

A MATTER OF SURVIVAL



**ORGANIZING TO MEET
UNMET NEEDS AND BUILD
POWER IN TIMES OF CRISIS**



DEDICATION

The title of this report is a reference to a quote from Johnnie Tillmon, one of the courageous women who formed and led the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s. This report is dedicated to the generations of brilliant poor people, welfare moms, caregivers, organizers and miracle makers who worked tirelessly for a society where we can all thrive, not just barely survive, and to all those who carry their legacies forward today, tomorrow and until we win.

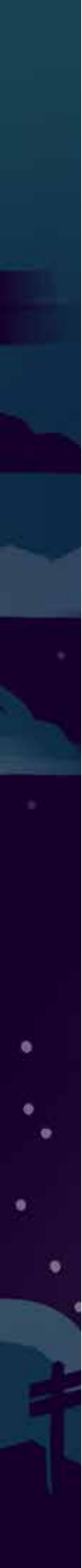


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis	4
Executive Summary	8
Introduction	16
A Model from Poor People’s Organizing	17
What This Report Includes and Why It’s Relevant Now	18
Part 1: A Theoretical Framework for Projects of Survival	21
Historical Examples of Projects of Survival	21
Applying the Theoretical Framework to Pandemic-Era Survival Strategies.....	25
Building Agency and Addressing Trauma	30
Lessons from South Africa: A “Living Politics” of Communities in Struggle.....	33
Part 2: Pandemic Survival Strategies	35
Pandemic Safety and Security	35
Health Care, Mental Health and Emotional Health Care	37
Harm Reduction	39
Food Security	39
Homelessness and Housing Security	41
Access to WIFI and Connectivity	41
Political Engagement	42
Part 3: Challenges to Survival Strategies	45
Institutional Challenges: Religious Denominations and Local Government	45
Gaps Between Capacity, Infrastructure and Resources	47
Cultural Norms and Trauma	49
Heightened Hardship: Immigrant Communities and the Rural Paradigm	50
Finding Vision in the Darkness: Global Lessons from MADRE	51
Part 4: Overcoming Challenges and Scaling up Past the Crisis	54
Pre-existing Community-Building and Organizing	55
Becoming a Central Hub of Activity: Churches and Community Schools	56
Part 5: From Networks of Care to Networks of Resistance and Power	61
Contextualizing Projects of Survival Within a Framework of Abundance	62
Centering the Leadership of the Poor and Most Impacted	63
Prioritizing Political Education	65
Believing in Human Decency and Goodness	66
Using Art and Culture Strategically	67
Conclusion	72
Acknowledgements	75

FOREWORD

BY REV. DR. LIZ THEOHARIS

In a groundbreaking essay for *Ms. Magazine* in 1972, the trailblazing welfare rights leader Johnnie Tillmon wrote: **“I’m a woman. I’m a Black woman. I’m a poor woman. I’m a fat woman. I’m a middle-aged woman. And I’m on welfare. In the country, if you’re any one of those things you count less as a human being. If you’re all those things, you don’t count at all. Except as a statistic.... Welfare is a women’s issue. For a lot of middle-class women in this country, Women’s Liberation is a matter of concern. For women on welfare, it’s a matter of survival.”**¹ A poor Black mother and grandmother herself, Tillmon knew then, as poor people have long known, that the question of democracy, or freedom from oppression, was intimately tied to the question of survival, or meeting our basic needs.

As an organizer and faith leader, Johnnie Tillmon has been an inspiration to me and the work of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice since our beginning. We are proud inheritors of an organizing tradition that she and other welfare rights activists developed and passed down through generations of struggle, a model of movement-building sorely needed in such a time as this. In a moment when there is more wealth being created than ever before, and in a nation that is home to eight of the ten wealthiest people on the planet, poverty is the fourth leading cause of death in the country. Not only is this crisis of poverty a crisis of abandonment amid abundance, it is also a reflection of an impoverished democracy that is more accountable to the rich than to the rest of us.

MUTUAL SOLIDARITY AMONG THE POOR

Long-standing attacks on welfare and the social safety net, alongside the suppression of wages, the widespread denial of health care to the poor, systemic racism, anti-Blackness, anti-immigrant attacks, anti-women and anti-LGBTQ+ policies have contributed to profound and widespread economic insecurity. At least 40 percent of the population, or nearly 140 million people, are poor or just one emergency away from financial ruin. On these frontlines of systemic suffering and injustice, communities engage in extraordinary acts of solidarity.

This solidarity comes to the fore wherever people’s lives are threatened by the immense injustice and brutality of our society: rallied in moments of acute crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating results of climate chaos, as well as in response to authoritarian assaults on our democracy, mass deportation events in our communities, attacks on homeless encampments and unhoused people and more. Much of this activity is carried out by poor and dispossessed people themselves, working tirelessly to provide food, clothing, shelter, dignity and security for those displaced, disregarded and targeted in the midst of fires, storms, evictions, crackdowns on civil liberties and escalated state violence.

The heroism of these communities is tragically under-reported by the mainstream media and disregarded even among many involved in social justice organizing. But within these survival strategies of the poor, there are indispensable lessons for those committed to protecting and reconstructing a democracy that is multi-racial, safe, affirming and economically just.

In our current democracy, held captive to the interests of the rich and powerful instead of ensuring abundance for all, poor and low-income communities are the canaries in the coalmine. Their experiences reveal both what others can expect as inequality and authoritarianism increase, as well as strategies to deploy in response to these devolving conditions.

ABANDONED AMID ABUNDANCE

There is a stark illustration of this in the early days of the second Trump administration. As of the writing of this report, Elon Musk, the wealthiest man in the world, has unprecedented access to review and shape federal budgets, priorities and programs through the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). He was not elected into this position, nor is he accountable to the voters, and yet he wields wide influence over federal spending on programs and payments that are vital both to the poor and broader sectors of society, from social welfare, health care and public education to federal jobs, taxation and social security.

Although these most recent acts are a stunning display of democratic decline at the highest level and in many way unprecedented, this trajectory was anticipated by the experience of poor communities in Michigan, when, more than a decade ago, emergency financial managers were appointed by the governor to take control over city budgets and spending.² They, too, were unaccountable to the electorate and only interested in financial efficiency, especially securing the interests of powerful financial institutions and wealthy individuals. Under their authority, the state shut down half of the public schools in Detroit and poisoned the entire city of Flint. In response to the emergency manager's decisions in Michigan, mothers and families found each other to build a stronger community of struggle, provide for themselves as best as possible and protect those around them.

Musk's DOGE is working on a much bigger scale, with its sight on cutting up to \$2 trillion — or one-third of federal government spending — without any mechanism to hold him responsible for the suffering that will inevitably ensue. But the assault on democracy is eerily familiar, as well as the inseparability of the attacks on democracy and attacks on the poor. In fact, when a federal freeze was enacted to enable DOGE's agency review, HeadStart and Medicaid were among the first programs that were immediately impacted.

PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL

As always, the response of those on the frontlines of these decisions will be to protect and care for one another, even when abandoned by the very institutions in society that are supposed to offer support. While these survival strategies will not be able to fully address the harm, they provide fertile ground for deeper organizing, including among intentionally disunited American communities that, through the experience of increasingly common mass crisis events, are being awakened to the need for systemic change. When these survival strategies are politicized and connected, they have lit the initial spark for transformative social movements over and over again in American history. From the abolitionist-era Underground Railroad, to the unemployed councils and tenant-farmer unions of the early 20th century and the networks of households, schools and churches

that anchored the Civil Rights Movement, these “projects of survival” served as the solid foundation for broad-sweeping movements for systemic change.

One of the most compelling examples of this history is the free breakfast program organized by the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. Although the enduring image of a member of the Black Panthers is of young Black men wearing berets and leather jackets carrying gun, in truth, most of their time was spent meeting the needs of their communities. Through dozens of community-based survival programs, the Panthers bravely stepped into a void left by the government to feed, educate and care for the poor.

When these survival strategies are politicized and connected, they have lit the initial spark for transformative social movements over and over again in American history.

At the same time, the Black Panthers’ survival programs were aimed at more than meeting immediate needs. They purposefully used such programs to highlight the refusal of the government to deal seriously with American poverty, calling out the grim paradox of spending billions of dollars fighting distant wars on the poor of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, while claiming there was never enough for the poor at home. In doing so, they also developed widespread trust among the poor across racial lines of divisions, in poor Black, white and Latino communities. Their survival programs gave them bases of operation from which to organize new people into a broader human rights movement that could transform the lives of poor Black people and the whole of society.

It was these activities that, according to the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover, made the Black Panthers “the greatest threat to internal security in the country.” Government officials feared that their organizing could catch fire across wider groups of poor Americans at a moment when the War on Poverty was being dismantled and the age of neoliberal economics was just around the corner. The ability of the Black Panthers to put the abandonment of poor Black people under a spotlight, unite grassroots leaders within their community and develop relationships with other poor people across racial lines was a far more dangerous threat to the oppressive status quo than the guns they carried.

LESSONS FOR TODAY

Just like the genealogy of Johnnie Tillmon and the welfare rights movement, the experience of the Black Panthers features prominently in the anti-poverty organizing tradition that has shaped the work of the Kairos Center. As you will read in this report, survival organizing and “projects of survival” are a critical element of bottom-up movement-building and social change. This has been true across American history, it was true during the first two years of the pandemic and it continues to be true today.

To turn the tide of deepening extremism and worsening inequality, we must listen to and learn from the grassroots leaders who are courageously standing in the breach of our soul-sick society. As they, and we, organize around our basic needs and rights, we are laying new possibility for a movement that turns these “matters of survival” into demands of our society as a whole, for a government of, by and for the people, where all of our needs are met.

**AS WE SAY AT THE KAIROS CENTER,
“WHEN WE LIFT FROM THE BOTTOM,
EVERYBODY RISES.”**

- 1 Tillmon, Johnnie. “Welfare Is a Women’s Issue,” *Ms.*, 1972. <https://msmagazine.com/2021/03/25/welfare-is-a-womens-issue-ms-magazine-spring-1972/>
- 2 Tse, Allison; Murphy, Kevin; Mann, Cory; Delpino Marimon, Pilar; Gathany, Bailey, Pryce, Ashley, Gupta, Charvi; and Jasper, Imani. *Michigan’s Approach to Fiscal Crisis: An Emergency for Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2017. https://labs.aap.cornell.edu/sites/aap-labs/files/2022-10/Tse%20et.al_2017_FullReport.pdf

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been nearly five years since the coronavirus pandemic started wreaking its havoc, revealing and exacerbating long-standing fissures in our society. Despite significant federal investments and expansions of public assistance, systemic inequities prevented millions of people from receiving adequate care and protection from the virus' tragic path, leading to disproportionate and continuing harms across income, race, ethnicity, gender, ability and geography. Collectively, we still have not grappled with the extraordinary consequences of this societal failure: over 1.2 million people have died from COVID-19 in the US, more than any other country, while millions more labored dangerously on the frontlines of the pandemic.

In response to these failures, thousands of communities stepped in to provide critical material and emotional care for their families, friends and neighbors. While these networks were not new, their scale and scope during the pandemic was. On the one hand, these survival activities were an inspiring reminder that people in crisis will always find ways to take care of each other. On the other hand, the extent to which these activities were necessary laid bare the widespread and punishing reality of American poverty and inequality.

This need persists today, at a time when more than 40 percent of the population — or nearly 140 million people — live below the poverty line or precariously above it, just one emergency away from economic ruin. Further, the pandemic is far from over, between long-COVID, ongoing spread of the virus, higher disability rates and other permanent changes to how we live, learn, worship and work. In fact, the community-based networks that burst to the fore during the early years of pandemic are still providing support to millions of people every day, responding to multiple ongoing crises around housing, hunger, health care and climate breakdown, as well as attacks on immigrant communities, reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ youth and households.

And yet, this extensive survival organizing remains on the margins of the social justice movement landscape. Little attention is paid by national organizations, foundations, policymakers and others to the networks of care that hold together thousands of communities. Even less attention is paid to the possibility of leveraging these emerging “projects of survival” into footholds to anchor a broad-based movement of poor and dispossessed people that can turn these activities into political demands of our government and society at large.

This report, *A Matter of Survival: Organizing to Meet Unmet Needs and Build Power in Times of Crisis*, demonstrates the importance of this sphere of activity and emphasizes its political potential for social justice organizing. Drawing on experiences since the onset of the pandemic, it gathers lessons and insights from more than 40 leaders of 35 community-based organizations, social institutions, congregations and cultural groups that jumped in to fill housing and hunger gaps, assist in harm reduction, provide benefits enrollment and/or vaccine administration, lead cultural organizing, protests and more.

More than a review of what was accomplished through these “survival strategies,” this report is an appeal to organizers, clergy, cultural workers and other community leaders to engage in these activities more deliberately and strategically, turning collective acts of survival into organized programs of protest, resistance and power-building. It is also an

instruction manual for those communities on the frontlines of the attacks coming from an authoritarian movement that has seized even greater power in the 2024 election cycle and a road map for what it will take to provide for marginalized communities through these crises to create a society where everybody can thrive, not merely survive.

In the past, politicized “projects of survival” have served as essential cornerstones of transformative social movements — from the burial traditions of the poor in the Roman Empire to the Underground Railroad and the mutual aid networks of the Black Freedom Struggles. Today, amid threats of worsening political repression, widening inequality and militarized violence, these projects have the potential to play a similar role in building a mass movement that is organized to meet the unmet needs of millions of people, while pushing back on rising political extremism.

Indeed, there is a heightened need for survival organizing as extremist forces take over our churches, schools, community institutions and every level of government, unabashedly advancing a divisive, anti-democratic agenda through the use of state violence, policy, religion, media, disaster relief and other projects of survival. With a level of coordination, funding and reach that far outmatches movements for economic, racial, gender and environmental justice, Christian nationalists and aligned authoritarian actors are aggressively developing new leaders and growing their networks for the long-term. They do not care about majority rule and have the resources to experiment widely, using our communities as laboratories for their dangerous political goals. In their playbook, there is no place too small or unimportant to be considered for full scale takeover.

As Aaron Scott, Staff Officer for Gender Justice in the office of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church noted, “I was giving a presentation on Christian Nationalism in rural Oregon in the summer of 2023, and what local LGBTQ+ organizers there shared with me was that they had absolutely no capacity — neither in terms of people power, nor funding — to contend with the far right out-of-state networks that were now pumping millions of dollars in local school board elections, in tiny towns the rest of the country has never even heard of.”

Although the social justice eco-system is not yet equipped to adequately contest on this terrain, there may be untapped potential to push back, reclaim lost ground and establish newfound power through a vast network of “projects of survival.” Not only could this network provide an effective counter to these reactionary political forces, it could give new meaning to what a democratic society can and should look like today.

Although the social justice eco-system is not yet equipped to adequately contest on this terrain, there may be untapped potential to push back, reclaim lost ground and establish newfound power through a vast network of “projects of survival.”

AN ORGANIZING MODEL FOR PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL

The most critical element of projects of survival is the regular work of meeting unmet needs. However, material support alone is insufficient to anchor an organized social movement. Instead, this activity must be politicized, coordinated and developed at scale, with its participants trained and willing to exert political leadership and direction for the whole of society.

To this end, the model offered in this report has two parts: the first focuses on the concrete activity of meeting unmet needs; and the second develops a process of political formation connected to that activity.

- 1. Meeting material, unmet needs on a regular basis:** This is the foundation upon which a sense of community and belonging can be established and political consciousness can be raised, especially among poor and dispossessed people.

Defining characteristics of this activity include the following:

- The need is met consistently, for free, and with little or no bureaucratic process.
- Everyone interested in the activity has a role to play — and there are always new opportunities to incorporate and involve more people.
- The activity is anchored in community building beyond service delivery.
- The community engaged in the activity experiences a political awakening that activates their sense of agency to change the conditions they are confronting.
- If this work is effective, the community and/or activity often becomes the target of attack by reactionary sectors of society.

- 2. Politicizing survival activity to turn networks of care into networks of resistance and power-building:** Through this second dimension of the model, participants and community members develop their understanding of living within a system that is antagonistic to their needs. They also begin to claim a sense of responsibility to change that system, both for themselves and others.

Core principles to guide political formation include:

- Contextualizing projects of survival within a framework of abundance, asserting that all of our needs can be fully met.
- Centering the leadership of the poor and those most impacted by systemic injustice.
- Prioritizing political education with dedicated staff, time and resources.
- Believing in human decency and goodness.
- Using art and culture strategically to build community and counter-hegemonic power.

To transform survival activities into projects of survival, the two dimensions of this model must be intimately connected, one informing the other. When survival activity becomes untethered from the process of political formation, its power to change how we understand society and our role within it is diminished. Instead, the activity remains at the level of triaged direct service. Likewise, political formation disconnected from a community that is addressing material needs is rarely able to establish a permanent base and influence broader sectors of society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TIMES AHEAD

Drawing on the experiences of survival organizing during the pandemic, this report offers several recommendations to popularize and promote this model of projects of survival:

1. **Recognize the importance of connecting the activity of meeting material needs to political organizing and building community power.**

Whether through mutual aid, ministry or community organizing, meeting material needs is an act of resistance in a society that punishes the poor for their poverty. It is a protest against unjust systems and structures that cheapen and shorten our lives through budget cuts, mass incarceration, militarization and the devastation of our communities, histories and people. Rather than accepting narratives that diminish our humanity, projects of survival affirm that we deserve a society that is organized to meet all of our needs.

In other words, the work of meeting material needs is inherently political and should be more deeply integrated into our political organizing.

The pandemic experiences of Desis Rising up and Moving (DRUM) is instructive on this point. DRUM has been organizing working-class South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities in New York for more than 20 years. For most of this time, the organization did not directly engage in survival organizing. This changed during the pandemic. As its Director, Fahd Ahmed, explained, “[DRUM] has historically tried to stay away from meeting [the] material needs of our people, because that was what the neoliberal order was stripping away, the responsibility of [the government] to provide for us, and privatizing that responsibility through nonprofits or charities, or just abandoning them.... We didn’t want to take on that work, because that would reinforce the neoliberal logic... but at the beginning of the pandemic, what we saw was the wide scale abandonment of society as a whole and our communities in particular.”

This reality prompted DRUM to develop a phone-based campaign — Power and Safety Through Solidarity (PASS) — to assess their communities’ needs and meet them when possible. With the PASS campaign, their entire organization was able to “level up,” grow their base and expand their activity, while bringing in dozens of members into new forms of leadership. According to Ahmed, “Some of them had been members before — the kinds that would just come to the meeting and nod along. Our assessment had been, ‘that person’s not going to be a leader.’ But in this moment, they proved us wrong, reminding us that there are different ways to lead... and **the way we assess leadership can’t just be who’s ‘politically sharp,’ but also who’s well**

connected, who's able to hustle, who doesn't care about the politics, but is willing to do the work and deliver food to as many people as you need me to. We can't be narrow in our understanding of what is a person's commitment and what the qualities of leadership are... if we create the space, people will step into their leadership, if we are open to the different kinds of strengths that different people bring."

