March 20, 2020

Hello Friend,

Last Thursday we made the difficult decision to temporarily close the Center’s offices in Englewood. The decision was rooted in deep love and care for each other and our community.

We feel incredibly fortunate to be part of a community of visionaries, who imagined things nobody thought possible—a Reparations Ordinance for racially motivated police violence, a Center that recognizes and addresses the harm inflicted by policing and institutionalized racism.

The ability to access our imaginations for the sake of creating a world where we are all free, cared for, nourished, and connected is the most radical act we can take at this moment.

At the Center, we are now working to reimagine how we stay in connected, supportive and accountable community across distances.

As individuals and as an organization, we have prioritized:

- Establishing a phone tree for making regular calls to community members to check on and respond to changing needs while the Center is closed
- Continuing to provide therapeutic support to our participants who need it through phone calls and virtual groups
- Setting up infrastructure that will allow us to operate a “warm line” to offer support by phone to people who are pre-crisis
- Creating toolkits and worksheets as a resource for folks who are isolated and experiencing anxiety, panic, depression, rage, etc.
- Daily staff check-in video conferences to strategize and coordinate our collective response and practice getting and receiving care and support in community
- Supporting multiple efforts to free individuals from county jails and state prisons in light of this public health crisis
- Deepening our understanding and support of mutual aid efforts, both locally and around the world
- Offering a public link to our healing zine for incarcerated survivors, Wellness on the Inside, that has useful activities and exercises we can practice from wherever we are
- Creating a public workbook, Trauma Informed Practices During the Coronavirus Pandemic, complete with suggestions to address elevated stress and activations
- Gathering resources for ongoing healing, connection, and daily support to share with our community in the coming weeks

Public health advocate Dr. Howard Ehrman, formerly an assistant commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health and Will County chief medical officer during the Ebola outbreak, has offered some clear insight into how the response to COVID-19 is unfolding and why.
The collective disintegration and shut-down we are all experiencing during this pandemic—particularly in our medical and economic infrastructures—have been fostered through decades of defunding and privatization. The crises this produces has been the living reality for those for whom the systems were already failing, or never designed to support.

This pandemic has made plain the human cost of a system that is built to maximize profit at the expense of providing care. In doing so, it has also clarified the Center’s critical role as a resource for survivors and a catalyst for structural change we desperately need, by providing free care. In this moment, it becomes clearer now more than ever, that we must rebuild and protect public healthcare—inclusive of mental health services. Funding and support for public health services must be protected, expanded less we experience further crises that are exacerbated by organized divestment from the public commons, and ultimately, put all of our lives and health in jeopardy.

Despite these crises, we can be reminded of practicing awareness as we try our best to withstand these challenges. Returning to grounding practices helps us center in the midst of the unknown. Outside your window, you may be able to see buds on trees, the first crocuses emerging from the thawing ground, and can be reminded and inspired by our natural world that every day is a reflection of our own resilience, beauty, and creativity.

As a part of the CTJC community, you have likely heard us say, “what we pay attention to grows.”

We will continue to unapologetically name and fight to dismantle the many interplaying systems and tactics of divestment that harm our people. We will continue to tend to the seen and unseen wounds these brutal systems inflict and we will move with a renewed and steadfast commitment to work with our communities to create new systems and new practices that allow us all to thrive, flourish, and live!

Moving forward, the Center will remain closed until further information is available on how we can protect ourselves and our community. Stay on the lookout for new resources being developed as well as opportunities for connection that will be coming next week.

As we are physically distanced, there are still actions you can take right now and as we shelter in place over the coming weeks to support our communities and bring repair to the systems we live in:

- Support mutual aid and response efforts, like the Chicago COVID-19 Hardship and Help Page
- Call the offices of Kim Foxx, Chief Judge Evans, and the Cook County Sheriff to keep people safe by immediately and dramatically reducing the number of people in jail
- Call Governor Pritzker’s office (312-814-2121) to demand that Gerald Reed, who is immunocompromised and was sent back to jail on an illegal ruling by Judge Hennelly, and all vulnerable and elderly prisoners in Illinois be released
- Write an incarcerated survivor to let them know they are not alone—email gina@chicagotorturejustice.org and let us know you’re interested
- Complete the 2020 Census online by April 1 to ensure all of our communities have the resources they need—in times of crisis and always
Donate to the Center so that we may continue to respond to survivors’ changing needs as these challenges unfold.

This week, we participated in a national conference call about mutual aid led by organizer Mariame Kaba and U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Mariame opened the call with a reading of the following poem by Starhawk. It fills us up to think of the home we find in you, our CTJC community, and these words help to capture some of that feeling. We hope it will bring you some calm and hope today.

"Community" by Starhawk

We are all longing to go home to some place
we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.
Community.
Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.
Somewhere a circle of hands
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.
Community means strength
that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.
Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing.
A circle of friends.
Someplace where we can be free.