

## BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



### CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

#### Season 2, Episode 30 : Mutual Aid: Meeting Social Crises with Community Care.

**Moderator:** Margot Rinaldo Sacramento's Democratic Socialist of America co-chair and Sac State alumna

**Guests:** Paul Andrews, Community Organizer

**Please note:** This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Margot Rinaldo directly should you have questions.

#### Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

**Margot:** So welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm Margo Rinaldo, one of the co-chairs of the Sacramento Democratic Socialists of America. And I'm here with community organizer Paul Andrews.

**Paul:** Hello. I am a community organizer in a lot of places in Sacramento. And so, yeah, I'm interested and talking.

**Margot:** Awesome. Awesome. We're glad to have you here. Today we'll be discussing mutual aid. Kind of what it is and how it seeks to meet the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors when systems of governance fail to do so. So thank you, Paul, for being on. And I guess my first question to you would be what brings you to mutual aid work?

**1:39**

**Paul:** So honestly what brought me to mutual aid work is kind of a recognition of what was going on more broadly in society and how a lot of needs weren't being met. And so I started recognizing that that sort of work was necessary. And I found myself in a lot of places with people who were doing that sort of work. And so I just kind of started pitching in wherever I could as much as I could. And it honestly helped at the time that right around the same time the pandemic was starting. And so there was some free time because my office was trying to figure out how to get remote work up and running And so it gave me some time to see where I could plug in.

**2:24**

**Margot:** I know a lot of people and a lot of networks sprung up during the pandemic for mutual aid. And so what exactly is mutual aid and how does it kind of differ from other forms of community assistance?

**Paul:** Well, mutual aid is basically there to meet people where they have in need. And our current system is set up in such a way to ensure that there is always need. It needs scarcity to ensure that prices get driven up and that sort of thing. And and as a result, what you end up with is a lot of people who don't have their needs being met. And so what we can do is try and basically provide what they need (as much as much as our ability allows us). And so that and that may mean something simple like, you know, helping someone out, you know, putting some furniture together or something like that or maybe, you know, actually providing food, providing meal, water---that sort of thing. So it just depends on the moment. But basically it's this idea of building community and being there for your community when they need you and also understanding that they're like they're going to be there for you when you need them. Because we all, you know, inevitably need help from time to time, whether it's something small or something large. We're going to need that.

And.... how it differs is one of the things that I've heard, you know, it kind of compared to, which is entirely accurate, is charity. And this isn't the same thing as charity because charity comes from a place where it kind of like acknowledges but keeps in place the differences between people rather than recognizing the similarities and how people need assistance at all times. And it kind of creates this like upper and lower caste almost, where one person has the resources and the other person needs them, and oftentimes they're required to do something. Or, you know, I've seen a lot of places where, you know, they required us to sit through certain sermons or that sort of thing to receive the help. And this is just more of very basic recognizing like, you're human, I'm human, I need help. Can you help me? You need help. I can be there and help you out.

**4:43**

**Margot:** Awesome. Yeah. And like, I definitely think of mutual aid as like taking away, trying to take away the power difference in those relationships. Where charity, yeah, again relies on the power difference in our relationship to remain like hierarchical.

**Paul:** Right.

**Margot:** So yeah, mutual aid seeks to destroy that power dynamic, I guess.

**5:12**

**Paul:** Yeah. Well, because in so many areas of our lives we have these sorts of power dynamics and they're largely unhelpful because they just end up creating more barriers between people and, you know, understanding people and having that sort of like, bond with people. They don't really have that or you have less of that with mutual aid because it is kind of ---give and take.

**5:34**

**Margot:** If mutual aid networks work to, like, quickly organize to meet the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors ,what are the long term goals of mutual aid?

