

Mutual Aid and a Vision

A story of the Future Economy Collective’s mutual aid initiative in the New River Valley. This short vignette is part of our “Virginia Food Systems and COVID-19 Story Collection Project” that aims to highlight, collect, and share stories of hope and resilience in our food system amidst the pandemic. Find out more about this project and view our entire series on [our website](#).

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By Hunter Hilbert

The Future Economy Collective of Blacksburg set out to provide for “those facing material hardship” during the Coronavirus pandemic (Dhillon, 2020). The Collective’s vision is centered on mutual aid and community building and is based on the idea that we are all better and stronger together. Materials were provided to those in need at no cost, and donations poured in. Available items ranged from food and toilet paper to masks, baby formula, and Narcan. The collective has also created a small, honor system-based seed bank—allowing for patrons to grow some of their own food at home. However, the current mutual aid box campaign is not



Gretchen Dee poses with the Collective’s seed bank. Photo courtesy of The Roanoke Times.

the Future Economy Collective’s long-term goal; rather, the group aims to establish a volunteer-run café. The café’s revenues will fund grassroots organization efforts—like the petition to stop the Mountain Valley Pipeline, as pointed out by Lauren Malhotra who is a Collective cofounder and board member. Lauren describes the Future Economy Collective as “a grassroots project to build a flexible-use community space in the NRV” and funding from the café will also help contribute to the viability of the community space (L. Malhotra, personal communication, July 30, 2020). The future community space is where the mutual aid box campaign was headquartered, and down the road, it will be a place to share resources, skills, and education (Dhillon, 2020; Malhotra, 2020). The physical space for the Collective was dubbed Southpaw, located in Downtown Blacksburg. The name “Southpaw” is a direct reference to an athlete who is lefthanded, particularly a baseball pitcher. The organization has existed for just over three years.

Due to the pandemic, the plans for the café were delayed and the business plan was modified. The pandemic “definitely altered the way that our community space and volunteer-run space is able to look” (Malhotra, 2020). Because the establishment of the café’s was paused due to the pandemic, taking care of the emergency needs amongst community members took precedence. The founders hope that the café can open soon—either by the end of August or the beginning of September (Malhotra, 2020).

To distribute mutual aid boxes, the Collective utilizes an online information gathering platform called JotForm patrons can easily provide their household’s information along with their current needs. On the JotForm, there were “no hoops to jump through,” as proof of residency was not a requirement, contrasting from the verification process required for some forms of governmental assistance (Malhotra, 2020). A box was filled and ready within about a week of the form’s completion. Boxes could either be picked up at curbside or delivered by a volunteer. Malhotra says that the most common distribution method was via no contact deliveries.



Lauren Malhotra loads cheese into a mutual aid box for distribution. Photo courtesy of The Roanoke Times.

The founders of this initiative are friends who met while protesting the Mountain Valley Pipeline. The founders say, “the driving idea is that we are stronger when we’re in a community together rather than on our own” (Dhillon, 2020). For the mutual aid box initiative, the main goal was for it to be totally donation-based and volunteer-run. Malhotra mentioned that many local farmers and individual gardeners donated fresh items to add to boxes in addition to the typical pantry staples.

They hope that the community members that have utilized the resources of Southpaw will be the same community members to keep the initiative rolling for others yet to come; “the founders want the people who use it to feel like they own a part of it, proposing that if people contribute to something and take from it, they will also take responsibility for it (Dhillon, 2020). Malhotra emphasized the founders’ attitudes toward mutual aid, saying that the relationship between the Future Economy Collective and its patrons is a ‘partnership’ and based on a ‘nonhierarchical’ approach (Malhotra, 2020). Further, she added that their views are rooted in “solidarity, not charity” when it comes to providing for community members in need.

Though the founders acknowledge that the creation of a new entity like Southpaw is a ‘risky endeavor’ during a ‘terrifying time’, Malhotra and her cohorts see the positives. It has been an “eye-opening experience” and the local “community outpouring has been heartening” (Malhotra, 2020).

The Collective is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization under current United States tax code. This vignette was adapted from an original Roanoke Times article from April 19, 2020 and a personal interview with Lauren Malhotra from the Future Economy Collective on July 30, 2020. To learn more about the Future Economy Collective, [visit their Facebook page](#). For more information on mutual aid and its roles in communities, especially during a pandemic, [click here](#).

References

Dhillon, M. (2020, April 19). *Southpaw: Thrown a curve, collective stands in*. Retrieved from: https://roanoke.com/news/nrv/southpaw-thrown-a-curve-collective-stands-in/article_23edbc3e-b332-5554-bc48-1a3ba4f1458d.html?fbclid=IwAR3GlyDMbf1crP7qOFtTmsfSIIS9V77EtxxEj0a603ecBEjAqj5J4ym3gvQ