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Starting a Mutual Aid Pod Quick Reference Guide

Supporting a neighbor in need is the purest expression of community and care. In crisis, powerful, effective leadership often emerges from unexpected sources, and the highest impact is frequently achieved by providing the most basic resources.

Here are some steps to begin making an impact:

1) Define your pod

Mutual Aid pods are most effective when they are concentrated and focused within a small, defined community or targeted area. Both the giving and receiving of mutual aid requires a strong foundation of mutual trust, which may be easier to foster within defined parameters.

- Choose a clear, small geographic or social boundary (a neighborhood block, a building, 5–30 people).
- Walk the area, compile a list addresses/units; split into multiple pods if more than the desired number of households or individuals in the pod.
- Tip: Name the pod (e.g., “Main Street Pod”) for easy reference.

2) Recruit a core team

- Find 1–3 community members to co-lead as Pod Point Person(s) (PPP).
- Ask neighbors you already know and trust to co-lead the pod; invite volunteers to fulfill other supporting roles.
- Role examples: communications lead, logistics/errands coordinator, safety officer, finance/solidarity fund manager.

3) Map needs & skills

- Compile a list of needs in the community and compile a list of the time and resources others can offer (e.g. special skills, availability, interests, languages).
- Create a short intake form using secure technology (e.g. Cryptpad) or good, old-fashioned notes.
- Examples of needs / mutual aid offerings: groceries and supplies donations, grocery drops, carpooling assistance, school drop-offs and pick-ups, appointment accompaniment, translation services, tech support, medical support or medicine runs, emotional support, laundry services, legal advice, meal trains, rental assistance, dog walking services and more.

4) Establish safety & privacy rules

- Agree on member vetting protocols, personal safety, confidentiality, and limits of mutual aid.
- Share simple protocols for secure deliveries, protecting identities and locations of at-risk community members, and establish secure communication channels.
- Tip: Share members' identifying or location details only on a strict need-to-know basis. Keep the pod footprint small: one member reports a need, the pod fulfills it, and the PPP arranges safe, limited contact between volunteers and recipients.

5) Choose communication channels

- Designate the primary group communication tools for real-time and reach-all contact.
- Opt for end-to-end encrypted messaging apps such as Signal, and avoid using SMS, Gmail, or other services where the safe handling of your data is not guaranteed. Consider keeping a back-up phone list of all members in the Pod and store it in a safe place.
- Tip: Set an expectation for response times and check-in frequency.

6) Create intake & task flow

- Standardize how requests arrive, who triages them, and how tasks are assigned/recorded.
- Simple steps to log requests and monitor fulfillment can be tracked as follows: Request → PPP or triage volunteer logs it → Assign volunteer → Confirm completion → Mark closed.
- Use a secure shared doc (hosted in a secure app such as CryptPad or Proton Drive) or use a simple offline task board.

7) Run a pilot project

- Start with one recurring, visible service to build trust (weekly groceries, medicine runs, or a meal train).
- Set a schedule, limit the scope of services at first, and assign one coordinator to manage the initial test run. Publicize the outcomes and lessons learned within the pod and evaluate after 2–4 runs.

8) Set boundaries & prevent burnout

- Create rotating shifts for certain PPP roles and assign the shifts in advance. Establish the services or aid that is out of scope for the Pod (e.g., grocery deliveries are limited to weekends).
- Volunteers should also clearly state what type of aid they are willing or able to provide and indicate periods of unavailability. Using the status or profile name within the chosen communications app could be an effective way to signal availability.
- Tip: Encourage micro-tasks (e.g., drop off a meal, walk a dog, drive someone to work once per week) to lower barrier to helping.

9) Manage funds & shared resources

- Decide if you'll collect money (solidarity fund to buy groceries or help with monthly rent) or whether the support will be limited to donated goods.
- Designate a treasurer, use transparent ledger, agree spending and disbursement rules, and opt for cashless transfers where possible (e.g., Venmo or Zelle).

10) Build relationships & community norms

- Hold introductory conversations about the goals and shared beliefs of the community members. Adopt simple agreements on guiding principles, such as respect, reciprocity, and accessibility.
- It may be advisable to meet all volunteers in person before admitting them to Pod communications channels, to ensure mutual alignment and upfront vetting.
- Ask key questions (e.g., motivations for participating, availability, skills, health needs, emergency contacts).
- Create a one-page "pod norms" to share with all members or new entrants.
- Tip: Encourage social activities (e.g., weekly check-ins in person or virtually) to strengthen ties and maintain momentum. Share stories of success and impact.

11) Expand network & mutual aid map

In time, there may be opportunities to grow organically. Be on the lookout for those opportunities and spread the word about what is possible. Share advice with other groups who are just getting started.

- Connect with neighboring pods and local organizations to share resources and escalate needs.
- Share PPP contacts, aggregate supply lists, and referral pathways.

12) Track, evaluate, adapt

- With the core team of PPP, keep brief records of tasks, participation, recurring needs, unmet needs, and lessons learned.
- Establish a cadence for regular quick review: what worked, what didn't, who needs support; update plans and approach and redistribute roles if needed.

13) Accessibility & inclusion

- Agree upfront how accessibility and inclusion may be prioritized. If certain community members are not fluent in English, look for volunteers who can provide translation services or serve as primary contacts. Understand any disabilities within the community and plan for disability accommodations. Understand the needs of less-connected neighbors, such as at-risk families unable to move around freely, and plan for the outreach that could bring relief to their situation.
- Recruit multilingual volunteers, and volunteers with experience in assisting those with disabilities.

14) Safety escalation & external help

- Define when to call professionals (medical emergency, legal risk, criminal activity).
- Maintain a short list of emergency numbers, non-emergency police, local clinics, and reliable social services.
- If possible, enlist volunteers who are trained or certified to provide medical or legal services within the community, to add an additional layer of confidentiality, trust and protection.
- Train and educate PPPs on boundaries.

15) Celebrate & sustain

- Recognize volunteers and successes to maintain morale.
- Share quick shoutouts in the group, host occasional in-person or virtual gatherings, and rotate leadership responsibilities.

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