




**BUILDING  
COORDINATED  
CRISIS RESPONSE  
LEARNING SPACE**

**2022-2023**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>What Is the Interrupting Criminalization Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space?</u></a>	3
<a href="#"><u>Who Participates in the Space?</u></a>	5
<a href="#"><u>What Kinds of Community Crisis Response Are We Building?</u></a>	6
<a href="#"><u>Who Are We Building it For?</u></a>	9
<a href="#"><u>Who is Responding?</u></a>	12
<a href="#"><u>Program Design</u></a>	13
<a href="#"><u>How Will People Access Community Crisis Response Programs?</u></a>	17
<a href="#"><u>Tech Is Not Always the Answer, and Can Be a Danger: Important Notes On Digital Security</u></a>	20
<a href="#"><u>Outreach</u></a>	24
<a href="#"><u>Recruitment &amp; Training</u></a>	26
<a href="#"><u>Evaluation</u></a>	27
<a href="#"><u>How Do We Resource Our Work?</u></a>	28
<a href="#"><u>Landscape of Community Crisis Response Programs</u></a>	30
<a href="#"><u>Lessons</u></a>	31
<a href="#"><u>Appendix</u></a>	34

This report was authored by Andrea J. Ritchie, with the support of the Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space facilitation team, Shira Hassan, Mimi Kim, Shannon Perez-Darby, Megyung Chung, Maria Thomas, and Sheila Nezhad, with deep gratitude to everyone who participated in the BCCR learning space over the past two years.

# WHAT IS THE INTERRUPTING CRIMINALIZATION BUILDING COORDINATED CRISIS RESPONSE LEARNING SPACE?

Interrupting Criminalization (IC) is a movement resource hub offering tools, resources, cross-movement networks, and learning and practice spaces for organizers, practitioners, and advocates on the cutting edge of efforts to build a world free of criminalization, policing, punishment, and violence.

**The 2020 Uprisings in response to the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and hundreds more since then – at a rate of an average of three police killings a day in the U.S. – spurred increased interest and possibility for creating non-police crisis response programs.**

Based in part on recognition that half to a third of people killed by police are, or are perceived to be, in a mental health crisis at the time and in part on reluctance of police themselves to respond to calls for assistance perceived to be the domain of “social workers” not cops, this increased attention to crisis response manifested in the form of task forces to study the issue, calls for the creation of unarmed municipal crisis response teams, university initiatives that sprang up overnight, the rollout of a coordinated 988 crisis response system nationwide, and the creation of community crisis response programs.

While the term “crisis response teams” is used to refer to a broad spectrum of programs, the vast majority presume continued police involvement, whether as a “co-response” model in which health care providers or social workers respond to crises alongside cops, or cops reach out to a crisis response team if they deem that the situation warrants. [CAHOOTS](#), a Eugene, Oregon-based harm reduction program funded by the municipality and police department to respond to 911 calls in some instances involving “non-criminal situations” gained widespread attention in the summer of 2020, spurring introduction of federal legislation (the [CAHOOTS Act](#)) to fund programs modeled after it across the country. A similar program in Denver, [STAR](#) also rose to national prominence as a similarly promising model, despite critiques from harm reductionists who were initially involved in designing the program only to be pushed out of leadership. Police support for programs like these is often conditioned on maintaining control over both funding and allocation of crisis calls and waned when community groups sought independence and full control over them. Meanwhile, since 2019, in Sacramento and Oakland, California, the Anti Police-Terror Project has been building [Mental Health First](#), an entirely community-based, Black-led crisis response program, and training community members across the country on their model.

**In the context of IC’s efforts to support organizers fighting for divestment from policing and investment in community-based safety strategies, in 2021 we released Defund Police, Invest in Community Care: A Guide to Non-Police Mental Health Responses, offering an in-depth look at the nuts and bolts of each of these program models.**

The report and accompanying [checklist](#) are intended to support organizers advocating for and working to build non-police, community-accountable crisis response teams and programs, flagging key issues and considerations for planning and implementation.

Following the report launch in 2021, IC responded to requests from organizers for a space in which to continue to learn from each other and strategize around this issue by launching a monthly practice space in which organizers can come together for more informal, in-depth discussions of practical and emerging issues in building non-police mental health crisis response.

**Initially known as the Mental Health Practice Space<sup>1</sup>, the Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space is a monthly, virtual, abolitionist, multi-**

**lingual, collaborative learning space in which participants are invited to share knowledge and expertise, as well as questions, uncertainties, nuance, and disagreements.**

We are focused on non-carceral, non-police crisis response and prevention programs. We understand coercive mental health interventions and control to be a carceral response.

The general format of our monthly two-hour sessions is to spend the first hour discussing a particular theme and then invite participants to bring questions, scenarios, and issues to workshop in the second half.

The BCCR planning and facilitation team is made up of people who have both needed and offered community-crisis response completely outside of state sponsored systems, and includes IC co-founder Andrea J. Ritchie, IC Transformative Justice Fellow Shira Hassan, Creative Interventions founder Mimi Kim, Megyung Chung, and Shannon Perez-Darby, supported by Beyond Do No Harm fellow Maria Thomas and IC Operations Manager Sheila Nezhad.

---

<sup>1</sup> We decided to change the name in order to clarify the intended purpose of the space — to support organizers building coordinated crisis response programs — and to move away from ableist notions of mental “health.” We also wanted the name to reflect the fact that, while responses to people with unmet mental health needs loom large in the popular imagination, in reality the crises community members face are wide-ranging and include domestic violence, sexual assault, homophobic and transphobic violence, eviction, housing and food insecurity, and isolation and absence of care for young and elderly people, among others.



# WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE SPACE?

The Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space is an open drop-in space — while some people participate regularly, others come in and out as they need to. The existence of the space is publicized through IC’s newsletter and social media channels, as well as through listservs and networks reaching organizers working to divest from policing, remove police from care settings, and interrupt criminalization in the context of accessing care.

**Over 700 people have participated in the BCCR Learning Space since its inception.**

Throughout its existence, the majority of participants have been in the visioning and planning stages of building a non-police crisis response, with a growing minority (from 5-30%) currently in the process of implementing a non-police crisis response program.

What follows is a brief summary of key questions and lessons that have emerged from the space. We offer them as a resource to guide groups working to build coordinated community-based crisis responses. We strongly encourage groups to consult [Defund Police, Invest in Community Care: A Guide to Non-Police Mental Health Responses](#) and the accompanying [checklist](#) and to read the [Painting the Ocean and the Sky](#) appendix to this report.

In 2024, the Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space will be hosted by the [Just Practice Collaborative](#) — [sign up for updates!](#)

# WHAT KINDS OF COMMUNITY CRISIS RESPONSE ARE WE BUILDING?

As explored in greater detail in the [Painting the Ocean and the Sky](#) reflection by Shira Hassan, a companion piece to this guide published independently as an illustrated zine, the question of what kinds of community crisis response programs we are building has loomed large in the space. As abolitionists committed to disability justice, we are clear about what we don't want in our community crisis response programs: any police involvement, any involvement of coercive state systems such as the family policing system (also known as "foster" or "child welfare" system) or migration enforcement, or any coerced medical interventions.

**But do we have clarity about what we do want? Are you building a:**

- **Peer network** made up of people with shared experiences of crisis and similar relationships to structures of power, in deep connection with each other over time, who offer each other ongoing support, including in times of crisis; examples of this type of program include the Fireweed Collective, Wildflower Alliance, and Project LETS.
- **Mutual aid group** made up of people who share geographies and may share some identities, experiences, and social locations, but who may be strangers to some people who might seek them out when in crisis; examples of this type of program include Mental Health First and Relationships Evolving Possibilities.



