Advocating Against the Grain: Nonprofit Advocacy and Human Services

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Abstract

Homelessness is a wicked problem, due at least in part to the disenfranchised nature of the population. This population lacks a voice in the democratic process, and subsequently has little leverage to change the perceptions and conditions they face. Many of our most wicked problems require advocacy that can link the voices and needs of the community to community development efforts and the public sector at large, which may be an ideal vehicle for fostering democracy while simultaneously addressing homelessness.

Advocacy is viewed as an integral part of the function of human service nonprofit organizations. Yet the advocacy road for these organizations is fraught with complexities, often leading to adulterated or nonexistent advocacy activities. This chapter examines homeless service organizations in-depth, through comparative case studies of Philadelphia and Houston, to better ascertain the determinants of homeless service organizations engaging in advocacy activities. The author also examines the types of advocacy activities organizations employ, and

how those decisions are made. The analysis argues for a more refined definition of "advocacy" in the field of human service nonprofits, allowing for a deeper understanding of the role of these organizations in community development policy and practice.

Introduction

Wicked problems, according to Rittel and Webber's 1973 treatise on the subject, are persistent problems within society that do not have a clear "correct" solution. These problems are inherently complex. Definitions of the problems and the sufficiency of solutions are political and dependent on one's world-view (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Homelessness is a wicked problem, due at least in part to the disenfranchised nature of people experiencing homelessness. This population lacks a voice in the democratic process, and subsequently has little leverage to change the perceptions and conditions they face. Many of our most wicked problems require advocacy that can link the voices and needs of the community to community development efforts and the public sector at large, which may be an ideal way to foster democracy while simultaneously addressing homelessness.

Human Service Nonprofits (HSNPs) take up an extraordinarily important space within society, focusing their energy and resources on serving some of the most underserved and marginalized groups while tackling pressing and wicked social issues such as poverty, substance abuse, homelessness, foster care, and recidivism. Organizations providing services to the homeless face a particularly formidable: these organizations often stand as the only potential voice to address social welfare issues related to homelessness that have been ignored or even exacerbated by the private and public sectors.

In modern American society, nonprofit organizations are faced with increasingly challenging conditions for survival, with decades of federal and state retrenchment and a trend toward privatization of many government functions. HSNPs find themselves forced to continually make their case for relevancy and to fight for even a small piece of an ever-diminishing pot of financial resources. Given this environment, there are a multitude of reasons why HSNPs in particular should be enticed to engage in full-scale policy advocacy campaigns, using both insider and outsider tactics to promote the importance of the social issues they address. Yet we seem to see rather limited forms of policy advocacy, if any, occurring among HSNPs (Berry and Arons, 2003).

Various theoretical perspectives explain why these organizations hesitate to engage in advocacy. Whether it be for reasons of dependence on scarce public funds, fear of breaking from "normal" behavior, or even resource allocation challenges, HSNPs are less likely to engage in direct forms of policy advocacy. However, there are also examples of HSNPs that buck this trend and engage in considerable policy advocacy behavior. What causes these organizations to seemingly go against the grain and break through the multitude of barriers that block human service organizations from participating in the policy advocacy arena on behalf of the populations they serve?

Denhardt and Denhardt's (2011) call for a New Public Service paradigm is centered around the idea that government should be directly responsive to the needs of its citizens. The needs and concerns of the homeless are diminished due to severe marginalization. Homeless service providers are often, and increasingly so, the ground-level experts on the particular barriers and challenges of the individuals and families they serve, and also on the barriers to direct policy implementation. Despite this considerable expertise, there is significant scholarly

debate on how this expertise, and the voice of the most marginalized populations of society, finds its way to policy-makers.

Policy advocacy has been widely understood as a key tenet for nonprofits to engage and serve their constituencies, give voice to issues and people who have been marginalized, and promote social justice (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014). Interest group and social movement literature has been exploring the phenomena of nonprofit political advocacy for a number of decades (see Walker, 1991; Marwell, 2007). However, much of the research in this area has focused on the activities of advocacy organizations that specifically focus on issue advocacy as their primary function. More recently, there has been a vibrant discussion about the advocacy behavior of nonprofits whose primary function is something other than advocacy, namely human service provision. As Mosley (2011) points out, the incredible volume of HSNPs, and their increasing role as contracted service providers, creates an incredible potential for HSNPs to have an influence on social policy.

Human Service Nonprofit Policy Advocacy in the Literature

Research on the advocacy behavior of HSNPs demonstrates a fairly complicated scenario, with wide responses on how extensively these organizations are engaged in advocacy. Both Berry & Arons (2003) and Mosley (2010) report rather large percentages of organizations surveyed participate in advocacy activities; 75percent and 57 percent, respectively, in their studies. Studies by Salamon (2002) and Schmid, *et al*. (2008) showed that organizations engaging in advocacy are small or limited. As Almog-Bar & Schmid (2014) point out, much of this variation can be attributed to the variety of ways in which advocacy is defined and measured.

Advocacy in nonprofit sector research is most often defined as "any attempt to influence the decisions of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest" (Jenkins, 1987, p.297). This definition has been by far the most cited for its broad nature. How advocacy is conceptualized and operationalized becomes an extremely important factor in how we understand and measure the activity itself. The conceptualization of "advocacy" is of particular interest given the confusion of the term for practitioners (Berry and Arons, 2003) and its relation to lobbying specifically, which is a regulated legal activity. In particular, the recent *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) case in the Supreme Court opened the floodgates on how nonprofit organizations can engage in political activities and spending on political activities, creating both increased opportunity and increased confusion over the already contested IRS 501(c) lobbying regulations. HSNPs face an interesting dilemma in this new dynamic. While they too may have increased opportunity to engage in policy advocacy with less threat of legal redress, the contested nature of the political environment and the confusion over how the Citizens United case coincides with IRS regulations creates a tenuous environment for organizations that already operate on extremely scarce resources.

