



MUTUAL  
aID  
DISASTER  
reLief

# LESSONS LEARNED



**Mutual Aid Disaster Relief**

[mutualaiddisasterrelief.org](http://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org)

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Dandies of The Dandelion Network in co-conspiracy with and sown by Mutual Aid Disaster Relief

# CONCLUSION

We share these lessons, knowing that there are many like us: individuals, collectives, organizations, networks, and movements that lovingly, boldly do the work of revolution, striving to ground that work in an ethic of care and mutual aid. Disasters may soon become the new normal. There will be many times on the paths ahead of us when there aren't easy answers. But we want to share with you what we gleaned from our time doing this work, in hopes that you can build off of the successes and avoid the mistakes of previous iterations of this type of organizing.

We see you. We know your fierce love, your heartbreak, your passion, your insistence on a better world (or worlds) in which we can survive and blossom in a thousand directions together. These disasters can sometimes bring us to tears. But we know that we are not alone. Please know that you are not alone either.

In some ways, our home is where we're going, not where we're from. And we, and you, and so many others share transcendent visions for the future, glimpsed in each other's eyes or words, or discovered in recognizing, respecting, listening, and caring for the "other."

**We believe in you. We love you.  
We won't give up.**

**You don't either, friends. You got this.**

# romanticization of elders

Romanticizing elders is different than respecting elders and is a pitfall that we've seen do two harmful things. Putting elders on a pedestal separates them and makes their activities for justice seem unreachable and not replicable. And it sets us up for disappointment. We can't put anybody on a pedestal. Movement elders, just like everybody else, have inconsistencies, failures and shortcomings. We are all human. Realizing that people who have done great things in the past were still completely human also encourages us to see that we are all capable of big achievements despite of or even because of our frailties and shortcomings.

# the nonprofit industrial complex

The nonprofit industrial complex refers to how our movements can be undermined by funders who don't want revolutionary change. If people are not careful, funders may try to dictate the programs created rather than creating programs based on the self-determined needs of people impacted. Since we often need funding for our relief work, we should educate ourselves in advance of how the system works often through the hands of people with good intentions in foundations and nonprofits to preserve the status quo and absorb our energy as it doles out its "support". We must remain vigilant in creating programs based on the self-determined needs of the people we serve, and not succumb to the preferences of financial backers.

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence has a great book out about this subject called *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (<https://incite-national.org/beyond-the-non-profit-industrial-complex/>).

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### conclusion

# INTRODUCTION

This zine is a compilation of some of the major lessons Mutual Aid Disaster Relief has learned through the network of organizers and activists engaging in disaster response work. As this network grows and our relief experience increases, we plan to add what we are collectively learning to this resource.

We know that we must be evermore strategic in our response as the number of crises on our horizon multiply. While learning, at a tactical level, how to respond with limited resources to disaster, we are also tasking ourselves with growing in our capacity to respond more justly and equitably so that we can create a new and better world out of this crumbling system's ruins. It's a tall order, and each community cannot afford to learn these same lessons the hard way, so we invite you to consider what we've gathered here and reach out to us to add to this resource.

We'd like to note that some of the problematic approaches to response work that we call attention to in this zine are rooted in systems of oppression that should be addressed not only in disaster situations, but in all of our work. We suggest that these issues should not only be called out when there is a clear perpetrator of them in our circles, but also intentionally worked on inside each of us individually. Patriarchy, racism, and complexes like white saviorism can find fertile ground in crisis, and part of this work is a commitment to transforming ourselves as we work to support others. Every one of us, and significantly those of us with closer proximity to the imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy and its ingrained assumptions, should be continually seeking to learn about how our unconscious motives and assumptions about the world affect those around us. This is particularly important when we are engaging with people at their most vulnerable.

protect us and keep others from joining our work. Relief work brings a lot of unfamiliar faces together. More than anything we want the people most affected to feel welcomed in participating and owning the relief work. But again, there is a need to be smart. Recognize red flags. Misogynists make great informants (<https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Why-Misogynists-Make-Great-Informants.pdf>). And we don't need to wait until they've done great harm to show them the door.

## colonialism/gentrification

New Orleans is a good example of a city that is whiter now than it was prior to Katrina, and relief workers, even if they were anti-racist, anti-privatization, anti-disaster capitalism, and anti-colonial, played a role in making this a reality. Some people were really thankful for the thousands of non-local people gutting houses, distributing supplies, doing medic work, and operating other programs. However, others saw them as an occupying colonial force.

