



SISTA Fire

Our Mission: SISTA Fire is co-creating a network of women of color and non-binary people to build our **collective power** for social, economic, and political transformation. SISTA Fire aims to nurture a movement-building culture in Rhode Island which **centers the experience and leadership of women of color and non-binary people of color**. By investing in their leadership capacity and creating space for them to build relationships, heal from their individual and collective trauma, develop their historical and systemic analysis, and strategize community-led solutions.

Our History: SISTA Fire was co-founded by **Ditra Edwards** and **Chanravy Proeung**, in May 2017 to address the lack of support for women of color's vision for change and their development as leaders.

Mutual Aid

What is mutual aid? Mutual aid is survival work done by **volunteers** who are directly impacted and belong to marginalized groups. People participate because of a passion to combat injustice and **care** for their community. The seminal work of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords to meet people's **basic needs**, where the system has failed and without expectations, is what truly grounds SISTA Fire's mutual aid work. SISTA Fire's mutual aid work values **self-determination** for people impacted and/or targeted by political and social conditions. Engagement with mutual aid builds broader political participation, **solidarity**, and power.

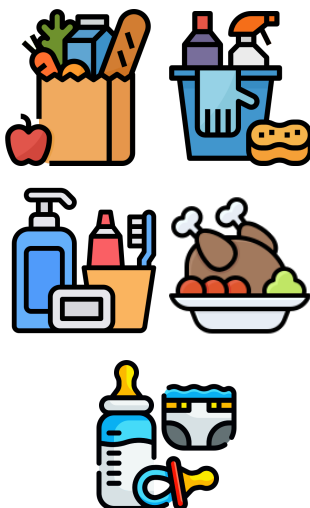

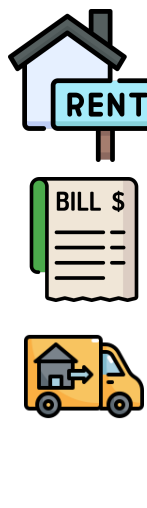
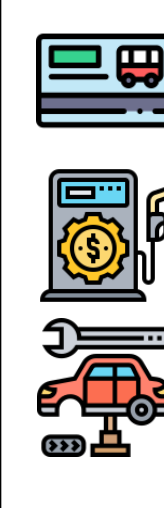

We are all **inherently worthy**, have **dignity**, and are **interconnected!**

Rapid Response & Short-Term Recovery

Starting in March 2020, SISTA Fire began coordinating mutual aid in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the **economic and social disaster** experienced by SISTA Fire members and communities of color across Rhode Island. Mutual aid **volunteers** engaged in key roles and responsibilities including, but not limited to, phone banking, translation and interpretation, driving and delivery, documentation, and fundraising. SISTA Fire was able to do this work **effectively and thoughtfully** because of long-standing and consistent efforts to be in relationships and in community with the people. Solidarity was further created and **strengthened** among community members in Providence, Cranston, Central Falls, Pawtucket, Warwick, and Woonsocket through these efforts.

Types of Mutual Aid

SISTA Fire engaged in both direct financial assistance and non-monetary forms of mutual aid with our community during the COVID-19 pandemic. SISTA Fire’s mutual aid work has shifted from mostly food assistance and grocery/medication delivery at the start of the pandemic to increased requests around utility bills and overdue rent, increasing debt based on these accumulating bills, and the devastating impacts of eviction through 2023.

Direct Financial Assistance and Non-Monetary Forms of Mutual Aid				
<p><u>Food & Groceries:</u> Food, Toiletries, Cleaning Supplies, Baby Supplies, Turkey Dinners</p>	<p><u>Health Related Support:</u> Healthcare Visit Co-payments, Medication, Doula Services, Feminine Care Products, COVID-19 Vaccine, BIPOC Therapists, Wellness Workshops</p>	<p><u>Living Costs:</u> Rent & Utility Assistance, Rent Relief RI, Funds for Electricity, Gas, & Phone Bills, Moving Expenses</p>	<p><u>Transportation</u> Bus Pass, Money for Gas, Car Repairs</p>	<p><u>Other:</u> Small Business Relief, Winter Coats, Art Supplies</p>
				

