Mutual Aid Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Strengthening Civic Infrastructure in East Boston through Community Care

Caption: Mutual Aid Eastie team members (Credit MAE website)

Final Report -- May 2024

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In collaboration with community research partners:

- Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS)
- City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU)
- Maverick Landing Community Services (MLCS)
- Mutual Aid Eastie (MAE)
- Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE)

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1. Introduction and Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid efforts intensified in East Boston, as they did in many marginalized communities. Some of the resident leaders involved in this work define mutual aid as a new way of living that embodies reciprocity and solidarity. Throughout history, disenfranchised groups in the US, Latin America, and across the world have built mutual aid networks to sustain themselves. Mutual aid has served as a tool of survival during and after natural disasters and times of economic distress. In Massachusetts, ongoing mutual aid efforts became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic when many immigrants did not receive government aid, and support from social service providers was insufficient.

Latinx community leaders in East Boston strengthened a network of community organizations, service agencies, funders, and volunteers to facilitate partnerships and increase access to resources for those experiencing economic and health challenges. The East Boston mutual aid network has involved numerous residents who had not previously engaged in civic initiatives. The network has fostered and enhanced collaborations among community groups, nonprofit service providers, government entities, and funders. In East Boston, mutual aid initiatives are evolving and becoming more permanent endeavors, viewed by some as enhancing community capacity to address and support diverse needs and care for one another.

This report presents the findings of a community action research project supported by AmeriCorps and conducted by Tufts University's Department of Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning (UEP) with five community organizations in East Boston: Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS), City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU), Maverick Landing Community Services (MLCS), Mutual Aid Eastie (MAE), and Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE).[1] This initiative extends a previous AmeriCorps-funded community action research project involving eight Boston-area community organizations and Tufts UEP. That project explored the ways in which the pandemic induced innovations in civic engagement and expansions of community care, while also posing daunting challenges.[2]

This project explores how mutual aid efforts strengthened and emerged during the pandemic and how they have impacted civic infrastructure in East Boston. Mutual aid responses were particularly strong in East Boston during the pandemic. These efforts built upon the existing

[1] The community partners were selected from those groups that had been involved in forming Mutual Aid Eastie and which had time and capacity to engage in this project. All the partners except one had pre-existing relationships and collaborations with Tufts UEP.

[2] This project is funded by Americorps grant #22REAMA002. See final report *Grounded and Interconnected in the Pandemic: Community engagement and organizing adaptations from COVID response efforts in Metro Boston* (October 2022, funded by Americorps grant #18REHMA001). Available at: https://pennloh-practical.vision/2022/11/03/new-report-how-community-responses-to-covid-in-the-boston-area-are-building-new-infrastructures-of-care-and-community-engagement/

civic infrastructure and included informal and formal efforts. A new Mutual Aid Eastie network emerged and continues to this day, along with other mutual aid initiatives.

All five community research partners were a part of mutual aid efforts and the creation of MAE, though there were also others involved.[3] Together, we developed the following research questions:

- How did mutual aid efforts strengthen, emerge, and evolve since spring 2020?
- How did mutual aid efforts affect existing community groups in terms of their community engagement, organizational capacity, and relationships with other groups and stakeholders?
- What were the challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from these mutual aid efforts?
- How have roles and relationships been changing through mutual aid among community groups, government, service providers, funders, and other partners?
- How has mutual aid been connected to community organizing and movement building?
- How can mutual aid efforts be strengthened and made more sustainable?
- What is our long-term vision for mutual aid and Mutual Aid Eastie?
- What are some of the stories of mutual aid efforts that should be documented and not forgotten?

The research partners came together in 2023 for three convenings of two hours each on March 28 (in-person in East Boston), June 20 (via Zoom), and October 18 (via Zoom). All convenings were conducted in English and Spanish with simultaneous interpretation. All emails and materials sent to partners were provided in Spanish and English. The first two convenings reflected on the pandemic and the mutual aid efforts that emerged. Over the summer of 2023, the Tufts team conducted interviews with twenty individuals involved in mutual aid in East Boston, including those affiliated with the research partners as well as others. Interviews lasted from 25 minutes to over an hour. Ten interviews were conducted in English and ten in Spanish.[4] The final gathering shared preliminary findings from the interviews and discussed the possible trajectories of mutual aid in East Boston.

1.1. East Boston Context

East Boston has been a working-class community with a large concentration of Latinx immigrants and other people of color and immigrants.[5] This neighborhood of over 45,000 is

[3] While we focused on how mutual aid efforts intensified during the pandemic, we recognize that these efforts pre-dated the pandemic. We also acknowledge that there are many other mutual aid efforts beyond those explored here, though it was beyond the scope of this project to do a more comprehensive documentation of these efforts.

[4] All quotes in this report are provided in the original language of the interview and then translated in brackets.

[5] All data in this paragraph from Boston Planning and Development Agency, Boston in Context: Neighborhoods 2017-2021 American Community Survey, (January 2023).

about two-thirds people of color, including 55% Latinx. Almost half (46%) are foreign-born, which is the highest amongst Boston neighborhoods, while one-third are not US citizens. More than half (51.9%) speak Spanish at home.

East Boston was one of the neighborhoods most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Its COVID infection rates were among the highest in Massachusetts.[6] This vulnerability is not surprising given the pre-existing challenges around unaffordable housing, overcrowding, economic insecurity, and environmental injustices. East Boston was experiencing the highest displacement risk among Boston neighborhoods in a 2020 analysis by the City of Boston.[7] Due to overcrowded housing in East Boston, COVID infections spread even faster.[8]

A summer 2020 survey found that respondents from lower-income communities of color, including East Boston, were more likely to leave their homes to work and buy food, ride transit, and work in jobs requiring contact with the public.[9] The same study also found that respondents in East Boston reported the highest rates of having large income losses and worrying about running out of food.[10]

The civic infrastructure in East Boston is fairly well developed. There is a long-established set of social service providers, some dating back to the settlement house movement serving the immigrant waves of the early 20th century. There are established civic and neighborhood associations that are rooted in the white ethnic neighborhoods where there are higher proportions of homeowners. Since the beginning of the 21st century, another layer of smaller community-based organizations has emerged from and serve the now majority immigrants of color that have been arriving since the 1980s.

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[6] "Data Show COVID-19 Is Hitting Essential Workers and People of Color Hardest," ACLU Massachusetts (April 8, 2020). https://www.aclum.org/en/publications/data-show-covid-19-hitting-essential-workers-and-people-color-hardest

[7] Office of Housing, City of Boston, "Boston Displacement Risk Index: 2020." https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2021/04/Boston%20Displacement%20Risk%20Map%202020_%20Summary%20Sheet.pdf

[8] Luc Schuster, "Residential overcrowding has increased regionwide as housing affordability declines," Boston Indicators (December 14, 2022). https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2022/december/residential-overcrowding-increase-2022

[9] Boston Area Research Initiative, "Living in Boston During COVID-19: Inequities in Navigating a Pandemic, Report #1," (2020).

[10] Boston Area Research Initiative, "Living in Boston During COVID-19: Economic Strains, Report #3," (2020).

1.2. Key Findings

Below, we summarize the most salient findings from our project:

- During the pandemic in response to inadequate systems, mutual aid efforts in East Boston grew out of existing initiatives and were anchored by a network of community-based organizations with deep relationships to the most vulnerable.
- Mutual aid efforts spanned a wide range of activities, such as providing material aid (food and housing), financial aid, support and education to access government and social service systems, and facilitating wellness and healing.
- These efforts boosted feelings of solidarity, reciprocity, and care amongst those involved and built community capacities to organize systems of collective care.
- Mutual aid efforts brought together many people and partners who had already worked together before, as well as sparked new collaborations (and dissolved some silos), particularly between social service agencies and grassroots organizations.
- In building practices of reciprocity and mutuality, participants shifted mindsets away from one-way dependence on charity towards recognizing that everyone has the capacity to give and to receive.
- Mutual aid participants emphasized the importance of relationships and trust as the building blocks of this work.
- Though there were and continue to be many challenges posed by existing systems to mutual aid, the pandemic period showed that it is possible for government, large social service organizations, and funders to play a positive role in mutual aid with shifts in culture and practices.
- Mutual aid is building relationships of care, which creates conditions for connecting more people to organizing and social movements and developing more leaders.
- Some see mutual aid not only as a temporary response to crisis, but as a new way of life and new way of being to collectively care for one another.
- Mutual Aid Eastie is experimenting with ways of organizing itself as a neighbor support network, facilitated by a core team.

2. East Boston's Civic Infrastructure

We first present a brief overview of the landscape and history of community networks in East Boston. It is within this network that our community research partners are embedded and that mutual aid efforts emerged. We use the term "civic infrastructure", which is defined as the formal and informal (and sometimes invisible) processes and networks that enable collective decision making and problem solving.[11] The concept includes social capital (relationships of trust) as well as the spaces and resources that support relationship building and collective action. The civic infrastructure of East Boston was already fairly well developed by the time the pandemic shutdown started in March 2020.

The civic infrastructure in East Boston has evolved with the successive waves of immigrant populations who have settled here.[12] By the mid-1800s, East Boston became an immigrant destination, initially with waves of Irish and Jewish immigrants, followed by Italian immigrants. In the last two decades of the 20th century, East Boston became majority Latinx immigrants. There are now also significant numbers of Southeast Asian, North African, and Arab immigrants.[13] Similar to other immigrant gateways in the region, there are various organizations and networks associated with these immigrant waves, and often a distinction between "old" (the white ethnic immigrants who had arrived before the mid-20th century) and "new" (immigrants of color who came after 1980). For newer immigrants, language and legal status are significant barriers to accessing services and civic participation.

In the last two decades, as the housing affordability crisis has gotten worse in the region, East Boston has seen some of the most intense gentrification and displacement pressures in the area. Many new waterfront developments cater to younger urban professionals, causing a ripple effect of rent increases that price out long-term residents. This next wave of residents is yet again contributing to shifts in civic infrastructure. While some are not very engaged with their neighbors, others have become involved with existing and new community organizations.

2.1. East Boston's Civic Infrastructure Landscape

The following chart and map provide a high level overview of the types of organizations that are part of East Boston's civic infrastructure. These include organizations that have been named by our community partners and found through an online search for East Boston nonprofit and community organizations.

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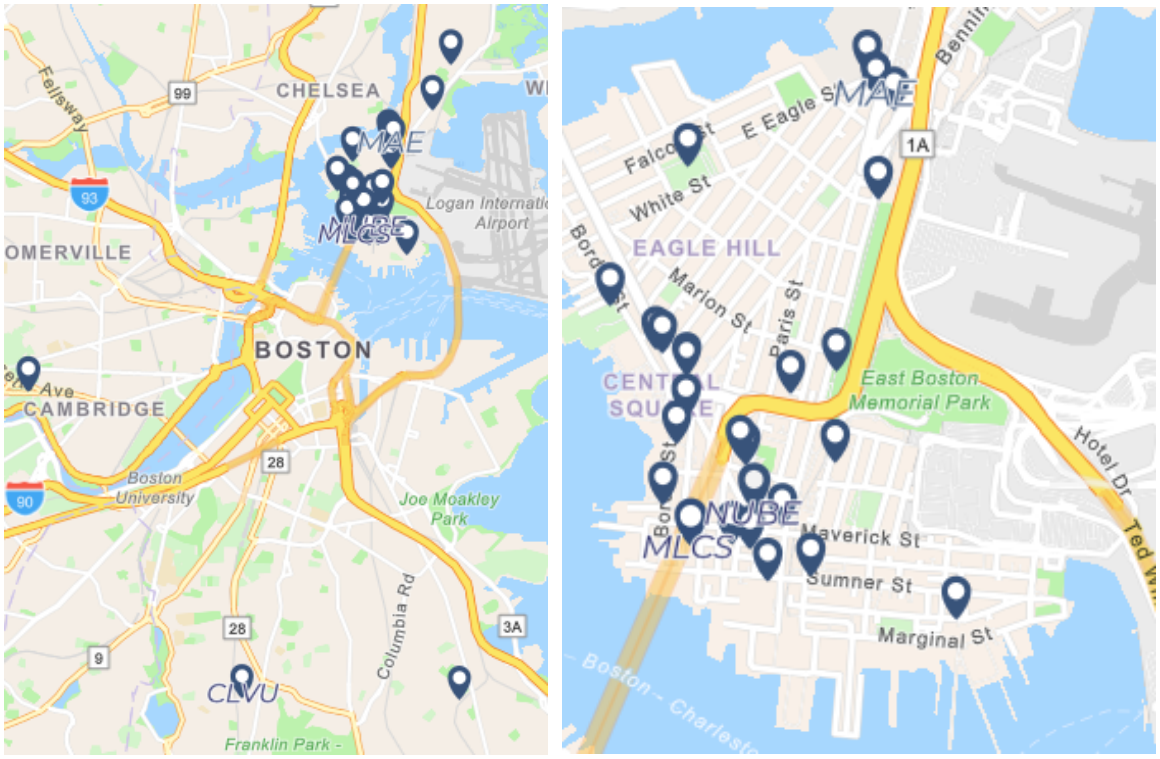
[11] John Parr, "Civic infrastructure: A new approach to improving community life," National Civic Review, 82, no. 2 (1993): 93–100.

