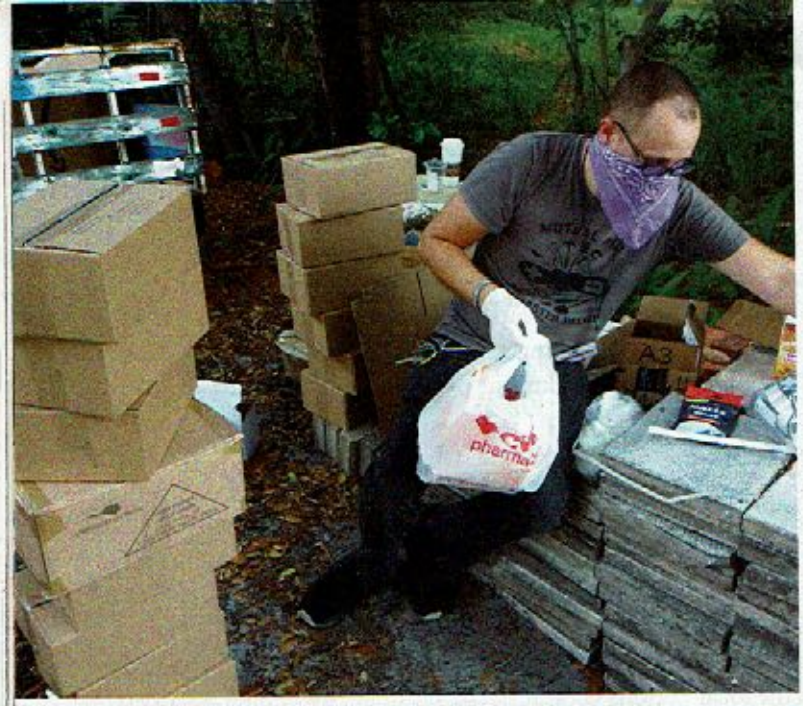

Top: Jimmy Dunson, from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, puts together care packages. Middle: Dunson assists with Hurricane Dorian relief efforts in 2019. Bottom: Dunson prepares to deliver masks.
Photos: Mutual Aid Disaster Relief.

Friends in Need

Mutual aid societies offer a model of cooperation for helping the vulnerable.

BY REBECCA NATHANSON

It was mid-March when Julia Ho realized that COVID-19 would hit St. Louis a little later than some of the larger coastal cities. That meant she and others in Missouri's second-largest city had more time to take pertinent action. So in that early phase of the pandemic, before most shops and offices were shuttered and face masks donned. Ho called up a handful of local organizers.

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The result was a new initiative called STL Mutual Aid.

"All of us really just kind of came together," says Ho in an interview with *The Progressive*. "Not with the intent of creating an organization, but just to build on the relationships that we already have, and to provide an outlet for individuals to feel like they have some power in reacting and providing care for other people in our community."

The new group included members of Solidarity Economy St. Louis, a network of groups and individuals that Ho, a community organizer, founded in 2014 to push for an economy based on social justice, sustainability, cooperation, and self-determination. That summer, she participated in the Ferguson Uprising in nearby Ferguson, Missouri, helping to organize a bail fund for protesters arrested in the wake of the police shooting of Michael Brown.

Dean Spade, an associate professor at Seattle University School of Law who helped create the mutual aid resource BigDoorBrigade.com, defines mutual aid as people cooperating to "support each other with survival needs based in a shared understanding that the systems in place are not going to meet our needs and we can do it together right now."

The current systems that offer emergency relief, Spade says, leave out people who are poor, have disabilities or criminal records, or who are undocumented.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid networks in hundreds of U.S. cities have formed to help people who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Sometimes this might involve connecting them with a neighbor who can help get groceries and other essentials. Or providing resources about tenants' rights and domestic violence hotlines. Or helping them find an emergency fund giving out cash grants.

In March, a group of volunteers created COVID-19 Mutual Aid USA to connect people in need to their nearest mutual aid project. By May, the group listed more than 700 groups on its interactive map, up from 400 in March. Mutual aid projects now spread from Fairbanks and Anchorage, Alaska; to Corpus Christi, Texas; Bozeman, Montana; and the northern towns of Maine.

While heavily concentrated in major cities and still absent in a few Midwestern states, mutual aid groups have quickly become a fixture in nearly every corner of the country, most offering some combination of food delivery, financial assistance, prescription pick-up, transportation, and assistance navigating social services.

