



**Mutual Aid Disaster Relief**

WELCOME PACKET

Although we enthusiastically encourage autonomous action by, with, and for disaster survivors, when people volunteer with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, we ask that they thoroughly orient themselves with our *Welcome Packet*, covering strategies and philosophy, group decision making, health and safety, and other considerations for living and working in a disaster zone which helps prepare them for Mutual Aid Disaster Relief activities and actions.

Introduction	What to Expect	Code of Conduct
Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Guiding Principles	Our History/Organizational Structure

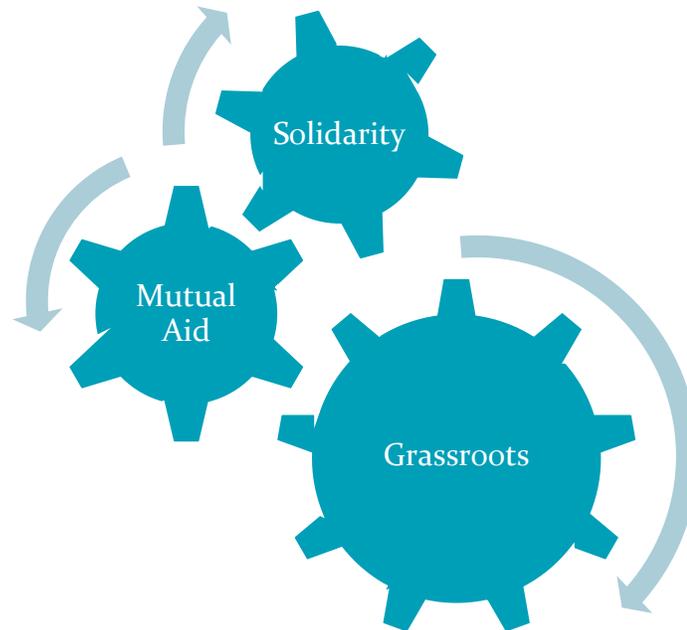
For questions, concerns, or to help us improve this packet contact [mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com](mailto:mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com)

in solidarity,  
Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Training Committee



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	pg. 3
What to expect	pg. 4
Affinity groups	pg. 5
Flood response safety	pg. 6
More in depth health and safety information	pg. 6
Code of conduct	pg. 7
Consent	pg. 7
Relationships	pg. 8
Drugs and Alcohol	pg. 8
Inclusion	pg. 9
Cross-cultural respect	pg. 9
Healing spaces	pg. 9
Property destruction	pg. 9
Etc.	pg. 9
Free association	pg. 10
Building a culture of compassion and respect	pg. 10
Mission, vision and core values	pg. 12
Mission	pg. 12
Vision	pg. 12
Core Values	pg. 13
Guiding Principles	pg. 14
Our History	pg. 15
Organizational Structure	pg. 17
National Network	pg. 17
Steering Committee	pg. 18
Working Groups	pg. 18



## INTRODUCTION

With coming climate change and the extreme weather that will accompany it, we come face to face with our own vulnerability. Super storms like Katrina and Sandy will most likely become far more prevalent.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is a decentralized network and organization that people can plug into, facilitating the ability of people to give and receive aid based on a grassroots, mutual aid and solidarity model borrowed from social movements that has been proven time and again, from New Orleans to Occupy Sandy to OpOK to Occupy Boulder Relief to be more effective and efficient in responding to disasters and crisis than a top-down approach.

Hierarchical relationships, based on class and race, forced into light by a disaster, are only reinforced by charitable institutions unless they address privilege and power. Self-determination and agency are critical in this process. People impacted by disasters have more of a stake in their own survival and well-being than well-intentioned paternalistic givers of charity, and will firmly grasp the tools to participate in a communal recovery given the chance.

Survivors of disasters look for accomplices who can assist them in achieving this communal recovery without imposing the stigma of receiving assistance. This is what we are here to facilitate.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief responds in a flexible, responsive and effective manner by not assuming everybody's needs are the same or that we know best what a community needs,

but instead acts humbly, asking, listening, and responding. To us, disaster survivors have a right to be part of a communal recovery. We recognize survivors' rights to determine what their needs are and how best others could assist them and we utilize the knowledge, skills and networks gained from our background in social movement organizing to respond from below, with direct action and no bureaucracy or red tape. This mutual aid, solidarity-based, grassroots approach to disaster relief, in addition to meeting the self-determined needs of disaster survivors more effectively, has the added benefit of building bridges, serving to unite disparate elements of social justice and liberation movements and build power from below.

Whether future disasters become focal points for the powerful to further entrench policies that uphold their privilege and political, social, and economic disparities or whether they become opportunities to build more empowered and resilient individuals and communities and strengthen our movements for radical social change is up to us and the choices we make.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

While Mutual Aid Disaster Relief strives to create safe and accessible spaces for people wanting and willing to participate in disaster relief, it is wise to consider your emotional, physical, and mental capacities and limitations prior to deciding to deploy to a disaster zone. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief strives to find accessible housing, spaces, and projects for those who are differently abled, those with personal safety concerns, and any other concerns with regards to emotion, mental, or physical capacity. However, disaster zones are inherently unsafe and traumatic. Also, when attending to the needs of disaster survivors, particularly in spaces we may be unfamiliar with, we cannot speak for, or vouch for, the knowledge of locals with regards to certain sensitivities and material realities. Often our movements work in relatively safe microcosms, familiar activist milieus. With this type of work, in contrast, we are engaged with a much broader population, some of whom may not be familiar with things we take for granted. This presents a lot of opportunity for consciousness-raising, but also presents many challenges as well. We encourage individuals and affinity groups to be proactive in attempting to carve out safer spaces for things such as awareness of gender, neuro-divergence, and so forth when traveling to somebody else's community to do relief work. But there is no way to guarantee these spaces will arise as much as we hope that they will.

