Nine to Five Charity

Community need runs continuously. Community aid runs on a schedule, and that schedule is set by the honest limit of when a volunteer can be in the room. This report looks at four kinds of mutual aid across six cities and asks a narrow question: what is available at 11 PM on a Tuesday in February, and what would it take to help these organizations make more of it available then.

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FINDINGS

01 **Open hours are hard-won, and they cluster in the workday.** A Pittsburgh clothing closet that gives away coats all year opens Mondays from 10 AM to 1 PM, the window its volunteers can reliably cover.[10] Tool libraries commonly run six to nine hours a week.[14, 15] Composite the published hours in this report and you get 14 hours out of 168.

02 **The people who need aid are frequently at work when it is open.** A majority of families receiving diapers, 51 percent, have jobs.[5] Roughly a quarter of parents report missing work or school because they could not supply the diapers childcare required.[7] For a family on an hourly wage, the trip to collect free diapers can cost as much as the diapers would have.

03 **Volunteering is growing while each volunteer gives less time.** 75.7 million Americans formally volunteered in 2023, a record two-year expansion, contributing 4.99 billion hours.[1] Hours served per person have continued to decline.[2] Capacity is arriving in smaller and smaller pieces, and 82 percent of it must be spent in person.[3]

04 **In a disaster the schedule gets shorter, not longer.** After the May 2024 Houston storms, responders opened distribution sites 9 AM to 1 PM and 3 PM to 5 PM, or from 10 AM until supplies were gone, which is as much as crews working through the same outage could sustain.[19, 18] Cooling centers operated during normal library business hours.[20] The heat did not keep those hours.

05 **Donors are on the same clock as recipients.** The Pittsburgh closet asks that donations be brought during the three hours it is open.[10] A Charlottesville tool library takes donations Thursdays 4 to 7 and Saturdays 9 to noon.[15] Both halves of the exchange have to fit through the same door on the same shift.

WHAT WE COULD NOT MEASURE

Four things this report wanted and could not obtain. First, a complete inventory of aid hours in any one city: no registry publishes them in a machine-readable form, and 211 directories are incomplete and change weekly. Second, how many people arrive at a closed door and turn around, which nobody counts because nobody is there to count it. Third, unmet demand outside open hours, as distinct from demand that shifts into them. Fourth, the operating cost of an additional staffed hour at a volunteer-run site, which varies too widely across the six cities to average.

Every hour cited below is a time an organization publishes for itself. Where a figure is our own composite rather than a published statistic, it is labeled. See the methodology note.

I.

A locked door at 11 PM

Picture someone standing outside a church basement at 11 PM in February. It is the right building. The sign on the door is accurate: free coats, hats, gloves, scarves, all winter long. The hours below it say Mondays, 10 AM to 1 PM. It is Tuesday. The coats are eight feet away, on the other side of a locked door, and they will still be there in the morning when this person is at work.

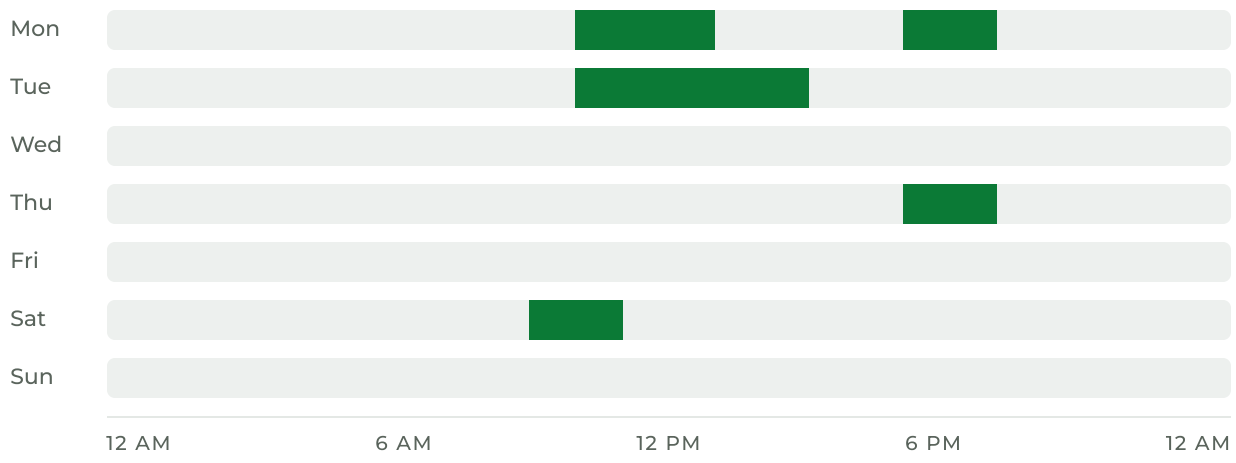
Nothing in that scene is anyone's fault. The closet is real and generous. South Hills Interfaith Movement runs it out of a church in Pittsburgh's South Hills, free clothing for infants, children and adults year round, roughly 2,500 items a year, with diapers alongside through a partnership with the Western PA Diaper Bank.[10] It is open Mondays from 10 AM to 1 PM because that is when volunteers can be there.

