

CONNECTIONS

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An Experiment Studying Experiments

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From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

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The Work of
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

By Michele Archie



Kettering research has noted that community resources and the way that a community functions are essential for survival and recovery from natural disasters. The foundation has begun studies of how communities are deciding to respond to COVID-19 and what they are doing. We are especially interested in learning from community decisions that lead to sustained public work to support and rebuild community institutions and economies.

This research is driven by a strategy that asks, What inhibits or strengthens communities' ability to make decisions and act under the constraints and

challenges of the pandemic? How are communities innovating and learning? How is what's learned passed on between different places and actors? Who are they? What organizational forms do such collective efforts take? How are efforts to sustain, rebuild, and reimagine communities organized?

As a part of this research, the foundation asked Michele Archie to track what she sees happening in communities across the country. Many of these places will be part of further research initiatives. This is Michele's account of her research so far.

Since March, I have been scanning traditional and social media, dropping in on Zoom meetings, and engaging in a bit of good, old-fashioned conversation by email and phone, looking for ways communities are coming together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be heartening to know that such community-driven responses are not in short supply; I have found an inspiring variety of examples, ranging from the simplest of grocery delivery services to an entirely community-generated COVID-19 testing effort.

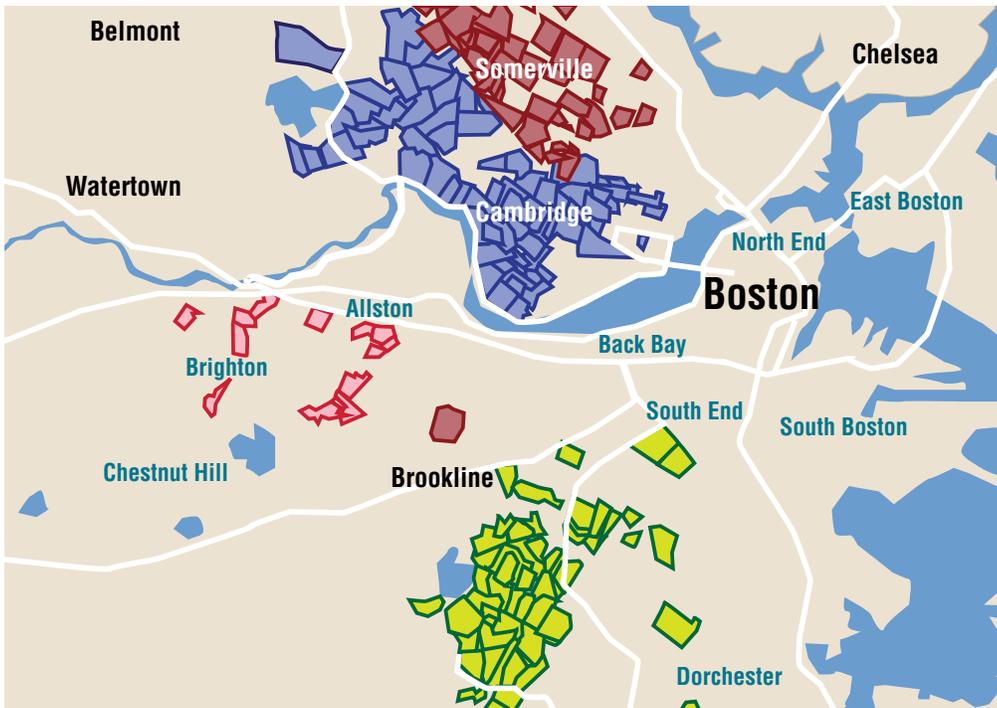
In May 2020, the *New Yorker* published “What Mutual Aid Can Do During a Pandemic,” an article about COVID-prompted mutual aid. In it, author Jia Tolentino quotes

Harvard political scientist Nancy L. Rosenblum: “There is little evidence that disaster generates an appetite for permanent, energetic civic engagement.” Instead, a temporary “ungoverned reciprocity” is what’s left when “government and politics disappear from view.”

