



**PAINTING
THE OCEAN
& THE SKY**

BY SHIRA HASSAN

THE LANGUAGE OF NUANCE AND PURPOSE IN OUR
NON-CARCERAL COMMUNITY CRISIS RESPONSE

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last year and a half, I have been honored to answer phone calls at the Transformative Justice (TJ) Help Desk at Interrupting Criminalization (IC). After nearly 300 hours of conversation with abolitionist activists, organizers, and service providers from all over the world who call us at the TJ Help Desk, and after attending, assisting in co-designing, and facilitating monthly online Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Spaces also hosted by IC, my notebooks were full of the powerful interconnections I've been able to witness. I started to feel that electricity in my body, the kind I feel when I *just know* we are close to *something*. The writing of this piece began like all my writing does, scribbling notes, half ideas, fragments that become clearer through conversation with friends, loved ones, and comrades, all of us bent on finding a way through to liberation with as many of us alive and thriving as possible.

I started to reach out to my thought partners more intentionally as this document began to take shape, and this could not have been written without input and guidance from Dean Spade, Andrea Ritchie, Ejeris Dixon, Ill Weaver, Maria Thomas, Mimi Kim, Mariame Kaba, and Megyung Chung. And as I spoke with each of them, I got more and more excited about the world we are building together. Thousands of people are engineering projects to dismantle prisons and police, that strive to take care of each other without carceral state systems and social services, that care for and honor our crisis and claim power in our willingness to muddle through and try new things.

This reflection is humbly offered to those of us who are working to build collective community-based, non-carceral responses to crisis — and to prevent and create spaces to heal from them, to create

Can transformative justice be practiced in non-profits?

Is grant funding necessary for long term sustainability of radical groups?

What is peer work? Is mutual aid peer based?

Is there a line between crisis and emergency? or is it more like a spiral?

How do groups stay both politically radical and sustainable?

What do we do if the needs in our community are greater than our group can meet?

Why do we work underground?

Do we have to compromise our politics to grow to a larger scale?

and maintain resources that interrupt the almost routine harm and violence our communities experience as we simply move through our daily lives. It is offered in the spirit of knowing that everything written here can and should change over time, be pushed back on, expanded, and refined. Although I started to write this piece in earnest about a year ago, I have been reflecting on some of the ideas written here with my thought partners and peers for close to three decades. So much of what's in these pages is nuanced in real life application, and there are more fine lines than bold ones.

This essay is a small attempt at refining some necessary language that current abolitionist activists and organizers are using when building coordinated structures of care that are alternatives to police/carceral emergency services. In our liberatory communities, we work hard for our terms and language — the meaning of words matter. In a workshop led by the Detroit Narrative Agency at the Allied Media Conference, facilitators offered the phrasing “Clarity is a love language.” Getting clear creates a collective understanding of our work, allows for boundaries, gives us room to see ourselves, our power, and our formations so we can continue to nourish our resistance movements. Intentionally naming who we are and why, how and what we are creating is of crucial importance to continuing to build complex and viable community-led responses that do not involve the state.

When painting a landscape we need to “differentiate the blue of the ocean from the blue of the sky¹” so that we can see the horizon and know where we are going and how to get there. Here I paint some broad strokes to help us to make critical distinctions and ask ourselves critical questions as we build coordinated community crisis responses and learn from our work together.

¹Hill Weaver in conversation with the author, August 2022. Weaver was referencing a prior conversation with Makani Themba.

Beginning in the early 1990s, and for most of my organizing life, my communities have been struggling to survive multiple epidemics at once. I came of age in the late 1980s through the early 2000s, around the time that the HIV crisis came to a head in New York City, intersecting with the existing housing crisis, the dismantling of welfare, the war on drugs, and the rise of mass incarceration accompanied by non-stop police violence, two Gulf Wars, and 9/11. Most of the people I knew were either leaving violent homes or abusive relationships. Pervasive transphobia, queerphobia, and whorephobia intersected with anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, anti-immigrant violence, and the development of the “Homeland Security” paradigm. We were organizing around the clock to come up with community care strategies that increased our capacity to transform violence and respond to urgent crises. Our long game, we hoped, was that these would result in sustainable solutions and meet our people’s immediate needs while decreasing reliance on the state and transforming the root causes of systemic violence.

My co-organizers were my peers, chosen family, and other sex workers and people in the sex trade who were using drugs and street-based. The truth is that even if calling the cops *was* part of our politic (*it was not*), we simply could not call the police for help, and we could not rely on most social services or charity models as they required us to be drug free to access services or be willing to enter treatment programs. These social services were routinely homophobic and transphobic. Many social workers would call the police or children’s services or in some cases try to reunite families that many were trying to run from. Simply put, we had no other options but to keep each other alive outside of state systems and through mostly underground methods.

We were using mutual aid² and liberatory harm reduction³ strategies and transformative justice⁴ as our main tactics to help each other survive, but that wasn’t language we used yet.

²Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2020).

³Shira Hassan, *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

⁴Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description,” Transform Harm, January 11, 2019, bit.ly/tjdescrip.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid is the work we do in our movements to provide direct support to people in crisis. It's only mutual aid if we are working from a shared understanding that the systems we live under, not people, are to blame for the crisis (which is the opposite of charity work, which blames people individually for being in crisis). It's also only mutual aid if it includes an invitation to collective action. People aren't required to join collective work to make change, but mutual aid projects always offer people a way to join their own efforts and broader efforts to change the conditions that are producing crises. —Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)*

Liberatory Harm Reduction

Liberatory harm reduction is a philosophy and set of empowerment-based practices that teach us how to accompany each other as we transform the root causes of harm in our lives.

We put our values into action using real-life strategies to reduce the negative health, legal, and social consequences that result from criminalized and stigmatized life experiences such as drug use, sex, the sex trade, sex work, surviving intimate partner violence, self-injury, eating disorders, and any other survival strategies deemed morally or socially unacceptable.

Liberatory harm reductionists support each other and our communities **without judgment, stigma, or coercion**, and we do not **force** others to change. We envision a world without racism, capitalism, patriarchy, misogyny, ableism, transphobia, policing, surveillance, and other systems of violence.

Liberatory harm reduction is true self-determination and total body autonomy. —Shira Hassan, *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction*

KEY DEFINITIONS (CONTINUED)

Transformative Justice (TJ)

Transformative justice is a political framework and approach for responding to violence, harm, and abuse. At its most basic, it seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or engaging in harm reduction to lessen the violence. TJ can be thought of as a way of “making things right,” getting in “right relation,” or creating justice together. Transformative justice responses and interventions 1) do not rely on the state (e.g. police, prisons, the criminal legal system, I.C.E., foster care system, though some TJ responses do rely on or incorporate social services like counseling); 2) do not reinforce or perpetuate violence such as oppressive norms or vigilantism; and most importantly, 3) actively cultivate the things we know prevent violence such as healing, accountability, resilience, and safety for all involved. —Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description”



We viewed the small, grassroots organizations (that were led by people of color, sex workers and/or people with similar life experiences to ours) as political homes. The very few harm reduction projects that existed at that time were lifesaving, and while most did not have an explicit abolitionist politic, they rarely called the police because they were staffed by people who had current or former experience with drugs and/or sex work. Many of these organizations were actively working alongside us to end state and interpersonal violence.