Moving forward from this lesson, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief prefers to amplify and support local, spontaneous manifestations of mutual aid rooted in the impacted community, providing them the resources they need, rather than encouraging volunteers to parachute into the situation. When there are calls for mobilizations of volunteers, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief proceeds cautiously and works to educate new volunteers about privileges and oppressions and their place in social hierarchies.

We strive to build slowly, at the speed of trust, focused on relationships, respect, and solidarity while continuing to assess the ways in which outside volunteers are affecting a community and how a community's desires manifest and change over the course of the relief work.

Additionally, people carrying privilege, especially white privilege, should work at the individual level to uproot this tendency. It doesn't always manifest as a central character trait or a conscious attitude one holds, but is more often a subconscious social orientation that one has to intentionally work to decompose and form new habits around.

No one is here to be saved, we don't need "missionary allies" or pity. Furthermore, guilt should never be a motivating factor. There are no saviors here. We all have to put in, we all have to do our part. And we can work together across divisions as equals rooted in our shared vision creating authentic friendships as we struggle together. To dive into this subject more, read Jordan Flaherty's book No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality (<http://jordanflaherty.org/saviors/>).

## **state surveillance & informants**

The state is still surveilling us, just as they did the Black Panthers, American Indian Movement, and others in the 60's and 70's.

Brandon Darby, an agent provocateur and informant who rose to prominence in Common Ground Relief during Katrina relief work, is a good example of what we need to avoid. Brandon was charismatic with an air of self-importance. He was either leading a meeting or skipping it, never just participating, didn't have patience for horizontal organizing, called himself the "modern John Brown," and often bragged about his level of militancy. He abused his leadership position by taking advantage of young women. And he sowed dissension, creating discord throughout the organization. Later, after an Austin-based Gaza Flotilla activist's mysterious death, and Brandon's encouragement and entrapment of two young activists at the 2008 Republican National Convention protests, Brandon was outed as an FBI informant.

While we should be wary of undercover agents, we also need to avoid operating out of a place of paranoia. We don't want to create unnecessary security protocols that actually do little to

**ON  
BUILDING  
POWER  
DURING  
CRISIS**

# **speed of trust/ speed of dreams**

We move at the speed of trust and at the speed of dreams. Moving at the speed of trust reminds us to invest in each other, to be mindful, and take the time to develop bonds that are stronger than the hurricane winds. Keep etched deep into your memory those who are there with you in the mystical moments bridging dawns, when you become aware of a sense of possibility and sacredness.

See who is there with you. Make it a priority to develop deep, lasting ties. Finding each other is a revolutionary act, and it is the basis from which all other revolutionary acts flow organically.

In a microcosm, we can strive to create a beloved community, wherein we care for each other, respect each other, believe in each other, show kindness to each other, comfort each other, communicate to each other, and are there for each other.

At the same time, we dream. Dreams are the X factor. Once we escape the colonial prison of our minds, and begin to imagine freely, dream big, and put our head, heart, hands, and feet to work in service of those dreams and imaginings, they grow exponentially. Everything begins as an idea, just a little idea. And through the speed of dreams, through a form of magic if you will, empires fall, slavery is abolished, and movements take form and flight. The biggest threat to Power isn't us seizing power through violence or some other means. The real threat to Power is us breaking their monopoly on creating — breaking

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as an American Parable of Race and Gender Violence (<https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Looking-for-Common-Ground.pdf>) and Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years After Katrina (<https://mutualaiddisasterreliefsite.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/luft-disasterpatriarchy-2016.pdf>).

## **savior mentality**

Savior mentality is the assumption that wealth, whiteness, or other forms of social power give a person moral authority and the ability to “save” oppressed peoples. This kind of relationship generally creates a harmful power dynamic, with the volunteer consciously or subconsciously being made to feel superior, and the survivor made to feel inferior. “Saviors” have a tendency to create dependency on themselves and their support. Similarly, someone who identifies as an “ally” may hold romantic notions of oppressed communities they wish to “help,” seeing survivors as victims and tokens rather than people, again leading to an unequal power dynamic.

Bred in our schools by the “Great Man” theory of history, the savior mentality also encourages the emergence of charismatic “hero” leaders, who can seize power and be difficult to critique. We need to refocus away from individual people, regardless of their charisma, and recognize the contributions of the thousands who make up our movements.

