



Mutual Aid for Food Systems Change in the Time of COVID-19

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Mutual aid is a way for individuals and groups in a community to support one another in times of crisis. Often mutual aid initiatives or projects emerge after “natural disasters” in the form of relief and disaster recovery services, but they also exist as a way of life for some communities and in response to “un-natural disasters” that many groups and communities face every day as a result of historical injustices, social inequities, and religious persecution. In this way, mutual aid can be understood as work rooted in individual agency and collective action to address both the immediate needs and structural conditions a community seeks to address, such as by providing affordable and safe housing, food security, appropriate health care, or accessible transportation. What is important is that the mobilization work draws attention to the needs of all, but especially those most vulnerable to the conditions the community seeks to change (Spade, 2020).

Coined by Russian philosopher and theorist, Peter Kropotkin, in 1902 from his observations of cooperation, negotiation, and mutual support that is common in the animal and plant kingdoms as well as in human societies, the term has come to represent a modern movement around “cooperation for the sake of the common good” and “generosity and kindness”:

“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” (Spade, 2020).

Mutual aid is based on reciprocity and embodies the mantra “solidarity not charity” that seeks to protect and provide for those most vulnerable (Kropotkin, 1902; Goodman, 2020); where blame for the situation is not placed on the individual, but rather the systems in place that “make some people rich and keep other people poor,” homeless, criminalized, and desperate for the benefit of the few (Spade, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is profoundly impacting all aspects of our food system. Now more than ever we need to pay attention to the cracks in the system, gaps in services, and respond

accordingly with acts of solidarity, kindness, and mutual aid—not competition. Farmers and farm workers across the country are experiencing the stress of continuing to operate essential food production while risking the safety of themselves and their families. Food system workers are being laid off, furloughed, or having their hours greatly reduced as many of our food businesses temporarily close to comply with social distancing and stay-at-home orders. Food service workers are also putting their own health at risk to ensure food is available for the public while demand continues. We must consider the needs of those most vulnerable to such disruptions in the system: communities of color, those without the economic means to stay at home without the fear of losing their job, the houseless, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and those with pre-existing or chronic health conditions.

Now is the time to push forward with community-based solutions and collective action that will help ensure that those most impacted by the pandemic are both leading with solutions and receiving the support they need. Now is the time for acts of solidarity and collective care. This requires us to build community relationships, networks, and trust to better problem solve and imagine what is possible. It is through mutual aid and genuine care that we can generate new ideas and solutions that will help us navigate this incredible challenge and also move forward a new set of possibilities for transforming our food system to be more fair, just, and resilient for generations to come.

The following resources are mutual aid projects, resources, and new articles that may be of interest to you and your community. If you would like to add to this list, please contact Katie Trozzo at ketrozzo@vt.edu

Mutual Aid Networks in Virginia Addressing COVID-19 Community Needs

Northern Virginia COVID-19 Supply Exchange

This Facebook group is for people located in Northern Virginia to join and post if they are in need of supplies or food--anything from diapers to soap to bread and milk. Designed to connect needs with supplies. ([Facebook link here](#))

Corona Aid 757

If you need help getting groceries for elderly or immune compromised individuals ask for help if you need us to make a grocery run for you! Located in Norfolk, Virginia area. Call at 757-598-1480. ([Website link here](#)) ([Facebook link here](#))

COVID-19 Emergency Relief in Richmond, Virginia

This is a mutual aid supply drive in the Richmond area that is also taking direct cash donations. ([Twitter link here](#))

Looking Out for Each Other in Montgomery County, Virginia

This is a Facebook group for Montgomery County residents who are organizing to help each other during this time of social distancing and isolation with locating essential supplies, supporting donation programs, and sharing up-to-date information about food/farm businesses and services. ([Facebook link here](#))

Southwest Virginia Tip Jar

This virtual “tip jar” is designed for anyone to send your local service workers in southwest Virginia much needed resources, as a tip, at a time when their hours are being cut and places of business are being closed. You can also add your information if you would like to be on the list as a food service worker. ([Website link here](#))

Roanoke Mutual Aid

A Mutual Aid group based in Roanoke, Virginia created as a response to COVID-19 has forms to fill out if you are in need of assistance or able to offer assistance. It allows community members to help and receive support from one another ([Facebook link here](#)) ([Website link here](#))

Roanoke Food Sources During COVID-19 Pandemic

A google document food source directory that lists details for food pantries, free meals, and farmers markets in the Roanoke Valley during COVID-19.