[12] Before colonization, East Boston was comprised of five islands that were traditional hunting grounds for the Massachusett, Pawtucket, and Naumkeag tribes. After colonization and incorporation into Boston in the 1600s, the waterways were filled in and occupied by shipbuilding and other industries.

[13] Neenah Estrella-Luna, "East Boston: Our History is Boston's History," East Boston Initiative (2012). Available at: https://www.slideshare.net/starluna/eb-museum-brochure-jan-2012.

Grassroots community groups		Social service organizations	Government and Public Institutions	Local Business
Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE)	Mothers out Front*	YMCA	East Boston High School	Channel Fish
Centro Cooperativo de Desarrolo y Solidaridad (CCDS)	Harbor Keepers*	East Boston Social Center	East Boston Harborside Community Center	East Boston Main Streets
City Life Vida Urbana (CLVU)	Eastie Farm*	East Boston Neighborhood Health Center	East Boston Branch of the Public Library	East Boston Chamber of Commerce
Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH)	Mutual Aid Eastie Network (MAE)	East Boston Community Development Corporation (EBCDC)	Boston Housing Authority	
Centro Presente	Pueblo Unido de East Boston para Liberar y Organizar (PUEBLO) Coalition	Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH)	Mayor's Office of Immigrant Advancement (MOIA)	**Religious/ Cultural/ Ethnic Organizations**
East Boston Community Council (EBECC)		Maverick Landing Community Services (MLCS)	City Councilor Julia Mejia	Veronica Robles Cultural Center
		Zumix	Rep. Adrian Madaro	Our Saviour Lutheran Church
		Eastie Coalition		
		East Boston Community Soup Kitchen		
		Salesian Boys and Girls Club		
Organizing and power building groups				
Environmental groups*				



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(https://www.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/2682c5f9b81a4c5bb4101f394eb92da0)

2.2. Project Research Partners

The five community research partners represent a subset within the ecosystem of organizations in East Boston. Except for Mutual Aid Eastie, which emerged in response to the pandemic, all other organizations had been operating for five or more years prior to the outbreak. Several had strong partnerships before the pandemic. All of them participated in early efforts during the pandemic, contributing to the formal establishment of Mutual Aid Eastie. Below are short descriptions of each partner.

Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity/Centro de Desarrollo Cooperativo y Solidaridad (CCDS) originated in November 2015, driven by the concerns of Latinx immigrant residents of East Boston witnessing the swift gentrification of their community. CCDS is dedicated to fostering worker-owned cooperatives and empowering immigrant residents through technical, educational, and organizational opportunities. CCDS champions cooperativism, the solidarity economy, and cooperative ownership to empower low-income families, fostering community capital, creating jobs, and ensuring livable wages. Notably, CCDS was selected to be part of the Inaugural Common Future Accelerator 2023 Cohort, supporting ten BIPOC women-led organizations developing models to address the racial wealth gap.

City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU) was founded in 1973. This grassroots community organization has its office in Jamaica Plain and serves the Greater Boston area. It has had a presence in East Boston since 2008-2009. CLVU passionately advocates for racial, social, and economic justice, along with gender equality. Through direct action, coalition building, political education, advocacy, tenant organizing, and collective bargaining, CLVU strives to empower the working-class. Committed to its core mission of defending homes, fostering community empowerment, securing protections, and nurturing community leaders, CLVU has been a pivotal force in safeguarding tenant's rights, preventing displacement (such as evictions and foreclosures), and promoting affordable and community-owned social housing across the region.

Maverick Landing Community Services (MLCS) was founded in 2007. This multi-service organization lives in the heart of East Boston's Maverick Landing housing development. MLCS works directly with children, families, and adults through afterschool programs, skill-building opportunities, job training, ESOL (English as a Second Language) support, computer literacy, and more. Their commitment to creating equitable communities is represented in their mission to uplift and support families, promote community health, and nurture resident leadership and creativity for the youth. Maverick Landing Community Services was recognized as the City of Boston's 2020 Community Champion for its Pandemic Response.

Mutual Aid Eastie (MAE) came into existence amidst the pandemic in 2020. This interconnective network unites neighbors while fostering trust, solidarity, and community care. Their vision strives to leave no neighbor behind, promoting equity in East Boston through mutual aid. In doing so, they create community spaces that enhance unity and address diverse needs of neighbors. More detail on MAE's formation and evolution are covered later in this report.

Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE) was founded in 2007. This direct-action grassroots organization fosters "abundant leaders" to organize and advocate for just public policies in East Boston. NUBE welcomes neighbors to co-create social change by leading with the heart, sharing gifts, and embracing difficult times together. NUBE is committed to intentional relationships with its neighbors and increasing civic engagement through organizing, education, and leadership development programming. In 2014, NUBE increased civic engagement and voter turnout by 10-15% in the 2014 election. More recently, NUBE reached 4656 voters for the 2022 election, out of all the people they contacted, 67% were Hispanic and 2446 turned out to vote.

Prior to the pandemic, CLVU, CCDS, and NUBE were already collaborating in various coalitions and alliances including PUEBLO, Cosecha, Solidarity Economy Initiative, and Right to the City (Boston and national alliances).[14] Several individuals actively engage in two or all three of these groups, contributing as staff, board of directors, as well as other volunteer and leadership roles. These partners see themselves as social movement organizations, building community power to transform societal systems. MLCS had the least collaborations with the other partners prior to the pandemic. As discussed later, MLCS became a trusted collaborator with the four other partners through mutual aid initiatives and the formation of MAE.

Caption: Mutual Aid Eastie team members (Credit MAE website)

[14] See https://www.pueblo.boston/, https://www.lahuelga.com/, https://www.solidaritymass.com/, https://righttothecityboston.org/

3. Literature Review

In this section, we review some of the literature on two concepts at the center of this project: mutual aid and civic infrastructure.

3.1. Mutual Aid

Mutual aid emerged and spread quickly in the COVID pandemic in the US and across the globe.[15,16] However, mutual aid is not a new phenomenon, but rather one as age-old as human civilization itself.[17] At its most basic level, mutual aid is nothing more than people taking responsibility to care for one another and provide for material needs. In the US, mutual aid can be found particularly in the histories of marginalized peoples, from Free Black societies first founded in the 1770s and Chinese immigrants defending themselves from racial discrimination in the 19th century to the settlement houses serving European immigrants by the start of the 20th century.[18] In recent decades, mutual aid efforts have emerged in the wake of disasters like Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans), Superstorm Sandy (New York City), and Hurricane Maria (Puerto Rico). These emergencies can spark a rise in social support, though these efforts can and do wane when resources and energy run out or can be undermined by government.[19]

During the pandemic, there was a surge of interest in and action around mutual aid, as the lock downs and spread of illness disrupted economic and political systems and civic life. Mutual aid was seen sprouting everywhere, particularly in the most marginalized and vulnerable communities. Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar documented the beginnings of pandemic mutual aid through interviews in April 2020 with dozens of mutual aid activists across the world.[20] From the Greater Middle East, South and East Asia, and Southern Africa to Europe, Turtle Island (North America), and South America, they documented the presence of mutual aid efforts and how they were building on existing networks of community and civic action and deep relationships.

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[15] Nils Carstensen, Mandeep Mudhar, and Freja Schurmann Munksgaard. 'Let communities do their work': the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response, *Disasters* 45, No. S1 (2021): S146–S173.

[16] Rebecca Solnit, 'The way we get through this is together': Mutual aid under coronavirus, *The Guardian* (May 14, 2020).

[17] Dean Spade, "Solidarity not charity: Mutual aid for mobilization and survival," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 131–151.

[18] Rinku Sen, "Why Today's Social Revolutions Include Kale, Medical Care, and Help With Rent," Zócalo Public Square (July 1, 2020). Available at: https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2020/07/01/mutual-aid-societies-self-determination-pandemic-community-organizing/ideas/essay/

[19] Guanlan Mao, John Drury, Maria Fernandes-Jesus, and Evangelos Ntontis, "How participation in Covid-19 mutual aid groups affects subjective well-being and how political identity moderates these effects," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 21 (2021): 1082-1112.

[20] Marielena Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, editors, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the COVID-19 Crisis* (Verso Books, 2020).

There are also many connections between mutual aid and community engagement and organizing. Several reports document how grassroots community-based organizations pivoted to provide mutual aid, as part of their work to address systemic racism and inequalities.[21,22,23] Indeed, as our own work has found, through mutual aid, community organizations in the Boston area have interacted with many more people than they did previously.[24] These groups are developing new ways to engage these residents to also contribute to the community and longer-term civic initiatives, instead of only being aid recipients.

Because mutual aid can be defined in different ways, mutual aid groups span a wide range of political philosophies. It can be seen as community self-help and perhaps only necessary in times of crisis. It can also be seen as the basis for society-wide cooperation and mutual exchange.[25] Mould et al. describe three possible trajectories for mutual aid efforts that emerged during the pandemic: 1) becomes a charity model that meets immediate needs ("give someone a fish to eat"), 2) empowers people to participate within the existing system ("teach them how to fish"), or 3) seeks to change the conditions that create vulnerability and inequalities in the first place ("seize the means of fishing altogether").[26]

Those who want mutual aid to change underlying conditions often invoke the phrase "solidarity, not charity".[27] Pandemic Research for the People defines an emancipatory mutual aid as "that which is necessary to help fundamentally transform the conditions that created the crisis in the first place. The emergency was here long before the virus arrived."[28] Writing about mutual aid in New York City during the pandemic, Lauren Hudson describes mutual aid as "both ethos and tactic", where the purpose "is to change relationships between people … and to take care of

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[21] Praxis Project, "Organizing Against Systemic Racism During COVID-19," (2021). Available at: https://www.thepraxisproject.org/resource/2020/organizing-against-systemic-racism-during-covid19.

[22] Miguel Rodriguez, "More than one pandemic: how New York City community members fight against coronavirus and systematic oppression," *Social Work Education* 39, no.8 (2020): 983-992.

[23] Madison Tallant and Siena Ruggeri, "Pivoting to Meet the Moment: A Case Study of Community Organizing Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic," Community Catalyst (March 2022). Available at: https://www.healthinnovation.org/resources/publications/pivoting-to-meet-the-moment-a-case-study-of-community-organizing

[24] Neenah Estrella-Luna and Penn Loh, "Opportunities to Invest in Community Resilience for COVID and Climate: A Report to the Barr Foundation," (2021). Available at: https://barrfdn.issuelab.org/resource/opportunities-to-invest-in-community-resilience-for-covid-and-climate.html

[25] As proposed by Russian geographer Peter Kropotkin in his 1902 book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution.*

[26] Oli Mould, Jennifer Cole, Adam Badger, and Philip Brown, "Solidarity, not charity: Learning the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic to reconceptualise the radicality of mutual aid," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47 (2022): 872.

[27] Spade, "Solidarity not charity."