This is the shape of the whole problem, and it repeats across every category of aid we looked at. It is a logistics problem, not a commitment problem. The goods exist. They have been donated, sorted, and shelved. What is scarce is not the coat. What is scarce is the hour in which a human being is available to hand it to you.

FIGURE 1 · RELAI COMPOSITE

One week of published aid hours against one week of need

Each green band is a real published time from an organization named in this report, laid onto a single week to show the shape rather than any one program's schedule. Need is drawn as continuous because a cold night, an empty diaper bag, and a burst pipe do not wait for Tuesday.



HOURS IN A WEEK	COMPOSITE OPEN HOURS	SHARE OF THE WEEK THE DOOR IS OPEN
168	14	8%

The green bands are the hours volunteers have managed to hold open, week after week, and they are worth reading as an achievement. The white space is the constraint. Two weekdays are uncovered, along with every evening after 7 PM, every night, and all of Sunday. The bands that do exist sit almost entirely inside a standard shift, which is the same shift many of the people walking toward that door are working.

II.

Four kinds of aid, one constraint

Diapers. The National Diaper Bank Network's 2023 study found 47 percent of US families with young children could not afford the diapers they needed, up from about a third in 2010; the 2026 study reconfirmed that roughly one in two households experience diaper insecurity.[4, 6] Diapers cannot be bought with SNAP or EBT, which makes them a required cash purchase.[13] Most diaper banks are warehouses, not storefronts: they move volume through partner agencies, and a family is directed to a partner and told to contact them for the next distribution date. Nashville Diaper Connection's own instruction to families is to find a partner on the map and contact them directly for upcoming distribution dates and times.[12] The hours a family actually faces are the partner's hours, and there are hundreds of different ones.

Tools. Tool libraries are the clearest case because their schedules are simple and published. Portland's city guide describes the pattern plainly: most are open Saturdays in the morning or early afternoon, some with weekday evening hours, and it advises checking before you go.[16] Ballard Tool Library in Seattle opens Monday and Thursday 5 to 7 PM and Saturday 9 to 11 AM, six hours a week.[14] Cville Tool Library opens Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings, and says directly that it relies on the dedication of its volunteers to staff the library.[15] Asheville Tool Library has been volunteer run since the

beginning and asks active volunteers for 15 hours a quarter.[17] These schedules are built around the evenings and weekends volunteers can give, which is also the only time many borrowers are free, so the two compete for the same few hours.

Winter gear. This is the case that prompted the report, and it is the one where the mismatch does physical harm. Chicago's mutual aid networks publish narrow windows: one neighborhood group distributes clothing Saturdays from 12:15 to 1:30 PM, another runs a free store Saturdays noon to 4, a third offers winter clothes and boots Mondays and Wednesdays 4 to 6 PM and Saturdays 11 to 2.[8] In New York, a winter clothing closet runs most Mondays from November through March, aims to serve about 50 people a week, and limits guests to one visit per season.[9] The supply side is enormous by comparison: Cradles to Crayons alone sets a goal of 50,000 winter coats in Chicago and collects through more than 50 drop-off locations.[11] The coats have been gathered. What has not been gathered is enough staffed hours to hand them out.

