

## Commentary

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By Theresa Hernandez, Beryl-Ann Mark, Anne O’Connell, Ana Teresa Portillo, Nadia Rajaram, Bernadette Rilloraza, Mercedes Sharpe Zayas

### Mutual Aid Parkdale

Over the last year and a half, mutual aid projects rooted in the principle of “solidarity not charity” took shape across the country. A long history of reciprocal caring relationships that seek to survive and resist white settler colonialism / capitalism exists in Indigenous (please see current project: <https://www.indigenoumutualaid.org/>) and other marginalized communities. Toronto has seen the rise of many new mutual aid groups, including CareMongering TO, The Bike Brigade, Davenport Mutual Aid, The People’s Pantry, Toronto/Tkaronto Mutual Aid, East for East, Scarborough Mutual Aid, Indigenous Street Outreach, and the Eritrean-Ethiopian COVID Solidarity Fund. The recognition of colonial histories / presents point to the importance of land acknowledgements and ongoing actions that support land back movements (please see <https://redpaper.yellowheadinstitute.org/>). York University is situated on land that has been taken care of by the Anishnabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. It is home to many First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. The current treaty holders of Treaty 13 are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region. As with many treaty agreements, the Toronto Purchase transpired unjustly and without consent (for a current view of appropriate consent practices, please see: <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/resources/three-frameworks-of-consent/>).

This commentary focuses on the work of Mutual Aid Parkdale (M.A.P.) and a panel presentation of its community pod leaders. M.A.P. is a neighbourhood-based mutual aid group that arose in response to the extraordinary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like other mutual aid projects in the City of Toronto, individual pods based on streets, buildings, and smaller areas of neighbourhoods, came together to assist one another in meeting basic needs, and building sites of community action committed to racial and economic justice. Many residents in Parkdale were already facing evictions, inflated rents, aggressive landlords, food insecurity, and contract low-wage employment. Following the announcement of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, the Parkdale People’s Economy (P.P.E.), a project of the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre (known as PARC), supported the formation of M.A.P. by convening self-organizing mutual aid pods to build strong connections with neighbours during the pandemic. A public call initiated by P.P.E. encouraged neighbourhood pods, hyperlocal text message groups, WhatsApp, Facebook and/or phone trees between neighbours. Pod leaders take responsibility for reaching out and checking in on neighbours, coordinating safe grocery and medicine purchases and delivery for seniors, personal protective equipment distribution, social and emotional supports

through friendly check-ins, mental health supports, tenant rights information sharing, and more. Pod leaders and members also build skills in leadership, administration, communication, and grassroots organizing through their participation. Funding from the City of Toronto and a GoFundMe campaign supported these activities resulting in the creation of 22 pods, reaching over 200 hundred households communicating in English, Hindi, Tagalog, Tibetan, Hungarian, Tamil and Polish.

Mutual Aid Parkdale supports co-learning about the meaning and practice of ‘mutual aid’, especially the foundational concept: Solidarity Not Charity, where everyone has needs and everyone has something to contribute. Mutual Aid Parkdale does not distinguish between participants and volunteers - we are all pod members, and we all benefit from membership and the distribution of funds based on: Trust and No Judgement; Respect and Confidentiality; Racial, Disability, and Economic Justice; Collective Responsibility; Transparency and Accountability. The urgent need for food security led to M.A.P.’s partnership with Toronto Bike Brigade to help purchase and deliver food in a healthy, safe, and environmentally friendly way. M.A.P. formed multiple committees to oversee finances, fundraising, collective narrative-building, community outreach, and safety, and created workshops and groups such as the Emotional Support Circle, Tenant Organizing and Eviction Prevention. Additional activities included free outdoor fitness and dance classes, sharing resources for accessing CERB, a garage sale encampment fundraiser, Mother’s Day brunch, Halloween candy drive, Holiday cookie drive, daily pot banging and connections to a Long-Term Care home.

