

**“Mutual Aid and its Applications in the Nonprofit Sector: A Case Study of
Stillwater Nonprofits”**

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I. Introduction

Mutual aid is community action driven and led by community members. Principles of mutual aid include direct action, cooperation, mutual understanding, and solidarity. Providing aid involves satisfying a person's needs. Such as, feeding a person who is experiencing food insecurity, providing shelter for a person who is unhoused, or any number of ways people can support one another. Mutual aid empowers those in need through a shared commitment to the idea that everyone has something that they can contribute to aiding the collective struggle for the betterment of society. Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) popularized the term “mutual aid” in his 1902 book titled *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. In it he theorized that popular evolution theories which centered on the idea that competition was the driving force behind evolution were lacking. He believed that cooperation was as much of a driver and as much a part of human nature as competition. There are many instances of the organic formation of mutual aid throughout human history, many of which are outlined in Kropotkin’s literature. An aspect of mutual aid evident in more contemporary examples in the last 75 years, is the inherent politicization of communal care. Mutual aid networks consistently crop up among marginalized populations from the Black Panther Party to LGBTQ+ community aid. Mutual aid networks exist in and are created by the communities where need exists. They are based on the idea of “solidarity, not charity.” Mutual aid prioritizes individual and community empowerment. The charity model is often criticized for disempowerment and creating dependencies (Spade, 2020). This comparison led me to question how and where principles of mutual aid can be better incorporated into the missions of nonprofits.

In my thesis I examine themes of mutual aid as defined by existing literature. I also discuss historical examples of mutual aid and illustrate what contributes to the formation of such networks. Additionally, I explore examples of mutual aid in Stillwater, Oklahoma through conversations with non-profits, seeking to understand their practices and examining the ways mutual aid is reflected in their organizations. To understand the practices of nonprofits and their intersection with mutual aid, I conducted interviews with five nonprofits in Stillwater and a community member involved with community efforts to settle Afghan refugees within Stillwater. I then used what I've learned about mutual aid to create an informative 'zine', which I will distribute on the Oklahoma State University campus. Through conversations with those around me during the process of planning and executing this project, and through the interviews I've conducted, I have found that many people are unfamiliar with mutual aid. I hope to give people a baseline knowledge of what mutual aid is and how they can engage with it in their own lives.

II. Theory and History of Mutual Aid

Kropotkin was a Russian geographer and philosopher known primarily for his anarcho-communist beliefs and for his writings on mutual aid. To begin to understand Kropotkin's writings on mutual aid, one must first understand his background as an anarchist and a staunch believer in collectivism. In his book *Conquest for Bread* Kropotkin begins by writing about how the existence of wealth and industry in the world, especially in the West, is built off the knowledge and labor of people and societies which preceded us. He paints the picture of a mine shaft still bearing the scars of a miner's pickaxe that first dug the tunnel and of cities built on top of the cities that came before it (Kropotkin, 1892). Through this picture, Kropotkin is

expressing the belief that the advancements we make today are only made possible by the works and progress made by preceding generations. This chain of connection stretches all the way back to the beginning of humankind. He argues that each small advancement adds to the total value of human wealth (Kropotkin, 1892). This belief fuels his ideas of collectivism. After all, if this is true, then who can lay claim to a harvest sown by every human across all our history? “By what right then can anyone whatever appropriate the least morsel of this immense whole and say – This is mine not yours?” (Kropotkin, 1892: 13). Kropotkin argues that no person has the right to claim sole ownership over a machine of production and to what it produces, just as a feudal lord in Medieval times had no right to claim ownership of a plot of land and demand taxation over the yields the laborer gains from it (Kropotkin, 1892).

He argues that what was once a dream of “plenty for all” in past ages, when production was so strenuous and limited, is now ours for the taking with the advent of machine and industry (Kropotkin, 1892). However, instead of utilizing the production capabilities of industrialization for collective good, profit incentivized the wealthy to bolster their own wealth and manufacture luxuries through the exploitation of the labor of others. To correct this, Kropotkin calls for the elimination of private property. He argues that what the rich claim for themselves is the right of all, as it was forged by all of humankind which came before and should be considered “*common property*” (Kropotkin, 1892: 11). In this way, Kropotkin’s background as an anarchist geographer was intrinsically tied to his belief in mutual aid.

Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* is a series of essays initially published from 1890 to 1896. Kropotkin contradicted the common notion that competition was the driving force behind evolution, arguing that it was cooperation (Kropotkin, 1902). The book makes its

argument by first establishing the existence of mutual aid among animals, then among indigenous societies, medieval society, and lastly at the current age of evolution from which Kropotkin was writing. Kropotkin does not argue that competition (or “self-assertion of the individual”) does not exist in the process of societal evolution, but rather that mutual aid plays an equal role and has been largely ignored compared to “survival of the fittest” mentalities that have been much more prominent in prevalent theory (Kropotkin, 1902). He outlines that many animal species who have more elaborate engagement with mutual aid, and in which “individual struggle” has been reduced, live the longest, are more numerous and prosperous (Kropotkin, 1902). This longevity grants experience which aids in “intellectual development” and progress (Kropotkin, 1902). Therefore, in aligning with Kropotkin’s theories, the history of mutual aid begins at the start of life itself.

Kropotkin’s theories support the notion that human cooperation and collectivism is inherent to our nature. Human instinct is to help support one another, even in instances where we may see no benefit, and may even be at some degree of personal sacrifice. If this is so, why then does so much of our current culture appear to be at odds with such a philosophy? Many believers of the theory of mutual aid argue this disconnect between modern society and our true communal nature is manufactured and abetted by capitalism and colonialism (Spade, 2020). Spade argues, “As people were forced into systems of wage labor and private property, and wealth became increasingly concentrated, our ways of caring for each other have become more and more tenuous” (2020). This argument mirrors Kropotkin’s and illustrates the belief that capitalism has alienated us from our capacity to live collectively and imposes a posture of individualism.

Kropotkin gives us an excellent baseline defense of mutual aid as innate within nature, species human and otherwise. Mutual aid takes hold in the wake of natural disasters, as we've become increasingly aware of in the past couple of years. However, within a modern context it becomes clear that mutual aid is inherently political, especially within the conditions of capitalism. Mutual aid, on principle, goes against the way we've been conditioned to engage with one another and with community. In fact, for many, the definition of mutual aid itself is politicized. For example, Dean Spade, a lawyer, trans activist, and writer on mutual aid, defines it as

A form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable. (Spade, 2020a: 136)

This is telling as he defines mutual aid as *political participation*. In a hyper-individualized society, the act of caring for one another where systems fail to, is political action.

Most people witness and/or partake in mutual aid in the wake of natural disaster. At this moment, many more people became familiar with the practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. As pointed out in *Amplified injustices and mutual aid in the COVID-19 pandemic*, "disasters amplify existing injustices" (Bell, 2020: 411). On their website, the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Organization lists Hurricane Katrina as one of the key events that brought about the creation of the network. They specifically cite systemic failures and attribute the neglect of New Orleans by all levels of government to racism. Black and poor populations in the city were

more adversely affected and some argue that the mishandling of the disaster on whole was due to the high concentration of those populations in New Orleans (Henkel, 2006). During the pandemic, the most vulnerable populations were Black, Hispanic, and Asian adults who were most likely to experience food insecurity (Lofton et al., 2021).

Mutual aid is often born within marginalized communities where state support often does not reach. These communities learn to care for themselves through caring for one another. The Black Panthers engaged heavily in mutual aid networks, as evidenced in their Community Survival Programs which operated from 1967-1992. Their slogan “survival pending revolution” illustrates that mutual aid was a component of political action within their organization. The programs provided free breakfast programs, ambulance access, medical clinics, rides to those who need them, and schooling for black children (Spade, 2020a). Many members of the left and members of marginalized communities utilize mutual aid as a way to survive the conditions of larger systematic oppression. Spade describes aid as an important companion to dismantling the root causes of suffering, which he considers to be “capitalism, white supremacy, colonialism, and borders” (2020a: 135). This is one aspect of mutual aid generally agreed upon—that it operates in recognition of systemic failures and/or deliberate oppression as the ultimate cause of suffering, not personal or moral failing. The Black Panthers’ engagement with mutual aid only strengthened their political and social power (Spade, 2020a). The desire for change and for revolution can only come from a place of genuine care and compassion for your fellow community members, thus, caring for one another through the process of liberation becomes necessary.

Mutual aid has been accepted by many political revolutionaries as a cornerstone of rebellion. Mutual aid and social movements are inextricably linked. In his book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, Dean Spade analyzes this relationship and determines that mutual aid serves as a gateway for many people to enter social movements and a social awareness (2020). This is done through both the provision of solutions to the failures of broader society and governance, as well as a creation of “social spaces where people grow new solidarities” (Spade, 2020). Mutual aid also deals with peoples “immediate concerns” (Spade, 2020). The free breakfast program by the Black Panthers was a direct response to the problem of hunger within the black community. With aims of liberation, a population cannot become politically conscious while it struggles under efforts of survival. A fundamental aspect of mutual aid is community building. In the case of the Black Panthers, efforts to provide aid were a deliberate step toward liberation. Angela Davis expressed this motivation, “If you’re gonna talk about a revolutionary situation you have to have people who are physically able to wage revolution, who are physically able to organize, and physically able to do all that is done” (Davis, 1972 as cited in Potori, 2017: 86).

