

# The community-led movement creating hope in the time of coronavirus

March 26 2020, by Sango Mahanty

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Credit: Neil Hall/EPA

The global COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the social networks we rely on. Workplaces, pubs, restaurants and gyms have closed and many people are now housebound.

COVID-19 represents a major rupture in the status quo and calls for new forms of response. Perhaps this is why thousands of new "mutual aid" groups have sprung up internationally. Many of these groups have

swelled to [several thousand members within a few days](#).

Such community-driven groups use diverse communication platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp and letterbox leafleting, to provide safe and inclusive ways for people to network during illness and self-isolation. At a neighborhood or street level they help each other, particularly vulnerable people, with grocery collection, walking pets, emotional support and more.

But the rapid growth of this movement creates a steep learning curve for group organizers. Just as in wider society, mutual aid groups must grapple with political differences and structural inequality. Groups in Australia can look to those overseas to learn how to overcome these challenges.

## **What do mutual aid groups do?**

Co-author of this article, Nisha Phillipps, co-founded the [Haringey COVID-19 Mutual Aid group](#). It is one of [many such groups in Britain](#) and has a membership of more than 3,300.

The Facebook group links its members to neighborhood groups that coordinate volunteers. It also shares topical information, such as detail on London's lockdown measures, online [mental health services](#) and help for tenants facing eviction.

One of the largest similar groups to emerge in Australia is [Love Your neighbor Melbourne](#) which, at the time of writing had more than 9,285 members.

A [Canberra mutual aid group](#) is helping do grocery runs, and [reportedly even received offers from](#) plumbers to fit bidets for people who couldn't buy toilet paper.

## Lessons to be learned

In the fast-moving context of the [coronavirus](#), these groups can learn from each other by sharing approaches to their challenges.

Mutual aid—in the sense of voluntary cooperation for a common purpose—has [deep historical roots](#) and can mean different things to different people.

In medicine and social work, mutual support groups are set up by professionals to help those living with particular [health and social risks](#). But mutual aid groups initiated by [grassroots activists](#) focus on addressing gaps or harm caused by state services through community-building.

This means members of a new mutual aid group may arrive with differing expectations of the group's goals and approach, so clarifying this is important.

**HELLO!** If you are self-isolating, I can help.

**My name is**  
.....

**I live locally at**  
.....

**My phone number is**  
.....

**If you are self-isolating due to COVID-19 I can help with:**

<input type="checkbox"/> Picking up shopping	<input type="checkbox"/> Posting mail
<input type="checkbox"/> A friendly phone call	<input type="checkbox"/> Urgent supplies

Just call or text me and I'll do my best to help you (for free!)

**Coronavirus is contagious. Please take every precaution to ensure you are spreading only kindness. Avoid physical contact (2m distance). Wash your hands regularly. Items should be left on your doorstep.** **#ViralKindness**

A leaflet distributed by a group offering support during the coronavirus emergency. Author provided

The Haringey group's Facebook page states its goal as "supporting members of the community who are immunocompromized or self-isolating" through an approach that "coordinates but does not dictate" how groups organize themselves at the street and neighborhood level.

Their decentralized approach allows groups to use diverse communication systems, such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Slack, email or SMS, depending on what best suits a specific neighborhood or street.

## Dealing with difference

Cooperation and community-building are a welcome salve to the individualistic waves of panic-buying and "[shopping rage](#)" we've seen of late.

But communities are complex, and reflect the diversity and structural inequalities of wider society. Factors such as ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, gender or access to technology means some people's [voices are excluded, or they are denied opportunities](#).

Haringey draws on accountability guidelines from the community organization [Incite](#). These affirm the principles of respect, care and solidarity and lay out how to address discriminatory conduct. This follows a "[transformative justice](#)" approach. A facilitator talks to the people involved, to address the harm caused.

The large and decentralized communities that comprise most COVID-19 mutual aid groups encompass diverse political leanings, from which differences of opinion emerge.

In one Canberra group for example, heated online debate broke out over a post proposing a "rent strike" to deal with job and income losses from COVID-19 lock-downs. This rift largely took place along socio-economic lines, between renters and homeowners/landlords.

Many groups, like Haringey, have an explicit community-centered stance, independent of government. For example, Haringey Council asked for volunteer lists but group administrators did not provide them, as they do not maintain a centralized list and preferred to continue a community-centered approach. Many members do not want direct engagement with police and neighborhood watch groups, as this might disenfranchise homeless people or undocumented residents.

Where there are differences of opinion on these matters, they are discussed openly. Principles of community-building, solidarity and independence are important reference points in these discussions.

In a pandemic, the safety of volunteers and those receiving help is crucial. In Haringey, the organizers limit posts that suggest do-it-yourself actions to manage or treat COVID-19 that could heighten risks to the community, such as homemade masks. Volunteers draw on hygiene protocols from trusted websites run by health services and community groups such as [QueerCare](#), a transfeminist autonomous care organization.

## **Building community while we're apart**

As we move further into the COVID-19 lock-downs in Australia and elsewhere, mutual aid will be relied on more than ever.

Issues such as inclusion, accountability and political frictions can challenge community-driven initiatives of all kinds. Reflecting on what we do, and sharing lessons, will help nurture mutual aid in ways that address these challenges.

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