Disaster mutual aid. Section IV takes this up in full. In brief: when a storm arrives, distribution becomes more schedule-bound rather than less, because everything depends on volunteers who are themselves affected, roads that may be closed, and supplies that run out mid-shift.

FIGURE 2 · RELAI TABULATION

Published access hours in six cities

One representative organization or program per city, coded from what it publishes for itself, accessed November 2026. A dash means no published schedule, not zero service. Non-random sample. Sources 8 to 22.

CITY	PROGRAM CODED	PUBLISHED ACCESS	OUTSIDE THOSE HOURS
Pittsburgh, PA	SHIM Clothing Closet	Mon 10 AM to 1 PM	None published
Philadelphia, PA	JFCS Our Closet	Scheduled pop-up events	None published
Asheville, NC	Valley Hope Foundation	Tue 10 AM to 3 PM	None published
Houston, TX	City distribution sites	10 AM until supplies run out	None published
Nashville, TN	Nashville Diaper Connection	–	None published
Los Angeles, CA	Water Drop LA, SELAH, PUMA	–	None published

CITIES WITH A PUBLISHED AFTER-HOURS OPTION

0 of 6

PROGRAMS WHOSE HOURS END BY 5 PM

4 of 6

PROGRAMS REQUIRING A PERSON ON SITE

6 of 6

Nashville and Los Angeles carry a dash because the programs there do not publish a fixed public schedule at all. Nashville Diaper Connection refers families to partner agencies and asks them to contact each one directly.[12] Los Angeles mutual aid groups run scheduled outreach to encampments rather than a fixed site.[21, 22] Both are harder to plan around than a narrow window, not easier.

III.

The volunteer hour is the unit of capacity

The generous reading of narrow hours is that generosity is in short supply. It is not. AmeriCorps and the Census Bureau recorded 75.7 million formal volunteers in 2023, 28.3 percent of Americans, giving 4.99 billion hours worth an estimated $167.2 billion, the largest two-year expansion of formal volunteering ever measured.[1] A further 54.2 percent of Americans helped neighbors informally, with tasks the survey itself lists as house sitting, running errands, and lending tools.[2]

Two details in the same data explain why more volunteers has not produced more open hours. The first: hours served per person have continued to decline even as the number of volunteers rose.[2] The average sits around 64 to 66 hours a year, roughly eight working days.[3, 23] The second: 82 percent of formal volunteers served completely in person.[3] Capacity is arriving in more, smaller pieces, and almost all of it has to be spent standing in a particular room at a particular time.

> A coordinator does not schedule the hours that would serve people best. A coordinator schedules the hours they can reliably staff, then hopes those are the same thing.
>
> RELAI, DRAWING ON THE VOLUNTEER-SHIFT STRUCTURES CITED IN THIS SECTION

Look at how shifts are actually posted and the arithmetic becomes visible. Northeast Portland Tool Library needs cover for Saturdays 9 to 2, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 5:30 to 7:30, and Fridays 10:30 to 12:30, in shifts of two to three hours, with many volunteers signing up for one.[24] Every open hour is a slot somebody has to fill, week after week. Extending a closet from three hours to twelve is not a decision about generosity. It is a decision to find nine more shifts, indefinitely, and a Charlottesville tool library is candid that its hours change when its volunteer roster does.[15]

IV.

When the surge arrives

Disasters are the stress test, and they expose the limit of synchronous distribution in a specific way: demand goes vertical at the same moment the hours a site can stay open contract, because the volunteers are themselves in the storm.

Houston in May 2024 is a clean example because the city published its own schedule. After the storms and the outages, cooling centers opened 2 to 7 PM on the first day; sites subsequently ran 8 AM to 7 PM, water and ice distribution began at 10 AM and ran until supplies ran out, food and water at 2:30 PM on the same terms, with other sites at 9 AM to 1 PM and 3 to 5 PM.[18, 19] Houston's standing heat plan makes the constraint explicit: libraries and multi-service centers function as cooling centers during normal business hours, and parks department community centers open to the public only after the day's programming ends.[20] Heat does not peak during business hours. It peaks in the late afternoon and stays dangerous overnight in a house without power.