ACCOMPLICES  
NOT ALLIES



GRAPHIC BY INDIGENOUS ACTION MEDIA

are working in. What are the measures we need in any particular setting to prevent this from happening?

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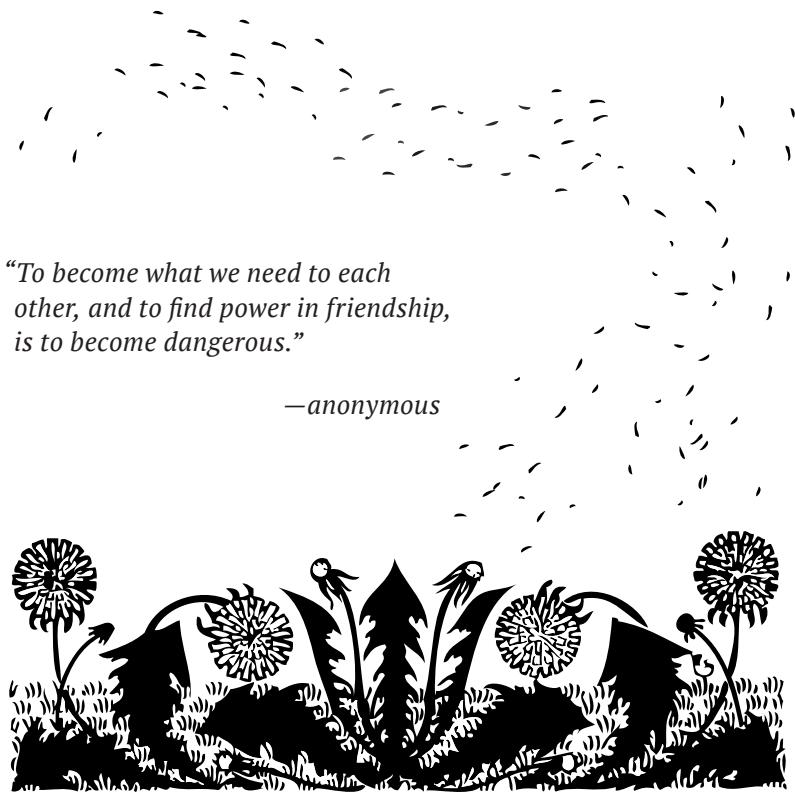
## This is about holding power in check. We should have open channels for seeking and acting on people's input along the way.

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While striving to meet people's needs with focus and determination, we can also foster an organizational culture of internal support, where it's important to take breaks, talk to each other, be real about how we're doing, laugh, and be creative. We replace urgency with a prefigurative commitment to people's wellbeing along the way. We also understand that these steps alone will not preempt disaster patriarchy, for disaster patriarchy is about power.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief has included some measures to push back against disaster patriarchy. "We Use Consent Here" posters are displayed throughout all of our organizing spaces. We have a survivor-centric zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual violence. We educate new volunteers about consent, sexual violence, and sexual harassment, and we have designated advocates on standby to support and advocate for survivors. We demand active, mutual consent. And we encourage other mutual aid collectives and networks to do likewise. The notion of consent extends beyond sexual encounters, and needs to be present in all our interactions with disaster survivors as well. Other great ideas include creating more spaces where dominant groups have accountability such as caucuses or transformative justice resources. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is not a perfect example of intersectional gender liberation, but we are committed to walking that path, and encourage you to make a conscious effort to push back against disaster patriarchy as well. To explore disaster patriarchy more, consider reading *Looking for Common Ground: Relief Work in Post-Katrina New Orleans*

their monopoly on bending reality to will. One of our secret missions is to dispel the illusion of powerlessness people feel. To give people glimpses that Power is fragile. Give people experiences of altering reality. To show people the only thing that keeps those in power in that position is the illusion of our powerlessness. A moment of freedom and connection can undo a lifetime of social conditioning and scatter seeds in a thousand directions. We can break the spell of powerlessness placed upon us, and flower and blossom in the thousands upon thousands of forms our movements take.



*"To become what we need to each other, and to find power in friendship, is to become dangerous."*

—anonymous



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHNNY AUTOMATIC

## **power of the people**

Audacity is our capacity. We can imagine new ways of interacting with the world and it is so beautiful to see the results of believing in and acting with our power.