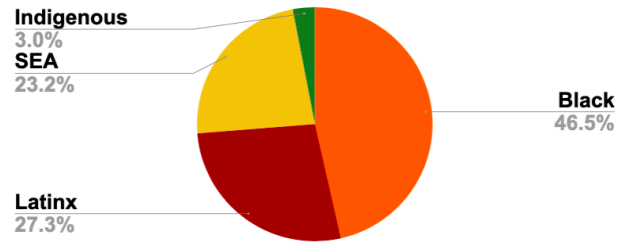
Timeline

- May 2018 - Mutual aid started when Sista Fire started... helping people and building community (rent assistance, doula support, clothing exchanges and food)
- January 2020 - First COVID-19 case in the U.S.
- March 2020 - Shutdown
- March 2020 - grocery shopping and picking up medications, feminine products, diapers, baby formula, and other necessities for community members not able to safely leave their home or go to the store or pharmacy
- Mask Distributed during mutual aid deliveries
- April - Free Virtual Wellness Workshops for Membership (homeschooling tips, cooking, and yoga)
- April- July 2020 - Supported small businesses applying for SBA PPP Loan for business relief support, specifically in the Khmer community during Rounds 1 & 2? (There was a severe lack of translation of business relief information during the first few months of the pandemic in many popular spoken languages, such as Khmer and other Southeast Asian languages.)
- July 2020 - Community Altar Building to honor Black, Indigenous, womxn, and girls, and our trans and non-binary siblings most impacted and lost to state-sanctioned and medical violence
- November 2020 - Holiday Dinner Basket Distribution
- December 2020 - Christmas first for families with five or more children
- December 2020 - End-of-the-year holiday postcards mailed to community members engaged through MA
- April 2021 - Rent Relief RI Training and support for Spanish- and English-speaking community members to apply for rent assistance from the state
- April 2021 - Conducted outreach for BIPOC Vaccine drive and were a resource for Black, Latinx, & South Asian & South East Asian community members to get set up with COVID-19 vaccination appointments - 75 appointments made for elders, immigrants, & non-English speakers.
- August 2021 - Supported members to apply for Guaranteed Income Pilot, led by the Providence Mayors office.
- November 2021 - Distributed Thanksgiving dinners
- December 2021 - End-of-the-year postcards mailed to community members engaged through MA
- December 2021 - Organized an end-of-the-year family photo day at the Knight Memorial Providence Public Library
- December 2021 - Winter Coat Drive with Diamond at the George Wiley Center. SISTA Fire reached out to our core members and was able to donate 12 bags of coats and support them with processing and distributing the donations at the GWC.
- Completed 2022
 - \$35,00 Spent on Support
 - Creating, sharing, and growing a comprehensive list of Black Indigenous and people of color therapists practicing in Rhode Island to support our community in making decisions around mental health and accessing culturally relevant care.
 - SISTA Fire action (rapid response, vaccine outreach, Community Baby Shower)

Who engaged in mutual aid?

Both people served through the mutual aid network and those a part of the committee are community members most impacted by COVID-19, economic violence, and structural and systemic oppression. This includes Black women, women of color, queer and trans folks, single parents, expecting families and new parents, elders, immunocompromised, disabled, and chronically ill community members, immigrants, and undocumented people.