[28] John Gulick, Jasmine Araujo, Cora Roelofs, Tanya Kerssen, Meleiza Figueroa, Etant Dupain, Serena Stein, Deborah Wallace, Ryan Petteway, Jone Choe, Luca de Crescenzo, Audrey Snyder, Colin Kloecker, and Rob Wallace, "Dispatch 2: What is mutual aid? A COVID-19 primer," Pandemic Research for the People (2020).

one another as an act of solidarity and of commitment to interdependence. To align with these values in the pandemic crisis, mutual-aid groups have had to shift their perspective from a service they are providing someone else to instead building a community that they will eventually rely on as they themselves become ill."[29]

Other research has identified challenges to mutual aid, such as who participates (and not) given digital access and exclusion,[30,31] how to meet immediate needs versus addressing structures of inequality,[32] and how or whether to sustain efforts over time as the immediate crisis fades.[33,34] The relationship between mutual aid and government is also a long-standing debate, given that it is often because government has inadequate capacity or is unwilling to meet needs that mutual aid efforts start in the first place. One study of three COVID-era mutual aid efforts in Scotland found that each progressed through various phases of being supplementary, complementary, and adversarial in relating to government.[35]

Care and reciprocity are core values often expressed in mutual aid work. A study of COVID mutual aid efforts in Colorado found three values underlying these initiatives: reciprocity, shared humanity and interdependence, and community-driven care and redistribution of resources.[36] Mould et al. note that although vulnerability is created by current inequalities in systems, it can also be a site "of creating new collectivities via solidarity, care, empathy, and defiance."[37]

Tronto's definition of care can be a useful one for mutual aid: "Care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which

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[29] Lauren T. Hudson, "Building Where We Are: The Solidarity-Economy Response to Crisis," Rethinking Marxism Dossier: Pandemic and the Crisis of Capitalism (2020): 175-176.

[30] Robert Z. Soden and Embry Wood Owen, "Dilemmas in Mutual Aid: Lessons for Crisis Informatics from an Emergent Community Response to the Pandemic," In *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction,* Vol. 5, CSCW2, Article 475 (October 2021).

[31] K. R. Wilson, O. M. Roskill, and J. Mahr, "Mutual aid using digital technology: a case study of virtual community organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic," *Journal of Community Practice* (2022).

[32] Soden and Owen, "Dilemmas in Mutual Aid."

[33] Soden and Owen, "Dilemmas in Mutual Aid."

[34] Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Guanlan Mao, Evangelos Ntontis, Chris Cocking, Michael McTague, Anna Schwarz, Joanna Semlyen, and John Drury, "More Than a COVID-19 Response: Sustaining Mutual Aid Groups During and Beyond the Pandemic," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 716202.

[35] Jack Rendall, Maeve Curtin, Michael J. Roy and Simon Teasdale, "Relationships between community-led mutual aid groups and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: complementary, supplementary, or adversarial?" *Public Management Review* (2022).

[36] Danielle M. Littman, Madi Boyett, Kimberly Bender, Annie Zean Dunbar, Marisa Santarella, Trish Becker-Hafnor, Kate Saavedra, and Tara Milligan, "Values and Beliefs Underlying Mutual Aid: An Exploration of Collective Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 13, no. 1 (2022): 89-115.

[37] Mould et al., "Solidarity, not charity," 874.

we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."[38] Mutual aid as a form of care, could contribute to her concept of a "caring democracy" where care is a central value of our political systems and where all have an opportunity to participate in deciding how caring responsibilities are distributed. The Care Collective defines care similarly: "Care is also a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life. Above all, to put care centre stage means recognising and embracing our *interdependencies*."[39]

3.2. Civic Infrastructure

Mutual aid in all its variants can also be understood as forms of civic infrastructure. Civic infrastructure was defined as early as 1993 as the "invisible informal and formal networks and processes through which community problem solving and decision making is carried out."[40] It was seen as the equivalent of "social capital".[41] At that time, there was an acknowledgment that fewer resources were coming from government, and thus local and regional stakeholders needed to collaborate more to solve pressing problems. As Henry Cisneros, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Clinton administration, said in 1992, we need new "places, forums, communications, conversations, and systems" – civic infrastructure – to rewrite the social contract.[42]

In the context of community development, civic infrastructure has been seen as a component of social capital that bridges between groups, as a "social equivalent of physical infrastructure."[43] A 1998 article defined civic infrastructure as "the network that exists among local groups such as community development corporations (CDCs), foundations, other nonprofits, local governments, public housing authorities, businesses, and voluntary associations."[44]

More recently, the civic infrastructure frame was reiterated in a 2015 report by the Aspen Institute, *21st Century Civic Infrastructure: Under Construction*.[45] An article based on this report defines civic infrastructure as "the places, policies, programs, and practices that enable us to connect with each other, define and address shared concerns, build community, and solve

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[38] Jean C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape Democratic Politics*, (Cornell University Press, 2015): 3.

[39] Care Collective (Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal), *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso, 2020): 13 (ebook).

[40] Parr, "Civic infrastructure".

[41] As popularized by Robert Putnam in the 1990s (see *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, 1993).

[42] Henry Cisneros as quoted in Parr, "Civic infrastructure".

[43] Robert E. Lang and Steven P. Hornburg, "What is social capital and why is it important to public policy?" *Housing Policy Debate* 9, no. 1 (1998): 6.

[44] Lang and Hornburg, "What is social capital," 5.

[45] Jill Blair and Malka Kopell, "21st Century Civic Infrastructure: Under Construction. Forum for Community Solutions," The Aspen Institute (Spring 2015).

public problems."[46] As physical infrastructure has become a major priority for the federal policy agenda, there have been attempts to use the civic infrastructure framework to make more visible the social dimensions of democratic problem-solving. One study conceives of the inputs to civic infrastructure as democratic governance, civic spaces, and civic education and the outputs as civic literacy, civic identity, and civic engagement.[47]

Caption: Mutual Aid Eastie event (Credit MAE website)

[46] Stephen Patrick and Sheri Brady, "Building an Intentional and Inclusive Civic Infrastructure," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Aug 7, 2015).

[47] Julia H. Kaufman, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Douglas Yeung, and Jennifer Kavanagh, "Defining and Measuring Civic Infrastructure," (RAND Corporation, 2022).

4. Mutual Aid in East Boston During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section tells the story of how mutual aid activities strengthened, emerged, and evolved in East Boston in the first six months after the COVID pandemic hit.

After the pandemic shutdown in March 2020, many leaders began to talk to one another about what was needed to help their community survive. The groups that were rooted in and connected to the most vulnerable were confronted with the impacts of people losing work and income, getting sick and navigating health care, worrying about food, facing evictions, and housing insecurity, and suffering emotional trauma and mental health issues. Furthermore, many residents could not access or had challenges accessing public resources because of immigration status, language barriers, and the technical and confusing processes.

Sandra Nijjar, an immigrant and environmental activist in East Boston has been supporting her neighbors for over twenty years. Sandra provides support to those struggling with addiction recovery and those looking for affordable housing. Another way in which she has supported the community is through her soup kitchen, which she opened in 2016, to provide weekly meals for those experiencing homelessness and hunger. During the beginning of the pandemic, her kitchen expanded service to provide meals twice a week. The soup kitchen has become more than a meal service for the East Boston community; it is a safe place of gathering and celebration for those experiencing isolation and mental health challenges.

Some groups that were not set up to be direct service providers (like NUBE) realized they had to make a shift as the pandemic progressed. Gloribell Mota and Eny Lovo of NUBE had an initial conversation prior to the shutdown where Eny felt they should be doing something to address the COVID-19 threat, but Gloribell believed it should be the healthcare sector's role. That changed very quickly.

4.1. Origins of Mutual Aid Network

After the pandemic shutdown, a number of efforts began, including outreach to neighbors and food distribution. These brought together the people and groups that would eventually form MAE.

When the pandemic lockdown came, NUBE Organizers (Gloribell and Eny) reached out to PUEBLO coalition organizations and decided that they had to respond collectively to community needs. NUBE had already been building a decentralized network of civic leadership in the neighborhood and created a WhatsApp group to start connecting neighbors. They came up with the idea to use their voter mobilization lists to reach out to neighbors via phone. NUBE staff started calling people to understand how they were being impacted by COVID. They invited people to serve as "block captains" to coordinate this outreach. Block captains were active members and leaders in partner organizations. CCDS initially took on part of this list but then decided to focus its efforts on a similar process with its own contact list.

Food distribution emerged as one of the highest priority mutual aid activities in the early pandemic period. Kannan Thiruvengadam at Eastie Farm started to get calls about food insecurity, including from children at the schools that they had been working with. Mothers Out Front (a climate justice group) contacted Kannan because they had been working with local restaurants to prepare meals for people in the City of Lawrence and had more interested restaurants than they could work with. So they directed some of those contacts to East Boston. Eastie Farm raised some money and began working with these restaurants to prepare cooked meals for distribution. Eastie Farm reached out to NUBE, CCDS, and others to coordinate the distribution of these meals. Eventually, they began working with the Bon Me restaurant, using City of Boston's Resiliency Fund support to distribute cooked meals once a week.

Multiple points of food aid emerged in these early days, with existing channels (such as Sandra's soup kitchen and East Boston Neighborhood Health Center) stepping up and new ones emerging (through City of Boston, Boston Public Schools, and YMCA). With more food aid coming in, the challenge then became how to get it out to those who needed it most. Groups started to coordinate their lists, and key people, including the block captains organized by NUBE, became distribution hubs in the network. Volunteers stepped up to deliver food to those who could not come out to pick it up.

An example of how this worked was Rita Lara at MLCS getting involved early as "block captain" for Maverick Landing. According to an MLCS staff person, Juan Pablo Ochoa, MLCS implemented multiple strategies to "support the community, such as doing kits with sanitizer, masks, soap, things like that." They also made brochures with some information about COVID and continued dropping off the kits in the community. After a few days of dropping off the kits, MLCS staff began delivering food and groceries, especially to elderly residents, becoming a distribution site that served not only their development of 1,000 people but the broader area. They recognized that the bagged school lunches that the City was giving out were not going to be enough. They enlisted the help of a volunteer group that had been rescuing food for a once-a-month pantry. According to Rita, "The woman who runs it pretty much was experiencing homelessness herself and was like driving around the truck and just getting food everywhere." Even though MLCS did not have specific funding for food, Rita decided "we're just going to do this" and paid her several hundred dollars a week from MLCS funds. According to Rita, "I'll never forget her coming in at one point with like three trucks of food. … She had a van, and the U-hauls when she had big deliveries. People were just like, woo hoo. It was like a celebration. But those were hard days."

As MLCS became a larger point of food distribution, they continued bringing in people to help get it out. For example, Rita then asked Marielena Martinez to serve as a distribution point for people in her neighborhood of Eagle Hill, so residents didn't have to travel all the way to Maverick Landing. Marielena had already been active in the neighborhood, volunteering with CLVU since 2009 after she had received housing support from them. During the pandemic, Marielena became the food hub for 30 families who were struggling to afford groceries and rent "creo que es de mucha ayuda en realidad para nuestra comunidad ahorita que todo está tan

caro y a veces la gente está luchando nada más para la bendita renta [I think it's really very helpful for our community right now when everything's so expensive, and people are struggling at times to make the gosh-darn rent]." Marielena loves supporting her neighbors and increasing access to healthy food, "Y ayudar que sea en algo a estas familias, entonces es como algo que a uno lo motiva [helping these families with even anything, it's something that motivates us]." She has continued to do weekly food distribution and currently serves about 55 families including cancer patients and people with disabilities.

At its peak in summer 2020, the MAE network was distributing 5,000 meals per week. These food justice efforts were mutual aid in action and relied on existing networks and relationships, as well as making new connections.

As these direct aid efforts grew and proliferated, a number of key leaders worked on ways to better coordinate and support this work. Mutual aid became a way to conceptualize what they were doing. Eny noted that they chose to use this term because it embodied the values of solidarity and community care they saw in their home countries. Kannan drew inspiration from the mutual aid networks that had emerged elsewhere in the region, such as Somerville/Medford (MAMAS: Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville) and Jamaica Plain, which had created online platforms for people to post needs and offers and make direct connections. He came from the technology world and had his own website for his radio show, so he developed the first online mutual aid site for East Boston. He created a layer to protect the security of people's names and contact information so that there would not be a deterrent to the participation of those who may be fearful of sharing their information. According to Kannan, Luz Zambrano's team at CCDS (Owen in particular) translated most of the site into Spanish.

Eventually, MAE developed WhatsApp chat groups, such as one for neighborhood members to respond to and make asks, a chat for the block captains, one for driving coordinators, and more. Up to 300 people were in these chats to directly connect with one another. Groups maintained their own spreadsheets of who was on the lists and what aid they were receiving, which helped organizers prioritize resource distribution for those most in need. Though there were likely some people on multiple lists with various organizations, most of the coordinators were not highly concerned about people taking more resources than they needed. Rather, they trusted that people were taking what they needed and that many were picking up aid for family and friends.

The reciprocity in mutual aid was central to these efforts. According to Zaida Adames of MAE, "Of everyone that has come through here [MAE], 80% of the people have given back to the community in some way. And those are the people that we want in the mutual aid group." Similarly, Gloribell saw that people "were really doing, like, collective grocery shopping, bulk shopping, and sharing with each other as neighbors collectively so that they're not alone."