The late 1990s and early 2000s gave rise to a small but powerful surge of organizing led by feminists of color who built formations that could respond to state and interpersonal violence that were multi-issue and elegant in design. We built hotlines, safe houses, underground syringe exchanges, relationship violence interventions, rape crisis responses, and sex worker organizing projects. Largely led by queer and trans people of color, these response strategies were intentionally intersectional and run by the people who needed them most. We were architects and line workers simultaneously.

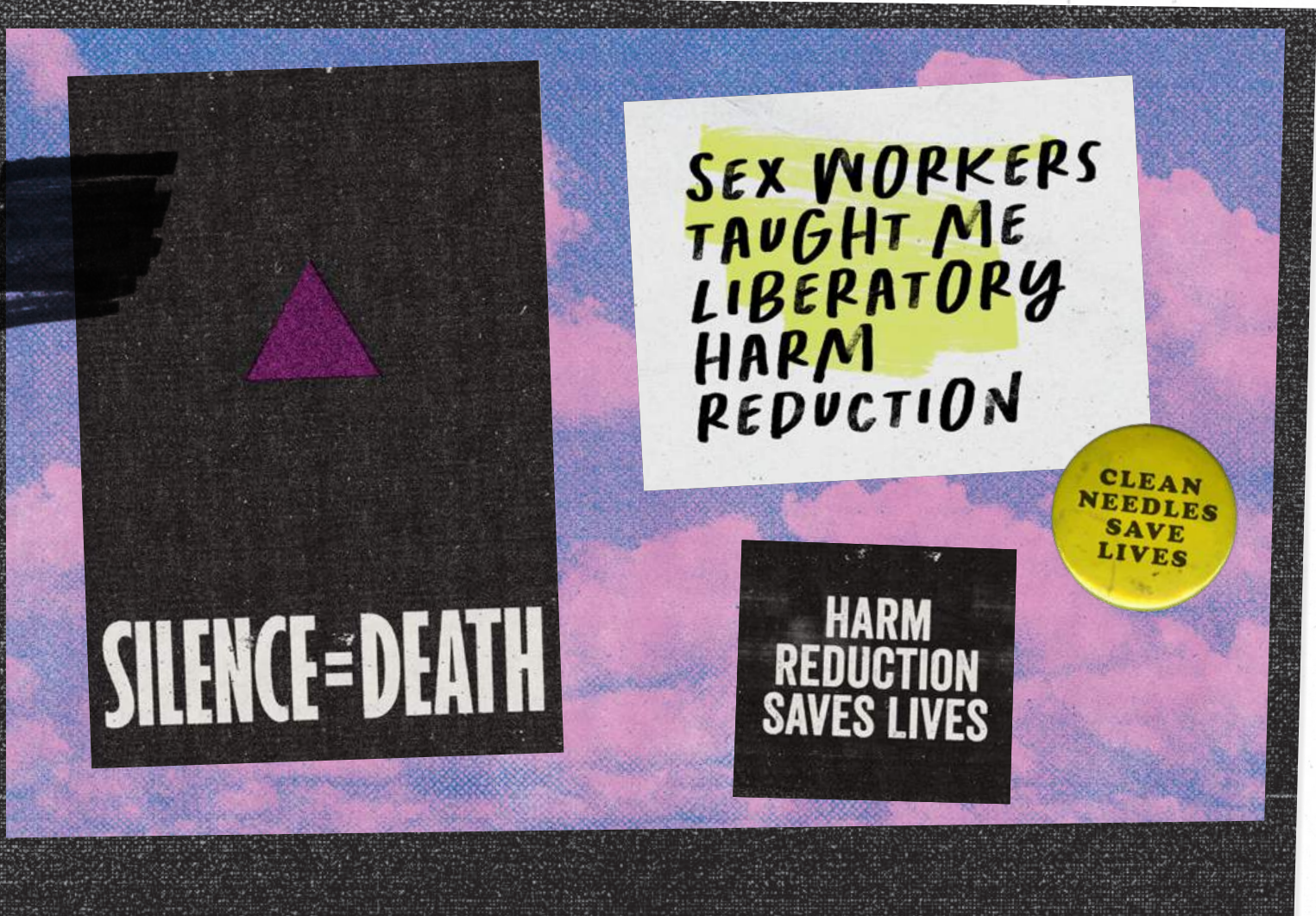
Keeping the lessons from the last twenty years in mind and the glittering inspiration coming from the exciting new range of projects in bloom, the purpose of this exercise is to explore critical terminology and its application to our everyday work.

DESIGNING ABOLITIONIST PROJECTS

Choosing words that realistically and accurately describe how our projects are structured will help us understand the distribution of power within and around them, which in turn will help us discern essential elements like a decision making model, clarify the boundaries of our work, and envision future pathways in our organizing. This clarity can help us to understand things like risk, liability, insurance, and mandated reporting requirements and can also better explain our work to our communities. Clear language can help us fundraise, make critical choices around how and to whom we distribute resources, and establish our long-term goals towards liberation. **The decision to focus on these terms is an intentional political intervention.** Because so much of our movement's language has been co-opted by nonprofits, the state, and charity models, we have begun to enter murky waters, and words that once meant something specific, like transformative justice, have become less potent over time.

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This essay will explore five key phrases that can offer greater clarity as we build abolitionist responses to violence.

1. Politicized Social Service

2. Mutual Aid

3. Working Underground versus Above Ground

4. Peer to Peer Work

5. Crisis Response versus Emergency Response

The term *politicized social service* emerged through observation of trends in calls to the Transformative Justice Help Desk and themes that surfaced in the Building Coordinated Crisis Response learning space hosted by Interrupting Criminalization. After hours of conversation with abolitionist organizers who have been creating awe-inspiring configurations to respond to basic needs, crises, and emergencies in their communities, I began to notice a synchronicity of practices. In order to be sustainable, seek funds, and develop complex responses to complex problems, many groups began to consider nonprofit status. This move from collective organizing to establishing nonprofit social services has happened in many waves throughout our movement history. The first time I witnessed this phenomenon was in radical health care during the 1980s and 1990s. HIV positive, queer and trans people; feminist abortion activists; and racial justice organizers established ways of providing liberatory access to HIV treatment, queer and trans positive primary care, syringe exchange and distribution, and birth control and pregnancy termination through mutual aid formations and liberatory harm reduction practices that were largely underground and underfunded. Over time, many of these groups became nonprofits in order to access grant money and assist more people in need. The result was that many of these nonprofits became depoliticized and embedded in the public health system and stopped being able to provide liberatory spaces that honored self determination or offered health care with dignity.

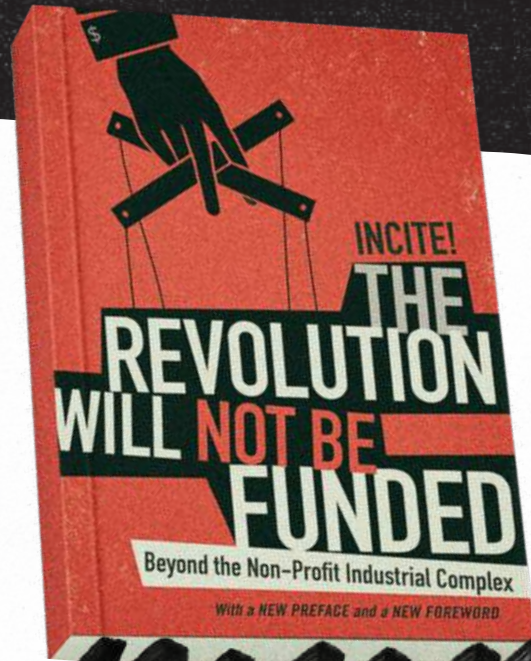
Naming *politicized social services* comes from a longstanding conversation about depoliticized social services that feminists, queer and trans activists, and racial justice organizers have observed over many years. Before digging into the possibilities of a politicized social service, let's briefly talk about the thorny categories of social service, nonprofits, and the charity model.

