Mutual Aid 101

#WeGotOurBlock

This toolkit includes step by step instructions for how you can build your own mutual aid network while staying safe from the spread of COVID-19. You can start by posting on social media: "I'm going to support my neighbors through COVID-19. Ocasiocortez.com/we-got-our-block #WeGotOurBlock" **and keep us updated on your mutual aid work through #WeGotOurBlock.**

On Wednesday, March 18, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and organizer Mariame Kaba discussed a response to COVID-19 based in community building and resource sharing — **"Mutual Aid."**

Mutual aid is **"cooperation for the sake of the common good."** It's getting people to come together to meet each other's needs, recognizing that as humans, our survival is dependent on one another. If you're interested in learning more about the long history, politics and practice of mutual aid, we encourage you to read the links we're including at the end of this toolkit.

Download a printable copy of this toolkit here.
Download printable #WeGotOurBlock signs for your windows/door here.

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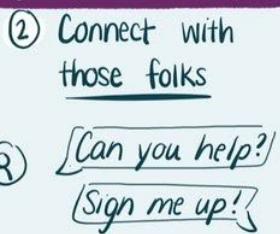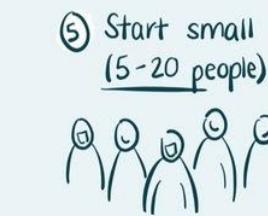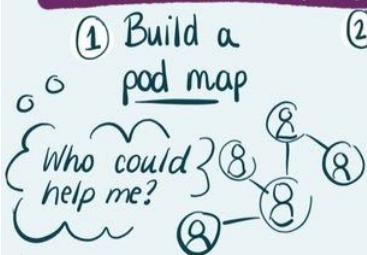
Credit: Becca Barad

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What is Mutual Aid?

Mutual Aid is a practice and politics that emphasizes solidarity rather than charity. What does that mean? It means we recognize that our well-being, health and dignity are all bound up in each other. It means that we understand our survival depends on cooperation, not competition. In this particular moment, we see that our health is also dependent on other people's health, and we can literally save each other's lives. Rather than disengage and feel powerless, mutual aid allows us to plug in where we can make the most impact — locally.

Mutual Aid is...

✓ *Getting people together in your community to provide material support to each other*

✓ *Building relationships with your neighbors based on trust and common interest*

✓ *Making decisions by consensus rather than relying on authority or hierarchy*

✓ *Sharing things rather than hoarding things*

✓ *Treating no one as disposable*

✓ *Providing all kinds of support, ranging from food prep to childcare to translation to emotional support, and recognizing the value of all of them*

✓ *A political education opportunity, where we build the relationships and analysis to understand why we are in the conditions that we're in*

✓ *Preparation for the next disaster (natural or economic). Next time around we'll already have relationships with each other and know who is vulnerable and needs support*

✓ *A great jumping off point for other kinds of organizing and movement work*

Mutual Aid is not...

✗ *Quid pro quo transactions*

✗ *Only for disasters or crises*

✗ *Charity or a way to "save" people*

✗ *A reason for a social safety net not to exist*

Building a Neighborhood Pod

This guide is adapted from Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville's ["Neighborhood Pods How To."*](#)*

Before the first step: Who's in your support network? Before beginning to build your neighborhood pod, we recommend taking some time to figure out who would already show up for you when you're in crisis, and vice versa. Check out [this resource](#) by Rebel Sidney Black.

Step 1:
Find a buddy or two (if you can) to build your neighborhood network/pod.

- *A buddy helps make the work feel less overwhelming — you can plan things together*

- *A buddy keeps you accountable to each other*

- *A buddy may have relationships and know resources you don't*

Start by identifying someone in your building or block, and text/call them to ask them to be your partner in building a neighborhood network.

Step 2:
Identify your zone.

Are you trying to support people on your floor, in your building, your block, your neighborhood, or a non-geography-specific social community? Try to start small: 5 - 20 people is a good ballpark. Build out as you gain confidence, organization and more knowledge of the resources in your community.

Step 3:
Invite your neighbors.

