

# Mutual Aid as a Queer Intervention in Public Library Service

**By Flan Park**

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For the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) workers and the neighbors who rely upon our services, the period of unequalled challenges beginning with the first COVID-19 stay-at-home order in March 2020 has only magnified routine difficulties. Austerity budgets, systemic neglect, and administrative myopia defined the 2010s in community-facing government services. Since the 2008 financial crisis, public workers have worked with activist networks to prevent the closure of a wide swath of branch libraries and called for full funding of everyday programs. But the last fiscal year ended with city workers rallying to keep municipal agencies closed. What had changed, and what had remained the same?

The one-size-fits-enough solutions of neoliberal government clashed repeatedly against the lived experiences of the people working in the public good. Where Philadelphia's bureaucrats saw this economic downturn as an unnavigable political morass, Free Library workers refused the no-win terms of the game. Looking outward to the efforts of queer community activists, we instead advanced new efforts toward direct material mutual aid. In the process, we provided the means to begin redefining public library and information services.

Queer activism was not just a model but a motivating factor for my personal commitment to the work of mutual aid. I am a queer nonbinary person who has worked alongside countless queers, trans folks, and women in vital caring positions since I was a teenager. In my prior program at the Free Library, our flagship Literacy Enrichment Afterschool Program (LEAP), well over 90 percent of my coworkers were women and nonbinary people. When the Free Library laid off temporary and seasonal staff in June 2020, between 20 and 30 percent of LEAP workers who lost their jobs were out-at-work trans folks.

Though I had the extraordinary luck to have a grant-funded summer position at FLP, I watched as dozens of talented and dedicated educators who were deemed essential at the pandemic's onset were sacrificed to austerity logic and abandoned to navigate an overwhelmed unemployment system. In using my social position at the library to build a mutual aid network from the grassroots up, I was not only hoping to transform the definitions of information commons and community-learning support but to literally take care of my own.

Even under ordinary circumstances, Philadelphia is reckoned among America's poorest large cities, according to a variety of benchmarks. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated those historical inequities. In April, Pennsylvania's unemployment rate peaked at 16.1 percent, averaging 13 percent over the summer.<sup>1</sup> Philly's municipal workforce was not untouched by this disaster, as the city drastically revised its fiscal projections to Recession-era levels. Facing a 13 percent cut under this new budget, the administration of the Free Library laid off over 200 low-wage workers in temporary and seasonal job classes.<sup>2,3</sup> Disproportionately, these workers were Black and brown, and women and nonbinary. While the Mayor and City Council touted their commitment to equity, these employment decisions told a different story.

While the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged Philadelphia, the remaining workers at the Free Library worked through summer 2020 at a dramatic distance from our own administration. As Philadelphia's streets thrummed with rallies and marches for racial justice, upper-level management at the Free Library remained determined to curtail anti-racist organizing in our workplace and instead prioritized reopening libraries to full indoor service as rapidly as possible, seemingly indifferent to the danger this posed to employees and patrons. Rank-and-file workers viewed this priority and its potential to drive community spread as unacceptable risks for both ourselves and the neighborhoods we served. We were adamant we could advance our civic mission while maintaining respect and care for ourselves and our communities.

Our time before returning to onsite work proved vital to envisioning the task of public library workers under pandemic conditions. After organizing efforts led to the emergency closure of all branch libraries, library workers were invited to voluntarily redeploy to municipal food distribution sites from April through August. The library workers who worked these shifts during the city's scaled-up food program continued to seek out material aid projects to collaborate with. Our interest in mutual aid flowed from observing and participating in queer-led projects like West Philly Bunny-Hop, Dipes'n'Wipes, and Philly's numerous community fridges as the pandemic progressed.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Drawing on these and other models for neighborhood-based calls to action, small donor fundraising, and open-air accessibility, library workers were able to interpret the mission of the Free Library ("to advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity") through organizing tactics modeled by Philly's queer grassroots networks. For example, collaborating with the organizers of Dipes'n'Wipes enabled us to meet financially stressed families' immediate caretaking needs, like infant care and menstruation supplies.

As library workers connected with other neighborhood organizations, we collectively leveraged our individual abilities to administer aid in the form of physical, outdoor spaces for information search and connection. We brought our partners together to create safe, accessible

outdoor space for folks to connect to services. While our administration focused on “getting back to normal,” we aimed to keep meeting community members’ immediate physical needs, while supporting and supplementing at-home learning in the absence of the library as an indoor learning space. The experience we had in the rapidly responsive spheres of queer activism provided us a template to intervene in public library services with fresh imagination.

Through those interactions, we did what library workers do every day: work with individuals to build community capacity to meet intellectual and social needs. We met caregivers for in-patient facilities looking for hand crafts and skill-based activities for their ward-bound adult clients. We interacted with countless caregiving adults struggling after being thrust into full-time educational support for their remote-schooling children. We talked with unemployed people ripped from their everyday routines and livelihoods who lacked the Internet connections they needed to access benefits, apply for work, and even keep themselves entertained. We also distributed hand-sewn face masks, take-home art kits, homework help supplies, and thousands of free books.

Our motivation to materially aid those most affected by economic distress bore tangible results. Thousands of dollars of goods and services were delivered to hundreds of working-class Philadelphians at essentially no overhead cost to our organization. Collaborative relationships were formed and strengthened in our communities, bringing new confidence and hope in our neighbors. Without waiting for administrative sanction, rank-and-file municipal workers transformed a season of deprivation into a period of innovation.

Worker-initiated, community-responsive initiatives are the future of public library services in the face of state austerity. The Free Library of Philadelphia Mutual Aid project demonstrated active concern for workers’ and neighbors’ safety, both in terms of COVID-19 transmissibility and meeting material and intangible needs during a generational economic and public health crisis.

When this present crisis is past, entrenched institutions and governments possessing vast cultural and financial capital must vest programming initiative and resources in the hands of workers. It is not enough to be deemed essential until the point of disposability. Our cities do not work without us. We demand a future where community-facing workers lead.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Benshoff, “Pa. unemployment rate drops to 10.3%, hospitality and leisure still suffering,” 18 September 2020, <https://why.org/articles/pa-unemployment-rate-drops-to-10-3-hospitality-and-leisure-still-suffering/>.

<sup>2</sup> Laura McCrystal, “Philly budget deal cancels \$19 million increase in police funding, moves another \$14 million elsewhere,” 18 June 2020, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/budget-police-philadelphia-kenney-covid-20200618.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael D’Onofrio, “City council approves \$4.8B budget full of spending cuts, layoffs,” 25 June 2020, [https://www.phillytrib.com/news/local\\_news/city-council-approves-4-8b-budget-full-of-spending-cuts-layoffs/article\\_6435a7fa-1301-55f3-bbea-5c9fae329e6f.html](https://www.phillytrib.com/news/local_news/city-council-approves-4-8b-budget-full-of-spending-cuts-layoffs/article_6435a7fa-1301-55f3-bbea-5c9fae329e6f.html).

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<sup>4</sup> West Philly Bunny Hop is a network of food workers and neighbors distributing fresh produce and pantry essentials to over 350 families per week in West Philly, South Philly, and Kensington.

<sup>5</sup> Dipes'n'Wipes is a volunteer-run redistribution effort that pops up at community events throughout West & Southwest Philly to give away infant care supplies and menstrual health products.

<sup>6</sup> Community fridges were established throughout Philadelphia, often by explicitly anarchist neighbor organizers, seeking to meet neighborhood nutrition needs and reduce fresh food waste during the pandemic economic crash.