To better understand the advocacy behavior of HSNPs, researchers have attempted a number of approaches. Most have explored the tactics or advocacy strategies employed by nonprofits measured against an array of dependent variables such as funding sources, size of organization by budget, and organization age. As Almog and Schmid (2014) point out, we must proceed with this analysis with considerable caution, as there have been inconsistencies in how advocacy has been bound and defined, which could explain the variation and disagreements in the results. For instance, Chaves *et al.* (2004) found that government funding seemed to have a positive effect on nonprofit political behavior, yet admittedly their work was not able to delineate

between various types of advocacy; just an overall trend in political behavior in general. Salamon (2002) and Mosley (2012) see similar results, likely due to their broad categorization of the term advocacy. Each of these studies show increases in policy advocacy behavior, yet are unable to differentiate between the types of advocacy that are occurring and to grapple with what may be shifts in the tactics that organizations employ.

To get at a more precise understanding of what may influence HSNP policy advocacy behavior, and especially differences in the types of tactics that directors engage in, a clearer categorization of behaviors is needed. Mosley's (2011) work aims to deal with this, and comes up with a distinction between insider and indirect tactics. For Mosley, insider tactics "are intended to change policy or regulation by working directly with policy-makers and other institutional elites," such as direct participation in government committees or discussions of policy revisions with policy-makers. Meanwhile indirect tactics and outsider tactics, such as letters to the editor, working through coalitions, and boycotts or demonstrations may be more confrontational and do not require inside connections (Mosley, 2011, p. 439). Onyx *et al*. (2010) discuss distinctions between "institutional" and "radical" types of advocacy by HSNPs, but are much more interested in what they see as a trend toward a merged form of advocacy that is not distinctly radical or institutional. They instead identify a hybrid behavior they call "advocacy with gloves on", meaning that organizations are taking a posture that keeps one foot in each door and allows for them to engage in the form of advocacy they perceive to most effective depending on the situation; an advocacy that can be bold and firm, but professional and cautious. Onyx and her colleagues attribute this to a trend in professionalization and formalization of the nonprofit sector. Mosley (2011) and Donaldson (2007) agree, with each seeing trends toward institutionalization of nonprofits across the board.

While there are discrepancies in the amount of advocacy behavior HSNPs engage in, the previously highlighted research provides evidence that much of the advocacy behavior that is occurring is of an "insider" or cooperative nature, as opposed to more indirect, confrontational, or "outsider" types of behavior (see Chaves *et al.*, 2004; Mosley 2011; Onyx, 2010; and Mosley, 2012). If the trend of HSNPs is to engage primarily in insider tactics of advocacy, if at all, this begs the question of whether advocacy is occurring more for organizational maintenance purposes than for the policy benefits of clients. In an environment of increasingly professional relations between nonprofits and government, of extreme importance is the ability for an independent nonprofit sector to promote necessary discussion on issues of social welfare, particularly for the most underserved and vulnerable populations of society. Does an insider strategy of advocacy actually just lead to further co-option and suppression of the important democratic voice that a true, citizen-serving NPS model requires? Or could these insider tactics be an ingenious approach for nonprofits to gain more political leverage than they would through more confrontational approaches?

Theoretical Framework

How can we tease out what determines the advocacy behavior of HSNPs? There are a number of key theoretical lenses through which to explore the factors that may lead to the decision-making of HSNPs to engage in policy advocacy, as well as what tactics they employ. The most common have pointed to neo-institutional theory, resource dependence theory, and theories of organizational capacity.

Neo-institutional theory, or institutional isomorphism, posits that in order for organizations to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of public officials and their peers, they will conform to the norms and standards that are laid out by those who have power (Meyer and

Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and may engage in advocacy behaviors that are more cooperative or "insider" in nature (Mosley, 2011). Meyer and Rowan's theory states that organizations will conform to the institutionalized culture, even though it might be in direct conflict with the idea of efficiency (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). DiMaggio and Powell added that this conformity is not always rational, and that the change can often come from coercion based on a situation of dependence, particularly financial resources (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Mosley (2011) relates this to Piven and Cloward's (1977) ideas of the formalization of social movements into organizations that begin to take insider approaches to the power structure and in turn become less effective. In addition, the institutionalization and professionalization process would seem to lead to leadership that focuses on organizational maintenance as opposed to social change (Piven and Cloward, 1977).

Resource dependence theory posits that when an organization is dependent on another organization for scarce resources that the dependent organization tends to conform to the norms of the organization holding the resources (Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In this theory, a HSNP that is dependent upon financial resources provided by the government is not likely to directly combat that necessary source of funding through policy advocacy. The organization's dependence upon government funding may suppress its advocacy behavior (Smith & Lipsky, 1993; Schmid *et al*., 2008). Research on this dynamic has been divided, with considerable recent research finding government funding does not seem to decrease advocacy activity, and may even enhance it in some circumstances (Berry and Arons, 2003; Chaves *et al*., 2004; Mosley, 2012). However, as Mosley (2011) points out, extant research has not yet been able to determine whether the presence of government funding may considerably change the

kinds of tactics that HSNPs choose to engage in, even if it does not exactly have a suppressing effect on advocacy behavior overall.

Taken separately, each of these theoretical perspectives can help to explain the existence or nonexistence of policy advocacy by nonprofit organizations. Taken together, they point to an issue of political opportunity that may be the true driving force behind how HSNPs decide to engage in advocacy behaviors, and even what types of tactics they may employ. Tarrow's broad definition of the term states that political opportunity refers to "consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 85). Meyer and Minkoff's (2004) work focuses primarily on social movements and protest movements, but it highlights the presence of both formal structural models and informal signal models of political opportunity. Structural models are formal policy changes by the political system that open the door for further advocacy efforts. Signal models are informal messages that can be perceived by organizations as political opportunities for advocacy (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). Each of these models of political opportunity can play a role in the decision-making of HSNP directors to engage in advocacy.