Collaborations with Greenest City’s Good Food Boxes, Mom’s Kitchen, United Way, and a bi-weekly hot meal program keep each pod busy. A current expansion of mutual aid practices across Toronto is the Neighbourhood Pods TO (NPTO) pilot project, now active and focused on the radical transformation of colonial and economic models embedded in white supremacy (for more information, please see: [www.neighbourhoodpodsto.com](http://www.neighbourhoodpodsto.com)). This pilot has employed 9 mutual aid organizers and is working with 28 community-based agencies across the city. These agencies help to convene a total of 19 pod support groups representing a 130+ neighbourhood pod network across the City of Toronto. These small networks of people build meaningful relationships through discussing and implementing mutual aid values and practices in their communities. The Neighbourhood Pods TO (NPTO) project implementation is modeled from the collaboration between M.A.P and P.P.E. The NPTO project also organizes community conversations at the super-local, to neighbourhood and City-wide scale, on various topics including Mutual aid Models for vaccine support, Tenant Rights and Eviction Prevention, Dismantling the Police and Community Based Safety models, Dismantling White Supremacy through allyship and solidarity, etc. These conversations are places to learn, share and coordinate a wide spectrum of community-based solidarity strategies (Neighbourhood Pods TO Pilot Project Report, 2021).

The following panel of local experts and organizers was recorded on November 25, 2020, for a York University second-year social work undergraduate course entitled Identity, Diversity and Anti-Discriminatory Practice - Anne O'Connell.

**Guest Panel:** Nadia Rajaram, Beryl-Ann Mark, Bernadette Rilloraza, Theresa Hernandez

**Anne:** So, I want to welcome four community leaders to class today to talk about their experiences with Mutual Aid organizing in Parkdale, a downtown neighbourhood in the west end of Toronto. The School of Social Work has invited them to talk about inequality in the neighbourhood and their experiences with Mutual Aid Parkdale group which started in response to COVID-19, where neighbours are helping neighbours with a variety of things like shopping for seniors, medication delivery, friendly phone calls, mental health support, to hundreds of people in the neighbourhood for the last 7 months now. They were also part of a GoFundMe that raised 20,000 dollars to spend in the neighbourhood, to keep some of these activities going. First, I want to introduce...

**Nadia Rajaram**, who lives in Parkdale and is a tenant organizer with the Parkdale Tenants Association, she's also a member of the Workers' Action Center that's worked on the campaign for raising the minimum wage; she's part of Parkdale People's Economy and is a leader in the Mutual Aid group. Second, we have...

**Beryl-Ann Mark**, who is currently working at Parkdale People's Economy as a community engagement lead, she is a member of Parkdale Women's Leadership Group, and is a Pod leader; she has been living in Parkdale for 26 years, has 5 children born and raised in this community. Welcome! Next we have...

**Bernadette Rilloraza** – is a mother of two special needs children; she came to know Parkdale and the mutual aid group through her own personal experiences during an extremely rough time during the pandemic. She's become involved with M.A.P. as a pod leader and tenant advisor. And finally we have...

**Theresa Hernandez**, welcome. She's lived in Parkdale for 31 years; she's a single mom of a 21-year-old son. She has a degree in industrial psychology. When she came to Canada she took many courses, and became a PSW; she's worked in many places and in private homes, and she is also a Pod Leader.

**Anne:** So that is a lot to talk about just with those biographies. A warm welcome to everyone. I've mentioned your bios, but want to ask if there is anything more you want to add about how you are involved in your neighbourhood?

**Nadia:** I'm involved with Parkdale Legal Aid, Parkdale Legal Services as a Board Member and Committee Member; I'm also with Workers' Action center, as a tenant organizer.

**Beryl-Ann:** I've lived for 26 years as you've said, I love this neighbourhood it's so convenient, everything you need is here, it's conveniently placed. Currently I am working at Parkdale

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People's Economy which is an organization under PARC, Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre; PPE consists of 20 organizations that get together every two months to talk about how to best help residents in the community. I volunteer at the board of Parkdale Community and Recreation Centre (PARC), I've volunteered at Parkdale legal Services, where I have received a plaque for being one of the most helpful residents in the community.