When a crew of Mutual Aid Disaster relief organizers traveled to Puerto Rico, they heard about a government warehouse that was neglecting to distribute huge stockpiles of supplies. They showed their Mutual Aid Disaster Relief badges to the guards and said, "We are here for the 8am pickup." When guards replied that their names were not on the list, they just insisted again, "We are here for the 8am pickup." They were eventually allowed in and told to take what they needed. After being let in once, aid workers were able to return repeatedly. More badges were made for local community organizers, and this source continued to benefit local communities for months.

We have also seen insistence and confidence open many doors in post-Katrina New Orleans, post-Sandy NYC, and in other disasters. Sometimes we joke that it is like a Jedi mind trick — We ARE the droids you've been looking for!

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## **This style of organizing builds power from below. It also unites different elements of our movements.**

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For example, Common Ground Relief (itself composed of many different sorts of people) partnered global justice activists with community leaders and teachers to force the reopening of Martin Luther King Jr Elementary School in the Lower 9th Ward, which was one of the best-performing in the city, yet was to be abandoned

## **disaster patriarchy**

Disaster patriarchy, in the words of activist-scholar Rachel E. Luft, is the “political, institutional, organizational, and cultural practices that converge before, during, and after disaster to produce intersectional gender injustice.”

A sense of crisis and urgency that leads us to violate our principles and make hasty decisions is part of disaster patriarchy. We try to stick with our principles, which is not the same as being inflexible or falling into the trap of ideological purity. Valuing excessive and unrelenting physical labor above all else, militant posturing, and the minimization of emotion are all red flags in disaster environments that are clear signs of toxic and unsustainable cultures. They also center a certain kind of masculinity that precludes the wisdom others bring. It's not just sexist, it weakens the work.

These harmful ways of engaging with crisis highlight how important it is to balance autonomy with feminist, anti-racist practice. “Natural born leaders” aren’t usually born that way, they’re often invited, encouraged, and entitled at every turn. What works for them, then, gets normalized in decision-making processes. We strive to be mindful of how the mechanisms and rituals we’re building on the ground thrust some people to the front and hold others back. If people tell us this is happening, it’s smart to listen to them.

The demands of the work are never an excuse for harassment or violence, or for perpetrators to escape accountability. We know that we need explicit measures to ensure that people, especially women, transpeople, people with disabilities, poor people, people of color, and immigrants are not experiencing the unintended consequences of what we do, because we understand that without intentional interventions, this is the likely default. This applies both to other mutual aid responders and to the communities we

Collaborate, share power, but also ground your work in the communities you are serving. The Black Panthers were not a beacon for collaborative decision-making. They were a traditionally structured revolutionary organization. But in their survival programs, they did share power with affected communities. The community itself shaped what was done based on its own needs (e.g. free breakfast for the kids, security, sickle cell testing, pest control, an ambulance program, etc.). The Zapatistas similarly speak of mandar obedeciendo, leading by obeying. Conflict over process is normal and to be expected, but don't let it lead to paralysis. Our questions, as the Zapatistas taught us,

are for walking. You don't have to have it all figured out before you act. Take small steps and as you each interact with survivors and address their needs in holistic, respectful ways, you may find that some answers materialize.

Instead of getting paralyzed by lack of experience, some folks found it helpful to start efforts off by taking on small projects expecting to learn from them and adapt their approach the next time around. Say, for example, you've raised \$50,000 and don't know how to best spend it. You'd likely learn more and do more good spending \$5,000 ten times instead of figuring out the perfect way to spend the whole \$50K. This approach requires processes for evaluating work and adjusting accordingly. It requires more deliberation, but reduces the stakes of each disagreement, and allows for testing new ideas and strategies. Ultimately, it creates room for multiple perspectives rather than concentrations of power, and it reduces the desire to sit around and theorize by placing the onus of taking action on the people proposing an idea.