Those involved in these early days saw an outpouring of good will and people volunteering their time and resources. In this initial period larger service agencies and certain funders and government agencies that did not typically work with smaller grassroots organizations began to collaborate.

Organizers describe this period of the pandemic as all-consuming. They were on call 24/7. The community's needs were enormous. And there was an overwhelming sense of needing to help people survive. Many people were dying or enduring extended illness from COVID, impacting their families. This work took a tremendous toll on those who were most active, with many feeling burned out by end of the summer. Before turning to the story of how these efforts eventually became formalized into MAE, the next subsection details the wide range of activities that have become part of mutual aid.

4.2. Mutual Aid and Community Care Activities

While early pandemic efforts focused on food, health, and housing, mutual aid extended to many other forms of support to help people survive and thrive. Mutual aid included all the basic material needs such as food, housing, clothing, and baby diapers. There was education and advocacy to help people access resources and services, such as health care (including COVID testing and vaccines), domestic violence prevention resources, digital literacy and remote learning, and English lessons for language isolated residents. Application assistance was also provided to those eligible for stimulus checks, and other government support programs such as unemployment insurance and housing assistance with special attention to those experiencing language and cultural barriers. In addition, funds were also raised to provide direct cash assistance for families in need. There was direct accompaniment to services, as well as transportation services.

Organizers and volunteers also understood the importance of nurturing community connections and the emotional well-being of residents. There was a focus on physical, social, emotional, and mental health. Health kits were provided to community members who were quarantined due to illness. There were wellness checks with community members, which consisted of phone calls to hear people's stories and needs. In addition, organizers were on call and often accompanied people in distress. Finally, to sustain the work and center a restorative justice approach, healing circles, celebrations, and gestures of gratitude were carried out to acknowledge and care for those providing aid.

Caption: Meal delivery (Credit Mayra Molina)

Table: Mutual Aid and Community Care Activities		
Need	**Category**	**Action**
Basic Materials	Food	Deliver food and meals to distribution sites and directly to people's homes
		Share recipes for the ingredients received through food distribution
		Provide people recently laid off with the materials to make and donate/sell food
		Secure culturally-appropriate foods
		Shop for one another and offer their wholesale memberships
	Housing	Provide furniture for homes
		Raise money with social centers to support displaced families
		Support people to apply for rental assistance and prevent eviction
		Direct people to resources for displacement support
	Goods	Provide diapers for babies
Financial, Employment, and Business Development	Money	Provide relief funds, particularly for undocumented
		Distribute money from people who donated their stimulus check to the cause
	Jobs	Get people hired to help City food relief efforts with YMCA and schools
	Economic Incubators	Support developing cooperatives and having cooperatives produce masks and food with inputs of some money, materials, and equipment and then giving away part of products to serve those in need and allow some selling to generate income
Access to and Education about, and Advocacy for Resources	Health	Support access to tests, health care kits and information about vaccines
		Make referrals to health care
		Distribute flyers and videos to prevent and address domestic violence
	Safety	Provide access to domestic violence resources
	Technology	Provide digital literacy and youth programs where youth create journals or produce items to sell
		Get people iPads so they could join virtual organizing meetings
	Information	Reach out and educate people on the eviction moratorium
		Provide workshops on local programs
Navigating systems	Guidance	Support or accompany people to court
		Help people fill out unemployment applications and other government program forms
	Language Justice	Help with English interpretation
		Provide language liaison / a connection for language isolated residents.
	Language Education	Support bilingual teachers
Creating and Sustaining Community, Healing, Wellness	*	Hold open hours on Fridays where neighbors can stop by to chat, ask for help, etc.
	*	"... una conexion para ellos, pues me ha ayudado mucho lo del idioma, que es lo que más se." [Being a connection to them, the language has really helped me, it is what I know best]
	*	Hold healing events, such as peace healing circles with language interpretation.
	*	Community Healing Center Project emerged
	*	Support funeral services
	*	Connect neighbors, provide resources, and make space for support
Transportation	*	Give people rides to hospital
		Help with transportation around town

4.3. Shared Stories of Mutual Aid Activities

No single story can cover the many actions that comprised mutual aid during the pandemic. Below, we provide selected vignettes of various forms of mutual aid to provide a deeper understanding of what mutual aid looked and felt like for participants.

4.3.1. Accompaniment

An important form of care during the pandemic was accompanying those in distress. Zaida of MAE recounted how she supported a neighbor whose husband was in the hospital with COVID. The neighbor could not go inside the hospital to be with her husband, so she asked Zaida to drive her to the hospital and sit with her in the parking lot so that she could be closer to her husband. He ended up passing away that evening while they sat in the parking lot.

The isolation and distancing protocols in the earliest months of the pandemic also prevented families from the usual funeral services. There was one story of another woman whose husband died of COVID in their kitchen, and no one wanted to come pick up the body for fear of contracting the virus. Mayra Molina emerged as someone who people went to for help with funeral arrangements. She said that " ver gente que no vio a sus familiares, no pudieron enterrarlos, gente que se lo llevaban y ya nunca más lo volvieron a ver, tal vez por medio de una pantalla, nos llamaban, nos preguntaban y creo que eso es algo que no se puede borrar [to see people who did not see their relatives, who could not bury them, people who were taken away and never saw them again, maybe through a screen, they called us, they asked us questions, and I think that is something that cannot be erased]."

Caption: Mutual Aid Eastie food distribution (Credit MAE website)

4.3.2. Food Abundance

Mayra Molina shared a story about a co-op farm in Massachusetts that reached out to her and asked if she would like milk from their cooperative. She agreed, so the farm sent three trucks full

of milk, yogurt, eggs, and fresh produce for the community. Neighbors were grateful and gathered to unload the trucks. People took the milk home and called Mayra back a few days later, offering her cheese they had made from the milk. Mayra told her neighbors she couldn't accept the cheese and encouraged the families to save it and feed their kids because it was uncertain how long that abundance would last.

4.3.3. Housing Support and Advocacy

A community member shared a story about the support she received from MAE and CLVU when she was being evicted from her apartment. Zaida helped her find furniture for her new apartment and thrift clothes. Zaida offered her emotional support and assisted her with translation and interpretation, as she does not speak English and faces many access barriers. Even though this interviewee chose to remain anonymous, she is deeply grateful for everything MAE and CLVU did for her and the community. From housing justice advocacy to driver's license campaign work, she has continued to show up for those who have been historically left out in East Boston. She continues to join the regular weekly housing anti-displacement meetings on Zoom organized by CLVU. She hopes to continue learning her rights as a tenant to support other community members at risk of eviction.

CLVU deployed many resources to East Boston during the peak of the pandemic and pivoted to protect tenants and homeowners from mass displacement during the height of the pandemic. The Eastern Housing court in Boston was shut down in mid-March. On April 20, 2020, Massachusetts enacted the strongest eviction moratorium in the country that not only protected tenants from evictions but also protected homeowners unable to make mortgage payments. After the statewide moratorium lifted in October 2020, organizers were aware that people were getting evicted despite the Center for Disease Control's national housing eviction moratorium which protected only tenants from housing displacement (and did not protect homeowners). CLVU launched an outreach campaign to increase awareness about the moratorium and empower residents to advocate for their rights. Gabriela Cartagena (Gaby), who began working at CLVU during the pandemic, learned that it could be more effective to frame housing issues as public health issues and as racial inequalities during this time. City Life established a housing hotline a week after the courts closed. CLVU's support expanded from local to state-wide to assist housing insecure people. CLVU worked closely with MAE on their moratorium outreach.

Because they got so many referrals from MAE of residents looking for housing support, CLVU trained MAE staff and residents on housing anti-displacement organizing and advocacy. An "army of anti-displacement defenders" was born from these efforts to provide residents with information and tools to prevent displacement and navigate eviction processes from the first notice to quit to accompaniment at eviction court proceedings. Their organizing meetings were held on Zoom, allowing many residents beyond those located in East Boston to join CLVU trainings and meetings. CLVU had funders request their donations be used to supply CLVU member leaders with Wi-Fi hotspots and iPads to provide digital. Now these weekly meetings have shifted to hybrid, online, and in-person in their Jamaica Plain and East Boston hubs.

4.3.4. Digital Literacy and Remote Access

During the pandemic, technology skills for remote and online access became even more important. MLCS had already been offering Information Technology classes for young people. Juan Pablo Ochoa, an immigrant from Colombia who lives in East Boston, had been running a Maverick Makers Project at MLCS where youth would create and sell customized journals. During the pandemic, Juan started teaching digital literacy classes at MLCS. One of the students, Andrea Martinez, was able to take these classes at no cost, even though she did not live at Maverick Landing. For Andrea, this resource was particularly important, as she had just come to East Boston from El Salvador during the pandemic in 2020. Andrea learned new computer skills and at the same time, started meeting new people and building community: "le ayuda a gente mucho, porque uno ahí va aprendiendo, conoce más personas también [it helps people so much, because you start learning and meeting other people]." Through her sister Marielena Martinez, Andrea got connected to MAE and started to help with the organizing of food boxes.

4.3.5. Addressing Domestic Violence

One collaboration focused on how to help those who might be experiencing domestic violence in their homes. A communication committee was formed with CCDS, Dr. Neenah Estrella-Luna, Leo Olsen, and others to figure out how to do outreach and education. CCDS produced videos in English and Spanish about what to do if people were in a household where abuse was happening. A local graphic designer created a professionally designed handout to use. The committee also provided tips to those delivering food on how to check in with family members about safety status. Furthermore, they included information in the food bags about domestic violence resources and the phone numbers of hotlines to call in case of emergency. They also created flyers with this information that were printed with the help of the Boston Resiliency Fund and included in food boxes delivered by the YMCA.

4.3.6. Healing Circles

Wellness and mental health were already a concern before the pandemic and became even more urgent during the pandemic. One of the efforts that emerged during the pandemic was connecting people with health and wellness services through the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center (EBNHC). Erin Bourgalt of EBNHC had been working with several groups (MLCS, CCDS, MAE) to help individuals they referred to navigate and access health resources. This community-based approach included the work of the EBNHC, such as running grief groups, peace circles, and yoga classes. During the pandemic, some of this work had to move to Zoom meetings twice a month. For Erin, the "intergenerational peace circles were honestly one of the most powerful things for me during COVID." This led to the formation of the East Boston Neighborhood Trauma Team Collective, consisting of 4-5 counselors, life coaches, and other healers who had all been connected during mutual aid activities and came together to provide more healing resources, such as running a domestic violence training. A new Community Healing Center Project is now being developed by these joint efforts.

4.3.7. Volunteer and Paid Work

Mutual aid work blurred many of the boundaries between people who were paid team members and those who volunteered with organizations. Everyone pitched in to try to meet the tremendous needs. Narda Peña is a good example of how these lines were blurred. As a longtime resident of East Boston (over 20 years), she dedicated her free time at the beginning of the pandemic to various food efforts. At first, she was working with food distribution at Eastie Farm, where she was one of the only native Spanish speakers. With her strong language skills in English and Spanish, she found that she could be of particular help to those who spoke primarily Spanish. After volunteering with multiple organizations during the pandemic, she ended up being hired by MLCS to be their part-time Resident Services Assistant. Narda described her new role as fulfilling and finds joy in helping out her neighbors. "Estaba necesitando una persona y ahora estoy muy contenta de ayudar a los demás, a muchos residentes que realmente necesitan conectarse, navegar por el sistema [they needed someone and I am so happy to help, there are so many people who need assistance navigating the system and getting plugged-in]."

4.3.8. Collective Fundraising

Most of the community partners in this research project are smaller nonprofit organizations that are perennially under-resourced. Aside from MLCS, the other groups did not provide direct services and had difficulty accessing larger funding sources. During the pandemic, these groups started to see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem. Those with more access to various funds, such as MLCS, began to raise funds for all their partners, overcoming the silos and competition that often happens in the field. Rita mentioned, "I'm a little bit of an ecology fundraiser. I mean, that's what Gloribell Mota called me. She's like you're the ecology fundraiser because every time you see an opportunity for money, I think: how can we pursue this in a way that also brings in my new friends?" In one example, she applied to the United Way for funds that would support MAE, CCDS, NUBE, and the East Boston anti-racism coalition.

