

Mutual Aid and Community Care, More Important Than Ever

by **HEATHER MACINTOSH** /// EAC Volunteer

Whether it was sewing masks for front-line workers, getting groceries for neighbours, tracking down vaccine appointments or volunteering at testing centers, Nova Scotians stepped up and began helping each other in new ways when the Covid-19 pandemic crashed upon our shores. When crisis hit, we bridged gaps in government and traditional supports and took care of our neighbours.

Mutual aid (from everyday acts of kindness to organized forms of community support) has existed in various forms for as long as human beings have lived in groups. Russian anarchist and political theorist Peter Kropotkin first wrote about mutual aid in 1903, noting that in the natural environment cooperation was more successful than competition.

Examples of mutual aid throughout modern history are plentiful. During the Great Depression, Canadian families shared spare rooms and extra food with extended family and neighbours. In the United States, immigrant groups, free African and abolitionist groups, farm workers and labour unions formed “fraternal societies” to provide their members with the support they needed. In the 1960s, the Black Panther Party started a free breakfast program for children, created free bus routes to prisons for people to visit incarcerated family members, and opened food pantries and health clinics. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, residents in areas devastated by the storm organized to help each other with shelter, food, and access to medical care, forming Common Ground Relief, which still provides access to free healthcare for the community today. Last fall when flooding wiped out highways and bridges in British Columbia, pilots from a local aviation club rescued stranded motorists and brought them to safety. Crews worked to restore major routes, but six weeks later, several remote towns in the province’s interior were still without access to fresh food. Volunteer groups got together, talked with residents about their specific needs, and arranged to fly in shipments of medicine, food, and warm clothes.¹

When gaps exist in institutional support for our communities, we have the power to help one another. At its core, this is what mutual aid is.

Solidarity, Not Charity

Mutual aid is cooperation for the common good. It’s a form of solidarity-based support, where communities address their own immediate, self-determined needs for survival and work to create a strong network of neighbours, where everyone has something they can offer. This differs from a traditional charitable model, where recipients receive aid from an organization or institution. Mutual aid acknowledges that institutional safety nets aren’t enough, and that often the government systems we rely on for support have themselves contributed to the crises we face.



1. MacDonald, Nancy “B.C.’s Operation Elf flies in Christmas cheer, supplies to remote places cut off by floods.” The Globe and Mail, 24 December 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-with-bcs-operation-elf-helicopter-pilots-spread-christmas-cheer-and/?symbol=print-ms>
2. Anderssen, Erin. 2021. “How We Heal Together: In Bleak Times, Science Makes the Case for Simple Kindness.” The Globe and Mail, 24 December 2021 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-what-science-tells-us-about-kindness-healing-and-helping-each-other/?symbol=print-ms>



The Community Fridge, located outside Glitter Bean Café at 1491 Carlton Street, is a barrier-free service that provides free food in Kijipuktuk. **PHOTOS: Maddi Tang**



TAKE ACTION

Want to get involved in mutual aid initiatives in your community? Look for existing community-based groups addressing needs in your area (many are organized online through Facebook). Most importantly, get to know your neighbors and community! Organize together and find ways that you can build capacity and take care of one another.

Resources/Groups to get involved with:

- **Halifax Mutual Aid** (halifaxmutualaid.com)
- **Radstorm community space** (radstorm.org)
- **Anti-Racist Caremongering** – Kijipuktuk (community care group on Facebook)
- **Halifax Community Fridge** (@communityfridgehfx on Instagram)
- **Books Beyond Bars Halifax** (booksbeyondbars.wordpress.com)
- **P.A.D.S. Community Network** (@padsnetwork on Instagram)

Nova Scotia Strong: Mutual Aid at Home

Mi’kma’ki/Nova Scotia has a long history of sharing resources and helping each other through difficult times, dating back centuries before Europeans arrived. A current example comes in the form of Halifax Mutual Aid. When the pandemic placed additional pressure on Kijipuktuk/Halifax’s existing housing crisis, Halifax Mutual Aid stepped up to build emergency shelters for those experiencing homelessness. In addition to providing temporary shelter and a small sense of autonomy for community members, these efforts amplified the conversation about housing in HRM, and the failure of local decision makers to adequately address the issue. Many other examples of local cooperative initiatives exist in Mi’kma’ki today: buy-nothing groups and “really free markets”, tool libraries, community gardens, crop exchanges, and efforts to rebuild homes damaged by storms. Kijipuktuk/Halifax has joined cities across Canada and throughout the world with the creation of a community fridge. Located on Spring Garden Road, the Halifax Community Fridge stocks produce, canned and dry foods, first aid supplies, and more. Open 24 hours a day, cleaned and replenished by volunteers, it is available for anyone in need.

Mutual Aid and Climate Change

Increased climate variability and unpredictable weather events will make systems and networks like these all the more necessary. In Nova Scotia, climate change will impact infrastructure along the coast, increase demand for fresh water and concerns about contamination, and disrupt food systems.

Can a mutual aid model of care help us become more resilient as we face the climate crisis in our communities? Could the lessons of the Covid pandemic help us weather the climate crisis?

Researchers, including Dr Vincent Agyapong, Chair of Psychiatry at Dalhousie University, have been studying outcomes for individuals after traumatic events that destroy communities through fires, floods, and losses. They note that people with more social support had the best outcomes and recovered more quickly after a disaster.² Mutual aid can play an important role in building resilience as we face the challenges brought on by a changing climate.

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