Local Institutional Work in an Organizational Field:
A Case Study of Open Table Nashville

By

Jason M. Rodriguez

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Community Research & Action

December 17, 2022

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

David Diehl, Ph.D.

Marybeth Shinn, Ph.D.

Kimberly Bess, Ph.D.

Deborah Wells Rowe, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2022 by Jason Michael Rodriguez Masi
All Rights Reserved

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this document has my name on the byline, I did not write it alone. Numerous friends, colleagues, mentors, and family members share responsibility for its completion, because I could not have done it without them. First among these is my wife, Anna. Throughout the process, she was my sounding board. As I brainstormed with whiteboard scribblings or groaned about various writing conundrums, she was always a patient listener and willing to offer her own feedback. As the research and writing picked up steam, we put our lives on hold (in many respects) as the needs of the dissertation took over. In my lowest moments, when I could not see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, she believed in me and urged me to keep pressing on. Thank you, darling, from the bottom of my heart.

I am also indebted to an array of community activists in Nashville, including those who participated in this study's research. These individuals—especially Lindsey Krinks (of Open Table Nashville) and Howard Allen, Jr. (of the Nashville Homeless Underground)—have had an enormous impact on my thinking. Through the efforts of their respective grassroots organizations, they have expanded my imagination for the institutions that *could* be. When I noticed that institutional theory did not have a satisfactory way of couching the significance of their work, I began to formulate my dissertation topic. Later, Lindsey helped get my dissertation off the ground by introducing me to potential interviewees and arranging for me to observe some of Open Table's activities.

I also want to thank my dissertation committee: Debbie and Kimberly, and especially Beth and David. Throughout my time at Vanderbilt, Beth has been an invaluable mentor who I have been honored to work with. My interest in Housing First is largely thanks to her. While

writing my dissertation, I could reliably count on her for frank and specific feedback paired with helpful suggestions. Meanwhile, David shepherded my dissertation from start to finish and was particularly crucial for helping me pinpoint and articulate my theoretical contributions. This started with his “Organization Theory” course, which sparked my interest in institutional theory and its limitations. Likewise, Kimberly shaped my theoretical contributions in key ways. Most notably, she pointed me to Anthony Giddens, whose ideas about social practices were important for helping me articulate the reproduction of local-level practices and institutions in an organizational field—which was critical to my theorized construct, the local organizational field. Finally, without Debbie’s instruction and guidance on qualitative methods, I would not have been equipped with the skills needed to undertake the study. I am a researcher whose work is almost exclusively quantitative, making a wholly qualitative dissertation a unique challenge.

Of course, I would be nowhere near this point but for my family. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for having sacrificed so much for me and my education. Thank you for putting your kids before your careers, for instilling in me a love for reading, for doing all you could do to keep me in good schools, for the attention you always paid to my schoolwork, for modeling compassion for others, and for insisting on holding me to high standards. Thank you—Mom, Dad, Jessica, Grandma, Grandpa, Nani, and Granddad—for always believing in me, investing in me, and praying for me. I am standing on your shoulders, and I will never forget that.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .... **vii**

LIST OF TABLES .... **vii**

LIST OF FIGURES .... **viiviii**

INTRODUCTION **1**

CHAPTER 1. Connecting Issue and Place: The Local Organizational Field **15**

Theoretical Foundations 17
Foundation 1: Institutional Mechanisms and Pillars 18
Foundation 2: The Issue-Based Organizational Field 19
Foundation 3: Community-Level Institutions 24
Foundation 4: Social Practices and Structuration Theory 26
Foundation 5: Institutional Work 28
The Institutional Environment of Institutional Work 33
Multilevel Institutional Systems and Multiple-Embeddedness 34
Place and Institutional Work 36
A Fizzled Discussion About the Institutional Environment 41
Reimagining the Organizational Field 44
Theorizing the Local Organizational Field 46
The Local Organizational Field as a Site of Translation 53
The Local Organizational Field as a Site of Institutional Work 56
Implications for the Institutional Work of Community Organizations 60
Conclusion 61

CHAPTER 2. Subject Matter, Research Questions, and Methods **63**

Contextualizing the Institutional Work of Open Table Nashville 68
The Origin, Legitimation, and Diffusion of Housing First 77
Housing First in the Nashville Context 80
Open Table Nashville (OTN) 84
Research Questions 91
Cultural-Cognitive Drivers of OTN’s Institutional Work 92
Activities Comprising OTN’s Institutional Work 93
Methodology 96
Sampling and Data Collection 97
Data Analysis 109
Conclusion 111

CHAPTER 3. OTN’s Culture of Homeless Assistance **113**

"Journeying Alongside" People Experiencing Homelessness 116
Facet 1: "We See Them as Friends" 117
Facet 2: "We Meet People Where They Are" 118
Facet 3: "Developing That Relationship" 122
Facet 4: Mobilizing Them in the Direction of Housing 123
Facet 5: Helping Them Retain Housing 128
Imagined Possibilities for Service Provision 129
Tensions Between the Friendship Ideal and Service Provision 131
OTN's Embrace of Housing First 132
How OTN Interprets "Housing First" 132
What Motivates OTN's Alignment with Housing First 136
Assessing OTN's Cultural-Cognitive Alignment with Housing First 141
OTN's Positionality in the Homeless Assistance Field 145
Conclusion 147