4.3.9. Cooperatives and Mutual Aid

Mutual aid also became an opportunity for cooperative businesses to develop. CCDS had already been working to support residents to form worker cooperatives to build the capacity of the neighborhood to provide for itself. With emergency aid from the City of Boston Resiliency Fund, groups across Boston, including CCDS and NUBE in East Boston, formed a consortium to assemble wellness kits for families with COVID-positive members across Boston. When they wanted to obtain 2500 masks for the kits, the consortium looked to the sewing cooperative that CCDS had been supporting in East Boston, called Puntada. Consortium members helped to source donated materials for the masks and paid the sewing cooperative for their labor. Even though Luz Zambrano of CCDS had known some of the other leaders of this effort for years, she says that "this connection was so natural and organic." She goes on to say that "from this

experience of solidarity we (CCDS and Puntada) felt that we could do something bigger and impactful working in partnership with other communities and organizations."[48]

In another example with Puntada, the Piers Park Sailing Center asked them if they could sew bags for their sails. But the machines that Puntada had could not sew the heavier fabric. So, the director proposed giving Puntada money to buy new machines and the fabric and that after they sewed the bags, they could keep the machines.

Caption: Puntada sewing cooperative members (Credit Luz Zambrano)

4.3.10.Cash Aid and Support for Family Businesses

While some people received COVID relief stimulus funds from the federal government, many residents of East Boston lacked the appropriate documentation to qualify for government aid. Thus, some groups created cash assistance funds to help these families. MAE, CCDS, and CLVU developed their own funds and were part of a broader Mass Redistribution Fund that raised $900,000 in 2020-2021, partly by encouraging donations of federal stimulus funds from those who did not need them.

[48] Quotes from Zambrano previously published in Solidarity Economy Initiative (SEI),."THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY INITIATIVE 2014 – 2021: Stories and Reflections on Building Spaces of Solidarity. Center for Economic Democracy," (2022) Pp. 1-31.

Organizations who were a part of the early MAE networks nominated names of families in need, prioritizing undocumented families and people who did not receive stimulus checks. Checks were delivered by organizers on the ground who, with NUBE's support, assembled mini-care packages with masks, sanitizers, tenants' rights information, care messages, and a check for direct relief starting the summer of 2020.

CCDS raised about $100,000 in the first year and formed a committee to decide on distribution. Each week, they reviewed the needs of families on their list and coded them with colors to indicate their level of need. They could give funds to five to ten families each week, depending on who was most in need and how much they had. According to Luz Zambrano, they knew that giving $200 to a family was not a lot, so they started to think if they could use the funds more creatively to make a long-lasting impact. They knew that some families had various skills, such as cooking and sewing. So "If they were cooking pupusas, we're going to buy everything for making the pupusas. Then we ask them to give 50% of that to the community in need so they can just give it to the families for free, but then with 50% of the production to sell it so they can actually get money back for their families as well."

Luz added, "Most of those pupusas were sold to families in Jamaica Plain who came together to support our effort. They bought between 100 to 150 pupusas every week for non-immigrant families." Everyone had a role in these solidarity initiatives; "we also included the children from our families (between 35 to 55 families each week) ... we tried to be creative because we knew families were under so much stress." Another example was a food project that later became a catalyst for Sazon Coop, which brought pizzas to families in need every Friday for a few months. Children were encouraged to make art from the pizza boxes. Luz said they did a weekly art contest where children could win a $25 prize. "That project created so much excitement and happiness for the families because, at least for a few nights, kids were working on their projects instead of being in front of a screen."

4.4. Establishment and Evolution of Mutual Aid Eastie

As described above, the initial work that led to the formation of Mutual Aid Eastie came from NUBE's efforts to create a system of block captains to reach out to neighbors in need and from Eastie Farm's initial food distribution efforts and Kannan's online mutual aid platform. Gloribell explained the initial vision, "It was about how do you create a network where neighbors who have abundances could share with those that have needs and also connect with the nonprofit networks that are there to serve."

In these early days, people showed up to do whatever was necessary and set aside some of the tensions and politics that were more prevalent before the pandemic. However, after an intensive summer, many became exhausted and burned out. Neenah, a board member at NUBE who had been helping with funding and managing the systems for the mutual aid work, stepped up to lead a six-month planning process starting in Fall 2020. A larger group met twice a month to think through, as described by Neenah, "what are we doing? Why are we doing this? Should we keep going?"

Out of that process, they decided that MAE should keep going and needed paid team members. In 2021, Leo Olsen and Deysi Gutierrez were brought on as the first facilitators of the network receiving a small (quarter-time) stipend to keep the network active and moving. Deysi had just finished college, had previously volunteered with NUBE, and was working at the nonprofit arm of Channel Fish (a local seafood company), where she established a free little pantry. Leo had also been working at Channel Fish. Together, Deysi and Leo, following the lead of active MAE volunteers and "captains", decided to build MAE as a space of connections instead of replicating what service providers were already doing.

Leo and Deysi started to hold "office hours" outside the library and later transitioned to a space that Channel Fish allowed them to use and where MAE is still based today. After becoming an official entity, MAE's fiscal sponsorship also shifted from Eastie Farm to Resist, Inc. Eastie Farm had served as the initial fiscal sponsor, but over time, the work of MAE started to go beyond what Eastie Farm could support.

As Deysi and Leo started to build out MAE, they dealt with some confusion over what mutual aid was. As Deysi described it, mutual aid "happened everywhere, and it was like a way of life almost rather than just a brick and mortar place where you get food, and that's it." Leo mentioned, "It's hard to consider mutual aid as like a job. We all have decided to live a lifestyle, really, in which mutual aid is integral in everything we do."

Nevertheless, the decision to pay some people involved in mutual aid work has made it feel like a job for some. MAE has had to grapple with how to use its resources, including money, to sustain mutual aid as a space of connection and care. Leo said, "the idea is how do we pay people who are already doing community work to join our team and continue doing that and give them more sustainability."

Deysi also experienced burnout as a team member, where "it almost felt like if I didn't do it, you know, the whole thing was going to collapse." She said they had to overcome a scarcity mindset and try to get to an abundance mindset. Leo mentioned the work "definitely takes a toll, and you need to take measures to stay sane."

At the end of 2023, MAE had developed into a structure where, in Leo's words, "the network is all of us, and the Core Team are the folks maintaining it and trying to promote mutual aid values in different spheres in East Boston and connect neighbors." Weekly office hours continue to be an essential space and an open door for anyone, particularly new people, to come and seek help and/or provide support.

MAE's initial core team included Leo, Hugo, Deysi, and Zaida, who joined after Deysi left her role in spring 2023 when she became pregnant. The core team meets weekly to make decisions together in a horizontal way. In 2023, MAE engaged about a half dozen *diputadxs* (representatives) who acted as community liaisons between MAE and the broader community. Some have since taken on a greater role and transitioned to join the core team (including Valinda, Edy, and Gerber). When new residents are brought into the MAE network (including the WhatsApp chat group), they get an orientation on the mutual aid values of the network and its

role to help people meet needs and to provide opportunities for them to help others. As Zaida emphasizes, "Everybody has something to give back to the community, to the neighbors."

More recently, MAE implemented a compensation system based on stipends rather than a salary or hourly wage. Leo wants to move away from the wage labor system because "if we need to adjust the stipend based on how much or how little you're able to do, we'll do it." "We're looking at who's really involved, who would want to keep being involved, and then we're finding ways that we can sustain and bring them in further so that they can keep doing even more work."

This structure, compensation system, and work philosophy go beyond typical nonprofit conventions. MAE's vision and long-term goal is to shift how people relate to and care for one another and to embody values of solidarity and reciprocity. They want to use the practice of mutual aid as a foundation for community organizing and movement work, such as collaborating with Cosecha around their campaign for driver's licenses for the undocumented. One example of how they are furthering the shift in values is the role MAE played when some families were displaced by a fire on July 19th, 2022. MAE decided to facilitate a survivor-led process. They worked with East Boston Social Centers to raise relief funds for the families. They then worked with the displaced families to decide how the funds should be distributed among them. They convened a lunch and offered some ways to think about distribution. According to Neenah, "they talked about it amongst themselves, and they came up with an even better formula then I ever could have come up with." Several are still active with MAE. In fact, Gladis, a high school student whose family was displaced by the fire, began working with MAE in the summer of 2023, using funding from MLCS.

Caption: Driver License campaign (Credit Leo Olsen)

4.5. Other Ongoing Efforts

Many mutual aid efforts that started or were ramped up in the initial stage of the pandemic continue today, partly because the unmet needs of residents have persisted after the critical period of the COVID pandemic. For example, Sandra's soup kitchen continues, as does Marielena's many food distributions. Groups are also hoping to build more permanent mutual aid structures that can become a new normal. In addition to MAE, there are the Boston Housing Support Station and Community Healing Center Project efforts that carry on.

The Boston Housing Support Station is a collaboration that builds on a project that started before the pandemic where embedded artists like Anthony Romero developed community-based dialogue around housing insecurity to inform the City of Boston's Office of Housing Stability. During the pandemic, this project pivoted to create an eviction defense station in East Boston that was designed by MLCS, NuLawLab, CLVU, and the City of Boston, with the funds Romero received during his artist-in-residency through the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Advancement (MOIA). The Support Station is based at and managed by MLCS. In addition to these core partners, this project has also involved other partners such as Tufts University/School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Suffolk University Legal Innovation & Technology Lab, Ropes & Gray, and Runcible Studios. The Housing Defense Station provides an office with computers and printers, funds a full-time employee and internet, and includes a relationship with law students who can help residents navigate housing resources.

The **Community Healing Center Project** (CHCP) emerged from mutual aid efforts around mental health and well-being. This initiative includes the East Boston Neighborhood Trauma Team Community Support Collective, MAE, MLCS, and Mandela Yoga Center, amongst other partners, community members, and healers. The CHCP is an independent initiative building a collective healing and community care approach. They have intentionally refrained from forming a nonprofit. Instead, they are trying to build consensus and use several community-based nonprofits as fiscal sponsors. They also use stipends to compensate for people's contributions, valuing everyone's time equally. According to Erin, this effort is made possible by the deep relationships formed during the pandemic. "I don't think that there necessarily would be this Healing Center project if we hadn't built these relationships."

Caption: Free Little Pantry flyer (Credit MAE website)

5. Reflections, Insights, and Learnings

This section outlines the themes and learnings from our three convenings with project partners and the 20 individual interviews. We first share the range of definitions of mutual aid. Then, we lay out significant challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from the pandemic. Next, we explore the changing roles amongst community groups, service organizations, government, and funders and the relationship between mutual aid and community organizing and movement building.

5.1. Definitions and Feelings of Mutual Aid

There are varying ways that mutual aid is defined among our research partners and interviewees who were involved in these efforts. Some described it as a network or coalition of groups across the neighborhood.

- Juan: "Mutual aid here is like a network that connects individuals to services that are needed."
- Kannan: "It isn't just one organization. ... But mutual aid, by definition, is this loose network of everybody and everything."
- Zaida: "I would define mutual aid as a group of neighbors, a club of neighbors who are eager to connect with other neighbors and that they will survive with each other because it's the only way that's going to happen."

Mutual aid brought together groups in ways that they did not ordinarily connect. According to Rita, "I see mutual aid as a sort of some synaptic fluid that sort of dissolves the siloism and allows us to work more cohesively.... It's sort of resiliency in action."

Others defined mutual aid more broadly, by the values that it promotes, including care, reciprocity, and solidarity:

- Dr. Neenah: "What we do is we bring people together and foster community care."
- Luz: "Mutual aid is that you give and you receive." "Sometimes what you give is one thing and what you receive is another thing, but it's still mutual." "Mutual Aid is one of the cooperative values CCDS follows and during the pandemic it became alive in everything we did for and with the community."
- Deysi: "It's a different way of saying reciprocity" "It was like a movement and it wasn't just this one specific thing in Eastie. It happened everywhere and it was like a way of life."
- Gaby: "Solidarity. Solidarity amongst neighbors… grassroots. Bringing community together."
- Anonymous community member: "Apoyo mutuo (MAE) también está apoyando a CLVU, también apoyo mutuo (MAE) esta a la licencias también. Apoyo mutuo no ve

diferencias... un ejemplo de ser unidos [Mutual Aid Eastie is supporting CLVU, MAE is also supporting with the drivers license work. Mutual Aid doesn't see differences... it is an example of unity]."