**5: 49**

**Paul:** I think it would be to basically ensure that everyone's needs are met. We just want to make sure that everyone has what they need. And if that's something that we can get to then that's an ideal situation because then we don't have ----a lot of , a lot of issues these days are caused by a lack of a lack of what is needed being provided to people. And, oftentimes the resulting trauma. So the resulting trauma is what causes a lot of these issues between people. And so what we have to do is try and address that so that way we don't have that underlying trauma that ends up causing like so many difficulties within society. And so the goal really is to provide those needs. And actually, I mean, in so doing, we would end up creating a much more robust form of community. We're basically just much more connected to each other, much more dependent on each other and understanding that we're there for each other. And that's one of the bigger issues that we have. And, you know, in capitalism . In the Western world, that sort of thing , as a whole is this idea of an individualism .When in reality we're a very community centered species. That's how we evolve. And so this individuality that we've been told is largely artificial and it's not what we actually need to be able to survive and thrive.

**7:15**

**Margot:** Yeah, absolutely. Well, I guess then the next question for you would be, how have you been involved in mutual aid locally? And can you share with us what have been some of the successes of local mutual aid projects?

**7:36**

**Paul:** So I have been involved in a number of different mutual aid projects. The most the most consistent has been every other Monday serving meals at Cesar Chavez Plaza, downtown Sacramento. And that's been the most consistent. That's kind of one of the more direct routes we were able to just directly see how you're helping folks out. In addition to that, I also run a free pantry that that people drop food off at and then people pick food up from. And I've seen both. I've actually seen unhoused folks drop off food there. I've seen, you know, a wide variety of people who you may not necessarily typically think of when you think of food insecure, like people who have, you know, have cars. But maybe I've had I've had folks from DSA stop by and pick up food. And it's just one of those things where it's just like, you understand that people have this need and they may be able to pay rent. They may even be able to make a car payment.

But food is just not on the cards. And they need what they need. They need housing and they need transportation to a job and food just get dropped behind.

I've also helped out with a local organization called NorCal Resist and NorCal Resist helps out with local immigrants who are settling in the area, people that are seeking asylum. And I help them out with, you know, things as far different as dropping off groceries to new families, dropping off presents around Christmas time. They currently have a farm in West SAC that they're working to set up as a way for new immigrants to this country to be able to utilize, you know potential skills that they may have to not only grow a family for their own families, but also to be able to sell their food to help support themselves.

So and then, you know, other areas are just like I was in one group for a while during wildfire season where we would regularly discuss how to get, you know, low cost air filters assembled for people, how to get them out to people, how to get a quick response type support out to folks if they were suffering or had to move away from an area because due to wildfires. So it was just it's a broad network of folks out here.

**10:08**

**Margot:** Can you share, like what some of the difficulties are in trying to organize quick responses like that?

**Paul:** Yeah, a lot of times the quick responses, the the issues are people's capacity. I mean, you can only do what you can do. And so you want to try and keep that in mind. Also the availability of resources. So you. You may have the capacity, but you also need the resources to be able to provide the people. And then it's also communication with those areas, trying to find out what they need. And if you have the resources to be able to get it to them in a timely manner. And so, yeah, it takes a lot of organizing just to make sure that you have what's available and what they need in those in those rapid tempo situations.

**10:53**

**Margot:** What are some of the most frequent needs that you have addressed? It depends on on a variety of factors, honestly. So one of the biggest things has been water. Especially during like summertime, but in general, just that sort of thing. Because it's one of those things, especially if you're talking with unhoused individuals like they. A lot of the ways that we interact with the world require certain tools. And one of those is frequently a car. And the car requires, you know, gas. And that's not always a priority when you're trying to it to make sure you have enough food to eat or have some sort of, like, safe shelter. And so when you have one or has a water need, you're talking about something that's heavy. And they may have to, you know, walk a mile or two to be able to get and then bring back. And even then, they can't bring back that much because they're limited by how much they can carry. Maybe they have a bike that they can attach something to. That's one of the harder ones.

Another one is, with the frequency the sweeps in the area, where they sweep entire encampments and take everyone's shelter. What usually ends up happening is that they there's a rapid need for tents, for shelter supplies, sleeping bags to keep people warm just to ensure that they're able to survive, you know, the first night or two after something like that happens. And as they're trying to kind of regain their senses and figure out what they need to do, moving on from that point forward to be able to continue surviving.

**12:34**

**Margot:** Yeah, that's like that's just I feel like incredibly important, but also really heavy, heavy work to be engaging with on a regular basis. So what are some of the most common misconceptions you regularly encounter about our homeless neighbors or unhoused neighbors? And how has participating in mutual aid given you a different perspective?