But the COVID-19 pandemic is no ordinary disaster with a time-limited event (such as a hurricane, flood, or wildfire) followed by a period of recovery. While the community responses I am seeing may not be permanent, they also may not be fleeting. Indeed, Rosenblum told Tolentino that “because it had been clear from the beginning that the pandemic would last indefinitely, many groups had immediately begun thinking about long-term self-management, building volunteer infrastructures in order to get ahead of the worst of the crisis, and thinking about what could work for months rather than for days.”

What gives these efforts staying power? Many of the examples of community response and collective action that seem to have found the strongest legs build on existing community capitals, character, and habits. These can be as fundamental as a “we’re going to do this ourselves” attitude or as structural as a strong, functional network of community-based organizations.

“Many of the examples of community response and collective action that seem to have found the strongest legs build on existing community capitals, character, and habits.”



MAMAS provides a simple toolkit for organizing neighborhood pods. Point people pull together their neighbors, moderate a group chat or phone tree, and stay in touch with other neighborhood point people and with MAMAS to share resources. These pods have been organized in Medford, Somerville, and other communities in the Boston area.

Here are several examples of community-driven COVID-19 responses that may be building themselves to last.

MUTUAL AID MEDFORD AND SOMERVILLE (MASSACHUSETTS)

The Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville (MAMAS) COVID-19 mutual aid network in Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts, grew out of an idea a group of friends in their 20s had to form a snow-shoveling brigade to help elderly neighbors keep up with the legal requirement to shovel snow from their properties. The winter of 2019/2020 was mild, so no shoveling was needed, but the

idea of supporting neighbors created fertile ground for a mutual support network when the coronavirus emerged.

Since its early days, the group has operated in a distributed way, through a collection of Google documents, forms, and groups; a Slack group; and email and phone connections. The MAMAS website outlines the core features of its work: offering and requesting support, connecting in “neighborhood pods,” and a roster of working groups and initiatives. There are no rules about what can be offered or requested. The website notes, “There is no offer or ask too big or small here. We support each other through grocery shopping,

deliveries, monetary support, childcare, housing justice, political education and more. We encourage you to offer or ask for whatever you need.”

Not content to create just mutual support transactions, their aim is to support longer-term community connections for resilience in the face of future challenges. Over time, the shift they want to see is neighbors self-organizing to help other neighbors when they see a need. MAMAS encourages people to connect directly to give and receive assistance and asks people who have received aid what they have to offer, recruiting them to work with the money team and other working groups. Each working group has a volunteer coordinator to keep it going. The money team, which spearheads fund-raising and coordinates transfers of funds from givers to receivers, also has “money coordinators” who

help support these aid connections. Anyone can become a money coordinator through a simple process of trust-building conversations about visions and values of the group, privacy of information, and other norms.

BETHEL STRONG (VERMONT)

By mid-May, many Vermont mutual aid groups were reporting far less demand for basic grocery delivery and financial support and assistance than they had anticipated. Bethel Strong, which was created from scratch by local volunteers in response to COVID-19, is one group that turned its attention to a longer horizon, acknowledging the uncertainty about the needs and responses that might emerge as the pandemic goes on. Rebecca Sanborn Stone, one of Bethel Strong’s core organizers, referred to the “civic infrastructure” needed to recover from lost economic activity: “If we can build that infrastructure, then we’ll be much more prepared to collaborate and solve problems when they happen.”

Bethel Strong has also made gardening and growing food a centerpiece of its work. These efforts are about more than just providing food during the pandemic. They are aimed at building resiliency into the local food system. The group created a teaching garden to show locals



the gardening ropes and to grow vegetables they give away at community concert and food pickup nights. Bethel Strong distributed donated raised-bed garden kits and volunteer gardening assistance to interested residents affected by COVID-19. And they encouraged gardeners and farmers to join the Grow an Extra Row campaign and donate extra produce to the local food pantry and school.

BORREGO SPRINGS CORONAVIRUS TASK FORCE (CALIFORNIA)

Borrego Springs, California, is a small desert community whose population more than doubles in the cooler months with tourists and part-time residents. It faces particular COVID-19 challenges having to do with managing visitor numbers and behavior, a lack of hospital services, and highly vulnerable populations of seniors and low-income Latinos.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Borrego Valley Endowment Fund (a local community foundation) created a volunteer coronavirus task force that helps coordinate a loosely structured larger community effort to focus community resources on controlling the spread of the virus and supporting the local economy.