Additionally, while engaging in disaster spaces, we'd encourage you to think about the level of emotional wellbeing and capacity you have. When we are in these spaces, we want to take care of ourselves, our comrades, and address any conflicts which arise, so that we can do this work sustainably for the long haul. At the same time, we also want to prioritize the survival programs we are doing on the ground for impacted communities and those affected by the disaster. So while we are wanting to help people involved work through interpersonal conflicts, we strongly encourage affinity groups to take on the work of resolving conflict within their squad as much as possible. Remember, compromise is essential to consensus. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief wishes to prioritize the wellbeing of volunteers and integrate healing justice in all aspects of our work. We also are limited by time and resources and encourage you to think about your abilities and capacities honestly. None of us want to be a drain on resources to those affected, and so, at times, it may be more strategic for some individuals to

sometimes find other ways to engage in supporting people's survival and self-determination in the context of disasters without being physically present. If you are curious and interested in offering behind the scenes support roles, email us, and we can plug you in!

During disaster relief work, volunteers on the ground should, ideally, brief each morning on community-vocalized needs and organize response based on affinity groups, number of volunteers available, resources available, and/or group needs and assessments before heading to work sites.

More in depth weekly meetings can be organized by volunteers on the ground to address mobilization efforts, update on resources as well as resources needed and how to organize their procurement, working group or affinity group updates and any other organizational and/or emotional processing that is needed.

It is very difficult to do long periods of intense solidarity work without feeling emotionally exhausted. Injustice hits you in the face again with every new case - each new personal tragedy. Since grassroots solidarity requires a genuine emotional engagement with those we're supporting, it also exposes us to their suffering. We may always dismiss it as trivial in comparison, and while it's true that we may not be the ones experiencing the real violence or loss, we are susceptible to the cumulative effects of exposure to story after story. However, it is also possible to help others through crisis while limiting vicarious trauma and gain a new sense of what is possible through the process. We ask that even in times of crisis, you take time to make your physical and emotional well-being a priority by practicing self-care and giving yourself adequate time to rest, recover, and process.

Although there will be people attempting to help facilitate and coordinate logistics on the ground, just like in major demonstrations, it is better to come with your own plans and connect those affinity group plans with a larger picture/strategy once you get on the ground. You most likely will not be assigned a role like in other organizations. Although if you need more direction, we will try to accommodate. The good side of that is there's lots of space to jump in, find a need and fill it. As the Zapatistas say, we are "asking while walking". We don't have everything figured out. We just know that volunteers are not cogs in a capitalist or non-profit industry machine. We are all co-decision-makers and each one of us brings unique talents, history, experience, skills, and knowledge. So if disaster survivors you meet need something (and we hope you are asking and listening), you are empowered to assist them in meeting that need with honesty, creativity, solidarity, and integrity. Only with empowered volunteers can we contribute to the empowerment of disaster survivors.

## Affinity groups

An affinity group is a small group of people who come together to prepare for and take direct action. Affinity groups are organized in a nonhierarchical and autonomous way, there are no leaders and everyone has an equal voice and responsibility. Sometimes, these groups are formed just for one action, but often they are ongoing groups that organize and take part in actions over a number of years. Affinity groups work best when people have something in common (the 'affinity' bit). This affinity might be based on prior friendships and connections, where you live, the issues you want to campaign on, the tactics you want to use or a particular skill you have to offer (e.g. Street Medics, Cleaning Crews, Aid Distribution, Tool Lending Library, Environmental Response, Documenting and intervening in police abuses,

Animal Rescue, Community Kitchens and Community Media Centers), or a mixture of all of these.

Another important aspect of affinity groups is their autonomy – all important decisions are made within the group even if you are participating with others in a larger action. By working closely with a small group of people you can work out what's important for you, and then go out and make it happen. Your affinity group may be part of wider campaigns and networks, but ideally you only need to depend on yourselves. This is especially the case if you work at building up skills within your affinity group, so you can cover your own needs. Affinity groups make good use of resources. Usually 10 groups of 10 people can achieve more than 100 people acting on mass. Because affinity groups can make decisions autonomously on actions, they can react quickly and creatively if the situation changes. Having a group of people looking out for one another before, during and after an action or during a long and tiring campaign is a useful way to make sure everyone is cared for. Stress, police repression, doubt, fear and campaign setbacks are all dealt with much more easily as part of a group than on your own. Debrief thoroughly, learn from mistakes, socialize and share workloads and skills. Be realistic about what you take on. Take time to celebrate your successes, no matter how small. Look after yourself and encourage everyone else to do the same. Above all, support each other through stressful times and watch out for signs that people may be suffering from burnout. If you are worried about someone, be ready to ease their workload even if it means you get less done as a group.

Joining a mass action can pose a problem of how to maintain your group's autonomy. It can be difficult to plan and act independently, and report on your own actions. This is often caused by relying too much on the overall organizers for information and infrastructure. Affinity groups can come together for mass actions and coordinate their activities via a spokescouncil. Each group sends a representative (often called a spoke) to the spokescouncil meeting, where issues such as tactics, overarching action guidelines and logistics are discussed. What the spoke is empowered to do is up to their affinity group. Spokes may need to consult with their group before discussing or agreeing on certain subjects. The spokescouncil does not take away the autonomy of each individual group – consensus on each proposal has to be achieved not only within each group but also among all groups together. And remember, with consensus the operative question in consenting to a proposal can be: “can I live with this?” rather than “is this perfect and do I agree completely?” These modes of organizing offer a liberating way of organizing – anti-hierarchical, participatory, supportive, directly democratic, empowering, sustainable, creative... Liberating because you work as equals, and liberating because of the things you can achieve together. This is all about creating a world where we don't need leaders and laws. It's about direct democracy. If you also use affinity organizing to plan and carry out effective direct action, you'll be a good step along the way to creating a better world, inside and outside of your group.

