

Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions

a non-comprehensive community toolkit and report

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bit.ly/disorganizing

“How do we get this work funded? Take institutional money!”

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The process of making this toolkit included one-on-one interviews with organizers as well as shared learning sessions that bring together cumulative knowledge and experiences. Organizers shared strategies and tactics with each other in both public-facing and closed community events. We uplift the perspectives of sex worker and survivor organizers who face multiple and overlapping barriers while organizing, including policing and surveillance.

We started this project focusing on political collectives centering informal workers, or as one organizer puts it, “forced informality” where workers are forcibly excluded from the economy or working in the shadows of formalized economies. In the process of conducting research, we also learned a lot about ways political collectives and organizations themselves are informal and precarious.

This toolkit features a summary of research conducted between February 2021 - July 2021. We appreciate the contributions of collectives including the BIPOC Adult Industry Collective, Lysistrata, Red Canary Song, Whose Corner Is It Anyway, California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, and Street Vendors Project among others. We are grateful for the time and contributions of everyone who spoke with us.

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Blunt, Zahra Stardust, and TD Tso and with additional guidance by Yves Tong Nguyen and Alexis Briggs. You can access the full conference archive at bit.ly/h2sexttech.

Writers' note: There are many ways to be part of a movement. There is no perfect way to organize, and there is no map that's going to prevent you from coming up against barriers. Some organizational forms will be better at getting some kinds of work done and others will be better at other kinds. Flexibility and constant reflection is important. While sometimes things work for a while, changes happen within or outside of our work that means new strategies are necessary. Often, when things go wrong, it can be easy to blame ourselves, to think 'I could have done better'. Allowing ourselves to consider our failures also helps us to keep trying, building, and transforming.

As facilitators of this toolkit, we are simultaneously conveners and participants of multiple movement spaces and political collectives that experience many of the challenges raised by other organizers. We have questions about the conflicts that come with uncompensated and undercompensated labor in social movements and the issues that arise with fundraising, tax compliance, and organizational formalization. We have also moved between (and continue to work across) different kinds of organizations, institutions, and formations. This toolkit is an attempt to answer some of these questions we continue to struggle with.

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Why a disorganizing toolkit?

"The cycle doesn't end. We study. We cooperate/care. We practice solidarity. This is how you disorganize." - Stevie Wilson, 2019

It is not that our movements are disorganized, but rather, we are building tools, practices, and structures beyond the scope of formal institutions—we are disorganizing the systems and structures that have excluded us. The idea of dis/organizing emerges from an essay by incarcerated abolitionist organizer Stevie Wilson, who offered the provocation that organizing from within prison walls was more about prison disorganizing. Through creatively working within and against the system, he worked collectively to create regular study groups to trade books and

zines, organize gatherings, and coordinate phone zaps. These practices are disruptive to administrations, bureaucracies, and institutions.

“We’re messy on purpose,” says an organizer building with workers in street economies.

At the same time, institutions also attempt to disorganize our movements by subsuming them into bureaucratic structures. The NGO-ization of mass movements for liberation from the 60s and 70s may have afforded opportunities to pay volunteers and expand funds. However, political formations then needed to register with the government and develop structures governed and controlled by following specific fiscal requirements and bylaws. As members of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence have pointed out, non-profit models can constrain the imagination of organizing structures by making movements submit to state governance. The nonprofit model tethers the resourcing of movement sustainability to institutional structures and freezes movement growth through bureaucratization.

“Government organizations perpetually create a cycle of harm, that then creates cycles where survivors go on to harm others too,” says another organizer in an informal political collective.

Additionally, systems and institutions often divide people, sowing tensions and animosities, and pitting people against each other, exploiting regional and national differences or immigration status to maintain and gain power. The digital and gig economies also further segment workers by turning workers into entrepreneurs. The systemic roots of institutional violence—racism and capitalism—can perpetuate cycles of harm and often make it difficult to build solidarity and unity to fight against shared exploitations and work beyond individualized identities.

Forced Exclusion and Enforced Inclusion: In the midst and aftermath of crises, political collectives, such as mutual aid groups, grassroots campaigns, and community-specific organizations, emerge. For example, after the shutdown of Backpage in 2017, groups like Lysistrata, an online-based worker cooperative, came together to provide emergency funds and support to marginalized sex worker organizers. When police raids of massage parlors in Flushing, Queens led to the death of Yang Song, the organization Red Canary Song formed to build collective safety and well-being for Asian and Asian American sex workers. Many neighborhood-based, worker, and tenant-led mutual aid groups formed during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide ongoing support to communities left out of formal protections and institutional social safety provisions.

Often, groups are fulfilling needs for people who cannot access them through existing institutions, such as informal workers or workers excluded from formal economies. In other words, they experience forced exclusion from institutional systems. For example, people primarily working within cash economies may lack formal employment history and end up cut off from unemployment benefits and other forms of economic relief.