The concept of political opportunity can convincingly encompass the convergence of neo-institutional and resource dependence theories, as well as the issues of organizational capacity into a singular framework that together may explain the variation in advocacy behavior undertaken by HSNPs. For instance, HSNPs serving the homeless, given the less attractive nature of their work and the increased challenges of funding stability, may have both the most risk and highest need to engage in policy advocacy, especially those tactics deemed less cooperative and more confrontational in nature. But even in this context, we still see

considerable variation in the decision-making of these HSNPs on their engagement in policy advocacy behavior, as well as varied tactics and strategies.

The literature and theoretical framework highlighted above points to an especially challenging advocacy arena for homeless service organizations. There are a multitude of barriers: confusion over the legality of certain behaviors, fears of political or funder backlash, and a lack of financial or professional capacity. Given this, it seems that we should see very little engagement in policy advocacy behavior by homeless service organizations, yet there are examples of organizations that break through these barriers to advocate on behalf of their clients in some extensive ways. The theory on nonprofit advocacy behavior, particularly in HSNPs, is imprecise and non-predictive. Using homeless service organizations as a case study, I will examine what determines when an organization's leadership will break through the barriers to engaging in policy advocacy behavior and their perception of the tactics they employ.

Methodology

To address the research topics identified above, an exploratory comparative case study was undertaken. In theory, two organizations operating within the same context, with the same basic characteristics, should engage in advocacy behavior in the same ways. However, we know that there is significant variation between the ways that organizations actually engage in advocacy (Berry & Arons, 2003). A comparative case study of homeless service organizations across two geographic contexts allowed for a deeper analysis of the nuanced elements of why some homeless service organizations choose to engage in advocacy activities, while others do not (George & Bennett, 2004). Homeless service organizations were specifically selected for study here due to the severe disenfranchisement and marginalization their clients experience.

This study examines the advocacy behavior of homeless service providers in two major cities: Philadelphia and Houston. In an attempt to better understand this behavior, the study sought to interview key informants, on the ground, within these two geographic contexts. Using extant literature as a way of understanding potential advocacy behaviors and activities, as well as the potential barriers and opportunities homeless service providers may face, this study used a two-step methodology. The first phase of the research was a survey of homeless service providers in each case city to create a baseline of the key homeless organizations, as well as the baseline of exactly what types of advocacy activities each organization engages in, and how often. The second phase of this study consisted of field interviews of key informants, which consisted of both homeless service providers, as well as other stakeholders in each city, such as funders, coalition leaders, public officials, and other advocates.

Early in the process of case selection for this study, Philadelphia was chosen as a case city, largely due to an extensive knowledge of the organizations and contexts I intended to explore. To determine the second case city, I compiled a list of the top 50 US cities in terms of total population, and subsequently collected a host of demographic variables that could determine similarities and variations in the advocacy behavior of organizations in those cities. Based on this work, Houston, Texas was selected as the second case city for a number of specific reasons. Houston is relatively comparable in size to Philadelphia, both in total urban area population, as well as in the key indicator of the total homeless population, as measured by the annual Point-In-Time Counts (PITs) from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the respective rates of homelessness for each city that I calculated (Housing and Urban Development, 2013; Agans, *et al*., 2014). In addition, Houston has a poverty rate (22.9%) fairly comparable to Philadelphia's (26.5%) (US Census, 2013). Houston's

comparable total size in both total population and homeless count also leads to a comparably established network of homeless service providers, allowing for a wider selection of case organizations for this study.

Houston and Philadelphia also vary in some key ways. The most obvious is a variance in region, which is also an indicator of variation within local and state policy, as well as potential variation in cultural or political context, which may play a role in the decisions about whether organizations engage in advocacy behavior. Various studies have examined the uniqueness of Houston and Texas's political context (Fisher, 1989; Vojnovic, 2003; Phelps, 2014) and differences in state and local political context across cities and regions (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). Table 1 provides a summary of the two case cities and the key variables.

Table 1: City Case Selection

City	Region	Total Population	Poverty Rate	Violent Crime Rate	Home-ownership Rate	Unemploy ment Rate	Homeless Rate	HSNP Density	Housing Org Density
Philadelphia	Northeast	1,553,165	26.5%	1160.1	53.3%	5.0%	0.3635%	0.000340	0.000122331
Houston	Southwest	2,195,914	22.9%	992.5	45.4%	4.1%	0.2896%	0.000408	0.000135707

Sources: US Census, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Center for Charitable Statistics, Department of Housing and Urban Development

To appropriately compile a list of organizations for the initial survey, and subsequent field interviews, I sorted through the IRS master data file for 501c3 organizations that identified as either "Human Service" organizations or "Housing and Shelter" organizations in each city, and then further trimmed that list based on localized research of which organizations primarily served the homeless. Through internet searches, organizational and government websites, and conversations with local stakeholders, a list of the key homeless service providers in each city (43 in total) was compiled for the purposes of the Phase 1 survey, which would allow me to identify the most appropriate organizations for Phase 2 field research and interviews.

Survey and Results

A simple online survey to the compiled list of homeless services providers across both cities was then conducted via Qualtrics survey software. Preliminary research had identified 43 total homeless service providers. Twenty-six organizations verbally agreed to participate in the survey. In the end, nineteen organizations sufficiently completed the survey (10 in Philadelphia, and nine in Houston). While this did not allow for a deeper statistical analysis of the responses, it certainly provided a valuable distribution of baseline of activities in each city and provided an assessment of the overall climate for advocacy behavior by homeless service providers in each city. The 19 survey respondents satisfy a representative sample of the 43 homeless providers initially identified. Respondents vary significantly in terms of total budget size, employee size, and age of organization, providing perspective across a wide array of organizational capacities. The responding sample also contained a wide range of revenue sources, measured by the percentage of revenue from private and public sources, and also a representative number of founding executives. Survey responses also played a significant role in the development of the interview protocol used for phase two interviews and case analysis.

This qualifying survey asked organizations to indicate whether or not they engaged in a host of the most common advocacy activities drawn from the literature, how many times each year they engage in those identified activities, and if they designate specific financial or human resources to those activities.

