

# Abolitionist Legacies and Mutual Aid: From the Quaker Divide to Des Moines

## Introduction

This report examines the historical and contemporary threads of abolitionist activism and mutual aid in Iowa, as detailed in the provided document. It traces the evolution from the radical faith-driven resistance of Quaker communities in the 19th century to the explicitly political, abolitionist mutual aid work of modern organizations like Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA). The analysis highlights the philosophical, practical, and ethical continuities that define this unbroken tradition.

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## Quaker Abolitionism on the Iowa Frontier

### Theological Roots: The Inner Light and Equality

- Quaker abolitionism was rooted in the doctrine of the "Inner Light," the belief that every person possesses direct access to the divine, making all people equally precious and worthy<sup>[1]</sup>.
- This led to a series of "testimonies"—Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Service—that shaped Quaker life and compelled them toward abolition<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The journey to abolitionism was gradual; early Quakers were themselves slaveholders before internal activism led to a collective stand against slavery by the late 18th century<sup>[1]</sup>.

### Community and Conviction: The Bear Creek Friends

- Quaker migration to Iowa in the 1830s and 1840s established settlements like Bear Creek, which became abolitionist strongholds<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The Bear Creek Friends displayed a fierce commitment to principle, seen in both their abolitionist actions and internal religious schisms<sup>[1]</sup>.
- Their community became a key station on the Underground Railroad, providing sanctuary and direct aid to fugitive slaves at great personal risk<sup>[1]</sup>.

### Underground Railroad in Action

- Bear Creek was a critical node in Iowa's Underground Railroad network, with families like the Cooks serving as "conductors" and "station masters"<sup>[1]</sup>.
- Personal accounts detail the dangers faced—evading slave catchers, defying the Fugitive Slave Act, and using creative tactics to protect freedom seekers<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The risks included severe legal penalties and threats of violence, underscoring the courage and moral resolve of these abolitionists<sup>[1]</sup>.

## II. The Evolution of Abolition: From Slavery to the Carceral State

### The 13th Amendment and Its Loophole

- The abolition of slavery via the 13th Amendment in 1865 was incomplete due to its exception clause: "except as a punishment for crime"<sup>[1]</sup>.

- This loophole enabled the rise of convict leasing and, over time, the development of the modern prison-industrial complex (PIC)<sup>[1]</sup>.
- Contemporary abolitionists argue that this system perpetuates racial and social control under a new guise<sup>[1]</sup>.

### **Modern Abolitionism**

- Modern abolitionism, influenced by thinkers like Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, calls not for reform but for the dismantling of policing and prisons<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The movement seeks to address root causes of harm—poverty, housing insecurity, health inequities—through community-led support systems<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The call to "defund the police" is part of a broader strategy to redirect resources toward building safer, healthier communities<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **III. Mutual Aid: Philosophy and Practice**

### **Solidarity, Not Charity**

- Mutual aid is defined as collective, horizontal coordination to meet community needs, distinct from hierarchical charity models<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The practice is rooted in both anarchist philosophy (Kropotkin) and the survival strategies of marginalized communities, particularly Black mutual aid societies<sup>[1]</sup>.
- Key principles include solidarity, participatory decision-making, and building "dual power"—alternative institutions that challenge the state's inadequacy<sup>[1]</sup>.

### **Historical and Contemporary Examples**

- Black mutual aid societies in the 18th and 19th centuries provided vital services and were integral to abolitionist organizing<sup>[1]</sup>.
- Today's mutual aid groups inherit this dual legacy, combining political critique with practical, community-based support<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **IV. The Abolitionist Present: Des Moines Mutual Aid**

## Revolutionary Vision and Principles

- Founded in 2019, DMMA explicitly positions itself as an abolitionist mutual aid collective, responding to state violence against the unhoused<sup>[1]</sup>.
- DMMA’s "Points of Unity" articulate its core principles:
  - **Solidarity, Not Charity:** Rejecting top-down models in favor of collective liberation.
  - **Community Autonomy:** Building self-sustaining, independent communities.
  - **Police and Prison Abolition:** Linking mutual aid to the goal of making police obsolete.
  - **Raising Political Consciousness:** Combining material aid with education.
  - **Revolutionary Organization:** Rejecting electoral politics in favor of building alternative institutions<sup>[1]</sup>.