Hunger is an age-old tool of repression. The Black Panthers knew that hunger was holding black children back from reaching their full potential. Kropotkin elaborates on the importance of a revolution fueled by bread, “*bread for all*”, in his chapter titled “food” in *Conquest for Bread*. He brings up three revolutions in France’s recent history (recent from the time of his writings) which did not make efforts to feed the populations they sought to liberate (Kropotkin, 1892). As a result, they lost support, for even under an oppressive regime, at least they and their children were fed. He wrote “bread, it is bread that the revolution needs!”,

carrying the message that care is an important component in social movements and in revolution (Kropotkin 1892: 52). In relation to Angela Davis's words on the importance of maintaining a population strong enough to stand up to their oppressor, Kropotkin expresses a similar sentiment, "for they are quite alive to the fact that it is not easy to keep the upper hand of a people whose hunger is satisfied" (Kropotkin, 1892; 53). If a people group are kept poor and starving, they will be focused on solving their hunger rather than ideological causes.

In this way, mutual aid, while necessary in its own right to fill a need within the community, also served as a crucial step in radicalization and liberation. The Black Panthers' free breakfast program was notable outside of the basic practice of providing food for hungry children, but also for engaging in community building. The breakfast program included history lessons focused on black history often ignored, and teaching on the beliefs of the Black Panther party (Potorti, 2017). The program allowed not only for a vital physical need to be met, but for black children to be surrounded by revolutionaries. The Black Panther party stated, "The children thrived on the presence of revolutionary black men and women whose spirit and love represented a better future" (Potorti, 2017: 94). The aid went further than simply addressing the problem of hunger, it enriched the minds and spirits of the suffering and gave them something to be a part of. In short, it participated in radical and liberating community building. This liberation was also witnessed in mutual aid networks after Hurricane Katrina. The Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Organization notes the "devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina gave movements for liberation and others devoted to social transformation the opportunity to achieve an unfamiliar cohesion and unity that transcended the tired old divisions based on ideology or tactics" (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, 2021). When faced with immediate need,

people have an instinct to come together in a kind of cooperation we are rarely able to achieve otherwise. Whereas liberation movements are often so focused on rooting out the bad, participation in mutual aid efforts gives people the opportunity to act on good nature and build something together.

The Black Panthers believed that class oppression was the root of peoples suffering (Potorti, 2017). In working on alleviating the burden of food insecurity, which would limit the ability for black children to learn and thrive in schools, they created more opportunities for these children. “Getting support through a mutual aid project that has a political analysis of the conditions that produced your crisis also helps break stigma and isolation (...) It builds faith in people power and fights the demobilizing impacts of individualism and hopelessness-induced apathy” (Spade, 2020).

Mutual aid creates a framework which is revolutionary and rejects conventional organization methods and circumvents hierarchy by creating a horizontal structure. An issue which often arises within charities and social services is that the decisions about who gets what, and often who are deserving of what, are made by those in positions of power, either political or economic power (Spade, 2020). The Mutual Aid Disaster Relief network states on their website:

We believe in horizontalism, decentralization, prefiguration, and that the most effective decisions and actions take place at the level of those closest to the problem or most impacted by the solution. Therefore, whenever possible, we strongly encourage the formation of affinity groups that can maintain their self-organization and autonomy,

while simultaneously connecting and working with ongoing Mutual Aid Disaster Relief organizing. (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, 2021)

They employ “steering committees”, members of which have experience in mutual aid and disaster relief and can be utilized by other mutual aid organizations while forming to provide temporary assistance with a “light touch” (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, 2021). In this way communities can receive assistance at the inception of mutual aid networks, then proceed to support themselves once they have gotten off the ground. This system of establishing new networks utilizing more experienced mutual aid practitioners, then having those members step back and allow the network to be completely community driven is an empowering way of helping communities through crisis.

III. Stillwater Non-Profits and Mutual Aid

To broaden my understanding of the realities of non-profit work, I spoke with several organizations within Stillwater, Oklahoma. I was interested in gaining an understanding of their practices, the reasoning behind operational decisions, and the realities of working in the nonprofit sector outside of readings and theory. I was also interested in the potential intersection of mutual aid and the work these organizations do. What I found was a collaborative group of organizations who hold one another in high regard. I reached out to each organization through phone calls and organized in-person interviews with representatives. I used standardized questions across the sample size, and also asked specific questions pertaining to the different practices and missions of each organization.