**13: 02**

**Paul** There are so many misinterpretations, so, so many misconceptions. God, it's hard to figure out where to start. So I'll start with one of the ones that made most people may not know. So there's a yearly point in time count that's done, every two years, actually. And they would do a point in time count where they go, they have volunteers and they go out to a number of different census tracts and count the number of people experiencing homelessness. And they use that to estimate how many people in the entire city or county are experiencing homelessness.

The only issue is, is that while that number has grown recently and it's not a good thing that it's grown it doesn't take into account people with inconsistent housing. So these are people that may not be out on the street or they may not be quite as visible on the street, but they may be in their car. And maybe they're they may be parked somewhere. They may have a wait. Some people can, I would be more than happy to let people park in front of my house for days at a time without like calling the cops or anything on them, because they just need someplace consistent and safe that they can just, like, hang in front of and not have to worry about things for a little while.

But then there's also things like people living too many people to a house more than, more than it's comfortable in a house I've heard some stories where people you know, it may be that someone, you know, left in an abusive environment, and so as a result, they ended up having to move in with a family member or friend. And so what you end up with is where that where before there may maybe two or three people in a two bedroom house Now you have six and you might have to have someone's kids doubling up inside of a bedroom and a parent's sleeping on the bed or, you know, that sort of thing. And so a lot of those numbers aren't captured. And so as a result, I think we kind of underrepresent the number of those people who are experiencing that sort of tenuous housing

Another thing is, is that the majority of homeless people are criminals. A lot of times what happens is, is that we we we choose to criminalize things that are related to homelessness and are related to being poor. And then what happens is, is that people get charged for those things or get ticketed for those things. iF they get ticketed and they have a date to show the court because of the experience of being homeless. They're not necessarily able to make that date. They may not even know it exists because they don't have an address to send information to And so as a result, what ends up happening is that they may get a failure to appear on their on their record. Now they've got a they now they've got a record. They've got a misdemeanor. Any number of things like that, that could be considered a criminal record. And so what you see is a lot of people that are housed are have an experience that of "oh, they're criminals." And it's like, well, no, because the crimes that we're charging them with aren't ones that they can necessarily refuse to follow or not follow. If it criminalizes them existing outside, they have no choice but to exist. So it's going to happen one way or the other

Another one that a lot of people have the misconception of is that the majority of homeless people suffer from mental illness. Now while a lot of people may become homeless because of mental illness. A lot of people develop mental illness from being homeless. And so

what happens is, is that it's a constant stressor on them and it causes them to stress out about all sorts of things that you may, you don't have to even think about when you have housing. And what happens is, is that in many, many situations, we have folks with mental health that need help but they don't have any support, whether it's family or friends or whatever. And so they're forced to deal with these sorts of mental health issues out in public. And it looks bad because it may be someone, you know, walking down your alley, screaming their head off because they're experiencing a mental health episode. But most people who are housed have similar experiences. I've got pissed off before. I've yelled because I've gotten frustrated on my computer before. If I had to do that outside, I can't imagine the judgment I'd receive. And so because of my housing, though, I don't have to deal with that judgment, but they do. And so it's one of those things that I think a lot of people don't take into consideration.

Another thing is, is addictions are very similar as well. Addiction, yes, some people are addicted and we recognize that addiction is a medical issue. And I believe, if I remember correctly, I believe it has a genetic component as well. So it's this whole idea of you're responsible for something that's in your genes. You're responsible for something that may be in your genes that typically is brought out by a trauma. Trauma is usually like I can't think of an instance where trauma would be the person is being traumatized's fault. So you're literally trying to put the onus for something that happens to someone on them as though they created the situation for it.

And it's similar to mental health in homeless individuals where it can be it can either precede or be as a result of being homeless, where it kind of triggers it. And what I've seen is I've seen a lot of situations where you have people with mental health issues. Who may be seen by a doctor, may be seen by a county doctor, but they'll get, you know, couple days worth of medical supplies. And that's not enough to deal with a lot of long term mental health issues. And so as a result, once they're done with that, they end up having to turn to other substances to help them with the variety of things that they're experiencing mental health wise. So it's a lot of that.

