

Mutual Aid Organization Guide

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Contents

Why this guide	2
1. What is mutual aid.....	2
a. history	2
b. what mutual aid groups do.	2
c. compared to charity.....	3
2. Why mutual aid now	3
a. economic vulnerability	3
b. social vulnerability.....	3
3. How to start a mutual aid group	4
a. think micro-local.....	4
b. mobilize weak ties	4
c. get the word out	4
d. use incentives to recruit people	4
e. develop “leaders” and a leadership structure.....	5
f. find and catalogue needs and resources.....	5
4. How to maintain a mutual aid group.....	6
a. expanding and replacing leadership.....	6
c. preventing, acknowledging, and addressing burnout	7
a. developing a communication system	7
b. organize fun and safe meetings.....	8
5. Managing change in a mutual aid group	8
a. changing issues	8
b. changing constituencies	9
c. internal conflict.....	9
6. Ending a mutual aid group.....	10
Other Guides	11

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Why this guide

There are many excellent guides for mutual aid groups out there, created by groups from the lessons they have learned in practice. A number of those are listed at the end of this document. This guide adds to the library by concentrating less on the nuts and bolts of specific mutual aid activities and more on the “background” organizational issues that face not just mutual aid groups but any volunteer civic group.

1. What is mutual aid

Mutual Aid is a very simple idea, though it is so far outside of most people’s experience that we have to keep reinventing it. In a true community, people help each other out in untold ways. It is not some community members taking the role of giver and some taking the role of getter. Instead, everyone is both a giver and a getter. It is also not like an hours-based economy where you buy things with hours rather than dollars. It is simply individuals freely contributing support to each other without any mediating currency. Mutual aid is characteristic of places where people would mow each others’ lawns when they are away on vacation, cook meals for sick neighbors, help fix their plumbing or electric, help shovel each others’ driveways in the winter, and engage in many other acts of mutual support. When the neighbor brings fresh-baked cookies over, it isn’t in payment for repairing their leaky pipe. It is just being “neighborly.” Mutual aid is neighborly.

a. history

Mutual aid is so simple an idea, that it may in fact have always been a characteristic of humanity, and perhaps even all thinking life. But we have come to know about it mostly because of how it has been practiced by people who are struggling with either acute disasters, such as hurricanes, or chronic disasters, such as poverty.

Many mutual aid groups organize during times of disaster. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, for example, has its roots in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

Some groups organize in contexts of chronic rather than acute disasters. Those living in the intersection of both racial and economic marginalization also provide examples of mutual aid. The Free African Society was one of the earliest examples of a mutual aid group in the U.S., dating to 1787. The Black Panthers organized free meal programs for children, education programs for neighborhoods, safety programs for elders, and even health care and ambulance services. The United Farm Workers organized food and clothing programs, a gasoline co-op, and a credit union. The Young Lords, led by Puerto Rican youth, organized, food, clothing, and education programs, as well as dental services and child care.

Other groups have been part of the fabric of the United States. Many fraternal societies and even some insurance companies trace their roots to mutual aid groups.

Mutual aid exploded onto the scene during the COVID-19 pandemic as the public policy response to the virus created grave difficulties for many people to access food, maintain shelter, and obtain health care. Groups sprang up everywhere to fill the gap left by government, corporations, and even nonprofits that could not meet the demand.

b. what mutual aid groups do.

In the midst of COVID-19, mutual aid mostly started off with food distribution for people isolated in their homes. But it quickly spread to also helping people pay for rent and utilities. As people

began to rediscover this practice of collective self-help, the practice widened to creating networks of social support for people who were physically isolated.

As the police killing of George Floyd sparked protests and rebellions across the globe, mutual aid expanded yet again. Mutual aid groups began providing water, food, and first aid to protestors, organizing bail funds, and stepping up prisoner support efforts. From there, people began organizing mutual aid for any need that people might have—transportation, safety, housing security, and child care. Groups even began setting up community fridges on the streets. Mutual aid groups also engage in advocacy and policy struggles.

In short, groups organized to meet any need that might be met by a government, nonprofit, or business, and more. The difference was not in what needs groups met, but in how they met those needs.

c. compared to charity

There are two important distinctions between mutual aid and charity.