For my interviews I wanted to include a mixture of straightforward or closed questions and open-ended ones. For example, I asked each organization the way in which they witnessed community building in Stillwater and how they feel their organization contributes to a sense of community in Stillwater. I was intentionally vague about defining “community” as I believed the way the interviewee interpreted the question would also be illuminating. And it was. Many organizations answered the question regarding the community which exists among the organizations themselves, not between individuals. I believe this illustrates the separation within the charity model between the organizations consisting of donors, boards, and staff and the community or clients, guests, or recipients. I will further elaborate on exactly what the organizations had to say about intra-organizational relationships. However, through my interpretation, the very nature of their answers helped give a sense of some of those boundaries.

My sample size is small to maintain manageability. This project was executed over the course of a single semester. Therefore, the findings cannot be argued to represent all nonprofits. My project was specifically geared toward working to gain a better understanding of the Stillwater nonprofit system, how they represent and view themselves as individual organizations, in relation to each other, and in relation to the Stillwater community. A notable missing component of my research is that I did not speak to anyone who *utilizes* the services of these organizations. In a longer and more intensive project, their perspective would be invaluable to fully understanding the effectiveness of the services provided and for understanding how they may be improved.

Before corresponding with any of the nonprofit organizations I interviewed, I went through the process of gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I had previously satisfied the necessary training, and then got approval on a script which I was to use when contacting organizations requesting their participation, and approval on interview questions.

Organizations interviewed:

Organization	Description
Wings of Hope	Domestic Violence Shelter
Saville Center	Child Advocacy facility for children involved in abuse situations
Payne County Youth Services	Substance abuse treatment, emergency shelter, transitional living, and crisis service for the local youth population
Our Daily Bread	Food pantry and resource center
Stillwater Mobile Meals	Food delivery service to deliver food to elderly and disabled people

A recurring theme of unity emerged while I examined the nonprofits of Stillwater, Oklahoma. In the first and most obvious way, there is the United Way of Stillwater. Several of the organizations I spoke to are partnered with United way: The Saville Center, Wings of Hope, Stillwater Mobile Meals, and Payne County Youth Services. Primarily, United Way works to fund nonprofits within the community. But through reading up on them and through speaking to the

organizations partnered with them, it becomes evident that they are much more involved than that. Every single organization I spoke to brought up the unique synchronicity and cooperative nature of nonprofit organizations in Stillwater. This ranges from something as informal as referrals between organizations alongside an effort to not repeat services between organizations (after all, this would be a waste of time, energy, and resources), to more organized and official mechanisms in the form of director meetings across different organizations.

Additionally, this idea that people can do more to help one another when they congregate resources is what led to the formation of Our Daily Bread. Our Daily Bread is an amalgamation of various food pantries which once existed in Stillwater. Several food pantries in Stillwater were doing what small things they could accomplish, most open only once a month. These smaller programs, many run through churches, decided that they would accomplish more together than they were able to separately. Now Stillwater has a pantry that is open in its primary location three days a week, along with a mobile market, a campus market called Pete's Pantry, a market in Stillwater's alternative high school, Lincoln Academy, and a location in Ripley, Oklahoma, with intentions to grow. Consolidating resources allowed them to expand and serve the community more thoroughly.

There appears to be no competition between any of these nonprofit organizations, and seemingly for the better. This allows for the most efficient distributions of human resources and funding through eliminating an unnecessary repeat of services. Every organization I met with expressed how well the nonprofits in Stillwater work with one another. The representative at Wings of Hope praised Our Daily Bread and the work they do. They expressed how vital of a

resource the food pantry was. In turn, Our Daily Bread told me that Wings of Hope is an excellent resource for them when they come across instances of domestic abuse with their guests. Additionally, they told me that each non-profit offers unique services with very little overlap. However, Our Daily Bread still works to be a one-stop-shop for their guests. If someone comes to them with a need they cannot fill, they work to find referrals so they can still leave with the help they need. Payne County Youth Services talked with me about how unique it is for organizations to work as well together as they do in Stillwater. The fact that all these organizations expressed variations of the same sentiment leads me to believe there is somewhat extensive collaboration between them. I would imagine there would have to be, as so often the demographics served by these organizations overlap. Systemic issues at the root of poverty and abuse are intersectional. There is a strong positive relationship between food insecurity and intimate partner violence. As discussed, when exploring instances of mutual aid, those networks often pop up among marginalized groups because they are the ones most often neglected if not actively targeted by power structures.

