

The Praxis of Street Medics

Ideas for Building A New World

Mags Beall

2025

It's a grey, wet day, so everyone who can find a spot is packed into the warehouse instead of spreading out across the grounds outside. In pockets around the space, people are skilling up or building art.

Doc is teaching a small group how to be street medics. Mass arrests, street battles, teargas, and more rain will come in the days ahead and people are readying themselves for the tens of thousands arriving to fight the machinations of global capitalism. It is April 2000, Washington, D.C.

By the end of the decade, thousands will gather as they have many times; the summit-hopping era in the U.S. using some of its last pull to counter political power at party conventions. One of the most notable being Saint Paul, Minn., 2008, the Republican National Convention. Among myriad other important aspects of this convergence, North Star Health Collective is founded in the Twin Cities to care for those in the streets that summer.

Street medic-ing begins neither in 2008 nor 2000. It has a powerful history that includes the health and care work of the Black Panther Party and Young Lords, though there are lineages far older than that. Often today's street medics name originated with the Medical Committee for Human Rights, begun in 1964 to provide medical care for civil rights workers in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer project. Medic skills continue to evolve and new medics are trained into the struggle today.

For over a decade, North Star, as a community health collective, has been training and running street medics. From global economic summits to Occupy in 2011, from every response to the almost annual police murders in the Twin Cities, to protests when Trump comes to town. then, George Floyd was murdered and it is not hyperbole to say that everything changed.

Before May 25, 2020, the core organizers of North Star were a group of medics who opted to take on logistics—mostly training and supplies. In the uprising that followed George Floyd's murder, there suddenly weren't enough street medics to keep up with the days of intensity and so many people pouring into the streets. North Star had to lean on a foundation of ethics and praxis and build quickly without losing sight of the anarchist values at the core of the collective.

There is a difference between being a street medic and being a medic in the streets. EMTs, nurses, former combat medics, or anyone who hits the streets with their med bag when something happens are not likely prepared to medic. More importantly, without being trained by movement medics, they are not operating with radical values that set street medics apart. It's one thing to Batman in and dole out medical care to those wounded on the front lines. It's another to do so while making sure that a patient's bodily autonomy and dignity are prioritized.

Which is not to say that skills are not important. In fact, it is central to any movement looking to build a new world that setting and holding standards for work, including care work, be taken seriously. Critical to the work is maintaining people's confidentiality and only working within one's scope. That is, a set of skills collectively determined as a baseline standard for street medics. Almost anyone can take an EMT course, learn to use a tourniquet, splint an arm, etc. But care using consent-based practice with anarchist, de-colonial, anti-racist, feminist, queer, and trans affirming praxis at its core is what street medic-ing must strive to be.

North Star has continued to evolve its collective structure as hundreds of medics joined during the uprising and slowly numbers then waned. At its core, the goal is always to prefigure directly democratic structures that empower all members of the collective. Every North Star training begins with the group's ethics. If the struggle seeks to end white supremacy, patriarchy, ablism, etc., then care for those in the fight means that care work doesn't replicate the violence and violations common in mainstream health systems. North Star's core values include consent, do no harm, take no shit, respecting a diversity of tactics, and care for medics and the collective.

(For more in-depth information on North Star's values, see *Constellations of Care, Anarcha-Feminism in Practice* by Cindy Baruka Milstein (Pluto Press, April 2024) and our website at northstarhealthcollective.org.)

Street medics love to say, "Do no harm. Take no shit." Because beyond seeking to minimize harm, street medics are taking a side and do not work with the state or non-state fascists.

Frequently "a diversity of tactics" gets used as a code that it has to be okay to burn things down. Street medics respond in such moments, but what often gets missed is that in the years during, following, and in between uprisings, there have been marches, protests, community assemblies, vigils, communal mourning, building occupations, mutual aid efforts, and more.

Individual medics have different feelings about various tactics being used yet the collective shows up where invited and needed, because people who are organizing and agitating deserve care. This is a constant and uneven balance as the group strives to make impactful, bold, creative tactics and strategies possible—*because* people are cared for.

Anarchist and abolitionist values mean taking care of each other. North Star medics rely on a buddy system with a dispatch back up.

North Star sees these ethics and protocols as a welcome duty, not a burden. To care for each other is to take responsibility for each other. In numerous actions across the continent, street medics have been targeted by police and fascists. Building and holding such structures and agreements is part of the active work of building the world we want. Thus, these ethics map onto the anarchistic and liberatory values that guide the work of the collective.

A moment of uprising can turn the world upside down, but praxis—practice based in ideas, in values—is what has the potential to build moments into movements. North Star and street medics in general cannot be seen or understood only in moments of upheaval or crisis, because how the actions taken at those points in time are defined by much longer, deeper relational work rooted in anarchist ideals.

North Star thrives because of the same need for praxis. Just as protocols update and change, the group grows and evolves. It's broad and it's granular. It is how the collective is structured, how medics check-in with each other at the start of an action, how dispatch makes sure they get home safely.

Praxis and ethics provide a compass for the wide-ranging and challenging ongoing process of remaking care work in the world today.

~

It's pouring and everyone is soaked. Yesterday, George Floyd was brutally murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. A march was called, starting at the intersection where he was killed and has found its way to the 3rd Precinct of the MPD. Sadly, it is not the first march of its kind in recent years across the Twin Cities, but this one has turned into a full street battle.

The precinct was initially breached, but now protesters have been pushed back and the cops are in defense, surrounded on three sides. They are firing tear gas every way they can. They fire a round and people move back to let the chemical spray pass. Street medics from North Star have followed the march and are now washing peoples' eyes out, getting people new COVID masks, and caring for them so that they can return to the fight.

That was five years ago. There have since been and continue to be challenging struggles. It is one thing to say that new levels were reached when that precinct burned down. It's another to live here day-to-day with police who continue to get more money and act with impunity.

The insurrectionary moments happen, but the daily work of world changing, of movement building is not inherently improved by them without autonomous infrastructure also being built on anarchist and abolitionist praxis. For all the broader attention that comes with the pitched battles and direct actions, there remains the question of what are the guiding ideas that move towards liberation.

Long-term projects can get stuck, lose agility. But if that can be avoided, they can also carry forward skills and knowledge for how generations have learned to fight better, stronger, with more care for each other. The uprisings of the past years have been glorious, surrounded by solidarity and the kind of breaking that makes way for new worlds.

They also, though, have shown what was lacking in anarchist physiology of movement—the “how” of what needs to happen to build a liberated world, not solely rage against the one that exists now. North Star continues to try to hold steady based in the idea that anarchist infrastructure and actions guided by ideas is needed to continue the struggle and build new worlds.

Mags Beall is an organizer in the prefigurative anarchist tradition; she identifies as a queer white femme. Over the past twenty-five years, she has organized against ecological destruction and for animal liberation, in (im)migrant solidarity, antifascist work, and more. In addition to North Star, she is active in food mutual aid, neighborhood solidarity, and environmental justice struggles.

fifth Estate

Mags Beall
The Praxis of Street Medics
Ideas for Building A New World
2025

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/416-spring-2025/the-praxis-of-street-medics>
Fifth Estate #416, Spring 2025

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net