⁵Interrupting Criminalization was founded in 2018 by Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie. The Transformative Justice Help Desk (bit.ly/ICHelpDesk) answers calls from organizers who are building projects to end violence without violence.

SOCIAL SERVICES, CHARITY, AND THE NONPROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

In a nutshell, a social service is either a private or government organization that intends to provide assistance to groups of people in need. Almost all social services are nonprofit organizations, designated as 501(c)(3) or (c)(4) organizations by the Internal Revenue Service, granting them tax free status. These tax designations were originally created as tax shelters for the rich and are used to strictly regulate the organizations that receive them in ways that constrain revolutionary organizing (see the section on nonprofit industrial complex below). Social service organizations range in size from just a few staff to hundreds of staff. They typically serve a particular population — like domestic violence survivors, or currently house-less people, or low-income children — and provide something specific like food, housing, case management, or mental health care. They typically have specific rules about who can get the services they provide based on income, immigration status, whether you have kids or not, age, etc.

Social service organizations are typically run as charities; they are often funded based on how many people they serve, and they can also raise money based on how many people they turn away. This means they can be motivated to document coming into contact with large numbers of people to get more money, even if they provide those people little or nothing.⁶



Social service organizations largely operate on a charity model and most fall into what has been called the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC). I strongly recommend reading the entire groundbreaking INCITE! anthology *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond The Non-Profit Industrial Complex*,⁷ and specifically the article by Dylan Rodriguez called “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex” for a better understanding of the NPIC and how it was created to suppress revolution, abolition, and liberation.

⁶I have seen this happen in shelter work, where some grants are written based on the number of people who are turned away for the night, for any kind of reason, like showing up high, drunk, or late to the shelter’s curfew, rather than giving that person an available empty bed. Those numbers are then used to justify reasons why the organization needs more funds, i.e., “Based on the number of people we turned away this year, we anticipate needing \$X in additional funding.”

⁷INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond The Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

THE NONPROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

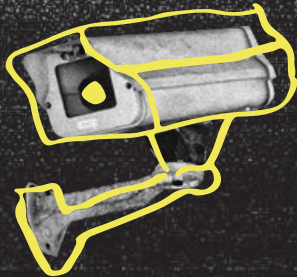
IS A SYSTEM OF
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN



THAT RESULTS IN THE SURVEILLANCE, CONTROL, DERAILMENT,
AND EVERYDAY MANAGEMENT OF POLITICAL MOVEMENTS.⁸

⁸ "Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," INCITE!, accessed October 2, 2023, bit.ly/beyondnpic.

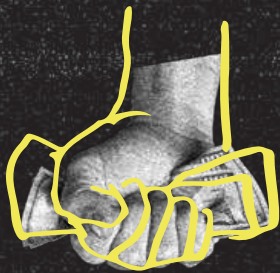
THE STATE USES NONPROFITS TO



MONITOR AND CONTROL SOCIAL
JUSTICE MOVEMENTS



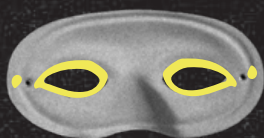
DIVERT PUBLIC MONIES INTO
PRIVATE HANDS THROUGH
FOUNDATIONS



MANAGE AND CONTROL DISSENT
IN ORDER TO MAKE THE WORLD
SAFE FOR CAPITALISM



REDIRECT ACTIVIST ENERGIES INTO
CAREER-BASED MODES OF ORGANIZING
INSTEAD OF MASS-BASED ORGANIZING CAPABLE
OF ACTUALLY TRANSFORMING SOCIETY



ALLOW CORPORATIONS TO MASK
THEIR EXPLOITATIVE AND COLONIAL
WORK PRACTICES THROUGH
"PHILANTHROPIC" WORK



ENCOURAGE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
TO MODEL THEMSELVES AFTER
CAPITALIST STRUCTURES RATHER THAN
TO CHALLENGE THEM⁹

⁹Ibid.

Dean Spade offered this helpful viewpoint during our conversations:

Nonprofit status is used to create a situation of philanthropic control – that we have a professionalized sector where people who want to help others and to change the world are supposed to go make a career, and everyone else is just supposed to donate, and that funding for nonprofits mostly comes from government and the rich, so they just fund tactics that they find palatable, and they give money with strings attached. Mostly what becomes funded is policy work and depoliticized social services, and they don't fund community organizing that builds people power. They also historically fund reform work, not work that seeks to abolish prisons, borders, or the military. They give money with strings attached – like often the condition that nonprofits don't serve undocumented people or people with certain histories of criminalization.

In general, the funding of the nonprofit sector creates a controlled space for work to help people and make change, and it is controlled by funders.¹⁰

- DEAN SPADE

What is a charity model?

In the simplest of terms, the vast majority of social services (but not all nonprofits) operate on a charity model – the organizations are made up of people who are not necessarily part of the community they serve and operate based on eligibility criteria that determine who gets help, relief, or aid. A charity-based approach is a band-aid at best; at worst it is moralistic, dehumanizing, and criminalizing.

¹⁰Dean Spade in conversation with the author, August 2023.

Contemporary charity comes with eligibility requirements such as sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training or parenting courses, cooperation with police, a lawful immigration status, or identifying the paternity of children. In charity programs, social workers, health care providers, teachers, clergy, lawyers, and government workers determine which poor people deserve help. They do not do the more threatening and effective work that grassroots mutual aid groups do for housing justice, like defending encampments against raids, providing immediate no-strings health care and food to poor and unhoused people, fighting real estate developers, slumlords, and gentrification, or fighting for and providing access to actual long-term housing.¹¹

What is mutual aid?

Spade defines mutual aid as

a collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. We see examples of mutual aid in every single social movement, whether it's people raising money for workers on strike, setting up a ride-sharing system during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, putting drinking water in the desert for migrants crossing the border, training each other in emergency medicine because ambulance response time in poor neighborhoods is too slow, raising money to pay for abortions for those who can't afford them, or coordinating letter-writing to prisoners.¹²

¹¹Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2020)

¹²Ibid.

Dean writes that there are three essential elements to mutual aid work: “One. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need. Two. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements. Three. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective actions rather than waiting for saviors.”¹³

One of the diciest moments for a mutual aid group is if the group decides to apply for a grant to fund their work. How will the money be held? Will the group be fiscally sponsored or get their own nonprofit status? Who will sign the checks? Distribute the funds? Ensure that there is a clear decision making model? How will power be held? What will the money be spent on — just supplies, or will some people get paid for their time working on the mutual aid project? Which people will get paid and why them and not others? This moment is where so many ethical decisions arise that can gravely challenge a group’s ability to maintain their political stance on abolition, their ability to continue organizing alongside one another in collective coordination to meet each other’s needs.

Mutual aid offers a useful chart to show us the distinctions between a charity model and a mutual aid model (bit.ly/mutualaidchart). In the next section, I suggest that we consider a third column for this chart: Politicized Social Service. If created and maintained with clarity, politicized social services represent a third radical possibility between charity and mutual aid for moving towards abolitionist futures.