Another commonality among the organizations I spoke to was a “formation” conducted by community members recognizing a need and working together to fill it. This is, in the most basic terms, following the idea of the formation of mutual aid, and supporting the notion that collaboration is a part of human nature and strengthens societies. As the most earnest example, Wings of Hope began as a fairly straightforward example of mutual aid. Learning about their history and practices was extremely illuminating for my project, as the organization itself began as mutual aid. As their website relays, three women in Stillwater were out to lunch in 1973 when they decided they wanted to do something to help women experiencing domestic

violence; the women wanted “to offer solutions and connections to others experiencing domestic abuse and sexual assault”. It began as a 24-hour hotline staffed by these women and members of the community. They would provide emergency shelter for these women by taking them into their own homes or putting them up in hotels. Eventually, they transitioned into an official nonprofit organization.

To a lesser degree, this same pattern applies to the formation of Our Daily Bread. It was formed out of various food pantries, most of which ran out of churches. As previously mentioned, those individual pantries conglomerated into one pantry. The individual pantries were created by churches in the community, then community members recognized an opportunity to improve these services.

Payne County Youth Services is partnered with the Oklahoma Association of Youth Services. They are created and supported by this statewide institution, according to my interview with their representative. However, each regional organization, like Payne County Youth Services, is governed by their own board made up of community members. This allows the unique needs of individual communities to be addressed in ways that are best suited to them. The representative I spoke to described this as “community-based care”. Even so, Payne County Youth Services has found that between the few towns within Payne County there are still differences which must be accounted for. For instance, efforts for prevention education they have engaged in different towns have been received in some more readily than others. Some communities are slower to adapt and less receptive to outsiders coming into their communities to try and educate them. They said that Stillwater is always the most eager, comparatively.

When examining the conversations I had with these nonprofits and in analyzing what I learned from them, I wanted to look at their practices from a mutual aid perspective. By that I mean, stacking what I believe a mutual aid design would prioritize against what nonprofit structures prioritize based on the perspectives of those I interviewed. For example, embedded within the mechanism of mutual aid networks, is a more natural system of internal feedback. Because the network is essentially run by those who need it, there is an inherent process of feedback and readjustment.

In contrast, the charity structure has a stark separation between recipient and service provider. There are those giving care and those receiving it, the two groups separated by firm boundaries and clear positions. That's not to say there is no kind of relationship which may form, but there are distinctive roles. Therefore, any grievances held by those receiving services through these organizations must be communicated across this line in some manner. There are limits to my study, a notable one being that I spoke only with one side of this relationship: the service providers. I did not have the opportunity to speak with any clients/guests of these organizations and am therefore missing a critical perspective. However, there is insight to be gained from what I was able to do. I asked each organization if there were any official channels of receiving feedback from clients, how that feedback was processed, and if they could give me examples of how responses have resulted in a change in practices in the past. Universally, these organizations rely heavily on paper or digital surveys to hear back from clients on their satisfaction with services. This seems to be a limited means of communication, as Payne County Youth Services stated themselves, they have a "terrible" response rate.

This illustrates why it is particularly important for nonprofits, especially when viewed in relation to mutual aid, to be intentional about opening effective lines of communications. As explored throughout the history of mutual aid, from the perspective held by its practitioners, there is no one more knowledgeable of a community's needs than the community itself. There is no one more knowledgeable of an individual's needs than that individual.

When I was walked through the shopping experience at Our Daily Bread, I found Another example of a disconnect between mutual aid and nonprofit models. Some aspects of the experience were open to criticism. When it is a guest's turn to shop, they are paired with a volunteer "shopping assistant". I believe it is important, especially through a lens of mutual aid framework, to question every point where shopping at a food pantry divulges from an ordinary grocery store experience. As discussed previously, unnecessary hurdles or surveillance is often used as a way of punishing or othering those receiving aid through charities. When I spoke with the representative at Our Daily Bread, I felt that they sensed my hesitation. They told me that dignity is something they believe in at Our Daily Bread and they express that to every volunteer. They told me that they themselves do not require an assistant when shopping, so they understand that the guests of Our Daily Bread don't always require one either. The representative told me that they visit other food pantries to compare services and practices, which is an excellent way of maximizing quality of service, and that many of them do not have shopping assistants. They said that when they are short volunteers, they offer the guest the choice of whether they prefer an assistant or not. However, if they are not short volunteers, that option is not offered, as they believe fostering relationships with guests to be a priority. Based on my research on empowering recipients of aid and charity, I would suggest that the

choice between whether a guest wishes to have assistance while shopping always be offered. It is true that some people would enjoy the company and the chance to socialize, but for some it may feel as though they are being watched. The effort to connect with guests is important, but fundamentally, the purpose of the food pantry is to give food to those who need it. A person should be able to come into the facility, have this need satisfied, and have nothing else expected of them. I will note that the shopping assistance has many positive attributes. For one, as mentioned, communication with guests is key to providing the best service possible. Fostering relationships between staff and guests is an important part of opening those lines of communication. Additionally, some people may prefer or require one, either for social preferences or physical assistance. However, the choice should be left entirely up to the guest.