When groups come together in moments of heightened urgency and necessity, infrastructures may come together quickly and often leave internal infrastructures and processes, such as decision-making, communication, and leadership development less clear. Additionally, as groups grow to meet the needs of participating communities, the pace and scale of work can become less sustainable, with individual organizers experiencing exhaustion and burn-out. Yet, in order to maintain their formation and access resources for longer-term sustainability, groups also may become forced to incorporate into the very institutional systems that have created and upheld barriers for participation and resource distribution. *This means simultaneous forced exclusion and enforced inclusion.*

Building Solidarity Across Differences: Collectives work within and across race, class, age, and language diverse communities. Members within collectives also experience different gradations of violence, risk, and precarity. For example, amongst sex workers, some forms of labor like dancing and camming may be legal while other practices are not. Or, while street vending and massage are ‘legal’ forms of work, getting access to a license can be extremely difficult. For street vendors in New York City, many may pay upwards of \$20,000 to rent a vending permit due to city-wide caps on permits. Or, operating a massage parlor without a license may be categorized as a felony while street solicitation may be a misdemeanor. Precarious immigration status also compounds risks and consequences. For undocumented immigrants, criminalized activities such as loitering or fare-beating may become labelled as ‘aggravated felonies’—an invented label that reinforces the immigrant threat narrative. The risk of arrest and detainment can make base-building and information-sharing difficult.

This toolkit offers key organizing lessons and political directions from migrant worker and sex worker-led political collectives, formations, and organizations. Organizations range from being 1-5 years old to organizations that have existed for multiple decades. Some hold 501c3 status or are fiscally sponsored, while others continue to function without formal status. These are collectives representing workers that have been excluded from formal economies and structures and working within ‘gray’ economies. Criminalization and stigmatization of workers seeking means of survival impedes and deprives access to resources, including funding, social support, digital platforms, and physical organizing spaces.

We draw from resistance strategies by communities who have been unbanked and un-funded; excluded from communications and financial platforms, social services and social networks, and from most institutions; and unwelcome and policed in public spaces.

Here, we share key ideas and shared learnings on ways to build and sustain political collectives, organizations, and formations beyond existing institutions.

Navigating Difference in Movement Spaces

Getting people together can be messy, especially when people have different and uneven material relationships to labor and work that also impact how they participate in activism and movement spaces. For example, members within a collective may also live in different moments of precarity, going from low to no income or from housed to unhoused; additionally, depending on types of work, access to licenses, and/or immigration status, people will be differentially exposed to systems of criminalization and vulnerability to arrest. In building towards liberation, groups have to internally navigate social differences including race, age, socioeconomic class, gender, and ability in how they organize.

Reflections on Building Unity Across Uneven Difference:

“A big one that is mentioned time and time again is sex worker identity. That’s not something that migrant massage parlor workers necessarily identify as even if sex work is happening in parlors. The stigma of sex work is huge and sex work is a very Westernized political term and identity. The idea of choice is one of privilege.” - Asian American and Asian migrant worker collective

“We are not very good at directly addressing conflict in our group. While conflict has not been about direct assistance, it can come from the way people are interacting with more marginalized members of the community in public spaces.” - Political organizing collective for low income workers

“More so than race or ethnicity, we often see differences showing up in terms of ability. Working with groups of marginalized people, we have experienced types of trauma without access to mental health resources. People are at various intersections of marginalization and we see it come up there. We want to give people access to mental health support, so we offer folks access to mediation services — so interpersonal differences don’t interfere with the work. It’s harder to reach certain people when there’s layers of assistance they need before they can come through the virtual door. That’s been a challenge.” - Black-led worker collective

“It can be difficult working alongside organizers who may have different experiences and hardships, including adverse childhood experiences. It’s important to have trauma-informed organizing. We can’t qualify experiences as if one has priority over another.” - Multiracial sex worker collective

Suggested Practices:

1. *Creating a Statement of Values:*

What are we doing together...will it change over time?

What holds you together?

What are we each bringing to the room?

What are we building?

Putting things on paper at the beginning helps people collectively create a safer space and be more accountable. As one sex worker collective by and for people of color describes, “We’re often the ones who are the minority in activism and work environments. We take the brunt of microaggressions, so we want to eliminate that in our group.” They shared that one of the things they did was to create a list of values. “We really mapped out our values against anti-blackness, xenophobia, transphobia, biphobia...[around] what we want to stand for and how we want to treat each other. We have guidelines for communication that include things like not talking badly about each other on social media and rules of conduct for acting with one another in meetings and greater community.”

2. Being Careful & Intentional about Inclusion:

“Open-ness is often dangerous for vulnerable people...I don’t think we always need to share space.” - Naomi Lauren, 2021

Building inclusive spaces takes active maintenance; open spaces are not necessarily safe nor accessible and often, the most privileged members of a group end up feeling the most comfortable at the cost to other more marginalized members. The desire for movement spaces to be fully inclusive can be tricky and requires attention to intragroup dynamics across race, class, language, etc. For example, while people of color may be ‘included’ into majority white spaces, they may speak less in that space or be more cautious about what they say. Or mixed class spaces can feel triggering or burdensome.

As one organizer for a low-income sex worker collective shares, “There’s stuff that is normal to us that can really upset other folks. Then, we have to deal with them being traumatized... It’s exhausting managing mixed class environments...they have to be managed well.”

One group describes that when they bring members into new spaces, they also take the time to introduce people prior to a meeting to develop relationships and cultivate trust. As a group with mixed membership across racial lines (but majority women of color members), the collective also takes time to build subcommittees that represent the membership. At the same time, there are white members in the collective (who are also poor and in crisis) who tend to volunteer more for subcommittees and leadership roles; there are often difficult conversations about why it’s important to take time for outreach and moving people of color into leadership first.

Another group is trying to expand their member body so no individual feels tokenized. While their member body is majority cis Black people, they are trying to conduct more outreach to Asian and Indigenous people as well as queer and trans people.

3. Practicing Language Justice:

Language justice is the right to communicate in the language we feel most comfortable (Antena Aire, 2013). Language justice is also disability justice: building in commitments to collective access.