CHAPTER 4. OTN and the Nashville Homeless Assistance Field 149

Local Translation Work: Housing First in Nashville 155
How's Nashville and Housing First 157
OTN's Efforts to Institutionalize Housing First in Nashville 166
Local Boundary Maintenance: Nashville Homeless Assistance Amidst COVID-19 172
OTN's Involvement in the Nashville Continuum of Care 173
The Homelessness Planning Council's Initial Response to COVID-19 177
OTN's Boundary Maintenance 189
The Complication of Place 190
Conclusion 192

CHAPTER 5. Beyond the Issue of Homeless Assistance: OTN and Nashville, Broadly ... 195

OTN and the Problem of Local Inequity 200
Local Regulatory Systems and the Affordable Housing Deficit 201
Inequity's Roots in Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Systems 207
Bridging Work: Disrupting Local Inequities Linked to Homeless Assistance 214
OTN's Strategies of Education 218
OTN's Strategies of Advocacy and Organizing 232
Conclusion 245

DISCUSSION 248

Limitations 250
Future Research 253

REFERENCES 257

APPENDIX A. OTN Activities List 274

APPENDIX B. HPC Recommendations for COVID-19 Response 275

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

2.1. Question Bank for Getting to Know the Informant and OTN 99

2.2. Question Bank for OTN's Conceptualization of Housing First.. 101

2.3. Question Bank for OTN's Institutional Work 103

2.4. Observable OTN Activities of Interest 105

2.5. Archival Sources 107

2.6. Sources of Articles Collected in which OTN Was at Least Mentioned 108

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1.1. A process model of institutions and institutional work 31

1.2. Alternate depictions of Field A with embedded subfield X 48

1.3. The local organizational field as the interaction of an issue-based organizational field with a place-based community 50

2.1. The staircase paradigm of homeless assistance 71

2.2. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville 84

4.1. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville (emphasis on the boundary between the global level of the field and the local level of the field) 153

4.2. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville (emphasis on the local boundary between the homeless assistance context and other local contexts).................................. 154

4.3. Facebook post by How's Nashville during the first year of the campaign......................... 165

4.4. Facebook post by How's Nashville during a 100,000 Homes Campaign training............. 167

5.1. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville (emphasis on place-based institutional pressures not specific to homeless assistance) 197

5.2. The roots of Nashville's affordable housing deficit, as understood by OTN members 208

5.3. NIMBYism slide from the Advocacy and Policy Training 210

5.4. “Escalation of Tactics” slide from the Advocacy and Policy Training 215

5.5. Samples from OTN’s public gallery, observed during an urban immersion tour................ 231

5.6. OTN’s first public reaction to the Mayor Cooper’s cut to the Barnes Fund........................ 242

INTRODUCTION

Our world is filled with social issues and organizations that respond to them. Scan the national newspapers for the key players, and you will see juggernauts: governments, NGOs, corporations, and academic communities, to name a few. Pick a social issue; let's call it "X." Look closely, and you will find a *field of organizations*—not just the juggernauts, but also a myriad of startups, grassroots nonprofits, citizens' groups, and other stakeholders—practicing what they see as appropriate responses to X. What responses are appropriate? Not everyone in this field will agree. But over time, some practices might gain widespread legitimacy and longevity, eventually becoming accepted as "just the way we do things" with respect to X. That is, they might become *institutions*. Ambitious stakeholders—most easily and most noticeably, the juggernauts—sometimes try to put their fingers on the scale to help this process along for their preferred practices (or to *reverse* this process in favor of alternative practices). In institutional theory, this is called "institutional work." But what about the strategic actions of smaller players? What about institutional work by organizations with a limited geographic focus, such as community organizations?

This case study is about how a community organization might purposively work to influence the institutional processes defining its issue-focused organizational field. Such a field is often the assumed context within which scholars of institutional work situate organizational action. Because an organizational field is defined by shared interest in an issue and not by geography, it is an expansive and populous context within which community organizations can seem like pinpricks. It is not surprising, then, that the institutional work of community organizations is an uncommon topic of discussion in the institutional work literature. Instead,

scholars tend to direct their attention to the strategic actions of elite actors with global or national sway. Here, I seek to demonstrate that systematically overlooking community organizations is a mistake, because it leads scholars to overlook important institutional processes at the level of the geographical community. It also diminishes the agency of community organizations at a time when their activism is evident everywhere.

In response to these limitations, I propose a new theoretical construct: the "local organizational field." A local organizational field is a community of organizations[1] interested in a particular issue *in a particular place*. In more ways than one, it is a community within a community: a sub-community of a (global) organizational field and sub-community of a geographical community. Potentially, organizations in this social intersection contend with the reality that the institutions of the global field and the institutions of the geographical community do not quite align. In a local organizational field, organizations develop shared understandings of the appropriate ways to respond to this complex set of social pressures—ultimately, shaping whether and how the global field's institutions manifest as practices in their locale. Community organizations are well positioned to influence these shared local understandings and local practices. They are also well positioned to influence the more-general institutions of their geographical community in ways that can soften (or harden) local resistance to global field institutions. In other words, *local* institutional work is possible and meaningful in an

[1] Throughout this study, I reference both "community organizations" and a "community of organizations." I chose these terms carefully, and they should not be confused with one another. A "community organization," or community-based organization, is a singular organizational entity (often grassroots and non-profit) representing a segment of a geographical community and focused on addressing particular problems within that community. It is, by definition, rooted in a particular place. In contrast, the term "community of organizations" does not have a geographical connotation. In that term, "community" is deployed in its most general sense, as a collective organized around something held in common. It connotes interaction and shared interest. Although this interest could be a place, it could also be an issue (such as chess).

organizational field. Thus, the local organizational field spotlights what the global organizational field, on its own, obscures.