First, many mutual aid groups adopt the slogan “solidarity, not charity.” This means they see both “givers” and “getters” as part of the mutual aid group. This contrasts with the traditional charity organization where the givers are the organization and the getters are the clients. Additionally, in charity models, the givers choose what to provide, maintaining power and resource inequalities. This makes it even harder for getters to maintain their self-esteem. Mutual aid groups work to involve the getters into also being givers in whatever way they can.

Second, many mutual aid groups consciously adopt a culture of “cooperation, not competition.” They work to build relationships of collective cooperation among everyone involved in the group, as well as between mutual aid groups. Rather than the competitive struggle for funding that characterizes the nonprofit charity sector, mutual aid groups strive to build networks across communities in places like New York City.

2. Why mutual aid now

It may seem obvious why we should focus on mutual aid now. A lot of people need it during this time of the disruption from a pandemic and from an economy that has suspended so many people’s paychecks. Those disruptions have also made clear just how far we have drifted from a sense of community, and that is the other important reason to focus on mutual aid.

a. economic vulnerability

Severe economic stresses widen the gap between the haves and have nots. And it’s not just the gap between the one percent and everyone else. It’s also the gap between those who can just barely pay their bills each month and those who cannot. People just above the poverty line are likely to know people who have now fallen below it, making the need for mutual aid clear. That is why so many mutual aid groups are micro-local, organized at the small-town, neighborhood or, in places like New York City, building level.

b. social vulnerability

People living in disaster contexts, where institutional responses are absent or weak, suffer from more than unmet material needs. They also suffer socially and emotionally. And when the official public policy response is for everyone to isolate, the emotional suffering magnifies. As mutual aid groups organized to meet people’s material needs, they realized they also needed to work to meet people’s social-emotional needs. One such need for basic human connection—

someone to talk to. The other is for purpose—a reason to exist. That is another reason that mutual aid is so much more powerful than charity. Charity might partly fill the need for human connection. But it cannot fill the need for purpose for everyone. Mutual aid, by virtue of its focus on mutuality, offers purpose for whoever gets involved.

3. How to start a mutual aid group

Starting a mutual aid group is a lot like starting any voluntary group. There are lots of guides out there for starting voluntary groups. Here are some basic principles for mutual aid groups.

a. think micro-local

In order for mutual aid to be mutual, it is best for people to be relatively close in space. And even at times when people can't meet face to face, if they share the same small rural community, or neighborhood, or building, they can still build relationships. Such relationships can last even if the need for mutual aid goes away.

b. mobilize weak ties

Organizing mutual aid at the micro-local level doesn't mean that everyone will know everyone. In fact mutual aid is a great opportunity to connect people who don't know each other even though they live just around the corner. The sociologist Mark Granovetter, almost four decades ago, wrote about what he called the "strength of weak ties." We seem to most value "strong ties"—close tight-knit bonds of family and best friends. But those bonds don't extend very far. If your strong ties are experiencing the same crisis as you, you're all in trouble. In contrast, weak ties—neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, congregation members, and so on—usually come from more varied walks of life and can access more varied resources. And those "weak ties" may not actually be weak at all. They are just less intimate, and thus less predictable. But they may provide as much or more support than family, which we all know can be fraught with dysfunction. A mutual aid group organized only around strong ties is more vulnerable to the same systemic shock that created the need for the group in the first place. So, reaching out to diverse neighbors is important.

c. get the word out

A mutual aid group won't be very useful if no one knows about it. In these days of social distancing, some groups default to social media strategies. But those strategies can leave out people who lack social media skills or access. For groups working at the micro-local level, more old-school strategies can help. Signs in yards or on utility poles, along with flyers stuck in people's doors, may work better than social media in some cases.

d. use incentives to recruit people

Those who study why people join voluntary groups have found that three types of incentives. The first is the "selective incentive"—something a person can only get if they join the group. So if someone needs groceries, and the group offers groceries, they are more likely to sign up. Second is the "social incentive"—friendship or comradeship. A group that builds relationships provides this incentive. Third is the "purposive incentive"—an appeal to one's values or morals. These incentives can be stacked. Someone may join initially because they need groceries, but then find that they like the people involved, and then become committed to the group's values.