¹³ibid.

MUTUAL AID CHART

The chart below is not written in absolutes, but rather highlights the qualities in each kind of organizational formation.

<p>Horizontalist and Participatory Characteristics of MUTUAL AID PROJECTS</p>	<p>Characteristics of Hierarchical CHARITABLE NONPROFITS & SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS (or what tends to change about mutual aid projects as they move toward becoming charities or social service programs)</p>
<p>“Members” = people making decisions</p>	<p>“Members” = donors</p>
<p>Deprofessionalized survival work done by volunteers</p>	<p>Service work staffed by professionals</p>
<p>Beg, borrow, and steal supplies</p>	<p>Grant money for supplies/ philanthropic control of program</p>
<p>Use people power to resist any efforts by government to regulate or shut down activities</p>	<p>Follow government regulations about how the work needs to happen (usually requiring more money, causing reliance on grants, paid staff with professional degrees)</p>
<p>Survival work rooted in deep and wide principles of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, racial justice, gender justice, disability justice</p>	<p>Siloed single-issue work, serving a particular population or working on one area of policy reform, disconnected from other “issues”</p>

MUTUAL AID CHART (CONTINUED)

MUTUAL AID PROJECTS	CHARITABLE NONPROFITS & SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS
<p>Open meetings, as many people making decisions and doing the work as possible</p>	<p>Closed board meetings, governance by professionals or people associated with big institutions or big donors, program operated by staff, volunteers limited to stuffing envelopes or other menial tasks occasionally, volunteers not part of high level decision making</p>
<p>Efforts to support people facing the most dire conditions</p>	<p>Imposing eligibility criteria for services that divide people into “deserving” and “undeserving”</p>
<p>Give things away without expectations</p>	<p>Conditions for getting help or participating in something — you have to be sober, have a certain family status, have a certain immigration status, not have outstanding warrants, not have certain convictions, etc.</p>
<p>People participate voluntarily because of passion about injustice</p>	<p>People come looking for a job, wanting to climb a hierarchy or become “important”</p>
<p>Efforts to flatten hierarchies (e.g., flat wage scales if anyone is paid, training so that new people can do work they weren’t professionally trained to do, rotating facilitation roles, language access, etc.)</p>	<p>Establish and maintain hierarchies of pay, status, decision-making power, influence</p>

MUTUAL AID CHART (CONTINUED)

MUTUAL AID PROJECTS	CHARITABLE NONPROFITS & SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS
<p>Values self-determination for people impacted or targeted by harmful social conditions</p>	<p>Offers “help” to “underprivileged” absent of a context of injustice or strategy for transforming the conditions; paternalistic; rescue fantasies and saviorism</p>
<p>Consensus decision-making to maximize everyone’s participation, to make sure people impacted by decisions are the ones making them, to avoid under-represented groups getting outvoted, and to build the skill of caring about each other’s participation and concerns rather than caring about being right or winning</p>	<p>Person on top (often Executive Director) decides things or, in some instances, a board votes and majority wins</p>
<p>Direct aid work is connected to other tactics, including disruptive tactics aimed at root causes of the distress the aid addresses</p>	<p>Direct aid work disconnected from other tactics, depoliticized, and organization distances itself from disruptive or root causes-oriented tactics in order to retain legitimacy with government or funders</p>
<p>Tendency to assess the work based on how the people facing the crisis the organization wants to stop regard the work</p>	<p>Tendency to assess the work based on opinions of elites: political officials, bureaucrats, funders, elite media</p>
<p>Engaging with the organization builds broader political participation, solidarity, mobilization, radicalization</p>	<p>Engaging with the organization not aimed at growing participants’ engagement with other “issues,” organizations, or struggles for justice</p>

POLITICIZED SOCIAL SERVICE

There are many important reasons why a mutual aid group may decide to apply for funds or may decide to apply to get their 501(c)(3) status, becoming a nonprofit. While building the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) is **not** a goal of abolitionist organizing, employing the strategy of working from both inside and outside the system towards liberation is essential to our end goal of surviving and reaching liberation. I do believe it is possible to run a radical nonprofit organization working towards revolution. For example, the Black Panther Party (BPP), which was primarily a political organizing formation, operated over a dozen Survival Programs (bit.ly/bppartyprograms), the most famous of which was Free Breakfast for Children, including a school, medical van, and sickle cell research. These programs operated in a variety of ways, including as all volunteer mutual aid programs, as fiscally sponsored nonprofits in partnership with community organizations, and, in the case of a few Survival programs, staffed nonprofits. While some of these programs may have taken the shape of nonprofit social services, their radical origins and intent created new possibilities — including what this essay is naming as “politicized social service.”



It's About Time Archives

In my own experience, politicized social services are importantly different from mainstream charity-based, often carceral, social services. Funded and politicized social services — those that work with a liberatory harm reduction praxis and are staffed and led by people directly targeted by harms caused by the state — are often key players in making sure that our communities survive.

Politicized social services (PSS) can offer more effective support than charities and actual help to people who are usually locked out of mainstream charity-based, carceral social service organizations because PSS are guided by a politic that doesn't presume or prop up the status quo, but instead seeks to change it through its practices. PSS intentionally set themselves up to be low barrier — meaning they don't require identification and impose very few limits on accessing or participating in services. Although politicized social services carry all the same legal responsibilities as any mainstream nonprofit, they often choose to have different practices around mandated reporting, forced hospitalization, and working with law enforcement that may not be written into their policies but are part of their practice handbooks and guidelines for workers.

PSS are social services organizations started by people who have a strong critique of social services and are trying to do it differently, aware of the dangers of the charity model and nonprofitization. This is not easy because the limits of the nonprofit model of funding, liability, and legal restrictions drive social services organizations to fall into the worst practices. Politicized social services must embody a political critique of systemic oppression and work to end the violence from the state while offering true life affirming assistance or services. In other words, PSS groups actively work through on-the-ground organizing to put themselves out of business by ending structural violence that created the need for them to begin with.

Examples of Politicized Social Services

I had the privilege to be helped by a politicized social service when I was a young person in New York City. Streetwork Project, which began partnering with street-based young people who were living and working the streets of the Times Square neighborhood in 1984, is one of the earliest examples in the country of a harm reduction project that served young people ages 16-24.¹⁴ It was their outreach program that taught me how to survive using harm reduction strategies and also helped me realize that harm reduction could be used as a larger organizing tool to collectively build power. In the 1990s, when I was working inside of a peer-led project in New York City, we partnered with Streetwork and a handful of youth-led, anti-police, social justice projects to form a campaign that culminated in a demonstration to demand the city be accountable for the deaths of street-based young people. We demanded that emergency services respond to health emergencies when called by trans people and peer support teams, we demanded that police be removed from emergency services, and we demanded that police stop sexually assaulting and arresting queer and trans young people.

After I moved to Chicago and became a part of the Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) (an example of a peer-led project), I was able to be up close as The Broadway Youth Center (BYC) was forming. Founded by twenty community partners and organizers who were furious with Chicago's lack of care for LGBTQ street-based young people, the BYC's commitment to being non-carceral was woven throughout every part of their formation.¹⁵ In order to make sure that both staff and young people were safe and cared for, the BYC established principles and practices to ensure the project operated within its capacity.¹⁶ Working with 500 street-based young

¹⁴Streetwork Project has changed over the years and is now a part of Safe Horizons, a large city agency in New York, and their work more closely resembles a mainstream nonprofit focused on individual needs. I am writing about the years I was most connected to them, which was 1988-2004.