Mutual aid was also often described by the feelings that people experienced and their motivations for being involved. Mutual aid brought about feelings of being connected, trusted, and supported by community and making a positive impact on their community:

- Marielena: "Para mí, quizás es una bendición porque aparte de uno estar conectado con la comunidad, uno está conectado con sus raíces. [For me, perhaps a blessing because besides being connected to the community, … one is connected to one's roots. … I thank God because we are where we are and everybody knows us.]"
- Rita: Before the pandemic, "I felt really alone in East Boston…I felt isolated in the work, felt like people didn't really know us. … They just didn't see us." But when we started doing mutual aid, I felt "Oh, thank God, I'm not alone in this work. … It required a shift in how we operated from a deep silo to, we need to trust each other. We're working together to do this important thing. I felt always good about making that shift."
- Sandra: "Ver que logras hacer una diferencia en la calidad de vida de la persona. Para mí, esa es mi motivación. [To see that you make a difference in the quality of life of a person. For me, that is my motivation.]"
- Juan: "I feel like it was really nice. It was worth it. … You know, we are helping people, supporting those who are in need. And at that moment, especially because I'm very young so if I can do it, why should I not?"

There was also a sense that mutual aid was initially very spontaneous and that participants started to see new possibilities for the community and for new ways of being and lifestyles:

- Kannan: "Initially, the way it emerged is people in the community saying, I want to help. I can give money, I can give time, I can translate, I can drive. And then just connecting all this goodwill and resources coming from within the community to where it's needed. Initially, it felt like *that* was mutual aid. And later on, what began to emerge is the self-empowerment of the community: so it can raise itself, its platform, its ability to speak, its profile, and its place in the larger discourse in the city, the state, and the nation. It started to feel like people power."
- Erin: "It was an invitation to be like, I'm fully in this and I think the ways that people supported each other made it so it's no longer like, oh, there's working Erin and there's home Erin. We are kind of living this work, but we're also compartmentalizing, [which] isn't really working anymore because we have to be in a deep relationship with each other if we're going to get through this."
- Mayra: "lo viví, como decimos, en carne propia, ¿verdad? Porque la comunidad es nuestra comunidad. El dolor que siente cuando uno hace el trabajo con amor.. [I lived it,

as we say, in the flesh, right? Because the community is our community. The pain you feel when you do the work with love]."

- Leo: "We all have decided to live a lifestyle, really, in which mutual aid is integral in everything we do."

As much as people experienced mutual aid with positive emotions, it was also described as exhausting, overwhelming, and daunting:

- Gloribell: "I think at the beginning, I was totally terrified. I will say it's the most work I've done in all of NUBE's years."
- Eny: "Creo que para mí fue una carga muy fuerte, realmente. Pero en general para mí fue una satisfacción saber que pudimos apoyar a tantas familias, conocer a tantas familias, conocer tanta gente de otras ciudades, que me llamaban, les llegaba información de todos lados [I think it was a very heavy burden for me, really. But, in general, it was satisfying for me to know that we were able to support so many families, to meet so many families, to meet so many people from other cities, who called me, who received information from all over]."
- Gaby: "So it was overwhelming. I feel like I've been in a perpetual burnout since then... But also very gratifying. It's heart work. Yes, it's hard work and heart work."

5.2. Challenges

The mutual aid responses to the pandemic brought many challenges for our partners and interviewees. For instance, there was broad agreement that the **systems and resources for aiding residents were not adequate or sufficient**. They described many occasions where the needs for food were greater than what they were able to provide and there were not enough people who could transport the food. Several people told stories about families that did not have enough space in their homes to isolate when a family member got COVID. Organizers and volunteers felt like they could not help everyone who came to them.

They also described **difficulties accessing existing government, social service, and funding systems**. Many residents were ineligible to receive certain benefits (such as the Federal stimulus checks). There was a lack of awareness and confusion over who was eligible for which programs. And then there were language barriers, as not all programs had information in multiple languages. Institutional regulations also presented barriers, such as the EBNHC's inability to offer certain services like yoga to people seeking housing help because certain buildings are prohibited from providing clinical services (which included yoga). While some funders made their processes easier to access during the pandemic, many still described onerous reporting requirements. They emphasized that funder systems were still set up for individual organizations rather than collaborations.

There were **many challenging attitudes and mindsets** that had to be addressed. Mutual aid workers had to overcome a general lack of trust in the government to get people to believe in

their mission and that change was possible. There was scarcity thinking that could lead to competition over resources instead of an abundance mindset. In mutual aid's pursuit of reciprocity, they encountered a predominant charity model where resources flow one way and presume dependence and deficit of those in need rather than centering the survivors. While many saw mutual aid as a way to sustain beyond the immediate crisis, some thought of it as temporary and asked when it would end.

Some of the greatest challenges were to the mutual aid workers themselves. Many described the **stress, exhaustion, and burnout** that they experienced due to the physical and emotional burdens of the work. Gaby, for instance, said "I did not prioritize myself at all. I was very much in grind mode a lot. Yeah. It wasn't until my body literally started hurting where I realized I need to do exercise." Leo reflected that "it also really takes a toll on you. I don't think anyone who does this work would be honest in saying that it doesn't." Gloribell said "I totally burned out. I will say that by the end of that pandemic year, going into the next year, not dealing with my own fears, right, of getting COVID, … that took an impact by the end." On top of just the stresses of trying to meet needs and doing this work around the clock, mutual aid workers were also fearful for their own health and endured risks of exposure to keep services going. Sandra, who kept her soup kitchen open, said "Seguimos las reglas, el protocolo de mantener nos saludables lo más que pudimos. Y gracias a Dios sobrevivimos toda esa crisis. [We followed the rules, the protocol of keeping us healthy as much as we could. And thank God we survived that whole crisis.]" Describing the pressure she felt, Deysi said "everybody felt like the thing (MAE) was going to collapse if they didn't do something or a neighbor was going to be in deep trouble if they didn't answer the phone."

Despite the goodwill and collaborative spirit that many experienced, there were also some **tensions and conflicts amongst mutual aid workers and organizations** over funding, credit and acknowledgment, and expectations about what MAE could do. Though these kinds of frictions are commonplace in nonprofit and community work, they are included here to show that these still arise in mutual aid work. In one case, a leader was upset over not being acknowledged in a celebration of mutual aid work. In another, there were differences over who should have received what portion of funds that had been raised for mutual aid. Finally, another tension arose over whether MAE was setting unrealistic expectations over what they could offer to help an individual's housing issue.

These mutual aid efforts faced tremendous challenges in **building capacity and leadership.** In general, there was a sense that there were too many needs and too little time and resources. Groups had to figure out what they had capacity to do in relation to others, including the city, and then set and communicate those boundaries. While many people were actively engaged, it was difficult to bring new leaders in. As Rita mentioned, "It's hard to build leadership when people aren't well." Some also encountered challenges related to using technologies for remote participation. Some had to navigate new roles, such as Leo becoming a facilitator of MAE and having to take on management and administrative duties.

We heard two other challenges in our interviews. One person thought there were too many WhatsApp chat groups. Some people were in multiple groups. Another challenge raised was the protection of information and privacy for community members, especially health information. The need for this protection limited some sharing of information in the mutual aid networks.

5.3. Opportunities

As daunting as these efforts were, all our research partners and interviewees pointed to the many opportunities that arose through mutual aid work. There was **more communication, connections, and sharing amongst neighbors and a sense that they had something to contribute and give back, not just receive**. The WhatsApp chat groups were one place where people could post and respond to needs in a decentralized way. Sandra noted that many volunteers in her soup kitchen initially came to receive food. People saw the values of reciprocity, solidarity, and cooperation in action. As Kannan described, "there's a lot of goodwill that we discovered during COVID. A lot of goodwill." Luz explained that "because people are in a system that is *me* most of the time. It's about *how I am going to get my needs covered* and stuff like that, so when this happened, we felt like a lot of the values and principles of cooperativism took life. This is not about talking about it; this is about doing it."

Luz highlighted that CCDS seized the opportunity to have conversations with the community and within their ecosystem about the current system and how "it has not worked for immigrants, particularly undocumented." She mentioned they could "help people analyze the root causes of the problems and inequalities that we had before the pandemic, but that became so apparent during the pandemic." Additionally, CCDS saw a window of opportunity to "build community and strengthen our cooperative movement. Our motto became: *Crises are opportunities.*" Luz emphasized that "cooperativism and solidarity economies do not happen when people are comfortable with their lives, but when people are distressed and need to work collectively for the common good.

New and stronger collaborations emerged, which helped to **bridge some of the silos, especially between service and organizing groups**. According to Gaby, "something that mutual aid did was really bring organizing groups and service-based groups together." In particular, MLCS developed many new connections and came to be seen as a critical part of the community ecosystem. Before the pandemic, Rita of MLCS noted how she felt isolated and that others thought, "Oh, that's just the housing development over there." Gaby confirmed this, saying, "for example, like Maverick Landing, no one really ever worked with them before the pandemic, which is sad, but is a reality of how community work is dispersed in different communities and not communicating or collaborating with each other." But then they became a key hub for food distribution and part of the startup of MAE.

Rita also had initial concerns over their work with CLVU on the East Boston Housing Support Station. CLVU had done an action at Maverick Landing, its last eviction blockade in late spring of 2015, that was critical of Trinity Management, which owns the development and provides space for MLCS. But she introduced the Trinity representative to a CLVU organizer at a

Juneteenth event that Trinity had suggested organizing for the first time. And when that interaction went well, Rita saw "that it really wasn't as difficult as I thought it was going to be. I had fears, because I know very different cultures who might be at odds at different points. … but I think the way I balance it is by showing up as friend." Luz acknowledged that "there was a lot of barriers to work with each other" before the pandemic, "but in the bigger scenario of mutual aid in East Boston, I think we were able to get to know each other better. To understand that we are complementing our work. That if we work together for the same community, we can actually do great things." Gloribell noted that they were able to develop more partnerships with the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center. At the same time, Eny appreciated connecting with the City, elected officials, and even other groups outside of Boston. For Juan at MLCS, "Because of the mutual aid, we can also have more credibility and we can just support each organization working together."

Through these collaborations, people **got to know one another's organizations better and developed stronger and deeper relationships** that could **bridge racial and class differences**. During the meetings and coordination for mutual aid efforts, according to Neenah, "we're building those relationships across some pretty important differences, right, class differences, racial differences, ethnic differences, language barriers, like all of that within the network itself." Deysi described that "having regular meetings where different organizations and even individuals allowed people in mutual aid to get a better understanding of the many different services that were already being provided. They developed a better network to direct neighbors to the services they need instead of each organization feeling like they had to start providing everything from scratch." Luz noted that when CCDS launched their cooperative ecosystem at Eastie Farm, they were able to reach "the new people coming to East Boston; Eastie Farm had really good relationships with the middle class and white people." Kannan mentioned: "That's the most wonderful thing that can happen in a society where people come together across economic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic boundaries, even geographic boundaries. And then the other thing that happened with people who detected their own privilege said, I'm going to put this power of the collective to good use." Erin, at EBNHC, noted that the pandemic helped the Health Center recognize the value of the relational work of the Community Resource and Wellness Center where they have now established staff positions for a bicultural/bilingual team and "adjusted salaries and created different levels of positions and ways for people to move up."

Some of our interviewees **felt supported and gained new opportunities to be involved in community work**. Younger people like Evelyn were able to get involved with MAE and enjoyed talking with people and helping them. Narda noted that working with young people helped her understand new things and improve her skills. Narda was also able to get a paid part-time position at MLCS because she had already been involved in mutual aid: "Y entonces aproveché a este part time aprovecha en verdad las ganas que tengo de ayudar [this part-time position really allowed me to make the most of out my willingness to help]." Andrea, who had just come to Boston and had a child during the pandemic received support for food, mental health,

emotional support, and baby supplies "(El apoyo mutuo) puede ser gran ayuda, la verdad, porque es que no esperábamos tanto apoyo de la comunidad [(mutual aid) can be very helpful, we were not expecting as much support from the community]." A community member who struggles with English said she never imagined that she could receive help and guidance from people in the network like Zaida "como Zaida estaba ahí, cualquier cosa, estaba interpretándome y estuvo hasta en el último momento y yo estoy muy agradecida con esa mujer [because Zaida was there, if anything came up, she was interpreting, she was there until the last minute and I am very grateful for that woman]." She never imagined that someone who was once a stranger would help her so much and was impressed by her constant desire to support the community. "Estoy hablando de mujeres dedicadas a la mente, o tal vez no es de tanto pensar, sino que es del corazón que les nace [I am talking about women who have dedicated minds, or many it is not about the mind, but that willingness (to help) comes from the heart]."