Through an instrumental case study, my aim is to show that these local institutional dynamics can be empirically examined. My study focuses in depth on a single community organization named Open Table Nashville (OTN) and some of its institutional work in Nashville, Tennessee. Over several months in 2020, I interviewed OTN members, observed some of their activities, and collected archival data related to one of the organization's formal advocacy areas: "affordable housing plus Housing First." By examining their motivations and intentions, as well as their activities in the community, I was able to establish that OTN engages in institutional work. Even though this work takes place locally, I argue that it is still meaningful within the study's organizational field of interest.

My organizational field of interest is "the homeless assistance field": my term for a global community of organizations with a stake in assisting people experiencing homelessness. The homeless assistance field is defined by various institutions, one of which is Housing First: a paradigm of homeless assistance that insists that housing is a basic human right and that everyone has a right to autonomy and self-determination. In practice, this means that everyone without a home deserves to be offered a home promptly and permanently, without conditioning this offer on maintaining sobriety, accepting mental health treatment, or other behaviors. Over time, Housing First has become widely (though not universally) accepted in the homeless assistance field—fueled by a growing body of favorable research evidence, inspiring exemplars, and government incentives and mandates.

However, the institutionalization of Housing First has not happened uniformly everywhere. This is because institutions are not just cognitive constructs; they are practices

enacted in *places*, and the culture of a place can influence whether and how field institutions like Housing First are locally enacted. Sometimes, a local community of organizations—a local organizational field—tries to make sense of the global field institution in the context of their place, acting as a kind of prism through which the institution is understood and practiced by individual organizations. For example, as I describe in this study, OTN is embedded in a global culture of homeless assistance where Housing First is widely embraced, but it is simultaneously embedded in a *local* culture of homeless assistance which has been slow to take up Housing First.

A local culture of homeless assistance helps define "the Nashville homeless assistance field"—which is the term I use to describe the social community that helps enact Housing First and other homeless assistance institutions in Nashville. This local organizational field includes municipal agencies, housing providers, service providers (like OTN), advocates (like OTN), people experiencing homelessness, and other local stakeholders. The Nashville homeless assistance field is an institutional environment unto itself, with entrenched homeless assistance practices that do not always reflect the trends in the global field. This might be why Housing First started gaining traction in Nashville around 2013, later than in many other locales. Connected to this, the geographical community of Nashville imposes external constraints on the institutionalization of Housing First—for example, through local scarcity of affordable housing and through a culture of individualism that is perhaps stronger than in many other locales. These barriers persist. Thus, local willingness and ability to enact Housing First is in play.

The organization at the center of my case study, OTN, is a relatively new and small nonprofit, founded in 2010 to "journey alongside" and meet the needs of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness. Its primary focus is to provide homeless outreach and housing

navigation services, including managing a corps of volunteers and staff to keep people alive and warm on the streets during the winter months. This itself is not unusual for a service provider. What makes OTN unique is that it maintains education and advocacy arms that put the organization at the forefront of some of Nashville's social activism. OTN is a community organization that, rather than taking for granted existing ways of doing things, actively tries to steer Nashville toward *new* ways of doing things. Put differently, it engages in institutional work.

As an advocate of Housing First and vociferous critic of social inequities, OTN pushes for a local system of homeless assistance that promptly moves people into permanent housing, no matter who they are or how "undeserving" they might seem. Sometimes, this is expressed in the Nashville homeless assistance field as OTN urges its peers to prioritize permanent housing solutions to homelessness. Other times, this is expressed in Nashville more broadly, as OTN tries to pressure city leaders and ordinary citizens to prioritize the development of affordable housing—not just *any* "affordable" housing, but housing that is truly affordable to people at the very bottom of the income scale. In engaging in these efforts, OTN targets local systems such as regulations, social norms, and shared beliefs that prevent Housing First from being institutionalized in Nashville.

In this study, my aim is to show that OTN's activist efforts constitute institutional work and, even though they are locally targeted, have relevance for the institutional processes of the homeless assistance field. OTN demonstrates that community organizations can engage in meaningful institutional work, even in the context of an organizational field—that this is not a domain of activism limited to global and national juggernauts. I also identify unique *kinds* of institutional work for which some community organizations may be well-positioned, something that macro-level analyses obscure. The local organizational field construct is useful for bringing

these things into focus and is my primary conceptual contribution. My study's five chapters are organized such that I start from this theoretical base, then use it to structure my analysis of OTN's activism.