Race/ Ethnicity of Community Members Engaged in Mutual Aid 2021 - 2023

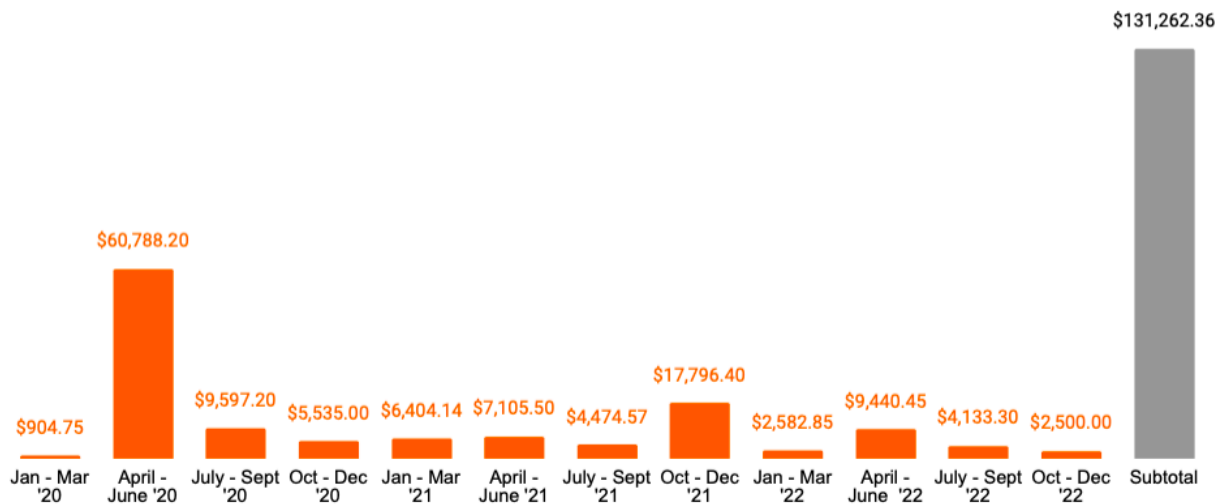


*Sista Fire did not begin tracking the race/ethnicity of community members engaged with MA until 2021.

Mutual Aid Impact

Between March 2020 and December 2022 SISTA Fire redistributed \$131,261 to 419 Rhode Islanders, not including Doula service support. A total of \$76,825 was redistributed in 2020. In 2021, SISTA Fire distributed \$35,780.61 to 63 community members, 18 of whom required multiple instances of support. In 2022, we distributed \$18,656.60 to 34 community members, 16 of whom required multiple instances of support.

Money Distributed to Community Members



Partnerships

SISTA Fire partnered with other community groups such as PrYSM, Community Care Alliance in Woonsocket, King's Tabernacle Church and several Buddhist Temples in Providence which allowed us to expand our network and reach to communities of color across the state. Our partnerships also extended to Community Health Workers. Additionally, through our relationship with Umoja Nia, we were able to connect families to doula services and provide financial assistance to families who could not afford it (this monetary aid is not included in graph totals).

Our Attempt at Transition

In the Fall of 2022, SISTA Fire made the difficult decision to finish out the year and transition the Mutual Aid Committee from coordinating and redistributing resources, to focusing on writing up the experience of our work, including the key learnings from 3 years of intimately working with our community to move resources, maintain and strengthen our mutual aid network. In December, we closed our office a week early from complete exhaustion. We needed to bring our focus back to our campaign work and integrate the knowledge we had gained.

In addition to partnering with community organizations and Black Churches, SISTA Fire leaned into our families and the depth of relationships our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles had in our neighborhoods. SISTA Fire also deepened our relationships with Providence Community Health Workers who work for various organizations and institutions across the state. Early in 2020, several Community Health Workers (CHW) reached out to us because they had heard about our rapid response work. They wanted to see if we could help them do more to close the gaps they were experiencing and witnessing in their communities and among their community families. Our relationship with CHW and our families allowed us to reach Buddhist Temples, Latino Churches, and groups of people who are otherwise outside of institutions and often invisibilized by the state, such as Immigrants and non-English speakers, undocumented families, Khmer and other SEA elders.

As part of our closing strategy, the Mutual Aid Committee connected with community members to notify them about closing out this section of our work and inform them we no longer had the resources to continue Mutual Aid. It was a challenging conversation for all of us because recovery from the pandemic had not happened for so many of us and the clear lack of investment in our communities is nothing less than neglect. In addition to inviting folks to step into deeper levels of membership and creating community resource lists, the committee also identified 5 families who had made repeated requests for assistance, to support with \$500 gift cards to transition before we officially closed.

Guidelines for determining who would receive the transition dollars were carefully developed and are laid out below:

1. **Frequency of requests** → Who has made 5 or more requests over the past year? Who has been depending on mutual aid more heavily?
2. **Immediate Needs around Food and Housing** → Addressing the immediate needs of people, specifically around food and housing.

3. **Sole financial supporters of their family & Single Moms** → Trends around increase in single mommas. 25% of people we supported last year are single moms. Many women of color are the sole supporters of their household.
4. **Isolation** people who don't have community or family connections: ie. Elders
5. **Job status** → unemployed or no full time consistent work / source of income

Although our committee had disbanded and we had stopped advertising our mutual aid work, at the start of 2023 new families started reaching out to SISTA Fire with requests for support, with worsening and sustained challenges around housing and food in particular. SISTA Fire hustled to raise resources. By the end of 2023, we had managed to move \$15,000 to families for rental assistance, utilities, food, and more. In 2024, we continue to provide mutual aid when possible.