Whether during a pandemic or after a hurricane or in any other crisis, mutual aid networks can be a critical tool for delivering assistance to marginalized people.

In 1787, two black ministers in Philadelphia, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, were frustrated at segregation in the white-dominated Methodist Church. So they formed the Free African Society, an organization founded to provide free black people of all religions with the kind of health and life insurance services not available elsewhere.

The group's preamble declares that "a society should be formed, without regard to religious tenets, provided, the persons lived an orderly and sober life, in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children."

More than a century later, in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois referred to the founding of the society as "the first wavering step of a people toward organized social life."

In the years after Allen and Jones formed the Free African Society, similar mutual aid societies followed: Boston's Free African Society, also in 1787; Charleston's Free Dark Men of Color, in 1791; the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, in 1808; Chillicothe, Ohio's African Benevolent Society, in 1827; and the Baltimore Society for Relief in Case of Seizure, in 1830. William Hamilton, president and co-founder of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, ended an address in 1809 with a call to unite for "mutual interest, mutual benefit, and mutual relief."

On the other side of the country, Mexican Americans struck upon that same formula for mutual aid after suddenly finding themselves minorities in a new country when Mexico ceded land to the United States after the Mexican-American War ended in 1848.

"[Mutual aid groups] are being formed by people who have to rely on each other because they not only don't have help from the dominant society, but they're being oppressed," says Julie Leininger Pycior, professor emeritus of history at Manhattan College and author of *Democratic Renewal and the Mutual Aid Legacy of US Mexicans*.

In the *mutualista* movement of the late 1800s, aid was sometimes referred to as mutual protection. "It's power to protect what you value, to pool information," Pycior explains. "Today, it would be pooling information vis-à-vis ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], for example. And that was true in these early ones."

The largest of these early endeavors in the Southwest was a group called Alianza Hispano-Americana. Formed in Tucson, Arizona, in 1894, it persisted into the twentieth century with chapters eventually spanning from California to New York, providing life in-

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surance and burial assistance, and becoming the first national Latinx organization in the United States.

By the time Alianza Hispano-Americana began to fade in the 1960s, the revolutionary movements of that decade had adopted mutual aid for themselves.

The idea for a free mutual aid breakfast program for schoolchildren was born in 1968, at the Black Panther Party's headquarters in Oakland, California. It was one of more than sixty Survival Programs developed by the party to help build community self-determination, including free ambulance service, free busing to prisons to visit incarcerated loved ones, free dental care, and free sickle cell anemia testing. But the free breakfast program was the most effective and popular of these services, making it a target of the institutions that wanted to eradicate the party.

In May 1969, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sent a memo to all FBI offices: "The BCP (Breakfast for Children Program) promotes at least tacit support for the Black Panther Party among naive individuals and, what is more distressing, it provides the BPP [Black Panther Party] with a ready audience composed of highly impressionable youths. Consequently, the BCP represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for."

Soon after, in 1975, the federal government made permanent its school breakfast pilot program, effectively coopting the success of the Panthers' initiative.

Around the same time that the Panthers were feeding children in at least thirty-six cities around the country, a Puerto Rican liberation organization known as the Young Lords was also doing mutual aid health work. In July 1970, the group highlighted its health activism by occupying Lincoln Hospital, a decrepit hospital in the South Bronx, a majority black and Latinx area of New York City.

The Young Lords' demands included an end to cutbacks in services and door-to-door preventative care, emphasizing tests for lead poisoning, anemia, tuberculosis, and drug addiction. The hospital administrator said the activists were only "trying to dramatize a situation which is critical." In November of that year, the group again occupied part of Lincoln Hospital, instituting a drug-abuse treatment program when promised funding for one failed to appear.