Chapter One lays the theoretical foundations for my study. It introduces key concepts and debates in institutional theory, leading to the emergence of institutional work as a research area. In many ways, scholars of institutional work have synthesized and expanded upon prior attempts to reconcile (a) established theory of institutions as totalizing forces with (b) the intuition that human agency exists and contributes to the comings and goings of institutions. Indeed, actors often try to influence institutions and are sometimes successful, even if the actors cannot themselves escape the influence of institutions. However (I argue), because the research area of institutional work often situates action within organizational fields, it is harder to see the agency of smaller organizations. As an alternative, some scholars situate action within geographical communities, which brings community organizations and their institutional work to the forefront. However, this kind of analysis is incomplete as well, as it extricates community organizations from their global, issue-focused communities of practice. Inherently, community organizations are interested in both an issue and a place, and no analysis will adequately understand their work if it does not integrate issue-based and place-based contexts.

To address this limitation, the second half of Chapter One theorizes the local organizational field construct and explains how it can bolster the study of institutional work, especially insofar as it involves community organizations. I begin by pointing out that the idea of intersecting or interacting fields of forces is not without precedent in social theory, and it is not a huge leap from there to consider how an organizational field and geographical community interact. Where an organized sub-community exists at this intersection, one may find a local

organizational field. Drawing from other literature in the social sciences, I suggest how a local organizational field can be a site of institutional "translation" from a macro level to a local level and how a local context can be buffered from macro-level institutional trends. These processes create local targets for institutional work, which a community organization can exploit—with practical implications for their locale.

Whereas Chapter One is highly general and theoretical, Chapter Two attempts to ground the discussion in a specific context, focal organization, and research agenda. I begin by introducing the homeless assistance field, which has been my own professional context for over a decade. This global, issue-focused community—at least, its modern iteration—can be traced back to the explosive growth of homelessness in the late 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of globalization and neoliberal capitalism. As the field formed, institutional momentum began to favor the "staircase" approach: a model of assistance where offers of housing were contingent on sustained demonstration of productive behaviors: especially abstinence from drugs and alcohol, participation in mental health treatment, and efforts to secure gainful employment. Conversely, backsliding in these areas often led to loss of housing. However, the staircase approach was soon challenged by the Housing First approach, in which housing assistance was decoupled from behavioral expectations beyond what would be typically expected of a tenant. More than competing practices, these were competing systems of beliefs and values; the staircase approach emphasized social contractualism while Housing First emphasized that housing, autonomy, and self-determination were basic human rights. During the 2000s, Housing First came to largely displace the staircase model as the favored approach among research and practitioner communities, national governments, and leading advocacy organizations.

After surveying some of the national (i.e., U.S.) and global trends in homeless assistance, Chapter Two introduces the *Nashville* homeless assistance field, specifically, and one of its community organizations, Open Table Nashville (OTN). This order of introduction—global field, then local field, then organization—emphasizes a series of levels of social embeddedness. By the time my attention turns to Nashville, it is clear that OTN and its local community of homeless assistance organizations are part of a larger trend of field institutionalization. Indeed, I detail how, in 2013, Nashville organizations began a local campaign to house people under a Housing First approach, in coordination with other communities that were launching similar campaigns across the U.S. This is when OTN's advocacy of Housing First began in earnest. OTN's alignment with Housing First and its range of activist activities—from participating in regulatory bodies to lobbying public officials to community organizing—is, in fact, what sparked my interest in the institutional work of community organizations. I wanted to learn more about OTN's work and the implications of this work for Housing First's institutionalization in Nashville, as a case study for how we might examine the institutional work of community organizations, generally.

The remainder of Chapter Two explains my research questions and methods. Through the lens of institutional theory, I sought to understand OTN's local activism around "affordable housing plus Housing First," which OTN cites as one of its top advocacy areas. Although Housing First is my institution of interest, OTN's linkage of Housing First to the issue of affordable housing pulls the latter within the scope of my study. My research questions were divided into questions about (1) the cultural and cognitive drivers of OTN's institutional work related to their advocacy and (2-3) the activities that comprise this work:

1(a). What are key aspects of OTN's culture of homeless assistance, and how do these align (or not align) with Housing First?

1(b). How do OTN members describe Housing First?

1(c). How do OTN members' descriptions of Housing First compare to common conceptualizations of Housing First in the homeless assistance field?

2(a). How has OTN acted directly to influence the local institution of Housing First?

2(b). How has the work in 2(a) implicated the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems of the Nashville homeless assistance field?

2(c). How has the work in 2(a) been limited by the institutions of the broader community of Nashville?

3(a). How has OTN acted to influence local institutions that are not specific to homeless assistance?

3(b). How has the work in 3(a) implicated the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems of the geographical community of Nashville?

3(c). How has the work in 3(a) implicated the local institution of Housing First?

Question sets 2 and 3 distinguish between action in the Nashville homeless assistance field and action elsewhere in Nashville, respectively. They go hand in hand with question set 1, because both *purpose* and *action* are integral to what institutional work is.