Social incentives can be difficult to use when people are being told to socially distance. But mutual aid groups have been in the forefront of innovations for balancing social connectedness with safety, sometimes using social distancing, personal protective equipment, and sophisticated

safety protocols; and sometimes using information and communication technology. Here are some resources to help with that:

**Face to Face Safety: QueerCare,

<https://wiki.queercare.network/index.php?title=Category:Covid>; Mutual Aid Brookline, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wr0i0v1Y5-Auv24z1nNSOvNCTdbsz-Pscw5ajDbRrjU/edit>; Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-SupplyDistro-MASafetyPracticesZine-WEB.pdf>

**Online safety: Electronic Frontier Foundation:

<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/03/keeping-each-other-safe-when-virtually-organizing-mutual-aid>

e. develop “leaders” and a leadership structure

Many voluntary groups are started by well-meaning people who just want to meet a need, and they operate pretty informally. But such groups often burn out and collapse or become a kind of in-group club because no new people join or, if they do, they soon leave because the founders haven’t made a place for them. Jo Freeman, 50 years ago, called this the “tyranny of structurelessness.” She noticed feminist organizations at the time tried to resist hierarchy by staying informal, but failed. Her insight is that groups need to create a structure to prevent too much power accumulating in one or a few people.

The related lesson here is that, to stay true to the philosophy of mutual aid, the group itself needs to practice mutuality, and that means rethinking the idea of leadership. One alternative model befitting mutual aid is “distributed” or “group-centered” leadership. Such a structure is good for both recruiting people and keeping them involved. If everyone who gets involved is offered leadership responsibility, then everyone has sense of purpose in the group. In such a structure, printing the flyers, distributing the flyers, maintaining the database, getting the groceries, distributing the groceries, and so on, are all leadership responsibilities requiring planning and decision-making. The group’s structure is then built from all of the leadership roles needed to do the group’s work.

**Group-centered leadership resource: The Grassroots Political Philosophy of Ella Baker,

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/197a/169301c506d755c3046cec4872a1d720808f.pdf>

f. find and catalogue needs and resources

Effective mutual aid requires a lot of information management. Groups need information on what needs people have, and on what resources they can offer (remember, this is *mutual* aid). They need contact information. They probably need to manage schedules, especially if they are organizing food access and have limited working space within which to manage social distancing. They may need to manage a budget. And it’s always good for multiple people to have access to both the information and the tools to manage it, so especially during times of pandemic, that almost certainly means using software (though a chalkboard or bulletin board on someone’s porch isn’t out of the question). Online survey tools can gather much of this information.

**Online survey resources: <https://surveysparrow.com/blog/15-best-surveymonkey-alternatives-top-competitors/>

Groups can manage that information with various online tools as well. Most people will probably use Google Sheets, but a friend with a server can set up any one of a variety of open source database systems that are easy to use.

**Online database resources: <https://alternativeto.net/software/microsoft-access/?platform=online>

An important consideration in collecting people's information is letting them know who will have access to it and how the group will use it. Will the group share it publicly? sell it to others? delete it at any point?

And because it's always good for more than one person to have access to the information system, training in the systems is also important.

4. How to maintain a mutual aid group

a. expanding and replacing leadership

Groups that depend on the same small group of people are usually not sustainable. Voluntary civic engagement such as mutual aid is usually an add-on to family and paid employment. So an individual or small group that starts up a mutual aid group should be willing and able to replace themselves. But it won't work to just grab people off the streets and ask them to put in the countless hours the founders have.

Most voluntary groups have three types of participants—think of them as three concentric rings. At the center is the committed core. These participants show up for all the meetings (indeed, they organize all the meetings) and do most of the work. Next are the regular participants. They will participate when called upon for specific activities. Then there are those who will show up for big events. The challenge is to identify people at the big events who might be brought into the second ring of regular participants, and to identify people in the second ring of regular participants who might be brought into the committed core.

Three criteria can help identify new leaders. One is what the sociologist Doug McAdam called biographical availability--people who have time because of their life stage. People who are not caring for children, are unemployed with adequate unemployment payments, or are retired with pensions (and, during pandemics, are not medically vulnerable) may have more time. The second criteria is passion. These are people who respond to "purposive incentives" and will shift other things in their lives to make time for the group's work because they believe in it. Third is skills—communication skills, technology skills, organizing skills, legal skills, etc.