Western North Carolina after Helene shows the same pattern over a longer arc. In the first week, an Asheville distribution point took donations 8 AM to 4 PM one day and 8 AM to noon for the four days after.[25] A year into recovery, the Valley Hope Foundation was processing and distributing food to between 5,000 and 8,000 families a week from a Black Mountain warehouse, on scheduled volunteer hours of Tuesdays 10 AM to 3 PM.[26] Relief warehouses in the Triangle collecting for the mountains ran Wednesday to Friday 2 to 6 PM and Saturdays noon to 5.[27] These are serious operations moving real volume under hard conditions. Every one of them, though, can only be open while someone is there to open it.

Los Angeles solves the same problem by moving the distribution instead of the hours. Water Drop LA, SELAH, Ktown for All and Palms Unhoused Mutual Aid run ice, water and electrolytes out to encampments on scheduled runs, precisely because the county's own advisories assume a mobility that unsheltered residents do not have.[21, 22] That is a real answer, and it is still a schedule. The volunteer has to be driving.

V.

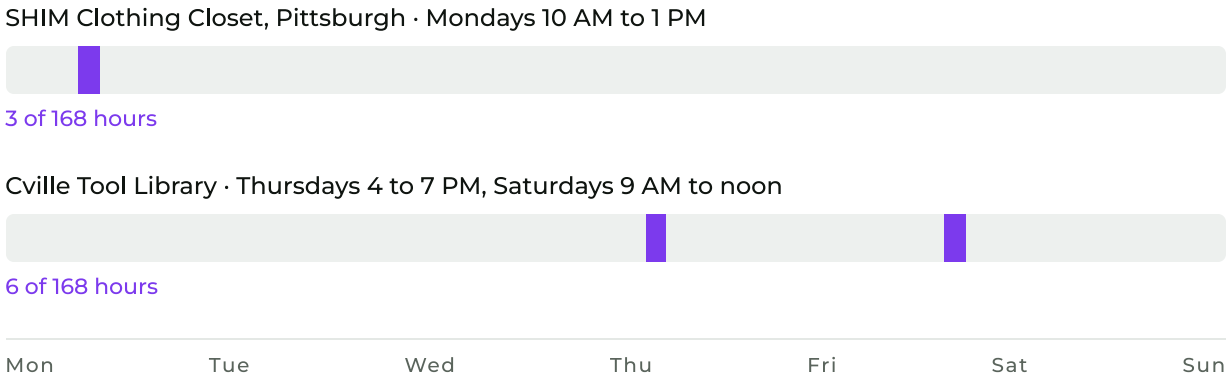
The donor is on the same clock

The schedule constrains giving as tightly as it constrains receiving, and this is the half most often overlooked. Someone who cleans out a closet on a Sunday night and finds four usable winter coats has, in most cities, no way to hand them over until a weekday window they are working through.

FIGURE 3

Two published donation windows, drawn against the week

Purple bands are hours a donor may drop items off, as published by each organization. Both sites accept donations only while staffed, which is also when they distribute.



Large operations route around this by multiplying sites: Cradles to Crayons runs more than 50 drop-off locations in Chicago and offers free door-to-door pickups,[11] and works through 278 partner human service organizations in the Philadelphia region.[28] That is an effective answer, and an expensive one, available to a national organization with a warehouse and a logistics team. A neighborhood closet with one Monday shift serves the same donors without any of that support.

VI.

Three objections worth taking seriously

Intake happens at the counter. This is true and it is not incidental. A Philadelphia clothing program places a social worker at every pop-up specifically to connect people to further benefits they may be eligible for.[29] A New York winter closet requires identification, allows one visit per season, and distributes only to adults present in person.[9] Those rules exist to ration scarce inventory fairly and, in the Philadelphia case, to do more good than the coat alone does. Asynchronous access does not replace that counter and should not try to. It handles the cases where the screening has already happened: the family a caseworker has already enrolled, the member a tool library has already signed up, the resident an outreach worker met yesterday. Nine to five stays for intake. The follow-up does not have to.