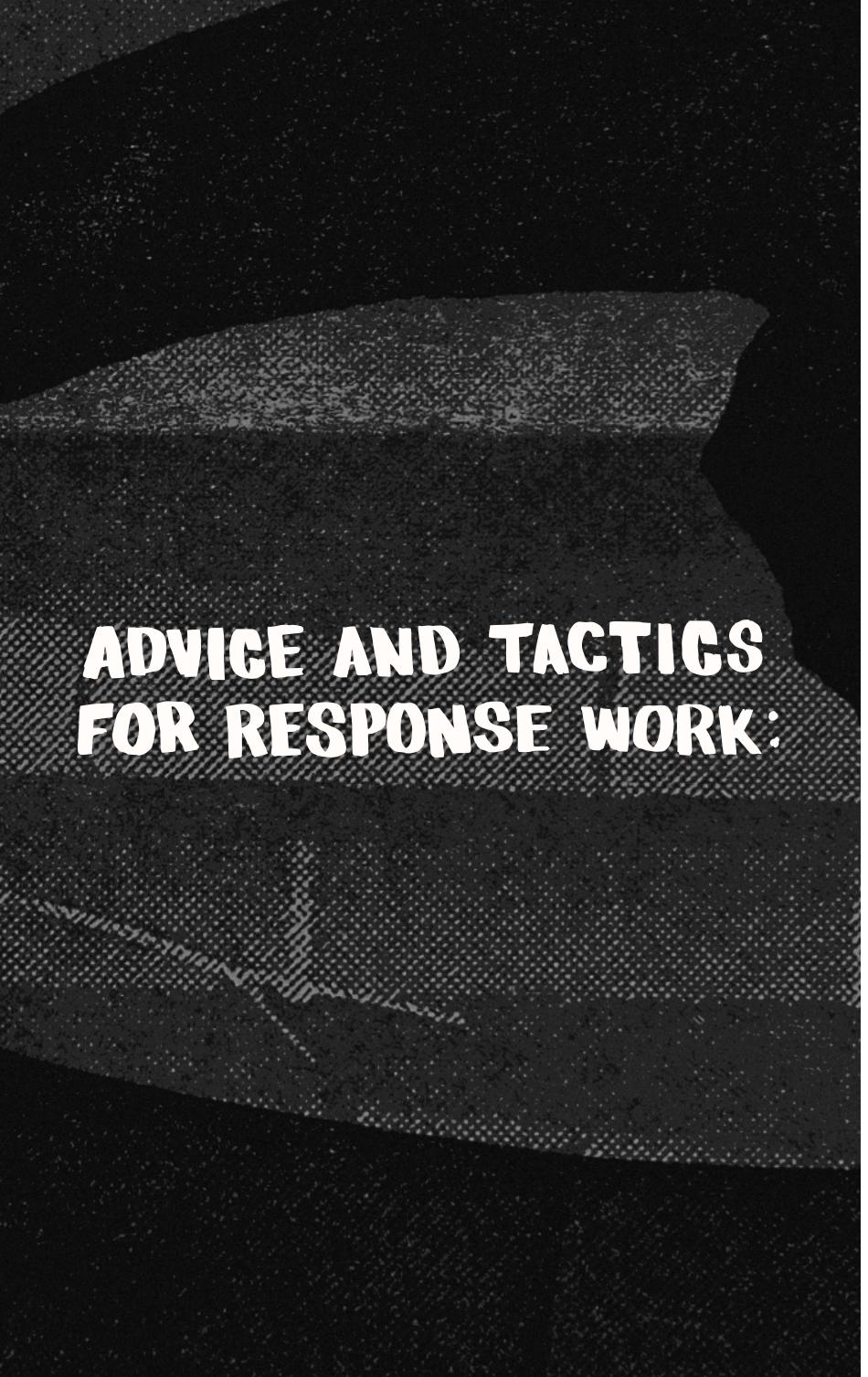
## COLLABORATE AND SHARE POWER BUT ALSO GROUND YOUR WORK IN THE COMMUNITIES YOU'RE SERVING.



ILLUSTRATION BY PETE RAILAND

and closed after Hurricane Katrina. The city had sold off the entire school system to a private charter school takeover immediately after the storm. The rescue of this vital community resource was accomplished with volunteers conducting a massive and very public direct action cleaning of the school, while parents and teachers led a sustained campaign of shaming the city and starting their own charter school. The school now teaches K-12 and also serves as a community center. It is the only school open in the Lower 9th Ward. Similar school and government building rescues happened throughout Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, and many are still, years later, operating as mutual aid centers or centros de apoyo mutuo (<https://redapoyomutuo.com/>).

In the aftermath of disaster, crisis can create new openings for us to work in alternative formations toward audacious goals. Look for the openings. And share the stories of success to inspire others.



## ADVICE AND TACTICS FOR RESPONSE WORK:

What if there's disagreement on what the priorities should be? How do we make decisions collectively?"

Within autonomous, non-hierarchical movements, there is an emphasis on shared decision-making power. This is one of our biggest strengths, but sometimes we can get stuck in process, and it feels like we're spinning our wheels.

