

Leveraging Mutual Aid Frameworks in Support of Refugees and Asylees

What is mutual aid?

The long and short — people helping one another. Mutual aid is the understanding that people and communities are able to thrive when working cooperatively and in support of each other. Mutual aid is different from charity or from the services and care provided by nonprofits or the government because it is from the community, for the community, and prioritizes those who are most vulnerable.

Mutual aid can include the giving of goods and resources, or even emotional support. Mutual aid reminds us that we are all able to help in some way as we are each a part of this community's well being. It lies entirely within a volunteer framework. It can mean getting groceries and medications to neighbors, checking in to make sure everyone is doing well emotionally, or helping to organize a shared pool of resources.

Why is mutual aid important right now?

Mutual aid can be practiced at all times, but it becomes particularly important during times of instability and fear. As the world struggles to respond to the current global health crisis, people are understandably afraid and some types of resources are becoming more difficult to access. We negate fear and build strength when we opt for mutual aid. Thousands of mutual aid networks are being mobilized across the country.

Researchers are still learning everything they can about the novel coronavirus and COVID-19. What we do know so far:

- While any person can contract COVID-19, older people and people with underlying medical conditions (including those who are immunocompromised) are at [higher risk](#);
- The best way to keep each other safe is to [work to stop the spread](#) by practicing physical distancing with social solidarity.

The emphasis on social distancing means that many people are being asked to stay home, and avoid crowds. To make sure that everyone is able to social distance and get access to resources and support, we look to mutual aid.

How do refugees and asylees fit into mutual aid?

Newly resettled refugees and asylees, and those who are well established in the US, know the importance of community support for their own success and wellbeing. We have the opportunity to leverage these long-standing community relationships to strengthen ourselves and our neighborhoods as we seek to respond to this health crisis.

Refugees, asylees, the communities that have supported them, and the communities they support, provide the basic framework for being able to activate a mutual aid system.

How do we get started?

Every mutual aid network is going to work and look different depending on the needs of each community, the resources available, and the restrictions being placed on movement and shopping by each state's and town's governments. The most important thing is to be in touch, offer support, and ensure we communicate that everyone is important, regardless of how much or what type of help they can give. The strength of mutual aid lies in community.

The first step is to see if there are already mutual aid networks organizing in your neighborhoods and towns — you can check Facebook, Nextdoor, WhatsApps threads, other neighborhood posting sites or this [growing list](#).¹ If beginning your own mutual aid network, you want to define what specific area or community you plan to help support and begin mapping your “pod.” Refugees and many asylees are already keyed into supportive community networks; we can mobilize those relationships and networks into the base of a mutual aid “pod.”

Your pod represents you, your helpers and the support they can provide (including resources, logistics support, offering emotional support, etc.), and places where you can all access resources. You can find a pod mapping diagram and instructions [here](#), and templates for mapping community resources for refugee integration [here](#). If you are hoping to support a larger group, or a group with very specific kinds of needs — such as communities that include recently resettled refugees and asylees — you can also create a [free Google form](#) to help map the skills, resources, and needs of our mutual aid support group. You can reach people by sharing the link or even safely posting flyers.

Once you’ve mapped your helpers and those in need of assistance, you’re ready to begin.

You can find examples of questions to include in your new form [here](#).

Important Reminders

While conducting your mutual aid outreach and services, please continue to follow the [health guidance](#) of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and any local orders governing movement. Limiting the number of trips and maintaining safe distances between volunteers, leaving goods on doorsteps, disinfecting spaces and materials, and wearing appropriate protective gear is essential to supporting one another safely while flattening the curve.

Please clarify ahead of time if money is going to be exchanged for errands such as grocery shopping or picking up medications. Because mutual aid is rooted in community support and reciprocity, we should not assume that payment will be given. If payment is going to be made, try opting for an electronic transfer (such as Venmo, or PayPal) instead of providing cash to help minimize contact.

Most importantly, remember that there is no one way for a mutual aid system to look! The needs of each of our communities and the special skills of participants is unique to each network! Any of these suggestions and systems can be modified to meet your group’s needs and makeup.

Additional Resources

- [Switchboard webinar on community resource mapping](#) for refugee integration
- [Switchboard templates on community resource mapping](#) for refugee integration
- [Big Door Bridge explainer on “what is mutual aid”](#)
- [An in-depth guide on how to build a neighborhood pod](#)
- [Democracy Now! story](#) on mutual aid, providing different examples of mutual aid networks
- [A mutual aid guide collected by the office of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez](#)
- [NYT article offering suggestions](#) on balancing the need of mutual aid and mitigating health concerns
- [Translated CDC documents on COVID-19](#)
- [Resources for parents on COVID-19](#)

¹ While these are great resources to see what networks are already in the works, we suggest moving the organizing toward free/private spaces (such as WhatsApp, Slack, or Google Office apps) to ensure the work is safe and accessible for people regardless of their immigration status.