This can be practiced through the use of captioning and offering simultaneous interpretation, including ASL. Language interpretation requires advance planning to share materials with interpreters to practice and build new shared vocabularies. This planning is also crucial for political education. Many words in English organizing lexicons, such as abolition or decriminalization, may not have immediately parallel words in other languages. “For example, how do you say misogynoir in Spanish?” asks one organizer.

One group working with street vendors in a large city is 100% bilingual in English and Spanish. “The street vending community is representative of the intense diversity of the city, so it’s important for us to build relationships across cultures and languages,” says a core organizer.

Prior to COVID-19, they always had an interpreter present for their meetings presentations as well as headsets to give to members to tune into their specific language channel. They also spent time building a translation subcommittee to form materials around policies, health and safety, etc. While online conferencing platforms like Zoom offer language interpretation, it’s also a new technology to learn for both organizers and members to set up and access language channels.

The group now organizes in Spanish, Bangla, Arabic, Mandarin, and English and primarily uses WhatsApp groups divided by language and WeChat for Mandarin to communicate with members. For virtual meetings, they break up their schedule by language.

Building multilingual spaces and resisting language dominance can also be difficult when there’s limitations in resources and capacity. Another group spends a lot of time feeding content into Google Translate and editing. While this is an imperfect tool compared to having a human translator and interpreter, one organizer shared that they needed to use it because they needed all materials to be translated, from surveys to meeting agendas and minutes, but didn’t necessarily have the resources or time.

4. Have a Conflict Resolution Process in Place

Organizing is relational and solidarity is all about relationships. What happens when that breaks? We have to have processes and practices for practicing patience and empathy. People come into movement spaces because of experiences with trauma and personal encounters with systems of violence across various scales and registers; this means conflict will inevitably occur—often, not due to political differences but interpersonal clashes and tensions. Having some processes in place for addressing, naming, and hopefully resolving conflict will help reduce harm. One organizer says, “I guarantee you that someone is going to fuck up. We’re trying to fight for the ability to fuck up, move past it, and be better.”

Part of this process is also self-reflective and understanding our own capacities, expectations, and values and learning to communicate that more openly.

Managing resource access & distribution:

“We’re gate-kepted out. We need to be in the books. We’ve been around forever, we need to be in blueprint of society.” - QTPOC mutual aid fund

During the pandemic, many groups shifted to mutual aid and direct services to meet the immediate needs of community members and communities excluded from the support of formal institutions in getting access to housing, food, and financial relief. Members may be excluded from formal support because they lack identification and social security cards, making it difficult to access resources such as healthcare.

Some mutual aid work included distributing material resources, such as supply drop offs with health and wellness kits (masks, hand sanitizer, etc) and groceries, while other parts of this work emphasized the fundraising and distribution of cash resources. Collectives have also provided phones, rides to and from work, child care, and stipends for marginalized workers. As some organizations shifted to digital spaces, they may have also expanded their membership in different ways, such as being able to support and provide access to people who are chronically ill and not able to pick up in-person drop-offs and/or serving communities across new and different geographies.

How money gets distributed and to whom can be tricky, especially for groups who also want to make sure there’s a low barrier to accessing funds. Groups want to ensure that they don’t replicate institutional models of dictating who is ‘deserving’ and who is ‘undeserving’. However, groups also recognize that needs are different across individuals’ circumstances, including ways that social positioning such as race, immigration status, and class, may hinder access to other resources. Community and individual needs may also exceed the capacity of existing funds.

Mutual aid groups may also experience bank account shut downs or being locked out of online accounts. Additionally, public scrutiny on funds may demand that groups build in more formal accounting structures, such as sharing weekly reports.

Challenges:

1. Institutional Whiteness: Organizations may rely on income secure workers to do back-end administration, such as record-keeping and funds distribution. Privileged members in leadership may be able to support access to financial resources like banking or take on tax liability, but this can make it difficult to maintain horizontal organizational models. Class privilege, or having the ability to ‘class pass’ (which is also racialized) often supports access to institutional resources,

such as grants. As one organizer shares, “Whiteness gives you an edge with bureaucracies ... bureaucracies will treat you worse if they think you’re not white, so white folks have expertise navigating these systems.”

2. Social Stigmatization: Ongoing social stigmatization of particular communities within institutions can create barriers. As one organizer says, “For [drug] users, trying to get healthcare is hard. They don’t give you 100% like they do for everyone else. When you go into a crisis unit, you won’t get professionalism from doctors, because you get judged.”

3. Decisions about Distribution: One organizer reflects that they’re constantly revisiting the question, who really needs the resources if and when we’re scarce? “When we deal with big discrepancies in privilege...we have to continue asking, is this mutual aid and is this financial solidarity?”

In a community survey that one group conducted about how their funds have been helpful, they found that workers with relative race and class privilege (but still experiencing precarity), were less happy with the amounts offered. An organizer shares, “There’s an interesting difficult position when you’re in crisis and your crisis is not treated individually. For longer-term community building, someone experiencing crisis is not a teaching moment.”

Additionally, groups have challenges surrounding decisions about who can be ‘verified’ as being able to accept the fund? For example, one group that emerged to provide financial relief for sex workers shared the tensions of verification while remaining a fund with low barriers to access. As one organizer shares, “Word about the fund is getting around more in street-based communities, but people don’t have the same verification that people with online presence have. People are getting pushed out of housing and entering the industry in desperation. They don’t really identify as sex workers and just need resources.”