¹⁵I am writing about the Broadway Youth Center in the time that I most intimately knew their work, which was between the years 2003-2015. I am not familiar with the current version of this program and cannot speak to their current work.

¹⁶Working outside of organizational capacity leads to an increase in violence and safety concerns. This can happen from too many people occupying too small a space or having to work with people for a short period of time in order to see everyone during one shift. Worker exhaustion also leads to hasty decisions like calling children's services or partnering with police and other carceral services. I cannot tell you how many times a worker has said to me that they are too exhausted to provide the real help someone needs and instead relies on a carceral system. Working within **actual capacity** is essential to being non-carceral in social services.

people per year offering everything from trans health care to dance classes to weekly youth-led circles to talk through community safety, the drop-in program operated four days a week, closing on Wednesdays to support staff and address instances of harm. For more about how their work was structured, please read the “Whose Security Is It Anyway?” toolkit (bit.ly/whosesecurity) co-authored by Lara Brooks and Mariame Kaba, and watch the Building Your Abolitionist Toolbox workshop (bit.ly/whosesecurityvid).

The Broadway Youth Center was the first organization to sign onto the Street Youth Bill of Rights (bit.ly/sybillofrights), a campaign by the Young Women’s Empowerment Project who found through their participatory action research that “young people in the sex trade and street economy are being denied help from social services and nonprofits and even police because they are involved in the sex trade, street economy, or are queer or transgender.” The BYC displayed this sign in their organization, worked alongside YWEP to get other social service organizations to sign on, and assisted in training and challenging the city for their neglect and institutional violence against young people involved in, or assumed to be, trading sex for money or selling drugs in the city of Chicago.

MORE ABOUT THE BROADWAY YOUTH CENTER



TOOLKIT

Whose Security Is It Anyway

bit.ly/whosesecurity



VIDEO WORKSHOP

Building Your Abolitionist Toolbox

bit.ly/whosesecurityvid

The Broadway Youth Center was one of the most important allies to street-based youth organizing in Chicago between 2003-2015, and their practices helped support and sustain at least a dozen other groups led by young people who were organizing for systemic change and abolition.

The essential difference between a politicized social service and a mainstream, depoliticized social service aligned with the NPIC is that:

A PSS continues to do grassroots organizing to transform the underlying conditions of state violence and does not collude or partner with the police and prison industrial complex, especially where harm to any worker or program participant is possible. A politicized social service ensures a direct line of accountability to the people it sets itself up to serve because they are led by and for – and/or because they have meaningful participation and direction from – those who are directly harmed by systemic violence.

A politicized social service:

- ✿ **Works to build community power beyond superficial engagement, and organizes to counter state violence while meeting everyday basic, survival, and crisis needs of the neighborhood, people, and community it exists to serve.** This includes things like not using pictures of people who come to your PSS on your website,¹⁷ not using people's life stories to raise funds, and allowing people who come to your PSS real power over the organization's leadership, structure, and development by serving on the board of directors and hiring committees, being part of strategic planning, and having access to decision making across the PSS.

¹⁷There may be times where participants want to share their story publicly on their own terms; however, groups should still be cautious about the slippery slope this may create. If there are people who want to share their story, I suggest creating protocols to ensure as little exploitation of people's lives as possible.

- ✿ **Works to put itself out of business** through bringing an end to racial capitalism and all forms of structural oppression through ongoing political grassroots organizing
- ✿ **Does not increase the reach and power of the prison industrial complex and actively organizes to dismantle it;** this means refusing to work with ICE, child protective services, and other imprisoning systems
- ✿ Is accountable to and, wherever possible, **led and staffed by and for people directly harmed by state violence** (and/or the issue the organization is set up to address)
- ✿ Recognizes that the abolition of the prison industrial complex is necessary to end state violence and **works to uphold abolitionist values in its daily operations, programs, and policies**
- ✿ Operates with an understanding of interlocking systems of oppression, and **takes a stance against settler colonialism** and for #LandBack
- ✿ Has an institutional structure that offers, supports, and **sustains both above ground and underground responses and interventions** (more on above ground and below ground below)
- ✿ Has an institutional structure that provides meaningful and daily support to the people who work inside of it through sustainable and humane policies that support time off, healing, care, and ongoing skill development for all those who are part of the project, and **works from an intentional disability justice framework with staff, volunteers, and program participants**
- ✿ **Is value based and driven** in its work through the applied practice of anti-racism; is pro- sex work and pro-immigrant; supports, sustains, and honors leadership from Black, Indigenous, people of color; applies an explicit disability justice framework; and practices liberatory harm reduction

Important Planning Considerations When Forming a Politicized Social Service

- 1.** **Make a plan to continue your grassroots organizing work** so that your PSS transforms and interrupts the root causes of violence while simultaneously caring for community/members/participants. Many groups stop doing organizing because a) their administration and work with services is funded, but their organizing work is not; b) racial capitalism creates ongoing serious crises in our community, both among people who are being served by the nonprofit and by those who work there; and c) organizations are expected to bat cleanup for racial capitalism, which motivates organizations to go after more and more money – the need is so great, it becomes very tempting/compelling to take the millions of dollars required to meet it.

- 2.** **What is your fundraising plan?** What funds will you never accept? What funds will you always accept? Can you avoid city, state, or federal funds whenever possible? Money often comes with strings attached, so how you are funded has political implications. Large amounts of funding, especially government funding, may also require expensive administrative oversight and lead to legal liability concerns that may make your work difficult. Question the presumption of limitless growth: what would it take to only accept funding from individual donations, crowdfunding, and small private foundations committed to a liberatory politic and to maintain a smaller staff with reasonable outcomes?

- 3.** **How will financial transparency be honored?** Will everyone know one other's salary and where funds are coming from? Write these agreements down and come back to them over time to refresh. Use these agreements as a basis for your ongoing fundraising. Ask other groups who are doing similar

work what kinds of strings have been attached to funding so that you can learn in advance what kinds of demands from funders you may be up against. This could allow you to create a different organizational or fundraising model.

4. **Consider how you will support your staff in full;** benefits packages can be co-created by all involved and can include things like paying phone bills, providing body work and holistic/allopathic health care, skill development, education, grief counseling, short and long term sabbaticals, and vacation. This takes a lot of money and can place tension on an organization, especially one with an ethical fundraising plan. To create a sustainable work load, your organization may need to operate fewer hours with less staff or find ways of offering support — for example, partner with a spa that allows discounted memberships, find an herbal apothecary that will provide herbs or other resources as donations, join a politically-aligned credit union that may offer some useful benefits like free tax filing and high interest savings plans.

5. What are your hours of operation? Remember, there is no rule that says you need to operate 24/7. **Maintaining long term, sustainable, capacity-informed work conditions may mean operating fewer days per week or only seeing a certain number of people per year.** This may mean partnering closely with trusted groups and individuals who can take over when you are not operating, having a well-vetted referral program, and having resources you can distribute to people even if you cannot work with them (like meals, clothing, storage facilities, vending machines that dispense condoms, or clean syringes and naloxone). Having fewer hours of operations and working with smaller numbers of people may bring up the tension of not being able to meet more people's needs during more hours of the day. I would argue that smaller organizations that are

capacity-informed are more sustainable, able to remain more values aligned over time, and, therefore, see more people over the sum total of their existence. Smaller organizations are often able to retain staff because they are able to truly hold their workers as whole people. Having low staff turnover, in turn, enables smaller organizations to do the deep work of staying in long term relationships with people who come in for assistance.