[Graphic note #1: Mapping Our Work](#)



- **Social service program** which may be operating with an abolitionist or harm-reduction based politic, and may employ people who share identities, experiences, and social locations with people who might seek them out when in crisis, but ultimately operate within a service provision model; examples of this type of program include Cambridge HEART and the Dream Defenders Healing and Justice Center.

As beautifully articulated in *Painting the Ocean and the Sky*, the type of community crisis response we are building will have have profound ripple effects with respect to:

- What we are able to offer people in crisis
- Our structure
- Our decision-making processes
- Potential legal liability and state intervention
- Confidentiality and reporting requirements

It is therefore critical to get clarity around which approach you will take and why before you begin to design your program and to understand how your decision will shape the crisis response program.

**See the Excerpt from IC internal resource "Things to Consider As We Build Infrastructures of Care" on the next page.**

## WHAT KINDS OF COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGIES ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

People are working to prevent and respond to all kinds of situations without relying on the violence of policing and systems. Individuals and communities across the country practice a **multitude of strategies** to increase safety every day – from looking in on each other, sharing food, housing, money and other resources, intervening in, de-escalating and mediating conflict, offering safe spaces and support for people impacted by violence and conflict, and practicing restorative and transformative justice. Groups are **responding to gun violence**, domestic violence and sexual assault, unmet mental health needs and mental health crises,

fight, houselessness, poverty, and nuisances like litter or loud noise without police. There is no one-size-fits all approach to reducing violence and building safer communities - there are a multitude of strategies to practice, explore, expand, and strengthen, as documented by Interrupting Criminalization and Project Nia’s Million Experiments website and podcast (**millionexperiments.com**) and Mariame Kaba’s Transforming Harm website (**transformharm.org**).

Shira Hassan offers the following framework as a work in progress to help understand a spectrum of community-based safety strategies.

PEER NETWORKS	MUTUAL AID	POLITICIZED SOCIAL SERVICE	SOCIAL SERVICE
Shared experiences	May or may not have shared experiences	May or may not have shared experiences	Generally don’t have shared experiences
In deep relationship with each other	Depth of relationship varies	In less deep relationship	Generally not in ongoing relationship beyond service provision
Currently have similar relationships to power structures, multiple overlapping identities and life experiences	May have similar or different experiences of power structures	Generally have different experiences of power structures – but critique of systemic oppression, disruption of power structures, empowerment of people accessing resources, and putting themselves out of business by ending structural violence that created the need for them to begin with are explicit goals of the organization. May have “off-the books” practices to meet the needs of people structurally excluded from non-politicized social services.	Different experiences of power structures  People offering resources have unchallenged power over people receiving services  Charity model: presumes continued existence of root causes of need for services
<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Peer project for young people ages 12-20 who are from a particular zip code and who are all using drugs or trading sex for money.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Neighbors providing food to people experiencing houselessness in their zipcode. Some neighbors may at some point have experienced houselessness themselves.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> A domestic violence hotline staffed by abolitionists who are also survivors.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> A homeless shelter operated by social workers and licensed professionals.

# WHO ARE WE BUILDING IT FOR?

The question of who we are building coordinated community crisis response for also came up early on in the learning space.

## Who do you envision reaching out to for support in a crisis?

- people over 18 only
- people under 18
- migrants
- criminalized people, including people who are incarcerated, on probation, on parole, or at risk of prosecution
- queer and trans people
- disabled people
- survivors of sexual violence
- survivors domestic violence
- survivors of homophobic and transphobic violence
- people experiencing political repression

Depending on your responses, what specific considerations, trainings, skills, and program characteristics does responding to this group require? How does offering crisis support to this group expand or limit your activities?

## Additional questions to consider:

- Are you building relationships with people who will engage your program before they are in crisis?
- Do you envision making agreements about how they would want and need people to respond to them in a crisis to maximize self-determination and agency? For instance, peer support groups made up of people who use drugs sometimes make overdose contracts ahead of time that name what to do in case of an overdose — who to call, how much Narcan to administer, etc. — so as to preserve self-determination and autonomy and limit harmful consequences.

# WHO ARE WE RESPONDING TO?

In the learning space, we talked about the importance of being crystal clear with ourselves and the people we envision meeting in crisis about what kinds of support we can offer, what kinds of situations we are available to support them through, how, and for how long.

- **Emergencies** — situations in which an individual's life is in immediate danger. Emergency response requires a particular level of skill, training, and availability. If your community crisis response is not equipped to respond to life-threatening situations, it is important to be clear about that and about which kinds of crises you can and cannot respond to.
- **Crisis** — a crisis can be acute (for instance, the sheriff is at the door to enforce an eviction), non-acute (a person has been served an eviction notice and has 30 days to respond), or chronic (a person is undocumented or in an abusive relationship). It is important to be clear about which of these kinds of crises your program will respond to, how, and how quickly.
- **Prevention** — does your program offer crisis prevention skills or programming (such as podmapping, trainings on toxic masculinity, self-defense, tenant organizing, etc.)?
- **Aftercare** — how long do you anticipate accompanying or supporting people in crisis? How? It is important to be clear about where any boundaries lie around ongoing support.

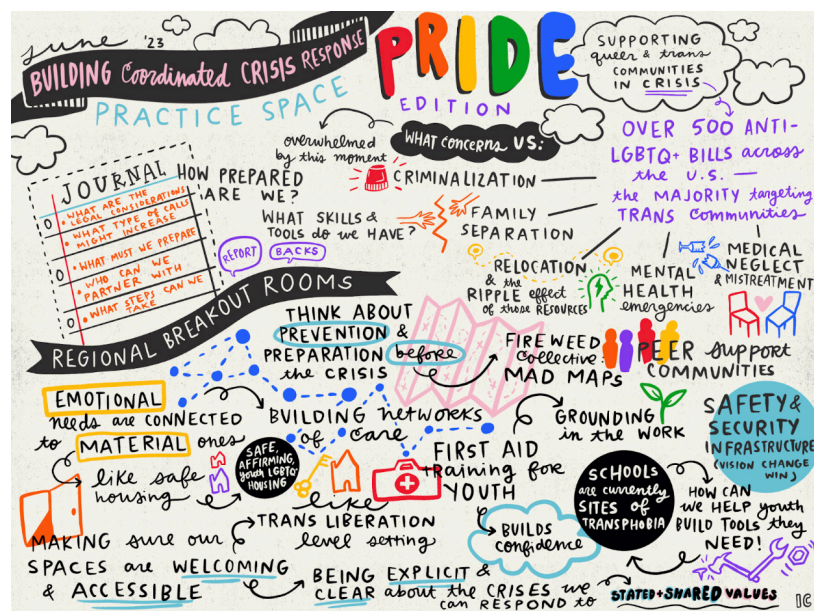
When people are in an emergency or in crisis, these nuances and distinctions often blur, so it is important to provide as much specificity and clarity as possible when planning for and communicating about your community crisis response.

While many crisis response programs are built with a crisis precipitated by unmet mental or physical health needs in mind, it is important to attend to the intersections between domestic, sexual, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist violence and mental and physical health. In other words, you may be responding to an acute crisis that manifests as a mental health crisis, but it may be fueled by an underlying set of conditions — such as ongoing domestic violence, immigration proceedings, or rising legislative and other attacks on trans people's existence.



It is also important to recognize that in many cases crises are precipitated by material needs such as sleep, water, food, housing, drugs, and safety.