PPE is one of agencies that partner with over 20 other agencies – they provide different services and they listen to see what each agency is doing to see how they can best help and partner.

**Bernadette:** I'm part of multiple organizations. I'm obtaining signatures for no evictions during covid times; I'm also a pod leader of M.A.P. and tenant advisor for Parkdale Land Trust.

**Anne:** How has it been getting signatures for no evictions?

**Bernadette:** Actually, I'm surprised with my neighbours; we are the second largest apartment building in Parkdale, with 270 units. I'm surprised we have been getting pretty good feedback. We hear "thank you, we didn't know there was somewhere we could run to at this time"; to know you are here, they are very supportive. Now they've lifted the hold on evictions, so they've started hearings, so we have many neighbours where they are doing virtual hearings as well, so we are continuing to collect more signatures and we have a meeting coming to discuss further.

There is a meeting this Sunday to discuss this, which I hope is going to go well. Lots of neighbours are getting eviction notices, and it's not just because they are behind in pay – they want to evict old tenants so they can raise the rent higher.

**Anne:** Important work, Bernadette. Where are people going to go when evicted?

**Theresa:** Hi, I'm Theresa Hernandez, hello to York students. I'm glad to be here. I met Bernadette at the PARC, that's where I got involved. During the pandemic she called me to ask me for help because I've been living in Parkdale for over 31 years, so I have lots of contacts. I started to call people - friendly calls - and I told them to share my information, to call me and add these people to the list. With the help of leaders in the community, they helped us also to become good leaders as well. They know me because my aunt used to be head coordinator of one of the Filipino community agencies. I volunteer at the school as well, TDSB, at Holy Family church, people know me.

**Anne:** It's really important for students to hear about how active you can be in your community, your own building. Sometimes, we think activism is learned in school, or university, when it is happening in neighbourhoods. I'm wondering if you can tell me what you think strong communities look like?

**Nadia:** Everybody coming together, working with each other, listening to each other, sharing ideas, being committed; if someone has a problem see if we can help them solve it.

**Beryl-Ann:** To me a vibrant community looks like people connecting with each another, sharing the resources, hanging out with each other, even spreading love wherever you go in this community. I just wanted to share with you how Parkdale is going through gentrification, where some of the landlords are going above rent guidelines to the point that people can't afford to pay for those apartments and they move out. People get frustrated and move out, the landlords renovate those apartments and have other people move in and they double or triple the rent. So, I like the idea that as a community we can bond with each other and help residents go through these different challenges, help each other. That's one way we come and help each other.

**Anne:** Really important to keep your eye on trends, to see how things are changing, how life is becoming less affordable in the neighbourhood, how to come together to stop that.

**Beryl-Ann:** It's so important, too, how residents work together with organizations like Parkdale Project Read and PARC to get through these challenges.

**Bernadette:** A vibrant community looks like what Beryl-Ann mentioned – where there is connection, where there is a sense of solidarity, of participating in your own community, where more people will try to do things to understand and know our community better, it would ultimately lead to people becoming more involved in making our community and to live in a better place.

**Theresa:** Our community Parkdale is a large and lively community and there are some good community leaders, like us. I'm proud of all of us. There are good leaders who are willing to help; we are good listeners, we give moral support, we are surrounded by good and interesting people, including you, Anne. We are stronger than we think. I hope the students joining us right now will learn from us and some day have their own mutual aid group in their area with the support of good leaders as well. Some day – you students will be the future, to help the community. Be proud of yourselves as well and you will learn more.

**Anne:** Can you talk a little bit about the kind of inequality you see in your own neighbourhood?

**Nadia:** Well, like Beryl-Ann said, I see lots of changes; businesses are closing down because of covid, even before covid, and gentrification, people have to live outside of Toronto to survive, and some people coming out of Toronto and then they come back in. Toronto is so expensive.