While it was begun as an initiative of a local institution, the task force has developed its own independent identity and has gone beyond sim-

ple coordination. The group has developed a range of mechanisms for resource sharing. Among its first efforts were an online coronavirus resource center, a related Facebook feed, and community letters distributed by email and mail and at local food banks. Initially, the focus was to provide a source of reliable information about COVID-19 in general and community medical resources in particular and to encourage people to abide by public health restrictions and guidance. Over time, that focus has expanded to promoting a community culture of health that includes COVID-safe behaviors. A new series of online town hall forums is a key part of that effort.

The task force has been influential in considerations about how and when to reopen businesses, schools, and the state park that surrounds the town, helping revitalize a stagnant community collaborative called the Borrego Valley Stewardship Council to provide a broader forum for COVID-19 collaboration that seeks to put the community more firmly in the driver's seat rather than simply responding to outside directives. One idea is to seek "pilot community" exceptions to state and county regulations and develop a robust testing program to allow Borrego Springs more flexibility in how its businesses, schools, and community gatherings are run.



It may be that some of the nascent or evolving associational life we are observing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be more than temporary and will become part of the ongoing resources available to community members.

CAN'T STOP COLUMBUS (OHIO)

The seeds for Can't Stop Columbus (CSCBUS) were planted by tech business leaders who came up with the idea of an online community COVID-19 hacking event at which anyone could “contribute by defining challenges, building projects, and sharing resources.” This idea grew into a wide-ranging collection of resources and activities spearheaded by this citizen-led initiative supported by two nonprofit organizations, Smart Columbus and the Columbus Partnership.

Can't Stop Columbus has positioned itself as a project-incubation

organization that helps bring community ideas to life. Its Requests for Help page differs from other community-driven COVID efforts because it is aimed at providing resources and guidance for emerging projects, not for people who are in need of food, financial, or other assistance.

As part of its preparation for a mid-August virtual “community rally,” CSCBUS produced a volunteer stories video in which several volunteers talked about who they were, why they were involved, projects they were leading, what they were proud of, and what they had gained from being involved in CSCBUS. Projects include:

- A website for the Westerville Chamber of Commerce to support its online arts festival;
- “Remembering Columbus,” which helps people whose loved ones have died with funeral planning, grief, and emotional health;
- “Keep Learning CBUS,” which is addressing the digital divide to connect people in need to the internet and computers for educational access; and
- “Come Together Columbus,” a new community organization focused on racial justice, equity, and police reform that connected with CSCBUS for organizational support and partnerships.

SAN FRANCISCO LATINO TASK FORCE (CALIFORNIA)

A number of Latino community-based organizations in San Francisco's Mission District organized themselves as the Latino Task Force for COVID-19 and were instrumental in forging a partnership with UC San Francisco researchers, the City and County of San Francisco, and the San Francisco Department of Public Health to organize voluntary COVID testing for residents in the Mission District and other strongly Latino parts of the city.

Test results illustrate the exacerbating effects of San Francisco's shelter-in-place ordinance on existing ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in health. By late April, the vast majority of the city's new COVID-19 infections were occurring in the Latino community, with infections also strongly associated with the need to work outside the home, frontline service work, unemployment, and household incomes under \$50,000 per year.

Beyond testing, the task force listened to what the city's Latino residents said they needed and then used its connections with other community-based organizations across the city and the City Department of Human Rights to channel support to meet these needs. The task force has committees on food

distribution, education, and communication that engage with interested residents to do the work and then report back at weekly meetings. Its multilingual website provides links to a wide range of community resources.

SEEKING LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS

Some of these and other community-driven COVID-19 responses I have uncovered since March are built on the foundation of an existing organization or involve new alliances of existing organizations. Others have been created from whole cloth in direct response to the pandemic and the impacts of public health measures that have been taken to control it.

It may be that some of the nascent or evolving associational life we are observing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be more than temporary and will become part of the ongoing resources available to community members. Kettering is seeking to develop relationships with these and similar initiatives to exchange insights into how they emerge, where and how decision-making takes place, how they approach coordinating community actions, and more. ■

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