Our movements are strongest when they are grounded in clear, direct, tangible tasks—block the entrance to Wall Street, feed people who are hungry, stand in front of a bulldozer, repair a flooded home. The action itself keeps us aimed at the long-term vision and keeps us from losing focus. One way to navigate questions over process is utilizing the principle of subsidiarity, which maintains that those closest to the problem or who have the most at stake in the solution, decide. Some decisions might be appropriate for a large group consensus, but for most decisions, devolving them to the localest scale possible can be an effective strategy to strike a healthy balance between collaboration, consent, and autonomy. Not everybody needs to or maybe even should be involved in every decision. We don't want to be the anarchistic version of a bureaucracy, but we do need to establish trust, create and respect boundaries, communicate, and act.

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## **interpersonal conflicts; don't let them destroy the movement**

You may have arrived at the thought, "Everything was so full of possibility and we were all psyched and connected, loving each other and doing amazing work, but now a month or two has passed and there's infighting, tension, and conflict."

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### **You're not alone. This is actually very common. Our bodies and minds aren't meant to go so hard, so long in a heightened state.**

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The stress and trauma adds up, takes its toll, and often comes out in unhealthy ways. People may take out the stress on each other. Let's face it, there's a lot at stake. Sometimes people's literal survival is on the line. But we can't let interpersonal conflicts destroy the movement. And, although it can be difficult in the moments of crisis to take the extra time, when we make healing justice and community care central to all aspects of the work, it can help alleviate some of this heightened stress that leads to conflict and make our work more sustainable. A note of encouragement or a hug and a lavender tincture can remind someone that they are loved and seen and that their needs matter too.

## **process paralysis**

You may have a lot of excitement about taking part in a mutual aid effort. Everything is falling in place. Where before there were roadblocks to survival programs, now there's open doors for them. The possibilities seem endless. And for once in our mostly poor lives, we are able to access resources to actualize some of our visions. Then somebody may say, "This is moving too fast. How do we all decide?"

## **scout and listen**

When a disaster hits a community, local community organizers rooted in that community will be responding. Usually the first step when we hear about a disaster is to reach out via email, phone, Facebook, any way we can to local chapters of Food Not Bombs, Earth First!, Rising Tide, Black Lives Matter, Democratic Socialists of America, Anarchist Black Cross, Industrial Workers of the World, etc. We ask what the situation is and how we can support. Sometimes this is just amplifying efforts already on the ground, and/or directing supplies and volunteers to these community-rooted first responders. Social media is often used to coordinate decentralized local relief efforts as well. After Harvey a page surfaced called "Hurricane Harvey 2017 — Together We Rebuild," others will be "#[Insert city name] Strong" - these are typically portals to spontaneous, locally connected rescue, relief, and recovery efforts.

Once on the ground, we advocate a simple but very powerful act: listen. For example, neighbors might let us know that the person in the apartment next door is in a motorized wheelchair and cannot charge it to leave their house. Or that the trailer park down the street is even more damaged and we should bring our truck full of supplies over there. Or that medical aid and food and water is great, but the biggest priority at the moment is not being evicted, so getting legal help is a priority. Or maybe a family has the physical things they need, but just wants to share their story. Listening is the foundation for a response that is effective and just.