**Beryl-Ann:** A big one for me is money. I feel like in Parkdale there are the haves and have-nots; you'll see in Parkdale there are a lot of people renting and working from paycheque to paycheque or living in poverty. And then a lot of Queen Street you'll see other people living in big houses and they have the means to take care of their family. And even in Parkdale, this one is a little bit hard for me. Cause when you see some people who have a home to live in and some people don't, a couple of blocks from where I live you'll see people living in encampments then people living in a big home in this community. The organization I work for gives people the opportunity to have a meal in dignity, and some people again will have a five-course meal no problem, so you see so much inequality. Food insecurity, money.

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**Bernadette:** Besides what has already been mentioned about gentrification and involuntary displacement of low-income people in South Parkdale, it leads to compromised mental health for a lot – I can base that on my experience because I have two special needs kids and because we just went above the income bracket that you are supposed to be able to qualify for any extra help or subsidies, we are not getting any support and we are just a few dollars over. So that is one of the inequalities that we can see here, besides homelessness.

**Theresa:** They mentioned most of the important ones. The most important is the health care and the housing. There are lots of losses of rights, but most important especially is health care. As Bernadette mentioned, she has two special needs children, and I include myself as someone in need in the community. I'm very proud. Although we are all in need in everyday living, we can still help other people. We are struggling and still participating; it's the second lockdown so most of us are still struggling. We are very lucky to have PARC, Mercedes and Theresa.

**Anne:** So I thought we'd move on to Mutual Aid Parkdale and can you talk about how you got involved in M.A.P. and what are some of the activities that you are involved in.

**Nadia:** How I got involved, before the pandemic hit I was part of PPE, they had their meeting and I was doing a project with them. Mercedes told me, she called me and told me they were doing something to support the community still, and she told me about M.A.P. Right now, I reach out to folks and tell them if they need any help, with groceries. I don't go out and get groceries but I ask people. I know some neighbours of mine they would tell me, if I have extra food I share with them. I told a community member about covid screening.

**Beryl-Ann:** Sure, I am an ambassador here at PARC; through that program I met a student who was doing their placement here, she asked me to do an interview for a school project, we became friends and she asked me if I wanted to co-found a pod with her. So, we brainstormed some of the details, she became the administrator of it, she created a flyer, she posted some on her street, I posted some on my street. Some of the residents reached out to her; I reached out to people in my building. Some of the things I've done is I've gone out to do groceries, also reach out as pod leader and pod member. I asked them if I could get help with groceries too, we had money initially from a grant, then we did a fundraiser, we wanted to move away from the fundraiser aspect of it and we want to utilize the resources we already have to support our community.

**Bernadette:** For me, I got involved – Theresa added me as a recipient as I was so desperate for all kinds of help during the first lockdown; we received an eviction notice. I have two autistic children and they were complaining about the noise during the pandemic, but the noise they were complaining about was between 9 am to 5 pm when you are allowed. I am unemployed with two special needs kids and because of M.A.P. they directed me to the right people at Parkdale Legal Services. So as a pay it forward thing, one of the pod leaders, Nash, told me there were no pod leaders for my building. So, I accepted the role. I was so happy for the help I got. I know other people who need help, and I am happy to help them in the way I was helped.

**Theresa:** I met Teresa in the PARC office and she offered me to help the community. I started with the friendly call, but the practical step – we built contact lists from existing networks, we conduct outreach, to reach people who are not connected with us, it started with word of mouth, where I shared my information and other people's information and then we create neighbourhood pods, and half pods with Beryl-Ann. We build solidarity, we help each other, we find leaders in different areas, like Bernadette, we have vision and we have a mission. We want to motivate York students to help communities; let's keep this kind of motivation, not just during the pandemic, ok students, cause most of us here need help, although people with money who are rich, they have their own issues, as well as poor people which I include myself in. We want to be the symbol of hope, and you guys as students will be the symbol of help too.

**Anne:** It's interesting to see how these connections are built, the skills, contacts and connections that are necessary. How do you think mutual aid is different from government programs that are there to help?

**Nadia:** Well, it's based on communities supporting each other, we don't ask for help from other agencies. I would say it's the community doing the job and has the commitment.

