

# **Designed to Fail, Excused by Scarcity**

Reimagining Public Systems with the People They Underserve

**Matthew McClendon**

Founding Director, Amid the Noise

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## Executive Summary

Across the country, public systems continue to fail the people they were meant to serve. The explanation is familiar:

“We’re understaffed.”

“We’re overwhelmed.”

“We’re doing the best we can.”

These are not neutral phrases. They are design language. They obscure the underlying logic.

Scarcity is not a symptom. It is an output.

Systems that consistently produce unmet needs, unnecessary arrests, missed appointments, and collapsing safety nets are not breaking down. They are behaving as built. Efficiency is preserved. Equity is deferred.

This paper argues for a different premise:

Trust the people.

Treat lived experience as data.

Make dignity a performance metric.

Public systems should not manage people. They should include them.

## Narrative

There's a mother outside a welfare office in Modesto, bouncing a fussy toddler on her hip. She's been there since 06h00, hoping for a same-day appointment. Inside, the clerk does not make eye contact. She does not need to. Fifty people wait. Two staff sit behind the glass.

A sign on the door reads: *Due to limited staff, we may not be able to serve everyone today.*

The baby starts crying.

Three blocks away, a probation officer cancels a meeting with a 19-year-old on early release. She is covering for a colleague and now carries 126 cases. Her notes flag him as high risk. He receives no bus pass. No referral. He misses his next check-in and is remanded for noncompliance.

Across town, a police cruiser rolls past an encampment under the overpass. The officer logs the location and marks it "high risk, moderate presence." The department is down forty officers. Patrol priorities come from predictive models trained on prior arrests, clustered in places like this.

The cycle holds.

Overworked clerks.  
Overloaded case managers.  
Under-resourced officers.

Each points to scarcity.

No one names the pattern.

This system was designed to fail certain people.

Not through malice. Through neglect.  
Not through bad actors. Through structure.

Resources exist. They are not placed in the hands of the people living the problem.

When we say a system is understaffed or overwhelmed, we are describing a system that was never built to include the people it serves.

This is not about privilege.

It is about math. Inputs. Constraints. Outputs.

Subtract enough from a system and call it fair, and eventually all that remains is a line at the door.

## **I. The Language of Excuse: “Understaffed” and “Overwhelmed”**

These words appear everywhere:

“Due to limited resources...”

“We’re doing the best we can...”

“Our system is stretched thin...”

They appear on school websites, courtroom calendars, DMV windows, police memos, and service recordings. They show up in the posture of burned-out staff who want to help and cannot.

We treat these phrases as descriptions. They are decisions.

“Understaffed” is not a condition. It is a choice about allocation.

“Overwhelmed” is not a fate. It is the result of concentrated burden.

When a school nurse treats 400 children alone, the question shifts to her performance, not the system that placed her there. When a benefits error leads to housing loss, we call it a mistake. When it happens repeatedly, it is design.

The system appears overburdened.

The burden was never distributed.

## **II. Scarcity Is Not a Symptom. It Is a Strategy.**

Scarcity is curated. It is enforced.

It concentrates in specific ZIP codes.

It defines food deserts, transit deserts, and behavioral health deserts.

It then reframes survival as personal failure.

“Not enough” becomes the mask.

Not enough staff.  
Not enough time.  
Not enough funding.  
Not enough capacity.

The phrase “doing the best we can” remains unexamined.

Best for whom.  
By whose standard.  
At whose cost.

A system that depends on exclusion to function is not failing.

It is working as intended.

### **III. From Burdens to Collaborators**

This is the pivot.

Millions of people live within reach of public systems yet are treated as burdens to manage rather than collaborators to engage. They are screened, sorted, and surveilled. Rarely trusted.

Their participation is episodic. Their insight is discounted.

What changes if we reverse the premise?

The people most impacted by public systems are also the most capable of improving them.

Not as stakeholders. As operators.

A system that excludes lived experience is not incomplete. It is inaccurate. And inaccurate systems produce predictable harm.

Participatory governance was never meant to be symbolic. It was meant to be structural.

### **IV. Civic Capacity Is Not Scarce. It Is Suppressed**

The math is straightforward.

There are more people than problems.

There is more collective intelligence in communities than in any centralized model.

Public housing networks, reentry groups, mutual aid systems, informal communication channels, these are active infrastructures. They are not recognized as such.

We do not lack empathy.

We lack systems that trust it.

We do not lack problem-solvers.

We lack pathways for them to act.

We do not lack time.

We spend it maintaining systems that resist adaptation.

The constraint is not capacity.

It is permission.

## **V. Case Studies: Signals of What's Possible**

### 1. CAHOOTS: Civilian Crisis Response

In Eugene, Oregon, CAHOOTS dispatches medics and crisis workers instead of police for mental health and substance-related calls.

In 2019, the program handled over 20,000 calls. Fewer than 1% required police backup. The cost per response is significantly lower than traditional enforcement.

The shift is not operational alone. It is philosophical.

Public safety expands when the public is trusted to provide it.

### 2. Participatory Defense: The Family as Infrastructure

Participatory defense initiatives enable families to contribute directly to legal strategy.

They gather evidence.

They build timelines.

They produce narrative context.

This changes outcomes, including reductions in sentencing severity and pretrial detention.

The system did not invite these contributions.

Their effectiveness exposes that omission.

### 3. Mutual Aid: Distributed Response Systems

During COVID-19, mutual aid networks delivered food, financial support, and care coordination faster than many formal systems.

Their reach scaled through proximity and trust.

They did not replace institutions. They revealed what institutions failed to do.

Communities responded because they were never the problem.

They were the missing layer.

## **VI. A Design Reversal Blueprint: Building Systems That Invite**

What changes when systems assume participation instead of policing it?

### 1. Replace User Compliance with Human Stewardship

Design systems that adapt to real behavior, not ideal behavior. Measure success through resolved exceptions, not rejection rates.

Example: WIC programs that allow substitutions based on actual inventory, not rigid SKU lists.

### 2. Decentralize Expertise

Treat lived experience as a qualification. Shift decision-making authority closer to impact.

Example: Policy teams that include individuals with direct experience of homelessness or disability as co-authors, not reviewers.

### 3. Trust the Public as Signal

The public is not noise. It is a real-time dataset. Capture it. Learn from it. Act on it.

Example: Community-driven signal mapping that identifies service gaps and conflict zones without relying on historical enforcement data.

## **VII. Final Position: Scarcity Is a Choice. Inclusion Is Infrastructure.**

If we can map distant planets, we can map human need.

If we can engineer complex defense systems, we can design civic systems that respond with precision and care.

The limitation is not resources.

It is intent.

We trained these systems. We can retrain them.

“Understaffed” and “overwhelmed” are not neutral descriptions. They are signals of exclusion.

Changing outcomes requires changing assumptions.

If we do not change the language, we do not change the logic.

If we do not change the logic, the outcome repeats.

Not by accident.

By design.

## Epilogue

We are not short on people.

We are short on courage.

Courage, in this context, means redistributing control.

It is time to build systems that trust the people they serve.

## Who is Matthew McClendon?

Dear Reader,

For nearly three decades, I have worked at the intersection of technology and human need, across UX, civic design, and systems that operate at scale. I have built products, guided founders, and studied the patterns that determine whether systems hold or fail.

As Founding Director of *Amid the Noise*, I focus on how ideas, data, and behavior shape the systems we live in, and how those systems can be redesigned with intention.

I also advise on matters of national security policy. That work reinforces a consistent truth: outcomes depend less on certainty and more on judgment, timing, and trust.

Mark Twain observed that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. The same holds for systems.

Precision matters. So does courage.