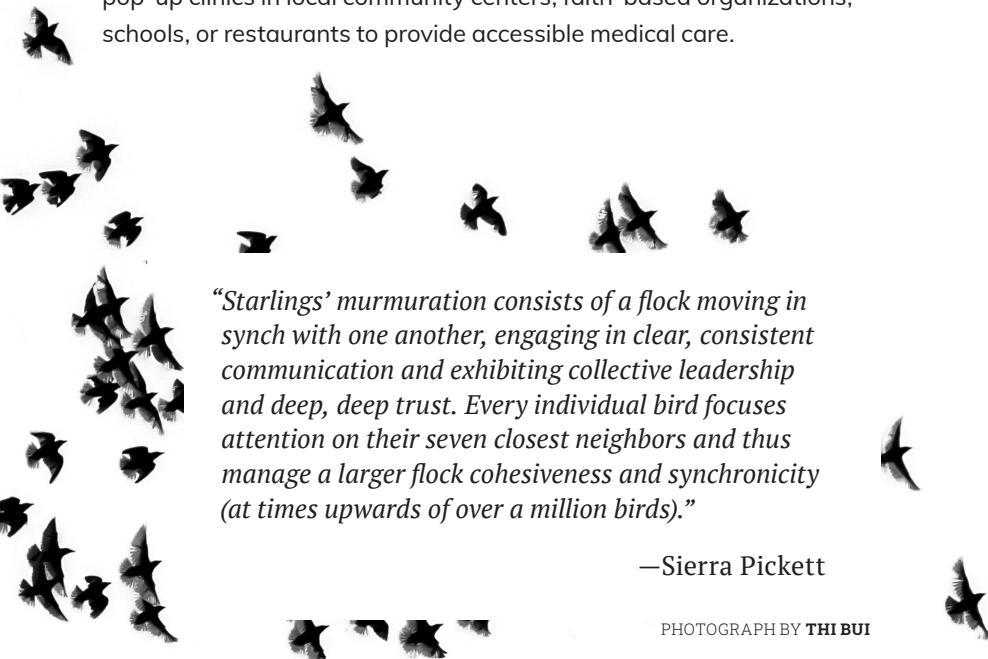
## **avoid proselytizing**

By all means, have real communications with folks about your intentions and your worldview and what motivates you to do mutual aid work. Write reports that communicate your efforts and put them into context. But also, whether it's religious tracts, Maoist newspapers, or anarchist propaganda, proselytizing isn't usually the best tactic. Focus on meeting needs instead of spreading ideology.

You show people what you believe by what you do. A pastor after Hurricane Irma said in a sermon to his congregation, “A week ago these people were known as Black Lives Matter, Antifa, terrorists. Have you ever seen a terrorist give Pedialyte to a child?” The power of action, itself, builds bridges, and communicates what is needed, without the risk of alienating people that proselytizing can bring.

## adaptability and flexibility

Be ready to adapt to changing circumstances. One of our greatest strengths is our capacity to be different in different circumstances, to remain flexible in order to be truly responsive to the self-determined needs of survivors. Expect minimal access to resources and exhaustion experienced among the people impacted. Be prepared to tend to hurricane survivors of all ages, genders, races, political persuasions, and other differences. Provide innovative options for delivery of care (e.g. home visits). Form teams encompassing a wide variety of skills and capabilities to be able to meet whatever emergent needs arise. Be creative and adaptable. For example, you can set up pop-up clinics in local community centers, faith-based organizations, schools, or restaurants to provide accessible medical care.



*“Starlings’ murmuration consists of a flock moving in sync with one another, engaging in clear, consistent communication and exhibiting collective leadership and deep, deep trust. Every individual bird focuses attention on their seven closest neighbors and thus manage a larger flock cohesiveness and synchronicity (at times upwards of over a million birds).”*

—Sierra Pickett

PHOTOGRAPH BY THI BUI

BEWARE  
OF

both the immediate need and the underlying social, economic, environmental, racial, gender, and other inequalities which lead to people's vulnerability and marginalization. Immediate rescue, relief, and recovery is not enough.

Now that we have people together working communally for the common good, let's prevent future suffering and loss by taking on the extractive economy that is making these disasters more frequent and more severe.