## Programs and Activities

Program Name	Description
Camp Aid Fund	Delivers supplies directly to encampments, bypassing bureaucratic barriers <sup>[1]</sup> .
Bail Fund	Pays bail to free individuals from pretrial detention, directly challenging the carceral system <sup>[1]</sup> .
Panther Pantry	Provides food and basic necessities to those in need <sup>[1]</sup> .
Criminal Records Expungement	Helps individuals clear criminal records, addressing long-term harm from the justice system <sup>[1]</sup> .

- These programs are the modern analogs of the Underground Railroad, providing direct, life-saving aid and challenging oppressive systems<sup>[1]</sup>.

## Ethical and Strategic Dilemmas

- DMMA faces dilemmas similar to those of 19th-century abolitionists, such as whether paying bail (or buying freedom) inadvertently sustains oppressive institutions<sup>[1]</sup>.
- The tension between immediate, pragmatic liberation and the ultimate goal of dismantling unjust systems is a recurring theme<sup>[1]</sup>.

## V. Continuity of Abolitionist Principles

**Comparative Framework**

Core Principle	Quaker Abolitionists (Bear Creek)	Modern Mutual Aid (DMMA)
Radical Equality	Theological belief in the Inner Light	Political commitment to collective liberation
Defiance of Unjust Law	Civil disobedience (Fugitive Slave Act)	Defiance of ordinances, abolition of state
Direct Material Aid	Shelter, food, transport for fugitives	Supplies, bail, legal aid for the unhoused
Building Alternatives	Underground Railroad network	Mutual aid collectives, alternative systems
Higher Principle	Moral law above state law	Ethical imperative of solidarity

- Both traditions are animated by a commitment to radical equality, direct action, and the creation of alternative structures of care in the face of systemic oppression<sup>[1]</sup>.

**Conclusion**

The story of abolition and mutual aid in Iowa is one of enduring radical hope and practical solidarity. From the Bear Creek Friends’ clandestine resistance to slavery to the revolutionary mutual aid work of DMMA, the core principles remain unchanged: defiance of unjust systems, direct support for the vulnerable, and the building of caring communities as acts of both survival and resistance. This legacy demonstrates that abolition is not a historical event but an ongoing process—one that continues wherever people organize to meet each other’s needs and challenge the structures that perpetuate harm<sup>[1]</sup>.

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1. Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\_-07072025.pdf

# The Connection Between Historical Quaker Abolitionism and Modern Mutual Aid in Des Moines

## Shared Philosophical Foundations

- **Radical Equality:** Both the Quaker abolitionists of the 19th century and today’s mutual aid activists in Des Moines are driven by a deep commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For the Quakers, this arose from the doctrine of the "Inner Light," which held that all people possess direct access to the divine and are equally precious. Modern mutual aid groups, like Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA), frame this as a political commitment to collective liberation, centering marginalized voices and rejecting hierarchies<sup>1</sup>.
- **Defiance of Unjust Law:** Quaker abolitionists openly defied the Fugitive Slave Act, risking legal penalties and violence to support freedom seekers. Similarly, DMMA and related groups often operate in open defiance of municipal ordinances that criminalize homelessness and poverty, prioritizing ethical imperatives over compliance with laws they see as unjust<sup>1</sup>.

## Direct Action and Material Aid

- **Underground Railroad and Mutual Aid:** The Bear Creek Quakers provided shelter, food, and safe passage to enslaved people escaping bondage, often at great personal risk. This tradition of direct, unmediated aid is echoed in DMMA’s work, which includes delivering supplies to encampments, running a bail fund to free people from pretrial detention, and supporting expungement of criminal records. Both movements bypass state-sanctioned systems to provide immediate, life-saving support<sup>1</sup>.
- **Building Alternative Systems:** Quaker abolitionists helped create networks like the Underground Railroad, which functioned as an alternative to the state’s oppressive systems. DMMA and its allies aim to build “dual power” by establishing community-based support systems that challenge the inadequacy and violence of state responses to poverty and social harm<sup>1</sup>.