## Flood response safety

*Working in flood affected areas have numerous health and safety considerations. The following are safety guidelines for careful review:*

- Risk and insurance: Volunteers serve at their own risk. Primary insurance coverage is the volunteer's own health insurance.

- Homeowner consent: Volunteer work is to be conducted with the consent of the homeowner.
- Age: Youth under 16 are discouraged from participating in work crews. People under 18 should seek parental accompaniment or written permission from their guardians if possible.
- Clothing: Wear boots, long pants and work gloves. Tyvek suits are best for mold removal.
- Face protection: For insulation or sheetrock removal, wear dust masks and goggles. If you are gutting a house, you'll probably need a respirator.
- Chain saws: Chain saws should be used only by experienced adult operators. Face shields and ear protection should be worn.
- Electricity: Before working in homes with wet or damp floors, or when removing sheet rock, be sure the electricity has been turned off.
- Mold: When working with mold, wear an N-95 Respirator, goggles, gloves so that you don't touch mold with your bare hands, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and boots or work shoes. Spray moldy surfaces with a solution consisting of one cup of bleach per one gallon of water. After working with mold, wash hands with soap or hand sanitizer.
- Asbestos: In some older homes, asbestos may be contained in tiles or insulation. In insulation, it may resemble shiny, lightweight gravel, brown or gold in color. If you think you may have encountered asbestos, leave the home and notify the homeowner.
- Generators: Do not use generators inside homes. Generators should only be run outdoors or in well-ventilated areas.
- Sharp objects: Beware of nails, broken glass or other sharp objects. Tetanus and other needed immunizations should be current. Treat wounds with soap, clean water, and, if available, antibiotic ointment.
- Lifting: Always lift with your legs, with knees bent, to minimize back strain. Volunteers with pre-existing health conditions should only perform tasks that are within their limitations.

See <http://MutualAidDisasterRelief.org/resources> for more extensive health and safety information.

## CODE OF CONDUCT

Disaster sites have the potential to be inherently unsafe. They may contain physical threats to health and body, emotional traumas, and strained or fragmented social relationships. We ask everyone involved in Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MAD Relief) projects—local and non-local volunteers, coordinators, and participating community members-- to be proactive in creating a supportive atmosphere where both the physical and emotional safety of others is ensured and validated.

### Consent

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief volunteers and community participants work together on the basis of mutual, active consent. We are resisting disaster capitalism and those responsible for climate chaos in large part because it acts without accountability to or consent from the people it rules over. We cannot replicate the domination and abuse that we're claiming to oppose. In the volatile, high-stress context of disaster, where people meet outside normal social relationships, it is easy to misunderstand each other. Therefore, it is essential to be *more explicit and more careful* in assuring all of our relationships are consensual.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief works in communities that invite and participate in Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, according to impartial need, not religion, race, gender, political affiliation, or any other basis.

- Individual participation in MAD Relief projects is up to whatever extent of each community members' desire and abilities. No person is required to nor should be pressured to accept or participate in MAD Relief support.

All volunteers and community participants must respect the physical and sexual boundaries of other people.

- Ask for explicit verbal consent before touching someone. Consent includes asking, listening, and respecting; it does not include coercion, expectations, or assumptions.
- Never assume consent, especially if drug/alcohol use is involved. Highly intoxicated people are always considered non-consenting.

MAD Relief is survivor centric and survivor oriented, and violence, abuse, sexual assault and discrimination will not be tolerated.

- Perpetrators of sexual violence and harassment are not welcome in MAD Relief spaces and activities and will be asked to leave MAD Relief spaces and activities. Sexual violence by a volunteer is grounds for immediately ending the volunteer's relationship with MAD Relief.
- A perpetrators' presence should not hinder survivors' participation in MAD Relief activities. MAD Relief invites survivors to contact MAD Relief Advocates Stephen Ostrow at (727) 452 5710 or Ellen Zitani at (646) 600 1039 to discuss how we can support you.

*\*Sexual Assault - any non-consensual sexual interaction. Sexual assault happens, and it happens in activist and radical communities as much as anywhere else. Sexual assault is a tool of domination, of taking power, and can rob someone of their self-respect, self-worth, and autonomy. Silence, passivity, and coerced acquiescence do not qualify as consent, nor do body movements or non-verbal responses necessarily constitute consent. Further, if someone is intoxicated, they may not be in a position to give you consent. Consent includes asking, listening, and respecting; it does not include coercion, expectations, or assumptions.*

*\*\* Sexual Harassment - Sexual harassment is unwanted comments, gestures, and/or actions forced on a person without their consent and is directed at them because of their actual or perceived sex, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Harassment includes unwanted whistling, leering, sexist, homophobic or transphobic slurs, persistent requests for someone's name, number or destination after they've said no, sexual names, comments and demands, following, and flashing. Sexual harassment is an interaction that makes one feel sexualized, intimidated, embarrassed, objectified, violated, attacked, or unsafe. It is an interaction that restricts one's movement or makes one modify their behavior in an attempt to avoid the possibility of being verbally and/or physically harassed. No form of harassment is ever okay; everyone should be treated with respect, dignity, and empathy.*

## Relationships

It is the unfortunate reality of being impacted by a disaster alone that might separate a Mutual Aid Disaster Relief volunteer from a community member. Disaster survivors constitute an eclectic mix of human beings who have endured different experiences, and there is no reason why their status as a disaster survivor should determine what kind of relationship you have and how close you get to a given individual. However, it can be unwise to get involved in a sexual relationship with someone who has just endured a particularly traumatic experience. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief participants do need to be acutely aware of the myriad reasons why relationships might develop. Aside from genuine attraction, this might be triggered by grief (of dead, missing or missed relatives or partners); an irrational sense of awe for those who show kindness in an otherwise hostile environment; the perception that MAD Relief participants are a passport out of misery, etc. With these factors taken into consideration, volunteers need to be cautious about what kind of responsibility and power they might have over a person and act accordingly.