The survey produced a number of key findings. In table two below, a few important organizational demographics are noted. First, it can be noted that none of these nineteen organizations pay for a professional lobbyist, therefore they perform any and all of their advocacy activities themselves, or via coalitions (discussed shortly). While more than half of the organizations in this survey (11 of 19) indicate that a staff person within their organizations is dedicated to advocacy work, only four of these organizations have a staff person dedicated to advocacy work as their primary job function. Most organizations indicated that the CEO or COO takes the advocacy lead. While this is not uncommon, the work of advocacy is significantly diminished when the staff responsible for that work has other, more significant job functions to fulfill. Only four of the nineteen responding organizations have a specific committee focused on "policy" within the board of directors, a potential indicator of the level of importance placed on this work by the leadership of the organization.

Table 2: Organizational Details

Characteristics	Average	Range
Full-Time Employees	68.05	1-300
Annual Operating Budget	$5,868,512	$313,000 - $25,000,000
Organization Age	1977	1889 - 2012
	Yes	**No**
Founding Executive Director	3	16
Board Policy Committee	4	15
Staff Dedicated to Advocacy	11	8
Currently Pay for Lobbyist	0	19
Note: Houston and Philadelphia Residents Combined		*(n=19)*

Table 3 displays a number of key findings regarding organizational advocacy behavior based on the survey. Traditional "insider" behaviors such as inviting elected officials to visit your organization and soliciting government funds via grant opportunities are common in both cities. We also see similar behavior across cities, although to a more limited extent, in terms of the suggestion of new programs with government (mostly local level) and voter registration drives. However, we begin to see significant disparity in the more "outsider" types of advocacy behaviors by city. For instance, seven out of the ten organizations in Philadelphia indicated an engagement in direct-issue lobbying, while no organizations in Houston claim to engage in that way. Similarly, eight out of 10 organizations in Philadelphia indicated that they participate in protests or demonstrations, whereas only one Houston organization indicated engaging in that way. This begs the question of what perceived or real structures might cause such a significant disparity in the more "outsider" type of behaviors that needed to be explored much deeper via informant interviews in both cities. Additionally, every responding organization indicated participation in at least one local coalition, which may indicate a significant space for advocacy behavior to be performed via collective mechanisms. However, an important subtext of this dynamic is that in Houston, all nine organizations indicated participation in the same coalition, whereas in Philadelphia, a wide variety of overlapping coalitions was identified, possibly indicating an opportunity for unified voice in Houston, and fractured voice in Philadelphia.

Table 3: Organizational Advocacy Behavior

Advocacy Activity	Houston	Philadelphia
	(n=9)	*(n=10)*
Invite Elected Officials	8	9
Initiate Voter Drives with Constituents	4	5
Solicit Government Funds	6	8
Suggest New Programs to Gov't	4	6
Ask Friends/Donors to Contact Gov't	4	7
Write/Distribute White Papers	1	2
Direct Issue Lobbying	0	7
Participate in Protests or Demonstrations	1	8
Participate in Coalitions	9	10

The survey also asked participating organizations to qualify how important they perceived advocacy to be in their overall mission. Nearly half of all organizations in the survey (nine) indicated that advocacy was an "essential" part of their mission, while 4 organizations indicated "very important" and 4 organizations indicated "important, but not as important as services. Two organizations declined to respond to this question.

Interview and Case Study Analysis

To more appropriately decipher the advocacy behavior of organizations in each of my case cities, and to better understand the disparities in behavior across cities that was identified in the survey analysis, a deeper case study of each city was needed. This research incorporated interviews with key informants in each city and an examination of the overall context in each city that appeared to lead to significant differences in organizational behavior. Leaders of homeless service providers (and board members when possible), public officials, coalition leaders, funders, and other advocates were interviewed in this process, and a deep examination of public documents, organizational websites, and news reports was undertaken to better ascertain the advocacy behavior of homeless service organizations as well as the local and political context in each city.

In all, 15 interviews were recorded in each city, for a total of 30 interviews. In a general sense, what became abundantly clear was that local context mattered significantly, in terms of local political context, but also in the structural and funding contexts that govern local relationships and local decision-making. In essence, the theoretical concept of "political opportunity" discussed above played a significant role in the types of activities homeless service organizations engaged in; however, the ways in which organizations perceived and navigated these opportunities took slightly different forms in each city.

Houston

Houston is a fascinating city. Houston is commonly assumed to be a conservative city, perhaps due to its location in Texas. This perception proves itself to be incorrect in some key ways, and the research for this project further unpacks the complexity of the "liberal" vs "conservative" outlook on public policy and democracy in Texas. In certain respects, Houston is a politically liberal island in an otherwise politically conservative state, which makes for some interesting challenges as it applies to homelessness and advocacy for social and policy change.

Houston is somewhat surprisingly a very diverse city. In fact, it ranks as one of the most diverse cities in the United States, according to the most recent Houston Area Survey conducted through the Kinder Institute for Urban Research out of Rice University (Kinder Institute, 2017). Houston's long history as the global capital of the oil and gas industries has, for decades, drawn diversity, which a number of interviewees claimed has led to a more tolerant and welcoming city. In 2009, Annise Parker was elected as the first openly gay mayor of a major city in the United States, eventually being elected for three consecutive terms and shattering some of the common perception about Houston's political leanings. Moreover, Mayor Parker was the driving force behind major policy directives to curb homelessness in Houston, with the creation of a

special office for Homeless Initiatives, and personal, vocal support for those efforts. Numerous interviewees for this research remarked about the personal mission Mayor Parker led on issues of homeless, often single-handedly keeping the issue high on the city's agenda.