**Beryl-Ann:** I'd like to think we are very honest with each other, transparent, let each other know what we are doing, nobody is hiding anything. I think that is very important being transparent and honest with each other; that is what we value.

**Bernadette:** I always like solidarity not charity, because like Nadia and Beryl-Ann said, mutual aid is autonomous in attaining its goal, mutual aid is voluntary; it's a reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit, where we take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions. These are efforts to support neighbours facing their conditions, not like government's imposing the eligibility conditions - like I mentioned earlier - you have to be on a income bracket to be eligible for most of the benefits that you can get. So that the eligibility criteria that they always follow divides people into deserving and non-deserving.

**Theresa** – Before I mention the values, I want to mention the challenges we face also as pod leaders; it's not easy, but we are motivated, because we have different nationalities in the community. The values – we need to have self-determination; we need to build power. We share everything, we contribute if we find a resource, we share it with the leader so they can send it to the pod. Support, if you're a member of mutual aid, there is always support and power.

**Anne:** Ok, we have one question left. I think this is really important. So for mutual aid to work really well you need a lot of skills. I am wondering if you can describe what those skills are, because we talk about social work as a skill-based program.

**Nadia:** I'd say communication, basically listening to each other; you have to show a courtesy of manner, when someone wants help, be there as a resource for help, and see if there are others ways to help them, like do a daily check up. I have a social worker personally. She does check up on me, makes sure my day is ok things like that, she does my paperwork for me; I do it now, but

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I ask her over the phone. You have to have that time commitment for your client in the community.

**Beryl-Ann:** I would say good communication skills, you have to deal with people constructively, sometimes it's not always easy. It's hard to communicate constructively when you hear what you don't want to hear. Time management, you know juggling. I have three younger children, so I have to manage my time wisely. I have a job also. In the height of it, I wasn't working. Half of the pandemic I was not working; still I have to juggle, take care of my family, other people, my community, by going out and doing groceries. I would also say counselling skills. People are going through a lot, we are dealing with challenging issues; be empathetic. I would say active listening skills. Some people don't need you to give them an answer, they just want someone to listen to them. Teamwork is very important – collaborate with others to get the job done, doing those things, it's really important to self-worth, self-esteem. When you work as a team you build each other up. Empowerment skills also, to lift people up, empower them to continue to survive in society.

**Bernadette:** Well, you have to have passion about injustice, self-determination. The benefits and good feeling that comes with volunteering easily outweighs any time and energy you would spend, it's such a good feeling to give back to the community.

**Theresa:** They mentioned most of it already: communication, stay motivated. We need to have a caring heart. We need to be kind-hearted, warm-hearted. You need to be concerned, authentic, and hopeful. We need to considerate and have compassion. We don't know the people in the community but we need to understand them and have compassion. Because I'm working also as a caregiver as well, so my ideas are about compassion. In that way we can support our community and ourselves as well. We are struggling with our own problems, our own needs. We have this group leaders' chat. We have this WhatsApp where we can talk for as long as we can. We are connected. In some place, I am dreaming of connecting with my leaders and pod leaders. We used to say sharing is caring, but now it's hard to share, with covid we cannot share.

**Anne:** Thank you so much, you are all brilliant. Amazing insights, I was making lots of notes while you were talking. It was amazing to hear your experiences and for our students to hear from you. And what would it be like for students to build their own mutual aid group in their own neighbourhood. That would be really interesting to see that grow.

**Students:** "Thank you, thank you for the work you do." "I'm so inspired." "Thank you for the work you do in the community."

**Theresa:** We don't know you by person, but if you need help, I am willing to share my information. We are willing to help you. God bless all you guys and some day you will be good leaders.



**Lurie** (student): I would just like to say some words. My name is Lurie and I am very glad to be a student with Anne. I just want to tell you I took some notes and I want to share with you what I am taking. From Nadia, you said “the community is the one that gets the job done”. And I totally agree. From Theresa, you said “the community needs leader like us,” and I totally agree. You also said “its not easy but we are motivated”, oh yes – we need people like you. From Beryl-Ann, you gave us some skills we need to take with us to do and provide a good job, “communicate, constructive communication and be empathetic” but I wrote your final words: “empower people to continue to survive in society.” And Bernadette, you said “solidarity not charity”. So, thank you very much for the job that you do.