## Drugs and Alcohol

We know people self-medicate in different ways, but recreational drugs and alcohol have the potential to cause harm to the organization's reputation and increase the risk of sexual

violence. Especially at a location offered to us by people of faith, be mindful of behavior that you might find normal in your everyday life back at home, but could burn bridges for Mutual Aid Disaster Relief if you engage in it in this setting. Please respect our hosts and do not use recreational drugs and alcohol at Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces.

## Inclusion

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief spaces are community centers. People come in for the first time very often. We know you will probably be very busy with very important work in these spaces. We ask that if you are at a mutual aid disaster relief space, please make an effort to extend warm greetings to people who come through the doors or look like they may need assistance. Our model is more effective because it is participatory and inclusive. But it depends on everybody to keep that inclusive spirit and extend it outward. Often times people expect aid that comes with stigmatizing, and bureaucratic hangups. It's up to all of us to carve out an alternative, truly liberatory space.

## Cross-cultural respect

We acknowledge the difference in choice and power between someone impacted by a disaster and the volunteers and organizations that respond with assistance.

- We ask MAD Relief volunteers to commit to centering the needs, experience, and cultural values of people in communities in which we are invited to work. Respect people's opinions, beliefs, experiences and differing points of view.
- We encourage all volunteers to educate themselves on local histories and cultures, on post-traumatic stress, and on the privileges they bring with them as part of their work.

## Healing spaces

While ultimately our goal is to support collective responses to build diverse, connected community, MAD Relief acknowledges the need and right, at times, to define exclusionary healing spaces and decision-making bodies to center, elevate, and protect the voices and experiences of particularly vulnerable people aligned around identities of race, gender, sexuality, faith, ability, relationship to disaster or place (i.e. disaster survivors or local volunteers), parent/guardian status, or other need.

## Property Destruction

We recognize autonomy, decentralization, and the necessity of direct action to support disaster survivors, and we respect people's choices to determine the tactics that they believe are most likely to strengthen our movements for collective liberation. *However, people and groups do not engage in property destruction under the name Mutual Aid Disaster Relief.*

## Etc.

MAD Relief volunteers must not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of fraud, harassment, discrimination, physical or verbal violence, intimidation, favoritism, or exploitation of community members or each other.

MAD Relief volunteers may not accept money, gifts, services, sexual relationships, or any other form of coercion or exploitation in exchange for assistance.

## Free association

Failure to respect these guidelines and other egregious violations of volunteer or community safety may result in “free dissociation” of the violating person from all MAD Relief spaces, activities, and resources.

- Volunteers and community members have the right to leave situations where they feel threatened. MAD Relief will work with people to try to find alternatives in which they feel safe, if possible.
- Violators of this Code of Conduct may be asked to temporarily or permanently leave MAD Relief spaces, including volunteer housing, distribution points, work sites, or other operating spaces.
- When possible, MAD Relief seeks to resolve conflicts through de-escalation and mediation, including seeking alternative spaces or roles for people, especially disaster-impacted community members, who have violated MAD Relief guidelines.
- In extreme cases, MAD Relief may refuse support to people whose behavior harms or threatens harm to others.

## Building a culture of compassion and respect

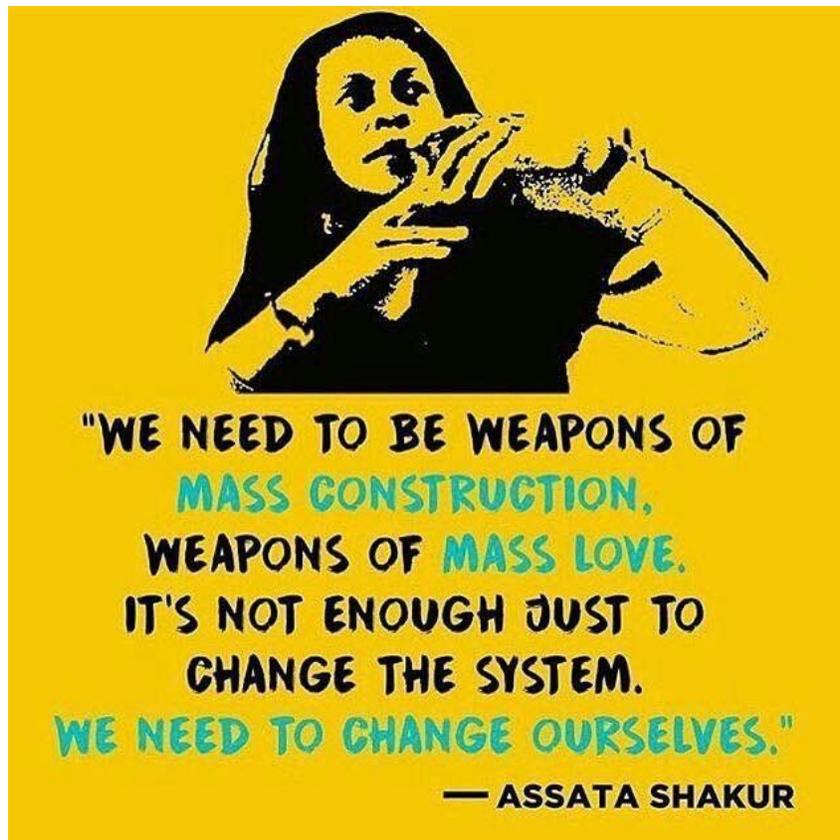
Although this code of conduct is critically important to our work and ensuring the wellbeing of all participants, it is just a stepping stone. We don't want to simply avoid disasters, whether personal or collective. We want to prefigure the world that we know is possible and are attempting to create. This applies to how we relate to each other interpersonally as well. We are all in this together with the same good intentions of making the world a better place and creating safe and inclusive environments for patrons, donors, volunteers, and any others who find themselves participants.