- 6.** **If you have licensed social workers or other licensed practitioners** on staff, how will you support them in meeting their primary commitments to the people they work with and avoiding collaboration with systems of policing and state violence?
- 7.** **How will you ensure that you do not experience mission drift**, i.e., beginning as an abolitionist organization and becoming an organization that must collude with law enforcement or children's services to operate? How will your work be co-created and co-held over the long term?
- 8.** **Both digital and physical security are essential** to protect both staff and people seeking support from your organization. Begin with a digital security audit from a values aligned expert and consider keeping as much information as possible offline and on paper. Consider constructing your own databases rather than relying on pre-existing online services that have user agreements that do not protect your information from being sold to third parties or turned over to law enforcement.
- 9.** Working with those who share organizational values and understand how they operate in practice is almost more important than hiring people with a particular skill set.

Before beginning, **create a plan for hiring or volunteer recruitment** into your organization that includes skill development, learning benchmarks, mentorship, and support. Ensure that everyone who comes into the organization is committed to abolitionist and harm reductionist politics *and practices* — including people working at the front desk, drivers, bookkeepers, and others who come into contact with the people you work with. Take time to make sure that people are given sufficient training to do their jobs and sufficiently engaged with the political principles of the organization, rather than hiring people and hoping they pick it up later — this investment in onboarding new staff helps reduce conflict for the organization and frustration for the people hired.

10. **Your organization will likely require some kind of insurance** to cover the costs of accidents, injuries, and mistakes. Some insurance companies may require background checks for all staff and board members. Consider calling other allied organizations or groups to find out how they are covered and calling multiple insurance brokers before choosing your plan. Your insurance may determine some of the services/events your organization can or cannot offer.

11. It is critical to have a plan for life-threatening emergencies. **What is your plan to avoid calling 911, mandated reporting, and/or forced medical interventions and hospitalizations?** Co-create this plan with as many of the people involved in your organization as possible, including participants. Then write the plan down or memorize it through recitation during meetings. Review this plan at the beginning of every shift so that all workers know what is expected of them and are not making decisions in isolation.

WORKING UNDERGROUND VERSUS ABOVE GROUND

Politicized social services and radical nonprofits often offer both above ground and underground options to their constituency. Sometimes this is intentional and explicit, but often it develops because the work to build community power leads to the creation of micro-projects within the larger whole.

Most of the projects I have worked for have publicly listed a handful of interventions on their websites and literature. For example, the flier or announcement may have said “Come distribute condoms, syringes, and food, and learn how to become an organizer.” These above ground and advertised interventions allowed for us to attract funds and young people in the sex trade and street economy who needed resources and were interested in changing the world.

But our work did not begin and end with what we could achieve above ground. We had to do an enormous amount of underground work to keep ourselves and our community alive that we did not discuss outside of our immediate circles and never advertised. This work included paying for abortions, creating access to hormones, providing bond funds, and creating and maintaining a safe house model.



It is crucial that politicized social service members and mutual aid groups come together to identify together what work can happen inside the nonprofit or mutual aid group and what work needs to happen outside of it. In some cases, separate projects that do the underground work may need to be formed in order to protect everyone involved. This also creates an opportunity for consent as not everyone may be able to afford to take the possible legal risks involved with doing underground work.

Our organization specifically invested in some of these underground offerings by raising funds outside of formal philanthropy through individual donor programs and earned income strategies like selling art, t-shirts, bath balms, and other goodies we made ourselves. The most powerful offerings, however, were spontaneously and regularly provided by members/participants who shared resources and strategies for survival as a part of their politicization and solidarity with each other. Our “food bank” consisted of a large bookshelf with the request that any time you were in the store and could afford it you brought back one non-perishable item for anyone who needed it. If we advertised that we had a shared food pantry, we would never be able to meet the demand or requirements to operate it.

It is essential that groups make the clear distinction around which services are above ground and publicly discussed. Underground work is often riskier and less sustainable and, therefore, both essential and necessarily discreet. If the underground work is advertised, the demand for it may exceed the group’s capacity to provide it, and the legal risk may become too great. In other cases, underground work, like safe housing, must remain underground to be effectively secure for the people accessing it.

PEER TO PEER WORK

Peer work is my whole heart. And it is a term that has been co-opted slowly by both public health agencies and the NPIC. I believe it is important that we fight this cooptation and retain the political lineage of peer to peer work¹⁸ that can be traced back generations to every liberatory movement. In most of the formations I grew up in, we almost exclusively worked from a peer model. The definition of peer I am using is one that exists outside of the charity model and operates between people who share the same walks of life with multiple intersecting and overlapping identities and life experiences. Often these life experiences are highly stigmatized, like being involved in sex work, being a drug user, being street based or houseless, being formerly incarcerated, struggling with mental health, and being disabled. Peer to peer work is powerful because it creates space where the shame that is projected onto us is interrupted by simply being around others like us. Most of the peer groups I have been a part of have the explicit goal of breaking isolation — isolation that comes from shame, stigma, and criminalization — because isolation kills. There are so many incredible examples, both current and past, of peer work that it would be impossible to list. I have been a part of the New York Peer AIDS Education Coalition (bit.ly/nypeeraids), the Young Women's Empowerment Project (bit.ly/yweproject), and numerous radical harm reduction projects led by queer, trans, and BIPOC people that provide deep support around mental health and drug use.

In peer to peer work, we are the experts in our own lives, and the work is led by us and for us at all times. Peer to peer work is not about fixing each other, or even helping each other make change. Rather, it is a support network made up of people who choose to accompany each other and have each other's back for the ride. The

¹⁸See *Saving Our Own Lives* for more discussion about the political lineage and importance of peer work in liberatory movements.

working definition I am using in this piece is that a peer to peer project is made up of a group of people with multiple overlapping identities and life experiences, whose lived experience makes them uniquely qualified to respond and tend to their own communities. It doesn't necessarily mean there are no power differences in the group, rather that those differences are engaged directly and consciously and doing so makes the group more powerful and resourceful.

Peer roles are often unpaid; for example, a peer project made up of young people ages 12-20 who are all using drugs or trading sex for money may exist to support each other, distribute condoms and syringes, and make changes in their community. In my small corner of the world, where I have been a member of unpaid, peer-based support work for over thirty years, the term "peer" remains precious, radical, and outside of carceral mainstream social services.

It is important to distinguish peer-based work from politicized social service work and even from mutual aid work that is not peer-based for many reasons. First, so that we do not lose sight of the power dynamics that play out differently between these formations. When two people who are both 16 years old, queer, and trading sex for money come together to support each other through unpaid work in a group they formed themselves, the power distribution is dramatically different than if those same young people received condoms or syringes from adults who are paid and not involved in the sex trade/sex work. I would argue that even if these same young people fundraised to pay themselves and established their own nonprofit, while the power dynamics would change significantly, those dynamics would still be different than if they went to a politicized social service for the same assistance.

Mutual aid is the exact opposite of the charity model. Mutual aid groups are often made up of peers and run by people who share overlapping identities. However, many mutual aid groups work across identities and are not peer-based for important reasons, i.e., a migrant justice organization is supporting people in a detention center and the project includes migrants and non-migrants, or

when a mutual aid project supporting people living in a tent encampment includes people living there, people who are formerly unhoused, and people who are housed and have always been housed collaborating together.