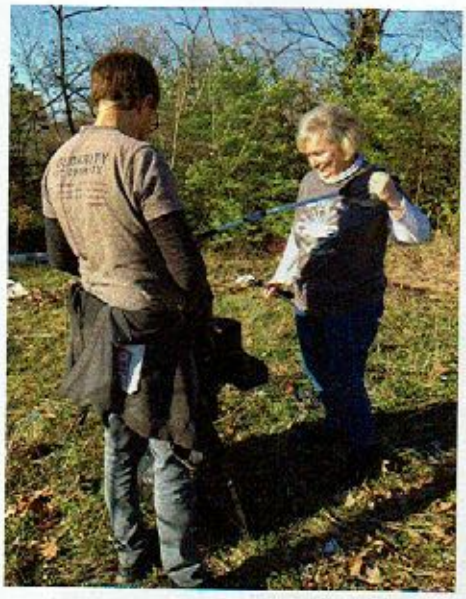
In California, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta's United Farm Workers union acted as a mutual aid society for its Mexican base, inspired by the earlier *mutualista* movement. And as the 1970s progressed, LGBT health clinics formed to meet that community's needs outside of the mainstream health care system.

That long lineage of mutual aid now flows through organizing efforts like hometown associations, scattered across the country and comprising immigrants coming from the same hometown in Mexico, and initiatives like the Oakland Power Projects, which works toward abolishing policing and building self-determined communities in northern California.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Jimmy Dunson was living in Tampa, Florida, serving vegan and vegetarian meals to people experiencing homelessness through his local chapter of Food Not Bombs, a volunteer-run global mutual aid organization. Food Not Bombs took food that would otherwise be discarded and turned it into free meals for the hungry.

Dunson saw a call for mutual aid from Malik

A virtual STL Mutual Aid meeting.



Left to right: Volunteers in Nashville, Tennessee, clean up debris after the 2020 tornadoes. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief puts solar panels on the rooftop of a mutual aid center in Puerto Rico. Volunteers in Lebanon, Tennessee, cook culturally appropriate food for tornado survivors. *Photos: Mutual Aid Disaster Relief*

Rahim, a former Black Panther living in New Orleans, and headed to Louisiana. He arrived, he says, with little prior knowledge or experience of disasters—"just the willingness to listen and ask and respond to whatever the self-determined needs of folks were." He stayed for nine months.

During that time, Dunson saw that the hurricane presented not just chaos and disorder but also the opportunity to reimagine how society could be organized. It's a phenomenon that has long followed crises, from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, when residents came together to create makeshift kitchens as the city burned, to recent hurricanes—Katrina, Sandy, Maria—when people neglected or wronged by official institutions united to handle things for themselves.

But if mutual aid is one side of the coin, "disaster capitalism" is the other. Crises create panic and distraction, as likely to usher in neoliberalism as they are radical change. The former took place when New York City nearly went bankrupt in the 1970s, weakening public institutions that have never recovered; the latter, when workers reclaimed factories in Argentina after the country's 2001 economic collapse, turning them into cooperatives that remain open almost two decades later.

About four years ago, Dunson and others who had been organizing mutual aid during recent disasters created Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, a national disaster relief network to respond to crises and build off the successes—and avoid the mistakes—of previous efforts.

The challenge for mutual aid projects that form in the depths of a crisis can often come later, when momentum dwindles, opportunities diminish, and a sense of normalcy returns. But Mutual Aid Disaster Relief has managed to maintain a sense of continuity between crises, particularly as these increase in frequency.

But despite the benefits of experience and history, the current pandemic provides unique obstacles to those organizing mutual aid projects. Unlike a natural disaster hitting one section of the country, the spread of COVID-19 impacts every person and every place, albeit to different degrees.

As of April, when New York City was at the epicenter of the outbreak, *The New York Times* noted that COVID-19 deaths for African Americans and Latinx residents were higher than their share of the population. In Chicago, the numbers were more grim: black residents, who comprise one-third of the city's population, accounted for more than 70 percent of coronavirus-related deaths.

One unique challenge is that the pandemic renders physical gatherings impossible, pushing all organizing online. Still, in the early days of the crisis, a multitude of mutual aid initiatives appeared.

Many resembled STL Mutual Aid, which became a resource to help people pool information and connect with others in their neighborhood, a place where they could figure out who couldn't safely go outside or afford basic necessities. In about a month, individuals redistributed more than $27,000 through connecting with one another on a Google spreadsheet set up by STL Mutual Aid. The group raised an additional $80,000 through its mutual aid fund.

Organizers initially referred to the project as St. Louis COVID Aid but soon changed the name, aiming to better reflect the idea of mutual aid as something that communities can do all the time, not just during crises. As Spade puts it, "We're always doing mutual aid projects up against really painful, difficult conditions. That's why these projects exist." •