

## What do we mean by “mutual aid”?

Mutual aid is a term to describe people giving each other needed material support, trying to resist the control dynamics, hierarchies and system-affirming, oppressive arrangements of charity and social services. Mutual aid projects are a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government, but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable. A few critical concepts are inside this:

- “Charity” is a framework that often means rich people giving a little bit to poor people to make themselves look better in the eyes of God or other people. Usually there are lots of strings attached to what they give: e.g., giving only to mothers, only to children, only to sober people, only to people of faith and other “deserving poor” models. This means that charity is often a strategy for controlling poor people. Charity also frames people in need as morally lesser than rich people—as if poverty were the fault of the poor rather than the fault of systems of racism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, land theft and labor exploitation that make some people rich and keep other people poor. Charity looks like generosity from rich people, but actually upholds the systems that make most people poor for the benefit of the few.
- Charity is the frame used for most social services delivery. Most social services blame poor people for poverty, operating on the idea that there is something wrong with people in need—they need to get sober, they need to get “housing-ready,” they need to take parenting classes, they need to work harder. In reality, poverty is a result of capitalism, and people of color and women are the poorest people because of sexism and racism. Social service agencies typically employ middle and upper class people, often with race and educational privilege, and put them in the role of judging, punishing and controlling poor people. Sometimes they put “empowerment” in their name or mission statement, but the power dynamics are usually the old standards.
- In recent decades, charity and social services have been privatized and contracted out to what critics call the Non-Profit Industrial Complex. Non-profits compete for grants from corporations or philanthropists to address social problems or serve poor people. This means that rich people and corporations get to decide what strategies should be funded. They also get to protect their money from taxation if they give it out to non-profits. Non-profits are mostly run by rich white people with graduate degrees, they have steep pay scales in which upper class people and white people get paid more, and the people most effected by the issues they claim to address have no say in what they do or how they work.

**Mutual aid** projects depart from these norms of charity, social services and non-profitization in several key ways that often include:

- An understanding that it is the system, not the people suffering under it, that creates poverty, crisis, and vulnerability
- Governance/control by people who are most effected (can mean having a membership base of those most effected, or being formed in ways that ensure those providing the aid are from the same group as those giving the aid, or models that allow allies to participate but focus on accountability to those being served)
- Transparency about how they work, any money they use or manage (many mutual aid projects are not funded and are all volunteer run)
- Open meetings and pathways for new people to join and participate
- Political education within the organization to help those working in the project to expand their awareness of experiences that are not their own, to build solidarity, and to make the project supportive and welcoming to marginalized people
- Humility and willingness to accept feedback about how to make the project more useful to the people it serves
- Long-term commitment to provide the aid the project works on
- Connection to and solidarity with other mutual aid projects and other transformative work
- Commitment to dignity and self-determination of people in need or crisis
- Collaborative decision making and shared power rather than majority rule