It is therefore important to consider how your program will meet these needs, or connect people in crisis with trusted groups who can do so effectively, and make clear to the people you are responding to what kinds of support you are — and are not — able to offer.



[Graphic note #2: Building Coordinated Crisis Response, Pride Edition](#)





Graphic note #3: DV/SV and Crisis Response

# WHO IS RESPONDING?

Our initial [report](#) and checklist highlighted the fact that who responds to crisis can inform the shape the response takes; for instance, licensed health care professionals may prioritize medical interventions, including carceral responses such as coerced medical interventions, involuntary psychiatric holds, mandated medication regimes, etc., while peers committed to disability justice and liberatory harm reduction may be more likely to make every effort to honor the agency and self-determination of people in crisis.

The skill level of people responding can also shape the range of crises the group responds to and the shape the response takes. Responders skilled in de-escalation, violence interruption, and navigating police presence may be more willing to step into situations where there is violence or a risk of violence without contacting police or relying on violence or the threat of violence to diffuse the situation.

**The skills and particular identities of responders can also shape the scope, accessibility, and trust the community has in a crisis response.**

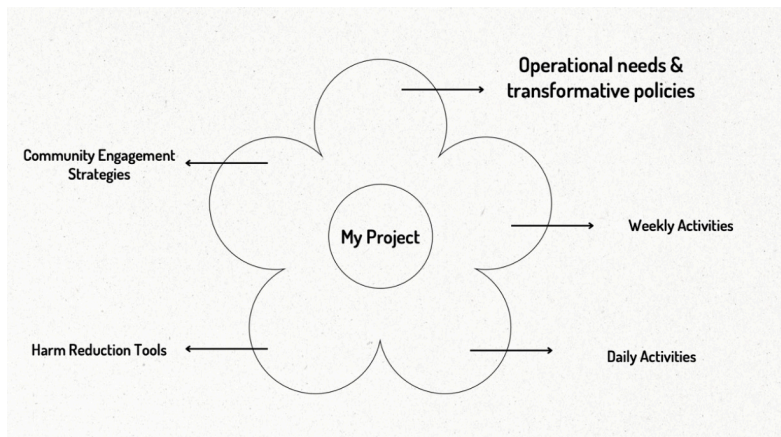
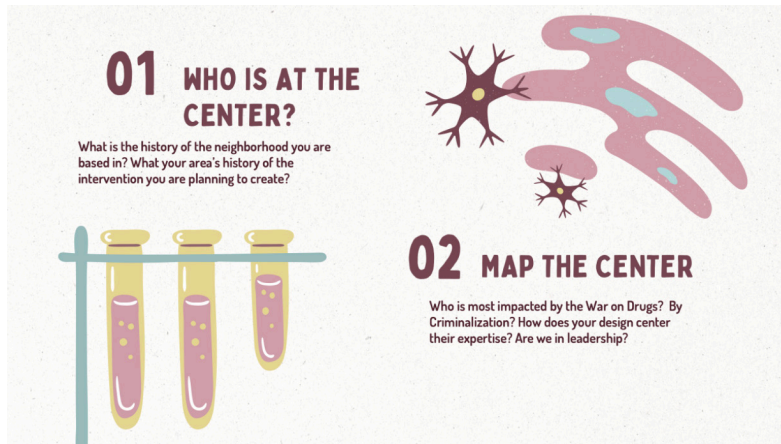
# PROGRAM DESIGN

Designing community-based crisis response programs requires clarity about who is at the center of your vision. IC Transformative Justice Fellow Shira Hassan offered members of the learning space a simple “daisy” abolitionist program design model illustrated by the graphics below.

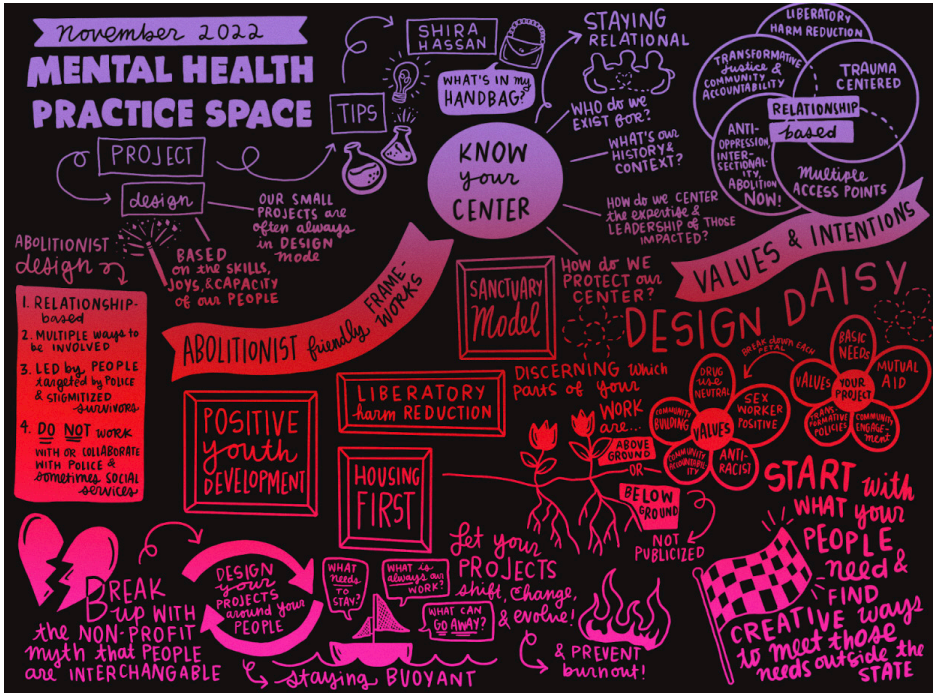
## **At the heart of the design process is:**

- Knowing who is at the center of what you are building
- Mapping the needs of the people at the center
- Mapping the role people at the center will play in design, leadership, and evaluation of the program
- Getting clarity on program intention and values and the practices that will reflect them
- Getting clarity on how you will remain accountable to program intentions and values, who can hold you accountable to them, and how they can hold you accountable
- Getting clarity on which aspects of the program will be visible to the public, the state, or the community, and which will be less visible and why
- Breaking down goals, intentions, and practices into programs, protocols, and activities

For more information about this design process and to talk through how to use it for your program, please contact Shira at the [IC Transformative Justice Help Desk](#) to schedule a consultation.







[Graphic Note #4: Project Design Tips](#)



[Graphic Note #5: Program Design](#)

### **Additional questions to consider:**

- What is your geographic scope? What times will your program be available?  
Generally speaking, it is better to start small and build out rather than to overextend and not have the capacity to meet a community's needs.
- How will decisions about the program and individual crisis responses be made?  
What are your decision trees?
- How long will you be available to a person who reaches out in crisis?
- What levels of de-escalation is your group comfortable with? Verbal conflict, physical conflict, domestic violence, situations where a weapon is present? Everyone who works with your project, no matter their role, should have de-escalation training. It may be difficult to find trainings in your community that are politically aligned; you may need to attend a generic training and adapt it to your needs and purpose.
- How will you navigate unsolicited police presence (i.e., someone else calls them, they show up on their own)?
- Do you have goals and a protocol for interacting with police?
- Are any people in your group trained legal observers? Check out the resources available from the National Lawyers' Guild.