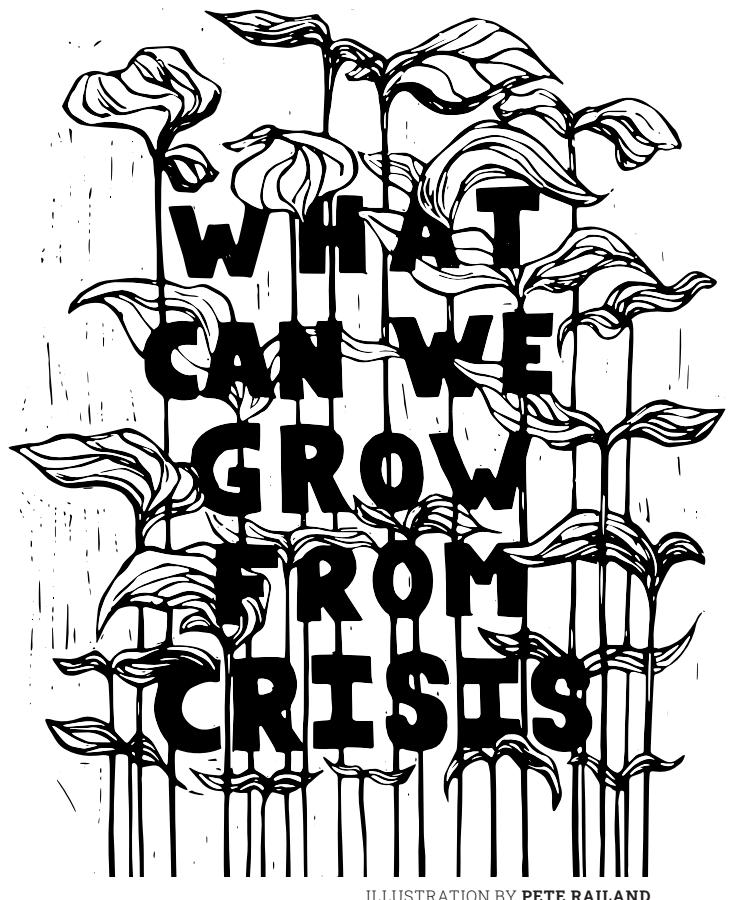


ILLUSTRATION BY PETE RAILAND

## **partner and repair damaged buildings, be good guests and respect hosts**

You don't have to find a perfect place, untouched by the disaster, to put together a relief hub or volunteer headquarters. Find the right people, who are down for the people, and want to address their self-determined needs too, regardless of how damaged their church or community center is, and offer to fix it up in exchange for using it as a hub for a while. It can be presented as a transactional thing to initiate the conversation, but in reality it can benefit everyone as long as it's done with respect for, and alongside, the community.

**REPAIRING A NEEDED,  
BELOVED COMMUNITY SPACE  
IS AN END IN ITSELF, AS  
IS FOSTERING A SPACE FOR  
COMMUNAL RECOVERY EFFORTS.**

Oftentimes when we do get spaces to operate out of post-disaster, it is in partnership with small churches, community organizations, or individuals' houses. Try to go above and beyond in respect to being good guests. The host often pays the rent/mortgage, utilities, and other expenses. If you are able to help offset these costs, it could strengthen and lengthen the partnership. If you are on a tight budget, you can still set up a donation jar or online fund for people to donate to the space. Clean and tidy up. If something breaks, get it repaired. If a host (or anyone) is uncomfortable with something, respect their boundaries. Anticipate what their needs may be, and offer to assist, whether it's clearing debris, coordinating parking, or anything else.

## **engage with experts or authorities when appropriate**

We value DIY culture, but safety and quality of the work is important as well. We can strike the right balance. We can and ought to consult and work with people with expertise when necessary and when it improves the quality of our work. During disasters, formal institutions often mobilize to provide resources and assistance. We can work creatively to maintain our autonomy and accountability to the communities we serve while still leveraging what we can to redirect the resources of formal institutions to support the self-determination and survival of those whom it purports to serve.

We can work as advocates, holding the experts and authorities with resources accountable to their stated missions and goals that they often fail to meet.

## **amplify and support; don't supplant and replace**

Find, amplify, and support folks who are spontaneously engaging in mutual aid. It's inevitable that people are going to spontaneously



ILLUSTRATION BY THI BUI

come together to meet their own and their community's needs during a crisis. A displaced single mom may be caring for other displaced single moms, or a grandmother's house may already act as a hub for the community. Don't supplant or replace efforts like these, but lift them up and provide them with backup and support if possible.

## **navigating different norms**

Many of us are queer, vegan, into radical politics and may spend much of our time among people who are similarly positioned. Doing solidarity work often requires stepping outside of our usual activist milieus and this can be challenging. At the same time we want to hold ourselves to the highest standards possible and be uncompromisingly ourselves, it may be unrealistic sometimes to expect people in rural towns in Puerto Rico to get our pronouns right or to expect folks from the projects to be excited over lentils and tofu. Doing this work presents opportunities to educate each other, be real with each other, and build bridges between diverse communities, but doing so may sometimes stretch us beyond our comfort zones. Balancing a commitment to all forms of liberation, and showing solidarity with impacted individuals and communities who may be rooted in opposing or just different cultural norms is something that each one of us has to learn to navigate in ways that feel true to us. We should also strive to be accessible by avoiding an unnecessary amount of security culture measures or radical subculture posturing. This is an opportunity to be an entrypoint into social justice and activism for people with all varieties of perspectives.

## **address root causes**

Naomi Klein talks about these moments of crisis having the potential to be civilizational wake up calls. There is a real opportunity to turn the energy and desire for action into root cause economic, social, and climate policy transformation. In our relief and recovery work, let's work in a way that addresses