When volunteer-based mutual aid groups reach out to others in their zip code to provide free food, but do not have any other overlapping identities or lived experiences with the people receiving it, then the power dynamics may also be different than with a peer-based approach. Members of the mutual aid group may also have power because they have access to the resources they have accumulated as part of their formation. In short, when what joins us is a shared zip code versus the intersections of shared identity *and* lived experiences, power differentials pile up. We must take the time to address and tend to the power dynamics in whatever formation we choose to work in so that we may have strategies that align with liberatory values.

It's also good to know that some peer to peer projects *might* have fewer mandated reporting concerns (or a reduced need to force medical interventions or hospitalizations) as only very few states require young people or people of any age working outside of social services to make reports to state agencies (bit.ly/ecmrguide). Mandated reporting, or the family regulation and policing system, causes widespread pain and violence in Black, brown, and people of color communities. In addition, there is widespread confusion about what needs to be reported and who is required to report, which leads to rampant overreporting. While we are building alternative solutions to mandated reporting, there are important ways that your mutual aid organizations, politicized social services, and peer projects can be structured so that you do not need to make reports or force hospitalizations.¹⁹ Part of our work towards abolition must include the elimination of the family regulation system (bit.ly/tornapartbook). We must create alternative responses to interrupt violence in families that go beyond what we are currently doing. For more information about this or to get involved in ending the family regulation system, please see *Mandatory Reporting is Not Neutral* (bit.ly/isnotneutral) and *JMAC for Families* (bit.ly/jmacfamilies).

¹⁹I would love to speak with you at the Transformative Justice Help Desk (bit.ly/ICHelpDesk) about how to implement this in your specific project.

Qualities of Peer to Peer Projects and Mutual Aid Projects

There are many overlapping qualities between peer to peer work and mutual aid groups, and there are no absolutes; they often occur simultaneously inside of one project. Both peer-based work and mutual aid work can be liberatory, radical, and change the game in your community — neither formation is better than the other, and they are meaningfully similar, and in my opinion, best when combined. In my head, there is a flowing lake with only floating buoys on the surface to separate some of the points listed below. However, I believe it's still helpful to map the qualities of each type of formation to provide you a sense of the political lineage, implications, and structure so that you can make an intentional choice about how your group unfolds.

It is also important to note that even in a group where people share some identities, there are still differences and power dynamics. Speaking from my own experience in a group where everyone is a sex worker, some people might be higher paid, or some people might have disabilities, or people are from different racial groups or have different immigration statuses. There will be power dynamics around ableism, income, gender, country of origin, eligibility for various services, etc. Peer formations work intentionally to respond to and engage these differences with the goal of personal and group transformation towards building collective power and liberation.

Peer to Peer Formations

Peer-run projects are run by the people who start the project who have multiple overlapping identities and lived experiences that are often stigmatized and/or criminalized. They tend to support only their internal members to honor the value of being “experts in their own lives” and do not focus on fixing people or rescue but instead build solidarity and collective power through personal and group support of one another. No one participating in a peer formation is a “client”, everyone involved in the project receives and gives support to other members of the group. Peer to peer outreach recruits more

members to the group and provides resources to others with the similar or overlapping set of identities and life experiences the group was established by. People are welcomed in via their existing relationship connections, which also means it can be harder to find a peer to peer group unless they publicly advertise something like a “new member meeting” or other public facing event.

Additionally, peer to peer formations:

- ✿ Are usually created by and for the people they are intended to engage, meaning the group is informed, led, and directed by those who established the project and those who become members/participants
- ✿ Can operate either inside or outside of nonprofit structures
- ✿ Can be stipended, paid, or volunteer-run
- ✿ Tend to offer just one or very few interventions; for example, peer support, syringe distribution, sex worker support, mental health support, etc.
- ✿ Often are decentralized and low barrier, meaning there are often no intake processes, so you can just talk directly to a person involved in the project to get what you need and get involved
- ✿ Tend to have a self-organized structure that varies from project to project; it may be a collective with a rotating core that makes decisions or just a phone number that anyone who has the capacity signs up to answer
- ✿ Tend to emerge through existing relationships and may last several years or decades
- ✿ May or may not be involved in transforming the root causes of violence or organizing efforts; some projects may exist solely to offer support between people who are stigmatized, criminalized, and/or isolated from the larger world while others may do education for liberation and connect to larger movements’ organizing work

Examples: (1) Young people of color ages 14-18 who have been suspended from high schools gather to support each other, discuss the school-to-prison pipeline, and sell t-shirts; (2) peer groups for people who are formerly incarcerated (It's important to remember there are still important power differentials based on the type of activity they were incarcerated for, for how long their incarceration lasted, where they were incarcerated, etc.)

Mutual Aid Formations

- ✿ Can be a part of a longer term organizing/campaign strategy, or can be an entry point for people who want to help out who then become more politicized and connect with other tactics being used in their location
- ✿ May not share overlapping identities with the people who the project is set up to support
- ✿ Have a strong do-it-yourself culture and are rooted in volunteer-run work and often run by consensus or in a collective formation
- ✿ Tend to spring up as a response to a particular need; may be shorter or longer term
- ✿ Exist to support both those inside and outside the group's formation and may do widespread outreach
- ✿ Work to create a shared politicized understanding about why people do not have what they need and connect people to broader social justice movements

Examples: (1) Neighbors providing food to people experiencing houselessness in their zip code while working to organize against food deserts and joining campaigns to oppose criminalization of unhoused people in their town; (2) neighbors helping neighbors after a hurricane — which dissolves once the original crisis has subsided



CRISIS RESPONSE VERSUS EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Why We Need to Know the Difference Between Crisis and Emergency

Understanding the line between crisis and emergency is essential to non-police response projects. As a survivor of multiple forms of violence who is also disabled and struggles with sometimes acute mental health symptoms, it has been personally, politically, and organizationally important for me to understand my own experiences as well as the experience of my peers, friends, and chosen family. The working definitions named below are ones that I have compiled from a variety of sources including from some social work handbooks that helped me make sense of the interchange that runs between these life experiences.

An **emergency** is a life-threatening situation that requires an immediate response. Emergencies are often, but not always, unpredictable, and often, but not always, relatively short in duration. Common examples of emergencies include someone having a heart attack, overdosing, experiencing a physical or sexual assault, being arrested, having their child taken away by the state, etc.

A **crisis** is an ongoing series of events that may or may not be predictable that produces harm or stress but is not always immediately life threatening. Common examples of crises include being unhoused, being in a violent relationship, being undocumented, experiencing the aftermath of a tornado, etc.



I am so old that I once had a transparent orange pager. (My transparent blue pager fell in the toilet, and I bought the orange one from a person selling socks and batteries on the F train in NYC.) I used it for what we would now probably call community-based crisis response, but at the time we just called it living and surviving through collective care, responding to each other's needs as we were able. We were a small, peer to peer organization made up of sex workers, drug users, and street-based people between ages 12-28. We didn't have dispatch systems or uniforms, and we found ways to communicate requests for support that wouldn't bring the state into the picture – because that was also necessary for our survival.