Some Suggested Practices:

1. Conducting a Community Needs and Resource Assessment:

In addition to mutual aid and cash relief, collectives may self-conduct to assess community needs and compile their own resources. One outreach organizer says, “We’re printing out a lot of flyers, lists of churches that help with bills, food pantries, all the clinics, mental health resources...and handing it out. We text links or email them. If you don’t have a phone, when I have information in my hand, I’m coming to find you.

To find the right resources, I do a lot of calling or reading at a library about access. One resource can also lead to another, so I investigate. For example, we were making a list of shelters and learned that one was not a good place. So we will also ask members, Have you been there? How did they treat you? How did they work with you? If we know you’re going to be treated shitty, we won’t give you that resource.”

With a membership of over 100 people, this organizer also has a process of creating 'research profiles' to figure out how to give members the resources they need, whether that's finding people without steady housing with a warm place to stay on cold nights or finding service dogs.

The organization works within a community where people speak a mix of English and Spanish. Part of this profile creation includes a way to find people to provide ongoing support, especially when members may not have access to a single phone number or address. She says, "If they need resources, I get it. ask them what you need right now. What resources would you like?"

In terms of resource distribution, she also uses the profiles to assess needs. For example, food access is a priority so she might start there and work her way down. Clothing is also a priority. If there's inclement weather, rainproof clothing like ponchos become more urgent to procure and distribute. Resource need may also be different across categories like age and language. This work requires a lot of time and planning.

Another group shares that expanding their membership process will also better supports needs assessment; however this may come in tension with members who desire more anonymity and privacy for safety and protection. An organizer in charge of funds distribution says, "We need to update our resource process and expand membership. When we become more familiar with who people are and their situation, we can offer more regular assistance than someone who wants to stay anonymous."

2. Transparent (and Flexible) Decision-Making on Distribution:

Groups must learn to communicate their decision-making processes in transparent ways both internally and externally. This also means building processes for shared consensus and agreement about how to use funds as well as navigate conflicts over resources without resorting to punitive measures. In addition to community agreements over shared values, groups also need to come up with shared agreements on how they make decisions.

One organizer for a mutual aid group shares, "We're trying to come up with agreements on things like how do we deal with people creating multiple emails to get more funds? Is it an internal blacklist or do we send it to other mutual aid? We try to keep your information really safe, but if you're using so many emails that you are impacting other people's access to this resource, we can't guarantee that. That's a pressing issue that has to do with size of need."

"We've had a white cis worker ask us to pay her cable bill, what do we say? Or, a person who identifies as a black queer and disabled person who has asked for funds twice...do we do it a third time? If we know specific cases, can we do a larger amount for this case? As we take on new volunteers, we need to come to new agreements within the core group. However, we're having a difficult time keeping engagement with the core group given health flares and the added stress of pandemic."

One organizer shares that building in flexibility in how decision making and communications structures can better address burn out and changing health needs. They say, “A majority of our group leadership is chronically ill or disabled, so we try to build flexibility in how we make decisions. We do a lot of decision-making through group chats. I’ll know when someone has a difficult health time — we take that into account in terms of activity of core members.”

Another group that has a model of distributing three large monthly micro-grants uses external accountability for decision-making about money: “We reach out to community members to help review applications. We keep everyone’s applications in a queue for the following month and keep applicants until we have given everyone money.”

More money, more problems

“Money can be transformative...it’s the difference between whether someone eats, whether someone can get out of jail.”

The issue of money and taxes is a tenuous one for political collectives. When most groups start out, they don’t have a lot of funds and resources. People give their own time, labor, and money. One organizer shared, “I just received a stimulus check, and I knew there were many in need that didn’t qualify. I went out and gave them \$50.” Another organizer reflects that “It’s the same \$50 that keeps circulating around.”

We need money from outside sources, but that money also comes with a lot of conflicts and challenges, including labor in funds management. Most people don’t get paid for organizing or activism work. An organizer working with a mutual aid fund says, “I’ve become an accountant and that’s just part of the work.” Additionally, different relationships to money based on individuals’ life circumstances and experiences may also contribute to conflict over money, such as feelings of guilt or scarcity mindsets. While some collectives may rely on class-privileged individuals with income stability to manage or hold funds that alone is not a long-term solution.

Additionally, digital fundraising and money handling practices also create additional risks and vulnerabilities. Groups have to navigate potential tax consequences and liabilities as well. However, there aren’t great options and often, decisions come with trade-offs, including privacy, organizational structure and also political alignment.

Challenges:

(Un)compensated time & labor: People experience burnout, especially when movement work is held by a small group. Additionally, unpaid labor & uneven distributions of labor coupled with differential material needs causes conflict.

Potential distrust & conflict: Assumptions about money & work are raced, classed, & gendered. For example, women of color fear accusations of scamming funds or feel conflicted accepting money for organizing work.

Documentation & distribution: Institutional requirements for documenting funds transfers (ex: W9 forms, IDs, etc) can be in tension with resource needs or negatively impact access to other means of support. For example, paying someone for organizing time may make someone ineligible for unemployment assistance.

Quotes:

“Since the pandemic, it’s been hard to have boundaries around time for the fund. This has become more of a job than I ever wanted it to be. With personal struggles with pandemic, a lot of us are feeling like we’ll have a major leadership shift.”

“Burnout is a real thing. I had to tell someone to stop volunteering because they were saying yes to everything.”