Aside from contrasting what I've learned of mutual aid practices to what I've learned of nonprofit practices through my interviews, I was also looking for ways in which mutual aid overlapped or was involved with the works of these organizations. I asked each organization about their familiarity with the practice of mutual aid. Some had a vague familiarity with it, some had never heard of it. I provided each with a brief definition to give them an understanding. Then, I asked them in what ways mutual aid played into their practice or if they had witnessed it in any form through the work they do. When I spoke to Wings of Hope, they told me they relied upon it. There is a limit to the services one organization can offer. Contacting members of the client's community to procure them rides, childcare, or various other forms of care and assistance, is vital for easing the operation of the organization. However, this isn't done exclusively to help decrease the demands of Wings of Hope, but this practice is better in the long run for the client themselves. When Wings of Hope helps

encourage connections within a person's community and helps build a network of support for the person, that connection is left even after the client has moved on from Wings of Hope. This is a great example of the unique benefits of mutual aid, community members helping each other in whatever ways they are able. Additionally, these relationships exist outside the provision of care—these are friends, neighbors, church members, colleagues, classmates, etc.

When I spoke to Payne County Youth Services, I asked them the same question, prompting them a bit and giving them the examples I had heard from other organizations like with Wings of Hope. However, in the case of Payne County Youth Services, they are not able to connect their clients with community members in the same way, as there is a certain level of discretion required when working with minors.

Additionally, when I spoke to our Daily Bread, the representative informed me that some of their guests also volunteer. The representative expressed that it was a way to give back, by giving time. This struck me – it is reminiscent of core philosophies behind mutual aid: giving what you can and taking what you need. From a mutual aid perspective, this can be a way to empower community members by allowing them to contribute. This gives us something akin to a network of care, as we see with mutual aid. Additionally, Our Daily Bread has built a community garden on their property where members of the community can participate in gardening and learn gardening skills. Anyone is welcome to take what they need without restrictions other than signs which indicate when produce is ready to harvest. They plan to expand this program by building gardens throughout Stillwater and in other towns in Payne County.

In addition to the nonprofits listed above, I also spoke to a person who was very involved in the process of settling the Afghan refugees over the past year or so. In Stillwater alone, there were 72 refugees. This person was tasked with leading the effort to house and process all these people with essentially only volunteers to assist them. Much of the assistance they received came from various local churches. The representative noted that Stillwater truly had no systems in place for resettlement, as it was such an incredible rarity here. Many places, I would presume larger cities, have existing networks for procuring transport, clothing, meals, etc. The representative I spoke with felt that Stillwater did not have a sufficient network for serving low-income people. The process was not cohesive and consisted of various agencies just “doing their own thing”. This was interesting to me because it seemed contradictory to what I had heard from the nonprofit agencies I had met with. Regardless, the organizations in Stillwater did their part to help support resettlement. For example, Our Daily Bread allowed the refugees to visit the pantry twice a month rather than once a month. Payne County Health Services sent people to help translate and fill out medical paperwork. Stillwater Public Schools donated furniture and the Salvation Army donated brand new winter coats.

Throughout my reading of mutual aid one of the biggest proponents of the practice comes from the belief that the communities in need are the only ones who can know how their needs will best be met. Knowing this, I asked the representative how communication between the refugees and those planning resettlement was organized prior to their arrival. They informed me that it was largely non-existent. When the US pulled out of Afghanistan, there was immediate chaos, and the entire process which followed was chaotic as well. Now, in this case their settlement was never going to happen through mutual aid and was never going to be

organized by Afghan communities. However, I feel that this is a good example of how difficult it is for outside individuals/organizations to understand the needs of communities they do not belong to. For example, I expected the community of Afghan refugees to be close knit as they share a language and culture in a new and unfamiliar place, as well as a similar traumatic experience. However, tribal identity is significant to many Afghans, and intertribal relations can be difficult in some cases. Additionally, there are language/dialect differences. These cultural factors were not accounted for during the settlement process and within the remaining 65 Afghans in Stillwater alone there are five different tribes represented. This makes relationships within their community more difficult and has sowed division. If the tribal groups had been accounted for when distributing settlement, it may have made the transition a bit easier and given the refugees a better sense of community among themselves.