The pandemic allowed for a **new narrative about vulnerability** to arise that, in Kannan's words "exposed our collective vulnerability and the connected nature of our society... if some of us are vulnerable, then we are all vulnerable." This helped to center the most vulnerable in mutual aid work.

5.4. Lessons Learned

There were several lessons learned that our partners and interviewees reflected on.

First, the **community was able to respond much more quickly and effectively than the government**. One of the reasons that mutual aid began was because existing systems of service were not able to respond in a timely and effective way. Mayra noted "Si nosotros como Red de Apoyo mutuo, o entre vecinos, porque fue más que todo entre vecinos al principio, no hubiéramos actuado, esa gente no hubiera tenido ni que comer, porque lastimosamente nuestra comunidad va al día con los cheques. Nadie estaba preparado." [If we as a mutual aid network or as neighbors because it was mostly amongst neighbors at the beginning, had not taken action, people would not even have had anything to eat, because unfortunately, our community was living paycheck to paycheck. Nobody was prepared]." According to Gloribell, "the way that the Mutual Aid Eastie got up and running was much more quicker than what the city or state could."

Many found that they shifted their approaches and attitudes to embrace more empathy, resilience, and patience and that they do not want to go back to pre-pandemic normal. Eny believes that "tenemos que aprender a ser más humanos, a ser más empáticos y que lo que menos teníamos que volver era a la vida que teníamos antes. Tenemos que regresar siendo mejores personas, porque creo que lo que ya existía era el problema [We have to learn to be more human, to be more empathetic, and that the last thing we need to do is go back to the life we had before. We have to return [or "come out"] as better people, because I think that what already existed was the problem]."

For Mayra, it is simply about "El amor a nuestro prójimo. Si no hay amor a nadie o algo, pues no se hace. Y eso es lo que que fue que nos unió mucho. Porque en veces de estamos como muy desconectados. [Loving our neighbors. Because sometimes we're too disconnected ... if there's no love for someone or something, then things don't get done. This is what united our community, love for the community and within the community members.]" Narda learned "No se queden ahí. No se limiten donde ustedes tienen la capacidad, a veces uno cuando está aquí como inmigrante se limita [don't stay in the same spot. Don't limit yourself when you're in fact capable. Sometimes as immigrants, we limit ourselves]."

One resonant learning is the **importance of relationships, trust, and communication**. For Neenah, building relationships and trust "allows us to hold each other accountable." Gloribell says that "we underestimate the power of social capital." Erin, who represents a more extensive service provider (EBNHC), says, "I'm learning always and try to show up in a restorative way and to support not just the work that the health center is doing, but that other organizations that like smaller organizations, that are BIPOC-led organizations, that community immigrant justice organizations are doing."

Some also noted that they learned that there are **limits to this work and perhaps lessons that still need to be understood**. Gaby indicated that not every person can be helped by this work; it is "something you need to start being okay with or just not be hard on yourself about because we just can't do it all. There are limits to our work," Kannan says, "I do strongly feel that we did not learn the lessons of the pandemic. It does feel like it's over because the symptoms of the pandemic to us were the masks and the social distancing and what not. Now we're not doing that. So it feels deceptively like we are back to normal. But it was never an acceptable normal in the first place, which is why the crisis was so bad and some people were affected so much. I'm not sure that we are really set up to face anything in any better way today." He believes that "we still don't have a good sense of the level of vulnerability in every community and who will need help. They shouldn't have to reach out to us."

5.5. Changing Roles

Mutual aid work arose to meet unprecedented needs during the pandemic. However, even before the pandemic, residents were not served adequately by the existing support systems, increasing vulnerability within the community. This section highlights how the roles and relationships shifted among community groups, government, service providers, and funders. There were opportunities and challenges to how these sectors worked together.

5.5.1. Challenges

Though there were some shifts, it is important to note that pre-existing challenges continued during the pandemic. Many noted that **mutual aid was doing work that the government should have been doing**. According to Luz, "they gave us a little bit of money here and there …, but we were actually doing their work for little money." Barriers to accessing resources included lack of language support, eligibility requirements (such as with stimulus checks), and distrust of government.

When government funding was available, opportunities were hard to apply for and challenging to manage. Eny says that they didn't apply to several funding sources because the processes were too complex and they didn't know how to do it. Rita says that government funding is "so hard to manage. It's what makes the work unsustainable, frankly, to manage public money." Likewise, Luz says "that it's more work providing reports than anything else. They expect too much for too little." Now public funding to MAE has been reduced significantly as the government sees the pandemic as over, crippling the digital literacy classes led by MLCS and MAE.

Many silos and tensions between service providers and smaller community organizations were still a challenge during the pandemic. Rita noted that "we operate in silos" and that before the pandemic there were very few youth from Maverick Landing who were in the program at the nearby Sailing Center and that it takes "deep intentional relationships … to really shepherd them in." Gloribell adds "we get caught up with the organization and we don't see each other interconnected." She noted that many of the largest service providers "work with each other, but they don't work with those that are servicing the most vulnerable." She went on to note that "a lot of these organizations seized the opportunity to get these [pandemic] resources without really working with organizations that have access or come from the most vulnerable communities, specifically our undocumented neighbors that are not able to access government aid due to economics, language, technology, and cultural barriers." Leo describes the main tension as between "direct services versus movement work" where some see more resources going towards the service organizations.

Some see these challenges as rooted in **an attitude of one-way charity and dependency on service work**. As Luz explains, some see government services as "poor people receiving because they're poor; they don't have nothing to contribute." For her, this is why "for mutual aid to work, you had to make people independent. You had to show people that they have something to give back, to contribute. So the human part of somebody, it transforms, it gets better."

5.5.2. Opportunities

Despite the challenges, there were some shifts and new openings for changing roles and attitudes. First, **government resources and policies are still seen as playing critical roles, even as more is needed**. When asked what the government could do to help further mutual aid, many responded that more money and resources were needed. They pointed out that pandemic programs to help with housing (eviction moratorium, RAFT rental aid), food aid, and paycheck protection program for small businesses were helpful but not enough. A good portion of funding that flowed through MAE came from the government. But there should be more than just public resources. Many also pointed to the need for policy changes to help reduce vulnerabilities (like being priced out, displaced, or evicted) in the first place, such as rent control.

Many believe that **government resources can support mutual aid, but only if they trust community partners more**. As Leo expressed, "I think government is important. We need good

people who are there and really genuinely want to use government at the disposition of community efforts." Many suggested that government agencies should be in the community more and learn about needs directly. In Neenah's words, "quit making us come to you." They urged government not to come in with an ego and not try to take center stage and the credit.

Luz wants the government to trust that community groups "know the community, know their needs, have the relationship with the community" and to not be in the middle of that and requiring them to ask invasive questions about who was receiving aid, such as age. She would like the government to give community groups more credit and funding, and request one report at the end of the year for grantees to share their progress. Eny and Juan emphasized the need for more communication and cross-cultural understanding between community and government.

People pointed to several **positive examples of change in government, service providers, and funders**. City Councilor Julia Mejia started a resource hub for mutual aid work. Similarly, State Representative Adrian Madaro collaborated closely with MassCOSH to provide diapers and other baby supplies to the East Boston community during the pandemic. Mutual Aid Eastie has also developed a relationship with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Advancement (MOIA) which has supported their initiatives by providing training to team members and making accessing and receiving funding more easy. As a smaller service agency, MLCS emerged as a critical partner in MAE. Erin at EBNHC showed that some staff there can be in deep solidarity with community and "are trying to figure out how can we as the health center show up and support people and figure out that as a part of the restorative process."

Both MLCS and EBNHC have been involved in collaborative fundraising. The EBNHC can use funding from Boston Public Health Commission to fund community partners who are part of the Neighborhood Trauma Team coalition and "for the trauma support work that they do on their own," according to Erin. As mentioned earlier, Rita is seen as an "ecology fundraiser" because now "every time you see an opportunity for money, I think: how can we pursue this in a way that also brings in my new friends?" MAE has also been introduced to new solidarity donors who are giving funds with few strings attached.

5.6. Movement Building and Organizing

Many of our partner organizations see themselves as part of transformative movements and some are explicit about their mission to build power through community organizing. Pre-pandemic, some (like NUBE) saw their role as organizing and not providing services, while others like CLVU recognized the need to provide some housing services (such as legal aid) along with anti-displacement organizing and advocacy. Their movement-building and organizing focus is intended to change the systems that create inequities and the need for services in the first place.

The pandemic forced all these groups to take part in service provision and access. Through mutual aid, they began to see **new connections between services and organizing**. Even MLCS started to see itself as "a sort of service organization that does believe in transformational

work," according to Rita. In our focus groups and interviews, we asked partners how they saw mutual aid as being connected to movement building, organizing, and political power. We got a variety of thoughts on how these connections were happening and the role that mutual aid could or should play (and not).

Several of the organizing partners saw **mutual aid as a place for meeting and activating people**. As Gloribell Mota described, "the **sweet spot is that this mutual aid is connected with social movement**." She hopes that MAE taps into the local social movement ecology and that groups that are doing different theories of change like direct service, legislative advocacy, and grassroots organizing (like NUBE) can be of service to the network. She says that "NUBE could do the organizing, could do the base building, could do the agitation, can move folks. But the part that we haven't been able to connect is how can neighbors see each other's humanity," which is what mutual aid can do. For Gloribell, mutual aid is about "changing culture and norms for neighbors and how to be in community" and "**strengthening those communal ties** and getting people to support each other with their own means and then go to the system."

A number of people considered mutual aid a great place to connect people to organizing groups like CLVU. Gaby thought that "**mutual aid is great in moving the masses and mobilization**. I feel like that's their role in social movement right now." However, she emphasized that "mutual aid alone I don't think will create this larger vision of social change. But mutual aid is definitely like an essential part of that wave of change or many waves of change that we need." She also hoped to see "mutual aid shift itself from just being a place where people go to for help to where these folks are redirected into some sort of **leadership pipeline to build movement**, larger social movement work."

There were important points of difference in views of mutual aid and movement and what kind of change is needed. Some pointed to the **possibility of mutual aid networks building political power** and influence. Kannan says that "We could have easily taken that power, I think, because in the current climate, all the politicians are paying attention to people on the ground. You say, 'we're the mutual aid group. Before you pass any legislation that involves this community, talk to us. Or we'll tell you what legislation we need.' It is not just about the leaders doing this, but letting the people get involved in it."

Mayra pointed to the need to **reform the existing system** to address barriers around language, education, and immigration status; "El gobierno no ha hecho lo que tenía que haber hecho. El sistema del gobierno tiene que cambiar [the government has not done what they should. The government system needs to change]." Meanwhile, Luz has gotten tired of fighting the system: "I've been doing this work for 34 years and **I got tired of fighting the system. I think it's the time for us to create our own**." Leo thinks that there are differing views as to what constitutes social justice work. 'We've learned how important it is to be fighting alongside those who are value-aligned."

Eny pointed to the need to learn from the pandemic that we need to build a different world. "Para mí, creo que cosas han cambiado y cosas deberían de cambiar. Porque si de la pandemia no aprendimos, creo que ya no vamos a aprender. Porque creo que fue un golpe tan fuerte que

si no nos tocó el alma o nos tocó algo en nosotros, es porque de verdad no estamos viviendo en este mundo y no queremos ser parte de la construcción, que sí se puede construir un mundo mejor, un mundo diferente [For me, I think things have changed and things should change. Because if we didn't learn from the pandemic, I don't think we are going to learn at all. I think it was such a huge shock that if it did not touch our souls or something in us, it is because we are not really living in this world and we do not want to be part of building, that it is possible to build a better world, a different world]"

The continuing dialogue and strategizing about mutual aid's role in transformative change also encounter several tensions. First, resources are not necessarily shared equitably. As Leo points out, "I think some people who are trying to do more movement work feel like a lot of the organizations that do direct service work are sucking up a lot of the resources." In providing aid, there are always questions such as Gloribell poses: "Are people really there because they want to be in social change organizing or are they here just because they're getting a service? People are engaged in different missions, theories on the ways that the work should be done, funding streams, and accountability mechanisms that can lead to challenges in working together; overcoming these differences is our movement leaders' task."

6. Future of Mutual Aid

Our final inquiry centered on the future of mutual aid. Specifically, how might MAE be structured? What visions do we have for what mutual aid work might become? What is needed to sustain and strengthen mutual aid?