“We all work on a volunteer basis. All of our organizing is done volunteer— and certain work gets small stipends. There’s a hesitancy in wanting to get paid for organizing work and that’s been challenging. A vast amount of money comes from grants or independent contractors.”

“I spent my own money and paid that out of pocket to produce a march, because there’s no money. Within activism, there can be social and emotional gain, but there’s no financial gain. People will give their time. But, the minute you ask for financial gain, you’re a bad person. The whole money thing around this work is really interesting because I’ve never been paid. It can be hard over time to delegate labor...what’s the actual labor to financially take care of myself and the labor to emotionally and socially take care of myself?”

Formalization (or tax compliance and handling money)

Non-Profit: Your collective may have already discussed these options, but might be at a standstill because of the onerous process of creating a 501c3 or difficulty finding the right fiscal sponsor.

501c3 Non-Profit*:

Benefits:

- You can be an independent entity with more control over finances.
- Tax-exempt status, and all donations are tax-deductible.

Challenges:

- Onerous and highly regulated process—requires detailed IRS application and review can take months.

- Less private because of public filing requirements. You must annually file a Form 990 with the IRS, which includes the name and address of the principal officer as well as a listing of all officers, directors, trustees, key employees, and highest compensated employees.
- Greater governance requirements—requires board of directors (or members with no financial stake who can vote on major decisions)

Fiscal Sponsorship*:

Benefits:

- Tax exempt status and potential administrative support from sponsor
- More privacy than a 501c3

Challenges:

- Loss of control, including risk of funds.
- Can be difficult to find a willing sponsor that is also the right fit

For Profit: The idea of having a ‘for profit’ entity can feel at odds with redistributive and anti-capitalist politics and also potentially impact public perception of organizations. However, there may be benefits in choosing these types of entities such as privacy, ease of formation, and financial control.

Corporation (C-Corp or S-Corp)*:

Benefits:

- Streamlined process, simply filing a certificate of incorporation
- Funding—can be easier to grow, raise, and attract capital (depending on scale and scope of funding sources)
- Relatively private compared to 501c3

Challenges:

- Taxation—double taxation for C-Corps and pass through taxation for S-Corps (entity itself does not pay federal or state income taxes but all profits and losses are “passed through” to the owners on personal income tax returns)
- Strict governance requirements (but control of governance)—owned by stockholders and managed by a board of directors (however, this could all be one person)

Limited Liability Company (LLC)*:

Benefits:

- Relatively private compared to 501c3; Delaware, New Mexico, and Wyoming allow for filing anonymous LLCs
- Relative control over governance—does not necessarily require board of directors and may be managed by members

Challenges:

- Pass-through taxation
- Harder to grow funds (in comparison to C or S-Corps)
- Very cumbersome publication requirement in New York State
- Harder to transfer ownership

**all options included are limited liability, meaning that individuals' personal and financial assets are protected from the organization*

Full slides at: bit.ly/hhfinancialworkshop

Materials adapted from Cornell Entrepreneurship Law Clinic. Celia Bigoness, Kayla Anderson, Kasaundra Barney, and Melissa Lin (2021) "Entity Selection & Formation." Sex Workers Organizing Against Barriers Conference, 23 April.

Considerations for models:

1. How would we like to raise funds? Crowdfunding? Grants?
2. How much control do we want to maintain over our funds and how we operate?
3. What is our capacity for creating an entity and managing it?
4. What are the needs of our communities that determine how we need to move funds?
5. What are the risks and privacy concerns of our communities?

CONSIDERATION: Scale

"We don't want to adopt a chapter model. We don't want to be accountable for how people use our name locally. Orgs that do this struggle with what's going on in places they don't know."
- Online fund that is also locally rooted

CONSIDERATION: Capacity

"Our fiscal sponsor says we need W9s for all the people that you paid, but on paper, it's messy. But, we need a fiscal sponsor to get grants, and the admin work that goes into a 501c3 was too much for us." - Organization currently prioritizing mutual aid distribution

CONSIDERATION: Areas of 'work'

"There can be a difference between building a strong membership base and leadership versus campaigning. These are different kinds of organizing...building community base and organizing for legislative change. They can go hand in hand sometimes, but the pace and nature of campaign organizing does not always lend itself to community; working on someone else's time doesn't lend itself to membership engagement (and often favors full-time English speaking staff members). - Membership-based workers' organization

CONSIDERATION: Grant Access

“Our goal is to register as a 501c3 or get a fiscal sponsor. We want to apply for grants to support programs for marginalized people, such as therapy funds.” - Organization with education and wellness programs & microgrants

CONSIDERATION: Resource distribution

“To ask people to wait for a paycheck is not tenable. We hand people cash the day of.”

“We’re filed as a limited cooperative, because there’s more accountability for task completion. It’s less demanding for one person and responsibilities are spread out better. The problem with fiscal sponsors may be taking payments and not notifying us. Or, they buy a resource equivalent off of a wishlist...but we are also a cash resource. You have to take cash and give cash — the speed at which a nonprofit structure moves is not in line with this funds’ operations.

We’re working on a partnership with another group, that’s people of color led, to build a joint 501c3 structure that will put us under the umbrella of leadership with ongoing financial accountability.” - Mutual aid group serving 400+ people

“It’s being stuck in a space where we’re bringing money to undocumented people, people who won’t sign forms, people not using legal names. For us to give cash, it must be a cash gift.

