

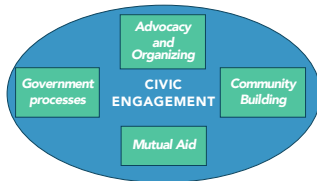
Mutual Aid Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Strengthening Civic Infrastructure in East Boston through Community Care

Lo que la pandemia del COVID-19 nos enseñó sobre el apoyo mutuo: **Cómo fortalecer la infraestructura cívica en East Boston mediante el cuidado comunitario**

RESEARCH PARTNERS

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

Background and Research Design/Questions



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In a 2022 report with 8 community partners (*Grounded and Interconnected in the Pandemic: Community engagement and organizing adaptations from COVID response efforts in Metro Boston*), we learned that mutual aid emerged as a civic engagement strategy.

This 2023-24 project worked with 5 community partners in East Boston to explore how mutual aid efforts strengthened and emerged during the pandemic and how they have impacted civic infrastructure. Our questions:

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

DESIGN & METHODS

- Partner Convenings: Three 2-hour convenings were held in March, June, and October 2023 and conducted with simultaneous translation in English and Spanish. We reflected on the pandemic and the mutual aid efforts that emerged. The final gathering shared preliminary findings from the interviews and discussed the possible trajectories of mutual aid in East Boston.
- Interviews: Over summer 2023, the Tufts team conducted interviews of with 20 individuals involved in mutual aid in East Boston. Interviews lasted from 25 minutes to over an hour. Ten interviews were conducted in English and ten in Spanish.



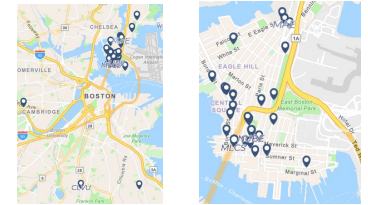
Key Findings

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



Mutual Aid and Community Care Activities		
Need	Category	Action
Basic Materials	Food	Deliver food and wash to distribution sites and directly to people's homes
		Share recipes for the ingredients received through food distribution
	Secure culturally appropriate foods	
	Shop for one another and offer their wholesale memberships	
Housing	Provide furniture for homes	
	Raise money with social centers to support displaced families	
Goods	Support people to apply for rental assistance and prevent eviction	
	Direct people to resources for displacement support	
Financial, Employment, and Business Development	Money	Provide diapers for babies
	Jobs	Provide referral funds, particularly for underserved populations
	Education	Distribute money from people who donated their intrinsic check to the cause
	Incubators	Get people hired to help City food relief efforts with YMCA and schools
Access to and Education about, and Advocacy for Resources	Health	Support developing cooperatives and having cooperative produce made and food with respect of some money, materials, and equipment and then giving away part of products to serve those in need and allow some selling to generate income
	Safety	Support access to tests, health care kits and information about vaccines
	Technology	Make referrals to health care
	Information	Distribute flyers and videos to prevent and address domestic violence
Navigating systems	Language Justice	Provide access to diverse cultural institutions
		Provide digital literacy and youth programs where youth create journals or produce items to sell
	Language Education	Get people paid so they could join virtual organizing meetings
		Reach out and educate people on the eviction moratorium
Creating and Sustaining Community, Healing, Wellness	Guidance	Provide workshops on local programs
		Support on occupancy people to visit
	Transportation	Help people fill out unemployment applications and other government program forms
		Help with English interpretation
Transportation	Education	Provide language lesson a connection for language isolated residents.
		Support bilingual teachers
	Transportation	Hold open hours on Fridays where neighbors can stop by to chat, ask for help, etc.
		Hold open hours on Fridays where neighbors can stop by to chat, ask for help, etc. "... una conexión para ellos, para que se ayudara mucho lo del idioma, que es lo que más le falta a la gente que viene, la gente que habla español, que es lo que más le falta" (Being a connection to them, the language has really helped me, it's what I love best)

Community Context



East Boston has been a working-class community with a large concentration of Latinx immigrants and other people of color and immigrants. This neighborhood of over 45,000 is about two-thirds people of color, including 55% Latinx. Almost half (46%) are foreign-born, which is the highest among Boston neighborhoods, while one-third are not US citizens. More than half (51.9%) speak Spanish at home.

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



Grassroots community groups	Social service organizations	Government and Public Institutions	Local Business
Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE)	Mothers out Front*	YMCA	Chanel Fish
Centro Cooperativo de Desarrollo y Solididad (CCDS)	Harborkeepers*	East Boston Social Center	East Boston High School
City Life Vida Urbana (CLUJ)	Eastie Farm*	East Boston Neighborhood Health Center	East Boston Main Streets
Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)	Mutual Aid Eastie Network (MAE)	East Boston Branch of the Public Library	East Boston Chamber of Commerce
Centro Presente	Pueblo Unido de East Boston (PUEBLO) Coalition	Department of Neighborhoods	Mayor's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
East Boston Community Council (EBCC)	Maverick Landing Community Services (MLCS)	City Councilor Julia Mello	Veronica Robles Cultural Center
	Zamra	Rep. Andrea Hanks	Our Sacred Lutheran Church
	Eastie Coalition		
	East Boston Community Stop		
	Sabian Boys and Girls Club		



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