

# **A Wildfire Sheds Light: Mutual Aid Is Everyone's Future**

Yellow Scene

Will We Change or Will We Burn?

Everywhere in the US decades of public funding cuts are a fact of life.

At present, governmental sources of crisis support, though they are crucial, are unlikely to ever be sufficient. Community-built systems of mutual aid may, as Dean Spade argues, be the key to a sustainable future, an alternative to “uneven suffering followed by species extinction.”

The strenuous efforts of officials and emergency personnel in response to the Marshall Fire were both necessary and outstandingly helpful. Boulder County immediately began daily press conferences. Within a few short days, a large Disaster Assistance Center was set up in the nearby town of Lafayette, offering emergency food and financial assistance as well as basic consultations on issues like property loss and insurance claims.

Nonprofits soon arrived, such as United Policyholders, an insurance consumer advocacy organization that connected numerous residents with volunteers who had gone through similar experiences. The Red Cross was on hand distributing COVID tests. Still, it wasn't nearly enough. Clearly, a different infrastructure would have been useful, one that doesn't rely on neoliberal institutions — shaped by free-market policies favoring deregulation and defunding.

So, what would “mutual aid” — also called “community networks of care” or “social reproduction” — mean in Boulder County? For Spade, mutual aid is different than philanthropy or volunteerism because of its critical edge committed to “exposing and resisting the root causes of crisis conditions” to “expand solidarity and build movements.”

In this approach, the project of helping one another, not just in response to hardship, but on a daily basis,

is linked with societal and personal well-being. As Spade explains, “Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.”

This kind of mutual aid involves creating and sharing the means of surviving and thriving. Mutual aid, then, does not equate to the one-way offerings that have made such a profound difference for so many Marshall survivors, but it does point toward future possibilities for developing community sustenance, the roots of which we can see in survivors’ stories.

At present in Boulder County, several mutual aid organizations are working together, including SAFE Boulder, Boulder Valley Mutual Aid, and Food Not Bombs. Members of SAFE Boulder describe the current topography of mutual aid as “a mixture of hardcore anti-capitalists and more socially democratic folks, most of whom have put down some degree of roots in the area.” SAFE Boulder’s major focus is on supporting people experiencing homelessness during the city’s current camping ban.

Events surrounding the Marshall Fire show that robust systems of mutual support are both needed and possible. However current political climates in towns like Superior and Louisville do not favor signing on for these projects, even with capitalism’s declining popularity.

If mutual aid is to expand in such suburban enclaves — without merely reinforcing class privilege — what might it look like? The goal, as Spade puts it, is to provide “aid that is actually determined by the participants through sharing local wisdom and useful practices, not rolling out standardized solutions that inevitably enforce exclusions.” Mutual aid needs to be collectively self-defined in each location, not just geographically but culturally and socially.

As Spade goes on to say, the local “is the scale where we meet disaster and political opportunity.”

What’s more — and anyone reading this in pleasure-obsessed Boulder County should listen up — people who explore mutual aid may find that they enjoy it. As Rebecca Solnit shows in “A Paradise Built in Hell,” helping one another — obviously its own reward, one would hope — can also give people the long-term emotional sustenance of “an incredible sense of joy, and power and connection.”

With everything to gain and learn, it’s helpful that some research and guidance exists on getting started. Step one for fostering mutual aid will be to bridge capitalist society’s built-in isolation — beyond participation on the Nextdoor app, with its tendency toward NIMBYist vitriol against the unhoused

community. As Spade explained, our separateness is a major obstacle to collective human well-being.

The sprawling suburban foundations on which many American cities are built often leads to loneliness. Rebecca Solnit describes such alienation as in itself a disaster, a daily one. The fallout from the Marshall Fire shows that this is true not only for the marginalized but for those who benefit from wealth and opportunity.