We are hoping to eventually stop mutual aid and go back to more organizing but get people stipends for that. We’re curious about how to do this in ways that feel ethical so it doesn’t feel like offering money incentives to make someone organize.” - Workers’ organizing collective

“We want to pay people for their time. We’re [also] a cash resource, so classified as a high-risk financial service. We need to formalize membership on paper. How do we collect information for taxes without handing over a registry of sensitive personal information?”
- Mutual aid and organizing collective navigating institutional risk

Ways to build capacity & leadership

Challenge: Maintaining safety and privacy

“We currently don’t have member records. We’re concerned about data from apps. There’s emails, names, stage names, links to profiles, and Cashapps. However, we also want to create a more solidified member database. While we have almost 300 members signed up on our email list, we don’t have a formal application process.”

Challenge: Burn Out

“Recruitment is a big deal. It’s so hard to get people to come to meetings. We’ve been finding that the same people are doing all the work, and they have their own work. It’s hard to get people to be dependable when they have other things happening. We’re asking each of the committees to come up with a description for volunteers and what that time commitment looks like.”

Taking time to Cultivate Relationships & Community

“When we first started [our leadership cohort program], we had a formal application process, but realized it wasn’t as necessary. I work really closely with community [and] folks who put in an application were people I’d identified [as being interested] in my head. Through meetings, and trainings, you’ll see how some folks are more active and ask questions; come early and stay late; and ask if you need help, and asking questions. When the cohort wrapped up, we have folks share their experiences and we’re able to have new members when people encourage others to get involved through word of mouth.” - Outreach coordinator for immigrant worker coalition

“Being able to give people who aren’t connected with other workers some community and education about the movement is a great way to foster local organizing. We offer low resource cash assistance that draws people in and leverages building up a longer-term base if people choose to do that.” - Organizer for mutual aid collective

“After serving for over a year, I can see who is interested in knowing and doing more. It’s been slow establishing trust and seeing small areas of how people might want to get involved.” - Outreach and recruitment coordinator for worker-led collective

“We’re trying to learn ways to have more open communication of [organizing] asks. We’ve had some stumbles and we’ve learned lessons in terms of how we’re structured. Something I’ve done is try to reach out to each person in membership individually and try to practice constantly checking in to get a read on what their life is like, what they need. “So many people will fall into silence and then resentment...this person is silent and not responding; or that person is in need of care and support. That’s something I’ve tried to cultivate within others...to ask people to check in with each person.” - Organizer for migrant organizing collective

Case: Leadership Development

One organization uses a rubric to assess interest in leadership roles and member engagement. This is a 20+ year member-driven workers’ and economic justice organization with over 3,000 members. Core membership is primarily immigrant workers with areas of work in campaign strategy, language justice, and political education. The leadership board is currently 15 members who are elected by the general membership. As part of the leadership, they engage in day-to-day operations and campaign planning. Term of service is one-year. All members of the leadership board receive a stipend for their work. The organization has a small number of paid full-time and part-time staff, which includes a team of organizers working with different language-based communities.

They grow their leadership capacity by identifying 100 members for building leadership. Political participation can look very differently across communities, which necessitates holistic understandings and approaches to 'leadership' and 'engagement.' For example, taking the steps to enter a Zoom call is a lot of engagement that requires learning and downloading a new system.

Showing up

- Attending actions, meetings, political education and/or know your rights trainings
- Showing interest in learning more

Planning

- Contributing an idea, opinion or a thought during a meeting
- Joining and being involved in a committee

Mobilizing

- Inspiring further engagement through active listening, asking questions, teaching others, and inviting others to speak out

Case: Political Education

A coalition of small business owners and workers in the personal care services industry (fiscally sponsored by a health services organization) emphasizes ways to create community and context specific approaches to political education about racial justice. The coalition's membership is primarily Southeast Asian workers. During the summer 2020 uprisings, they developed a series of trainings on anti-Blackness and anti-racism, as well as de-escalating situations as incidents of anti-Asian racism increased. They worked with external trainers to hold 'train the trainers' for staff as well as translate the curriculum.

The de-escalation training emphasized ways to undo normalized racial and gendered responses to violence. One organizer working on member training says, "De-escalation tactics are new and involves practice. When something happens, for folks who feel uncomfortable or don't speak English, what can they say and do in situations?"

For a training on anti-Blackness, they talked about the specificities of Asian migration to the U.S. as connected to the roots of white supremacy: "Why do Asian communities and Black communities not like each other? Is it because of the communities or is it because of white supremacy pitting communities against each other? We brought up examples of how Asian and Black communities worked together in the past and have been able to win."

The trainings raised points of tension regarding policing, criminalization, and migration. During the workshops, members built from personal experiences. For example, Southeast Asian youth were targeted and profiled by police for being gang members. One member shared a story of how her son was killed by police and others began remembering moments when their children were stopped and pulled over. These stories pushed members to think more deeply on why this

happens... was this a random traffic stop or was this racial profiling? These connections and shared experiences helped members identify and understand different relationships to police.

“With the murder of George Floyd...he called out for his mother [and] that was a trigger. [Our members], they’re moms and they thought, if that happened to my son and he called out for me, I would do anything. They got really upset. They wanted to print out posters [and] support.”

Accessing Technology:

“Technological fluency should not be not a prerequisite for leadership.”

Public health and safety needs around in-person gathering during the pandemic pushed many formations to be online if they weren’t already before. However, technological and communication practices emerging from professional and business classes have been normalized into everyday life including movement culture. This includes the wide use of Zoom for gathering or Google Workspace for collaboration, and also practices such as scheduling and adding conversations in advance or group texting etiquette. Additionally, a lot of digital activism prioritizes writing as a skill, including texting, word processing, and email, which can also be a barrier to participation. These norms are skills tied to social and cultural capital.

