

# THE CHOO CHOO SOCIALIST REVIEW

*The latest news and updates from Chattanooga DSA*



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## Mutual Aid in Chattanooga

*by Katie Keel, Chattanooga DSA Co-Chair*

As the holidays approach, many companies and other organizations will spotlight local nonprofit efforts, like Toys for Tots or the Salvation Army, in their newsletters to highlight their charity bona fides. As socialists, we don't believe charities should have to exist, so instead we decided to interview mutual aid groups in Chattanooga to find out how they're building a world without the need for charity.

Contact information for all three groups can be found on the last page of this newsletter.



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# Chattanooga Harm Reduction

***First, we interviewed one of the lead organizers of Chattanooga Harm Reduction, who will remain nameless here as their job is of a publicly sensitive nature.***

## ***When and why was Chattanooga Harm Reduction founded?***

*We started in January of this year. Like most of the mutual aid organizations around town, we're fairly young, and I think we just started in response to the need for harm reduction services around town - they're just not around, they're not accessible. And on a personal level, some of the folks in my community experienced some overdose deaths, and that kind of inspired the organizing in a way - it fueled the fire. And so we started in January with sort of a rough idea of what we wanted to do, which has changed along with the rotating cast of people in our collective.*

*But what we've always centered our organizing around has been, primarily, distributing naloxone and doing trainings [for how to use it]. We also collect information on safe use practices and display it on our Instagram, and give out test strips [for testing the contents of street drugs]. We've done a little outreach; in conjunction with some other groups we've been able to provide naloxone and medical supplies to unhoused folks around town, as well as distribute outside of MAT clinics [medication-assisted treatment clinics, aka methadone or suboxone clinics].*

*And we educate people; we work to destigmatize drug use by talking about these issues. We're trying to figure out the best way to train the most people; we've done Zoom trainings and just had our first in-person training a few weeks ago, and we'll be having more of those as time goes on.*

*We have these amazing tools now - naloxone is stronger than opioids; it can reverse an opioid overdose. It's amazing that we have it. And the fact that we don't just give it out to everybody, all the time, is just because it's so heavily and deeply stigmatized. So really, our primary goal is to combat the stigma that prevents people from accessing the tools that they need to make the choices that they want and do things safely.*

## ***Can you explain a little more about the idea of harm reduction for opioid use?***

*Harm reduction is founded on the idea that you have to respect human autonomy - people are going to make choices. So what? What's the difference between someone's choice to use heroin, and someone's choice to drink? And we do harm reduction in different spheres - harm reduction is condom use, harm reduction is bars, which are supervised use sites. Harm reduction is everywhere around us, so why aren't we extending the same compassion to people who [use opioids]? Why are we gatekeeping compassion because of certain views about certain substances? It sucks, so we're working around that.*

*And at this point, it's not even just people who are using prescription opioids, or stuff from the street - we're finding fentanyl in everything now. It's everywhere. They've found fentanyl in Adderall - in pressed pills ordered off the internet, tested in labs. They're finding fentanyl in coke, here in town. These reports aren't far off - pretty much everything, with just so few exceptions, is at risk of being contaminated with fentanyl, and we're seeing reports left and right of that happening.*

## ... Chattanooga Harm Reduction (cont. from page 2)

*So let's think about naloxone - it's not just for people who are using IV drugs, it's also something we should have around for everyone. What if you do coke sometimes? What if you're at a party and somebody brings over some molly, and you don't know that it has fentanyl in it? These scenarios seem more in reach [for most people], but we're making these decisions [about who deserves harm reduction] based on criteria that don't make sense. So distributing test strips is another one of our secondary goals, although we can't do it as much because they're expensive and we have to pay for them.*

*But we do hope to ramp up our distribution of everything in the next year, with some new funding streams coming in, as well as partnering with the Free Store to have a physical space. We've been working with them for a while now; they do a lot of our distribution, which is fantastic. We're also happy to do direct deliveries to people who want or need it. But in most cases, we can just direct folks to the Free Store, and they can pick out free naloxone [and other supplies]. Their pop-ups are every other Saturday.*