## Principles in Practice: A Comparative Table

Core Principle	Quaker Abolitionists (Bear Creek)	Modern Mutual Aid (Des Moines Mutual Aid)
Radical Equality	Theological belief in the Inner Light	Political commitment to collective liberation

Core Principle	Quaker Abolitionists (Bear Creek)	Modern Mutual Aid (Des Moines Mutual Aid)
Defiance of Unjust Law	Civil disobedience (Fugitive Slave Act)	Defiance of ordinances, abolition of state systems
Direct Material Aid	Shelter, food, transport for fugitives	Supplies, bail, legal aid for the unhoused
Building Alternatives	Underground Railroad network	Mutual aid collectives, alternative institutions
Higher Principle	Moral law above state law	Ethical imperative of solidarity

### Continuity and Evolution

- **From Theological to Political:** Where Quaker abolitionism was rooted in faith and religious testimony, modern mutual aid in Des Moines is explicitly political and abolitionist, seeking to dismantle not only the carceral state but also the broader structures of capitalism and social control<sup>1</sup>.
- **Ongoing Struggle:** Both movements recognize that abolition is not a single historical event but an ongoing process. The work continues wherever people organize to meet each other’s needs and challenge systems that perpetuate harm<sup>1</sup>.

### Ethical and Strategic Dilemmas

- **Means vs. Ends:** Both historical and modern movements grapple with the tension between immediate, pragmatic actions (such as paying bail or buying freedom) and the risk of inadvertently sustaining oppressive systems. This ethical complexity is a recurring theme, highlighting the shared human struggle to balance principle with urgent need<sup>1</sup>.

The historical work of Quaker abolitionists in Iowa and the modern mutual aid efforts in Des Moines are linked by a continuous thread of radical solidarity, direct action, and the creation of caring communities in the face of systemic injustice. The language and methods have evolved, but the core commitment to building a more just and compassionate world remains unchanged<sup>1</sup>.

## Parallels Between 19th-Century Abolitionist Networks and Modern Mutual Aid in Des Moines

### Core Philosophical Foundations

- **Radical Equality:**

Both the 19th-century abolitionist networks, particularly among Quaker communities like Bear Creek, and modern mutual aid groups in Des Moines are driven by a profound commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For Quakers, this was rooted in the doctrine of the "Inner Light," which held that all people possess direct access to the divine and are equally precious. Modern mutual aid, exemplified by Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA), frames this as a political commitment to collective liberation, centering marginalized voices and rejecting hierarchies<sup>1</sup>.

- **Defiance of Unjust Law:**

Abolitionist networks openly defied the Fugitive Slave Act, risking legal penalties and violence to support freedom seekers. Similarly, DMMA and related groups often operate in open defiance of municipal ordinances that criminalize homelessness and poverty, prioritizing ethical imperatives over compliance with laws they see as unjust<sup>1</sup>.

### Direct Action and Material Aid

- **Immediate, Unmediated Support:**

The Bear Creek Quakers provided shelter, food, and safe passage to enslaved people escaping bondage, often at great personal risk. This tradition of direct, unmediated aid is echoed in DMMA's work, which includes delivering supplies to encampments, running a bail fund to free people from pretrial detention, and supporting expungement of criminal records. Both movements bypass state-sanctioned systems to provide immediate, life-saving support<sup>1</sup>.

- **Building Alternative Systems:**

Quaker abolitionists helped create networks like the Underground Railroad, which functioned as an alternative to the state's oppressive systems. DMMA and its allies aim to build "dual power" by establishing community-based support systems that challenge the inadequacy and violence of state responses to poverty and social harm<sup>1</sup>.

### Shared Organizational Principles

Principle	19th-Century Abolitionists (Bear Creek)	Modern Mutual Aid (Des Moines Mutual Aid)
Radical Equality	Theological belief in the Inner Light	Political commitment to collective liberation
Defiance of Unjust Law	Civil disobedience (Fugitive Slave Act)	Defiance of ordinances, abolition of state
Direct Material Aid	Shelter, food, transport for fugitives	Supplies, bail, legal aid for the unhoused
Building Alternatives	Underground Railroad network	Mutual aid collectives, alternative systems
Higher Principle	Moral law above state law	Ethical imperative of solidarity

### Continuity and Evolution

- From Theological to Political:**  
 Where Quaker abolitionism was rooted in faith and religious testimony, modern mutual aid in Des Moines is explicitly political and abolitionist, seeking to dismantle not only the carceral state but also the broader structures of capitalism and social control<sup>1</sup>.
- Ongoing Struggle:**  
 Both movements recognize that abolition is not a single historical event but an ongoing process. The work continues wherever people organize to meet each other’s needs and challenge systems that perpetuate harm<sup>1</sup>.