It's a lot of assumptions of laziness. I know more than a number of homeless individuals who have jobs. A lot of a lot of elderly folks out there who I mean the only thing that they did was they depended on a Social Security system that would give them money when they retired. And the money that they got just isn't enough. I mean, I know several folks who are, you know, are making 1400, 1500 a month in Social Security. But that's not enough to get housing. And at the rate that we're going in local as well as nationally, a lot of times the developers have a motivation to develop more expensive properties because it's more profitable. But as a result, can these people who have 1500 bucks a month who can afford maybe \$1,000, you know, I'd be stretching it, but still it leaves them out so they're unable to make do with what they have.

And the same goes for the working folks who make a minimum wage, maybe through minimum wage job. It might not be enough to be able to afford a place to stay. So it just, you know, there's a it's just it's not as simple as well, a lot of people, I think would like to say it is. And it's one of those human, human condition things where we try to put people in a box so we can understand them easier, so we can judge them easier and so we can know how to interact with them easier. But no human being has ever been able to be prejudged in such a way that takes into the consideration the entirety of who they are and all of their trauma, all of their past experiences, all of what they're currently going through. And so as a result, we're

left with a very incomplete picture when anyone tries to do that. And it's just it's just a bad way to approach humanity as a whole, basically.

**21:02**

**Margot:** Well, thank you for sharing all that. And I mean, what I have so many thoughts, but one of them is like our local Care First Coalition at the county level did a report and they interviewed various folks inside jails that also unhoused. And one of the things that stuck out to me from those interviews was so many folks had vouchers for housing but simply were not eligible for that housing because of, you know, widespread discrimination, you know, against housing vouchers. So I think there's something like 1500 people in Sacramento County with housing vouchers that haven't been able to get an apartment. So yeah. So yeah, I think there's also this misconception again about laziness, but there's a lack of real consideration around the lack of affordable housing that there is and that homelessness is largely caused by you know, that that lack of affordable housing. And it's I think, yeah, it's largely individualized and yeah.

**22:16**

**Paul:** And it's actually it's a it's a it's a psychological thing as well. Like where and I don't know if it's, if it's folks in Western countries or what, but it's this whole notion of if something, if something happens to me, it's not it's beyond my control. It's a myriad of factors that would cause that. And as a result I can't be blamed for what's happening to me. But when I look at someone else, when I see what's happening to them, they must have caused it. It must be something that they did. And it's this kind of, it's this lack of empathy, of lack of understanding that those people are dealing with similar circumstances what you're dealing with. And as yours is complex, so is their situation complex as well.

And it's it's hard. Because the actual the same thing with the vouchers. I mean, the vouchers a lot of times what we heard from folks is that they are treated with they're they're prejudged because they're in this situation. And so they're assumed that they're going to be a certain way and going to be a bad tenant. And as a result, a lot of landlords simply can't refuse the vouchers will put income requirements, credit requirements, that sort of things. And, you know, make making sure that the person is not going to get in there despite the fact that they have this regular source of rent, which is going to pay out. So it's just it's kind of ridiculous to me that that's the case. It should be, I mean, I've heard numerous instances where people who are just like, "I've been homeless for X number of years at times and it's just like I finally get this voucher and no one will take it anywhere." And it's crazy.

And then the other thing I think a lot of people don't consider the fact is, like any of the groups that are overrepresented in homelessness, you would understand why it's all these groups that have been historically not included in the halls of power, the businesses and all that sort of thing.

And it's like, yeah, you wouldn't you wouldn't look at that.... like, LGBTQ folks are overrepresented in homelessness. You wouldn't be like, Oh yeah, that teenager who just got kicked out of their house because their parents are homophobic is now personally responsible for being homeless three or four years later, when they're now an adult. You wouldn't go, "Oh, yeah, no, They're they're just not a good person anymore". But somehow people can disconnect those two events and still blame the person, despite the fact that there were extenuating circumstances.