In addition to servicing basic needs, the families were partnered with local Stillwater families to help fill a sudden lack of community. These families were only asked to try and form a relationship with their partnered family. Some were more successful than others. Families would have meals together or go out to do activities. One man would take his partner out fishing. This is excellent because it fits with their halal diet in which fish is permissible. The children especially got along well as the Afghan children were quick to pick up English (as all children are quick to pick up new languages). This is a good example of care which aims not only to fill material needs, but to foster community relationships which exist outside of that need. These families were able to support one another through hardships flowing in both directions. They were able to, simply put, form friendship.

IV. Conclusion

I've come to understand through my readings and research that the formation of mutual aid looks and responds differently in different contexts. For example: Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid is one which forms and grows organically out of community. But in response to crisis communities don't always have the luxury of natural formation. In addition to the organic formation of mutual aid which blossoms out of community, there is a need for mutual aid to be organized in response to external stimuli. We see this through organizations like the Mutual Aid Disaster Network who work to plant mutual aid networks where there were none in the wake of natural disaster. When there is an immediate concern or emergency, there is not always time for these things to naturally grow and unfold. In those cases, experienced and knowledgeable patrons of mutual aid may be utilized to formulate necessary networks. These evolving understandings of old theories and practices, like mutual aid, must be adapted to fit a world which runs on the pace and scale of our modern one. When we talk about theories that are hundreds of years old, they cannot always be applied in exactness to modern society. Things have evolved in ways no one could have predicted; our society is globalized and advanced technologically into a whole new world. Globalization and technological advancement require us to recontextualize our understanding of community.

As I sought to apply my knowledge of mutual aid to the practices of nonprofits in Stillwater, I necessarily had to stretch its definition and application. There is a key component of mutual aid which cannot be applied to any of these organizations, and that is the revolutionary nature of the practice. These nonprofits work within systems and are funded by donors and or government grants. They work in tandem with law enforcement and legislation. They are, in this way, a part of existing systems. Mutual aid is a common tool of revolutionary

systems and social movements, often by those seeking to dismantle such systems. In this way, the comparison is at odds. Still, I believe the incorporation of mutual aid practices in whatever way possible will only strengthen the abilities of nonprofits to serve.

Through my research conducting interviews with Stillwater nonprofits, I found support for the idea of collectivism. Not only do the organizations hope to uplift community members to build a more productive community, but among the organizations themselves there is a sense of collectivism. Some organizations were formed by combining smaller organizations, such as with Our Daily Bread. In the case of Payne County Youth Services, they function as a part of a statewide Youth Service commission. And many of these organizations work together through United Way. Many organizations, Wings of Hope especially, find that community support outside of their organization is able to help a person through crisis in ways they don't have the opportunity to.

I believe my exploration of mutual aid, reading its theories, learning of its historical practice, and looking at its potential application to charity models has benefitted my perspective on what it means to build and uplift community. When I began looking at nonprofits both in a general sense and then specifically within Stillwater organizations, I found that I was better able to discern how priorities can differ within efforts to serve. Like with Our Daily Bread and their shopping process, practices that I may not have questioned, I now look at through the lens of mutual aid and can see what I would do differently. When I went into the interviews with the knowledge I had gained from my readings and research regarding mutual aid, I was able to analyze practices from a mutual aid perspective and understand how priorities differ between aid approaches. In short, I have found that the support of mutual aid is able to

strengthen and inform the work of nonprofits. If these organizations utilize a mutual aid perspective regarding the work they do, it will help provide the community with the best care possible.

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Appendix A – Mutual Aid Zine

What is Mutual Aid?

Pooling resources and providing services to distribute throughout the community, according to need

~~Horizontal~~

Mutual Aid involves resources passed among community members, rather than wealthy giving to those in need.

~~Empowerment~~

Mutual Aid empowers individuals and communities by believing that everyone has something that they can contribute to aiding the collective struggle.

~~Community~~

Decisions are made by those effected by the problem.

~~Solidarity~~

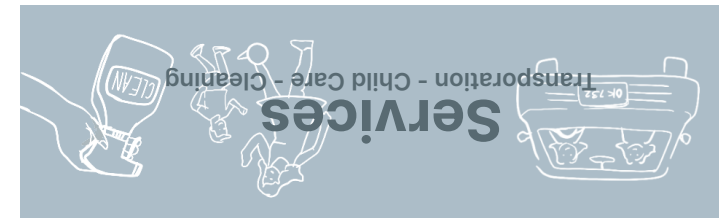
Mutual aid is organized and operated by those in need, for themselves and their community members.