### **Where does your current funding come from?**

*We're partially donation-funded, and a lot of it is self-funding. We get the naloxone donated, and we do the labor of assembling these naloxone kits, which have the vials and syringes and everything you need, but the actual materials are donated. The test strips we buy.*

*We have a Venmo and a CashApp, and we're working within the next year to prioritize our funding streams so we can order supplies more regularly and expand to different kinds of harm reduction supplies - safe smoking kits, for example.*

*We have a recurring micro-grant from the Free Store, which is a really cool example of the mutual aid network in Chattanooga.*

### **What does mutual aid mean to your group? Do you consciously think of yourselves as a mutual aid organization?**

*We haven't really taken the time to focus on our political principles as a group. I think harm reduction principles are fundamentally grounded in anarchist philosophies, for the most part - meeting people where they are, autonomy, etc. And I might be wrong, but I feel like most of the mutual aid groups around town are going to identify [with that idea of mutual aid] similarly.*

*We have chosen not to foreground our political identity, just because our collective is always changing, so we focus on the work that needs to be done and how we can do it. And I think that in itself is praxis, but somebody else working alongside me may not feel the same way.*

## ... Chattanooga Harm Reduction (cont. from page 3)

*We have talked about, in the future, including some sort of political element, or maybe linking with some groups in town to have some sort of political education. And to do that I think we'd all have to come together and explicitly decide how we want to politically identify. But for now, I think the best idea for us, and for accessibility of what we can do, and the identity of the collective, we just haven't chosen to be explicitly political, although personally I think a lot of us are.*

### **What is your group's stance on capitalism?**

*The ills of capitalism, which we are trying to fix and mitigate, are borne out through [the need for] harm reduction. What's the motive to put fentanyl in a drug? It's obviously a financial one.*

*I don't think that the harm reduction movement has to be explicitly anti-capitalist to function, just like I don't think it has to be explicitly political to function, but I think that it is praxis. We might not call it that, but that's what it is.*

*I also think there's a huge class stratification in who we decide gets harm reduction services. I see that all over the harm reduction movement. But harm reduction isn't just for the folks who we find societally palatable - the drug users who we're cool with - the ones who got hurt, and then had a prescription and then got hooked. Harm reduction isn't just for white cokeheads who go to dance parties. They deserve harm reduction too, everyone does, but it's not just for them either.*

*But that's where it's easiest to grant fund, to donate our own money - the stratification isn't necessarily in the work of people doing in harm reduction, but in how we as a society view harm reduction. We choose to allocate more money to groups like DanceSafe - who rule, and who I adore - and they started by distributing at parties. But people in homeless camps also deserve naloxone. And the person using IV heroin is not any less deserving of harm reduction services than a kid at a rave. So we can do better in distributing those resources.*

### **What's the biggest challenge you've faced as an organization?**

*The work itself is really hard - changing minds is hard. Education is hard.*

*And then of course, how do we craft a sustainable organization that can do the work that needs to be done around town, in a way that we can keep doing it? Our capacity is so limited. So our biggest challenge over the next year is going to be figuring out how we can cement ourselves in town and make what we're doing sustainable. There's a lot of pieces involved in making that happen.*

### **What are your goals for the upcoming year?**

*We are working with the Free Store to get a physical space, which is super exciting. It can serve as a distribution point, as well as a place for in-person trainings, peer support group meetings, and all kinds of things. The flexibility of a physical space is so exciting, and to be able to work with a group like the Free Store is fantastic and very exciting for us. We're grateful that they're cool with us piggybacking on all the hard work they're doing. So that's coming up next year.*

## ... Chattanooga Harm Reduction (cont. from page 4)

*We also want to expand our fundraising, and get a steady stream of funding coming in, so that we can have a steady stream of resources going out. We want to be able to scale up our distribution of harm reduction supplies to the community.*

***How can people get involved with your work?***

***What kinds of things would a volunteer for the group do?***

*For now, what I think everyone should do is go to a naloxone training - know what naloxone is, how to use it, and have it with them. And then talk to their friends, family, loved ones about harm reduction - don't shut up about it, please. Consider why we judge the people that we judge, and be a little bit more open-minded to people's ability to change. No one is irredeemable, and everybody is worth harm reduction services. Everybody is worth attention, and forgiveness, and love, and empathy. And that's a really, really big ask. What harm reduction is and asks of you requires a really big shift in the way you think, and that's the big ask.*