As DRUM's experience demonstrates, projects of survival can offer a pathway to overcome the significant capacity and resource challenges present across the social justice landscape. Another interviewee, Rev. Pat DuPont from the Outreach Center at Asbury Church in Rochester, New York, explained, "A movement that hinges on healing for the sick will catch fire among the sick. A movement that hinges on food for the hungry will catch fire among the hungry. A movement that hinges on oppression being cast out will catch fire among the oppressed." In a society where 140 million people are poor or one emergency away, a movement organized around meeting their material needs has the potential to catch fire.

2. **Start engaging in activities to identify and meet unmet needs (for community-based organizations that are not currently doing so).**

For some organizations, this may begin by choice or by meeting the needs of your existing membership. For other organizations, especially those working with constituencies experiencing greater antagonism, threats and violence under the second Trump Administration, this may occur out of necessity. In either case, organizations should find ways for this activity to grow their capacity, rather than diminish it, for instance through new collaborations and partnerships.

As Catalina Adorno from Cosecha described of their work during the pandemic, "The scale of mutual aid we did for our members was new for us. We experienced so viscerally that we were disposable. Undocumented workers were supposed to keep our heads down, while keeping the economic apparatus of the country afloat, without any support. Our members were very angry. **Nobody was coming to help us. We decided that we're going to take care of each other... it was a huge shift for us...** in the future, [Cosecha] will be depending on projects of survival even more."

3. **"Rethink church" in these times.**

Use the resources that faith organizations and congregations have at hand — from physical space, means of transportation, staff and volunteers — as well as their institution's legal status and social legitimacy, to encourage creative forms of building religious community, including ministerial activities to provide for unmet needs. Complement church leadership with lay and community leadership that is more intimately connected to needs on the ground. Consider sermons and Bible studies as opportunities for political education around confronting unjust systems, structures and theological beliefs. Develop collaborative efforts within and across congregations, denominations and community-based organizations as a way to collectivize power.

For example, during the early months of the pandemic, the People's Church in East Harlem collaborated with four other churches to operate as a single church with five sites. As Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé described, "Because

we were only preaching once every five weeks, we were able to focus on community programs and mutual aid at the church... All the community fridges throughout the boroughs were picking up food from us. We fed mosques, Pentecostal churches, everyone... it was a testament to what was possible when churches aren't bogged down with the day-to-day practice of religious ritual... we had an opportunity to rethink how we do church. **The pandemic ripped the [institutional structure of the] church apart. In that space, there was a creativity that was allowed to blossom and flourish."**

4. Build relationships with networks that can multiply a single organization's impact.

No organization can play every role in developing projects of survival. Rather, collaborative efforts across organizations and communities are essential to developing resilient networks that can hold these efforts together and allow them to flourish. In particular, churches and community schools can help anchor survival-based activity, integrate new relationships and offer expanded capacity and infrastructure.

As Shane Halladay, former vice principal at Massena Community High School in upstate New York, commented, **"We saw others scrambling [in the early weeks of the pandemic], but we had a structure in place to respond to people's needs already. It gave a place for all these people who were looking to help, but didn't know where to go."** Likewise, First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, worked in partnership with non-profits and government agencies to support feeding programs, housing programs, immigration justice work and more. For community-based organizations like Open Table Nashville, these collaborations allowed them to target their time and attention to the specific needs of the unhoused community they were connected to, with each node of their network playing a designated and necessary role.

5. Recognize cultural creation as both a project of survival and a way to support and build other projects of survival in community.

A central element of projects of survival is reclaiming the fullness of our humanity. This includes our identity as artists and cultural creators. Indeed, cultural creation and expression are projects of survival because they ensure that our voices, stories and lives are not erased.

According to Anu Yadav, a Los Angeles-based artist and cultural organizer with the We Cry Justice Arts Collective, "As poor and dispossessed people, we've been denied the right to be human, because what we do is not seen as art and who we are not artists... but we can reclaim our rightful place to be at the center of our creative production, to see ourselves as creative and as artists. This is a political project. It's a survival project. And it's a cultural project." As Charon Hribar, Director of Cultural Strategies at the Kairos Center, elaborated, "Culture can make sure our individual struggles aren't dismissed as being marginal or isolated experiences of a few people. When we bring our stories together — through music, visual art, poetry, ritual and storytelling — we reveal the contradictions of a broader system at work, while also tapping into the possibility of seeing ourselves as part of the 140 million people who are poor and dispossessed, living just one crisis away from disaster."

Further, when applied to organizing, “Cultural strategy must translate individual experiences into collective power. It isn’t about the best singers being the performers or the trained artists creating the coolest looking thing. **The way we create culture in organizing must build political collectivity and leadership through art, song and ritual,**” said Ciara Taylor, a cultural organizer with the Kairos Center.

During the pandemic, COVID memorials used visual art, song and prayer to celebrate and remember lives lost, while decrying systemic failures to keep communities safe. Community dinners began with storytelling, welcoming participants to share in small joys from the week. Virtual healing circles allowed individual pain and trauma to be healed collectively through song and poetry. Online choirs empowered disabled artists and songwriters to join new communities of care and resistance. This was all possible because, as Rachel Schragis, co-lead at the cultural strategy team of Look Loud noted, **“In almost any disaster condition, [cultural organizing] is positioned to pivot.”** Creative tactics also expanded both presence and possibility in protests against police violence, climate crisis and pandemic conditions. As Schragis’ co-lead, Josh Yoder, concluded, “when we expand the rally to include the living room, when we bring in the people watching us in isolation, we become large enough to win.”

6. Finally, for funders and philanthropy, support base-building, cultural organizing, political education and social justice ministry that is connected to meeting material needs for the long haul.

Developing trust and strong community networks are critical to effective crisis response and projects of survival, but often take years to develop. As Leonardo Vilchis, a founder of Union de Vecinos and the Los Angeles Tenants Union, said, **“Prior organization, prior construction of community, prior relationships allowed us to adapt to [crisis] in the moment. Other organizations were just imagining what was going to happen, while we were fully looking at it and moving in response.”**

One of the strengths of the anti-democratic, extremist forces we are confronting today is the extensive financial support they receive from foundations, charities, religious organizations and other wealthy institutions and individuals. This support provides them the ability to not only mobilize in response to crisis, be it hunger or hurricanes, but also establish a long-term presence in isolated, frontline communities.

To adequately confront the rising tide of political extremism, and turn the crises at hand into organizing opportunities, considerable investments must be made for base-building, community organizing, disaster relief and social justice ministry, as well as cultural creation and political education connected to these activities.

We need abundant resources to move in this direction immediately and for the long haul to establish networks of permanently organized communities and essential needs infrastructure that stitches together frontline, poor and low-income communities across the country. These funds should be made available for new ideas and experimentation, as well as for supporting grassroots (not just grass-tops) leaders engaged in projects of survival, especially in areas that have been conceded by progressive organizations. Importantly, resources in these areas must not only be directed towards

voter turnout or specific legislative priorities, but for scaling and building up the power of the people from below.



The Kairos Center draws its name from the Greek term, *kairos*, which describes a break in time that is defined by both crisis and opportunity. During a *kairos* moment, existing systems and structures fall apart, leaving havoc and misery in their wake, while also creating the possibility for a new kind of leadership to emerge, one that can move society in a different direction.

We are living in a *kairos* moment today. Our economic, political and social institutions are unable to adequately respond to the crises of our times, relying instead on fear, force and violence to maintain social control. In doing so, they have emboldened a regressive political movement that is gaining influence and power. However, since the start of the pandemic, we have seen another way to respond to these crises, one grounded in the extraordinary commitment of those taking on the ordinary responsibilities of meeting our unmet needs.

Within these everyday actions of millions of people lies the hope for a new society to be born. With the right kind of attention and political direction, these “projects of survival” could provide the foundation of a broad-based social justice movement and a new generation of grassroots and moral leaders committed to a society where we can all thrive.

May it be so.

INTRODUCTION



We Cry Justice collage, Kairos Center

When the coronavirus global pandemic erupted in early 2020, it quickly revealed long-standing weaknesses in our national crisis response mechanisms. These vulnerabilities were not new, but rooted in systemic failures to provide adequate housing, clean water, nutritious food, paid sick leave, affordable health care and other social determinants of public health. Instead, upon decades of growing economic inequality and a disintegrating social safety net, abundant resources were channeled towards military build-up and forever wars, surveillance, policing, prisons and immigration enforcement, all in the name of “national security.” These policy choices came with tragic consequences, as the United States lost more than 1.2 million people in the first years of the pandemic, accounting for more than one out of every seven deaths attributed to COVID-19 worldwide, and little to no preparation for its ongoing effects.

Alongside disparities in death rates across race, ethnicity, geography, employment and carceral status, poverty and economic insecurity were strong indicators of the pandemic’s impact on the ground.¹ According to the Poor People’s Pandemic Report, between 2020 and 2023, poor and low-income counties experienced death rates that were two to five times higher than wealthier counties. This discrepancy cannot be explained by vaccination rates alone, but points to the social effects of failing to ensure that everyone had what they needed to survive this crisis.

Where our national systems could not or would not deliver, local communities stepped in. Through mutual aid, community organizing, religious ministries or other forms of care, hundreds and thousands of people participated in the day-to-day work of providing PPE and basic information about the virus, as well as food, water, shelter, clothing, financial assistance, health services, immigration services, harm reduction, trauma relief, transportation, internet access and other essentials to make it through grueling weeks and months. These efforts saved an untold number of lives, abated widespread sickness and nurtured households back from the brink — often responding to layers of overlapping crises, beyond the immediate impacts of the pandemic. They also offered a glimpse into how society might be organized to realize substantive democracy, where we have a

meaningful say over the decisions that impact our lives to ensure that our needs are consistently and adequately met, through the more equitable distribution of societal resources.

This report presents an overview of pandemic experiences from the Kairos Center's network. In doing so, it distills concrete lessons towards turning these existing networks of care and survival into politically conscious networks of resistance and power, especially among poor and dispossessed communities that continue to confront crisis after crisis. Although the pandemic emergency officially ended in 2022, for tens of millions of people, conditions have only continued to deteriorate through the virus' ongoing impacts on their lives and livelihoods, long COVID or other forms of trauma. These effects are compounded for the 40 percent of the nation who are poor or economically insecure, or 140 million people, facing hunger, housing insecurity, the denial of health care, police violence, climatic breakdown and an authoritarian crackdown on our rights and livelihoods. And yet, our national priorities have not shifted to address these conditions. Poor and low-income communities, working with community-based organizations, faith-based ministries and other institutions, are still filling the gaps, meeting everyday needs with whatever resources are on hand, because nobody else is coming to save them.

If their efforts were connected, resourced and coordinated at scale, they hold the potential to bring thousands of communities together around a shared desire to transform systems and structures that are failing too many of us. In doing so, these "projects of survival" could establish the infrastructure for a broad-based movement to end poverty and systemic injustice and rebuild our fragile democracy from the bottom up.

These "projects of survival" could establish the infrastructure for a broad-based movement to end poverty and systemic injustice and rebuild our fragile democracy from the bottom up.

A MODEL FROM POOR PEOPLE'S ORGANIZING

Projects of survival are a critical component of poor people's organizing. They have also informed the Kairos Center's organizational history. This lineage traces back to the 1960s, from the Watts Uprising and National Welfare Rights Organization to the National Union of the Homeless in the 1980s and 1990s, poor-led organizing around low-wage jobs, health care, housing, water, police violence and economic inequality in the 2000s, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival and efforts to confront Christian nationalism today.

One of the key lessons drawn from these movements was that they relied on the brilliant and courageous leadership of poor people who were already organizing against the injustices of poverty, racism and militarism in their communities, bridging the gap between meeting immediate needs and resisting systemic injustice.² For more than two decades, the Kairos Center has worked to identify, train and connect this leadership through anti-poverty campaigns, organizing drives, truth commissions, protests and marches, civil disobedience, revivals, immersion tours, community-based exchanges, trainings, courses, convenings

and more. Today, our network spans more than 40 states and a dozen countries, embracing grassroots community and faith leaders, as well as those leading state-wide organizations, national coalitions, research institutes and faith-based networks and denominations.

As a center for strategic coordination across various fronts of struggle, we bring these diverse components together to develop a shared assessment of the conditions we are facing and how to confront them. Through coordinated activities and collective study, we connect their insights with lessons from historic social movements, political economy, Biblical study and liberation theology to inform our analysis of the current moment, its challenges and opportunities.³

Accounting for one-third of the eligible electorate, this population [of poor and low-income people] holds unrealized potential to move our country in a different direction.

In 2017, we brought our analysis and model of organizing to help launch and co-anchor the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, calling for renewed attention to the demands of poor and dispossessed people as a way to reimagine and restructure our society. In numerous reports, we have rigorously traced how poverty, systemic racism, climate crisis and militarism have devolved since 1968 and through the pandemic, as well as how these conditions might be addressed by prioritizing the needs of the poor.⁴ As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said while organizing the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, "The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society... If they can be helped

to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life..."⁵

The Kairos Center believes that organizing the 140 million poor and low-income people in the US into this "new and unsettling force" is the defining task of our times. Accounting for one-third of the eligible electorate,⁶ this population holds unrealized potential to move our country in a different direction. We are also clear about the increasing urgency to this work, as an emboldened anti-democratic threat continues to exert greater influence over legislation, policy, media, schools, religion and other sectors of society. These harmful forces, whose ideology is entwined with Christian nationalism, have become ever more embedded in numerous communities, and are steadily building their own political movement to influence all parts of American life.

WHAT THIS REPORT INCLUDES AND WHY IT'S RELEVANT NOW

In 2023, the Kairos Center and Move On Education Fund released *All of Us: Organizing to Counter White Christian Nationalism and Build a Pro-Democracy Society*,⁷ which offered an assessment of the current social justice organizing terrain and its response to the rise of authoritarianism and Christian nationalism. The report recommended three actions to counter these threats: 1) to organize more holistically and to attend to communities' material, emotional and spiritual needs; 2) to stop ceding geographic, political and moral space to these antagonistic influences; and 3) to plan and coordinate for worse crises.

This report, *A Matter of Survival: Organizing to Meet Unmet Needs and Build Power in Times of Crisis*, carries forward these recommendations by drawing on lessons from the pandemic to apply towards building a network of projects of survival, connecting community to community, grounded in meeting material needs and politicized to take action together. This network will need to provide for the emotional and material sustenance for poor and low-income communities, whose leadership is essential in organizing a social movement today, and form a buttress against regressive, anti-democratic forces that are very deliberately using these same tactics in their own organizing.

After conducting a preliminary survey during the summer of 2023, the Kairos Center engaged in a series of interviews with grassroots and community organizers, faith leaders, cultural workers and scholars in 2024 about their organizing to meet basic needs during the pandemic. Such activities included what might be described as mutual aid or direct aid, community organizing, base-building, social justice ministry or other forms of outreach and care. The report considers the breadth of this activity, as it was revealed through the research, to appreciate a broad range of breakthroughs, challenges and opportunities for social justice organizing in these times. It is organized in five parts:

Part 1: Introduces the concept of projects of survival with a theoretical framework that offers defining characteristics of this work from historic examples and how they manifested in pandemic survival strategies.

Part 2: Provides a broad sweep of survival activity that unfolded during the pandemic.

Part 3: Identifies challenges that communities faced while organizing and participating in these survival strategies.

Part 4: Highlights factors that enabled some survival strategies to surmount the challenges in Part 3 and scale up their activity.

Part 5: Returns to the theoretical framework for projects of survival, adding another dimension to politicize survival activities, or survival strategies, into conscious projects of both resistance and power.

The report ends by returning to our current moment, with a series of recommendations for grassroots and community-based organizations, congregations, denominations, networks, coalitions, funders and philanthropic institutions to implement this analysis.



The pandemic experience has been compared to a portal into what our future may look like. Whether this future is one of chaos or community depends on the lessons we are willing to learn and apply in our organizing, everyday lives and vision for society. If we are committed to building an equitable and just society, we must look first and foremost to those who were closest to the crisis, because they have the clearest insight on both the extent of the harm and how it can be fully addressed. In the Kairos Center's experience, poor and dispossessed communities are and have been the canaries in the coal mine: from economic meltdowns, climate disasters and pandemics to living under a militarized state that governs through force, rather than consent. Their resistance to being dehumanized, and their commitment and determination to thrive even under the worst conditions, present concrete direction for the social movement terrain as we strive to realize the society we deserve and know it possible.

- 1 *A Poor People's Pandemic Report: Mapping the Intersection of Poverty, Race and COVID-19*. Poor People's Campaign, Kairos Center, Repairers of the Breach, SDSN and Howard University, 2022. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/pandemic-report/>; Tan, Annabel X.; Hinman, Jessica A.; Abdel Magid, Hoda S.; Nelson, Lorene M.; and Odden, Michelle C. "Association Between Income Inequality and County-Level COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in the US." *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 5, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.8799>; Chen, Yea-Hung, Maria Glymour, Alicia Riley, John Balmes, Kate Duchowny, Robert Harrison, Ellicott Matthay, and Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo. "Excess Mortality Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic Among Californians 18-65 Years of Age, by Occupational Sector and Occupation: March through October 2020." medRxiv (January 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.01.21.21250266>; Jowers, Kay, Christopher Timmins, Nikolaos Bhavsar, Qihui Hu, and Julia Marshall. "Housing Precarity and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts of Utility Disconnection and Eviction Moratoria on Infections and Deaths Across US Counties." Working Paper 28394, National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2021; Sugie, Naomi F., Keramet Reiter, and Kristin Turney. "Excess Mortality in US Prisons During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Science Advances* 9, no. 49, December 2023. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adj8104>; Seligman, Benjamin, Maddalena Ferranna, and David E. Bloom. "Social Determinants of Mortality from Covid-19: A Simulation Study Using NHANES." *PLOS Medicine* (January 11, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003490>.
- 2 The mission of the Kairos Center is to raise up generations of religious and community leaders to build a broad-based movement to end poverty, led by the poor.
- 3 The Kairos Center produces numerous resources on these issues, including op-eds and news articles; weekly devotionals, sermons, liturgies, Bible studies and other resources for religious leaders; analytical resources for organizers; polemical content to correct misinterpretations of Biblical content; policy reports, briefings and fact sheets; cultural resources, songbooks and visual art; podcasts, video content and other media. Visit www.kairoscenter.org
- 4 See, *Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years After the Poor People's Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, The War Economy and our National Morality*. Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, Repairers of the Breach and Institute for Policy Studies, ed. by Shailly Gupta Barnes, Saurav Sarkar and Aaron Noffke, 2018. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/the-souls-of-poor-folk-audit/>; *A Poor People's Pandemic Report: Mapping the Intersection of Poverty, Race and COVID-19*. Poor People's Campaign, Kairos Center, Repairers of the Breach, SDSN and Howard University, 2022. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/pandemic-report/>; and *A Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live*. Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, Repairers of the Breach and Institute for Policy Studies, ed. by Shailly Gupta Barnes, Lindsay Koshgarian and Ashik Siddique, 2019. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/poor-peoples-moral-budget/>.
- 5 See, "Quotes from Rev. Dr. King's Last Years: "A Revolution of Values." Kairos Center, January 2017. <https://kairoscenter.org/quotes-from-rev-dr-kings-last-years/>.
- 6 Barnes, Shailly Gupta. *Waking the Sleeping Giant: Poor and Low-income Voters in the 2020 Elections*. Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, 2022 with 2023 statistical update. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/waking-the-sleeping-giant-poor-and-low-income-voters-in-the-2020-elections/>.
- 7 Cotler, Stosh. "All of U.S.: Organizing to Counter White Christian Nationalism and Build a Pro-Democracy Society." MoveOn Education Fund and Kairos Center, 2023.