We kept our work underground by using codes that indicated the difference between crisis and emergency and numbers that spelled words or told us what to do. For example, when someone needed me to meet them at the hospital or police station, we typed in the code for “Go Home” followed by the payphone number closest to where I was supposed to meet them. Sometimes it would take me hours to track down who called me, and I would just give a list of names to the security guards, most of whom I had built relationships with by bringing them food, soda, and cigarettes. If someone made it back safely after a late night or wanted us to know they were okay during an ongoing crisis, they would page the numbers that meant “Good night.” We each had a number attached to our names, and I had a sheet that I typed on an actual typewriter taped to the outside of my pager that I “laminated” with layers of scotch tape.

- SHIRA HASSAN

Not everyone has the same response to the same situation. For one person, witnessing violence may become a traumatic event that requires an emergency response because they may have a panic attack or heart attack, while another person may simply not have a trauma response at all. It is also important to note that many situations morph from crisis to emergency and back again; for instance, a person may fall behind on their rent and be threatened with eviction (crisis), the sheriff may be at their door forcefully removing them and their family and belongings (emergency), at which point they become unhoused (ongoing crisis).

Groups who are establishing teams to respond to crises and/or emergencies in their community will need to take a moment to name what kinds of rapid response they will and won't do and tailor approaches accordingly. It is critical that we get clear about what we can and cannot respond to and communicate that well to our communities so that people know what to expect of us. If we are unable to attend to life-threatening emergencies, then it may not make sense to publicly describe our work as "crisis response" as people tend to conflate crisis and emergency during traumatic situations. If we are able to respond to certain kinds of crises but not others, it's important for the people we are in community with to know that as well. Our response teams should regularly evaluate and reassess our capacity to respond to different types of crises and emergencies.

As whole people who exist in ever changing and complex relationships to our trauma, if we do not make the distinction between crisis and emergency, we may miss out on the opportunity to think systemically about harm and develop an organizing strategy to address it and instead wind up in constant rapid response mode. On the other hand, if we respond to everything only as though it is a systemic crisis alone, we will be unable to respond fast enough to a life-threatening or other emergency. Noting these differences allow us to create larger scale circuits of care that offer both short and longer term care for individuals while pushing back on the systems that may be at play in creating the crisis.



Emergency Response

An emergency is most commonly defined as an immediate threat to someone's life or physical wellbeing. An emergency requires a quick and skilled response to interrupt.

Both emergency response and crisis response use similar de-escalation and response strategies. Your emergency or crisis response group will need to have practiced communication and clear roles among your team members. You will likely need two to four team members who accompany a person during the moment of emergency and someone else in your group who can debrief and support the team members who are working alongside the person who called you for help. You may decide to have another wing of your team doing follow-up and check-ins with people after the first time you meet them. Your team will be equipped with everything from condoms and naloxone to granola bars and cigarettes as part of your back pack of must-have treasures. For about 22 years, my purse was brimming with my favorite items to have on hand including lavender essential oil sprinkled on cotton balls kept in Ziploc bags for easy distribution, Benadryl, condoms, naloxone, syringes, alcohol wipes, baby wipes, band aids, clean underpants, rolling papers, cigarettes, any individually wrapped candy I could find, and ibuprofen.

Maintaining community and self-care practices so that your team members gain skills while also getting time off to recover and allowing for multiple people in your formation to accumulate experience so that you can trade off effectively and often is a part of de-escalation work too. People who are rested and skilled can recognize and react with nuance and care in a way that becomes harder as people get more tired.

It is also important to note that your work does not have to tend to all kinds of crises and emergencies. For example, there is a long history of peer-based mutual aid response to sexual assault. Some rape

crisis groups respond to the immediate emergency and are short term. They offer help finding housing, crisis resources, health care, or other immediate needs. Other groups respond to longer term crises for those who experienced sexual assault. Both may also do structural work to expose and end sexual violence, like calling out sexual harassment by police and demanding that money be moved from the police budget to housing resources. It is crucial that groups name what kind of crisis or emergency you will be responding to and how. Check back in with each other regularly to assess how things are going and if your group needs to rework these lines or needs different or additional resources.

In order to be able to increase the range of situations we were able to respond to, in many formations I have been a part of, we went to as many trainings as we could afford, offered by any group and regardless of political alignment. Knowing the training would be oppressive and out of alignment politically only made it more important for us to attend as we could then tap into insight about how the state and social service systems functioned. This allowed us to better anticipate how the system would react to the emergency or crisis as part of our team's response plan.

We went to multiple 40-hour domestic violence and sexual violence trainings, HIV pre and post test counseling training, and harm reduction trainings on wound care, overdose reversal, and safer injection. I attended every training I could find on trauma and mental health and crisis response. I also went to training on working with young people, working with families, and different kinds of healing strategies and modalities like breath work. I got certified in ear point acupuncture for detox (bit.ly/nadahistory) at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx,²⁰ doula training and abortion doula training, and supporting people through grief and traumatic death.

²⁰Please learn more about this important technique that was developed by Mutulu Shakur in coordination with the Young Lords and Black Liberation Army. This led to the forming of the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (acudetox.com) where you can get certified.

Crisis Response

Usually the term **“crisis”** refers to an ongoing event or series of events (unexpected or predictable) that are dangerous or will lead to increased danger, instability, or stress. It may also be defined as a state of being. For example, the experience of being houseless is an ongoing state of crisis that can also lead to an increase in danger, some of which may be predictable. Crisis can also happen when someone is trying but unable to establish or re-establish stability in their recovery from trauma. If I am leaving a violent relationship or an addiction rehab, I may enter a state of crisis as I attempt to find my way back to safety. In this way, the beginning and end of a crisis can be very individual and tricky to judge.

When we are supporting each other through a crisis, it is imperative that we not end our accompaniment too soon. Unattended to crisis often leads to emergency. For example, people are most likely to overdose when leaving prison or rehab because drug tolerance is low. Typically, release from prison or rehab is viewed as a time when the crisis is over. However, the destabilizing nature of transition from prison or rehab can actually itself be a crisis. Overdose becomes the emergency that good crisis response could have prevented.

Understanding the gradation between crisis and emergency for the people you are supporting and your organization also allows for safety planning for your team and your community members. Safety planning is an essential element in de-escalation and survivor centered/led support work. Providing crisis support to our peers, through mutual aid projects, or in politicized social services can be a meaningful way to avoid emergencies, which in turn, reduces state involvement in people’s lives.

CONCLUSION

“Loving your people and loving questions are, I believe, the two most important qualities that an individual needs today to help create the new kind of politics we need to bring about fundamental social change.”²¹

- GRACE LEE BOGGS

As we are painting a world without policing, it is vital to remember that the blue of the ocean and the blue of the sky are equally beautiful and necessary — and clarity about which blue we are using (and its limits) makes the overall vision more achievable. When we are as precise as we can be about what we are creating and offering, it helps all of us get closer to the horizon of abolition. We get clear through asking loving questions of ourselves, our movements, and the formations we are building.

During this political moment, where our work is in such high demand and we have many new liberatory harm reductionists engaged in loving our people through building and refining community crisis response, it is my hope that these reflections can help us with meaning-making and lead us to the next right questions. As always, these ideas are shared with humility and hope that there will be push back, refinement, and expansion. I am so grateful to remain in the learning community with you through the Building Community Crisis Response meetings and the Transformative Justice Help Desk and for the opportunity to be students of our movement together.

²¹Grace Lee Boggs, “I Must Love the Questions Themselves,” in Grace Lee Boggs: *Selected Speeches* (Detroit: Privately Published, 1990), 21.



The TJ Help Desk offers free consultations to individuals and groups working to interrupt crises and violence without using the police. bit.ly/ICHelpDesk

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