If you don't already have phone contacts for your neighbors, you'll need to reach them somehow. Here are some ideas:

- *If you have some phone contacts of your neighbors but not all of them, ask for your contacts to connect you with the neighbors you don't know.*

- *Reach out to people via email or social media such as a building Facebook group. You can also post something in adjacent spaces, such as a list-serve for parents of a local school where the majority of the families live in your neighborhood.*

- *You can flyer in spaces where people tend to congregate or pass through, such as elevators, lobbies, laundry rooms, bike rooms, or garages. You can flyer the doors of your neighbors. Just be sure to limit person-to-person contact.*

Note: Initial outreach should be language-accessible. For example, if your building is majority Korean-speaking, include both English and Korean in your invite.

For a sample invite (text or flyer) in several languages, please check out page 9.

Step 4:

Build your pod.

Name your group. If your pod/network is more than 30 people, consider splitting into two groups. Big groups can get unwieldy and you can always still reach out to and coordinate with the other group!

You have a couple options in terms of communications setup:

- *Make a group text or social media chat if everyone is comfortable with text/social media.*

- *If most people can do text but some can only talk by phone, assign people responsible for calling those people to update them.*

- *If most people are only comfortable talking by phone, set up a phone tree.**

*What's a phone tree? Check out this resource for more information. A phone tree is a system for spreading information with a group of people quickly through the phone. You have a few people, called your "key group," and they communicate information to and from the subgroups they're responsible for. That way, each time something needs to be shared, you don't have to set up a huge conference call. We very much still recommend phone/video conference calls for discussion and decision-making, because non-hierarchical coordination is key to mutual aid. You can get a free Zoom account for your videoconferencing needs!

Step 5:

Have an intro conversation with each other.

Set some community agreements, for example, treating each other with respect and assuming the best intentions. You also want to get a sense of what each person needs, and what each person can do to help.

These are some questions to ask each other:

- *What are your hobbies and interests?*

- *What languages do you speak?*

- *When are you generally working/busy and when are you generally available?*

- *How regularly do you want to check in?*

- *What is your living situation like and who else lives with you?*

- *Who are your emergency contacts?*

- *What resources, skills or knowledge do you have that you could share with the pod or help others with?*

- *What are your needs? What are you afraid of losing? What do you need help with?*

- *Do you have any important health info about yourself you want to share with me? For example, do you have regular prescriptions or appointments you need to maintain?*

- *What will be your primary concerns if the pandemic lasts two months or longer?*

You might find that it takes multiple conversations with each other before people feel comfortable discussing the last few questions. That's okay! Relationship building is not a means to mutual aid, but fundamental to the work itself.

There are several ways to do this in a group that's larger than a couple people.

1. We recommend focusing on building relationships with each other before immediately jumping into asks. One way to do this is dividing everyone up into pairs. Each pair then talks to each other over video/phone and takes notes about the conversation to input into a spreadsheet. Switch pairings and do a couple more rounds of 1-on-1 conversations so people in your pod have relationships with not just one other person in the pod, but multiple other people!

2. You could also use a Google Form or Spreadsheet and have everyone input their responses on their own and read over each other's responses to the questions.

If you go with #1, make sure to clarify upfront what information gets shared with everyone in the pod and what information stays in your small group conversation. Consent about information sharing is important.

Step 6:
Support each other.

Your pod will have lots of needs at this time, and they may change as this pandemic continues. Some needs that might or have already come up:

- *Food (both grocery store trips and prep)*
- *Childcare (especially as schools close)*
- *Picking up medicine or other absolutely essential errands*
- *Cleaning supplies*
- *Financial support (especially as more workers get laid off or have to stay home without sick leave)*
- *Emotional support and socializing*
- *Mental health counseling and services*
- *Recreational activities, for both adults and children*
- *Help navigating benefits processes*
- *Language translation/support*
- *Information on what community resources are available*
- *Tech assistance*
- *Internet access*
- *Timely and accurate public health information*

An Invite for Neighbors

Here is a sample text/invite for neighbors, in some of the most commonly-spoken languages in Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez's district NY-14.