However, it should not be ignored that many of the perceptions about a conservative political climate in the state of Texas overall prove to be quite true, creating a couple of key barriers to the advocacy potential around wicked social issues. While Houston proves to be much more progressive in terms of its approaches to homelessness and its related social challenges, the city itself sits within Harris County, which is geographically larger, and spans a number of wealthy suburban communities, creating a spatial and political disconnect between Houston and its suburbs. While this urban-suburban disconnect is not unique to Houston, the power of county-level politics creates political and financial problems when city and county attitudes about social issues do not align. In addition, the conservatively leaning state political climate further exacerbates the challenges of Houston city and Houston service providers in terms of their desire for increased attention and resources for solving wicked social problems. Furthermore, the Texas state legislature has a biennial meeting schedule and only meets for 3 months, leaving a very limited space and timeline to advocate for new, or less popular, issues.

Responses to homelessness are seemingly strong in Houston's history. The Houston Coalition for the Homeless was formed in 1982, as a collective of disparate organizations serving the homeless, realizing the potential of coordinating their efforts to better serve populations in need. Over time, the coalition drew funding resources to buoy their efforts, developing into a strong force in Houston for homeless service coordination. With Mayor Parker's personal pledge to focus on ending homelessness, the Coalition was further supported by the mayor's new Office of Homeless Initiatives and having the direct ear of the mayor. Through this, the coalition and its

19

members (mostly homeless service providers) took advantage of a major policy push from HUD and its related funding opportunities to develop a sophisticated model of "coordinated access" for the homeless. This model was intended to carve out specific roles for each service provider that focused on each organization's strengths, eliminating unnecessary overlaps, and encouraging better communication between organizations within the homeless service "system." Houston's coordinated access system has become a respected beacon of success for other cities looking to improve their homeless service provision. From these initial glances into Houston and its homeless service provision efforts, it appeared that the situation in Houston was quite strong, and that Houston may have created a fertile place to drive cooperation, advocacy, and collective voice around homelessness. Alas, there are pitfalls, as in most places. My specific research objective was to determine the behavior of service providers as advocates, and it was not yet clear if that was happening, or what those activities looked like on the ground.

To get a better sense of this, I spent 3 weeks in Houston meeting with various leaders of homeless service providers, the Houston Coalition for the Homeless, staff from the Mayor's Office of Homeless Initiatives, funders, and other advocate organizations involved in homelessness. What I found over my time in Houston was a significantly murky picture in terms of advocacy.

Focusing initially on the service providers to better understand, in their own words, what advocacy work they do, do NOT do, why, and why not, it became immediately clear that the coalition was not truly the source of cooperative strength that it appeared to be. Service providers overwhelmingly voiced distrust, uncertainty, and frustration with the coalition. According to my initial survey, every responding service provider indicated they participate in this specific coalition. So why continue to participate given these clear frustrations? The reason was simple.

Organizations participated in the coalition largely because the Houston Coalition for the

Homeless is the lead agency of the HUD Continuum of Care (CoC) for the region, meaning they

control all of the funding for homeless services for the region. Quite simply, organizations have

to play nice. This immediately creates a serious power mismatch with the potential to impact the

ways that organizations engage with and utilize the coalition.

Additionally, interviews with service providers allowed for the compilation of a number

of key challenges organizations expressed in regards to engaging in advocacy work. Many of the

barriers to advocacy highlighted in the literature become apparent for Houston organizations,

whose members cited limited resources and capacity to engage in advocacy work, as well as

confusion and caution over who could be, and who should be, doing advocacy. One service

provider, when talking about whether their agency, the coalition, or someone else should take the

lead on advocacy, said "I feel like I have a role in it. I want to have a role in it, but should I be

driving this? It's like, who else is doing this? That's my frustration." Another service provider

expressed the challenges in getting the organization's Board of Directors to understand and

support any type of advocacy, stating that the two biggest challenges had to do with "the whole

501c3 anxiety and then the anxiety about politics, people's politics." The Texas political climate

was raised by everyone who was interviewed. One service provider described the situation as

"Houston is blue and Austin is blue, San Antonio is blue, Dallas is red and the rest of Texas is

red. I mean seriously." Another advocate described the dilemma for social issues as a situation

where "conservative Republicans dominate the legislature mathematically to the point that

Democrat representatives almost lack the ability to even slow down legislation." One even

posited why most organizations do not engage in much advocacy, stating that colleagues often

discuss how the Texas legislature is "pretty conservative, so people figure, 'Why would I

bother?'" When asked if this political climate dictates the ways in which they choose to engage in policy discussions, the responses were a resounding yes, with a consistent perception that providers had to be cautious about how issues were raised publicly.

Despite the barriers described, and their consistency with the common barriers to advocacy highlighted in extant literature, I also found that most service providers continue to find at least some ways to engage in advocacy. One service provider said, "We don't feel we have a choice. Our clients face too many obstacles to survive. Their needs are too great." However, it was also clear from each service provider interviewed that the greatest reason for engaging in advocacy was for increasing their own funding streams. One said, "Our advocacy is mostly for our own benefit… for our own goals and our own funds." Another said, "We're geared towards what we are trying to do and the funds that we're trying to obtain." In fact, the desire for increased funding dominated the conversations about advocacy, with very few mentions of advocacy for policy change. Service providers certainly showed concern about advocacy activities that might be seen as too political, showing some savvy in navigating that system, but with considerable caution. One said, "We see advocacy as being a gray area. We are cautious about stepping into those gray areas."