So, I developed a methodology that would help me understand OTN's purposes and actions in rich detail. I leaned most heavily on semi-structured interviews of OTN members. This method was necessary for understanding OTN's basic beliefs about homeless assistance, their values, and their perceptions of Housing First and affordable housing. Interviews also helped me understand organizational activities most salient for OTN members—especially those related to OTN's institutional work in the Nashville homeless assistance field (more narrowly) as well as across Nashville at large (that is, beyond the issue of homeless assistance, specifically). To triangulate my interview data, I also observed some of OTN's activities firsthand and collected archival data (organizational materials, news media articles, social media posts, public videos,

and more). I then used qualitative social scientific methods to iteratively code these data and interpret the codes, resulting in identifiable themes that I could relate to theoretical constructs. My concept of the local organizational field was key during this process; I grouped themes according to whether they related more to the Nashville homeless assistance field, narrowly, or to the geographical community, broadly.

Chapter Three examines the first set of research questions: those relating to the cultural and cognitive drivers of OTN's institutional work. It is also the reader's substantive introduction to OTN. Accordingly, I wanted to begin with a thematic analysis of the core of OTN's day-to-day work: homeless assistance. As OTN members put it, the organization "journeys alongside" people experiencing homelessness—which includes meeting their immediate needs; forming genuine, authentic relationships with them; helping them access housing; and helping them retain housing. As my informants described these aspects of OTN's culture of homeless assistance, some of their core beliefs and values came to light: notably, a conviction that housing is a basic human right and a fierce protection of the personal autonomy and self-determination of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness.

Learning all of this, and considering that OTN explicitly advocates for Housing First, it was not at all surprising when my informants unanimously praised the Housing First approach in my interviews. Of course, I wanted to dig into this further, so the second half of Chapter Three mostly examines what Housing First *means* to my informants. I found that these OTN members largely conceptualized Housing First the way I conceptualize it in this study, and I found that they have a variety of practical and impassioned motivations for endorsing it. It was clear that these convictions bubble up from OTN's culture of homeless assistance, described earlier in the chapter—thus linking advocacy of Housing First and its components to core aspects of OTN's

identity. All of this makes it hard to deny the *purposefulness* of OTN's activities that seem aimed at institutionalizing Housing First in Nashville. In addition, I learned how OTN's roots in a progressive faith community and OTN's grassroots funding structure might provide it with additional cultural resources and flexibility to creatively push for its institutional goals.

Chapter Four begins to examine the activities that comprise OTN's local institutional work around Housing First, with a focus on activities in the Nashville homeless assistance field. I chose two examples of institutional work that were prominent in my data. First, I examined OTN's involvement in the local institutionalization of Housing First (as narrated by key informants and corroborated to the extent possible with archival evidence). This included OTN's participation in How's Nashville—part of a nationwide effort called the 100,000 Homes Campaign, which encouraged communities to identify the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness and move them into permanent housing using a Housing First approach. This campaign was in sync with OTN's culture of homeless assistance, and OTN quickly joined other Nashville organizations and municipal leaders in efforts to institutionalize Housing First locally. Collectively, this entailed establishing the local *meaning* of Housing First and creating local *systems* (e.g., funding mechanisms and routinized organizational collaboration) that could help Housing First practices endure. I refer to this kind of effort as "local translation work," as it involved a transfer of meaning and practical knowledge from one level of the field (global) to another level (local).

My second example of institutional work in the Nashville homeless assistance field highlights an OTN cofounder's participation in a local governance body called the Homelessness Planning Council (HPC), which has influence over local homeless assistance funding and priorities. In particular, I examine a series of HPC meetings in the early months of the COVID-

19 pandemic. During this time, local public health and emergency management authorities took the lead on managing a new outdoor emergency shelter designed to alleviate crowding at the Nashville Rescue Mission, Nashville's largest homeless shelter. Convening virtually in May and June of 2020, HPC members expressed concern that these authorities were neither consulting the HPC nor following best practices for homeless assistance. Ultimately, the HPC opted to send a letter of concerns and list of recommendations to the Mayor's Office, which included advocacy for permanent housing assistance. The OTN representative on the HPC was heavily involved in this process and pushed repeatedly for the permanent housing recommendation. In my interpretation, this was an attempt to assert the relevance of homeless assistance organizations and institutions, including a key component of Housing First, in a situation involving multiple issues (homeless assistance, public health, and emergency management). This defense of local field influence is a form of institutional work I am calling "local boundary maintenance."

Building upon where the previous chapter left off, Chapter Five examines how OTN understands and reacts to *external* constraints on Housing First—that is, constraints that are external to the homeless assistance context and which stem from the community of Nashville more broadly. I begin by examining OTN's understanding of the problem (as interpreted from my thematic analysis of archives and informant interviews), which can be summarized as follows. Most straightforwardly, Housing First is difficult to implement in Nashville because of a yawning (and growing) gap between affordable housing available and affordable housing needed, exacerbated by municipal policies that endanger existing affordable housing while failing to build enough replacement housing. More fundamentally, these dynamics are symptomatic of the city's commitment to wealthy interests over against the interests of Nashvillians at the bottom of the income scale. This is fed by widespread ignorance about

homelessness and by local internalizations of macro cultural systems like individualism. There is a limit to how far community members—city leaders and ordinary residents alike—are willing to go to assist people traditionally considered "undeserving." The Nashville homeless assistance field operates within these constraints, leaving Housing First with an uphill climb.