Non-Use and Collective Use: Collectives raise technological access as a challenge, primarily due to classed norms and practices. Many members’ primary mode of accessing Zoom, Google Drive, and other platforms are through mobile phones. Assumptions around individual technological use, such as having a single phone, emphasize middle class norms and can’t account for the differential relationships that groups have with technologies. Collectives may have a wide range of technology use, including non-use.

Best digital organizing practices:

Also Use Paper: Paper-based forms of communication, including street outreach and letter-writing, are important ways to share information, connect with more people, and also develop leadership. The presumption of ‘everyone is online’ (compounded during the pandemic) ignores the many people who are not online due to access barriers or forcibly cut off from digital communication, such as people currently incarcerated. Some collectives do very little online due to members lacking consistent tech access. Additionally, for collectives who may be doing online webinars and meetings, participants that call in are often not able to see presentation materials. One organizer working with immigrant communities suggests printing presentation slides out in advance and either mailing or dropping materials off so people can access visuals.

“A lot of us don’t have phones, so you can’t just send reminders through text messages. Where can I find you if you have no phone or a steady place where you are? I take walks to find the people with no phones...it might take hours. I do anything and everything for notification. I also write out letters and mail them. If I were to send a letter, I’m sending one two weeks in advance. With their consent, I keep track of notifying them. If I don’t hear from them within a certain amount of time, I go look for them to make sure they’re okay. I also walk the streets and ask if people know about us and recruit them. It takes a lot of time.” - Outreach and recruitment coordinator who works with housing insecure communities

Take time for skill-sharing: Organizational processes may be held by one to two people (which is not sustainable!). Training new people and sharing information more collectively is a way to re-distribute labor. Taking the time and effort to teach someone how to do something enables members to participate in leadership and decision-making, and also supports resource access to necessities like healthcare and housing. One organization has extended a storytelling mentorship that prepares members for legislative testimony into a tech mentorship to support members with technology.

Building technological fluency is multi-directional. Skill-sharing may look like holding one-on-one or small group sessions on downloading apps like Zoom and Google Docs. It may also be learning from community members how to use diasporic applications such as WeChat. It may also be showing people how to navigate privacy settings and training people on how to use aliases on different platforms.

Access to technology is also access to relationships, including connections with funders and other activists. This means also taking time to support relationship building, such as making introductions, checking in before and after meetings, and sharing information about who collaborators may be on a call or project. Inviting someone to a meeting through a Zoom link alone does not offer safety and comfort to participate.

Dis-organize Data: While record-keeping and identity verification practices are important for groups that primarily move funds and resources, doing so in a way that de-identifies (or disorganizes) data collected from individuals is also important to keep information safe. This might mean documenting money flow without putting individualized information onto a spreadsheet and discouraging people from sending any sensitive information over platform messaging functions, including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. For low barrier access to resources and avoiding information breaches, some groups suggest not requiring information such as addresses, phone numbers, IDs, or legal names.

Debunk Assumptions about Individual device Use: Cultural and social expectations of individualized access to technological devices, including assumptions about privacy, security, and control, are tied to class privilege. For some collectives, people may be sharing two or three phones between multiple people or not have regular access to a single phone number or device.

This means constant logging in and out of applications, and sometimes, getting locked out of necessary apps. People may be using broken, glitchy, or older phones that aren't able to download newer apps and software. There can also be all kinds of technical difficulties, like getting dropped from calls. This means thinking carefully about what it means to build collective safety and working creatively to find structures that can be both flexible but consistent.

“For our members, they have no control over what other people do with their phones. There’s no expectation of control over who else sees it. People don’t expect privacy and people don’t gain fluency in those systems.”

Tech Tools:

“Do I have Venmo? No, I don’t because they hate whores. Do I have AirBnB? No, because they hate whores.” -Milcah Halili

When considering platforms and tools, organizations and groups prioritize both safety and access, but often feel they have to make a trade-off between the two. Ultimately, we can't rely on technological tools alone to build collective safety or access. For example, tools that may offer encryption, such as Protonmail (an encrypted email service), may not be the most intuitive to adopt. Or, tools that offer anonymity may not necessarily be helpful for building and maintaining consistent relationships. We need other practices and structures that allow us to build relationships and trust. With limitations in mind, below are some different platforms that various groups have integrated into their organizing practices.

HUSTLE (TEXTING AT SCALE, hustle.com): A mass texting service recommended by a group with 1,000+ members, Hustle has a database where you can group people by language, type of platforms used, type of work, etc. “When we want to send something to a specific and larger group of people, we use Hustle text. We can send YouTube and Facebook videos as follow up after events, especially since a majority of members join Zoom events by calling in.” This platform may be helpful for groups whose members primarily use texting for communication. One group working mainly with Chinese migrant workers also suggests having an organizational number on WeChat, a Chinese messaging app, especially when personal numbers can become inundated when forwarded from contact to contact.

TRYST (DATING APP): A sex worker collective adapts dating platforms like Tryst for member recruitment by encouraging workers to come to meetings. You can adapt this strategy to platforms members are already using for building connections.

TRELLO (PROJECT MANAGEMENT): Some groups recommend Trello for project management. While adding a new platform can be tricky to collectively integrate (often demanding high administrative labor from 1-2 individuals), this might help groups with multiple projects, tasks, and deadlines.