A group needs to build relationships to use these criteria. Community organizers talk about having "one to one" conversations. The strict one to one model might be impractical in many cases, but it is easy to adapt. At events, like staffing a food and water station at a protest, leaders can listen to people in the third ring who show up, especially those who want to know more about the group. Ask people why they turned out, and whether they turn out regularly for such things. Explain what they can bring to the group. Ask for contact information. Have a meeting scheduled to invite them to. For those who staff the water and food station—the second ring—it is even easier to have conversations about experiences, skills, and passions.

**One to one conversation resources: Regional Center for Healthy Communities, <https://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Tip%20sheet.doc>; Leading Differently, <https://leadingdifferently.com/2017/03/01/one-to-one-relational-meetings/>; New York City Organizing Support Center, <http://econnet.eu/media/Listening%20and%20recritment/One%20on%20One%20Packet%20-%20NYC%20Organizing%20Support%20Center.pdf>

Replacing and expanding leadership also means providing leadership responsibilities (remember group-centered leadership) and training for new leaders. It is best to have more than one person who can handle technical tasks (like money management, information management) and social tasks (like discussion facilitation, conflict resolution). Training should cover not just those tasks, but also the group's history, decision-making process, and structure.

c. preventing, acknowledging, and addressing burnout

Continually expanding and replacing leadership is also about caring for existing leaders. But, on the flip side, it is important to help new leaders pace themselves. Some core groups also have highly unequal divisions of labor. That can work if some people really do have more biographical availability, but needs to be discussed.

One way to prevent burnout is to combine a flexible organizational structure with a relational process that allows people to share enough about themselves so the group knows how to flex the structure. One easy way to do this is to begin all meetings with "check-ins" that create space for everyone to talk about what is going on in their lives, letting the group know whether someone's biographical availability might be changing. Another way to prevent burnout is to rotate people in and out of more demanding leadership position on a regular basis (which is another reason to have more than one person who can take on specific leadership tasks).

**check ins resource: The New School Rules,

<https://www.edelements.com/hubfs/NSR%20Check-in%20Check-out.pdf>

People also need to feel comfortable acknowledging burnout, and the group can help in three ways. First, the group can build strong enough relationships so people feel comfortable discussing mental health. Second, the group culture needs to include learning and caring about mental health. Third, the group structure needs to be robust enough for people to take mental health breaks without feeling guilty (this is another reason to continually work to expand leadership).

a. developing a communication system

Any effective group has an effective communication system. And during times like pandemics that restrict face to face communications, groups need to carefully strategize alternatives. It may not make sense to use video-conferencing for every communication. Some communication might work better using email, group text messaging, or phone. The group also needs to openly discuss communication norms—does everyone on the video conference need to have their video on; is it OK for kids and dogs to be in the background or sometimes in the foreground, and so on. A group should consider different kinds of interaction tools to find those that will support the easiest and most fulfilling interactions.

**video conferencing systems: Tech Radar, <https://www.techradar.com/best/best-video-conferencing-software>

**group texting systems: Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/best-group-text-messaging-tools-2483091>

Another part of a good communication system is finding a balance between inundating people with needless messaging and expecting people to remember everything going on in the group without reminding. There are two important communications. One is having a leadership role of checking in with people who promise to do tasks, to see if they are on time and/or need support. Another is sending out reminders of upcoming meetings with agendas.

b. organize fun and safe meetings

There is a reason so many people hate meetings. One of the most neglected aspects of any group is meeting management. There are a number of things a group can do to make its meetings worth people's time.

First, craft a timed agenda and stick to it. This requires two leadership roles—timekeeper and facilitator. The timekeeper can check with the group as the time limit for a topic approaches and the group can make a conscious decision about how long to continue. The facilitator's job is to keep the conversation focused and balance everyone's participation.

Second, do check-ins and check-outs (some people call them checks-in and checks-out). We discussed check-ins above. Check-outs allow people to reflect on the meeting process to make future meetings even better.