PART 1: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL



Women from the National Welfare Rights Organization lead the Mother's Day March during the launch of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, Washington DC
Photo from the Jack Rottier Collection

This section identifies historical examples of projects of survival that have inspired the Kairos Center's two decades of work with poor and dispossessed communities. They offer defining characteristics of this kind of activity as a way to appreciate the community-based organizing that emerged during the pandemic. In this report, we refer to pandemic-related activities as "survival strategies" to describe the day-to-day work that thousands of people engaged in to make it through the multiple crises of the pandemic years, many of which are still ongoing. This term also distinguishes these pandemic-era activities from projects of survival. Even though they shared many of the same characteristics, most of them did not play the larger political role that projects of survival have assumed historically in relation to social movements. This does not diminish their importance, rather, it offers an opportunity to examine these activities and their power potential for the times ahead.

HISTORIC EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL

Across time and place, social movements have provided for their communities' material, social and spiritual needs to ground their organizing and embolden their agitation against systemic injustice and oppression. By taking on the responsibility to meet concrete, yet unmet, needs, projects of survival have allowed community members to call out society's economic, political and moral contradictions, while using those activities to build their base, as well as their legitimacy, political consciousness and power.

The following examples illustrate the role of these activities in poor people's organizing:

- **Burial traditions of the poor under the Roman Empire:** During antiquity, poor people often turned to underground community associations to cover the material expenses and political costs of burying their loved ones. As Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis explains, "Throughout the Roman Empire, there existed all kinds of institutions that were organized around various cultic figures such as Roman gods or goddesses, or labor associations or other aspects of communal life. And one of the key functions of those associations was ensuring the burial and the memorializing of their members... taking on the role of mutual aid societies for those too poor to provide for their own burial. When individuals died, members of their association would ensure that they were buried, honored and remembered."

For those who were dehumanized, terrorized and killed by the empire, these practices became rituals of resistance to Roman imperial power. Political leaders who were assassinated, such as John the Baptist, were also buried in this manner, thereby becoming part of a broader, organized movement from below. In fact, these burial societies were viewed as a threat to the Roman Empire, because they brought poor people together in times of great social upheaval. By incorporating cultural elements, such as rituals, prayer, song and meals, these burial traditions were widely adopted as the movement of the poor spread throughout the empire. One practice that was associated with the burials was to honor the deceased with the words, "We do this in memory of..." Jesus used these same words in the days before his death, drawing on the rituals that were already in use among the poor, which they would have understand as a cultural reference to their political movement against Caesar.

- **The Underground Railroad and Vigilance Committees:** The Underground Railroad was a vast network of safe houses, churches, homes and other institutions that provided material care and security to those who were freeing themselves from the bondage of slavery. The "stations" of the Underground Railroad were known through word of mouth, storytelling, song, star maps and other cultural expressions that could safely communicate points along the routes to freedom.

New scholarship¹ has revealed the central role of "vigilance committees" within this network, which worked both publicly and covertly to assist thousands of enslaved people in their escape and resettlement.² The committees, which emerged in the 1820s, were largely based north of Baltimore in cities like Philadelphia, New York, Schenectady and Rochester, along the strategic roads and waterways used by enslaved people fleeing north. According to historian Jesse Olsavsky, the committees were "the most inclusive organizations in [the] abolitionist movement... [where] men and women, Black and white agitators, enslaved and free people, workers and men of property, children and disaffected intellectuals, all did the underground work of fugitive aid."

The main work of the vigilance committees was their underground organizing and meeting the day-to-day survival needs of fugitives:

providing medical care, housing, food, transportation and documentation for fugitive slaves, and directly preventing their kidnapping and trafficking. These committees also documented the experiences, histories and resistance tactics of enslaved people, passing their lessons on to others who were planning to escape. They were the only place in the abolitionist movement that facilitated continual dialogue with enslaved people. Committee leaders shared their insights with other abolitionist organizations and anti-slavery societies, in time growing their influence over the broader abolitionist movement.

- **Black Panther Party Survival Programs:** Emerging out of the leadership of poor, Black people, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in 1966. Its 10-point platform gave substance to the party's slogan, "All power to the people," calling for: 1) The freedom and power for Black and oppressed communities to determine their own destiny; 2) Full employment; 3) Restitution from slavery and the ravages of capitalism; 4) Recent housing and education; 5) Free health care; 6) An immediate end to police brutality; 7) Release and fair jury trials for all Black, poor and oppressed people in federal, state, local and military jails and prisons; 8) An end to all wars of aggression; 9) land, food and justice; and 10) Community control of modern technology.

Although characterized by the FBI and others as a group of angry, militant youth, "from the outset... the [BPP] has attempted to provide an example to the community of what is possible and to raise the people's political consciousness,"³ most notably through their survival programs. From free breakfast programs to people's medical clinics, the range of programs they offered reflected the numerous needs of their community, such as dental care, ambulance services, transportation to prisons, clothing, pest control, plumbing, elder care, childcare, youth programs, legal aid and police patrols, as well as martial arts, theatre, dance and film series.⁴ Panther cadre worked with community members and expert volunteers to deliver these services free of charge, in a profound and comprehensive expression of what full citizenship and human rights in this nation could look like.

As the party's leaders were increasingly surveilled and harassed by federal authorities and police, these survival programs also came under attack. The People's Free Medical Clinics were targeted by regulatory agencies, eviction, legal challenges and police raids, while the FBI pursued party leadership through surveillance, infiltration and police harassment. Key leaders were killed by federal agents and others were incarcerated for years. Fred Hampton, who brought poor Black, white, Latino and other racially diverse communities together to form the original Rainbow Coalition in Chicago, worked closely with the BPP's clinics and free breakfast programs. He was only 21 years old at the time of his assassination.

- **Welfare rights organizing in the 1960s - 1990s:** During the 1960s, poor women like Beulah Sanders and Johnnie Tillmon began informally organizing hundreds of other poor women, parents and caregivers around their access to welfare benefits. At first, these activities were locally oriented, mainly focused on enrolling poor parents in existing

welfare programs, breaking the isolation and shame of being poor and offering community-based support for poor families.

Over just a few years, their organizing expanded dramatically. By 1966, the same year the BPP was formed, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) was formally established, allowing leaders like Sanders and Tillmon to connect with thousands of other poor parents and caregivers across the country. With a network of over 700 local welfare rights organizations and 25,000 dues-paying members, NWRO was one of the largest civil rights organizations of the 20th century. Its members were primarily poor Black women, but also poor white, Latina and Native women across all 50 states. In large part due to their efforts, between 1966 and 1970 enrollment in welfare programs grew from 4.5 million to 8.5 million and federal allocations more than doubled from \$5.5 billion to over \$12 billion. Advocating for “the right to fare well,” NWRO pushed back on work requirements and other restrictions to welfare to ensure full access to their rights. Its leadership also famously challenged Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he approached them about the Poor People’s Campaign, questioning his lack of knowledge on specific welfare policies. After his assassination, NWRO played a leading role in the campaign, marching alongside Coretta Scott King in the 1968 Mother’s Day March in Washington DC.

Although the organization officially closed its doors in 1975, welfare rights organizing continued locally. However, it suffered a major setback when President Clinton enacted welfare reform in 1996, forever changing “welfare as we know it.” The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act implemented many of the policies NWRO had been fighting against for years, such as stringent work requirements, life-time restrictions on welfare benefits and characterizing welfare recipients as lazy and undeserving of welfare rights.

Projects of survival⁵ occupied a central place in the organizing model of all these movements, allowing community leaders to expand their base, increase their political influence and sustain members through hardship. While each model had its own particularities, they also shared several key characteristics:

- **The project met a direct need, consistently, with no strings attached.**
- **There was a role for everyone who was interested in playing a role in the project.**
- **The project was anchored in community-building.**
- **The community engaged in the project experienced a political awakening, realizing their own agency to address the conditions they were facing.**
- **As this political agency was exercised, the community and project were perceived as threats to the status quo and became the targets of attack.**

Together, these five characteristics offer a theoretical framework for projects of survival as they relate to poor people’s organizing and social movement strategy. We will return to this framework in Part Five, to consider the role that

projects of survival could play in organizing poor, marginalized and dispossessed communities today.

APPLYING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO PANDEMIC-ERA SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

The remainder of this section applies the framework above to the survival strategies communities engaged in during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the Kairos Center began to research these activities, reaching out to community organizers, advocates, religious leaders, scholars and cultural organizers about community-based programs they relied on, participated in or organized. Most of these efforts did more with less by adapting existing social networks and creating new ways of providing for themselves, often by breaking through institutional and systemic barriers, sometimes for weeks and months on end.

In doing so, they exhibited several characteristics of projects of survival:

Meeting a direct need, consistently, with no strings attached.

Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) has been organizing working class South Asians and Indo-Caribbean people in New York City for more than twenty years. During these years, the organization mainly refrained from engaging directly in mutual aid as a program or campaign. When the pandemic began, the extent of the crisis in their community called for a new approach to their work. As their Executive Director, Fahd Ahmed, explained, “People didn’t know how to keep themselves safe... We knew that public health directives existed, but they weren’t getting to our communities.”

Through their new “Program to Build Power and Safety Through Solidarity” (PASS), DRUM began to provide basic health education in Punjabi, Bangla, Hindi and Nepali to their members in a phone-based outreach campaign. These calls became a way to stay connected, as well as assess their communities’ needs, eventually prompting the organization to take a further step towards direct aid. Ahmed continued, “If [we] weren’t meeting people’s needs, our campaigns would not have been useful. We can’t talk about political agitation if people aren’t feeling safe or are hungry.” As they built out the PASS program, DRUM also expanded their capacity to enroll people in unemployment and other benefits, deliver meals and meet countless other needs, all for free. In doing so, DRUM expanded their base and identified new leaders among their existing membership who “were really well-connected or able to assess needs, even if they hadn’t been identified through [our political work] before.”⁶

**“If [we] weren’t meeting people’s needs, our campaigns would not have been useful. We can’t talk about political agitation if people aren’t feeling safe or are hungry.”
— Fahd Ahmed, DRUM**

A few hundred miles away, the statewide political organization West Virginia Can’t Wait was in the middle of running several campaigns for local and statewide office. As the crisis hit, the group brought together its leadership, members and volunteer base to figure out what to do as their ability to campaign door-to-door was taken away in an instant. They decided to continue with their electoral

work, but, as the organization's co-chair Stephen Smith explained, make sure "what we're doing is meeting people's needs in a real way." They quickly trained nearly 400 volunteers to each take responsibility for 100 voter households within distinct geographic areas. Each "neighborhood captain" was responsible for contacting their designated households "at least 6 times about how they're doing, what they need help with, resources to connect them to, as well as information about candidates." As Smith explained, "This outreach was rooted in mutual aid... people going out to deliver groceries, negotiate electric bills, help with rent... and people also turned out to vote." In fact, he said that while "a good traditional voter turnout program might increase voter turnout by 3 or 4 percent, in some of our demographics, the people we reached out to were 20 percent more likely to vote than the control group."

Whether it was providing critical pandemic information, food assistance, clothing, water deliveries, Narcan and harm reduction trainings, bike repairs, mobile immigration services or health needs, the community-based efforts of DRUM, West Virginia Can't Wait and other organizations met all of these needs and more without payment, eligibility requirements or onerous paperwork. The most effective programs were organized consistently, in the same place, time and manner, to make sure those in need knew when and how to access them. For example, the Philadelphia Union of the Homeless set up outside of an intake center every Friday to greet unhoused people, hold their belongings and offer food and snacks before they entered the facility. They were deliberate about being at the same spot every week. This regularity was, as one of its organizers described, the "main glue" of their work.

There was a role for everyone who was interested in playing a role.

First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, is known as "Lincoln's church." The small church sits just four blocks away from City Hall and is where Mary Todd Lincoln's funeral was held. In March 2020, they closed their food pantry and focused on their outdoor micro-pantry. Throughout this period, the church remained mindful about developing leadership connected to and beyond its own congregation, working in partnership with non-profits and other agencies to support feeding programs, housing programs, immigration justice work and more. They were also intentional about including unhoused community members who were frequently on or around the property. As Rev. Susan Phillips, head pastor of the church, said, "We spend a lot of time convincing people they have gifts to share and the world needs them... Nobody is dispensable."

In Nelsonville, Ohio, the Community Dinners program took this principle very seriously. The program began pre-pandemic, as a spaghetti dinner for a dozen children after school, but quickly evolved into weekly buffet-style meals for hundreds of poor people in the small town. Every meal began with a conversation, with community members sharing something positive that happened during the week, like getting a driver's license renewed or welcoming a new batch of kittens into the family. Dottie Fromal, one of their lead organizers, described the community dinners as "one of the few places where [poor people] were really welcome in Nelsonville. Sometimes people would gather hours before we started just to talk. Some people just liked being around others, even if they weren't talking."

Making these meals available week after week required a number of people taking on all kinds of tasks and responsibilities. As Fromal explained, "If someone

wanted to help, there was always something to do, whether it was the dishes, setting tables, cleaning and cutting the vegetables. It was all important." Even the children had a role to play. According to Fromal, "The kids loved it. It gave them a sense of ownership and pride. They were glad to be serving people, inviting people to their dinner, helping to plan menus, just anything involved with this." Over time, their resources and capacity became greater than what the dinners could hold, prompting volunteers to set up free tables with extra food, clothing and other household goods, as well as partner with organizations and agencies around additional services.

The activity was anchored in community-building.

A consistent element of all the survival strategies included in this report was community building, which often extended beyond the specific activity that initially brought people together. For example, when the Nelsonville community dinners were shut down because of the pandemic, the volunteer base moved to delivering up to 350 meals a week directly to people's homes. "We weren't just delivering food, but connecting with these families," said Fromal. "We would see how they were doing and we could talk a little bit, play a little bit and get to know family members who didn't always come to the dinners. We built some strong bonds."

It was this extended community that held a memorial for a young boy who was killed in a gun-related incident in town. More than 100 people attended. As Fromal told us, "The same day as the memorial, there was a funeral for a fire fighter who died in the course of his work. He was honored by the city with a parade, with hundreds of cars. This little boy should have been honored, too, but because his family is a poor family, we were the only ones who showed up."

In New York City, Domestic Workers' United reiterated this theme of showing up. One of their leaders and cultural organizers, Christine Lewis, shared how she learned this lesson from a woman who used to come to the community garden where she and other domestic workers were distributing food. "Denise was a regular in the garden," said Lewis. "She was sick, very sick, we found out she was terminally ill and sometimes she would come by, utterly depleted. I would tell her to stay home, but she always came by. The last time I saw her was two weeks before she died, in August 2023... you know, we make excuses all the time, but they are just reasons for why we choose to do some things and not others. Denise came to the garden, even though she was dying, in the midst of the trials and storms she was facing... she taught me what it means to show up. When we felt abandoned and not sure what to do, the most important thing we needed to do was show up."

Taking on this responsibility to show up is what allowed for several organizations to better navigate the shifting terrain of the pandemic. Union de Vecinos is a community-based organization in Los Angeles, California, that has been organizing among undocumented and immigrant communities for 30 years. Whether through their "food not rent" campaign, food and PPE distribution

"When we felt abandoned and not sure what to do, the most important thing we needed to do was show up."

**— Christine Lewis,
Domestic Workers'
United**

or emotional care and support, Union de Vecinos' pandemic-era actions were guided by its community's needs and demands. As Leonardo Vilchis, a co-founder, reminded us, "If you surround yourself with the people, by God, you will know what to do."

In fact, Union de Vecinos anticipated the pandemic rent crisis well before an eviction moratorium was enacted. One of their lead organizers, Kenia Alcocer, described how they began to meticulously document the hardship that tenants were facing: "If we go to court, we will make sure every single judge sees the suffering our people are going through, and then have to tell them face-to-face they will be kicked out of their homes, even though they were working, keeping grocery stores open, being called essential workers."

Across the country, the Sycamore Collaborative in Schenectady, New York, was providing food to tens of thousands of people before the pandemic. The interfaith ministry was forced to change its operations when it lost its volunteer base in the early weeks of the pandemic, shifting to an entirely staff-based program.⁷ However, the more fundamental change for the organization was adapting its programs to prioritize the community over their institution. According to their Executive Director, Rev. Amaury Tañón-Santos, "The pandemic tethered us to the community in a way we weren't before. We didn't do this for the community, but with the community. The community isn't coming to us, we're going to the community."

In March 2022, Sycamore Collaborative began to pare back their delivery service, but quickly reversed this decision when, just a few days later, they received multiple calls asking about the deliveries. As Rev. Tañón-Santos recounted, "Single parents couldn't make it to the pantries when they were open. We realized that the 'emergency' was still ongoing. We had to figure out how to keep the deliveries and so we figured it out. And not only are we blessed to have relationships that would allow us to continue with the deliveries, we are blessed to hear that this is what the community needed."

For Open Table Nashville, which works with unhoused people in the greater Nashville area, building community with and through organizational relationships helped leverage critical resources and capacity. As co-founder Lindsey Krinks said, "We figured out how to collaborate with partners, instead of doing it all ourselves," working with national service provider networks and connecting them with a local continuum of care to provide the best possible services to their base. Likewise, local and state-based organizations and churches like the People's Church in East Harlem (New York), Bethel Community Center (Kansas City), West Side Opioid Task Force (Chicago) and Put People's First! PA (Pennsylvania, statewide), were able to develop partnerships with government agencies, hospitals, clinics, medical professionals, churches, libraries and others to amplify their efforts and meet greater needs.

One of the most compelling examples of partnership work took place in St. Lawrence County, New York, at Massena Community High School (MCHS), a community-school funded with public resources. Near the Canadian border and next to the Akwesasne reservation, MCHS worked with their indigenous neighbors, social workers, government agencies, local businesses, churches, food pantries, farmers and other community schools to bring a variety of services to the children and families in Massena. A high note from the MCHS experience was their relationship with the Akwesasne, with whom they developed a mindfulness

practice that was led by and available to high school students. Using a small room in the building, students created a space for meditation, reflection and quiet moments during the long, stressful days they were going through. The room is still filled with art and cultural references to indigenous practices and culturally relevant food, in the Akwesasne language.

Cultural interventions, practices and artifacts often play a distinct role in community building work. During the pandemic, this took many forms, from creating content in language to using visual art, song, theatre, writing and even games to break isolation and bring people together. Alianza Agricola, a farmworker-led organization in upstate New York, relied on soccer games to sustain their community during the pandemic. According to Tim Shenk, the Bilingual Communications Specialist with the Cornell Small Farms Program, “Even if people were working 12-hour shifts, they still rented lights and played soccer on Saturday nights. Hundreds of people would turn out, some driving from hours away, to be part of these outdoor community events.” These cultural interventions were cathartic, a way to release the fear and pain of crisis and even experience joy, fulfilling “the material human need for connection that keeps people going,” said Shenk. He continued: “Alianza Agricola has also used soccer tournaments as organizing tools. Their organizers use the time between games to talk to workers, ask about their living and working conditions and other needs and concerns. They introduce them to a form of organization that takes seriously their need for material and moral support as well as broader social and political change.”