# HOW WILL PEOPLE ACCESS COMMUNITY CRISIS RESPONSE PROGRAMS?

## 988 Programs

As the BCCR Learning Space was launching in 2022, 988 crisis response hotlines were rolling out across the country. As of June 2023, [26 states have passed implementing legislation](#), and over 5 million calls, texts, and chats had been routed through 988. While billed as an alternative to calling 911 that would limit law enforcement involvement in responding to crisis calls, in reality, calling 988 still [carries the risk of both law enforcement response and of coerced medical interventions](#) if the caller is deemed at “imminent risk” and does not comply with a safety plan. A [survey of 988 callers](#) released in June of 2023 found that [“only a quarter of people said they would be very likely turn to 988 in the future](#) if they or a loved one were experiencing a mental health crisis or suicidality – and less than a third of people with severe psychological distress who had already tried the lifeline were very likely to use it again.” We are grateful for the leadership of Trans Lifeline in sharing [analysis of the impacts of nonconsensual crisis call interventions](#) and for creating a crisis caller’s bill of rights.

To our knowledge, none of the groups who participated in BCCR to date receive calls through 988.

---

### Trans Lifeline Crisis Caller Bill of Rights

#### *Callers have the right to...*

- Trust that the help we seek will be supportive, not harmful
- Receive crisis support free of judgment and irrespective of substance use, participation in sex trade, mental health condition, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, age, citizenship, housing status, religion, nationality, or caste
- Reach out for support in a crisis without being criminalized, detained, or deported
- Have all trauma responses, including suicidality, understood as normal responses to current or past traumatic experiences, and be able to speak about suicidality without fear of more trauma
- Get crisis support without police violence, harassment, or threats
- Share our identities and experiences without being outed to unsupportive caregivers, workplaces, or abusers
- Be made aware of short- and long-term options for support that we can accept or refuse

### *Callers have the right to...*

- Know what services we're receiving when we call
- Clear and upfront information about which situations hotlines use police and emergency services — to be included on websites, apps, chatbots, and greeting/hold recordings, including geotracking
- Understand if and when our calls are being recorded, how they'll be used, and who they'll be shared with
- Be informed by operators at the beginning of calls about which situations or circumstances hotline policies dictate the use of law enforcement or emergency responders
- Be informed if police or emergency services are being dispatched to our location

### *Callers have the right to...*

- Determine which supports and care we utilize and which we refuse, as the experts in our own lives
- Access support and services without police or other emergency responders entering our homes, work places, schools, or any other location without our knowledge and consent; we did not call 911
- Make decisions about what's best for our financial and mental wellbeing, including not being charged ambulance or hospital bills for services we did not seek or consent to, or losing work, housing, etc.
- Protect ourselves from further trauma, harm, and instability

For more [information](#) and to sign on to the Crisis Caller's Bill of Rights, please visit Trans Lifeline.

## **911**

Several groups who participated in the BCCR learning space were seeking to receive calls through 911. As noted in [Defund Police, Invest in Community Care: A Guide to Non-Police Mental Health Responses](#) and the accompanying [checklist](#), there are a number of important considerations when considering receiving calls through 911 including:

- Which call codes are being referred to community crisis response? Which are excluded from community crisis response? Exclusions limiting or precluding community response to 911 calls involving “weapons” — which can be anything from a stick to a hammer to a gun — or “imminent danger” — which can be a subjective determination — can severely limit the reach and impact of community crisis response.
- Is 911 under police control?
- Can you move dispatch away from police control? So long as determinations about



which calls go to community crisis response are made by police, police have the power to limit or undermine the effectiveness of community response programs to maintain their power and funding and serve other interests.

- What is the relationship between 911 operators and police?
- Are 911 dispatchers police department employees?
- Are they represented by the same union?
- Do they share other interests?
- Who trains 911 operators in implementing crisis response protocol?
- How can you fight for training protocols and trainers that can minimize police response and/or maximize community response?
- How can you monitor 911 operators' decision-making around crisis call dispatch?

Some groups, like [Atlanta's Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative](#), are receiving calls related to “non-emergency quality of life concerns related to mental health, substance use or extreme poverty” through alternate municipal non-emergency lines like 311, but do not offer crisis response. While not controlled by police, questions concerning 911 dispatch are also relevant for groups considering dispatch through municipal non-emergency lines. Additionally, it is important to know what information municipal non-emergency lines are collecting from callers, what options are available to callers, and whether options are fully consensual and free from law enforcement interventions.

---

## Community Numbers

The vast majority of participants in BCCR who are building and implementing community crisis response created a separate regular number for community members to call or text.

### *The advantages of this approach are:*

- Police have no control over whether a community crisis response gets dispatched
- Community members who will never call 911 or 988 may be willing to access a community number

### *Challenges of this approach are:*

- Raising awareness of the number's existence in the community
- Making it easy for people to remember the number and hours of operation, especially when in a crisis
- Ensuring that the number is fully staffed during hours of operation
- Ensuring people responding to crisis calls have necessary training, skills, protocols, and commitment to confidentiality, agency, and self-determination, and do not act as mandated reporters

# TECH IS NOT ALWAYS THE ANSWER, AND CAN BE A DANGER: IMPORTANT NOTES ON DIGITAL SECURITY

Several groups who are part of the BCCR Learning Space are utilizing, considering, or exploring creating or using digital dispatch systems.

There are a number of critical considerations to take into account when deciding whether to use a digital or app-based dispatch system.

## **The first and main question is why does it feel important to use a digital system?**

We tend to default to online or app based systems because we believe they are easier, more efficient, more convenient, or frankly cooler than analog systems, but there is no reason they should be our first or even primary option.

Consider why these options wouldn't work just as well or better for your community crisis response than a digital, internet-based or app-based information system:

- A dedicated cell phone or phone number forwarded to the person/people on call
- A conversation on the phone or in person with a person in crisis
- A conversation on the phone or in person with fellow members of the crisis response team
- Handwritten notes with as little information as possible, kept in a way that maximizes confidentiality and protection from outsiders

While we want to make participating in community crisis response programs as accessible as possible, we don't want accessibility to come at the expense of the people who are seeking and participating in community crisis response.

## **Before gathering information electronically, ask yourself the following questions:**

- *How are you thinking about the privacy of the caller and the person answering the call?*
- *What information is being captured?*
  - ◆ Digital dispatch systems and apps often capture information about users' locations, as well as contact information, demographic information, and other private information.
  - ◆ Which parts of the information being captured should be treated as sensitive?

Confidential? Why?

◆The best practice is to capture as little information as possible beyond what is immediately necessary to respond to the crisis. Think about why you need the information — and how long you need it for.

- *How is the information being stored?*

- ◆Are calls/texts automatically recorded?

- ◆Where is this information stored?

- ◆How long is it stored for?

- ◆What about HIPPA compliant programs?

- HIPAA doesn't cast a magic invisibility cloak over information; it just creates a legal enforcement regime for violations of privacy of information provided in the context of providing health care. If a company violates HIPAA, the only recourse an individual has is to sue them, but at that point, the information is already public, and the remedy doesn't cure that.

- ◆What about encryption?

- Firstly, it is important to ensure that encryption covers not only the content of the communications, but also the fact that there was any communication at all. While it may be true that an app or service provider like WhatsApp might not be able to read the contents of messages under most circumstances (unless a user flags a message as "inappropriate"), it does collect data about senders and recipients and timing of messages that can be used by law enforcement.

- Secondly, we shouldn't presume that encryption will forever protect information from law enforcement. Federal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. are working to ban encryption on the grounds that it limits law enforcement's power.

- Lastly, encryption is not foolproof, be it from law enforcement or cyber attacks. As one writer put it, "Indeed, there are only two kinds of I.T. systems on this planet: those that have been breached, and those that will be breached."