*Once we have a physical space, we'll have more opportunities for things like naloxone kit parties, where everyone can come over at once and assemble kits together. That's a future place to plug volunteers in that we're really looking forward to. But for now, you can also follow us on Instagram, and donate to our Venmo or CashApp. ■*

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## Chattanooga Free Store

**Next we interviewed Avery Fairburn, one of the lead organizers for the Chattanooga Free Store, and also the manager of the CALEB Bail Fund.**

**When and why was the Free Store founded?**

We started in late May of 2021. I moved from Alabama last year, and I'd been following the Birmingham Free Store for a long time. I loved the work they did - no strings attached, you don't need to show your ID or fill out paperwork, you don't need to speak English - just come get what you need, we have it and we're going to give it to you. That really spoke to me; I really liked that idea, so I just thought, why don't we just do that?

So we did. And we've gotten a lot of support; we've seen that it's really a need. We've had about 100 people come to each of our pop-ups that happen every other week, and we distribute about \$400-\$500 worth of supplies each time - mostly diapers, wipes, and hygiene products.

It's a huge need, and there's definitely a community aspect of it. We've built a big community of volunteers and people who use the service. Our coalition is comprised of organizers and people who shop at the Free Store, so that we have input from the people who actually have a stake in this work, and who need mutual aid and use it.

## ... Chattanooga Free Store (cont. from page 5)

### **Are you part of a larger organization that spans beyond Chattanooga?**

A lot of free stores take inspiration from each other, but we're an individual, autonomous store, and that's part of what I like about it. It's a hyperlocal model of care, and it makes it very personalized to the community that it's in, which is really a benefit. In a lot of larger organizations, you have to work within a lot of rules, and it's very hard to orient an organization to the specific needs of the community. So an organization that's just by the community, for the community, that's very in touch with local needs and the best ways to get support, is a great thing.

### **Do you have a permanent location in addition to pop-up events?**

Not yet, but hopefully this month we'll be moving into our permanent location in Highland Park. That's also where we've done most of our pop-ups so far. It's a central location with a bus stop and a lot of low-income families around, so that's been our main location. Our permanent space will be about five minutes from where we've been doing pop-ups.

### **So if I come to the Free Store, how does it work?**

We usually have a line when we open, so we have them come in one at a time. People come in, tell us what they need, and we put it in a bag and hand it over to them. We also have a pop-up clothes closet that people can look through, as well as household items like pots and pans and other kitchen things as they're donated.

There's no sign up process and you don't have to give us your personal information. You just come up to where we are and get what you need.

### **Is there any sort of expectation, implicit or otherwise, that you would bring something to give in exchange? Do you encourage that from people who can?**

No, there's absolutely no expectation of that. Sometimes if someone is interested in clothes we'll mention that they can bring in any clothes from home that they're not using anymore, but we're not going to turn anyone away who shows up empty handed. There's absolutely no requirement, implicit or otherwise, that you have to give us anything to get something back.

### **How often do Free Store shoppers also bring something in return? How does the Free Store get the things it gives out?**

Free Store shoppers do often come with clothes and secondhand items. We'll take those and sort through them and have them ready for the next pop up. But most of our supplies, like hygiene items and things that can't be donated used, comes from our fundraising efforts. We take in about \$500-\$2000 a month, and almost all of that goes to buying supplies.

We have really generous donors and most of our donations are from individuals who live in Chattanooga, who see our work and like what we do, and we have a really good base of support from those people. So about half of the items we have comes from donation funding and the other half comes from things that shoppers bring in. We also have two drop-off locations around town, where people are free to drop off donated items whenever, and we usually pick those up once a week.