Josh Yoder, co-lead at the cultural strategy team of Look Loud, described how an accurate expression of a community’s values can cohere it even more strongly, with effects that reverberate past any singular moment. “A lot of the work that [we] do with communities is really helping those communities believe they exist...” Speaking particularly to protests and actions organized by the Mennonite community in 2024 around a ceasefire in Gaza, he recalled how the visuals in these actions projected far louder and bigger than its immediate presence. Although the Mennonites are a fairly small religious group, Yoder explained that “people will see [themselves] in the culture of the action and think ‘I will not only change my political opinions, I will ramp up my comfort and escalation, because I represent a community that I’ve been, really, dying to feel like exists and feel power in... and now I can express my political opinions and scale up my actions in a way I couldn’t before, because the community is there and it is for us... and what we believe.’”

The community experienced a political awakening, realizing their own agency to address the conditions they were facing.

As their survival work together continued, communities often began to re-define their roles in society. During the pandemic, renters stopped paying rent so they could feed their families. Domestic workers who were asked by their employers to test before coming to work began asking their employers to take covid tests as well. Undocumented immigrants reframed their campaigns around being

These cultural interventions were cathartic, a way to release the fear and pain of crisis and even experience joy, fulfilling “the material human need for connection that keeps people going.”
— Tim Shenk, Cornell Small Farms Program

BUILDING AGENCY AND ADDRESSING TRAUMA

Although its pandemic-related activity was limited, Al-Hadaf KC, a Palestinian led-organization in Kansas City, Kansas, was compelled to respond to other crises impacting members of their community.

As the war on Gaza escalated in 2023 and 2024, Al-Hadaf KC regularly organized teach-ins and meetings with local political officials. According to their co-founder, Fatima M., “Many of our Arab families are first generation and were living under oppressive conditions, where political engagement wasn’t allowed or even beneficial. We had an opportunity to address their fear... we give our communities courage to participate in social and political life, rather than being isolated from it.” Through this political awakening, the community established itself as a base of power, for itself and others facing similar conditions.

At the same time, the community had to address intense grief from unfolding violence in Palestine. Since October 2023, one of Al Hadaf’s leaders had lost over 120 family members. As Fatima M. described, “This is very intimate violence for [us]. We had to create space to step back and tend to our lives, our grief and rage.” To manage this toll, the organization implemented a rotation system where one member could step away, while others took over daily operations. This allowed them to also manage care expectations from their allies, many of whom were in despair. “We had to avoid becoming a community of care for our allies, we could not spend [our emotional band width] in this way,” she said.

workers, rather than being immigrants or undocumented.

Cosecha, a national network of immigrant leaders, families and workers that was launched in 2015, connected this reframing to the mutual aid they organized for their own communities. According to Catalina Adorno, a leader with Cosecha, “The scale of mutual aid we did for our members was new for us. We experienced so viscerally that we were disposable. Undocumented workers were supposed to keep our heads down, while keeping the economic apparatus of the country afloat, without any support. Our members were very angry. Nobody was coming to help us. We decided that we’re going to take care of each other... this was a clear moment for our base to see ourselves as more than immigrants or undocumented. It was about health care and protection at work... it was a huge shift for us.”

By reframing their role in society, these communities asserted a newfound agency among their base around the decisions affecting their lives, enabling everyday people to see their struggles as part of a broader political process in which decisions were being made for them, but not by them, let alone in their interests. They began to take up more political space, recognizing they deserved more than what was on offer. This awakening, according to Adorno, gave “a sense of power back” to people who had been disempowered by poverty, oppression, marginalization and systemic injustice.

While these kinds of actions may seem small, they were significant to people who had been treated as disposable their entire lives. In Nelsonville, the community dinners’ community became “something of a big deal,” said Fromal. They were painted on the town mural, which “infuriated a lot of people” who did not want to see poor people memorialized in the public square, she said. However, their presence could no longer be denied. In fact, it was this community,

first organized around immediate needs, that mobilized together to defeat a local voter suppression law that would have moved a polling station and made it more difficult for poor and low-income voters to take part in elections. As Fromal recounted, “We talked about it at the dinner and we pushed back.” And they won.

As the community’s political agency was exercised, the community and project were perceived as threats and became the target of attack.

In many circumstances, the political awakening described above was connected to some conflict around the survival activity. Sometimes these conflicts emerged as resistance or challenges from other community members. At other times, organizers faced more direct opposition and repression from government agencies and the police.

In Oregon, the City of Brookings told St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church that they were feeding too many people, too many times a week during the pandemic. Claiming it was a public health concern, the city demanded the church to cut back its feeding program from four days a week to two days a week and limit the number of people being served. The Church resisted, asserting their First Amendment right to practice their religion without interference. In court, they received a favorable ruling under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUPA) to continue their activity. While this feeding program was saved, the city successfully shut down the church’s vaccine program, which they were running out of their basement.⁸

Outside church walls, government confrontations often turned violent, particularly during the George Floyd protests of 2020. Detroit Will Breathe (DWB) was formed out of these protests, with long days of outdoor marches, community tribunals and more. Lloyd Simpson, an organizer with DWB, said that before vaccines were available, they and others took careful precautions to do “everything we could to keep people safe, because there was a need to be out in the street.” As protestors marched down a main thoroughfare in Detroit, they “saw hundreds of police officers, gearing up for urban warfare. They had armored vehicles, all sorts of tactical and military equipment, as if it was the 1967 [rebellions] all over again,” said Simpson. Over the many weeks of their actions, they faced intense police crackdown, “tear gas, rubber bullets, brutal arrests” and eventually a government-enforced curfew.

Organizing to survive injustice is an inherent act of resistance against a system that is antagonistic to our survival.

A repressive state response is one of the inherent risks of being involved in survival activity. Rev. Pat DuPont from Rochester, New York, reminded us that organizing to survive injustice is an inherent act of resistance against a system that is antagonistic to our survival. “Jesus was a political prophet,” he said, “and there will be opposition to the movement for freedom, liberation and justice.” Reflecting on the New Testament scripture in Mark 6, Rev. DuPont continued: “[In this passage] Jesus is... claiming authority and offering an alternative vision... and working towards that vision by healing the world around him. People don’t like that challenge. Who is it that he thinks he is, bucking the system, challenging the status quo? And then Jesus goes on to share this authority with the disciples, sending them out to engage in the same, recognizing that this opposition is going to continue...And then John the Baptist, an early leader in this movement,

is executed by the King. This movement is seen as threatening by the worldly powers and they will push back violently...”

Speaking to the challenges of organizing a rent strike, Ahmed of DRUM explained: “This isn’t always the risk people want to take.” Our organizations and movements must become better equipped to understand and determine the risks we are willing to take together, where even the most ordinary actions may be targeted and attacked.



This first section identified defining characteristics of projects of survival through which to analyze pandemic survival strategies. The next sections of this report go into further detail about these activities, including challenges and breakthroughs, providing greater insight into what it might look like to organize these activities at scale.

LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA: A “LIVING POLITICS” OF COMMUNITIES IN STRUGGLE

Abahlali base-Mjondolo (Abahlali), the Shackdwellers Movement in South Africa, is democratically organized among those who live in informal settlements, or shacks, on the periphery of major cities. It was formed post-apartheid in 2005, when members of the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban organized a road blockade to protest the sale of a plot of land that had been promised to them to meet their housing needs. Instead, the land was sold to an industrial developer. Over the past twenty years, Abahlali has grown dramatically, with more than 120,000 members in four provinces.

While its primary demands are around housing and land, Abahlali organizes around water, electricity, decent jobs, dignity, respect and true democracy. It defends existing settlements, supports new land occupations and develops those occupations into communities organized around food production, housing, schools, childcare and community-based social infrastructure — or projects of survival ensuring their basic needs are met with dignity. During community meetings, members will debate about their response to various threats and also sing and pray together, developing a profound sense of belonging, even amidst severe repression and state violence. Their members face evictions, demolitions, fierce police harassment and brutality. Several members have been killed by the police or other government actors, while their leadership have regularly been forced into hiding for their own safety.

However, every time their members are forced to break through the limits of what they believe they can endure, their struggle becomes stronger. Leaders from Abahlali describe this strength as “*inkani*,” the stubborn determination that goes farther than our ordinary capacity for resilience. It emerges when one is forced to do for their family and neighbors more than they thought they were capable of doing. It emerges out of the common experiences of suffering that are then reframed as resistance through reflection, prayer, song and a growing sense of organizing power.

S’bu Zikode, president of Abahlali, describes the politics that emerge from this community of struggle as a “living politics,” arising out of the everyday realities and aspirations of poor people. Rather than being defined by politicians, a living politic is a “politic of truth... and principle and courage. It is the politic that is thought from the ground about the reality of our lives... it is found in the humility of ordinary men and women... It is a politic that everyone can understand. It is a politic of land. It is a politic of decent housing for all. It is the politic of good schools, hospitals that heal, libraries, parks, safe streets and a decent income... it is the politic of water.”

When implemented through projects of survival, a “living politics” distributes electricity and water through informal “people’s connections” when the government refuses to do so; it occupies empty homes and lands when there is more than enough to go around; it takes to the streets when everything else has been denied; and it sees through lines of division and recognizes that the strength of poor people lies in their unity and numbers.

- 1 Olsavsky, Jesse. *The Most Absolute Abolition: Runaways, Vigilance Committees, and the Rise of Revolutionary Abolitionism, 1835–1861*. LSU Press, 2022. <https://lsupress.org/9780807177303/the-most-absolute-abolition/>.
- 2 As a form of organization, the vigilance committees reflected the state of development of the society in the antebellum United States, turning what was present in local posses, lynch mobs and the frontier justice of vigilantes into a vehicle for abolition. Some of their most defining moments were of daring rescues from slave catchers or in the middle of court proceedings, where the illegality of their activity was without question, as was their moral commitment to abolition.
- 3 Hilliard, David. *The Black Panther Party Service to the People Programs*. Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2008. <https://www.unmpress.com/9780826343956/the-black-panther-party/>.
- 4 By 1970, all party chapters were directed to establish People's Free Medical Clinics to provide basic medical care, preventative medicine and other services.
- 5 Other movements of the poor, including the unemployed councils of the 1930s, the housing takeovers organized in the 1990s by the National Union of the Homeless, immigrant rights organizing at the borderlands and the powerful work of international social movements like South African Shackdwellers' Movement (Abahlali base-Mjondolo) and the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra), integrate projects of survival in their organizing, with the same basic characteristics and framework.
- 6 For more information, see the PASS Report here: <https://www.drumnyc.org/passreport/>.
- 7 In the move to its staff-based food distribution program, the Sycamore Collaborative employs one person to run logistics, another for warehousing and another for distribution, with two part-time drivers.
- 8 Another faith leader recounted the story of a sister church that was prohibited from offering shelter to unhoused people. When police officers visited the church to shut them down, pointing out that several people in the pews were sleeping, the pastor quipped, "We have a lot of people sleep through our services," and continued with their ministry.

PART 2: PANDEMIC SURVIVAL STRATEGIES



Serving meals outside of the People's Church, East Harlem, New York;
Members of New Disabled South gather safely during the pandemic
Photo credits: Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé; Dom Kelly, New Disabled South

In 2020 and the years that followed, our communities faced crisis after crisis, from the COVID-19 pandemic to worsening economic conditions, wildfires, superstorms and militaristic policing. The survival strategies deployed during this time were borne out of necessity and resilience. They served as lifelines, providing vital support and resources to those in need, while simultaneously revealing the gaps and failures in existing social systems.

This section focuses on the range of survival strategies from the pandemic and how these efforts addressed immediate crises, while laying the groundwork for reimagining community solidarity, resistance and movement building.

PANDEMIC SAFETY AND SECURITY

Since the early days of the pandemic, community organizations have been rapidly adapting to address the health and medical challenges their neighborhoods faced. One key strategy was the immediate, grassroots response to the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). At Bethel Neighborhood Center in Kansas City, for example, volunteers rallied to produce and distribute over 1,000 cloth masks, stepping into the gap when larger systems struggled to keep up with massive need. As Mang Sonna, Executive Director of the organization, recounted, "The demand was immense, with community members consistently requesting more masks." Across the country, in Massena, New York, community members and high school students worked together to transport a donation of sanitizer from a warehouse more than four hours away, ensuring that local first responders and residents had access to this vital resource.

Several organizations also took on the crucial role of disseminating accurate information about the virus, particularly in marginalized communities. In Philadelphia, Asian Americans United set up a 24-hour hotline using an extra cell phone, which community members used to communicate fears, threats and questions they had about what was unfolding. Part of their responsibility was addressing misinformation and rumors about the virus. Similarly, DRUM

bridged the gap left by inadequate public health outreach by delivering health information in culturally relevant ways and tailoring public health directives to the linguistic needs of the community.

Other marginalized communities established their own covid-care and response systems, because existing mechanisms did not reach them. In Chicago, organizers developed a mobile application to address transportation gaps facing elderly residents: “[They] created this app because people were not able to get to and from doctors — [it was] mainly set up for senior citizens to get to the doctor,” said Joyce Brody, a member of the United Neighbors of the 35th Ward.

For the disability community, this required even greater attention and infrastructure, especially as the initial emergency response to the pandemic began to wane. As Dom Kelly, co-founder of New Disabled South, explained, “Early on, we felt somewhat supported, with people wearing masks and social distancing, but that only lasted a short time... our community was being left behind, left for dead... The science said we needed air filtration, but we didn’t have the government support to implement clean air broadly, so we started to organize clean air clubs, where we could be together in person. We would gather in community, and make sure we had air filters, so we could have some joy and fun and survive. It was up to us to take care of each other, because our government infrastructure couldn’t (or wouldn’t) take care of us.”

Some communities, including the San Carlos Apache in Gila County, Arizona, went even further.¹ Their reservation, which was established in 1872 as a

concentration camp, is home to approximately 17,000 members of the tribe.² In 2020, the Tribal Emergency Response Committee set up a COVID response team to assess community needs. They closed the reservation to non-tribal members and implemented strict mitigation measures suited to their community. For example, due to inconsistent access to running water and crowded living conditions, the Tribal Council turned the Apache Gold Casino into an alternative care site for quarantine. If a household could not be quarantined, San Carlos medical staff³ visited them, bringing food boxes, sanitizer and other PPE.

**“One of our main goals was to protect our elders. They are our history, prayers and traditions. If we lose our elders, we lose who we are.”
— Vanessa Nosie, San Carlos Apache**

Vanessa Nosie, a leader with the San Carlos Apache, explained how these culturally specific approaches allowed them to survive the worst impacts of the pandemic: “One of our main goals was to protect our elders. They are our history, prayers and traditions. If we lose our elders, we lose who we are. We did everything we could to protect them, including shutting down our casinos and the reservation as a whole. Look at what happened [to the elderly] in other parts of Arizona. If we had not established our own health care and our own protocol, we would have lost many more of our people.”

HEALTH CARE, MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CARE

With existing health systems under duress or in outright failure, community-based organizations and institutions that could fill these gaps played increasingly prominent roles.

In Brookings, Oregon, St. Timothy's Church became a key site for COVID-19 testing and vaccinations after the county's public health department collapsed.

"We had this experience with providing vaccines because we had been doing flu vaccines every fall. We had this infrastructure in place," said Fr. Bernie Lindley. "When the need came up for COVID testing and COVID vaccines, we stepped up into that. And at the same time, our County Public Health disintegrated, and was soon disbanded. The Oregon Health Authority came in and took over public health in our county and contracted with us to provide COVID vaccines and COVID tests. So we did that out of the basement. The city went berserk, because we're not zoned to be a COVID vaccine center... and it's like, do you understand that we're in this national crisis?"

St. Timothy's also offered showers, warm spaces and basic hygienic necessities, especially for unhoused and low-income people. Fr. Lindley continued, "When we started our Free Health Clinic, some people who came in to see the primary care provider needed to have their hygiene needs met, so we let them use the shower before seeing the doctor. Then we thought, why not let everyone use it during office hours? Now, about 25-30 people come in for a shower, coffee and a place to get warm."

In Pennsylvania, community-led mobile medical clinics expanded critical medical infrastructure. Put People First! PA (PPF-PA) had been working with health professionals before 2020, setting up mobile health clinics in poor counties across the state. When the pandemic hit, their activities took on increased importance. As one organizer, Harrison Farina, explained, "We've been doing this every week, for two years. At that point, we had really become a place in the community that people know about, that they can go to and that we can tell people, 'Hey, we're gonna be here next week.'"

While most of PPF-PA's activity was carried out in partnership with health professionals, the organization eventually expanded these practices, taking on even greater responsibility. As Farina explained, "We were doing a lot of testing and screenings, and at a certain point, we thought, 'We can replicate this in more parts of the state even where we don't have partnerships with a mobile clinic.'" By creating pathways to access health services in underserved areas, these mobile clinics became hubs for more holistic community care. Farina continued, "It was

**"When the need came up for COVID testing and COVID vaccines, we stepped up into that. And at the same time, our County Public Health disintegrated, and was soon disbanded ... The city went berserk because, we're not zoned to be a COVID vaccine center... and it's like, do you understand that we're in this national crisis?"
— Fr. Bernie Lindley, St. Timothy's Episcopal Church**

[testing], applying for state benefits... and we used [these clinics] as a way to talk about [our] rights and people's experiences with being denied those rights." This approach engaged people in conversations about their struggles with the healthcare system, building relationships and motivating collective action around the fundamental right to health care.

Emotional and mental health needs were also provided through community-based initiatives during this time. West Virginia Can't Wait convened a network of mental health professionals, who donated their services free of charge to the organization's members. According to co-founder Stephen Smith, "We built this free Mental Health Program where [mental health] providers who had relationships with our movement offered one or two slots in their schedule to a

**"We knew who was fragile in our community and who would be most impacted. Those of us who were less affected took it upon ourselves to make sure they were okay."
— Kenia Alcocer,
Union de Vecinos**

West Virginia Can't Wait person in need. We don't keep records because of HIPAA, but we had a list that people can call for free appointments." In California, Anu Yadav, a cultural organizer, helped shape a multi-million-dollar mental health awareness campaign to support frontline groups that were engaging in mutual aid. "We connected the concept of wellness to meeting basic needs and cultural production to distribute unrestricted money, as quickly as possible, to these grassroots groups," she said. "We supported tenant rights, community gardens, food distribution, and [cultural production], connecting mental health, social justice and art that was informed and driven by these communities."

Union de Vecinos was one of the community groups that benefited from this program, using these resources to support their members. As Alcocer told us, "Mothers needed to leave work and stay at home, not just as caretakers but as teachers and nurses, often without the resources to manage all these responsibilities... we had to deal with the challenges of [their] mental and emotional health during the pandemic..." The organization provided supplies like diapers and formula, and created space for connection and mutual support, which unintentionally became a therapeutic way to break the isolation many were experiencing. Alcocer reflected on the importance of this work: "We knew who was fragile in our community and who would be most impacted. Those of us who were less affected took it upon ourselves to make sure they were okay."