- *Who has access to the information?*

- ◆How are you ensuring confidentiality of the information you are gathering through digital dispatch?

- Who has access to the information?

- Who has access to the digital and physical spaces where the information is stored?

- How are you ensuring that the data is protected from disclosure?

- ◆How are you protecting the information from law enforcement? Remember, no matter what service agreements may say about privacy and confidentiality, internet service providers and app operators often make exceptions for law enforcement requests — or, worse yet, sell information to third parties who then provide it to law enforcement.

## Threat Assessment

When thinking about information gathering, storage, privacy, confidentiality, and safety, it is important to get clear about what potential harms you are concerned about, and who you are protecting the information from.

- *How could the information you are gathering and keeping be shared in harmful ways?*

- ◆ A primary threat is law enforcement accessing information about your crisis response program, participants, and people who call on you for crisis support — either through a legal process like a subpoena or through surveillance or other means. Think about how the information you are gathering could be used to criminalize:
  - People seeking crisis support, who may be engaged in or connected to people engaged in criminalized activity, or who might be at risk of criminalization or subject to surveillance by the family policing system (aka “foster” or “child welfare” system) based on the crisis they are experiencing, and
  - People responding or offering crisis support, who may be part of organizations already subject to state surveillance, or who may be criminalized based on the kinds of support they are offering.
- ◆ Another potential threat is people sharing information with state agencies, including family policing systems, immigration enforcement systems, public health systems and others. Of course, ideally all participants in community crisis response would be trained and committed to not sharing information about crisis calls and responses with the state and your protocols would reflect that commitment. Nevertheless, individuals may feel compelled under some circumstances to share information as mandated reporters, or for moral reasons. Remember: if you don’t have the information, or it’s not accessible, then it can’t be shared.
- ◆ State access to the information you gather is not the only threat; even gossip in community based on private information shared during a crisis call can cause harm, place people in danger, and breach trust.
- ◆ The best practice is to gather as little information as possible — and document and share as little as possible. Be clear in your trainings and protocols about what information may be harmful if shared and why, and review them often.

In some crisis response teams participating in BCCR, only one person has access to information from a crisis call and takes minimal notes. Team members meet regularly face-to-face to review crisis responses, debrief, troubleshoot, skill share, and support each other.





Graphic note #6:  
 Session One



Graphic note #7:  
 Digital Security

# OUTREACH

Participants in the Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space are connecting with community members to raise awareness of their programs through:

- Social media
- Existing relationships
- Canvassing and organizing

Outreach methods matter.

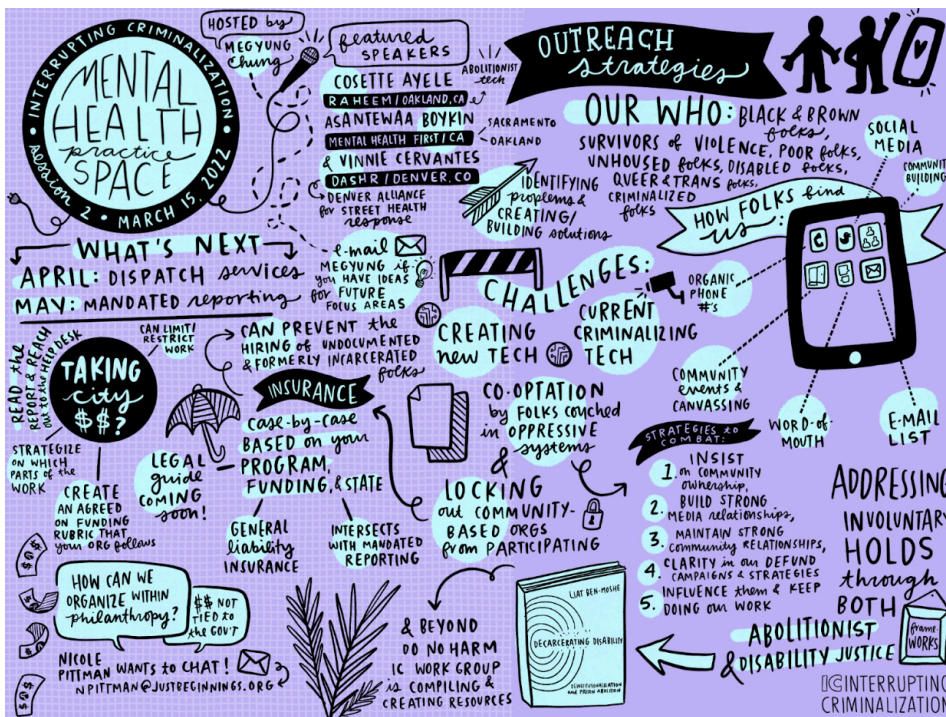
**It is easier to build relationships of trust and build agreements ahead of a crisis that maximize the agency of people in crisis with people we are already in community and conversation with.**

And keeping awareness of community crisis response to word of mouth can leave out people at greatest risk of harm from law enforcement and other state agencies, including people who are isolated, disabled, unhoused, and disconnected from communities.

If you plan to publicize the existence of your crisis response through social media, billboards, posters, and other methods that are likely to reach people you are not already in relationship with, it is important to consider how will you build trust, make agreements, maximize agency, and move from shared values, especially in the context of a crisis. It is also important to consider how what you share publicly about your crisis response might attract attention from law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies — particularly if you are offering support around things like medical care, medication, childcare, violence interruption, etc.

It is also critical to take care with how you publicly represent what you are offering so as to ensure as much alignment as possible between the expectations of people reaching out for support and your offering, and to build trust. For instance, you should make clear:

- When your crisis response is available and where
- Whether you are equipped to respond to serious medical emergencies, or other situations where someone's life or health is immediately under threat
- What kinds of crises you are prepared to respond to, and how
- Who is responding, and whether they are volunteers or paid staff; this also shapes whether you will need insurance and potentially be subjected to additional scrutiny by the state
- Who you are placing at the center of your crisis response
- How long you will continue to offer crisis support
- Whether any information gathered is confidential
- Any relationship you have to law enforcement or state agencies
- The values that guide your response



Graphic note #8:  
 Outreach Strategies



# RECRUITMENT & TRAINING

Several participants in the BCCR Learning Space shared their recruitment and training strategies, including Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP), Dream Defenders, and Mental Health First.

REP is a network of dedicated abolitionists showing up to support others in moments of crisis or urgency, with care and respect for the full dignity and autonomy of the people in crisis. When a crisis or problem can't be addressed by our existing support network, we need a trusted resource to call for help. REP's Revolutionary Emergency Partners provide emergency care to community members via a secure hotline, operating on Fridays and Saturdays from 7pm-12am.

REP regularly recruits and offers trainings for CARERs (which stands for Community Aid Resourcing and Emergency Response). Their [training outreach materials describe the training](#) as follows: "The work of CARERs is grounded in the awareness that people in our communities have the power, agency, and capacity to protect and care for one another. If you already respond to community emergencies, or want to learn more about it, join a 12-session training program to gain certified skills in first aid, violence prevention, crisis response, positionality and emergency planning." The training covers topics such as organizational history, abolitionist values and practices, first aid and street medic training, mental health first aid, interpersonal violence, "scene safety," self-regulation, copwatching, de-escalation, accountability, privacy, confidentiality, record keeping. Crisis response volunteers' skills and suitability are assessed through scenario training, role plays, and practice.