Service providers also mentioned the value they see in advocacy for raising public awareness for issues, which led them to engage in marketing campaigns and social media campaigns, but almost all advocacy tends to be at either the national or the local level. One service provider described their work as:

> *Either at the national level when you can engage with that larger piece (national policy issues), to affect from that end. And then locally, because this is where the money then spits back out, and where we can best access the money. But the state almost just gets bypassed totally in that.*

As a whole, the structure in Houston seems to have strong potential for developing a collective voice, having a singular, long-standing coalition in place. But that is not how the situation has played out. The Houston Coalition for the Homeless acknowledges that they have done nearly no advocacy work at this point, with almost all attention paid to setting up service coordination with providers. They freely expressed that in terms of "a more traditional legislative advocacy, we've not even scratched the surface." In addition, the Coalition has been significantly buoyed by a very strong presence of key figures in the mayor's administration and the City's Office of Homeless Initiatives. With major shifts in personnel in these key support areas expected, and the ever-growing concern of changing priorities with new administrations, there is uncertainty that the Coalition is able to successfully stand on its own. Even an official from the city said, simply, "It's a bit wobbly." Perhaps the most important problems the coalition faces are its ability to creative collective voice for advocacy and the limited trust from the service providers themselves. Very few individuals interviewed for this project expressed more than tepid confidence that the Coalition could garner a collective voice for homelessness. Many said they felt there was no chance for that. When pressed for what may change the prospects of that collective advocacy voice, multiple service providers simply stated that a change of executive leadership at the Coalition would be necessary.

In terms of the potential for harnessing a collective, underrepresented voice on homelessness via advocacy, a significant opportunity appears to go untapped.

Philadelphia

The homeless service provider landscape in Philadelphia has some clear differences from Houston. Based on the demographic data and the preliminary survey to providers, Philadelphia appears to have a similar rate of homelessness and a similar proportion of service providers

working with the homeless, but elements of the local context and the advocacy activity of organizations seems to diverge.

From the survey, Philadelphia homeless service providers seem to be willing to engage in more "outsider" types of advocacy, such as engaging in public protests and demonstrations, as well as direct-issue lobbying. What is the impetus of this stark divergence in activity from similar organizations in Houston? It would appear that part of the answer is tied to a few of the older, larger service providers in Philadelphia who had a long history of vocalizing dissatisfaction with government responses to a growing homeless epidemic. Leaders from a number of smaller service providers indicated that having a few vocal leaders engaging directly with local government seemed to "normalize" these approaches, and paved the way for the smaller providers to follow suit. Clearly, the larger service providers seem to have taken the lead on most advocacy work. A common refrain was expressed by one provider who said, "(Organization X) has all of the resources. We let them lead the advocacy work." But this has not translated well into a collective voice. One provider described the situation this way: "It has been very hard to get the providers at the table together. When we do, it's usually for one narrow focus and then we go back to our own work."

Throughout my fieldwork process, it became clear that service providers in Philadelphia engage in advocacy almost completely on their own. Two of the most of the common barriers to advocacy were expressed: mistrust between providers and bad history based largely on significant competition for the same scarce resources. Even when service providers in Philadelphia engage in advocacy, poor communication and a lack of mutual support may be significantly inhibiting the potential of a powerful message. For example, during field research in Philadelphia, two separate service providers organized advocacy campaigns in front of City Hall

to raise awareness about homelessness on separate days, about a week apart. Neither organization solicited the partnership of the other (nor any other partners) to coordinate the campaigns. Separate, individual advocacy campaigns, while potentially valuable and effective, may fall short of their collective potential, and run the risk of being self-serving, as opposed to challenging systems that don't work to end homelessness.

There is strong evidence that service providers in Philadelphia are finding ways to engage in a diverse array of advocacy activities. As can be commonly seen, most service providers expressed figuring out how to engage in some advocacy work out of a sense of duty or mission. One provider simply said, "We see advocacy as a responsibility." Similarly, another provider said that advocacy is necessary because "We can't solve big problems on our own." An additional, interesting theme emerged from this among the Philadelphia homeless service providers. The concept of "system change" as a major goal of advocacy work was discussed by a number of providers interviewed. One provider stated that the true value of advocacy is based on the "desperate need for system change." Another provider elaborated, stating, "The importance of advocacy is looking at the big picture of how are we going to shape the future of solving these problems. We want to have an impact on the systems that allows us to operate better, but also allows other organizations to operate better." This differed from Houston, where many of the providers indicated the value of advocacy had to do with increasing the organization's own funding. Maybe this is just a difference in the language used by organizations, or perhaps an articulated goal of system change could be one place to find common ground between service providers that have difficulty working together.

One of the most fascinating elements that came out of the survey initially was the multitude of coalition groups that most Philadelphia service providers expressed involvement in,

especially given that many of the same organizations portray frustration and distrust between each other, and the previously noted lack of coordinated voice on issues of homelessness. What would explain this apparent disconnect? With so many coalitions, we might imagine increased potential to leverage a collective voice, or perhaps a growing sense of trust between service providers given their extensive connectedness through various coalitions. Upon closer examination, it is clear that over time, narrowly-focused coalitions have popped up in Philadelphia to address specific issues of collective interest, thus culminating in a long list of specific coalitions: The Vote4Homes coalition dealing with chronic adult homeless, the Family Service Provider Network dealing with family homelessness, multiple versions of coalitions dealing with issues of youth homelessness and youth in/exiting foster care, and more. While these coalitions may be able to leverage their specific issues better with a narrow focus, this multi-coalition context appears to create more meetings that leadership must attend but little coordination between the various coalitions. In the words of one provider:

> *It takes a lot of time. You have to be at the table. You've got to go to weekly meetings or conference calls, or what starts out as the five CEOs around a table then becomes the five executive VPs, that becomes the five program directors, and then becomes the five interns, and then next thing you know things aren't really happening.*

In addition, the individual organizations indicated a significant degree of skepticism of the value and potential of coalitions. When asked if coalitions are an effective way to express collective voice on issues of homelessness, one service provider stated, "They don't work very well. I like it in theory. I have been in coalitions and what happens is people just always fall back on their own interests. When that happens, it's over." This same provider self-identified as representing her/his organization on at least three different coalitions focused on homelessness, and when

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asked if there were any examples of effective coalitions in Philadelphia, stated, "Absolutely not. Absolutely not."

The larger service providers, with dedicated resources and staff for advocacy take the lead in various coalitions, are reported to be the most vocal about the strategy and direction of the coalitions. The smaller service providers expressed a tendency to rely on those larger organizations for leadership. Only two of the homeless service providers within Philadelphia have at least one staff person dedicated to advocacy work full-time, leaving only a few dominant voices to lead these efforts for collective voice.