Key Learnings

Black, Indigenous, Immigrant and communities of color, women of color, disabled people, elderly people, immunocompromised, immigrants, parents, and LGBTQ people, have been hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic and the failures of our state to provide economic relief. Our communities continue to struggle to meet basic needs, including food security, quality housing, and adequate healthcare.

“Translation was the biggest factor when it came to help my community... because it's all about speaking the language and being able to gain their trust.”

Institutional Barriers

The criteria that exist for most support services and economic relief programs (ex., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], unemployment insurance, SBA Paycheck Protection Program, and Rent Relief RI) excludes many undocumented, non-English speaking, and low-income people from receiving critical and life-saving support for them and their families. Community members mentioned documentation, identification, personal information, translation, and paperwork as hindrances.

“Parents are having to ‘take food out of kids’ mouths to make sure things don't shut down,’ being forced to make impossible decisions like feeding your kids or paying rent.”

Food Security

Our community members mentioned high levels of food insecurity. Those with access to SNAP say it's not enough. Moms say the cost of baby formula is too high. Community members reached out asking SISTA Fire for food assistance and then would ask us to pay their utility bill instead, highlighting the difficult choices our communities face.

“Increased rent with the same crappy apartment, rodents, etc.”

Housing

People are making decisions on whether to pay for food or shelter. Many single women, including moms, have been struggling to find housing even though they have Section 8 vouchers because of racism and housing discrimination. We have heard from multiple community members about their experiences of facing eviction notices and threats of eviction, both during and after the state rent freeze.

“I felt important because people from SISTA Fire called and checked up on me.”

Mental Health

Toxic stress is a growing and pressing issue in communities of color, and there are not enough POC therapists and too many barriers for communities of color to receive culturally competent and humble care. Finding linguistically competent providers among the SEA community is a challenge. Women expressed struggling with isolation and loneliness, including moms who said their children are struggling with this also. Those who stepped in to form the mutual aid network came to realize and understood that they, themselves and the people they were organizing with, also needed emotional, caregiving, and economic support.

“But therapy doesn’t fix too high rent or bad jobs.”

Work

Many people in our community lost full-time work during the last two years and have been struggling with juggling multiple low-paying jobs that do not meet bills. This has been true for women of color in our community who are also often responsible for taking care of the children, parents, and/or sick partners and family members. Transportation is a challenge for people getting to and from work.

“Showing people what is possible and that there are folks who can create systems that center care with very little resources, we can have an impact. Abundance is possible.”

Approach to Mutual Aid

The approach of engaging the community around mutual aid and understanding how people are being impacted is essential. Trust and consistency are crucial. Relying on our relationships, word of mouth, check-in calls & occasional visits were critical. Communication with the undocumented community needs to consider fear. We further built trust across our communities by removing coded racist barriers to accessing support through our mutual aid (such as documentation, paperwork, income eligibility, status requirements.)

Recommendations

1. **Make the Guaranteed Income pilot project permanent** – Advocate for the state to adopt the pilot as a permanent program to provide consistent economic stability for low-income families.
2. **Expand microloan programs** – Establish culturally relevant microloan programs (e.g., Lending Circles) to support small businesses and financial independence.
3. **Create housing cooperatives** – Develop housing cooperatives specifically for single-parent households and low-income families to build long-term housing security.

4. **Expand and protect Section 8 vouchers** – Increase funding for vouchers, provide incentives for landlords, and enforce anti-discrimination protections.
5. **Implement statewide rent control** – Introduce a state-level rent control program to prevent price gouging and ensure stable housing costs.
6. **Invest in public kitchens and community spaces** – Establish public kitchens where families can gather, share meals, and build community resilience.
7. **Increase mental health resources** – Fund more BIPOC therapists and provide training for culturally and linguistically competent care.
8. **Reduce barriers to public assistance** – Remove documentation and ID requirements for public assistance programs to increase access for undocumented and non-English-speaking families.

"Showing people what is possible and that there are folks who can create systems that center care with very little resources, we can have an impact. Abundance is possible."