**Anna** (student): I want to say something. Thank you everyone. During my work we had to move to Parkdale, so I am quite familiar with that neighbourhood now. I just want to ask if you have experienced any challenges and how you overcome it?

**Theresa:** Yes, we have lots of challenges.

**Nadia:** For example, when you are doing door knocking for tenant organizing, you face challenges; some people answer, some do not, you try to leave a friendly notice. Or you try to convince them to get on board with your issue and sometimes people will agree and sometimes not. What I do for me, I try to not take it personal, or sometimes they don't understand. I try to make a conversation and slowly you might get one or two on board on your main issue. It's hard, but with practice...

**Beryl-Ann:** I can say one of my challenges. I remember talking to the coordinator of our pod and she asked if anyone could deliver groceries, and I volunteered, and then I realized when I was delivering the groceries that their kids and my kids went to the same school, so she felt a bit uneasy. She felt uncomfortable. So, I was glad to let her know that she is deserving, because when I was low on funds I didn't even have enough to buy groceries, I reached out to the pod to ask them if they could buy groceries for me and my family. So when I realized she was feeling uneasy, uncomfortable, for some reason she feels she is undeserving of something that's as necessary as food, I put her at ease. I said I've reached out to the pod, the same thing I'm doing for you, the pod has done that for me. They've gone to buy food for me and my family to eat. I think that was a real eye-opener for her. And she received her groceries and went on her merry way.

**Nadia:** We had a problem with one pod leader. I won't mention names. She went to deliver groceries and what happened was she was interrogated by some other person. Why are you delivering groceries to that person? Everyone remembers that, right? But we had a meeting and we told her not to take it personally. Sometimes you will find that kind of challenge.

**Theresa:** We deal with difficult people and its covid and they don't really trust. You knock on their door, you call them, they don't answer. You have to explain to them we are offering help, etc. Your communication is also a big issue, not everyone is speaking English. We are lucky we

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have different nationality leaders: we have Tibetan leaders, we have Filipino leaders, we have diversity.

**Beryl-Ann:** I also wanted to share, Anne, that you know one of the most challenging things in society is people, and people have different ideas, different perspectives, they have different ideas, different opinions, and they don't always align with yours; you're going to have to pick your battles, do you want to argue with that person? Do you want to be a problem solver? You can look at different ways to solve or resolve the issue. I choose to become a problem solver – it makes life easier to navigate.

**Bernadette:** I can share something really quickly. We were doing door knocking, it was something on my behalf for my landlord to stop harassing me and showing me these threatening emails, letters and eviction notices. So one couple, I think they were European, so the wife says it's ok to sign my petition, on my behalf to stop the landlord, and then the husband is speaking in their language and like I don't understand, and the wife says it's ok, give it to me, I can sign. The wife signs, and as soon as I close the door I can hear them arguing. I don't know why, if it's because the wife is signing the petition and the husband says "no" to her – that's one of the things.

**Anne:** I want to thank the four of you; there are lots of comments in the chat – "all of you are inspiring leaders and you inspired me so much, "thank you so much for what you are doing in the community," "I really appreciate your personal insights and stories shared," "you all are inspiring leaders, please also do some self care," "its awesome to hear your work and dedication, thank you so much for sharing with us"...

And I just want to add to that – thank you for taking your time. We really appreciate this, this is not something you are going to read in a social work textbook, this is what you are leading and building in the community, so I'm really thankful you took time out today and this evening.

**Beryl-Ann:** Can I share one more? One of the things I wanted to share, I was studying as a social service worker at Humber College, and one of the electives, one of the things the professor said, with all of the issues people are dealing with, he said, what are you going to do? Here is my community in Parkdale, we leave some information about what you can do out there.

**Theresa:** When you become pod leaders, you can come shout out to us someday.

**Everyone:** Bye-bye everyone, students and colleagues.