If some of the key goals and values of coalitions is to create partnership, cooperation, and collective voice among disconnected service providers, Philadelphia's context displays limited success. However, upon closer examination, some coalitions may be more successful than others at developing that sense of mutuality and trust. One major coalition, led by one of the larger and well-resourced providers, is widely described as feeling top-down. Coalition members expressed a sense of value and accomplishment of the coalition, but also indicated, "We don't feel we have much voice there. We are mostly told what to do, and I rarely feel heard." Another provider and member of that coalition expressed frustration that the lead agency "mostly just advocates for themselves. We feel more like we are just tacked onto a list to look like we are all talking as one." Conversely, another large homeless coalition in Philadelphia received a considerably more positive assessment from member organizations. One provider and member of that coalition expressed that the meetings felt more welcoming and worth the time, adding, "You have more executive directors that are talking to each other."

So, if coalitions are the mechanism by which collective voice can be leveraged, what is the difference between the two coalitions identified in the previous paragraph and their

perceptions of value and effectiveness amongst the member organizations? One answer may lie in the approach to leadership within coalitions. Of the two, the first relies on the more sophisticated, well-resourced advocacy capacity of the lead service provider to direct the coalition efforts. There are well-established successes from this coalition, but most members of the coalition feel little involvement aside from attending meetings. The second coalition discussed above has taken a very different strategy to gathering the necessary leaders. The individual in charge of leading the coalition is classically trained as a community organizer, and expresses that training in describing the way to gather a diverse group of people to think collectively:

> *I use a community organizing model, bring in leadership together from the non-profit community, and to some extent the public sector, to address issues and concerns… developing a consensus… it's almost by nature an entirely collaborative process.*

Members of this organization consistently reported feeling empowered, respected, and heard in this coalition. They also expressed always leaving coalition meetings with action steps for each service provider to be responsible for, making it feel like a collective effort.

Philadelphia's local context has both similarities and differences to Houston's. HSNPs in Philadelphia may be more likely to engage in a diverse set of advocacy activities that Houston providers appear less likely to engage in, particularly in some of the outsider types of activities. This may be due, in part, to differences in the perceptions of political opportunity, whereby normalization over time of outsider types of behavior in Philadelphia has conveyed to service providers that engaging in activities such as protests, demonstrations, and direct-issue lobbying is less risky than commonly perceived. The stark contrast of the legislative structures in Houston/Texas, compared to Philadelphia/Pennsylvania, seem to convey a strong message of political opportunity for advocacy to providers in Philadelphia that is not felt strongly in Houston.

Despite this perception of potential political opportunity in Philadelphia, and despite a host of coalitions to serve as a unifier of collective voice, service providers remain significantly fractured there. Most providers continue to advocate on their own. However, there is a running expression from providers that there is a need for collective voice to accomplish system changes. If coalitions are the most appropriate mechanism for creating a collective voice on homelessness and working toward those necessary system changes, there may be some foundational knowledge from at least one coalition as to effective approaches of breaking through the barriers of individuality and creating a powerful collective voice.

Key Findings and Emerging Themes

There are three common themes that emerge from this research that provide insight into the barriers and challenges that HSNPs face when deciding if, how, and when to engage in advocacy on behalf of their client populations.

Barriers to Advocacy

The first theme that emerged from this research is that the most important barriers to advocacy identified in the literature do exist, either in reality or in perception. HSNPs operate in an atmosphere of scarce resources and fierce competition with would-be allies. The HSNPs in this study consistently lamented their limited capacity, in terms of financial resources for supporting the work of advocacy and in terms of their professional capacity to know the specific rules, regulations, and strategies of effective advocacy. That limited professional capacity also emerged as a reason for the individual providers' uncertainty about the political risks of engaging in advocacy, leading to adulterated levels of advocacy activity overall.

Breaking through the Barriers

Despite these barriers and challenges, a number of organizations in this study do break through and find ways to engage in advocacy activity. As indicated above, most organizations

described this activity as a sense of duty or responsibility to their mission. Size of the organization plays a significant role. As expected, service providers with larger budgets, dedicated staff working on advocacy, and support from executive leadership and board of directors, engage in more advocacy activity than smaller service providers with less capacity. However, in both case cities, it is clear that the driving force for these organizations engaging in advocacy is increased access to funding. Nearly every interviewee in Houston expressed funding as the core reason to engage in advocacy. In Philadelphia, while there was a strain of language about desiring "system change," almost all advocacy activity witnessed and described in this study were clearly tied, at least in large part, to organizational self-preservation or self-promotion.

Regardless of the specific type of advocacy activities service providers choose to engage in, they clearly do so with caution. While some describe a much more sophisticated understanding of the regulatory environment around advocacy and lobbying than others, all service providers express the so-called "gray area" of the work, and either real and perceived risks of advocacy work. Understanding the ways in which HSNPs assess political opportunity can help explain stark variations in the types of advocacy service providers engage in across cities, particularly the higher levels of more "outsider" types of advocacy activities in Philadelphia. Over time, as a few larger service providers have experimented with these outsider tactics, the other providers learn that the risks of doing so are less than perceived, and soon follow suit.

Coalitions and Collective Voice

The third theme emerging from this research is that coalitions may be a valuable mechanism for collective voice and real solutions to wicked problems. Certainly, the literature

would suggest this (see Fyall and McGuire, 2015). But structures seem to matter immensely. Funding structures within the coalition or the local context certainly matter. Leadership within the coalition certainly matters. A sense of shared vision and shared responsibility certainly matters as well. The comparative elements of this research were able to shine a light on these particular challenges in a few key ways. First, in Houston, while Houston Coalition for the Homeless may be the only group able to truly leverage the collective voice on homelessness, this coalition serves as the financial agent for the local Continuum of Care (CoC), meaning they control the purse strings of the largest portion of funding that service providers are vying for. This financial role, and the structure of power it implies, runs the risk of alienating members of the coalition. In Philadelphia, the financial agent of the CoC is the city itself, eliminating a challenging power dynamic that could usurp the potential for collective voice.