But the dominant culture teaches us to use violence, coercion, competition, individualism, and commodification to minimize the potential for collective action. It also conditions us to believe that individual greed will somehow lead to a fair and efficient system. It teaches us to vote our preference without considering the whole, not to expect good decisions, and to focus on rules and mechanical procedures instead of spirit and attitudes. Developing open and honest communication through patience and collaboration is essential to unlearning those patterns and creating new and alternative ways of working collectively. Practice the following tips as much as you are able in order to build an organizational culture of compassion and respect. Remember, we don't have to wait until after the revolution to embody and exemplify the type of society we want to create, we can imagine it into being in the shadows of this one.

- Don't build up resentment. Please talk with the appropriate participant(s) before anything gets out of hand. When you do critique, critique inappropriate behaviors, not the person. If you see a behavior that is inappropriate, intervene. Don't wait for someone else to address it – especially around issues of oppression. Be open to critique or challenges of ideas, patterns, or behaviors and attempt to avoid defensiveness. None of us are perfect, and we need each other to become who we dream we could be.
- In addition to “calling out” when necessary, consider “calling in” and challenging oppressive behavior in a way that helps people grow. Ngọc Loan Trần on [Black Girl Dangerous](#) describes calling in as *“a practice of pulling folks back in who have strayed from us. It means extending to ourselves the reality that we will and do fuck up, we stray, and there will always be a chance for us to return. Calling in as a practice of loving each other enough to allow each other to make mistakes, a*

*practice of loving ourselves enough to know that what we're trying to do here is a radical unlearning of everything we have been configured to believe is normal."*

- Be aware of the collective vibe. Notice who is angry or uncomfortable and address it early on. Allow for all voices to be heard. Make it a point to involve people who are less vocal and find alternative ways for those who want to add to the conversation to do so. If you traditionally remain quiet or struggle to articulate yourself, be courageous and try to trust your fellow participants. Alternatively, if you know yourself to be more outgoing and verbal, take time to consider how your participation may silence others.
- Each person has experiences and information to share, each person has a piece of the truth, and each person can learn, especially when we compassionately listen to each other. This may mean taking an hour, a day, or a week to really think through and ask questions of the other or others in the conversation. This also means taking into account cues from people in the communities you are working with both when you are interacting with them and when you are not.
- Pay attention to language, especially your own use of profanity and its impact on those around you. Be aware that others might not understand your acronyms and could feel alienated by too much activist jargon that they don't understand. Don't use alcohol, drugs or weapons in places where they can endanger people, but instead be mindful of appropriate times to use alcohol or drugs.
- Be respectful of the value of others' time, keep confidentiality when appropriate, and be aware of the effects of your actions on others and communities around you.
- Respect the work and ability of others. A note of encouragement or complimenting somebody on a job well done can brighten up their day and make the stress and heartache we may experience more bearable.



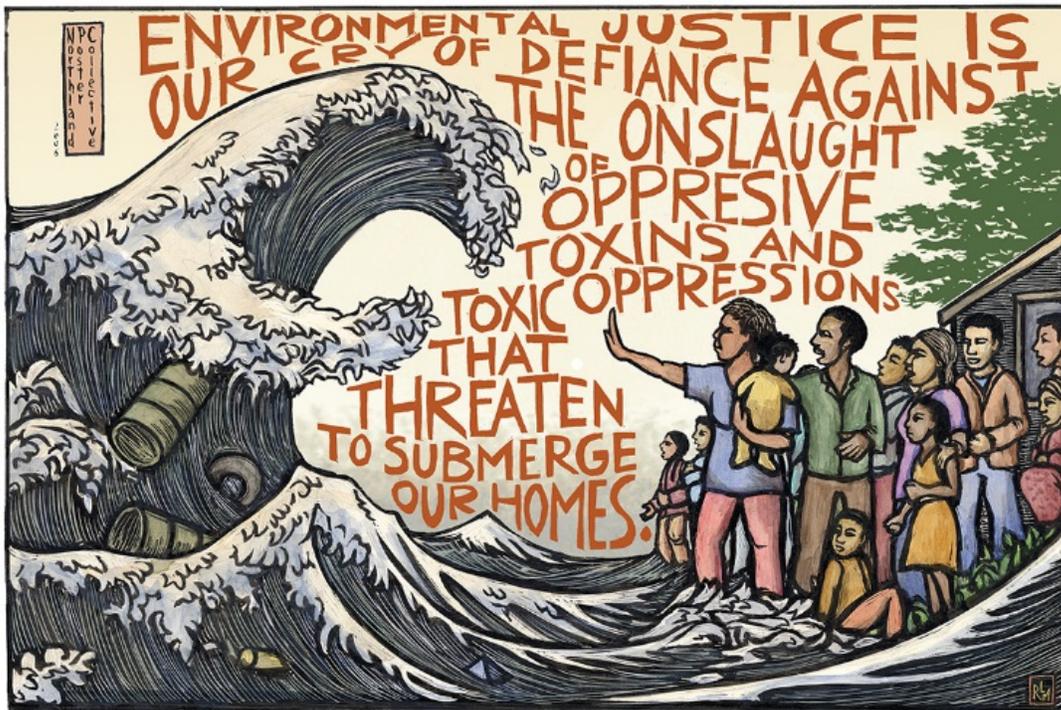
## MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES

### Mission

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is a grassroots network whose mission is to provide disaster relief based on the principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and autonomous direct action. By working with, listening to, and supporting impacted communities, especially their most vulnerable members, to lead their own recovery, we build long-term, sustainable and resilient communities.