[Graphic note #9: Recruitment and Training](#)

[Mental Health First](#) offers regular virtual and in person trainings for community members in Oakland and Sacramento and in communities across the country.

# EVALUATION

It is critical to bake in ongoing evaluation practices to learn from our experiments in crisis response and assess our impacts. For example, Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP) has built in an intentional pause every five months to assess their progress.

Some potential areas of evaluation:

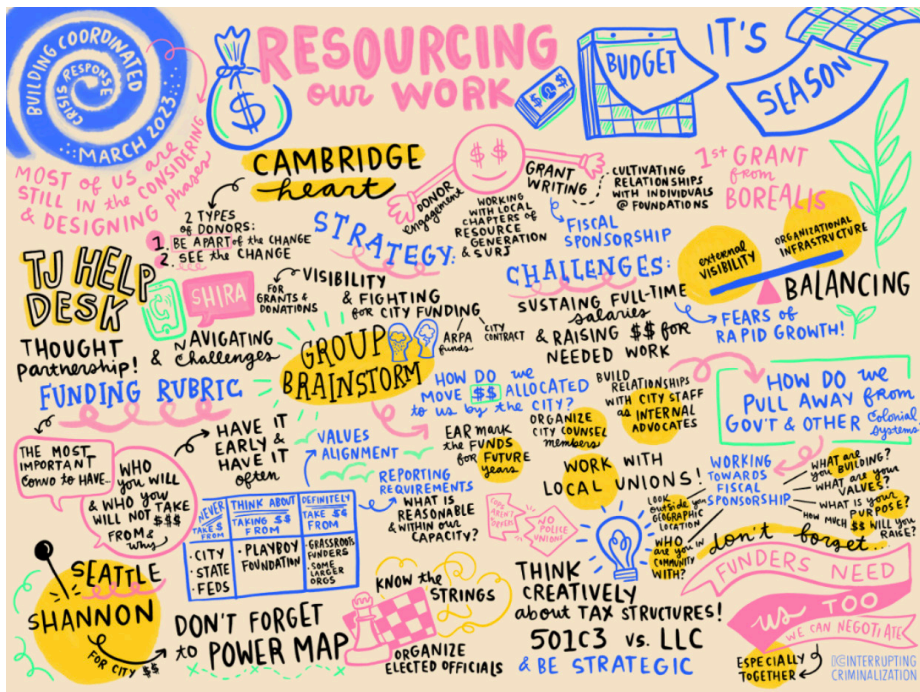
- How many people are we reaching/know about our crisis response?
- How many people are accessing our crisis response? How many do so more than once?
- How are we gathering information about the experiences of people we support through crisis? Their families, friends, and community?
- How are we gathering information about the experiences of people offering support? How are we supporting them?
- How are we using the information from people we are supporting (and those we are not supporting) to make needed changes? What feedback loops can be put into place?
- How are we working toward changing the conditions that precipitate the crises we are responding to?
- How are we increasing connections to community, preventative, and ongoing care for the people we support through crisis?
- What are some things we want to experiment with during the next phase of our work?

# HOW DO WE RESOURCE OUR WORK?

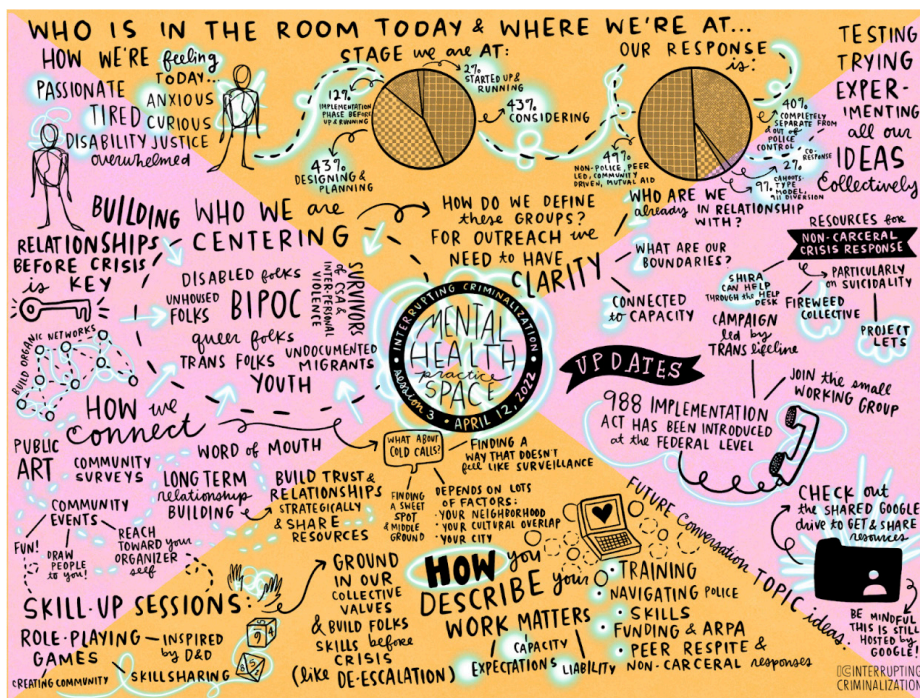
There are a number of things to take into consideration when thinking about how you will resource your crisis response program:

- How will you receive resources? Do you want to set up a legal structure (nonprofit, business, cooperative, something else)? What advantages and limitations does this structure offer?
- Who will you seek support from? It's generally a good idea to map out your collective values around who you will and won't take funding from before you start resourcing your program. Are there some lines you will not cross? What are some conditions on funding you will not accept?
  - ◆ State funding often comes with strings attached, including mandated reporting, insurance requirements, and burdensome information gathering/data collection, application and financial reporting requirements and the potential for surveillance and co-optation.
  - ◆ Corporate funding often comes from entities complicit in creating the conditions that precipitate the crises we are responding to.
  - ◆ Foundation funding likely, though not always, comes with strings attached, burdensome information gathering, application and reporting requirements, and funder priorities that may not align with your goals and values.
- What kind of funding are you looking for? Different types of funders will support visioning, planning, and design work; others will support operation; others will support evaluation.





Graphic note #10:  
Resourcing Our Work



Graphic note #11:  
Updates Sessions

# LANDSCAPE OF COMMUNITY CRISIS RESPONSE PROGRAMS

There is no doubt that the number of community crisis response programs has grown significantly over the past several years. Several directories have recently been published listing many of them, including [Mobile Crisis Units and Co-Responders: A Guide To Saving Lives](#), researched and published by [1 Million Madly Motivated Moms](#), and the [Directory of Community Crisis Response Programs](#) published by Indivisible Eastside. Neither claims to list all community crisis response programs and both were researched by volunteers.

## *Among the over 100 crisis programs listed:*

- The majority are under or just over a year old
- The majority are pilots, many competing with police department run pilot programs
- Most are not available 24/7
- Dozens are police-based, and the majority are described as co-response programs or work with law enforcement
- Dozens are Fire-EMS based
- The majority are 911 dispatched
- Many prioritize responders with the power to order coercive medical interventions

## *Sample situations in which police are involved in crisis response programs:*

- “Yes, officers usually make first contact then they reach out to [program].”
- “Initial assessment with clinicians via mobile dispatch. If it gets physical or person is unwilling to participate or use services, then law enforcement is contacted.”
- “May involve law enforcement if threat of harm.”
- “If situation is deemed dangerous.”
- “If there is immediate physical or medical emergency.”
- “Law enforcement called if escalated.”

# LESSONS

Based on our observations over the past two years of hosting the Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space, we have identified a number of challenges faced by organizers working to build and implement community crisis response programs that involve neither law enforcement nor coerced medical interventions.