Perishables and cold chain. Also true, and it is why this report is about diapers, tools, coats and supplies rather than about food. Produce, dairy and prepared meals need refrigeration, rotation and a shorter clock than an unattended handoff comfortably supports. Shelf-stable goods, formula, hygiene items, blankets and gear do not. The honest scope is the non-perishable share of what these organizations move, which in the winter-gear and tool cases is effectively all of it.

Capital cost against a volunteer shift. The fair comparison is not hardware against nothing. It is hardware against the recurring cost of the hours it would take to match its coverage. A closet open three hours a week costs one shift. Matching a 24-hour access point would cost 56 shifts a week, every week, sourced from a volunteer pool whose average member gives about 64 hours a year.[3] At that ratio the volunteer hour is the scarcest and most valuable input in the system, and the case for infrastructure is that it protects those hours for the work only a person can do: the intake conversation, the fitting, the referral. We are not in a position to publish a per-site cost, and this report does not.

VII.

What asynchronous access changes

Every constraint in this report traces to the root named in Reports 01 and 02: the drop-off and the pick-up are treated as one event, which requires two people in one place at one time. Here the two people are a neighbor who needs something and a volunteer who has it.

Separate the halves and each constraint releases on its own. A caseworker loads a compartment during their shift; the family collects at 9 PM after work, without taking unpaid leave to do it. A donor leaves four coats on a Sunday night; a volunteer collects them Monday morning as part of the shift they were already working. A tool library member returns a saw at 6 AM. A disaster warehouse pushes supplies out to access points at the edge of a service area and stops rationing its own opening hours. In each case nobody waits for the other to be free, and the volunteer hour goes to the part of the work that actually needs a human being.

This does not cover everything, and the objections above mark the real edges: intake, cold chain, and anything that needs a conversation. It also depends entirely on density. An access point that is a bus transfer away from the people it serves is not asynchronous, it is just differently inconvenient. Coverage, not concept, remains the honest measure.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Relai builds hyperlocal infrastructure for asynchronous access. Its Exchange Zones are secure, modular, climate-resilient access points deployed in everyday places, each divided into compartments that one person can leave an item in and another can retrieve later, without the two of them meeting and without staff on site.

This report was produced by Relai because the problem it describes is the one the company was built to address. Readers should weigh it accordingly. The evidence, sources and gaps are laid out above so the argument can be checked rather than taken on trust. The organizations named here are cited as evidence that the need is real and that people are meeting it; their hours are reported as capacity limits, which is what they are.

Aid organizers and county agencies: if you can name the hours you wish you could open and cannot staff, that is the conversation we want to have. Write to hello@relai.us.

Congregations, community centers, and neighborhood businesses: you already sit where people walk. Becoming an EZ Host puts an access point on your footprint without putting a shift on your calendar.

METHODOLOGY

Figure 1, the composite week. A composite, not a schedule any single organization keeps. Each band is a published time from an organization cited in this report, placed on one week to show the shape of availability. The 14-hour total is the sum of those bands and describes the composite only. No claim is made that it represents a city's total aid capacity.

Figure 2, the six-city sample. Cities were selected purposively for a mix of climate exposure, disaster history and size, and one representative program was coded per city from what it publishes for itself in November 2026. This is not a census of aid in any city, and every city has programs we did not code. A dash means the program publishes no fixed schedule, which the design convention of this series reserves for absent data rather than zero.

Named organizations. Every organization named is cited from its own published material and appears here as evidence that demand exists and is being met. Hours are reported neutrally, as the capacity limits they are. Nothing here is a criticism of any organization's choices, and several of them state plainly that their hours follow their volunteer roster.

National statistics. Volunteering figures are from the AmeriCorps and Census Bureau Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement for September 2022 to September 2023, the most recent available. Diaper-need figures are from the National Diaper Bank Network's own commissioned research, a source with an interest in the result, labeled as such at the point of use.

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