The second half of Chapter Five examines how OTN engages in institutional work *in response to* the Nashville-wide problems identified above. It is important to remember here that the core of OTN's day-to-day work is direct provision of homeless assistance. Yet, unlike many homeless service providers, OTN also engages in community interventions aimed at root causes. To target general community ignorance about homelessness and its pernicious interactions with individualistic value systems, OTN conducts a variety of strategies around community education. To directly target problematic municipal policies, including policies related to affordable housing and community development, OTN engages in advocacy and community organizing. These are formal arms of OTN, subject to careful planning and committed organizational resources. Motivating this institutional work is a core belief that we do not live in a world of siloed issues—that homelessness is intrinsically linked to other local issues, like affordable housing. Accordingly, OTN *purposively acts as a link* between its local organizational field and other social domains in the community. I call this "bridging work." The potential of bridging work is that it might transform external constraints on the local organizational field, including constraints that prevent a field institution like Housing First from taking hold in a locale.

Having described OTN and its institutional work, several facts are apparent. First, OTN is a provider of homeless assistance, firmly embedded in the global homeless assistance field and knowledgeable of that social world. Yet, OTN members feel empowered to work with others to help enact a field institution, Housing First, in their locale. Relatedly, the local enactment of field

institutions like Housing First is not necessarily a given; it is sometimes dependent on community organizations to “translate” the institution into their locale and defend the breadth of its influence in the community. Third, the local culture of a geographical community—for example, community development policies and their supporting belief and value systems—can make it easier or harder for the field institution to be locally enacted. Fourth, a community organization can purposively try to influence any of these processes, and this can be called institutional work. Finally, the local organizational field is a useful construct for examining these dynamics. Future research might consider a more-sweeping study of a local organizational field, instead of a study focused solely on the perspectives of one organization. Future research might also follow a community organization’s local institutional work over a longer period, which might yield insights into ways in which community organizations can achieve lasting impacts to institutional processes in organizational fields.

CHAPTER 1

Connecting Issue and Place: The Local Organizational Field

This study concerns community organizations and their relationships to institutions. Institutions are entrenched and authoritative social templates or models for thinking and acting—"rules, norms, and beliefs that describe reality for the organization, explaining what is and is not, what can be acted upon and what cannot" (Hoffman, 1999, p. 351). They can define multiple kinds of social context, some of which are geographically bounded. For instance, there are *societal* institutions, such as longstanding practices that restrict and condition public assistance in the U.S. At a lower order, and more-directly relevant for community organizations, *community*-level institutions govern action within a community, even if these are broadly enabled or restricted by higher-order (e.g., societal) institutions (Marquis & Battilana, 2009). For example, community rules, norms, and beliefs may lead public assistance to be restricted or conditioned differently in Atlanta as compared to New York City or central Appalachia. Since a community organization is place-based, its actions are likely influenced by the institutions of one or more place-based contexts.

The context favored in institutional theory is the *organizational field*: "a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system" (Scott, 2014, p. 106) around a particular issue (Hoffman, 1999). For example, there are organizations—international and local, big and small, motivated by this and that—participating in an organizational field formed around the issue of homeless assistance. An organizational field cuts across geographical contexts and is configured by events (e.g., campaigns, conferences,

publications, government hearings, protests, etc.) that facilitate communication and interaction among individuals, organizations, and other actors (Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Just as there are place-based institutions that govern action in a society or geographical community, there are issue-based institutions that govern action in an organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hoffman, 1999). Since a community organization is centrally concerned about a particular issue or issues, its actions are likely influenced by the institutions of one or more organizational fields.

Although most institutional scholarship focuses on how institutions constrain, enable, and otherwise influence action, a sub-literature concerns purposive efforts to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions. A term for this kind of effort is "institutional work" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This research area sees institutions and action as mutually constitutive and considers all institutional work—from the dramatic to the mundane—to be meaningful, potentially impactful, and worthy of study. However, despite its promise of a broad spectrum of relevant action, the research area of institutional work systematically overlooks the actions of community organizations. This seems to stem, in part, from the research area's overall indifference to the geographical community as a relevant institutional context in favor of the organizational field. It is a problem insofar as geographical communities and community organizations are prominent in certain processes of institutional creation, maintenance, and disruption.

My response to this is to maintain a focus on the organizational field while considering how it can interact with the institutions of a geographical community—to configure a *local* organizational field. As I define it, a local organizational field consists of interdependent, co-located organizations that have a stake in an organizational field's issue *as it is instantiated in their geographical community*. This context can be considered a distinct social microcosm

governed by distinct institutions, constrained and enabled by higher-level community and field institutions. Put differently, it is a place-based arena of institutional work that is embedded within a broader field of macro-level institutional pressures that influence action related to the issue in question. Thus, within a local organizational field, community organizations are "multiply-embedded" in local- and macro-level issue-based contexts. There are unique forms of institutional work that this multiple-embeddedness can draw attention to. For example, community organizations can work to affect how macro field institutions are interpreted and enacted in their locale ("translation work").

Below, I elaborate upon my concept of the local organizational field and its implications for the institutional work of community organizations. I argue that these ideas contribute to the research area of institutional work by helping it fulfill its promised inclusion of a *broad* spectrum of action—a promise that seems unfulfilled when community organizations are systematically overlooked as agents of institutional work. As I hope will be clear, the local organizational field is a useful concept for my later discussion of the community organization Open Table Nashville and its purposive efforts to influence local institutional systems that are fateful for homeless assistance in Nashville.