### Vision

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief envisions strong, vibrant, resilient, connected, and empowered individuals and communities as part of an awakened civil society that will restore hope following crisis, and turn the tide against disaster capitalism and climate chaos, in favor of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.



## Core Values

*Mutual Aid:* Voluntary, reciprocal, participatory assistance among equals and being with, not for, disaster survivors.

*Solidarity not charity!* Disaster survivors themselves are the first responders to crisis; the role of outside aid is to support survivors to support each other. The privileges associated with aid organizations and aid workers—which may include access to material resources, freedom of movement, skills, knowledge, experience, and influence—are leveraged in support of disaster survivor’s self-determination and survival in crisis, and their long-term resilience afterwards, ultimately redistributing these forms of power to the most marginalized.

*Self-determination:* Individuals and communities impacted by disaster have the agency, ability, and power to make their own decisions and choices about their lives, recovery, and long-term resilience, without interference or coercion from outside forces.

*Mandar obedeciendo and Subsidiarity:* The Zapatista principle of *mandar obedeciendo*-- leadership from below-- teaches that those who command positions of power, wealth, and influence should obey the direction of those with the least. The Catholic principle of subsidiarity teaches that the most effective decisions and actions take place at the level of those closest to the problem or most impacted by the solution. By embracing and applying these principles, disaster responders have a responsibility to center and elevate the leadership of disaster survivors, especially those in the most vulnerable and marginalized communities.

*Participation and Horizontality:* Decentralization and sharing of power within groups and communities reduces hierarchies and power imbalances within and between groups of people, enabling disaster survivors and responders to participate fully in rebuilding a better world together.

*Autonomous Direct Action:* Saving lives, homes, and communities in the event and aftermath of disaster may require taking bold action without waiting for permission from authorities. Disaster survivors themselves are the most important authority on just action.

*Intersectionality:* Historical and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination work together to make some people and groups more vulnerable to different types of disaster and during the rebuilding process. A just disaster response acknowledges, adapts to, and addresses the different needs, priorities, and perspectives of diverse disaster survivors.

*Sustainability:* Sustainable disaster recovery encompasses a respect for the intersectionality of all living systems, community norms and practices, as well as the distribution of knowledge about ecologically-sound and economically viable systems designs, which provide for their own needs and do not exploit or pollute. Skills training and upskilling are shared within the community and people are empowered to create or regenerate diverse, resilient communities that meet immediate ecological, economic, and social needs while increasing the health of human bodies, relationships, and the ecosystems in which they are embedded.

*Dual Power:* A strategy for the bottom-up transformation and replacement of existing institutions and mechanisms of society with self-organized counter-institutions. Disaster response that simultaneously opposes oppressive and exploitative structures while building alternative, pre-figurative structures for collective liberation and resilience unites disparate elements of revolutionary and reformist movements and meets unmet needs without waiting until “after the revolution”.

*Collective Liberation:* In the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free”. All struggles are intimately connected and movements must work together and share knowledge, power, and resources in order to bring about a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world free of any kind of unjust oppression of others or the earth.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

\*We are engaged in a horizontal, multidimensional and multidirectional process that contributes to the liberation of everyone involved, not charitable acts. This means we share resources, skills, experience, knowledge and ideas without perpetuating relationships based on hierarchical power.

\*We seek as much as possible to break down the barriers between givers and receivers of aid. Everyone has something to teach and something to share. And we all need assistance at times. We seek to acknowledge, challenge and subvert perceived and actual power imbalances, and use any privileges we have—including access to material resources, freedom of movement, skills, knowledge, experience, and decision-making influence—to support people's self-determination and survival in crisis and their long-term resilience afterwards, ultimately bridging the gulf between ourselves and "others".

\*We recognize that "natural" disasters are different in degree, but not in kind from the ongoing experiences of social inequality inherent in a capitalist, racist, colonialist, and patriarchal society. Therefore, we oppose and seek to confront and dismantle these and all other systems of domination and oppression within our society and within ourselves.

\*We recognize disaster survivors' rights to determine what their needs are and how best others could assist them. We therefore commit ourselves to acting humbly, asking, listening, and responding, while embodying in our current actions the future society we want to create. We believe in creative grassroots organizing and action that prioritizes and highlights the voices and power of marginalized individuals and communities and furthers their capacity to take action on their own behalf.

\*We engage in and encourage autonomous direct action, an alternative to bureaucracy and red tape, including the creation of new, alternative projects in line with these principles to assist people's self-determination, acquisition of additional resources, and to increase their resilience. At the same time, we believe in democratizing knowledge, sharing experience, and engaging with technical experts when needed to ensure safety and quality of work.

\*We believe in a participatory, horizontal, decentralized movement-building model of social change from below. This requires shared leadership and decision-making in an environment that is safe and inclusive for all participants. We, therefore, strive to integrate these principles into our organizing and decision-making processes.