In upstate New York, Massena Community High School's mindfulness program played a similar role for high school students, drawing on local Native American language, traditions and cultural practices. According to Kristin Colarusso Martin, who coordinated the program, "It wasn't just about mindfulness—it was about weaving in cultural traditions that made our curriculum more inclusive and helped bridge gaps between communities." In another initiative in Massena, elderly volunteers and college students were brought into elementary schools to be present in classrooms, offering support and connection to children who felt neglected or isolated. This collective care model emphasized the interdependence of community members and the shared responsibility of supporting one another through challenging times.

Given quarantine restrictions, sometimes these mental and emotional care models had to be designed and carried out virtually. Vahisha Hasan, a cultural organizer who is trained in healing and wellness practices, set up online spaces to address these needs with a variety of healing tactics, working with other healers and cultural workers, like Teresa Mateus and Xan West. As she described, “We set up a ‘virtual clearing’ drawing on African roots and traditions, where we would experience reiki, song and other wellness practices online... at first, I was skeptical, but we felt so connected. It helped me remember how there is healing in the moment and healing that can hold and continue, which we all desperately needed to make it through.”

HARM REDUCTION

Harm reduction was a common survival strategy in communities confronting the dual crises of opioid addiction and COVID-19. Mobile units and grassroots initiatives stepped up to provide life-saving resources like Narcan, Naloxone, access to social services and other support, without judgment. Their focus remained on meeting discrete needs and becoming a reliable presence in the community.

In most cases, community members who were themselves impacted became primary lifesavers. As Smith shared about West Virginia, “The real shit is happening here...we are one of the opioid capitals of the world. And it’s people in our own communities who are dying regularly. Yet, the state and local governments have criminalized syringe service programs and harm reduction initiatives in the midst of a pandemic.” Despite being demonized by the broader society, “The people who are saving lives out here are those who use drugs and those who do drugs... they are the ones saving more lives on a regular basis than entire infrastructures built to do so. They’re in it with people, and that’s why they’re effective.”

In Chicago, the West Side Heroin and Opioid Task Force began directly engaging with folks on the street. Carlos Rodriguez, a social worker and team leader with this effort, told us, “My team went to people dealing drugs, letting them know we weren’t there as spies or anything, but to help save lives. We taught them how to use Narcan and Naloxone.” By building trust and consistently showing up, they became a stable presence, recognizing that harm reduction must be a community-driven, non-judgmental strategy to address dependency. Likewise, in Nashville, organizers with Open Table Nashville expanded their Narcan distribution and training efforts to unhoused people at the encampments along the Cumberland River.

FOOD SECURITY

The pandemic exposed a troubling degree of food insecurity, which impacted as many as one in five households nationwide in the first half of 2020.⁴ In Nelsonville, volunteers delivered up to 350 meals a week. Fromal remembered a young girl who called her, asking when the food was coming as she described the depth of her hunger. “I can be patient when I’m [regular] hungry, but when I’m really hungry, I have to call out for help,” she said.

In response to widespread hunger, several communities established anonymous food distribution systems. Micro-pantries modeled after “little free libraries”

provided goods like rice, beans and canned foods without asking individuals to justify their need, prove residency or face any form of scrutiny. As Joyce Brody described of these efforts in Chicago, “I’m sure you’ve seen them — the free little libraries in people’s front yards. Folks converted those into free food pantries, offering non-perishable goods... It was a way for people to take what they needed and leave what they could, no questions asked.” Free vegetable sites began appearing across urban neighborhoods, often initiated by local restaurants and sustained by volunteer networks. While some sites were temporary, others, have persisted. “In Pilsen [Chicago], they still have the free vegetable giveaway, and it’s now managed in a way that keeps everything fresh,” said Brody.

Indeed, pre-existing infrastructure, like these little libraries or community gardens, played an even more central role at the height of the pandemic crisis. Lewis from Domestic Workers United distributed fresh fruits and vegetables to twenty-five women from the Maple Street Community Garden. “We met in the garden, under the willow tree, breathing fresh air, wearing masks and having conversations. It was a return to the garden when we couldn’t meet indoors,” she shared. Similarly, to expand their reach, Why Hunger’s national network of community gardens collaborated with local nonprofits to create new distribution networks, transporting produce from garden sites to community centers and local organizations miles away.⁵

Churches also utilized their existing space to become central distribution hubs to meet increasing survival demands. In Kansas City, Bethel’s weekly food distribution efforts scaled up dramatically, more than doubling its usual outlay to service over 23,000 individuals in 2020 alone.⁶ The People’s Church in East Harlem coordinated with four other Methodist churches to grow from a small congregation-based operation to one of the largest emergency food pantries in the area. “It started with me, my lay leader and a car,” said Rev. Dorlimar

Lebrón Malavé. “We connected with mutual aid organizations and began delivering food to those in need, even though they weren’t members of our church, just community members.” As the need grew, so did the operation — at its peak, they were receiving up to 25 pallets of food per week. They rented trucks, picked up donations and were in constant motion across all five boroughs to ensure deliveries reached East Harlem.

To maintain safety, several church-based feeding programs decided to reorganize their operations. Rev. Cedar Monroe and Aaron Scott with Chaplains on the Harbor described how they transitioned their meal services for the first two years of the pandemic: “We switched to to-go

meals, but we also made sure there were people outside who could talk to folks, maintain relationships and check in on them.” In Schenectady, the Sycamore Collaborative also adjusted its summer meal and pantry programs, moving from congregate settings to grab-and-go models, usually offering multiple meals at once. At the same time, the organization decided to prioritize food as a core part of their faith-based mission. “Food is the way for each one of our traditions to remain intentionally tethered to our communities,” said Rev. Tañón-Santos. “This

“Food is the way for each one of our traditions to remain intentionally tethered to our communities.”
— Rev. Amaury Tañón-Santos, Sycamore Collaborative

is the way our faith traditions call us to gather... Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, pagans, in each one of these traditions, food is central.”

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING SECURITY

Despite moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures, many individuals and households continued to face displacement and eviction during the pandemic. For those who were already unhoused, the pandemic exacerbated the absence of stable shelter options.

As Max Ray-Riek, an organizer with the Philadelphia Homeless Union noted, there was often “no place where [homeless] people are allowed to be.” Their attempts to keep people together in shelters or hotels were disrupted as individuals were scattered to different parts of the city, breaking up the sense of community that had been building in pre-pandemic times. “We worried about people being scattered across different parts of the city,” Ray-Riek said, reflecting on how such tactics had previously been used to weaken organizing efforts. At the same time, temporary housing in hotels, funded by FEMA and the city, proved to be a game-changer for their community. “Their health improved, their mental health improved, because they had a place to sleep during the day and night, and their bodies were healing for the first time in years,” said Ray-Riek. During this time, the union organized efforts to provide laundry and other services to make sure these basic needs were met, even if the community was dispersed.

In some communities, public institutions, churches and other local organizations took on the responsibility of offering cold-weather shelters to housing insecure households. Libraries in Chicago opened their doors to provide shelter (and internet access) for Chicago’s 17,000 homeless students. St. Timothy’s Church temporarily allowed car camping on its property for a limited number of families, until the city council shut down the program. With federal funding, programs like Chaplains on the Harbor were able to maintain safety protocols, enforce mask mandates and manage social distancing in their temporary shelter space. Despite the occasional COVID outbreak, these shelters provided warmth and safety during the winter months.

Even after the eviction moratoriums were in place, tenant associations organized rent strikes to ensure all of their needs were met — and that their right to housing did not displace their other rights. As Ahmed of DRUM told us, “When the pandemic hit, [we realized] if have to choose between eating and paying rent, we should choose eating.”

ACCESS TO WIFI AND CONNECTIVITY

For rural and underserved communities, providing reliable access to internet and communication technology was an essential strategy to keep up with work, school and survive the pandemic.

In Massena, which is part of one of the largest rural counties in the state of New York, Wi-Fi is notoriously difficult to access, especially for poor and low-income residents. To address this need during the pandemic, Spectrum temporarily provided free basic internet to households in town, while public libraries opened their networks, allowing families to access the internet from parking lots even when the buildings were closed. “I remember fathers and kids sitting in their

cars outside the library, trying to work,” noted Colarusso Martin from MCHS. As winter approached, the school decided to make their cafeteria available, so families could work in warmer environments. It also acquired hotspots to help those students who lived further away from the center of town. “We had a couple hundred kids we dispersed hotspots to throughout the community so they could attend school,” she explained.

In the absence of reliable Wi-Fi, cell phone-based organizing emerged as another tactic to reach, build and maintain community. The Cornell Small Farms program supports a diverse range of farmers across upstate and rural New York, including many Latino-owned or operated farms through its Futuro en Ag project. Tim Shenk highlighted the pivotal role of WhatsApp in facilitating their communication. “A lot of our educational work and community building has been possible because of cell phones, specifically, everyone is on WhatsApp,” he explained.

This technology allowed for rapid dissemination of information and resource coordination. Even when direct support was not possible, a direct line of communication was important for people in distress. “I feel like I became a de facto chaplain figure for people who didn’t have anyone else who could listen to them in Spanish,” said Shenk. “Some people shared stories, like kidnappings and sick family members back home who they need to be providing for, but they can’t because they can’t work. I could empathize with their situation and say, ‘May God’s will for justice be done.’ And I’ve struggled with that. It was such an unsatisfying thing to say. But I do hope that that empathy may lay the groundwork for some sort of deeper connection in the future.”

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

During the intense early months of the pandemic, millions of people continued to engage in protests and direct action, exercising their political rights to participate and defend our democracy and basic rights. Low-wage and “essential” worker organizing, pandemic relief, nation-wide protests around police violence and one of the most contentious elections in recent history compelled millions of people to figure out how to be in the streets and at the polls, all while staying safe.

For the disability community, which is “chronically online,” according to Dom West, the pandemic became an opportunity to ramp up their political advocacy. “We got to claim and assert our leadership at a new level,” he said. “For the [2020] elections, we used hashtags like ‘#cripthevote’ to pressure politicians and public health officials around our needs. We were able to put our concerns right in the middle of the public narrative.”

Blending political engagement with mutual aid created a way forward through the early pandemic months to the elections. West Virginia Can’t Wait’s Neighborhood Captain Program trained 397 volunteers to reach out to and maintain contact with thousands of voters in the state. Rather than relying on typical campaign messaging, their outreach was rooted in mutual aid, led by “neighbors” who were interested in developing real relationships. As Smith described, “People were hearing from the same actual human being who lived near them each time.” When it came time for the 2020 elections, trust and connection drove higher voter turnout rates in these areas.

In the city of Detroit, Detroit Will Breathe organized street protests, taking every precaution against COVID-19 and police violence, to protect their communities and exercise their rights. “We’ve been indoctrinated to believe that politics only happens at the voting booth. What we did in 2020 is open people up to the concept that you can also have democracy in the streets,” said Simpson. After the protests faced intense police crackdowns, with tear gas, rubber bullets, and mass arrests, the organization changed tactics. It held open mics, public tribunals and mass meetings in the neighborhoods of Detroit to build their base and expand the concept of democratic participation, connecting police violence to the everyday lives of poor and dispossessed people of color in the city.

Addressing the trauma and fatigue from these protest activities became a survival tactic of its own. As a cultural organizer, Hasan trained and worked with three cohorts of healers to support organizers in Kentucky during the protests that broke out around Breonna Taylor’s murder. These wellness teams prioritized treating those in leadership on the frontlines, who were carrying multiple burdens without attending to their own care. After securing this first line of defense, the teams established wellness practices that were more broadly available to those involved in the actions. In these moments, “there are different risk levels people are facing,” she said, “and each has a health need that we, as healers, need to attend to.”

Virtual tactics also facilitated more inclusive forms of protest and political organizing. As Yoder from Look Loud explained, these tactics had to “both amplify and replace presence... in [social justice organizing], there is an unspoken preference around focusing on people who are physically present in the same space... a 200 person crowd is supposed to represent 2 million people... but [during the pandemic] we had to expand that presence, because most of the people we need to win were not physically present. They were at home. They were watching on a phone screen, so we had to expand the rally to include their living room...”⁷

• • •

These pandemic-era experiences only begin to capture the extensive range of survival strategies that communities used to protect and provide for themselves, where local, state and federal systems could not. Many, if not all, of these gaps persist today, leaving these same communities and networks on the frontlines against poverty, housing insecurity, hunger, health and climate crisis, authoritarianism and more. In other words, this work continues by necessity. If connected and resourced, these communities could form a deep and broad network that is not only equipped to exchange lessons, tactics and survival strategies for increasingly difficult times, but politicized to take broad action together and transform the fabric of our democracy.

“We’ve been indoctrinated to believe that politics only happens at the voting booth. What we did in 2020 is open people up to the concept that you can also have democracy in the streets.”

**— Lloyd Simpson,
Detroit Will Breathe**

- 1 Gila County is among one of the lowest-income counties in the country, with nearly half of its population living under twice the poverty line (official poverty measure). During the pandemic, it had a death rate of 641 per 100,000, one of the highest death rates in the country. See, Poor People's Campaign. "County Fact Sheet: Gila County, Arizona." April 2022. https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GilaCo_AZ.pdf.
- 2 These lands have been significantly downsized over the past 150 years, mainly because of the vast mineral wealth that lies beneath them. The sacred lands of Oak Flat, known in Apache as Chi'chil Bildagoteel, have been leased to one of the largest mining companies in the world, prompting the Apache Stronghold to pursue legal action and occupy the land, in order to secure their cultural, spiritual and traditional practices.
- 3 Medical staff were working with the San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation, a privately run health care system that is independent from the government-run Indian Health Services. It was established after tribal leadership visited tribes in Alaska that had done the same and employs its own health care professionals. It had been in operation for more than a decade before the 2020 pandemic.
- 4 Kim-Mozeleski, Jin; Gunzler, Douglas; Pike Moore, Stephanie; Trapl, Erika; Perzynski, Adam; and Tsoh, Janice. "Food Insecurity Trajectories in the US During the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Prev Chronic Dis*, 2023. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd20.220212>
- 5 In Nicaragua, small women farmers protected their livelihood during the pandemic by building local seed banks, enabling dozens of women to produce food for hundreds of people in their community. "Their ability to build tools for survival are the beginning steps towards food sovereignty," shared MADRE.
- 6 While demand has since decreased, Bethel's food program still supports more than 10,000 people annually, demonstrating a sustained need for assistance.
- 7 More on this in Part 5, under the role of culture.

PART 3: CHALLENGES TO SURVIVAL STRATEGIES



Rev. McIntyre confronting state police in Nashville, Tennessee.
Photo Credit: Madison Thorn

To adequately appreciate lessons from the pandemic survival strategies, we must consider the challenges they faced, both in the throes of crisis and as that intensity abated. These challenges ranged from limitations specific to faith communities to cultural norms and the fundamental trauma of living in this society and organizing against injustice. In many circumstances, they were also overlapping, meaning that organizers and community members dealt with multiple challenges at the same time, compounding the difficulties they presented at any given moment.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES: RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The institutional challenges to survival strategies were particularly acute within church structures and systems, where traditional hierarchies often inhibited creativity and growth. For some, this was not a new experience. As West with New Disabled South explained, “Unfortunately, churches are not required by law to comply with the [Americans with Disabilities Act], so many of us feel excluded from faith communities in general. Plus, the language around disability — and how it’s portrayed as [something] to be healed or cured — are huge barriers to developing relationships with churches.”

For others, namely church leaders who used the pandemic to develop innovative programs to “rethink church,” church structures did not allow for them to build on that experience for the longer term. As mentioned above, the People’s Church was one of five United Methodist churches that worked together in East Harlem, New York, operating as one church with five sites. This structure allowed them to expand their outreach and deepen their ministry, but was ended abruptly in 2022. As Rev. Lebrón Malavé said, “There could have been so much more learning, and so much more growing that could have happened, had institutions embraced this moment in a creative way and really focused on receiving their leadership from people on the ground, and not so much like a top-down approach.” Although their efforts were widely recognized in the community and media, Rev. Lebrón Malavé lamented that, “At the end of the day, if [the denomination] was not in control, then that was it,” highlighting how institutional priorities overshadowed the potential for community-led transformation.

Some of this tension was driven by the organizational demands of denominational churches, which are composed of national, regional and local leadership. In many cases, a denomination both supports individual community-level congregations and collects contributions from them, with varying levels of autonomy depending on the specific denomination. “We could have been financially stable if we didn’t have to maintain the payments to the annual conference,” said one faith leader. “Instead, all funding was cut, and we are reverting back to pre-pandemic conditions, which weren’t working to begin with.”

For Chaplains on the Harbor, the financial strain on their ministry became worse when they shifted from being partially funded by the Episcopal diocese to becoming an independent nonprofit.¹ Although this transition was initially buoyed by pandemic assistance, when this source of funding dried up in 2022, the ministry’s independence quickly proved unsustainable, putting the organization’s viability into question. Indeed, the abrupt loss of public funding forced many church-affiliated organizations like Chaplains to abandon their pandemic programs, jeopardizing their ability to continue serving their communities. For some clergy, this decision-making process meant navigating a delicate balance between meeting institutional expectations and addressing community needs. As Rev. Lebrón Malavé expressed, “I was trying to figure out how to please Pharaoh so that I could have what I needed to feed the people.”

Other churches and religious-affiliated institutions were overwhelmed with the extent of the need at hand. Greater Birmingham Ministries (GBM) — a multi-faith, multi-racial organization in Birmingham, Alabama — provides emergency services and other assistance for poor and low-income communities. In 2022, their Community and Faith Coordinator, Rev. Carolyn Foster, briefed members of Congress on GBM’s limitations to meet the need at hand. “[We] can only do so much to provide temporary relief to people who are in great need... we can’t do it all and we shouldn’t have to,” she said, directing her frustration towards the government’s unwillingness, or inability, to step in and supplement what churches alone were providing. Or as Krinks from Open Table Nashville said, “No one was responsive or cared for our [unhoused] people; it was up to [us] to care for our friends in the streets.” This sentiment was echoed by many organizations that found themselves having to step in and take on roles that would typically fall under governmental responsibility, with fewer and fewer resources.

In Philadelphia, the mayor invited the Philadelphia Homeless Union to give their recommendations on how to better care for unhoused people at the city’s

local intake centers. However, as Ray-Riek told us, “Every idea we had was shut down. At one point, the director [of homeless services] said that the concerns of homeless people were not her job to deal with.” Instead, volunteers and members of the Homeless Union organized themselves to take the very actions they suggested to the mayor. “We stopped having conversations with them in April [2020] and started setting up outside the intake center a few weeks later, greeting folks as they come in. We’ve been there every week since then.”

In the case of protest and dissent, government apathy evolved quickly into active resistance and repression. In Charlotte, North Carolina, when solidarity protests broke out around the murder of George Floyd, “it felt like a war,” said Janki Kaneria, a lawyer with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice. She had been working for the city as a public defender and in her free time helping activists facing arrest, often liaising with the police in the morning and then confronting them in the streets at night. “Police took these actions [and protests] personally, said Kaneria. “They felt like they were entitled to use their authority to oppress and repress people... people were running from rubber bullets. There were tanks. There was no oversight on what was happening. It just felt like you were at war with the government. The police and state actors were so bitter, so mad.” Reflecting on her role as a public defender, Kaneria said, “Even if my arguments were more creative, and I was fighting so hard, the system was stacked against [me and my clients]. That’s really what all of this exposes — the broken nature of the criminal legal system, the criminal punishment system — and how power is self-preserving.”