### Ethical and Strategic Dilemmas

- Means vs. Ends:**  
 Both historical and modern movements grapple with the tension between immediate, pragmatic actions (such as paying bail or buying freedom) and the risk of inadvertently sustaining oppressive systems. This ethical complexity is a recurring theme, highlighting the shared human struggle to balance principle with urgent need<sup>1</sup>.

The parallels between 19th-century abolitionist networks and modern mutual aid in Des Moines are deep and structural. Both are animated by radical solidarity, direct action, and the creation of caring

communities in the face of systemic injustice. The language and methods have evolved, but the core commitment to building a more just and compassionate world remains unchanged<sup>1</sup>.

1 Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\_-07072025.pdf

1. [https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work_-07072025.pdf)

# Comparing Community Impact: Quaker Abolitionist Networks vs. Des Moines Mutual Aid

## 1. Direct Response to Systemic Oppression

### Quaker Abolitionist Networks:

- Provided immediate, life-saving assistance to enslaved people fleeing bondage.
- Actions included shelter, food, and clandestine transportation along the Underground Railroad.
- Their work directly challenged the legal and social order of their time (e.g., defying the Fugitive Slave Act).
- Impact: They physically liberated individuals from slavery and inspired broader resistance to the institution of slavery.

### Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA):

- Delivers direct survival support (food, propane, tents, bail funds) to the unhoused and criminalized populations.
- Operates outside government systems, often in defiance of city ordinances that criminalize homelessness.
- Impact: Provides life-sustaining resources and immediate relief, while also challenging the structures that perpetuate poverty and criminalization.

## 2. Building Alternative Community Structures

### Quaker Abolitionists:

- Created a clandestine, faith-based network (Underground Railroad) that bypassed state systems.
- Fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility within and beyond their religious community.
- Their homes and meeting houses became sanctuaries and organizing hubs.

### Des Moines Mutual Aid:

- Builds “dual power” by creating grassroots systems of care independent of state or charity organizations.
- Fosters horizontal, participatory decision-making and community autonomy.
- Their work is both practical (meeting needs) and political (raising consciousness, organizing for abolition).

### **3. Philosophical and Ethical Foundations**

#### **Quaker Abolitionists:**

- Motivated by the doctrine of the “Inner Light”—the belief in the inherent dignity and equality of all people.
- Their abolitionism was an outgrowth of religious conviction and the testimony of equality.
- Willingness to risk social standing, economic security, and even personal safety for a higher moral law.

#### **Des Moines Mutual Aid:**

- Guided by principles of solidarity, not charity; collective liberation; and abolition of carceral systems.
- Motivated by a political and ethical imperative to meet needs and challenge oppressive systems.
- Willing to risk legal consequences and public criticism to uphold community care and justice.

### **4. Long-term Cultural and Social Impact**

#### **Quaker Abolitionists:**

- Helped shift public opinion and religious doctrine against slavery.
- Their networks laid the groundwork for later civil rights activism and faith-based social justice work.
- Their legacy is visible in the moral language and direct action strategies of later movements.

#### **Des Moines Mutual Aid:**

- Inspires a new generation of activists to see mutual aid as both survival and resistance.
- Models how communities can organize for their own needs and build power outside traditional institutions.
- Their work is part of a broader movement to reimagine public safety, justice, and community care.