## External challenges include:

- **Blurred lines** between co-response programs (in which community members respond with or at the request of police) and non-police community-based crisis response
- **Efforts to find “model” programs** and create one-size-fits all solutions
- **Competing pilots** — When community crisis response programs are piloted alongside law enforcement run crisis response programs, it’s often a set up. Law enforcement based programs are resourced at a scale far greater than community response programs, and often end up being referred more calls as the majority of calls are excluded from community response, and 911 dispatchers’ default to referring calls to police. This creates conditions under which under-resourced community crisis response programs are more likely to be declared unsuccessful.
- **Default to coerced medical interventions** and absence of other options
- **Absence of robust community ecosystems** of non-carceral preventative and aftercare
- **Absence of resources** such as housing, income support, disability-related resources, health care, immigration status, education, and harm reduction options that prevent and enable people to avoid and recover from crises
- **Lack of long-term investments** in community crisis response programs, and pressure to “produce measurable results” within short time frames
- **Co-optation by the state or large nonprofits** committed to collaborating with law enforcement
- **Opportunism** — As interest in community crisis response increased during and in the wake of the 2020 Uprisings, so did claims to expertise, funding, and leadership in the field on the part of large nonprofits and academic institutions that were able to siphon resources and leadership away from grassroots community groups and informal crisis response teams.
- **Questions and concerns around mandated reporting requirements** — This issue came up in almost every session. To learn more, please visit [Mandated Reporting is Not Neutral](#). To talk through questions, strategies, and concerns, please contact the IC [Transformative Justice Help Desk](#).





[Graphic note #12: Mandated Reporting](#)

Our hope is that the Building Coordinated Crisis Response Learning Space has been a place where people envisioning, designing, planning, and implementing community crisis response can build relationships, develop skills, and gain greater clarity of:

- Purpose
- Politic
- Scope
- Program type
- Values in practice
- The role they play in larger community ecosystems of care
- Accountability
- Measures of positive impacts and success

We look forward to what the future holds as the BCCR Learning Space moves to its new host, the Just Practice Collaborative!





[Graphic note #13: What We Learned](#)



[Graphic note #14: Looking Back](#)





**PAINTING  
THE OCEAN  
& THE SKY**

BY SHIRA HASSAN

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



# CONTENTS

## **03** Introduction

---

## **11** Designing Abolitionist Projects

### **14** Social Services, Charity, and the Nonprofit Industrial Complex

### **24** Politicized Social Service

### **34** Working Underground versus Aboveground

### **37** Peer to Peer Work

### **43** Crisis Response versus Emergency Response

---

## **50** Conclusion







# 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 sky<sup>1</sup>” 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.

<sup>1</sup>Hill 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 aid<sup>2</sup> and liberatory harm reduction<sup>3</sup> strategies and transformative justice<sup>4</sup> as our main tactics to help each other survive, but that wasn’t language we used yet.

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

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

<sup>4</sup>Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description,” Transform Harm, January 11, 2019, [bit.ly/tjdescrip](https://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.

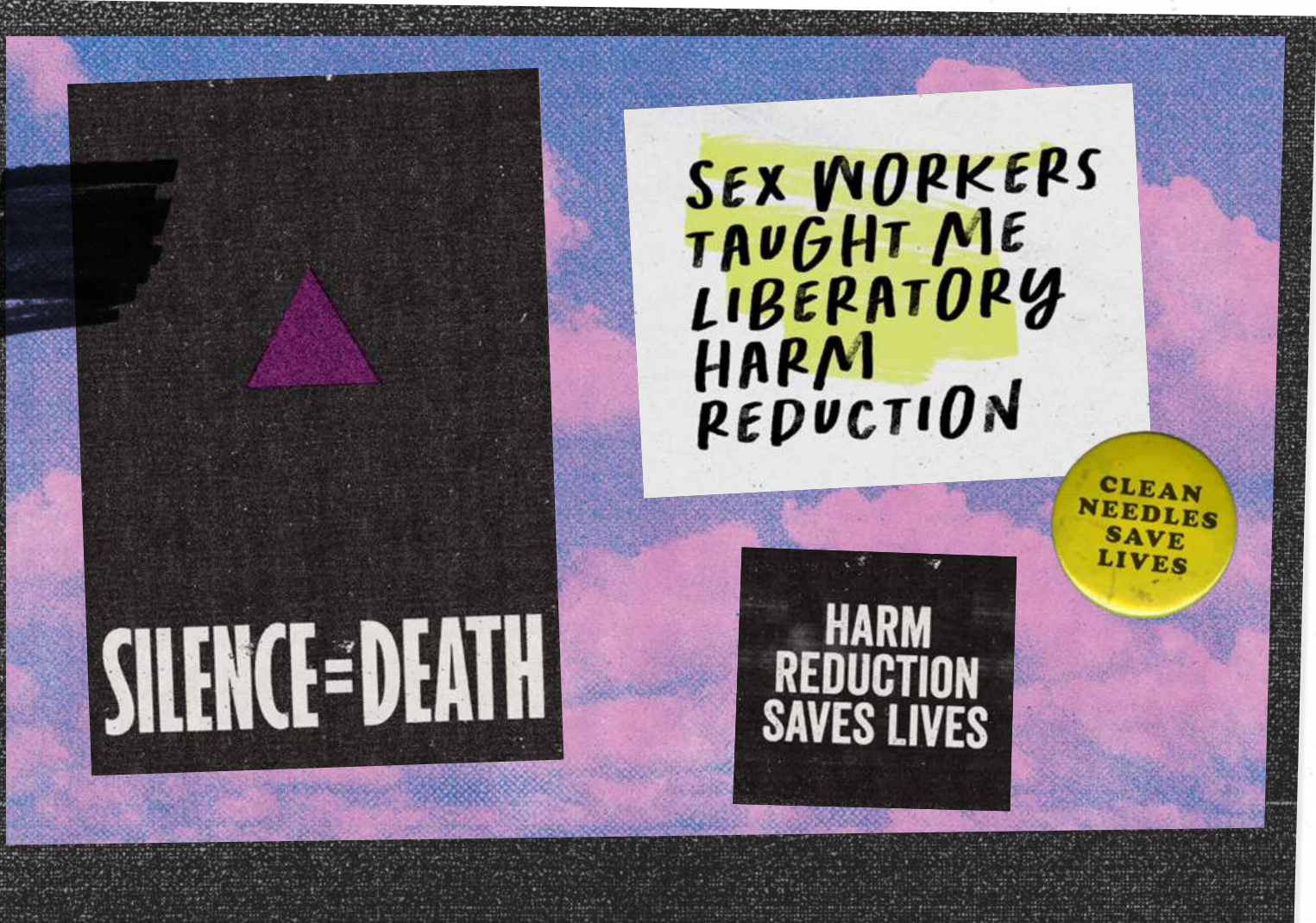
# DESIGNING ABOLITIONIST PROJECTS

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.

The decision  
to focus on  
these terms is  
an intentional  
political  
intervention.







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.