Whether in churches, government structures or other large-scale institutions, this instinct to preserve the status quo can overwhelm the drive for change.²

GAPS BETWEEN CAPACITY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES

Alongside institutional challenges, the pandemic revealed significant gaps between capacity and infrastructure in many movement and community-based organizations. For example, in 2020, Cosecha began to collect donations for undocumented workers and immigrant families who had been excluded from pandemic assistance programs. Within a very short amount of time, they received nearly \$2 million in donations. The organization was suddenly thrust into managing a large-scale financial aid effort, without any systems in place to do so.

Cosecha’s leadership quickly realized they had underestimated both the demand for this assistance and their capacity to allocate these resources equitably and efficiently. “When we first opened up the fund to distribute these donations [through an online site], we received 1,300 applications in a matter of hours,” said Adorno. “We had to close it immediately, because we were like, wow, we need to figure out how we’re actually going to do this.” Upon reopening the fund, the

“Every idea we had was shut down. At one point, the director [of homeless services] said that the concerns of homeless people were not her job to deal with.”
— Max Ray-Riek,
Philadelphia Homeless Union

response was explosive: within 25 minutes of going live, they hit their capacity of 2,500 applications, and just a few minutes later, another 2,300 applications poured in, overwhelming their website. “We weren’t prepared... we did not have the infrastructure to do that,” Adorno said, underscoring the immense responsibility that their organization was facing.

In other cases, these gaps meant that precious resources were lost or wasted. For the General Baker Institute (GBI) in Detroit, water storage became an ongoing logistical challenge. They had agreed to store water that had been collected by community members in the early weeks of the pandemic in their warehouse, but the storage process had to start from figuring out how to unload the pallets from delivery trucks. “That was the first step,” said Carolyn Baker, founder and

**“What people don’t realize is how heavy water is. The weight of the water actually breaks the pallets [they are stored on].”
— Carolyn Baker,
General Baker Institute**

director of GBI. “We had to get the water off the trucks. And then we had to figure out storing it. What people don’t realize is how heavy water is. The weight of the water actually breaks the pallets [they are stored on],” she said. In some cases, the stored water buckled the floors of the facilities where it was being held. Once unloaded and in the warehouse, their task was still not over: because the warehouse was not temperature controlled, the large six-gallon jugs were unstable, causing the containers to expand and burst, ruining the water inside. “The ones that kept expanding, that water went to waste. People can’t drink it,” said Baker.

Similarly, many organizations did not have the capacity to hold and retain the influx of people who became activated and engaged in their work. Although pandemic survival activities brought in new volunteers and members, most organizations could not assimilate these new people for the long-term. Ahmed articulated how DRUM lost this opportunity during their survival organizing. Although they brought in dozens of volunteers, who, according to Ahmed, “were just really, really good, really well-connected to people,” they suffered from the “challenge of absorption... all the tubes were coming in, but nobody had the structures, the mechanisms or processes, or sometimes even just the foresight to think about how we absorb all these people into our movement?”

The practical implications of these organizational shortfalls were widely experienced. Organizations had to scale back or even shut down long-standing programs, because their existing infrastructure and capacity could not match the accelerated times. This was especially true for grassroots-led mutual aid efforts, which were highly effective at addressing immediate community needs, but could not hold out for the long-haul. As Krinks from Open Table Nashville observed, “Mutual aid groups were so amazing and on top of things, doing all kinds of things like getting rent money, eviction prevention, helping people get to the doctor, getting diapers. They popped up quickly, but they burned out quickly too.” This burnout was largely due to intense demand and insufficient support structures, highlighting the gap between what community organizations are compelled to do and what they can sustainably manage. As emergency funding dried up, many organizations expressed dismay, weariness and anger at the disconnect between their commitment to continue their programming and this retraction of resources. “The state didn’t embrace the learnings from the

pandemic,” said Rev. Tañón-Santos from the Sycamore Collaborative, highlighting the failure to fund crucial programs whose need continues to this day.

CULTURAL NORMS AND TRAUMA

Cultural norms and beliefs also impacted survival strategies during the pandemic. The community dinners in Nelsonville were moved out of at least one church, because its staff was uncomfortable with the number of people attending the dinners. As Fromal said, “Some church ladies didn’t like how we were attracting so many poor people into the church... they were concerned about theft, bedbugs, lice... and then when we moved outside to the parking lot, neighbors complained that it was too noisy, that there were too many bikes in the parking lot. We experienced a lot of pushback.”

Sometimes, religious practices themselves became a challenge to survival activity. As Rev. Tañón-Santos noted, Purim and Iftar include meals as part of the ritual of their religious practice, allowing for those outside the religious community to participate in the ritual without necessarily engaging in religious worship. However, in Christian traditions, “everyone cannot come to the meeting. Presbyterians, Baptists practice an open table, but that happens in the middle of worship. You have to sit through worship to get the meal. This is not the same as in other traditions... it opened up a whole conversation for [Sycamore Collaborative] about how and why we do these meals, how they relate to our faith traditions.”

These cultural barriers are also present within organizations committed to social justice and providing for communities in need. According to Leonardo Vilchis from Union de Vecinos, “The biggest problem we saw was the lack of imagination...the fear of not knowing what to do, the fear of being liable, the fear of not having permission to do things.” When organizers were paralyzed by fear of being wrong or making a decision that fell outside their designated responsibilities, they could not carry forward the recommendations from the community and the survival activity stagnated or became a drain, rather than a catalyst for greater influence, organization and power.

The inclination to avoid mistakes in community-based work may also reflect a sense of responsibility that organizers feel towards the communities they work with, along with the emotional toll and trauma of working and living on the frontlines of these crises. Stakes are always high when organizing in poor and low-income communities, but they were even higher in the midst of COVID-19 and beyond. As Hasan observed, “Wellness can get deprioritized because you’re so busy doing, responding and resisting the waves of terribleness, which only get worse and worse... but anyone who labors on behalf freedom, to sustain that path and liberatory road, they must be well.” Her comments are a prescient reminder to address the emotional hardship of social justice work now if we are going to realize our vision of society in the long run.

“Wellness can get deprioritized because you’re so busy doing, responding and resisting... but anyone who labors on behalf freedom, to sustain that path and liberatory road, they must be well.”

**— Vahisha Hasan,
Transform Network**

HEIGHTENED HARDSHIP: IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES AND THE RURAL PARADIGM

The pandemic heightened existing hardships facing certain communities, especially immigrant and undocumented communities and rural communities. As Tim Shenk, with the Cornell Small Farms Program, emphasized, for migrant communities who “didn’t get those stimulus checks until maybe a year later if at all, there was no help in the moment other than charity or solidarity from local organizations and churches.” To address these gaps, immigrant-led organizations, churches and other service organizations — like Cosecha, Asian Americans United, DRUM, Bethel Community Center, First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, and others — stepped in to gather donations, resources and services to meet their needs. Considering the elevated risks to immigrants under the first Trump Administration, this sometimes required developing new safety measures to ensure access without facing arrest, detention or deportation.

In rural New York, immigrant justice groups and social service organizations have long partnered with churches as spaces to hold meetings, declare sanctuary for vulnerable families and even set up mobile consulate services. At mobile consulates, immigrants could update their national identification documents, receive legal support and navigate complex bureaucratic processes. These services are hard to access in remote areas, without traveling to New York City or Buffalo, let alone while minimizing risks from immigration enforcement. “People started lining up at 5 in the morning,” said Shenk, “and hundreds of people showed up. People trust the churches as sanctuary spaces where police or ICE won’t interfere, and since they can’t use buses or trains, they are grateful not to have to pay the exorbitant costs of travel and risk their safety going to a big city for a consulate appointment.”

“We’re easy to forget about.”
— Dottie Fromal,
Nelsonville Community Dinners

Unfortunately, the inaccessibility of these kinds of services is part of the rural American paradigm. Massena Community High School staff knew of several students who skipped school because they needed to walk several hours one-way to get groceries from the food pantry during the pandemic, just one of many systemic barriers to meeting needs in their community. Kristin Colarusso Martin explained: “In our county, getting vaccines was a challenge, because the places that provide services to low-

income families are in a [different] county about 35 miles away... if you don’t have transportation, there isn’t really reliable public transportation. It can take you an entire day to get to where you’re having to go... and then once you get there, you’re on their schedule. If [your appointment] is delayed or canceled, you have to figure it out again another day.” Indeed, as Rev. DuPont commented of upstate New York, “People in the suburbs think that the problem is in the city, when in reality, it’s probably the other way around... there’s so much work that needs to be done in the suburbs in order for there to be justice in the city.”

In Ohio, Nelsonville had been grappling with the devastating effects of deindustrialization and the opioid crisis for years, without adequate public resources to address these overlapping disasters. Once a thriving coal mining town, the small town of 5000 now faces high poverty rates and limited

employment opportunities. “When industry moved out, drugs moved in,” said Fromal. In just five years, she said, one of its local drugstores distributed over 16 million opioid pills to residents and others within driving distance. The town’s geographic isolation compounds these issues. “You used to have to travel through here to get from Columbus to Athens [Ohio]... but then they build a [bypass] on the highway, so you can avoid Nelsonville. It cut down on our traffic, which was nice, but it also took away some of our businesses, gas stations, restaurants... we used to be known as kind of an art town. We had an opera house and vendors would come in and we would have a community event around the square, sometimes with live music... but with the bypass, fewer and fewer people came though Nelsonville. The festival went away. We’re easy to forget about.”



During the pandemic, these challenges made survival organizing harder, but not impossible. In fact, they suggest new areas of growth and investment in organizational and movement infrastructure, including physical space, logistics, connectivity and essential needs infrastructure, as well as establishing a culture of organizing that is inclusive, flexible and creative. One example of a community that has successfully worked to address these challenges is New Disabled South. As West told us, “The disability community is a great example of how marginalized communities can survive [in this country] under systems of oppression... we take care of each other. We modeled how we can do this [more broadly].” Their disability justice framework provides a reference point for our organizing now, in order to build a more resilient movement in the times ahead.³

FINDING VISION IN THE DARKNESS: GLOBAL LESSONS FROM MADRE

MADRE is a feminist foreign policy organization that works with women in war zones around the world, where intense conflicts have precipitated a complete collapse of infrastructure. Their experiences reveal how survival organizing in the most dire conditions is a strategic necessity both as a response to immediate crises and to build long-term capacity and organization to address the root causes of these crises.

According to their Policy and Campaigns Officer, Kate Alexander, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine or the Congo, survival is often a question of identifying the “least worst risk... do we drink polluted water or risk dehydration? Do we kill our livestock and sacrifice our source for long-term economic survival or starve? Do I go to the hospital and die there or die at home with my family? So often, people are facing impossible choices.”

In Gaza, providing basic services like primary healthcare, reproductive health and maternal support has become dramatically more dangerous and precarious since 2023, putting immense pressure on the limited resources and infrastructure that remain. “The constant state of emergency they face has collapsed the notion of abundance into a narrative of creativity, resilience and making do with what’s available,” said Alexander. Ordinary Palestinians are both first responders and

human rights defenders, displaying extraordinary resourcefulness. Strangers rescue strangers from rubble, assist in delivering babies with video guidance and apply basic first aid without any medical professionals present. In many cases, Alexander explained, "If one woman is able to produce breast milk, she will produce as much as she can in that time period and... feed other people's babies." She described the networks borne under these conditions as "fragile and dangerous," yet indispensable. "As soon as you know that you are a resource for those needs, other people will come to you with those needs," creating communal resilience borne out of necessity, where every individual is an indispensable part of a broader survival network.

Across the region, residents have built community-based infrastructure: pop-up medical clinics, run by anyone who can help, relying on basic hygiene methods like boiling hot water in tin cans to sterilize equipment and prevent hypothermia in newborns; configuring new communication networks using radio programs and WhatsApp groups to disseminate health information, alert communities about military movements and coordinate neighborhood responses; creating internet hotspots near borders by leveraging intermittent signals from neighboring countries; and repurposing solar panels, car batteries, and makeshift wind powered generators to charge mobile phones or provide emergency lighting are some of the survival systems created under these conditions.

Whether in Gaza or other war-torn areas, Alexander said, "We're often taught that survival is a precursor, a first step before we can begin to imagine abundance or liberation, but what if collective liberation, abundance and survival are all in the same step?" For example, MADRE's partners in the Congo developed a communications infrastructure to address rising levels of domestic violence during COVID. This infrastructure also created new pathways of financial independence for women and girls. In Iraq, women's shelters that were the only place of refuge for women and girls fleeing violence at home during the pandemic are the same places where these women are now building a progressive feminist movement to end gendered violence.

"All over the world," Alexander told us, "abundance blooms where women human rights defenders can seed collective survival...In Yemen, women forged local peace agreements between warring parties by addressing water rights, something everyone needs, and forcing communities to come together around a shared, precious resource. Their model is now the foundation of a UN-led peace process in Yemen. Their resilience and commitment to building vision in the darkness is a lesson to us all: wherever we are, we must do what we can, with what we have, to protect one another and remind each other, it doesn't have to be this way. We cannot lose our footing in the darkness."

- 1 Nonprofit organizations face other challenges, in particular because of their accountability structures. As Rev. Monroe from Chaplains on the Harbor noted, “The nonprofit world gives you a lot less leeway to do political education and to actually be able to respond quickly to the needs of the community because you have to have a board and board structure.” Despite efforts to create a board that was sympathetic and aligned with the organization’s mission, the reality of external oversight ultimately curtailed their ability to function as a collective community. The decisions, once made by those directly involved on the ground, became subject to the approval of a board that was not as intimately connected to the daily challenges faced by the community. This shift in decision-making power limited the organization’s capacity to address urgent needs and engage in deeper political education. As Rev. Cedar reflected, “I’m not sure that there’s any model that fully resolves this, but it definitely changed our ability to function as a collective community.”
- 2 These kinds of challenges were also present in smaller, community-based organizations, where the vision and strategic direction of those in leadership of an organization might be in contradiction to or challenge the experiences of those carrying out the day-to-day work on the ground. Vilchis from Union de Vecinos described this as a “fear” among organizers of being wrong or going too far outside the bounds of their designated responsibilities and how it constrained some organizations in their response to community needs. The solution he prescribed was taking direction from the community first and having their insights determine organizational priorities in context, rather than in the abstract or through funder-driven priorities.
- 3 For more, see: Sins Invalid. “The 10 Principles of Disability Justice.” New Disabled South Rising, 2024. <https://www.newdisabledsouthrising.org/disability-justice>

PART 4: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND SCALING UP PAST THE CRISIS



Ron Casanova, president of the National Union of the Homeless, calling out the contradiction of homelessness during a series of coordinated housing takeovers of empty public housing.

Photo Credit: Harvey Finkle

In 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis sent dozens of Venezuelan migrants to Martha's Vineyard. The political stunt, intended to make a statement about the hypocrisy of the Democratic party, mimicked Texas Governor Greg Abbot's actions from the year before, when he bussed 90,000 migrants and their families to Washington DC, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Denver and Los Angeles. As thousands of people were dropped off with nothing more than what they could carry, communities began to organize in response: meeting them at bus stops with clothes, food and medical supplies; moving them into temporary shelters; and helping them figure out their next steps.

In Martha's Vineyard, First Congregational Church of West Tisbury drew on its network of government agencies, schools, emergency services, translators and other clergy to provide for the families now on the island. Rev. Cathlin Baker, who led these efforts, has a decades-long history in poor people's organizing. She knows what it takes to take care of people. As she wrote about this experience, "We were ready because the crises of housing and food security on this Island had already required us to care for one another."¹

Below are two factors that allowed for West Tisbury and other pandemic survival efforts to not only sustain through the immediate crises they were facing, but scale up their actions and plan further ahead.

PRE-EXISTING COMMUNITY-BUILDING AND ORGANIZING

Whether over a period of months or years, organizations and institutions that had established pre-existing relationships within their community were better poised to respond to the pandemic and seize opportunities that were suddenly made available during those times. According to Suzanne Babb and Lorrie Clevenger with WhyHunger, farmers' networks that had already been established adapted their existing practices to pandemic needs. "As the need grew, the networks grew," said Clevenger. "Most of these mutual aid groups existed prior [to the pandemic] but weren't quite as formalized. So as needs changed, or as other needs emerged, they shifted to address that. A lot of this is still going on, specifically around medicinal herbs, because access to [adequate basic health care] and medicine that is affordable is an ongoing need and people are more aware and connected now than they were before."

Under certain conditions, these previously constructed communities were able to have political impact, including on elections and policies. In Philadelphia, AAU leaned on the networks they have been building for nearly four decades, using their organizational relationships, intergenerational leadership, language ability and volunteer base of more than 200 people to respond to the pandemic. They provided supplies and community resources in language, hosted vaccine drives and ramped up their civic engagement work, both for the Asian community and beyond. They persevered even when false narratives targeted and threatened their community.

Wei Chan, AAU's director and a long-time organizer, spearheaded this effort, noting, "We've been working so hard... we pulled all these resources together, but our national and political leaders still called the coronavirus the 'China' virus... so our community had to stand up for itself and everyone relying on us." The impact of their work reverberated through to the 2020 elections, when AAU's outreach contributed to an 11 percent increase in voter turnout among Asian voters. "[That increased turnout] is about the difference between Trump's loss and Biden's win in Pennsylvania," said Alix Webb, AAU's former director. "AAU built on the apparatus that existed before the pandemic, because the city lagged behind in getting the community what it needed. It continues to do this work and will shift back to relying on that infrastructure in 2024."

In Detroit, the People's Water Board, We the People and other groups had been battling against water shut offs well before 2020.² The network had already secured a moratorium on water shut offs in 2019, but were preparing for a new round of shut offs in early 2020 by collecting and storing water to be distributed across the city. Thankfully, in July 2020, Governor Gretchen Whitmer reissued the moratorium on water shut offs, a measure that only happened because of the earlier organizing and advocacy of this grassroots network. In fact, Detroit had one of the longest-standing shut-off moratoriums in the nation, lasting until 2023, when it was supplemented by a water affordability plan.³ As Baker from GBI explained, "It's the community groups, neighbors, people closest to the ground who really jump in and provide that safety net, until people further up on the ladder get their stuff together."

Similarly, one of the reasons the eviction moratorium in Los Angeles stayed in place so long was because it came out of the demands and organizing in low-

income housing communities. According to Vilchis with Union de Vecinos, “Los Angeles was the last city in the country to lift the moratorium on evictions and back rent payments, because LA Tenants Union had been pushing for more radical, out of the box solutions [to the housing crisis] for a long time.” Indeed, it was the organization’s past work that informed its possibilities for the present. Vilchis continued, “The fact that we were here, in the neighborhood, allowed us to respond to the immediacy as we did. Prior organization, prior construction of community, prior relationships allowed us to adapt to the moment. Other organizations were just imagining what was going to happen, while we were fully looking at it and moving in response.”⁴

BECOMING A CENTRAL HUB OF ACTIVITY: CHURCHES AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

A second factor that contributed to a community’s ability to withstand and potentially grow through the crisis was their being part of a flexible ecosystem that could move resources and capacity to meet the needs at hand. This ecosystem often relied on a central or lead organization within a previously

“Prior organization, prior construction of community, prior relationships allowed us to adapt to the moment. Other organizations were just imagining what was going to happen, while we were fully looking at it and moving in response.”