### 5. Summary Table: Community Impact Comparison

Aspect	Quaker Abolitionist Networks (19th Century)	Des Moines Mutual Aid (21st Century)
<b>Immediate Impact</b>	Rescued enslaved people; challenged slavery	Sustains unhoused; challenges criminalization
<b>Structures Built</b>	Underground Railroad; sanctuary homes	Mutual aid networks; bail funds; pantries
<b>Motivation</b>	Religious conviction; equality testimony	Political abolitionism; solidarity ethic
<b>Risks Taken</b>	Legal, social, and physical danger	Legal and reputational risk
<b>Long-term Influence</b>	Shifted moral/religious norms; inspired future activism	Models new forms of grassroots power and care
<b>Legacy</b>	Foundation for civil rights, social justice	Ongoing abolitionist and mutual aid movements

### Conclusion

Both the Quaker abolitionist networks and Des Moines Mutual Aid have had transformative impacts on their communities:

- **Quaker abolitionists** risked everything to free people from slavery, modeling a form of community care that put moral principle above law and custom. Their actions not only saved lives but also changed hearts and minds, laying a foundation for future justice movements.

- **Des Moines Mutual Aid** continues this legacy in a modern context, meeting urgent needs while challenging unjust systems. Their work is both practical and revolutionary, providing a blueprint for how communities can care for each other when institutions fail.

**In essence, both movements demonstrate that when the state fails—or actively harms—communities, ordinary people can and do step up to create systems of care and liberation rooted in solidarity, courage, and hope.**

1. [https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work_-07072025.pdf)

# Why the Legacy of Abolitionism Is Foundational for Contemporary Mutual Aid in Iowa

## 1. A Tradition of Radical Solidarity and Civil Disobedience

The abolitionist legacy in Iowa, especially as embodied by the Quaker communities like Bear Creek, was defined by direct, principled action in the face of systemic injustice. Quaker abolitionists risked their lives, property, and freedom to aid enslaved people, guided by a belief in a “higher law” of justice and equality that transcended unjust statutes like the Fugitive Slave Act. As the document states:

“For him and his community, this is not a crime; it is an act of faith, a moral imperative dictated by a law higher than any passed in Washington... These two winter nights, separated by more than a century and a half, are not isolated acts of compassion. They are expressions of a single, unbroken abolitionist tradition in Iowa.”

This same spirit animates modern mutual aid in Iowa. Groups like Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) operate outside, and sometimes against, the law—not for its own sake, but to meet urgent needs and resist systems that perpetuate harm. Both movements see community action as a moral duty when the state fails to protect or actively harms the vulnerable.

## 2. Commitment to Direct Action and Community Care

Abolitionists didn’t just protest slavery; they built clandestine networks (like the Underground Railroad) to provide real, material support—food, shelter, and safe passage. This direct, practical aid was rooted in the Quaker testimony of equality and the belief that “all people were ‘equally precious to God.’”

Modern mutual aid efforts in Iowa continue this legacy by providing survival resources—food, propane, bail, legal help—directly to those in need, especially those failed or targeted by state systems. The document draws a direct line:

“The language has evolved from the theological to the political, the methods have adapted from secret farmhouses to social media fundraising, but the fundamental commitment remains unchanged. It is a commitment to direct action in the face of systemic oppression, a belief in the inherent dignity of every person, and the conviction that when the state fails to protect life—or actively threatens it—the community must create its own systems of care and liberation.”

## 3. Building Alternative Institutions

Both abolitionists and mutual aid organizers recognized that state systems were not just inadequate—they were often the source of harm. The Underground Railroad was a parallel system, a grassroots alternative to the state’s violence. Today’s mutual aid groups build “dual power” by creating networks of care and support outside of, and often in opposition to, state and charitable institutions.

#### 4. A Living, Evolving Tradition

The document repeatedly emphasizes that abolition is not just a historical event, but an ongoing process—a “thread of radical solidarity” that continues to this day. The abolitionist legacy provides both a moral framework and a practical model for contemporary mutual aid:

- **Moral Framework:** The belief in inherent human dignity and the duty to act when institutions fail.
- **Practical Model:** Organizing horizontally, acting directly, and caring for the most vulnerable as a form of resistance.