~~Cooperation~~

Uplifting and supporting one another strengthens communities and society at large

Examples

Mutual aid is community action driven and led by community members. Principles of mutual aid include direct action, cooperation, mutual understanding, and solidarity. Mutual aid empowers those in need through a shared commitment to the idea that everyone has something that they can contribute to aiding the collective struggle for the betterment of society



Reading + Resources

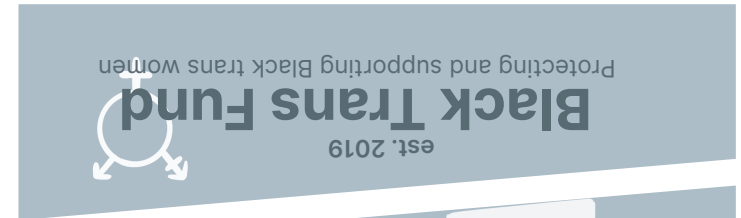
Natural Disasters

Mutual aid takes hold in the wake of natural disasters, as we've become increasingly aware of in the past couple of years. There are a few reasons for this. For starters, there is a natural proclivity to help one another in times of crisis. Sometimes, neighbors and communities can act more quickly to come to each other's aid than government agencies can. In this way, mutual aid efforts are crucial in the immediate moments after disaster.



Political Nature

Mutual aid is inherently political and is inextricably linked to social movements. Many define mutual aid as a form of political participation. Mutual aid is often born out of marginalized communities where state support often does not reach. These communities learn to care for themselves through caring for one another.



Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is a grassroots organization whose purpose is to provide support to communities in the wake of natural disaster. They function as a network of organizations which are each led by their own community members. They provide water, food, shelter, medical response, and financial support, as well as engage in activism and education efforts. www.MutualAidDisasterRelief.com



Mutual Aid Disaster Relief

A book on the theories and practices of mutual aid. This book focuses on the political aspects of mutual aid and the difference between it and the charity model. The book navigates historical and contemporary examples of mutual aid. The author, Dean Spade, as years of organizing experience. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dean-spade-mutual-aid>



Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity Through This Crisis and the Next, Dean Spade

Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution is a series of essays initially published in 1890-1896. Kropotkin contradicted the common notion that competition was the driving force behind evolution arguing that it was cooperation. Kropotkin does not argue that competition (or "self-assertion of the individual") does not exist in the process of societal evolution, but rather that mutual aid plays an equal role and has been largely ignored compared to "survival of the fittest" mentalities that have been much more prominent in prevalent theory. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution>



Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution, Peter Kropotkin

Lydia Blew

Special Thanks

Alyson Greiner, Thomas LaVanchy and Lily Smith

pocket guide to
MUTUAL AID

Appendix B – Institutional Review Board Information



Geography Department

CONSENT FORM

A Study in Mutual Aid and Non- Profits

Background Information

You are invited to be in a research study of non-profits in Stillwater, Oklahoma. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can stop the interview/survey at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your relationship with Oklahoma State University.

This study is being conducted by: Lydia Blew, Geography department, under the direction of Alyson Greiner, Geography department, Oklahoma State University.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: you will engage in an interview with the primary investigator, Lydia Blew, in whatever format you are most comfortable (email, phone call, or in person interview). If the interview is conducted in person or over the phone, I will take notes to gather necessary information. The name of the non-profit that you are associated with will be identified in the interview notes and in the final paper, but a pseudonym will be used instead of your name and you will not be identified.

Participation in the study involves the following time commitment: A 15-30 minute interview

Compensation

You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

Risks and Benefits

The study involves the following foreseeable risks: There is a potential risk of breach of confidentiality which is minimized by using the name of the non-profit that you are affiliated with instead of your name.

The benefits to participation are: The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are providing knowledge pertaining to mutual aid practices and how they may be incorporated into the practices of nonprofits. We cannot guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

Confidentiality

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number/pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

We will collect your information through interview. This information will be stored in a locked drawer if physical information, or in a password protected computer if digital information. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, identifiable data will be destroyed. This process should take approximately December 31st.

Contacts and Questions

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at (405) 612-8753, lblew@okstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact the IRB at (405) 744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.



Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study.

I give consent to be contacted for follow-up in this study:

Yes No

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____



Phone/Email Script

Hi! My name is Lydia Blew. I am a student at Oklahoma State University. I am contacting you because of your position at I am conducting research for my thesis on mutual aid and the practices of non-profits in Stillwater, Oklahoma. If you would be willing to participate in an interview, could you please contact me by email, lblew@okstate.edu, or phone, (405) 612-8753, so we can arrange a time and place.

Thank you,

Lydia Blew



Approved: 09/30/2022
Protocol #: IRB-22-396