**— Leonardo Vilchis,
Union de Vecinos**

established network of other organizations, which exercised a degree of authority to marshal collective resources towards common goals. As such, the lead organization became the center of gravity for many of the activities that ensued.

Two compelling examples of how these “hubs” functioned during the pandemic come from churches and community schools. Despite the institutional limitations mentioned in Part 3, churches deployed an incredible breadth of resources and capacity to meet pandemic needs. During the shutdown, their buildings and land provided meeting space, storage, housing, parking and places to gather for fellowship, prayer, vaccine administration and mutual aid efforts. As Rev. Pat DuPont from Asbury Church commented, “It was interesting to think about what the [Asbury Church] campus and resources could be used for when the church programming stopped.” Churches organized their buses, cars and other vehicles to provide transportation, pick up and deliver donations, relying on staff, board members and volunteers who remained

committed to being of service. Drawing on their legal status and moral legitimacy, churches provided sanctuary and safe haven for immigrants and the homeless. Church leaders also used their social legitimacy to build relationships with other community leaders, non-profit organizations, government agencies, public officials and community-based institutions, multiplying their resources, capacity and programs ever more.

In Kansas City, Kansas, Bethel Neighborhood Center, became one of these hubs. Bethel is a ministry of the American Baptist Church and serves a diverse population of immigrant communities from Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as poor and low-income residents in the area. Due to the great needs of

their community, they remained open during the pandemic, adapting all their programming and outreach as necessary. As one of the few institutions that did not shut down, Bethel became a central location for several community-based efforts. Their food security program alone distributed over 5000 pounds of food every week. As Mang Sonna, their director, noted, “Every Wednesday, people were lined up, blocking traffic. Just in 2020, we helped more than 23,000 people with their food needs. We’re still serving 10,000 people today.” They also developed capacity and resources in eight different languages, giving Bethel the opportunity to expand their existing outreach and services. They are now preparing to assume a new responsibility — resettling refugees in Kansas City — which they are perhaps more equipped to do coming out of the intense pandemic period.

In New York City, a constellation of five United Methodist churches banded together to act as a single church and shifted “how church was done,” freeing up their capacity dramatically. “Because we were only preaching once every five weeks, we were able to focus on community programs and mutual aid at the church,” said Rev. Lebrón Malavé, whose church, The People’s Church, led these efforts, specifically around food distribution.⁵ In the early months of the pandemic, the People’s Church became one of the largest emergency food pantries in East Harlem, distributing 25 palettes of food and feeding hundreds of people every week. As she recounted, “All the community fridges throughout the boroughs were picking up food from us. We fed mosques, Pentecostal churches, everyone... it was a testament to what was possible when churches aren’t bogged down with the day-to-day practice of religious ritual... [We] had an opportunity to rethink how we do church. The pandemic ripped the [institutional structure of the] church apart. In that space, there was a creativity that was allowed to blossom and flourish.”

Across the board, faith was the motivating factor for these innovations in church practices. “It’s that whole Matthew 25 deal,” said Fr. Lindley, referencing the New Testament passage about caring for the poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), for example, which has over 8,700 churches in its denomination, over 1,200 are designated as “Matthew 25” congregations. By their mission and mandate, they are committed to social justice ministry and could be poised to play a broader role in a movement organized around basic needs.

This commitment is not unique to Presbyterians. According to Pastor Steve Neal, a Baptist minister with the First Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kansas, “There are 2000 verses in the Bible about poverty. It’s the most talked about subject in scripture. If we describe ourselves as committed to following the teachings of Jesus, we have a responsibility to work on poverty.” He continued to say that this theological orientation is embedded in his church’s mission and ministry. “Our congregation’s DNA is to help people. We have 1400 members in our ‘caring connection collaborative’ who are connected around meeting needs. Our way of thinking is that you just do it. You help people. And then figure out how to do it better.”

**“The pandemic ripped the [institutional structure of the] church apart. In that space, there was a creativity that was allowed to blossom and flourish.”
— Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé, The People’s Church**

The community school presented another, non-religious model for these survival hubs. In Massena, New York, MCHS has been a full-service community school since 2016, relying on public funding to integrate wrap-around services that connect students with stable housing, mental health support, heating assistance and more, while promoting educational equity. As Colarusso Martin, the former community school director, explained, “[We] provide students with the support and services they need so they have their best chance at learning.”

Community schools work in close partnership with government agencies, social service providers, employers and all kinds of community-based organizations, some of which are student-led.⁶ Before the pandemic, MCHS had already formed a rapid response team, convening more than two dozen members

“We decided, very intentionally, we don’t know what’s going on in people’s lives and we don’t have to. If parents and caregivers feel like these kids need school supplies...it doesn’t matter where you’re going to school, if you need something, and if we have it, we’ll try to give it to you until we run out. Period.”

— Kristin Colarusso Martin, Massena Community High School

from government agencies, community-based organizations, counselors, teachers and other school staff. In 2020, the team grew to over 100 members as the school was able to “leverage this platform to address various needs that we were aware of among students, families and the community,” said Shane Halladay, former vice principal of MCHS. “We saw others scrambling, but we had a structure in place to respond to people’s needs already. It gave a place for all these people who were looking to help, but didn’t know where to go... [MCHS] was like the center of the universe.”

More recently, the school has started organizing job fairs and back to school events, using their well-known position in the community to provide additional services for students and families. “The goal [of the job fair] was to get kids employed over the summer so they wouldn’t get into trouble,” said Colarusso Martin, “and to teach them about earning money and the value of hard work.” The back-to-school events offered free school supplies, clothing and even haircuts for children returning to class. These events started small, but have quickly grown as word spread throughout the district. “The first year we did it, we had 1,700 people come through

the doors out of 2,500 kids in the district,” said Halladay. “One of the questions we had,” continued Colarusso Martin, “was do we limit this just to Massena students? And if so, do we limit it to low-income students? And we decided, very intentionally, we don’t know what’s going on in people’s lives and we don’t have to. If parents and caregivers feel like these kids need school supplies, it doesn’t matter where they’re coming from. By all means, give them a backpack, some markers, crayons and notebooks. And we had people coming from 40 miles away. Some people showed up three or four hours early. We had social workers bringing families through the line. I had other communities calling me up, asking if they could come. And we said yes, it doesn’t matter where you’re going to school, if you need something, and if we have it, we’ll try to give it to you until we run out. Period.”

• • •

As the examples in this section illustrate, long-term community building and organizing proves critical not only in immediate crisis, but also beyond. The Kairos Center refers to this as establishing “permanently organized communities” that provide for material needs and build power and political consciousness around a shared set of values and vision for society. The pandemic experience suggests considerable potential within churches and community schools to help establish these networks. Despite institutional limitations, their access to resources and capacity exceeds many other forms of organization. Their social and moral legitimacy can also transcend partisan political divides.

As Colarusso Martin commented, “Here in Massena, we’re very blue collar... and pretty conservative. We do have university towns nearby which are more liberal, but I tell [our staff], be like Switzerland. Politics don’t matter. All that matters is the kids and trying to help the kids, period... and, what I’ve experienced, is that everybody can come together on that, even if they grumble a little bit now and then.” If the resources allocated to community schools ever dried up, the void would be palpable in Massena. According to Halladay, “I think [we have been] valuable enough that, if the legislative money runs out, school districts would still be vested in keeping these positions... we are a place for all these people to go... we are a focal point. And I think if the district got rid of the community school now, there would be turmoil within the community. They would want it back.”

- 1 Baker, Rev. Cathlin. "Islanders are Always Ready to Help at a Moment's Notice." *Vineyard Gazette*, September 2022. <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/2022/09/19/islanders-are-always-ready-help-out-moments-notice>.
- 2 Detroit had experienced water shut offs for years, because of debts the water utility owed to Wall Street after issuing public bonds on its water infrastructure. To make its payments, the city utility kept increasing its rates, forcing tens of thousands of residents into water debt. In 2014, the utility terminated water services for 20,000 residents who could not afford to pay the higher rates. Entire blocks of homes lost their access to water overnight, with tragic consequences as children were separated from their parents and families evicted from their homes. In response, community-based organizations, block clubs, churches and other mutual aid associations regularly provided water to households at risk to shut offs. They set up water delivery stations, turned pipes back on in defiance of city law, ran pipes from homes that had water to those that did not and otherwise turned to mutual aid and assistance from as far away as West Virginia and indigenous communities across the Canadian border.
- 3 This plan had also been developed by community-based organizations years before it was enacted.
- 4 This holds true even under further deteriorated conditions. In MADRE's experience in war-torn contexts, "there is no [UN] big, institutional effort that can replace, mimic or match the trust build by local partners over time."
- 5 Founded in 1922 by Puerto Ricans in diaspora, the church has a history of providing for the people. In 1969 and 1970, it was occupied by the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican group with similar politics as the Black Panther Party. They used the church space to provide breakfast programs and daycare for children in the community. The daycare remained open at the church for years.
- 6 MCHS students created a "community closet" during the pandemic, carefully curating donated clothes, personal items and more for students in need. The space was seasonally updated with winter clothes, formal dress clothes, shoes and personal items, allowing fellow students to "shop" in a welcoming environment, all for free.

PART 5: FROM NETWORKS OF CARE TO NETWORKS OF RESISTANCE AND POWER



Ciara Taylor joins other cultural artists and organizers during a cultural organizing retreat.
Photo Credit: Steve Pavey

The first sections of this report applied a theoretical framework for *projects of survival* to *survival strategies* from the pandemic. This final section adds another dimension to that framework: the process through which survival activities are politicized into conscious acts of protest. To do so takes dedicated time and capacity, but can transform these informal networks of care into organized networks of political resistance and power.¹

Indeed, projects of survival must both meet unmet needs and raise the collective consciousness of those involved. As Huey P. Newton wrote of the Black Panther Party's Survival Programs, "All of these programs satisfy the deep needs of the community, but they are not solutions to our problems. That is why we call them survival programs, meaning, survival pending revolution...[they] are not answers or solutions, but they will help us organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of the situation. When consciousness and understanding is raised to a high level, then the community will seize the time and deliver themselves from the boots of their oppressors."

In the Kairos Center's organizing experience and analysis of social movements, there are five core principles that must be engaged to facilitate this process:²

1. **Contextualizing projects of survival within a framework of abundance, asserting that all of our needs can be fully met.**
2. **Centering the leadership of the poor and those most impacted by systemic injustice.**
3. **Prioritizing political education.**
4. **Believing in human decency and goodness.**
5. **Using art and culture strategically to build community and counter-hegemonic power.**

The remainder of this section elaborates on how these principles found expression in pandemic survival strategies.

CONTEXTUALIZING PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF ABUNDANCE

Open Table Nashville (OTN) has been organizing and advocating for unhoused people for nearly fifteen years. Most of its work focuses on the Tent City community, Nashville's largest homeless encampment, which is situated along the Cumberland River. When the 2010 floods destroyed the encampment, Rev. Ingrid McIntyre, an ordained minister who was volunteering at the encampment,

**“Even though we are working against a system, against the Empire, against Pharaoh and Caesar and the powers that be, when gathered and asked, ‘what can we bring,’ we will bring what we have and it is enough. There is enough for all of us.”
— Rev. Ingrid McIntyre, Open Table Nashville**

found herself immediately overwhelmed. “There was 14 feet of water that came up into the encampments... all of these people were displaced from their homes. There weren't a lot of resources, so what do you do?” She continued, “As I think back on it now, I think of the parable of feeding the 5000,³ with the child who gives the loaves and fishes to Jesus. Everybody questions him, like how good will that little bit of food do for all these people. But that child became an organizer, didn't he? With what he started, there was eventually enough. The three or four of us who gathered with those who had lost their homes, none of us had what it took on our own. But when we started reaching out to our community, asking, ‘what do you have? Can you make meals for six weeks? Do you have a van? And those who lost their homes, they brought with them what they had... we ourselves are the loaves and fishes. Even though we are working against a system, against the Empire, against Pharaoh and Caesar and the powers that be, when gathered and asked, ‘what can we bring,’

we will bring what we have and it is enough. There is enough for all of us.”

In other words, once the Nashville organizers realized that the only way to meet the needs at hand was through collective community action, they were able to gather enough.

During the pandemic, when stimulus checks, expanded unemployment insurance, monthly child tax credits payments, moratoriums on evictions, foreclosures and student loan payments and other pandemic programs increased the resources that were on hand, the experience described by Rev. McIntyre unfolded over and over again. Although temporary, the abundance made available through these programs allowed many communities to go above and beyond their usual efforts. OTN used the opportunity to build a medical respite where unhoused people had a place to go, as well as food, shelter and someone to take them to the doctor. As Rev. McIntyre recalled, “People kept telling us that the things that keep us alive aren’t accessible, but I know they are. The question is how do we make them accessible to all of us?... So we built [this village] together. This wasn’t something the city did for us. We had to scrape it together by ourselves.”

As mentioned in Part 3, Cosecha collected \$2 million for its undocumented workers’ fund, turning the extra resources people had from these pandemic programs into financial assistance for those who were excluded from them. “People didn’t know about [our organization], but they wanted to support immigrant workers,” said Cosecha’s Catalina Adorno. Similarly, Massena Community High School’s rapid response team collected countless donations, personal and household goods, school supplies, hotspots and financial resources for their community. “I haven’t been on a [rapid response team] call without a need going addressed within five minutes,” said Halladay.

The dark underside of these everyday miracles was that they revealed an alarming and widespread level of need that predated the pandemic and continues today. As a member of the Philadelphia Homeless Union noted, “If the city was actually providing housing to everyone like they did — temporarily — for some unhoused folks during COVID, there would suddenly be hundreds of thousands of people signing up for that.”

As Ahmed from DRUM commented, this made the pandemic a “humbling experience.” He continued: “The direct aid we did, it’s possible — and it’s a lot of work. In our biggest moments, we reached very limited numbers of people. If we had to do this for a city as a whole, what kind of infrastructure would it require? Our government is not structured that way. It’s very much, ‘survive or die. Good luck to you. You figure it out.’ And while it’s the responsibility of movements to develop these systems, we need them on a much bigger scale...” In their report on these experiences, DRUM called for greater coordination between mutual aid and organizing: “We need to build collective power to oppose the ever-increasing power of systems rooted in our exploitation and death. The relationships built by mutual aid networks represent an untapped potential to organize for the world we deserve.”⁴

CENTERING THE LEADERSHIP OF THE POOR AND THOSE MOST IMPACTED BY SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

In 1967, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was organizing the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign, he preached on the leadership of the poor as a social force that could change the very politics of our nation. “There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose,” he said. “If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life...” The power

of this leadership is both in its proximity to injustice and its collective form, with tens of millions of people acting together to transform their common needs into political demands of our government and society.

In the pandemic survival strategies, centering the leadership of the poor often looked like a “blurring of lines” between those running the survival activity and those participating in it, ensuring that those closest to the need were at the forefront of how that need was being met. At the People’s Church, the “same people on the line [receiving food, clothing or whatever we had] were the people who volunteered with us. It was a mutual effort,” said Rev. Lebrón Malavé. Importantly, these activities were never organized around a single person’s leadership. “The goal was not to have them follow me, but for people to learn how to do this work,” she said. Or as Colarusso Martin from MCHS commented, “This has to be something that can sustain even when the ‘leader ‘isn’t there.” Cosecha, in fact, restructured its organization during the pandemic, with a representative elective body of members from different states that coordinates and strategizes together. As Adorno explained, “The mutual aid work we did during the pandemic brought our base into the decisions that were being made by our organization. The projects of survival prompted conversations about who was doing this work, how it was happening.”

In Chicago, the West Side Heroin and Opioid Task Force began training dealers in harm reduction methods. As Rodriguez described, “My team went to people who were dealing drugs on the street. We would teach them how to use Narcan and Naloxone... that wrinkled some people’s feathers, asking who are you dealing with... and it took a while for them to trust us, but once that saw what we were about, that was it. I remember one dealer saying, ‘Hey can you come over here, there are some guys over here that I know are using heavy. I think it’ll be really good to teach them.’”⁵

Centering the leadership of the poor often runs contrary to social norms, especially in a society that blames poor and oppressed people for their poverty and oppression.

Centering the leadership of the poor often runs contrary to social norms, especially in a society that blames poor and oppressed people for their poverty and oppression. Poor people often hear that, if only they worked harder, prayed more, changed their habits and learned from more successful people, they could work their way out of their miserable conditions.

According to Rev. DuPont, Jesus, who was born homeless and lived among the poor and outcast, faced the same scrutiny as the drug dealers in Chicago when he assumed leadership and began organizing communities against the injustices of empire. As he explained, “[Mark] Chapter 6

starts with Jesus in his hometown, taking the authority to preach, educate and directly address the suffering of the people around him. And this ruffles some feathers. People question who he thinks he is, doing this teaching and healing. They’re resistant to him claiming this authority. They say things like, ‘You’re just a carpenter! You’re just Mary’s kid! You aren’t anybody special. What are you doing here?’ And Jesus just keeps doing it... and then he gathers the twelve disciples around him... and he shares this authority that he’s claimed with them. And he tells them to go out and preach and teach and heal...” As this small group of people continue to assert their leadership by meeting material needs and

preaching “good news” to the poor, they give rise to a “new and unsettling force” among those harmed by the policies and programs of Caesar, a new movement marking the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

Building this kind of movement will take more than “blurring the lines” between serving and served in projects of survival. However, these survival activities can create opportunities for poor and dispossessed people to assume greater leadership in organizing a broad social justice movement for these times.

PRIORITIZING POLITICAL EDUCATION

A catalytic force that can unleash the power potential of the poor is political education — the collective process whereby people connect their individual experiences of injustice to systemic, root causes and develop a shared analysis of power and social change.

Key components of this education process include a study of social movement history, political economy and liberation theology. At Chaplains on the Harbor in rural Washington, Rev. Cedar Monroe and Aaron Scott emphasized how they understood their work with unhoused people “as a way to provide for people’s needs and to use that activity to draw attention to the crises of poverty, homelessness, incarceration and educate our people around the structural realities they face, what was driving that and how to organize against that...” In their experience, meeting people’s needs opened up the space to talk and teach about why people were being evicted from their encampments, brutalized by the police or having their children taken away from them. Survival organizing was both a protest against unjust systems and structures that denied people their basic needs and an opportunity to connect individual experiences to a longer history of resistance and struggle. Their personal stories became part of a broader narrative of tens of millions of poor and dispossessed people in this country, and many, many more in world history, who have organized against these systems and formed poor people’s organizations, social movements and other political organizations to change how society was structured.

Through political education, their personal stories became part of a broader narrative of tens of millions of poor and dispossessed people... who changed how society was structured.

During the pandemic, the possibility of political education was heightened, as many layers of contradiction were exposed over weeks and months of multiplying crises. Health care organizers agitated around why hospitals did not have enough PPE for their staff. Tenant organizers politicized the relationship between tenants and landlords, convincing tenants to put their own interests first and take collective action through rent strikes. According to Ray-Riek, organizers working with unhoused people in Philadelphia talked to these folks about not just working towards a better shelter system, but “abolishing the shelter system... and providing housing for everyone.”