The same for women are overrepresented, minorities are overrepresented. They wouldn't go to a woman who was in a domestic violent situation, who left her family or who left her husband because she needed to get away to protect her kid. You wouldn't go like, "Oh, she's a horrible human being." But there becomes a disconnected after a certain amount of time. But now you can blame this person and you can act as though this traumatizing incident didn't cause the resultant homelessness. And it's just it's bizarre to me the ways in which we try to rationalize victimizing people.

**Margot:** Yeah. No. Yeah, I would say another thing that stuck out to me from those interviews really is almost everyone interviewed knew what kind of help they needed. And it was largely a, you know, like rehabilitation for like issues with addiction like that was across the board a common need. And the fact that we know that there are just not enough resources at the county level to meet that need. You know, it's not like we don't know how to help. You know, it's not like we don't know how to help people become healthy. We are simply just not putting our resources in the places to make that happen. Our priorities are currently different.

**26:18**

**Paul:** Yeah. Yeah. I think the last I heard I want to say the addiction services waiting list was like 500 people on. It was completely full. And the person, the people at the end were like expecting in the way like 18 months. So it's clear that the people want the help, but we're just not giving it. We're just not providing the resources. Like you said, we're just it's not a priority. And you can't simultaneously blame people for not being the way you want them to be and then also not give them the resources to be that way when they clearly some indication that they do. So it's just it's bizarre. And it's this like nonsensical gaslighting or it's like, are you serious like this. It's clearly you're not providing what they need. And so if you want to if you want to show it's your priorities, show us your budget. And that's literally what's happening right now is like county and city are putting out their budget. And what you'll see is you'll see is an increase in any number of areas that aren't community related, that aren't meant to help out, especially historically disenfranchized communities, health services, that sort of thing. They're not going to see the same sort of increase that other areas and the budgets are going to see. And it just shows you where their priorities are and what they and if they continue to try and complain about the areas that they think are issues then maybe they should put some money there.

**27:40**

**Margot:** Yeah. No. And so I guess our final question here is, yeah, how has participating in mutual aid given you a different perspective? Cause I guess, how is it connected with you?

**Paul:** Oh, I would say it's it disabused me of a lot of the notions that I had of unhoused folks. Of the like I think I shared a lot of not quite at the same level as what I see. But I. But I see some. Similarities between the ways that I viewed, and I wasn't quite the same. It seems like a lot of people right now I just really want to like get out of sight by it because I always think about it. I was never really like that. I just kind of happened. It was like a thing that happened, especially like in major cities and that sort of thing. And now I'm much more see it as like a thing that. That happens. But what we can address and we can stop. But that we don't. And so that part's kind of



disappointing because, like, I don't want to see people suffer. So it's just it seems it seems cruel to allow people to suffer when you have the resources necessary to be able to help them.

I know one thing that has been nice, though, is it's the best way to meet awesome people, that you can meet a lot of other people who you can be frustrated with. So that's always that's always an option. They are good people with with good. Like I I've always been really I've tried to be really good as far as empathizing. And I find a lot of people who in these spaces are really good at empathizing as well. And yeah, it's nice. It's nice to meet some genuine folks like that.

**29:28**

**Margot:**

Well, I guess before we log off, are there any final things you'd like to share with the audience?

**29:36**

**Paul**

Um. No. I mean, if you're looking like honestly, if you're looking to make some awesome genuine people, I would definitely look into local mutual aid organization. The the opportunities they offer are vast and they fit any number of, you know, any, any sort of like talent or any interest that you may have. And as a result, you could definitely be able to find people. Another thing I would say is one of the things that I know a lot of folks have issues with. I don't know is that not so much in college, but once you're out of college, it's kind of hard to make adult friends. It's awkward. You don't want to be the weirdo. Are you getting online or what's happening at the bar? And you know, if you're not, like, heteronormative and you may want to you may want to find other ways to meet people. And this is a great way to meet both. And the nice thing is, it's like I said, you know, they're going to be genuine people who are authentic and really interested in helping other folks and just kind of being part of like a really robust community.

**Margot:** Awesome. And with that, thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understanding, empathy, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. You just listen to the Building Justice podcast. The information contained in this podcast, including its title and description, represent the views and opinions of the hosts and guests and not necessarily the views or opinions of the Sacramento State, CRISJ and Building Justice Podcast Committee.

### **Outro Music Lyrics**

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.