## ... Chattanooga Free Store (cont. from page 6)

### **Do you distribute food?**

*We do get food sometimes, but we drop it off at the community fridge. It's open 24/7 and a lot more accessible than our pop-ups.*

### **What does mutual aid mean to the people who run the Free Store?**

*It means building a network of care for our communities outside of the regular means of accessing it, which are means tested, and require giving your personal information to the state.*

*This is a form of dual power building, at least to some of us. We don't make it outwardly political; we don't call ourselves an anarchist or socialist organization, just because we want the work we do to make that evident, and I think it does.*

*We plan to have literature at our permanent location that people can take, as well as a lending library of more radical literature. We really just want to see the community build up ways of taking care of each other without involving the police, without involving the state. We keep each other housed and fed and clothed, because that's how we want to live. We want to live in a community where people take care of each other and rely on each other.*

### **Does your group have a stance on capitalism?**

I don't think we have our statement of values out there yet, but we're a pretty radical organization - queer and trans affirming, we work with harm reduction groups and we distribute Plan B and condoms, we work for disability justice - so we do a pretty basic thing, but in a way that everyone can access it.

Personally, I'm an anarchist. Our coalition is split about 50/50 between more anarchist and kind of more "auth-com" type folks. But I don't think people should have to pay for anything that they need to survive, and I think most of the people that shop with us and I think all of our board members share that conviction.

We shouldn't live in a system where people die if they don't have money, period. Shouldn't happen.

### **Yeah, if you need something you should just have it.**

Yes, you really just should. And that's kind of what we're trying to do with the resources that we have from the community. A little microcosm of the world that we want to live in.

### **What challenges has the Free Store faced in your work?**

The biggest challenge is that there's a huge demand, and we're a small group of people using our personal relationships and resources to fill that demand. We don't have any kind of funding from the government, so it's really just grassroots organizing and our relationships.

Some issues we had in the beginning definitely revolved around funding. Diapers and wipes are a huge, huge need in the community, and we've had trouble in the past sourcing those in a cost-effective way, especially in times of supply chain issues. Toilet paper has been an issue the last few weeks. But we've addressed those pretty well. We've switched to buying bulk diapers and repacking them ourselves, which saves a little money.

## ... Chattanooga Free Store (cont. from page 7)

An issue I had in the beginning was with volunteers and realizing you can't do everything yourself, which was hard for me, but that's definitely gotten a lot better. We have a coalition of eight folks that run the Free Store, and then a group of volunteers that help us out regularly. I would say an ongoing challenge is still gathering volunteers and putting them to use, especially with the new building coming up and all the new programs we'll be able to do there.

### **How is the Free Store funded?**

We have a Patreon that brings in about \$500 a month. We have a few partnerships getting running with local businesses, who gives us \$100 or \$200 a month, and in return they'll get a little sticker for their window that says they support the Free Store, and we'll give them recognition on our pages. Doing that was a little controversial within the coalition, but eventually we decided that since it would help pay for the building, which would help out a whole lot of people, we did it. But we make it very clear that it means you don't have any influence over us - there's no strings attached, this is just a donation.

### **What are your goals for the future?**

Next year, we really hope to make the physical space into kind of a wraparound services center, as well as a mutual aid hub for Chattanooga. One of the things we're going to do is make our building available free for any other mutual aid projects or organizations that need a space. One of the things that I've found as a community organizer is that you can find a lot of things for free, but a space to use for your project or organization is not one of them. So we figure, we get so much support from the community - it's everyone's space, so everyone should be able to use it for projects and organizations that match up with our goals.

We also plan to do weekly shopping days instead of every other week, since we'll have a bit more capacity with the building. And we're going to have a free closet, which will be a lot easier when everything isn't in my garage in boxes. We'll advertise that not just as, if you can't buy clothing, but if you want to have a more sustainable option to come pick out clothes you like, and bring clothes that you don't want. A more sustainable, reusable clothing center for people.

Another program we're talking about is a warming center for cold weather, and a cooling center for hot weather, which will take a lot more volunteer labor. But we're strategizing about how to make that happen, which is cool, because that's what I want to see.

### **What's a cooling center?**

This summer, we did cooling stations. We had some coolers, and we'd go around to different areas where unhoused folks stay during the day and we'd hand out cold water and electrolyte packets. So we kind of want to take that idea and make it work with our space. Hopefully, if we can get the volunteers, we'll have open doors during the day as often as possible, where you can come get cold water and sit for a while. We'll have a little lending library and a TV, so you can come sit and be out of the heat and drink some cold water, maybe have some food. All for completely free, and you don't have to sign up or anything.