([Google doc link here](#))

Mutual Aid SAW

A place for people in the Staunton, Augusta and Waynesboro area of Virginia to give and receive volunteer, person-to-person assistance for logistical issues connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. ([Website link here](#))

Mutual Aid Resources & News Articles

[Peter Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution](#)

A collection of academic essays written by Peter Kropotkin, a Russian philosopher and naturalist, who explored mutual aid behavior in the animal and plant kingdom as well as within human societies. He also emphasized individual, community, and collective responsibility and accountability rather than allowing the state and government to intervene.

Kropotkin, Peter (1902). *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. London: Freedom Press. Retrieved from: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/kropotkin-peter/1902/mutual-aid/index.htm>

[Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid & How to Organize in the Age of Coronavirus](#)

Amy Goodman interviews Mairam Kaba of Project NIA and Professor Dean Spade of Big Door Bridge on mutual aid. The interviewees explain what mutual aid is and how it is being employed during the coronavirus crisis.

Goodman, A. (2020, March 20). *Solidarity not charity: Mutual aid & how to organize in the age of the Coronavirus*. Democracy Now. Retrieved from: https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus_community_response_mutual_aid

Big Door Brigade “What is Mutual Aid?”

A website created by Dean Spade that shares the significance of mutual aid for collective survival and mobilization. It has a page that explains what mutual aid is and includes an animated and narrated YouTube video. The website includes a mutual aid toolbox that provides best practices for a variety of types of mutual aid projects. The blog on the home page includes a number of COVID-19 related mutual aid resources.

Spade, D. (2020). “What is mutual aid?” Big Door Brigade. Retrieved from: <http://bigdoorbrigade.com/what-is-mutual-aid/>

Feeling powerless about coronavirus? Join a mutual-aid network

A New York Times opinion piece offers mutual aid networks as an opportunity for individuals to help their communities during the pandemic and describes the mutual aid initiative started by four friends in Massachusetts.

Warzel, D. (2020, March 23). *Feeling powerless about coronavirus? Join a mutual-aid network*. New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/opinion/coronavirus-aid-group.html>

Autonomous groups are mobilization mutual aid initiatives to combat the coronavirus

This anarchist media article reports on coronavirus and the impacts being felt by society and describes how mutual aid initiatives are popping up to provide relief. The article explains what mutual aid is, including an embedded YouTube video, and provides a list of mutual aid initiatives across the United States.

It’s Going Down. (2020, March 20). *Autonomous groups are mobilizing mutual aid initiatives to combat the coronavirus*. Retrieved from: <https://itsgoingdown.org/autonomous-groups-are-mobilizing-mutual-aid-initiatives-to-combat-the-coronavirus/>

Support for Local and Regional Food Systems in COVID-19 Response

This is a factsheet by Harvard Law School’s Food Law and Policy Clinic lists and explains several legislative and administrative actions that Congress and the USDA can take to unlock already-appropriated funding to support farmers who produce for local and regional food systems.

Broad Leib, E. Mawhorter, C., Johnson-King, B. and Scott, E. (2020, March 16). *Support for local and regional food systems in COVID-19 Response*. Harvard Law School’s Food Law and Policy Clinic. Retrieved from: https://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID_Support-for-Local-and-Regional-Food-Systems_FLPC_NSAC_final.pdf

Mutual Aid Hub

This website allows you to locate Mutual Aid networks and other community self-support projects near you. Reach out to these groups directly via the map to get involved, offer resources, or submit needs requests.

Mutual Aid Hub. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>

[Collective Care Is Our Best Weapon against COVID-19](#)

This Medium piece written by Cindy Milstein and curated by Kitty Stryker makes a case for the need for collective care in our response to COVID-19. It also shares information and general resources for Mutual Aid in the COVID Pandemic as well as a list of resources across North America for disaster relief during COVID.

Stryker, K. and Milstein, C. (2020, March 13). Collective care Is our best weapon against COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/@kittystryker/collective-care-is-our-best-weapon-against-covid-19-851e29568656>

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