



# MUTUAL AID AND MUTUAL CONFIDENCE IN RICHMOND

*By* Jahd Khalil

**N**ear the interchange of Interstates 64 and 95, and separated by railroad tracks and razor wire from Richmond's juvenile detention center, there's a small complex that resembles a kind of industrial equivalent of a strip mall. After expanding into one of the suites here last September, the volunteers of Mutual Aid and Disaster Relief Richmond (MAD RVA) were able to ratchet up capacity. But the decision to move wasn't without debate.

Their previous space was in a coffee roaster. The public-facing café's aesthetic lies between wrought iron and reclaimed wood. When the pandemic closed the café's doors to the public, the owners offered the group a space to store and package goods before they're distributed. But there was not enough room to socially distance or rest, and relief was in high demand. When the current, larger space in the industrial complex became available, some volunteers were concerned about right-wing people there menacing the group, which is not short on queer or BIPOC volunteers.

The manner in which Tamanna Kaur Sohal told me about the

disagreement among the volunteers underlined the fact that the organization was unlike any NGO, if you could consider it one at all (at least in the conventional sense). For starters, she is not speaking on behalf of MAD RVA in an official capacity. She might have this role without a title: the group purports to be a horizontal organization in which members take on responsibilities. Even if Sohal's an unofficial spokesperson, the transparency with which she talks about disagreements is not one you'd find in more institutional aid organizations.

“We ended up moving there because the other fact is like, Nazis are everywhere,” she said. She also noted that the group's old space was in a neighborhood that's been criticized as a gentrified area and that their presence could be contributing to the problem. White volunteers, she said, might have to defend the space if it materialized as a bigger issue. “You can punch the Nazis. I know you have that patch on your jean jacket.”

Sohal says many of the group's 100-odd volunteers are reading Dean Spade's book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)*<sup>3</sup>. The term itself is attributed to another book, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, which the 19th-century Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin wrote “as a scientific rebuttal to Charles Darwin.” In the 118 years since that book's publication, there have been plenty of examples of mutual aid, Spade says. He even goes far enough to say that “we see examples of mutual aid in every single social movement.” More contemporary organized large-scale examples of mutual aid include disaster relief after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The current manifestation of Richmond's mutual aid group came out of a bus that has provided relief during cold weather since 2018. The links and coordination were already in place when thousands came out to protest racism

in the wake of George Floyd’s killing by police. Like other places around the country, Richmond’s organized mutual aid efforts were especially energized by volunteers, donations, and dozens of people who were out of work, volunteers said.

On the Saturday morning before Thanksgiving, a few volunteers wearing gloves and masks unloaded groceries from volunteers’ cars, wiped them down with MadaCide, and added them to shelves. They use a web-based app that a volunteer developed to track the movement of the kinds of items people request from these shelves to a spread of several dozen paper bags on tables. Each order serves about three people and costs about \$50. In addition to the groceries there’s fresh produce from a walk-in cooler the volunteers built themselves as well as household cleaners. There’s also a pile of donated space heaters and plastic bins of toys.

Traditional Thanksgiving dinner ingredients are missing, except for green beans. Volunteers attributed that to a lack of capacity, not any political disagreement with the celebration of the holiday. It is doubtful that the DIY walk-in could hold as many turkeys as there are paper bags.

On a table near the shift coordinator’s workstation is a wire letter tray with envelopes used for the organization’s mini-grants. They’ve given out \$144,000 to 1,100 people but haven’t taken or applied for grants of their own. “Mainly because they’re annoying,” Sohal said. “But it is really important to us that we’re not falling into the grant pool. We want to really stay true to ourselves. We don’t want to lie to these grant givers about the work that we’re doing.”

But MAD RVA also doesn't fit neatly into the trope of the leftist collective splintering over ideological purity in practice. The group buys from Walmart and utilizes Amazon. Compromises happen, but not without self-awareness.

"It's a balance, I guess," Sohal said. "I don't know anybody locally who's milling their own toilet paper. It was just a matter of what is practical right now. We're still trying to be really intentional with every relationship we're building and everything we're doing on a small scale because there's only so many things that we can write off as convenience."

How much and in what ways Richmond's mutual aid participants interact with what they describe as the problem—businesses and the state—will probably change. The national organization, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, has 501(c)(3) status to enable tax-exempt donations. Maybe that's necessary for the scale of the problem. In April unemployment figures in Richmond were four times as large as the year before. Those numbers have improved, but even a larger MAD RVA hasn't been able to meet demand. But for now, the Richmond branch doesn't think leveraging official nonprofit status is worth it. Even then grocers have their own bureaucracies, said Larissa Goalder, another volunteer who looked into getting donations from Trader Joe's. And Sohal says nonprofit status is its own trap.

"A big part of nonprofits operating as nonprofits is that they never envisioned that their work ends. . . . Well, we want those things to end and we want everybody to have enough."

*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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