Theoretical Foundations

Before explaining the local organizational field in detail, it is necessary to survey some fundamentals of contemporary institutional theory. Due to space limitations, I am selective. My goal is to introduce the conceptual building blocks necessary to understand the concept of the local organizational field, while also defining key terms that I reference throughout this study. Five conceptual foundations are particularly relevant: (1) institutional mechanisms and pillars, (2) the issue-based organizational field, (3) community-level institutions, (4) social practices, and

(5) institutional work. The lattermost concept anchors a research area—one with promise for understanding purposive efforts to influence institutions.

Foundation 1: Institutional Mechanisms and Pillars

One of the puzzles that helped reinvigorate institutional theory in the 1970s was the "startling homogeneity of organizational forms and practices" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148) as a result of isomorphism—defined as a constraining process forcing an organization to resemble others in its environment.[2] For example, in their oft-cited study, Tolbert and Zucker (1983) sought to explain why municipal governments widely adopted civil service reform between 1880 and 1935. Examining local characteristics previously identified as predictors of civil service reform, the authors found that these characteristics only predicted *early* adoption, not later adoption. The authors concluded that civil service reform's social legitimation replaced internal community factors as the engine driving municipal governments toward formal organizational change. DiMaggio and Powell (1983), in an exceedingly influential paper, further explained this phenomenon by positing, in part, that different kinds of organizational relationships produce distinctive kinds of isomorphic processes. In particular: relationships to coercive authorities, professional associations, and mimicable organizational models induce coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism, respectively.

These early examinations of organizational isomorphism illustrate well an influential premise of contemporary institutional theory: that an organization's environment is itself organized, in ways that are particularly enduring—this itself being sufficient to explain much organizational activity (Zucker, 1977). For many scholars of institutions, the reasons for this are

---

[2] Since neo-institutional theory developed among scholars studying organizations, the organization is often the key actor referenced.

fundamentally cultural and cognitive. That is to say, the organized environment communicates particular templates for thinking and doing, littering the cultural landscape with the cognitive building blocks for organizational life (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 345). To the extent that these templates are exteriorized and intersubjective, they are called *institutions* (Zucker, 1977); and insofar as they have become woven into organizational life so seamlessly as to be taken for granted, they are said to have been *institutionalized* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977).

In their overview text *Institutions and Organizations*, Scott (1995; 2014) offers an influential perspective on institutions that diverges from theorists like Zucker (1977) and Meyer and Rowan (1977) who characterize institutions as *solely* cultural-cognitive structures. For Scott (2014), institutions "comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (p. 56). Scott refers to these elements—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive—as the three "pillars" of institutions. The regulative pillar consists of formal rules that, through coercive mechanisms, induce actors to comply with an institution out of expedience. The normative pillar consists of binding expectations that, through normative mechanisms, induce actors to comply with an institution out of social obligation. Finally, the cultural-cognitive pillar consists of shared understandings of social reality that, through mimetic mechanisms, induce actors to comply with an institution out of taken-for-granted belief. These categories deliberately correspond to DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) categories of coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism.

Foundation 2: The Issue-Based Organizational Field

The latest edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, a tome that surveys the major debates in the titular scholarly area, speaks to the organizational field's status as "the central construct of neo-institutional theory" (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017, p. 56).

According to the editors, the "overwhelming majority of studies now take for granted that the organizational field or environment is the appropriate level of analysis" (Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017, p. 3). Perhaps for this reason, the editors frame the organizational field as "foundational" for the study of organizations and institutions. It is important, then, to explain what this construct is. Later, I will argue that it might *not* be the appropriate level of analysis for understanding community organizations and their institutional work—at least, not without modification.

The field concept has its origins in the physical sciences—particularly in classical electromagnetism, as a way to explain the behavior of an element (e.g., a charged particle) near a magnet. Previous explanations by mystified Western thinkers tended to be mechanistic, invoking a supernatural force or an invisible ether of colliding particles as a way to resolve a magnet's apparent "action at a distance," which has long contradicted Western notions of causality. For example, in his work *On the Nature of Things*, the classical Roman philosopher Lucretius speculated that a magnet emits a stream of particles that breaks up the air between magnet and iron, producing a kind of suction effect that draws one to the other (Lucretius, 1969/2001).[3] Field theory makes such mechanistic speculations unnecessary by relocating the potential for force—attributing it not to the magnet itself but to an energy-latent space *around* the magnet (i.e., to the magnet's field). Thus, where an element is located in the field—its *position*—determines the direction and magnitude of the force that is activated. Particular attributes (e.g., a particle's charge) make an element more or less susceptible to this force. Consequently, the field theoretic offers a local explanation for action—it is the result of an interaction between the element's

[3] Similarly, in the absence of a conception of gravitational fields, Isaac Newton tried to explain gravitational force by invoking a ubiquitous, invisible ether of colliding particles surrounding material bodies (Rosenfeld, 1969).

position and attributes—without appealing to a distant cause and its ethereal mechanisms. The boundaries of a field are empirically determined; the field ends where field effects cease (Martin, 2003; Martin, 2011).

