCOMPLISHMENTS

EACH COLLECTIVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS OR SUCCESS STORIES:

“Every year, our mutual aid networks grow and refine our coordination around any emergency, climate or otherwise - making our efforts more effective and our reach more broad. Maintaining relationships with unsheltered communities has allowed us to grow our ability to make sure ALL our vulnerable neighbors feel supported - they trust us and we trust them. That does not exist when a state agency responds, folks will inevitably fall through the cracks or not seek help due to historically low trust in state agencies/law enforcement.”

REDNECKS RISING IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE RAISED OVER \$10,000 IN MUTUAL AID FUNDS AFTER HURRICANE HELENE AND REDISTRIBUTED THE FUNDS TO OVER 90 FAMILIES.

ANOTHER COLLECTIVE REPORTED THAT THEY WERE ABLE TO HELP SAVE THE NATIVE CRAYFISH POPULATION BY GETTING TRASH OUT OF THE CREEK AFTER A TORNADO.

THE MUTUAL AID COLLECTIVE IN KENTUCKY REPORTED THAT THEY ARE CURRENTLY IN THE THICK OF THEIR CLIMATE DISASTER AND IT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND SUCCESS AND POSITIVITY IN THE MIDST OF SO MUCH LOSS, GRIEF, AND PEOPLE STRUGGLING WITH BASIC SURVIVAL.

# CHALLENGES

EACH COLLECTIVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THE CHALLENGES THEY FACED:

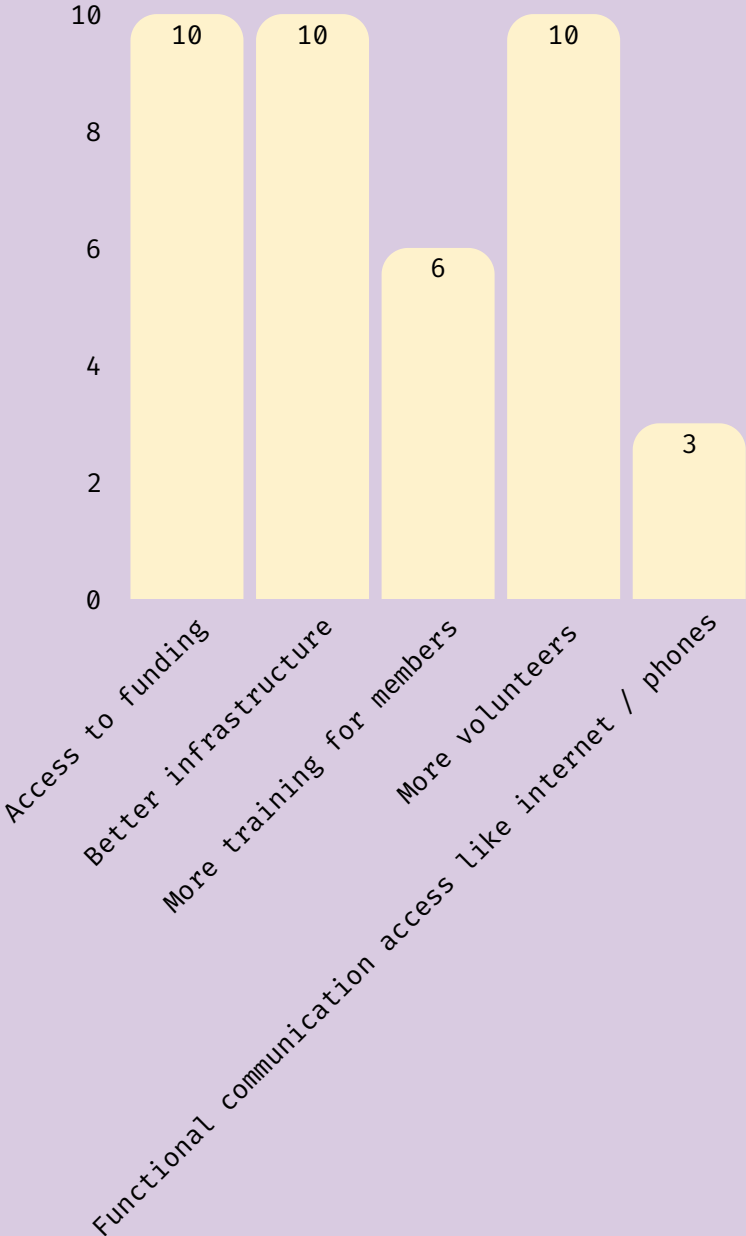
THE MAJORITY OF RESPONSES REFERED TO CHALLENGES WITH GETTING VOLUNTEERS / BURN OUT OF VOLUNTEERS.

ONE RESPONSE SHARED THAT THEY HAVE A CHALLENGE WHILE WORKING WITH THE UNHOUSED BECAUSE THE POLICE WILL SWEEP A CAMP AND THEY LOSE CONTACT WITH PEOPLE AND DON'T KNOW WHERE TO FIND THEM.

SOME RESPONSES TALKED ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION OF THEIR RESPONSE AND THEIR FUTURE PLANS TO MAKE A PROCESS TO FOLLOW SO TIME IS NOT LOST IN THE CONFUSION OF COORDINATION.



# WHAT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES OR SUPPORT WOULD HAVE ENHANCED YOUR COLLECTIVE'S RESPONSE?



PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO PROVIDE INSIGHT ABOUT HOW THEY CAN BE MORE PREPARED FOR FUTURE CLIMATE EMERGENCIES:

|Continuing to align with other organizations and knowing our place in the timeline of needs.|

|Help our volunteers heal more.|

|Maintain contacts with locals and increasing awareness in the community|

|Start preparing far more in advance. It's difficult because you are using so much energy to maintain resources at all times, planning ahead is challenging. But, to be collecting cold weather survival supplies in may - to be stocking up on heat wave supplies in January.|

|Get more funding. Funds mostly come from my own pockets.|

PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO PROVIDE ADVICE FOR OTHER MUTUAL AID COLLECTIVES RESPONDING TO CLIMATE EMERGENCIES, HERE ARE THEIR WORDS OF WISDOM:

|Act fast. Planning and coordinating are necessary, but don't be afraid to jump in and start helping any way possible ASAP. |

|build trust with people |

|Get connected with as many local orgs as you can and talk to each other I think we can definitely contribute our little experience and knowledge around phases of what people need and how to get it to folks. |

|Work together, communicate clearly and figure out where our gaps are and fill them before they are needed (ie. Are folks trained in narcan? Can we all offer basic wound care? Does everyone know the initial signs of frostbite/trenchfoot and how to respond?) |

|Wilson County has a long history of dealing with natural disasters - sharing this history with the community will inspire, inform, and instill a useful resilience. |

MUTUAL AID COLLECTIVES ARE INCREASINGLY SOUGHT AFTER AND USEFUL DURING CLIMATE EVENT RESPONSE.

THEIR ABILITY TO MOBILIZE LOCALS, BUILD TRUST BETWEEN COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND THEIR COMMITMENT TO SERVING THOSE WHO ARE MOST IN NEED IS EVIDENCED BY THEIR RESPONSES AND EXPERIENCES.

BY FOCUSING THIS RESEARCH ON GRASSROOTS DISASTER RELIEF EFFORTS, THE INTENTION IS TO SHED LIGHT ON THE WAYS IN WHICH COMMUNITIES CAN COME TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER MORE AUTHENTICALLY. WE TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER.





# RESEARCH ZINE

a dive into how localized mutual aid collectives respond to climate emergencies like hurricanes, tornados, and heatwaves.

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