For WhyHunger’s network of emergency food providers, “People were feeling very lost, with no direction from the government, on how to respond, how to

keep themselves safe... emergency food providers were essential workers on the front lines... some food banks [in California] unionized, which we didn't even know was possible," said Babb. Their organization took advantage of the moment to deepen their network's understanding of why they were in such crisis. She continued: "We worked up an 8-point checklist on how to change their work from a charity model to one based in root causes. There was an openness to dig into these issue...how capitalism contributes to hunger, people were ready to have this conversation."

Taking advantage of this possibility requires dedicated resources, a cadre of leaders who are trained and committed to this responsibility and the time to implement the process. Yet, the demands of the pandemic sometimes made it impossible to allocate precious capacity in this way. "We could have done more with education, building our leadership base, discussing how power works...it's a key component [of organizing] but we just didn't have capacity to do all of this," one organizer told us.

Some organizations implemented more creative forms of popular pedagogy to overcome these challenges. Detroit Will Breathe and the General Baker institute organized public tribunals and inter-generational exchanges to engage communities around the conditions they were facing and their systemic root causes. The Nelsonville community dinners in Ohio brought issues like voter suppression from the city council to the dinner table, where those who were typically on the outside of these discussions were able to participate in them in an environment built on trust and care. In East Harlem, the People's Church relied on the parables of Jesus to reinterpret their survival work. "The parables weren't just a story, but actively what we were doing. That was our story, week in, week out," said Rev. Lebrón Malavé.

In doing so, they reminded participants that they were not merely victims of injustice, but agents of history who can change what is politically possible.

BELIEVING IN HUMAN DECENCY AND GOODNESS

An important social and political corollary to meeting immediate material needs through projects of survival is believing in and appealing to basic notions of human decency and goodness. After all, a precondition to creating a society that ensures our full flourishing is first believing that everybody is *deserving* of that abundant life and that everybody means *everybody*. Across time and place, in times of crisis and uncertainty, regular people rise to the occasion to lend a hand to their communities. As chronicled in this report, this goodness was evident in the first weeks and months of the pandemic, as health care professionals and essential workers cared not just for their own families but to ensure that whole communities had sufficient food and necessities to weather difficult times. These survival projects, in fact, gave many different people the opportunity to lend a hand, respond to community needs and help construct the world they believed everyone deserved.

A critical learning from this process is how important it is to recognize that so many people want things to be better than they are, have a belief that things can get better and are prepared to help make them so. As Krinks from Open Table Nashville said, "people have a decency to them, where there is a chance to show it." This is true for those in need as well as those helping to fill those

needs. Indeed, despite the institutional and systemic failures of the pandemic, the wellspring of kindness, strength and integrity in hundreds of communities brought renewed faith in our ability to make a new world possible.

In Philadelphia, for example, despite the racist vitriol and violence that Asian communities were experiencing — as politicians fanned the fires of xenophobia and anti-Asian hate — Asian Americans United continued to provide for their members and the ongoing needs of other communities. According to Chan, “Many people don’t understand why we’re doing this... but it’s because we want to show our humanity, how we support each other in this difficult moment... that we immigrants came to this country not just for ourselves. We want to be good neighbors to you, too.”

For the disability community, the pandemic allowed for greater integration of their members and leadership in the social justice landscape. As West with New Disabled South explained, “[It] has been a struggle for movements to understand our community’s needs and demands. While we’re still not where we want to be, there is broadly more solidarity with [the disability community] now... folks understand we can’t leave anyone behind.

People understand that COVID is disabling, that there is a risk for everyone and that people who are at high risk should still be able to be [in community].”

Expanding and building a community where everyone is in and nobody is out, and where we fight for and with each other, is, at its core, a form of resistance against social constructs and institutional barriers that keep us divided and unable to see our shared interests. Alexander from MADRE described this practice of building connection across these divisions as the “sustainable movement infrastructure we need for greater social transformation... The connections we make in these moments of crisis are the basis of building the beloved community....and building the [collective] muscle of holding each other, reminding each other it doesn’t have to be this way, as we continue to try to build a world that we have never seen.” Or as Rev. Tañón-Santos commented, “How do we do this work every day? We deal with hope, justice and love, even when nobody else believes in it.”

USING ART AND CULTURE STRATEGICALLY TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC POWER

A central element of projects of survival is reclaiming the fullness of our humanity, including our identity as artists and cultural creators. Expressing our values and vision of society through cultural modalities is itself a project of survival because it ensures that our voices, stories and lives are not erased. This includes our identity as artists and cultural creators. Indeed, expressing our values and vision of society through cultural modalities is a project of survival because it ensures that our voices, stories and lives are not erased.

“While we’re still not where we want to be, there is broadly more solidarity with [the disability community] now... folks understand we can’t leave anyone behind.”

**— Dom Kelly,
New Disabled South**

Anu Yadav is a Los Angeles-based artist and organizer with the We Cry Justice Arts Collective. In her two decades of cultural organizing, she has relied on storytelling, theatre, music and visual art to build community and break through false narratives about poverty. In her experience, when deployed with intention and purpose, “culture can change how we organize and even what we mean by that.” As Charon Hribar, Director of Cultural Strategies at the Kairos Center, elaborated, “Culture can make sure our individual struggles aren’t dismissed as being marginal or isolated experiences of a few people. When we bring our stories together — through music, visual art, poetry, ritual and storytelling — we reveal the contradictions of a broader system at work, while also tapping into the possibility of seeing ourselves as part of the 140 million people who are poor and dispossessed, living just one crisis away from disaster.”

During the pandemic, cultural interventions and practices held the unique ability to connect with a deeper level of our collective consciousness, from our fears and trauma to our dreams of the lives we wanted to live and believed we deserve. As Hasan described, “The power of culture is that it touches something that is already inside us... it is a version of call and response.” She continued, “If a stranger, a complete stranger, walked by and said, ‘agoo,’ I would ‘amee,’” referencing the West African call-and-response greeting.⁶

The role of cultural organizing was also elevated because of its inherent flexibility. Rachel Schragis is an artist and co-lead cultural strategist with Look Loud. She and others had been planning for Earth Day 2020, when everything shut down.

**“We realized that we could teach people how to wheat paste... drop banners out their windows. We can turn our ‘hype tactics’ into community tactics for organizing.”
— Rachel Schragis, Look Loud**

“We can’t gather in person anymore,” said Schragis, “and we don’t think anyone’s going to care about Earth Day, but we’re still going to fight for climate justice, so what do we do? And then we realized that we could teach people how to wheat paste. We can teach people how to drop banners out their windows. We can turn our ‘hype tactics’ into community tactics for organizing in the pandemic.” As her co-lead, Yoder, explained, “The pandemic [facilitated] the same conditions for a resurgence of street art that you would have had in the Arab Spring in Egypt, or any time that you have like lockdowns in the streets, usually under authoritarian [regimes]: what was on the physical walls, outside, started to become very impactful and instead of focusing on taking all

of our supporters and putting them in the same place, [organizers began to] focus on taking all of our support and making it visible out there, everywhere.” Their toolkits on these tactics, adapted for the pandemic, were used by the Sunrise Movement, the Movement for Black Lives and other protest movements throughout 2020 and the years that followed.

These adaptations also challenged organizers to think about how actions were organized, so to include those who were not gathered together in the same space. As Yoder described, “The banners need to be legible to people who aren’t standing right next us, the way the crowd is set up needs to be visible to people who aren’t physically present, so the rest of the world can feel and participate in this.” Car caravans, virtual banners and video campaigns were other forms that applied

these tactics to expand the look, voice and presence of those involved in public actions and protests.⁷

When the Kairos Center's cultural team moved their organizing space for musicians online, they quickly realized that their virtual community of song leaders could absorb more people, broaden its reach and grow its capacity better than they were able to do in person. As Hribar told us, "Musicians from different social justice struggles had been asking to learn songs from each other, to build connections across the movements for housing, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights and other movements from earlier periods in time, through song, to use in the streets. We called this space 'Songs in the Key of Resistance,' or SKOR, and we would rewrite lyrics to bring all of these histories together. When we couldn't be in the same physical space [because of COVID], we realized we could do the same thing online to show a strong unified voice, even though we were isolated in the moment. One thing we found was that leaders in the art and culture work who have disabilities participated more, too. They have insisted on keeping hybrid organizing spaces open, pushing us to think about how we continue to grow the community of people who are engaged in this work." Since 2020, SKOR has created videos for the Climate Strike, the Poor People's Campaign, as well as ongoing campaigns for peace and justice.⁸

Other cultural tactics that were connected to pandemic survival strategies included storytelling at community meals, organizing soccer games, using specific language and food or re-interpreting the parables of Jesus around food distribution and mutual aid. These cultural forms of expression also connected survival activities to a broader context and history, beyond their immediate time and place. The Nelsonville community became representative of the town as a whole, immigrant communities came together from being hours apart, high school students in Massena developed a greater understanding of the indigenous people around them and The People's Church found community with the poor and dispossessed people of the Bible.

As Ciara Taylor, a cultural organizer with SKOR and the Kairos Center commented, "Culture illustrates your politics. Cultural strategy must translate individual experiences into collective power. It isn't about the best singers being the performers or the trained artists creating the coolest looking thing. The way we create culture in organizing must build political collectivity and leadership through art, song and ritual."⁹ In fact, both a project of survival and a way to support other projects of survival, cultural organizing is crucial to the strategic development of social and political movements. For example, SKOR has brought together different fronts of struggle through song, building trust across their leadership and collective consciousness across their membership.

Despite this power potential, art and culture remain on the edges of our organizing. "We can go really quick to logistics and roles and power mapping," said Hasan, leaving art and culture to the side. Sometimes this means culture is, more or less, "filling a gap between comms and organizing," said Yoder, instead of occupying a more central strategic role. This is a detriment to our movements, which often struggle to effectively engage and sustain collective action. Or as Taylor writes, they "risk losing momentum or [fail] to mobilize broad support."¹⁰

This is in part because, according to Yadav, "the realm of cultural production, and how we do it, is subject to a stranglehold by the ruling class. There is so much elitism, classism and oppression woven into who gets to be an artist." To confront

this challenge, Schragis suggested that the role of the artist be reframed entirely. As she told us, “Visual artists are trained to believe that the greatest honor is to have our work in a museum and we orient our work around the dream of our name up on the wall. But what if, instead, the greatest honor was to have my work held up in the street? When I dream that way, it shifts how I work. It teaches me to take pride in the depth of my collaborations and in my ability to listen and synthesize what my community needs me to say, rather than what I say on my own.”

• • •

While the primary work of survival organizing is to meet unmet needs, transforming these activities into conscious political resistance takes an additional process, which intentionally confronts and dismantles the narratives, beliefs and social constructs that have shaped our lives and communities for generations. These are not simply stories we are told, but deeply held beliefs that inform our understanding of ourselves and society as a whole. To push back on them requires using every available mechanism at hand, to not only inspire, but sustain collective action and reinforce our commitment to social change.

“If I close my eyes, what I hear is my own story and my family’s story. I never knew that I had poor white brothers and sisters.”

— Idalin Bobé, We Cry Justice Arts Collective

In particular, cultural strategy holds unrealized potential to connect the experiences of the 140 million poor and low-income people in this country. Language, song, imagery, icons and ritual must all be deployed to develop a coherent political narrative that can reach thousands of communities, preparing them to take action together around their common needs and demands.

Over several decades of work, the Kairos Center has seen how cultural exchange alongside projects of survival can bring diverse communities together. In 2017, we brought a delegation of poor and low-income leaders to

rural Washington state to meet with Chaplains on the Harbor and learn more about their organizing within the unhoused community. During the visit, the community organized a funeral for one of their unhoused members who was killed by the police (and the denial of health care). Our delegation joined in the preparations, playing Amazing Grace on the piano, serving food and listening to family members. One member of the delegation was Idalin Bobé, a young Black and Puerto Rican woman who grew up in Kensington, Philadelphia, one of the poorest communities in the city. After the funeral, she said, “If I close my eyes, what I hear is my own story and my family’s story. I never knew that I had poor white brothers and sisters.”

- 1 In this context, “political” does not necessarily refer to political parties or elections, but our awareness of power, how it works in society and our ability to influence that power in our favor.
- 2 These principles have also been part of the various political formation processes of historic social movements, including the ones listed in Part 1 of this report.
- 3 In this parable, Jesus and his disciples are faced with the challenge of feeding 5,000 people with virtually nothing. A child offers them two loaves of bread and five fishes, which is ridiculed and dismissed by the disciples, but Jesus uses these humble gifts to feed the multitude.
- 4 Access DRUM’s PASS Report here: <https://www.drumnyc.org/passreport/>.
- 5 West Virginia Can’t Wait followed a similar approach when they designed a program to acknowledge people who were on the streets saving lives, among others, as “hometown heroes,” especially those doing so under increasingly repressive and difficult conditions.
- 6 In one application of this approach, Hasan used the Biblical form of the Psalms as a call-and-response tactic for a virtual action for Palestine. She explained: “[The Psalm] was an expression of God formation; [we all] rewrote Psalms in accessible language, filling in the blanks online. By the end, we co-created a Psalm in the context of our faith and a free Palestine. The Psalm was the cultural driver, the call, and the response was to fill in the content.”
- 7 Hribar described how this transition impacted the work that she and other cultural organizers were carrying out with the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival: “In November 2019, we hosted a major art build at a national convening, where we brought together artists and community folks to create a bunch of art that they could take back and use towards mobilizing a major event for June 2020. We taught people how to do the screen printing, banner making and prepared folks who, even if they didn’t claim themselves as artists, were playing this role in their state committees. Then the pandemic happened and live art making wasn’t possible anymore. We had to adapt for the virtual world, but the size of what you make changes in a virtual space versus a real space. So we made a virtual banner that said ‘everybody has the right to live, in a time of pandemic.’”
- 8 For more cultural resources, visit www.kairoscenter.org/.
- 9 For more on this analysis, see, Taylor, Ciara. “How Cultural Strategy Drives Long-Term Change.” *The Forge*, October 2024. <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/how-cultural-strategy-drives-long-term-change>
- 10 Taylor, Ciara. “How Cultural Strategy Drives Long-Term Change.” *The Forge*, October 2024. <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/how-cultural-strategy-drives-long-term-change>

CONCLUSION



Pauline Pisano marches alongside Tony Eskridge in Memphis, Tennessee.
Photo credit Steve Pavey.

This report draws on the experience of pandemic-era survival organizing to suggest a two-dimensional model toward building a national network of projects of survival. The first dimension focuses on the concrete activity of meeting unmet needs; and the second develops a process of political formation to transform these activities into conscious political resistance.

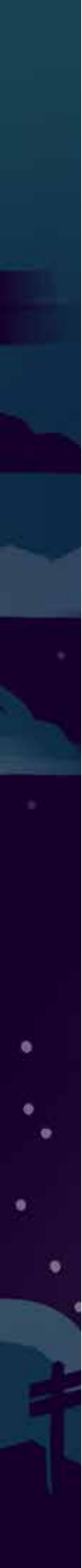
To develop such a network, we offer the following recommendations for organizers, faith leaders, community leaders and funders (described more fully in the Executive Summary):

- 1. Recognize the importance of connecting the activity of meeting material needs to political organizing and building community power.**
- 2. Start engaging in survival organizing, especially for community-based organizations that are not currently doing so.**
- 3. “Rethink church” in these times.**
- 4. Build relationships with networks that can multiply a single organization’s impact.**
- 5. Recognize cultural creation as both a project of survival and a way to support and build other projects of survival in community.**
- 6. Finally, for funders and philanthropy, support base-building, cultural organizing, political education and social justice ministry that is connected to meeting material needs for the long haul.**

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, survival organizing has continued en masse, in response to ongoing effects of the pandemic, as well as climate crisis, hunger, housing insecurity, the denial of health care, police violence, deportation defense, increasing militarism and other systemic failures of our society. As Vilchis from Union de Vecinos remarked, “Health crisis, housing crisis, all of these crises are still there. The material conditions have not changed, we just have less money and are more disorganized. The risk of losing your life to COVID is less, but your job doesn’t pay enough to cover rent or other costs of living. For many of us, life has gotten worse, but we’re not coughing as loud.”

This is particularly true for poor, low-income and marginalized communities. Cosecha will be “depending on projects of survival even more,” said Adorno, especially as it anticipates more intense attacks on undocumented people. Sycamore Collaborative is expecting hunger to continue to grow in its community. “We will hit the ‘million meal’ mark soon,” said Rev. Tañón-Santos, “and there has to be a way that we can foresee this happening and figure out how to prepare.” In Kansas City, the Bethel Neighborhood Center does not want to be “surprised... we need to be more prepared than ever,” said Sonna. Under a second Trump administration, these and other communities are also facing dramatic cuts to social welfare programs, precipitous climate breakdown, greater repression from militarized police and law enforcement and a regressive, anti-democratic political movement.

In this context, a vast network of projects of survival can play an increasingly essential role in keeping our communities safe, while politicizing and preparing grassroots communities to take coordinated action together as part of a broader social movement. Whether through mutual aid, ministry or community organizing, meeting material needs is an act of resistance in a society that punishes the poor for their poverty and misery — and prioritizes billionaires over the rest of us. If and when these efforts can be connected, scaled up and strategically organized, projects of survival can anchor the call for a society where all of our needs are met, today, tomorrow and for generations to come.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was motivated by a need to slow down and absorb some of the lessons of the pandemic — lessons about resilience, community strength and collective action. It is a reflection of the community members, faith leaders, artists and cultural workers, scholars, researchers and people of conscience whose relentless efforts since the pandemic are revealing new ways to organize against poverty, systemic injustice and regressive narratives, theologies and politics today. It was made possible with support from the American Baptist Home Mission Societies and the Colombe Foundation.

We extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who participated in the research process and shared their experiences, particularly those engaged in the thick of survival work, from small farm initiatives to faith-based ministries, from urban educational programs to rural outreach efforts, from community dinners to art builds and song circles. Each story and insight has been critical to the analysis in this report, with lessons that are increasingly necessary in the times ahead. We also acknowledge the hard-fought lessons from freedom fighters who came before us, for whom survival organizing was a political and moral necessity, through which they carried forward earlier generations of struggle.

Special thanks are due to Kairos staff who were pivotal to this process: Dr. Charon Hribar, Ana G. Lara López and Rev. Dr. Jessica Williams, who ensured the thorough execution of our survey and subsequent research, as well as Dr. Adam Michael Barnes, Ciara Taylor and Noam Sandweiss-Back for their insightful comments and review; and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis for her guidance and political direction, as well as her thoughtful foreword. We are grateful, too, for the graphic designers who contributed to this project: Josh Yoder (Look Loud) for the cover illustration and Carolyn Stillwell (Stillwell Design) for the report design.

Finally, we are thankful for a new and upcoming generation of faith and social justice leaders, artists and organizers, who are on the frontlines of the struggles for reproductive rights, gender justice, immigrant rights, housing, health care, public education, peace in the world, a tolerant and robust democracy and thriving planet. Through your clarity and commitment to equity, truth and justice, we see new possibility and hope. We, too, believe that we will win.

*"If you surround yourself with the people,
you will know what to do."*
Leonardo Vilchis, Union de Vecinos