#### 5. Summary Table: Key Parallels

<b>Abolitionist Networks (19th Century)</b>	<b>Modern Mutual Aid (Des Moines, 21st Century)</b>
Direct action against slavery	Direct action against poverty, criminalization
Civil disobedience (Fugitive Slave Act)	Defiance of unjust ordinances, policing
Underground Railroad (alternative system)	Mutual aid networks, bail funds, pantries
Guided by faith in equality	Guided by political/ethical abolitionism
Community risk for collective good	Community risk and solidarity for liberation

#### Conclusion

The abolitionist legacy in Iowa is foundational for today’s mutual aid because it established a tradition of radical solidarity, direct action, and community care in defiance of unjust systems. Contemporary mutual aid groups like DMMA see themselves as inheritors of this legacy—adapting its principles and tactics to new forms of oppression, but always guided by the same commitment: when the state fails, the community steps up to protect, liberate, and care for its own.

#### References:

- [Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](#)
  - See especially Introduction, Chapters 1–3, and Conclusion.
1. [https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work_-07072025.pdf)

## Direct Action Against Systemic Oppression

Both the 19th-century Quaker abolitionists and today's mutual aid groups in Iowa engage in **direct, often risky action** to confront and alleviate the harms caused by unjust systems. The document's introduction draws a vivid parallel between Harmon Cook's illegal transport of enslaved people to safety and a modern volunteer delivering supplies to houseless people in Des Moines, both acting "outside of and against a system they see as fundamentally unjust."

"These two winter nights, separated by more than a century and a half, are not isolated acts of compassion. They are expressions of a single, unbroken abolitionist tradition in Iowa... The fundamental commitment remains unchanged. It is a commitment to direct action in the face of systemic oppression, a belief in the inherent dignity of every person, and the conviction that when the state fails to protect life—or actively threatens it—the community must create its own systems of care and liberation."

### 2. Commitment to Radical Equality and Human Dignity

Quaker abolitionists were motivated by the theological principle of the "Inner Light"—the belief that every person carries a spark of the divine and is therefore equally precious. Modern mutual aid groups have adapted this principle into a secular, political ethic: **every person's life and dignity matter, and no one should be abandoned by society.**

"The language has evolved from the theological to the political, the methods have adapted from secret farmhouses to social media fundraising, but the fundamental commitment remains unchanged."

### 3. Civil Disobedience and Defiance of Unjust Laws

The Bear Creek Friends knowingly broke federal law (the Fugitive Slave Act) because they believed it was morally illegitimate. Similarly, Des Moines Mutual Aid and other modern groups often operate in defiance of city ordinances that criminalize homelessness or mutual aid itself, guided by the conviction that **ethical obligations to care for others outweigh unjust laws.**

"They operate without grants, without government approval, and often in defiance of municipal ordinances that criminalize the very existence of their houseless neighbors... consciously and deliberately working outside of and against a system they see as fundamentally unjust."

### 4. Building Alternative Community Structures

Both abolitionist networks and mutual aid groups have built **parallel systems of care** outside the state—whether it’s the Underground Railroad or today’s grassroots distribution networks, bail funds, and community pantries. These efforts are not just about meeting needs, but about **demonstrating and practicing a different, more just way of living together.**

### 5. A Living, Evolving Tradition

Modern mutual aid groups in Iowa explicitly **see themselves as inheritors and continuers of this abolitionist tradition.** They recognize that while the forms of oppression have changed—from chattel slavery to the carceral state and systemic poverty—the need for community-driven resistance and care remains.

“This is the story of that unbroken thread.”

### 6. Summary Table: Parallels in Tradition

#### **Quaker Abolitionists (19th Century) Modern Mutual Aid (Des Moines, 21st Century)**

Defied Fugitive Slave Act	Defy anti-homeless ordinances
Ran Underground Railroad	Run mutual aid networks, bail funds, pantries
Motivated by faith in equality	Motivated by political/ethical abolitionism
Risked safety for others’ freedom	Risk legal/social consequences for community care
Built alternative care structures	Build alternative care structures

### Conclusion

**Modern mutual aid groups in Iowa see themselves as part of an unbroken abolitionist tradition because they share the same core commitments: direct action, radical equality, civil disobedience, and the creation of community-based alternatives to state violence and neglect.** They view their work as the contemporary expression of the same moral and practical struggle that animated the Quaker abolitionists—adapting the legacy to meet today’s forms of oppression and need.