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## ... Chattanooga Free Store (cont. from page 8)

### **How can people can get involved? What kinds of things do Free Store volunteers do?**

Right now, the way that we run the pop ups requires several people to come with cars, load up supplies, drive them to the park, and then unload and set up and run the pop up itself. Hopefully that labor will be less with the building, but we'll still definitely need people to stock, and people to repack bulk items like diapers and tampons and pads. Definitely a lot of behind the scenes work too, like shopping, and sorting through clothes, and cleaning the space.

### **Do you think that our chapter's brake light clinics might be a potential candidate for a mutual aid project that could use your space? The Free Store seems like a good place to do that since people are already coming there to get their needs met.**

Absolutely. I have some friends in Huntsville that recently did a free car clinic, which is more involved, but we'd definitely love to work with y'all on something like that. ■

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## Chattanooga Planned Parenthood

Last, we interviewed Kamari, staff organizer with Planned Parenthood of Chattanooga.

### **How is Chattanooga Planned Parenthood involved in mutual aid?**

First, we're trying to start a menstrual equity initiative in Silverdale Prison, and we'd like to expand that to other prisons as we get more organizations and resources involved. Women in prison are being withheld menstrual care on the basis of good behavior, and they're at the mercy of power-tripping corrections officers. We want to meet the direct needs of these people, and I'm particularly excited about this project.

We also plan to start doing pop-ups around the homeless camps in town, to make sure houseless women and people who menstruate have the necessary products for that, as well as emergency contraception, condoms, and other items to limit the spread of HIV and other STDs in those areas and help maintain public health, since people in these areas often can't afford health insurance or have a way to get to a doctor.

Doing mutual aid work through PP in Chattanooga is not only necessary, but shows that PP is about maintaining the dignity and bodily autonomy of all people, especially those who are marginalized and vulnerable to the patriarchy, white supremacy, the prison-industrial complex and all the ways that those things intersect.

Personally, I really view mutual aid as a very necessary component to forging the world we want to see. If people don't have the resources they need to survive, then we as a community can come together and figure out and meet the needs of our fellow community members. Working at a sexual and reproductive health organization makes me feel empowered to come into the community and figure out where I can fill holes that need to be filled, since now I have the funding to be able to provide resources.

## ... Chattanooga Planned Parenthood (continued from page 9)

### **What challenges have you faced in trying to get those programs up and running?**

Not a lot of people are aware that PP has a presence in Chattanooga. I think if people did know they would be supportive and on board, so we're trying to get over that barrier of being visible in the community. In cities where PP actually has a clinic, people can go there directly, use their services and see the value that PP has in their community. But in Chattanooga we don't have that. So a lot of us don't know that we exist, or don't see what's at stake if PP loses the right to provide the services that we do.

### **What are your goals for the upcoming year?**

My big dream would be to start local or statewide coalition work with other people who do menstrual equity work, and maybe even figure out how to introduce policy reform in Tennessee to make sure people in prison are protected and able to access the healthcare that they need.

### **How can people get involved in this work? What would volunteers do?**

Volunteers can put together and pass out care packages for people in our houseless community, and for the menstrual equity initiative. We can also always use people for fundraising efforts and public drives for products to put into the care packages. We just need capacity and hands. ■

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## Where to find and support these groups:

### **Chattanooga Harm Reduction:**

Facebook: @chattanoogaharmreduction

Instagram: @charmredux

Email: ChattanoogaHarmReduction@protonmail.com

Phone: (321) 413-3332

Venmo: CharmRedux

CashApp: \$CharmRedux

### **Chattanooga Free Store:**

Facebook: @Chattfreestore

Instagram: @chattfreestore

Email: chattfreestore@gmail.com

Venmo: @chattfreestore

Paypal: chattfreestore@gmail.com

Amazon Wish List link: <https://amzn.to/3GBRi3w>

### **Chattanooga Planned Parenthood:**

Email: kallen@pptnm.org