6.1. How Might Mutual Aid Eastie Be Structured?

Mutual Aid Eastie currently has a core team that meets weekly to reflect and collectively make decisions. During the summer of 2023, two youth members joined the MAE core team to assist in relationship building and helping connect residents to resources. Neenah has also played a leadership role by advising and guiding the team for the past two years. In Leo's words, "the values at the center of Mutual Aid Eastie are reciprocity, solidarity, community care, and justice, and relationship-building is at the core of how the network functions." In 2023, MAE used a *diputadxs* system where neighbors act as community liaisons to "sustain the network in different capacities" and welcome new people. MAE is also hosting biweekly meetings with a cohort of grassroot organizations centered around rent control, as well as monthly cross-network meetings with the other community groups that form a part of the MAE network.

MAE hosts office hours at one of the Channel Fish's buildings in Eagle Square. Core team members still regularly visit the local farmers market to meet residents and host public events to share information with the community. Their office hours allow residents to find a trusted person to talk to about their current situation and find potential solutions and/or local resources. People are greeted with a smile by core team members; they are offered a coffee and a sweet, comforting treat. Don Hugo helps run the food pantry, ensuring nobody in the community goes

hungry. Zaida listens to and empowers women to get through the toughest of challenges, and Leo is an extraordinary ally, always willing to help.

Mutual Aid Eastie's funding is used to provide stipends for committed community members who put in the time and effort to sustain and strengthen the network, valuing everyone's time equally. Leo mentioned they "divvy up funds to support ourselves as best as possible and be somewhat proportionate with the amount of time we're spending" to ensure people feel supported and are compensated for their personal commitment. While MAE does not actively hire facilitators, in Leo's words, the core team looks at "who's really involved, who would want to keep being involved, and then we're finding ways that we can sustain and bring them in further so that they can keep doing even more work."

Given the increasing flux of immigrants arriving in East Boston and the economic and housing challenges current residents are experiencing, Mutual Aid Eastie remains a vital resource for the community. Leo hopes to continue to build a neighbor-to-neighbor support network instead of becoming just another non-profit or local organization.

6.2 Visions of What Mutual Aid Might Become

Some perceive mutual aid as a coalition or in Kannan's words "**loose network of everybody and everything.**" Eny thinks MAE "debería de estar creando comités de respuesta ante una emergencia, no esperar que nos agarre la emergencia para reaccionar **[should be creating emergency response committees**, not waiting for the emergency to hit us to react]." Other participants focused on the idea of mutual aid being a **network** and a way of working together – a **culture which embraces reciprocity and abundance**. In our final convening, partners talked about **mutual aid as a "motor for the community"** and that they needed to find the proper fuel for it so that it could be a "renewable resource".

Some had transformational aspirations for mutual aid. Neenah explains "we're trying to **build this new world while the old world still exists**." Zaida likewise hopes that "**one day we won't need government assistance**, that people can set up their own cooperative as a way of saving money or putting money away. That we will work with each other, babysit for each other, make our own products, and sell them to each other. That's what I hope that will happen. It's possible."

Gloribell envisions mutual aid as a process like the Alcoholics Anonymous circles that have spread internationally and that the mutual aid workers become the stewards of these processes. Kannan agrees that mutual aid should be helping small nonprofits like NUBE continue to do good work.

6.3. What Is Needed to Sustain and Strengthen Mutual Aid?

There were three types of responses to this question: shifts in values, strategies, and practices.

In terms of values shifts, the recognition of mutuality and reciprocity was central. Zaida noted that "**everybody has something to give back** to the community" while Eny believes that "todos tienen dones que compartir [everyone has a gift they can share]." Rita and Kannan emphasize the need to **center the most vulnerable people in mutual aid**. Deysi points to the need for participants to **feel ownership** over mutual aid. She urges giving "neighbors/community members an opportunity to donate money to mutual aid, even if they are just small donations. This could help build a sense of community ownership over mutual aid." Luz wants people to be more aware "that we need to **create a different system**, that we cannot continue doing what we do, that we cannot go back to the same way of being." Leo wants to "double down on the idea of being … a **neighbor support networ**k and not putting ourselves in a position as another nonprofit."

A number of strategies were identified for sustaining mutual aid. Evelyn urges **more involvement of youth**. Rita wants to **dissolve the silos**. Luz wants to "**nurture the spaces that we already have and not create more** because then we get dispersed and then it's like we cannot be in every single meeting and every single coalition and every single thing." Rita also urges **more alliances between communities and the new gentrifying class** in East Boston. Leo wants to **build more leadership**. He and Erin emphasize the **importance of the physical spaces for collaboration, relationships, and healing**. Juan hopes that funding access, particularly for smaller organizations, can be made easier.

Finally, a number of practices were identified for the future of mutual aid. Andrea noted that as more people come from more countries and looking for support, mutual aid should **welcome them with patience and acceptance**. Gloribell stressed the importance of having mutual aid be a **multi-lingual space**. Marielena urged that MAE be very honest about when it can help versus when it is out of their control or beyond their capacity. Deysi sees the need to track progress and quantify it holistically and hopes to stop burnout by caring for each other and being open to receiving and giving support.

7. Conclusion

We have documented here how mutual aid has grown and evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic hit East Boston. While there are many definitions of mutual aid, they all focus on collective community care and include people taking actions that involve solidarity and reciprocity. Mutual aid is not one-way charity. Even those with the most needs have something to give.

Mutual Aid Eastie is building the relationships and networks amongst neighbors to sustain these core values. The work involves both giving and receiving direct aid, as well as relating to neighbors in caring and communal ways that recognize our interdependence. As the partners expressed, mutual aid is like the engine that, if run on renewable energy, helps build community culture and practices to care for one another. It is not just individual leaders, a single organization, or even one coalition. It is all of those working together, along with government, funders, and social service agencies, to meet needs and activate the abundances and assets that the community already has.

Doing mutual aid work during an unprecedented crisis has created challenges and presented opportunities. While the work has been physically and emotionally exhausting, it has also shown that people can and will work with one another in solidarity. We are not stuck in systems that have created the vulnerabilities in the first place. Rather, mutual aid efforts are building new practices and cultures that may be transforming our existing systems and building the new worlds that some imagine.

As a community action research project, the questions we ask are never definitively answered. The work continues and evolves, in part informed by our collective research. Thus, this conclusion is not just the end of this stage of our work, but also the beginning of the next phase.

Appendices

A1. Research Partner MOU

Community Research Partner Agreement
with Tufts University Department of Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning

Impact of COVID-era Mutual Aid Initiatives on Civic Infrastructure in Metro-Boston Neighborhoods

The research partners on this project agree to the following.

Tufts University Department of Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning will:

- Communicate with all community research partners in a timely and transparent manner about the research project goals, workplan, and budget, and any changes from proposal to completion.
- Conduct all interviews and group discussions in the languages that participants are most comfortable using.
- Facilitate a welcoming and inclusive space for group discussions that supports active participation
- Synthesize information into preliminary findings for review by community partners
- Prepare and share a final report that supports the goals of the entire project team
- Protect confidentiality of participant data by sharing information in an identifiable way only when a participant has had a chance to review their information in context of the report or other research output and granted final consent
- Ensure security of all participant data so that it can only be accessed by the Tufts research team

Community Research Partners will:

- Participate in research activities from October 2022 through September 2023:
    - Review and approve initial research plan and any subsequent revisions
    - At least one interview with appropriate staff and members
    - Two group discussions of up to two-hours each with other Community Research Partners and the Tufts team. Initial convening in early 2023 to discuss the experiences and lessons so far and further refine research questions and plans. A final convening in summer 2023 to share findings and develop recommendations and conclusions
    - Review materials shared prior to the group discussions
    - Review and approve final report
    - Help distribute findings within organization and community
    - Participate in presentations and events agreed upon by partners for disseminating findings
- Assign one staff person to serve as primary contact and communicate any capacity constraints
- Notify the Tufts team of accessibility needs to ensure active participation

Tufts University will release half of the stipend ($3000) to each community research partner after the first group discussion and the second half ($3000) after the second group discussion.

Community Partner Authorized Signer Name _____

Signature _____ Date _____

A2. List of Interviewees

Zaida Adames

Erin Bourgalt

Gabriela Cartagena

Neenah Estrella Luna

Deysi Gutierrez

Rita Lara

Mike Leyba

Eny Lovo

Mayra Molina

Gloribell Mota

Sandra Nijjar

Juan Pablo Ochoa

Leo Olsen

Narda Peña

Kannan Thiruvengadam

Luz Zambrano

Evelyn*

Sonia*

Marielena Martinez*

Andrea Martinez*

(*pseudonym)

A3. Stories of Mutual Aid

A3.1. Mayra Molina's story

Mayra is an immigrant who came to East Boston 14 years ago; soon after she settled in, she realized immigrants could face injustice in various ways. After experiencing wage theft from a previous employer, Mayra became involved with MassCOSH (Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Health and Safety) and volunteered for NUBE in hopes of supporting other workers.

Three days after the COVID health emergency was announced in the US, Mayra and Eny began reaching out to community members. They understood people had many needs and decided to act. Mayra worked 24/7 to provide food to local families; her home became a food pantry and collection center. She purchased eggs, beans, and rice at wholesale prices to later distribute.

Even though Mayra felt like most government aid was not getting to the homes where it was most needed, she was grateful to see State Representative Adrian Madaro step up and provide resources for the community. Her trusted relationship with Madaro allowed her to share updates about how the community was coping with the pandemic challenges and identify gaps that the representative could quickly address. This resulted in baby products being provided for moms in great need of diapers and other essentials.

In addition to juggling her food pantry and meal deliveries, Mayra helped people fill out unemployment applications to receive stimulus checks. Mayra was always on call if people got sick and needed food or tea. Her approach to mutual aid and community service centered on love for her neighbors, which gave her the strength to keep going but made self-care very challenging. When 911 was not responding to East Boston, Mayra and Eny were there.

Mayra was tasked with arranging funeral services for many people in East Boston. She provided emotional support to those experiencing family loss and cared for those who could not grieve properly because they were never able to get the ashes of their loved ones.

Today, Mayra works at MassCOSH on OSHA and labor justice campaigns. She is deeply concerned about the housing crisis and displacement emergencies in East Boston.

A3.2. Marielena Martinez's and Andrea Martinez's story

Marielena Martinez has been working with City Life Vida Urbana since 2009 after experiencing abuse from a previous landlord. Her advocacy in East Boston has allowed her to make connections and better support her children. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Andrea Martinez (Marielena's sister) moved to the US from El Salvador. The pandemic was a tough time for the Martinez sisters. They both had other family members here who were part of their support network in the US, but unfortunately, they passed away from COVID-19. Their mom sadly passed away in El Salvador during the pandemic as well.

As they were both navigating a series of losses, Andrea had just become a mother for the first time and was adapting to her new life in the US. Marielena introduced her to CLVU and connected her with Zaida and Leo, knowing her sister could find support and care through the mutual aid network during this difficult time.

Both Martinez sisters have benefited from mutual aid efforts in many ways. Andrea highlighted that Leo often gave people rides to the hospital, paid for people's transportation during emergencies, and supported her with healing from her losses by encouraging her to find a therapist. When Andrea got COVID for the second time in 2021, Leo and other neighbors dropped off groceries, lunch boxes, and food while her family quarantined. Furthermore, Zaida connected Andrea to MLCS, where she became one of Juan Pablo Ochoa's students and could take free computer lessons despite living in a different neighborhood.

At the same time, Marielena launched her food distribution network in East Boston, where Andrea also helped distribute healthy foods to families on the weekends. During the initial years of the COVID pandemic, Marielena had close to 30 families in her food network; now, she has around 55 and not enough food to distribute. She is aware of the economic crisis many families face and is trying to partner with the food bank to get more resources.

Even though Marielena does not get paid to distribute food to her neighbors, she finds it very rewarding and is committed to continuing these solidarity efforts.

In addition to her food distribution network, Marielena founded her own cleaning co-op as a way to become financially secure. The process of registering her co-op was very challenging to navigate as an immigrant, but allies at City Hall supported her during the process. Marielena mentioned that "tener una cooperativa es como tener un bebe, requiere mucho tiempo y trabajo, es una gran responsabilidad [having a co-op is like having a baby, requires a lot of time and work, and it's a huge responsibility]," but her co-op has allowed Marielena to feel independent and keep working during the pandemic shutdown.

Both Marielena and Andrea mentioned that East Boston residents need more support and resources from the government. While Mutual Aid Eastie has been beneficial, there are gaps regarding healthcare and food that the government needs to address as more and more families move to East Boston.