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

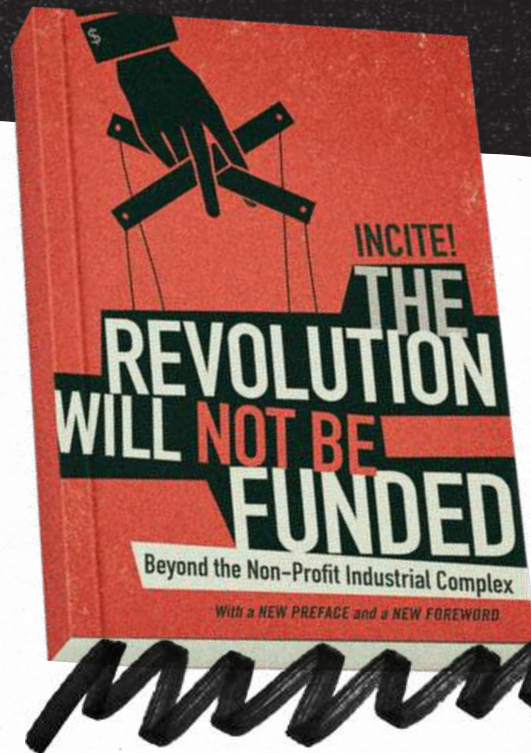


# SOCIAL SERVICES, CHARITY, AND THE NONPROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

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.<sup>6</sup>



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*,<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup>I 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.”

<sup>7</sup>INCITE!, *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

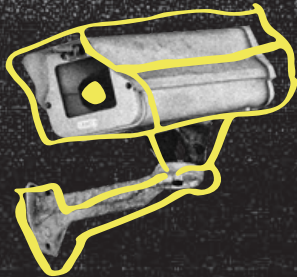


THAT RESULTS IN THE SURVEILLANCE, CONTROL, DERAILEMENT,  
AND EVERYDAY MANAGEMENT OF POLITICAL MOVEMENTS.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," INCITE!, accessed October 2, 2023, [bit.ly/beyondnpic](https://bit.ly/beyondnpic).



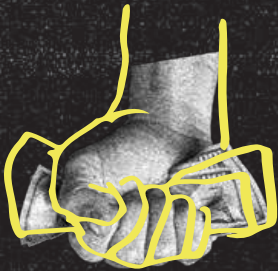
# THE STATE USES NONPROFITS TO



MONITOR AND CONTROL SOCIAL  
JUSTICE MOVEMENTS



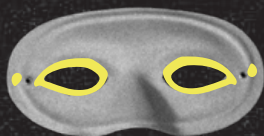
DIVERT PUBLIC MONIES INTO  
PRIVATE HANDS THROUGH  
FOUNDATIONS



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 THEM<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.



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.<sup>10</sup>

- 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.

<sup>10</sup>Dean 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.<sup>11</sup>

## **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.<sup>12</sup>

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

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

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.”<sup>13</sup>

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](http://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.

<sup>13</sup>ibid.



# MUTUAL AID CHART

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

<p><b>Horizontalist and Participatory Characteristics of MUTUAL AID PROJECTS</b></p>	<p><b>Characteristics of Hierarchical CHARITABLE NONPROFITS &amp; SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS</b> (or what tends to change about mutual aid projects as they move toward becoming charities or social service programs)</p>
<p>“<b>Members</b>” = people making decisions</p>	<p>“<b>Members</b>” = donors</p>
<p>Deprofessionalized survival work done by <b>volunteers</b></p>	<p>Service work staffed by <b>professionals</b></p>
<p><b>Beg, borrow, and steal</b> supplies</p>	<p><b>Grant money for supplies/</b> philanthropic control of program</p>
<p><b>Use people power</b> to resist any efforts by government to regulate or shut down activities</p>	<p><b>Follow government regulations</b> about how the work needs to happen (usually requiring more money, causing reliance on grants, paid staff with professional degrees)</p>
<p><b>Survival work</b> rooted in deep and wide principles of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, racial justice, gender justice, disability justice</p>	<p><b>Siloed single-issue work</b>, 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><b>Open meetings</b>, as many people making decisions and doing the work as possible</p>	<p><b>Closed board meetings</b>, 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><b>Efforts to support people</b> facing the most dire conditions</p>	<p><b>Imposing eligibility criteria</b> for services that divide people into “deserving” and “undeserving”</p>
<p><b>Give things away without expectations</b></p>	<p><b>Conditions for getting help</b> 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><b>People participate voluntarily</b> because of passion about injustice</p>	<p><b>People come looking for a job</b>, wanting to climb a hierarchy or become “important”</p>
<p><b>Efforts to flatten hierarchies</b> (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><b>Establish and maintain hierarchies</b> of pay, status, decision-making power, influence</p>



## MUTUAL AID CHART (CONTINUED)

MUTUAL AID PROJECTS	CHARITABLE NONPROFITS & SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS
<p><b>Values self-determination</b> for people impacted or targeted by harmful social conditions</p>	<p><b>Offers “help” to “underprivileged”</b> absent of a context of injustice or strategy for transforming the conditions; paternalistic; rescue fantasies and saviorism</p>
<p><b>Consensus decision-making</b> 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><b>Person on top</b> (often Executive Director) decides things or, in some instances, a board votes and majority wins</p>
<p><b>Direct aid work is connected to other tactics</b>, including disruptive tactics aimed at root causes of the distress the aid addresses</p>	<p><b>Direct aid work disconnected from other tactics</b>, 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 <b>assess the work based on how the people facing the crisis</b> the organization wants to stop regard the work</p>	<p>Tendency to <b>assess the work based on opinions of elites</b>: political officials, bureaucrats, funders, elite media</p>
<p>Engaging with the organization <b>builds broader political participation</b>, solidarity, mobilization, radicalization</p>	<p>Engaging with the organization <b>not aimed at growing participants’ engagement</b> 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](http://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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Working with 500 street-based young

<sup>14</sup>Streetwork 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.

<sup>15</sup>I 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.

<sup>16</sup>Working 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](http://bit.ly/whosesecurity)) co-authored by Lara Brooks and Mariame Kaba, and watch the Building Your Abolitionist Toolbox workshop ([bit.ly/whosesecurityvid](http://bit.ly/whosesecurityvid)).

The Broadway Youth Center was the first organization to sign onto the Street Youth Bill of Rights ([bit.ly/sybillofrights](http://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](http://bit.ly/whosesecurity)



VIDEO WORKSHOP

### Building Your Abolitionist Toolbox

[bit.ly/whosesecurityvid](http://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,<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup>There 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 work<sup>18</sup> 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](http://bit.ly/nypeeraids)), the Young Women's Empowerment Project ([bit.ly/yweproject](http://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

<sup>18</sup>See *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](http://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.<sup>19</sup> Part of our work towards abolition must include the elimination of the family regulation system ([bit.ly/tornapartbook](http://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](http://bit.ly/isnotneutral)) and *JMAC for Families* ([bit.ly/jmacfamilies](http://bit.ly/jmacfamilies)).

<sup>19</sup>I would love to speak with you at the Transformative Justice Help Desk ([bit.ly/ICHelpDesk](http://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](https://bit.ly/nadahistory)) at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx,<sup>20</sup> doula training and abortion doula training, and supporting people through grief and traumatic death.

<sup>20</sup>Please 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](https://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.”<sup>21</sup>

- 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.

<sup>21</sup>Grace 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](https://bit.ly/ICHelpDesk)

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Shira Hassan** has been working in her own community and speaking nationally on the sex trade, harm reduction, self-injury, healing justice and transformative justice for nearly 30 years. Currently working as a fellow at Interrupting Criminalization, Shira runs The Help Desk. The Help Desk offers supportive thought partnership to individuals and groups working to interrupt crises and violence without using the police. Along with Mariame Kaba, she is the co-author of *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* and the author of *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction*.

**Design by E Henderson**





**IC** INTERRUPTING  
CRIMINALIZATION

[interruptingcriminalization.com](http://interruptingcriminalization.com)