### Reference:

[See Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\_-07072025.pdf, especially Introduction and Chapters 5–7.]

1. [https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work_-07072025.pdf)

# Modern Mutual Aid and the Revolutionary Spirit of Past Abolitionists

## 1. Direct Action Against Systemic Injustice

Both the Bear Creek Quaker abolitionists and today's Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) activists practice direct, often risky, action to confront systems of oppression. In the 19th century, Quakers broke federal law by aiding enslaved people, guided by a "law higher than any passed in Washington." Today, mutual aid groups in Des Moines deliver survival supplies to the unhoused in defiance of ordinances that criminalize homelessness. Both see their actions not as crimes, but as moral imperatives.

"They are not breaking a federal law as momentous as the Fugitive Slave Act, but they are consciously and deliberately working outside of and against a system they see as fundamentally unjust, a system that creates the very needs they are trying to meet."

*(Introduction, p. 17)*

## 2. Commitment to Radical Equality

The revolutionary spirit of the Quakers was rooted in their belief in the "Inner Light"—that every person is equally precious. This radical egalitarianism compelled them to risk everything for the liberation of others. Modern mutual aid efforts echo this, centering the dignity and needs of the most marginalized, and rejecting hierarchies in both society and their organizations.

## 3. Civil Disobedience and Defiance of Unjust Laws

Quaker abolitionists openly defied the Fugitive Slave Act, risking legal penalties and violence. Modern mutual aid groups similarly operate in defiance of laws and ordinances they view as unjust, such as those criminalizing homelessness or restricting aid. Both movements prioritize moral law over legal compliance.

"Quakers had a long history of persecution for defying state power when it conflicted with their faith... The Fugitive Slave Act, which legally mandated complicity in the crime of slavery, was to them an illegitimate law. To obey it would be a sin; to defy it, a sacred duty."

*(Ch. 1, p. 20)*

## 4. Building Alternative Systems of Care

Abolitionists built the Underground Railroad—an alternative, clandestine network for liberation. Modern mutual aid groups build parallel support systems, such as food pantries, bail funds, and direct outreach,

providing care where the state fails or causes harm. Both demonstrate that communities can—and must—create their own systems of care and liberation.

### 5. Revolutionary Praxis: From Faith to Politics

While the Quakers’ actions were rooted in religious conviction, today’s mutual aid is grounded in political abolitionism and solidarity. Yet, the revolutionary spirit—the willingness to challenge the status quo, to act collectively, and to risk personal safety for the greater good—remains unchanged.

“The language has evolved from the theological to the political, the methods have adapted from secret farmhouses to social media fundraising, but the fundamental commitment remains unchanged.”  
*(Introduction, p. 17)*

### 6. Uncompromising Principle and Moral Courage

Both past and present efforts are marked by an uncompromising commitment to principle. The Quaker community was willing to fracture over matters of conscience, just as modern mutual aid groups refuse to compromise on their core values, even when facing legal or social risk.

#### Summary Table: Revolutionary Parallels

<b>Past Abolitionists (Bear Creek Quakers)</b>	<b>Modern Mutual Aid (Des Moines)</b>
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Civil disobedience (Fugitive Slave Act)	Defiance of anti-homeless ordinances
Built Underground Railroad	Build mutual aid networks, bail funds, pantries
Guided by faith in equality	Guided by political/ethical abolitionism
Risked safety for freedom	Risk legal/social consequences for care
Created alternative systems	Create alternative systems of care

#### Conclusion

Modern mutual aid efforts in Iowa **embody the revolutionary spirit of past abolitionists** by practicing direct action, radical equality, civil disobedience, and the creation of community-based alternatives to state violence and neglect. The thread connecting them is a shared, uncompromising belief in the dignity of all people and the necessity of collective action when the state perpetuates or ignores harm. As the

document asserts, these are not isolated acts, but “expressions of a single, unbroken abolitionist tradition in Iowa.”

**References:**

- [Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](#)
- See Introduction, Chapters 1, 5, and 6.
- 1. [https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work\\_-07072025.pdf](https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/74880133/6f742b7b-f34c-4263-a849-119b71f92167/Abolitionist-Legacies-Mutual-Aid-Work_-07072025.pdf)