\*We recognize that disasters are times of localized upheaval and suffering, but are also opportunities for the rich and powerful to consolidate power and to take advantage of shocks in order to institute economic reforms that further reinforce their privileged status. We oppose this disaster capitalism and affirm our commitment to environmental, social, economic, and climate justice. Instead, we see the sense of community and mutual aid that develops in the wake of crisis as fertile ground to merge social movement theory and praxis by supporting and enabling community members to help themselves and each other.

\*As natural disasters increase in intensity and frequency, we recognize that our hope for a livable future rests in developing resilient preparation for and response to crisis as individuals and communities, while simultaneously opposing intensive resource extraction and other root causes of climate change. We support community resistance to resource extraction, environmental injustice, and poverty, and community-led adaptation to climate change, as governments and

other large institutions have not responded to climate change with the urgency, gravity, or support required to avert climate chaos.

\*We believe in being accountable to the communities and people we serve as well as ourselves. We therefore recognize, honor and respect the differences across cultures, traditions, and religions in regards to experiences, languages, food, clothing, personal space, relationships, and other differences even if we do not agree with them. In recognition of this, we listen and support rather than prescribe solutions based on our own personal or cultural values, while still staying honest and authentic to ourselves and our principles.

## OUR HISTORY



New Orleans, a few days after Hurricane Katrina. In this apocalyptic atmosphere, here and there, life was reorganizing itself. In the face of the inaction of the public authorities, who were too busy cleaning up the tourist areas of the French Quarter, protecting shops, and responding with automatic rifles to demands for help from the poorer city dwellers, forgotten forms of community solidarity were reborn. In spite of occasionally strong-armed attempts to evacuate the area, in spite of white supremacist mobs hunting and killing unarmed black community members, a lot of people refused to leave the city. For those who refused to be deported like “environmental refugees” all over the country, and for those who came from all around to join them in solidarity, responding to a call from Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther, self-organization came back to the fore.

In a few weeks’ time, volunteer first aid first responders, called “street medics” for their work as first aid providers at protests, formed the Common Ground Clinic. From the very first days, this clinic provided free and effective treatment, including holistic, alternative, and western medicine to those who needed it, thanks to the constant influx of volunteers. The clinic, Malik’s house, and other newly formed Common Ground sites like the volunteer housing of those who came to clean and rebuild flooded homes became bases of daily resistance to the clean-sweep operation of government bulldozers, which were trying to turn parts of the city into a pasture for property developers.

People came from global justice, anti-war, anarchist, and other movements that survived state crackdown on dissent. Individuals from Food Not Bombs, Indymedia, Veterans for Peace, street medic and housing rights collectives, all joined together to set up popular kitchens, provide free medical care, engage in building takeovers to prevent their destruction, and more. Despite the presence of at least one [misogynistic agent provocateur](#), Common Ground created additional health clinics, a legal clinic, built community gardens, operated a women’s shelter, distributed aid, established a tool-lending library and radio station, gutted houses, cleaned up debris, documented police abuses, created community media centers, bio-remediated the soil, and replanted wetlands to build a barrier against the next storm.

People's willingness to engage in direct action found a new context in defending public housing, re-opening shuttered school doors, delivering much needed supplies past checkpoints, and helping community members maintain their historic centers of worship despite the opposition of church hierarchies. The experience and wisdom gained from mass mobilizations against globalization melded with the legacy of the Black Panthers survival programs. This practical knowledge accumulated in the course of several lifetimes of social movement practice all found a space where it could be deployed.

The devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina gave movements for liberation and others devoted to social transformation the opportunity to achieve an unfamiliar cohesion and unity that transcended the tired old divisions based on ideology or tactics. Street kitchens require building up provisions beforehand; emergency medical aid requires the acquisition of necessary knowledge and materials, as does the setting up of pirate radios. The political richness of such experiences is assured by the joy they contain, the way they transcend individual stoicism, and their manifestation of a tangible reality that escapes the daily ambience of order and work

Whoever knew the penniless joy of these New Orleans neighborhoods before the catastrophe, their defiance towards the state and the widespread practice of making do with what's available wouldn't be at all surprised by what became possible there. On the other hand, anyone trapped in the anemic and atomized everyday routine of our residential deserts might doubt that such determination could be found anywhere anymore.

Common Ground was not an activist utopia. Despite anti-oppression trainings and other limited attempts at stemming oppressive behavior, racism and sexism still were present. In addition, one early leader of Common Ground Relief, Brandon Darby, who later was revealed to be an FBI informant and agent provocateur, used his position of leadership to take advantage of young women, and alienated many people by his domineering misogynist tendencies, militant posturing and other poor behavior. When volunteers insisted that this problematic behavior be addressed, those people rather than the perpetrator were pushed out of the organization. The problems also extended far beyond one individual. Similar to how in disaster capitalism, the economic elite take advantage of the situation to further entrench their privilege and power and introduce neoliberal economic reforms, in disaster patriarchy, which was on full display in Common Ground, the sense of crisis and urgency was taken advantage of by people who used it as an excuse to bypass their principles for expediency. Valorization of hard and constant physical labor, a crisis-laden environment, militant posturing, minimization or degradation of emotion and basic human needs - these were all red flags that painted a toxic and unsustainable organizing culture and were not appropriately addressed. It takes a constant organizational self-awareness and willingness to critically reflect in order to not fall back into the trap of patriarchal, colonial, or other oppressive modes within organizing efforts.

These examples of Common Ground not living up to its ideals should not be glossed over or ignored. They are, in fact, critical to acknowledge and learn from. At the same time, it does not undo the critical, groundbreaking disaster relief solidarity work that Common Ground pioneered. It is often not a matter of whether manifestations of hierarchical power arise in our social movements and organizations, but when. When this does happen, it is critical to name it for what it is, and that this power be contested, opposed, and composted for something new to grow in its place.

