



Organizing A Sex Work COVID-19 Relief Fund Restored My Faith In Community

BY [KAI CHENG](#)

MAY 19, 2020

9:00AM PDT



Graphic by Sarah Sarwar

When COVID-19 hit North America, I had pretty much given up on community organizing: More than ten years of witnessing transmisogyny, explosive conflict, vicious call-out culture, and burnout in activism had jaded me to the romance of “the revolution.” An activist since my late teens, I was pretty sure I was done forever with being an organizer.

Then the pandemic arrived and threw everything into pandemonium. Dreams were crushed and plans fell to dust. The socioeconomic devastation of the pandemic has affected literally everyone, but perhaps no community more than the one dearest to my heart: sex workers.

Like many trans women, my life has been intertwined with the sex industry from a young age. Sex workers supported me when I had no one else, taught me how to protect and value myself, gave me survival tools to navigate a transphobic world. As someone who has been a counselor, community organizer, and artist, let me tell you something: No one knows resilience, resistance, and creativity like sex workers. No one does care and love like sex workers.

So when the pandemic arrived, instantly pulling the plug on a vast swath of sex workers' livelihoods, I let go of my misgivings about organizing and threw myself into a relief fund project with [Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers' Action Project](#) and [Butterfly Migrant & Asian Sex Workers Support Network](#), two sex worker support orgs in my home city. Our goal was simple: Raise \$10,000 and put it into the hands of the most marginalized sex workers.

Sex workers are a vulnerable population: Criminalization and stigma create a context in which erotic laborers – especially queer and trans, racialized, and poor individuals – can be abused and exploited. In the pandemic, these same barriers block many sex workers from accessing the government relief that so many people are now relying on.

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"The criminalization of sex work creates barriers to applying for relief. Many workers don't feel safe providing employment information. For some this means not filing their taxes, resulting in ineligibility," says Jenny Duffy, Board Chair of Maggie's. Migrant sex workers face further challenges, such as the threat of deportation and language barriers – my colleague and friend Elene Lam, Butterfly Director, adds that many migrant sex workers are not able to access any emergency support and are struggling to pay for essentials like rent and food.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I joined the team – like many of us trying to get through the pandemic, I only knew I had to do something. Would "the community" even care about what we were trying to do? Did anyone care about sex workers, when the chips were down? My jaded activist heart didn't hold a lot of hope.

Imagine my surprise when the donations started rolling in – and kept on rolling. To date, we've gone from our goal of \$10,000 to raising almost \$100,000, and we don't plan to stop now. Our small team of fundraisers has drawn on all the street-smarts and creativity of the sex worker community to get the word out and bring that coin in: We've used tactics from personalized donor calls to a social media influencer campaign to networking with wealthy philanthropists.

People are coming together around this thing we're doing – and so many other mutual aid projects – and it's more powerful and vibrant than almost anything I'd experienced in a decade of activism.

As for my jaded, burnt-out, done-forever heart? We'll see. We've still got a lot of pandemic left to go. But it might be starting to soften, just a little.

Donate to the Butterfly and Maggie's Sex Worker Relief fund: <https://www.maggiesto.org/covid19>

COMMUNITY CHECK is a series about mutual aid and taking care of each other in the time of coronavirus.

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Kai Cheng

Kai Cheng Thom is a writer, performer, therapist, wicked witch and lasagna lover based in Toronto, unceded Indigenous territory. The author of a novel, a poetry collection, and a children's book, she is a two-time Lambda Literary Finalist, as well as the 2017 winner of the Dayne Ogilvie Prize for Emerging LGBT Writers. Her work has been published widely in print and online, and she has performed as a feature spoken word artist at festivals and venues across the country. Find her online at www.kaichengthom.wordpress.com or on Twitter [@razorfemme](https://twitter.com/razorfemme)

Kai has written 12 articles for us.