Third, limit announcements. Announcements can be a huge time sink, especially when they generate tangential discussions, and generate very little benefit. Consider making a handout for any information the group doesn't need to make a decision about.

Fourth, limit presentations. Presentations don't require "synchronous" (everyone in the same space at the same time) communication. They can be recorded and posted. Yes, people might ignore them, but then it is worth asking whether the presentation is that valuable to begin with.

Fifth, maximize interaction. Meeting time is precious, and the more time people get to interact and build relationships, the better. Use meeting time to build the strength of the group, and engage newcomers so they feel part of the group.

5. Managing change in a mutual aid group

When it comes to mutual aid, situations can change rapidly. In rural areas the people may not change as much, but the issues can change fast as storms, viruses (animal, plant, and human), and economic shocks can cause much deeper disruption when there is a smaller population. Urban areas can see rapidly changing population as people move in and out of rental housing, requiring more time spent helping people get to know each other. Mass social conflict can also create larger disruptions in cities.

a. changing issues

Many civic organizations of all kinds structure themselves as single issue groups, providing food, shelter, voting support, or whatever. But most people engaged in struggle don't experience intersecting issues, and it is exhausting and disheartening to keep searching for different organizations for support with different issues. Many urban mutual aid groups in the summer of 2020 found themselves starting out helping people meet basic needs during virus lockdowns but, as people took to the streets after the police killing of George Floyd, some groups found themselves setting up food, water, and first aid stations in the streets to support protestors.

How do groups prepare to shift from issue to issue, or take on multiple issues? First, they need to think of themselves as a multi-issue group from the beginning. Then they need information. One source of information can be obtained from national and international networks of mutual aid organizations, to find out what all the possible issues are.

**links to networks: Mutual Aid Hub, <https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>; COVID-19 List, <https://www.covid-19list.com/knowledge-base/mutual-aid-volunteer-groups>

Groups also need to regularly interact with their local people—whether through flyers in doors, online surveys, phone outreach, or even face to face outdoors at six feet with masks—to listen for changing issues.

Groups can also use disaster preparedness principles to adapt to changing issues. And *disaster* here should be defined broadly. As COVID-19 overtook New York in the spring of 2020, the city's health and transportation infrastructure shut down just as it would with other disasters. Urban neighborhoods in places like Chicago are beset by gunfire at the rate of war zones. Urban and rural communities across the country experience chronic health and sanitation infrastructure gaps that match those occurring under acute disaster circumstances in privileged communities. The best community-based disaster preparedness is organized around mutual aid principles.

**community-based disaster preparedness resources: Vancouver Resilient Neighbourhoods Program: <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/resilient-neighbourhoods-program.aspx>; North Olympic Peninsula Local 2020 Group, <http://www.getemergencyprepared.com/neighborhood.html>

b. changing constituencies

A constituency is a collection of people with important common characteristics who struggle with common issues. A constituency can organize to identify their commonality and engage in mutual aid and collective self-advocacy. Constituencies can change through the life of a mutual aid group.

One way that constituencies can change is that people in stressed circumstances are often forced to move around. Their jobs go away, they get evicted, they need to care for others (in many communities of the most oppressed people, mutual aid is actually a way of life). Mutual aid groups in such contexts need to do regular outreach to make themselves known to new people entering the community.

A second way that constituencies can change is when issues change. Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus was on elders, who were told to strictly socially isolate, and thus needed support for basic supplies. Groups then started to realize that the people supplying everyone's basic needs, like grocery store workers, lacked the workplace protections needed to help them be safe. As people attempted to restart place-based retail and service businesses and schools, it became clear that working parents lacked safe childcare. As schools went online, a lack of technology access for school children became more visible. Mutual aid groups stepped up for each of these constituencies.

Adapting to changing constituencies is one reason why mutual aid groups need to continually bring in new leadership, as those new constituency members need to be involved in the group. Additionally, responding to new constituencies (because the old constituencies probably still need support too) stresses the capacity of a mutual aid group, and expanding capacity means getting bigger.

c. internal conflict

All groups of all kinds have conflict. It's a normal quality of any group. It can even add spark and energy to a group. What is important is how a group handles conflicts.