JITSI (WEB CONFERENCING, JITSI.ORG): One group mentioned Jitsi as a more secure alternative to Zoom for larger meetings and workshops. “Our last big event was near the elections, and we got Zoom bombed. We are thinking about moving to Jitsi and maybe thinking about Zoom as strictly for webinars.”

More secure alternatives...

Cryptpad instead of Google docs for note-taking

Protonmail instead of Gmail

A caveat...

“Sex workers who are tech savvy are often early adopters of security infrastructure. They have strict protocols about how to talk to them. I understand, you’re more surveilled than your peers at your class level. Whose Corner members do not use Signal, they barely text. [Our] members don’t use Protonmail, they barely use Gmail. It’s common that members are using a phone that has a broken screen. They have to use voice to text. I’ve always used a phone that is 5 to 6 years old...a lot of times we have a phone that Signal might not download onto.”

If you insist people can only text you via Signal, you’re not going to be in community with street-based sex workers and that is fine. When we construct advocacy spaces that have high security and privacy infrastructure, they are hard for us to get into, even though it might seem easy to you.” - Naomi Lauren

In Comparison - internal communication

- Slack: Useful for general communication with members & committee work. Quick & ideal for not cluttering inboxes; no message encryption
- Keybase: Open-source Slack alternative that offers end-to-end encryption; Doesn’t integrate with external platforms (ex: Dropbox, Trello, etc) like Slack

In Comparison - payment apps: not great lol

- **Venmo**- Discriminates against sex workers (true of all 3 apps); owned by Paypal
- **Paypal**- History of targeting users with particular politics; partners with Polaris to police communities
- **Cashapp**- “We were told Cash App might be snitching to social security & looks risky for bookkeeping practices.”

Anti-work & abolitionist visions:

“Seeing people as workers first before people...it’s still alienating for disabled people.” -Kitty Milford

“They have never thought of informal work like sex work, work that migrants do, everyday work you have to do to pay your rent, to get food, to be able to survive. We were excluded from politics.” - David Gonzalez

“The conditions we are living in right now are bad. Working for more and getting less. Why is dental separate from the rest of our insurance, that doesn’t make any sense. Are your teeth not in your body?” - femi babylon

DECRIMINALIZATION: Repeal local ordinances that criminalize people trying to survive. This includes decriminalizing sex trades and street economies. This also includes repealing ordinances criminalizing the occupation of public spaces, including statutes against loitering, camping, sleeping and public urination and defecation, and statutes against soliciting, panhandling, and fare beating. These statutes target people experiencing poverty and homelessness; and sex workers; and vendors operating with a license (who are often immigrant workers).

Additionally, police routinely harass Black and brown people, immigrants, and queer and trans folks under the assumption that their presence in public space is threatening, dangerous, and criminal. As one Black and trans organizer says, “The cops have a stigma, they think you’re a prostitute even if you aren’t doing that work. The policing of sex work affects trans women no matter what.”

Organizing efforts on legalization, such as the legalization of drug trades or lifting permit and license caps for vendors, may help the most vulnerable people, but they must also work in tandem with decriminalization and decarceration efforts. This also means ending fines and fees associated with the criminal legal process, such as ticketing and cash bail (where people are often incarcerated in local jails because they can’t afford to pay). We also need to end mandatory arrest and failure to protect laws that often harm survivors of gender-based violence. Decriminalization will also reduce arrests and jail churn (how many people are booked into a facility).

HOUSING AND BENEFITS FOR ALL: We need public benefits distribution without social control and policing. We can start building policy in ways that directly center those without access, such as building and housing policies that center the house-less or benefits programs centering the unemployed. One example of this includes setting up wide-scale mass enrollment of Medicaid for sex workers, since mutual aid alone for medicine, hormones, and therapy is not sustainable. Capitalism continues to produce crises. Increasingly, we find public benefits and services dismantled or privatized. Additionally, people struggling with mental health and substance abuse often experience heightened policing and stigmatization that in turn makes it difficult to seek support. We need low-threshold, trauma-informed, and non-punitive models and services for addressing harm.

A FUTURE OF ANTI-WORK? In reflecting on the motto ‘sex work is work’, a group of organizers discussed the limits of worker identity in positioning sex workers with labor rights movements—that incorporation into worker identity fixes value on production and within a permanent place of capital. This doesn’t fully address the root causes of whorephobia and the stigmatization of sex work. One organizer observed that in the U.S. and spaces where sex work is criminalized, sex workers are placed outside of ‘citizenship’ because they are paid for nonproductive work and relationships that don’t contribute to capitalism. As another organizer points out, “Work is not always a bad thing. They think, anti-work, you’re lazy or don’t like work.” However, anti-work shifts our attention to the refusal to work and bodily autonomy beyond the power structures that impose notions of ‘perfect citizenship’.

POLICY TIPS:

“Dismantling capitalism, prison abolition, and the removal of borders...this is all part of sex worker struggle, but we can’t say this to legislators in hostile spaces. People are inclined towards easy to digest experiences.”

“When it comes to policy work, it’s also learning how you’re positioned locally. The uniqueness of regional circumstances is powerful.”

“It’s one thing to propose legislation versus doing a ‘no campaign’. No campaigns are sometimes easier since you don’t have to propose alternatives, but just show harm. You just have to poke holes in the proposal so it can’t stand on its own.”

“Building relationships with legislators is crucial. Learning how the process works and showing legislators you exist and you’re someone they can turn to.”

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