Common Ground can be thought of as a mediating organization linking the traditional revolutionary organizing style of the Black Panthers and the diffuse leadership or horizontalism of Occupy Sandy. All three didn't share decision-making power within their organizations equally, but all three did share power with the communities they were in support of, listening, asking, and responding to people's needs, while articulating support for radical social change.

Fast-forward several years and an earthquake has just devastated Haiti. Most of us have left New Orleans and Common Ground and focused again on building other movements like the International Solidarity Movement, No Mas Muertes, Earth First! Rain Forest Action Network, Engineers Without Borders, Mountain Justice, the Beehive Collective, what became the Occupy Movement and countless others. But finding each other through acting directly and in concert with people affected to achieve their survival and other needs, besides giving us a heightened sense of inner power and fertilized imaginations, also built bonds that survived the years. Some people reconnected temporarily under the name Mutual Aid Disaster Relief in Haiti and sent several teams into Haiti providing medical care, supplies and assistance.

Many of us helped shut down Wall Street, however briefly, as part of the Occupy Movement and participated in local encampments. Occupy Wall Street began in New York's Zuccotti Park in 2011, where a number of protesters attempted to take nonviolent direct action to shut down Wall Street and raise awareness about issues of economic injustice and inequality. Many of us also participated in Occupy Sandy, the grassroots disaster relief network that emerged out of Occupy to provide mutual aid to communities affected by Superstorm Sandy. Occupy Sandy programs included medical assistance, construction, a tool lending library, volunteer mold removal, free meals, distribution of aid, free legal help, a free store, educational services, and more. OpOK, Boulder Flood Relief, the examples are numerous and clear. Mutual aid and solidarity is far more effective and efficient than top down approaches. Even the [Department of Homeland Security](#), ordinarily diametrically opposed to the work of anarchists, anti-authoritarians, anti-capitalists, and other dreamers of a better world, concedes the superior effectiveness of this horizontal, decentralized, network model compared to the top down command and control one.

Mutual aid disaster relief is a radical approach to disaster relief and to social movement organizing. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, the organization and network, acknowledges organizational failures of Common Ground and seeks to learn from those mistakes, build on lessons learned from decades of community-led disaster response, and ensure that best practices, relationships, and resources are ready to be deployed to support communities impacted by future disasters.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief has continued the legacy of autonomous, decentralized, and liberatory disaster relief by responding to the historic floods in Baton Rouge, flooding in West Virginia, Hurricane Matthew, Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Irma, and Hurricane Maria - building wellness centers, providing life-saving medication, cleaning debris, gutting flooded homes, distributing supplies, assisting with sustainable rebuilding efforts through water purification and solar infrastructure, tarping roofs, advocating for incarcerated prisoners, amplifying other liberatory relief efforts, and many more activities to support people's survival, empowerment, and self-determination.

Reconnecting with such gestures, buried under years of normalized life, is the only practicable means of not sinking down with the world. The time has come when we take these up once more. Extreme storms are increasing in intensity and frequency. Climate change is threatening life as we know it. The time to build a permanent network to respond, from below and from the left, to these and other disasters is now, and we welcome you to help write that history with us.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### National network

Our national network is made up of many eco-activists, social justice activists, global justice activists, permaculturalists, community organizers, and others who are actively organizing

around supporting disaster survivors in a spirit of mutual aid and solidarity. It is a decentralized network, defined by the character and creativity of a multitude of communities and drawn together by our collective commitment to stand in solidarity with those impacted by disasters and turn the tide in favor of climate justice. We build our network through education and action. We are deeply moved by the Black Panther survival programs which served the aim of satisfying immediate needs while simultaneously raising people's consciousness. Rooted in our history and experiences of social movement organizing we see our disaster relief work in the context of social struggle and believe that we must simultaneously address people's immediate self-determined needs for survival and organize for fundamental shifts in the way we relate to each other and the earth.

## Steering committee

The steering committee is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's main organizing body, comprising a dynamic group of about a dozen individuals from around the country. Many Steering Committee members have been involved in other mutual aid disaster relief projects including Common Ground Relief and Occupy Sandy. Steering Committee members educate, organize, and mobilize support around Mutual Aid Disaster Relief projects in their respective communities, regions and networks. They also provide Mutual Aid Disaster Relief with long-term organizational continuity and sustainability, work to build leadership within the national network, and work closely with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief working groups to ensure continuity with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief's campaigns, needs, and processes.

## Working groups

Semi-autonomous working groups exist within the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief network to help drive certain aspects of our work forward. Some working groups are temporary and are formed around specific needs such as campaign research or location specific organizing. Other working groups are more permanent, such as supplies distribution, medical, animal rescue, environmental/permaculture, and media/communications. Working groups communicate via conference calls, emails, listservs, and/or on the ground and are a point of access where anyone in the network can become more involved in shaping the direction of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief. To get involved with a working group, or to start a new one, contact us at [mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com](mailto:mutualaiddisasterrelief@gmail.com)

In addition, we believe in horizontalism, decentralization and that the most effective decisions and actions take place at the level of those closest to the problem or most impacted by the solution. Therefore we strongly encourage the formation of affinity groups and, if needed, spokescouncils, to promote self-organization and autonomy within the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief network, especially in the event of a large disaster response mobilization.

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*We know this is a lot of information. But thank you for taking the time to go through it. There is a seat at our table if you care to join us. We know we need each other now more than ever. And we look forward to supporting disaster-impacted communities and turning the tide against disaster capitalism together. Please email us if you have any further questions!*

- Mutual Aid Disaster Relief