Conflicts arise from all kinds of sources. Of course, no group can fully escape from the real world. The effects of structures and cultures that have privileged certain races, sexes, genders, classes, body types, ages, and so many other human characteristics can't be left outside. And even if such

things didn't exist, people with different life experiences will interpret what happens inside the group differently. New people entering a group can disrupt stable relationships. New events inside or outside the group can do the same.

Some of this conflict can be avoided by developing good meeting practices and good leadership development practices. In addition, the more people in the group who understand and can facilitate conflict transformation, the more the group will be able to maximize the benefits and limit the costs of conflict.

**Conflict Resolution Network free training materials: <https://www.crnhq.org/free-resources/> . Black Lives Matter tools for addressing chapter conflict: https://blacklivesmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/BLM_ChapterConflict_r1.pdf . Punch Up Collective Conflict Resolution & Accountability Framework: <http://www.punchupcollective.org/conflict-resolution-accountability-framework/> .

It is important to recognize that not all conflicts have a resolution. There may be fundamental value differences among group members, and they may need to agree to go their separate ways, which can lead to ending the mutual aid group.

6. Ending a mutual aid group

Many mutual aid groups closed up shop early on in the COVID-19 pandemic. But the stories of those groups that have closed down reveal that it is often single-issue groups with a small unchanging core group that end after a short period. They burn out or their issue ends.

What are the signs that it might be time to consider ending a mutual aid group? Sometimes the group's reason for being ends. During COVID-19, as grocery stores created early shopping hours for elders, and mask requirements commenced, mobility restrictions on elders eased, and many small grocery distribution groups disbanded. This is a problem especially for those groups that are very specialized. Groups that address multiple issues are more likely to just shift their efforts.

Another sign is dwindling participation among the leadership. If the existing leaders are feeling burned out, and there is no one who wants to replace them, it may be better to consciously end the group than have it slowly whither away. This can sometimes happen even if the issue the group is addressing is still there. In such a case, the most important thing the leaders can do is identify replacement services and communicate those with their constituencies.

Some groups that become formalized, get funding, and start paying staff, also suffer from becoming distracted by running the organization rather than addressing the issue that motivated the group in the first place. Sociologists call this "goal displacement." Groups should be wary of applying for official nonprofit status to begin with, as the usual motivator for doing so is to get funding to pay staff—a possible sign that the group is drifting away from its mutual aid values. It can also be times like this that factions form and it becomes time, as noted above, for the leadership to recognize that and split up.

If you see such signs in your group, how do you decide whether to close up shop or keep going? The first thing to do is to bring up the question, maybe not in an official meeting, but informally with other leaders. Talk it through quietly and calmly. Then have an official discussion. The second consideration is whether there are enough existing leaders who want to keep the group going. Third is whether there are enough resources to keep it going. And, last but not least, does the cause still exist and is there anyone else who is working on it.

Regardless of whether a mutual aid group ends, if the group has acted as a truly *mutual* aid group, the relationships it build through the process will last and leave a stronger overall community behind.

In any case, the group should end with a celebration of its accomplishments, with plans for a future reconnecting, in the spirit of mutual aid.

Other Guides

There are a number of other guides, covering other aspects of organizing mutual aid groups, you can access:

How to Create a Local Pod / Phone Tree for Mutual Aid, <http://bit.ly/neighborsupportNYC>

How to Start a Neighborhood Pod <https://docs.google.com/document/d/17iMBTzaM4tPsUym-wyiEqOcOaiHVkiXN3XSjJ26TBKM/edit>

How to Start a Mutual Aid Group, <https://aarpcommunityconnections.org/start-group/>

Establishing a local 'C 19 Mutual Aid' group,
https://drive.google.com/file/d/163dmkHZ_p5udFz_RhN_MPjhGYRMtNUfl/view

Mutual Aid: How to Build a Network in Your Neighborhood,
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ca-sz4DRNvUg8ezcrfd6awH-ahxBDJwnbdzxm4_qDV/edit

Community Care Resources,
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RMz_3arhWBaKAFE0eppscX64U6ta-QuF0RQNif1r608/edit#

Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville,
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RtYZ1wc8jxcSKDI555WszWhQWIOISkNnfjIOYV0wXRA/edit>

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