Trust between members is essential for coalitions to achieve a sense of shared vision and shared responsibility, and the chips are clearly stacked against this. As this research highlights, competition for scarce funds creates divides between service providers, making it difficult to share anything at all. Relationships require cultivation, with a focus on developing common purpose and common strength, while encouraging the idea that each partner has value. While there is a developing sense of shared vision and common purpose in Houston around the new coordinated access system, it is also clear that trust in leadership, especially of the Coalition, is very low, leaving the door open for the traditional tendencies of service providers to operate and advocate unilaterally. In Philadelphia, the multitude of narrowly-focused coalitions may have less leverage, and while the trust in the coalitions may not be as contentious as they appear in Houston, the providers in Philadelphia themselves indicated that most collective activity is based on a single issues when they arise, and then when the issue is sufficiently resolved, they go back

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to their own work. Narrow, reactionary approaches can die off quickly. To truly cultivate these challenging relationships, a consistent approach is necessary.

One promising model for cultivating this common purpose and common strength among competing service providers may have also emerged from this research. One coalition in Philadelphia garnered more positive reaction than the others during interviews. This coalition is led by an individual who has extensive training as a community organizer, and expressed a need for a framework for success when working with populations who may struggle to think and act collectively. This leader deliberately organizes the coalition's activities around "winnable" issues and consistent communication. There are clear action steps for everyone involved, which has slowly built the sense of accountability needed to see consistent progress. The skepticism remains between the partners, but the positive feedback from partner providers seems to indicate that this slow cultivation of the relationship is moving in a positive direction. It is possible that training coalition leaders in models of community organizing could enhance their ability to develop these difficult partnerships and enhance collective voice.

A deeper dive into the specific coalition dynamics is needed to sort out all of the lessons, but it is clear that the structural elements that govern these interactions and potential collaborations must be discerned to develop a collective advocacy power to effectively end a wicked problem such as homelessness.

Discussion and Conclusion

By most accounts, homelessness remains a persistent problem, despite decades of efforts from government and HSNPs to curb, or at least reverse, this wicked problem. The most recent data from the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) counts show a promising recent trend, with a 15% decline in homelessness since 2007 (Housing and Urban Development, 2016). While advocates

are encouraged by these data, there remain flaws in the PIT approach that may still result in

undercounting the homeless, a concern that needs continual assessment.

While individual HSNPs may or may not be the ideal voice for the homeless, given their

challenges and tendency toward self-preserving action (see Piven and Cloward, 1977), these

HSNPs may still be a valuable and even necessary mechanism within discussions on ending

homelessness. HSNPs have a direct, street-level connection to the stories and issues faced by the

homeless they serve. This is a voice that has sorely limited capacity to find its way onto political

or policy agendas. Despite the concerns of organizational self-preservation, HSNPs working with

the homeless (and other wicked problems) have the potential to foster a more democratic voice

on issues of homelessness and lead discussions on finding new solutions to solve the problem.

With the level of expertise and direct links to those experiencing homelessness that these

organizations have, their lack of voice within policy discussions may significantly hamper the

potential for comprehensive solutions.

Within this context, Denhardt and Denhardt's model for a New Public Service (NPS)

becomes a necessity for attempting to end a wicked problem such as homelessness. The

foundation of NPS focuses on valuing citizenship and people, with an aim to serve citizens and

seek the public interest, and is intended to drive local governance into a more responsive and

effective operational framework (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2011). The added complexity of a

severely marginalized and disenfranchised homeless population creates a void in the policy and

agenda-setting conversations that HSNPs have the capacity to help fill. Armed with the right

tools for navigating advocacy work and a framework of NPS that values democracy and service

to its citizens, these service providers may play an integral role in raising that marginalized voice

into the necessary policy discussions related to homelessness and significantly improve the responsiveness of local government to this wicked problem.

This study attempts to understand the decision-making processes of why some HSNPs engage in advocacy while others do not. It also attempts to assess the variety of activities these providers engage in or avoid and why. It does not specifically attempt to assess the efficacy of these different behaviors. Certainly, further research is necessary to effectively assess what types of activities "work" and "don't work." However, before we can make those assessments of efficacy, we need a more precise understanding of the typology of advocacy activity. Clearly, there are differences between "insider" and "outsider" activities that need to be delineated.

Individual efforts to engage in advocacy work appear to be, historically and currently, the norm for service providers. Frustratingly, individual efforts often seem to have limited impact. Is a collective effort or a collective, democratic voice necessary to truly give voice to a severely wicked problem such as homelessness? It would certainly appear so, but this is an extremely challenging endeavor given the structural and funding dilemmas that these service providers face, not the least of which is a long-standing fierce competition for scarce resources. (Re)developing trust, and a shared vision and mission (in the midst of this competition for resources) is essential. It will take time and intentional cultivation to do so. Training and approaches from community organizing models seems to be a promising method for this work.

Houston's "coordinated access" system aims to reduce the competition for funding that many service providers face by allowing individual organizations to specialize in key areas of the service continuum. This is also intended to minimize overlaps in services; everyone has a vital role in the system. This is extremely valuable for improved service quality. However, thus far, these efforts have not reduced the mistrust between providers, nor the fractured advocacy

behavior they engage in. Despite the promise of a singular, focused coalition for the homeless, Houston's model still has not seen an enhanced collective advocacy voice.

There have been some very recent efforts in Philadelphia, specifically around youth homelessness, that are showing some promise for a more collective effort. These efforts are being led by the city's newly appointed leadership within the Office of Homeless Services, and these collective discussions are largely incentivized by the potential for (though unspoken) access to increased funding. While it certainly shows there is potential to bring a diverse group of providers and city agencies together, this latest effort is in its early stages, and will require time to develop a sense of collective trust. For now, many divides between participating organizations remain.

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