LANGUAGE	INVITE
English	"Hello! I'm [**NAME**]. I live [**in your building/on your block/in your neighborhood**] and this is my number: [**PHONE #**]. I'm reaching out because I know that with COVID-19, it's important for us to be connected to each other so we can pool resources, share information, and help support one another. I'm going to coordinate a group text or a phone call for our [**building/block/neighborhood/community**]. Will you please reach out to me on my phone so we have your contact information? Thank you!"
Spanish	¡Hola! Soy [**NAME**]. Vivo [**en su edificio/en su cuadra/en su vecindario**] y este es mi número: [**PHONE #**]. Me estoy poniendo en contacto porque se que con el coronavirus es importante que estemos conectados para que podamos compartir recursos e información y ayudarnos unos a otros. Voy a coordinar un grupo de texto o una llamada telefónica para [**nuestro edificio/ nuestra cuadra/ nuestra comunidad**]. ¿Me podría contactar por teléfono para que tenga su información? ¡Gracias!"

Bengali	হ্যালো! আমি [**NAME**]. আমি [**আপনার বিল্ডিংয়ে / আপনার ব্লকে / আপনার আশেপাশে**] বাস করি এবং এটি আমার নম্বর: [**PHONE #**]. আমি আপনার কাছে আসছি কারণ আমি জানি যে COVID-19 এর সাথে আমাদের একে অপরের সাথে সংযুক্ত হওয়া জরুরী যাতে আমরা সংস্থানগুলি ভাগ করতে পারি, তথ্য ভাগ করতে পারি এবং একে অপরকে সাহায্য করতে পারি. আমি আমাদের [**বিল্ডিং / ব্লক / পাড়া / সম্প্রদায়**] কে বার্তা দিতে বা কল করতে যাচ্ছি. আপনি দয়া করে আমার ফোনে আমার সাথে যোগাযোগ করবেন যাতে আমাদের কাছে আপনার যোগাযোগের তথ্য থাকে? ধন্যবাদ!
Chinese (Mandarin, but you can use for Cantonese speakers as well)	你好！我是［**NAME**］。我住在［**这个楼房 ／ 这个街区／这个社区**］。这是我的电话号码［**PHONE #**]。 我们希望在新冠病毒疫情期间保持密切联系，分享资源，信息，互相支持。 我会建立一个信息和电话交流群。 请你们联系我，提供你们的联系方式。谢谢！

Health & Safety Tips

Organizing mutual aid during COVID-19 means taking extra precautions to protect yourself and your community from the spread of the virus. Here are some tips for minimizing your exposure:

- ✓ *Practice social distancing. Do not interact with people face-to-face. Connect with each other through phone/web.*

- ✓ *Go to grocery stores and pharmacies for essential errands at non-peak hours.*

- ✓ *Use delivery services when possible so you stay home. Pool money to pay for these services or find a volunteer delivery collective in your community.*

- ✓ *When dropping off food/medicine for someone, they should not open the door while you are there. Coordinate the dropoff through text/phone or speak through the door. Don't touch doorbells with your finger.*

- ✓ *Consider using digital payments rather than handing cash back and forth for errand reimbursements.*

- ✓ *Pool money to support one another so folks can stay home from work when they are sick or if they have a job that does not allow them to work remotely.*

- ✓ *Try to remain local and bike, walk, scooter or drive. Avoid public transit when possible. Avoid rideshares and taxis when possible.*

- ✓ *When you're outside, try to keep 6 feet away from other people at all times.*

- ✓ *Wipe down and disinfect everything you bring into your home.*

More resources

We can't stress enough, this kit is only the very beginning of the long history and practice of mutual aid work. To learn more, check out these resources:

- [Big Door Brigade](#) - a website guide to everything mutual aid by organizer Dean Spade.

- [Mutual Aid Disaster Relief](#) - a mutual aid network with many guides, reports and resources.

- [A chart](#) by organizer Dean Spade on leadership qualities that support cooperation/mutuality versus hierarchy in building organizations.

- [A podcast](#) by Rebel Sidney Black on the differences between mutual aid and charity.

- [A poem](#) "The Low Road" by Marge Piercy.

- [A longer article](#) by organizer Dean Spade "Solidarity Not Charity" about the theory, history and practice of mutual aid

- [A report-back](#) on mutual aid in the context of disability justice.

- [An example](#) of a rapid-response team being built out in Rogers Park, Chicago.

- [Demands](#) from grassroots organizers for a just response to COVID-19.

- [Continuously updated list](#) of resources (by Dean Spade) on COVID-19 mutual aid.