Martin (2003) points out that the field theoretic is relatively accessible and useful: "While we cannot see magnetic fields, we can quickly come to accept that they are there, and we can understand how to navigate and manipulate them" (p. 14). This might explain the broad appeal of the field theoretic in the social sciences. *Gestalt* psychology was the first to import it, holding that the meaning of a given percept (bit of perception) can only be fully understood with reference to the totality of the organism's "field of perception." Similarly, social theorists began to argue that action can only be fully understood with reference to the totality of the field of social relations in which the actor is positioned (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lewin & Cartwright, 1951; Mey, 2015; Martin, 2003; Martin, 2011).

Eventually, organization theorists began drawing on the field construct to conceptualize the bounded, forceful social environment in which an organization is positioned—that is, the "organizational field." DiMaggio and Powell (1983) provide what has become a widely used definition: "By organizational field, we mean those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (p. 148). Their elaboration is worth quoting in full:

> Fields only exist to the extent that they are institutionally defined. The process of institutional definition … consists of four parts: an increase in the extent of interaction among organizations in the field; the emergence of sharply defined interorganizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition; an increase in the information load with which organizations must contend; and the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that are involved in a common enterprise. (p. 148)

In the first sentence ("Fields only exist …"), DiMaggio and Powell allude to the tautologic principle of the field theoretic: that a field is identified by its potential for force. They then identify four key conditions for such potential; these, generally speaking, have to do with organizational interdependence and susceptibility to institutional pressures. Finally, at the end of this passage, the authors restrict the social space of field effects to those organizations "involved in a common enterprise." (Note that the organizational field is defined by social relations, not geography.)

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) use of the field theoretic implies that, more than simply an ecosystem, population, or network of organizations, an organizational field is a configuration of relations between organizational *positions* (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). For example, a resource supplier is positioned to interact more with retailers than with product consumers; indeed, there are many other relational configurations associated with the resource supplier position, which is one of many positions in a larger field of actors. The authors' thesis is that certain field configurations[4] and organization attributes predict the extent to which organizations in the field succumb to coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, homogenizing in the process.[5] In other words, DiMaggio and Powell's organizational field is a relational space with attendant institutional force that interacts with organizational attributes to induce isomorphic change.

---

[4] Rather than speaking in terms of an organization's position in the field, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) speak in terms of field configuration, which is analogous to identifying a person's physical location by describing the surrounding topography. In other words, position is implicit. With this in mind, DiMaggio and Powell's concept of the organizational field is consistent with other uses of the field theoretic in social theory.

[5] As an example of the influence of field configuration, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) hypothesize that an organization is likely to have become isomorphic with its field to the extent that organizations in the field transact with government agencies. As an example of the influence of organization attributes, DiMaggio and Powell hypothesize that an organization is likely to become isomorphic with its field to extent that the organization's goals are more ambiguous.

Some theorists, while accepting many of DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) insights, have chafed at the notion that field members necessarily share a common enterprise. What about contexts where organizations are less attuned in their goals and intentions? Perhaps with this question in mind, Scott (1995) defined the organizational field more expansively as "a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with other actors outside the field" (p. 56).[6] That is, the field is constituted by organizations with dialogic relationships. Furthermore, dialogic relationships are relevant insofar as they are fateful—that is, if they "impose a coercive, normative, or mimetic influence on the organization" (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017, p. 56).

Following Scott's (1995) lead, Hoffman (1999) attempted to hone the concept of organizational field by clarifying that a field is formed "around *issues* that bring together various field constituents with disparate purposes [emphasis added]" (p. 352). To illustrate this, Hoffman provided a case study of organizations tied together by the issue of environmental practice in the U.S. chemical industry. The field in question was constituted by organizations with a stake in this issue—most notably, environmental NGOs and U.S. chemical companies.[7] Hoffman observed that the organizations in the case study competed for influence over the meaning of corporate environmental practice and over the institutions that govern it. For example, both environmental NGOs and chemical companies had often sued the U.S. Environmental Protection

---

[6] In his updated edition of *Institutions and Organizations*, Scott (2014) modified his definition of organizational field, as follows: "a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system" (p. 106).
[7] Hoffman (1999) saw other influential organizations, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as key members of this issue-based field as well; however, environmental NGOs and chemical companies were the foci of his analysis.

Agency as a means of influencing the field-level regulations that defined what legitimate corporate environmental practice was. Accordingly, Hoffman adopted Brint and Karabel's (1991, p. 355) characterization of organizational fields as "arenas of power relations" where organizations struggle to shape the institutions (the templates for action) around a common issue.

Summarizing the evolution of the organizational field construct in *Organizational Institutionalism*, Wooten and Hoffman (2017) argue that the dialogic conceptualization of fields—brought to the fore by Scott (1995) and Hoffman (1999)—altered the kinds of organizational linkages that theorists saw as relevant to institutional processes. The organizational field came to include "constituents with *incongruent purposes*, not common technologies or industries that assured some commonality of interests … Rather than locales of isomorphic dialogue, the field became *contested* [emphasis added]" (p. 60), with its institutions subject to revision by field members. This reimagining of the organizational field as a context formed around a common issue made more room for deviance and purposive action in institutional theory.

Foundation 3: Community-Level Institutions

Whereas an organizational field implies a common issue, a geographical community implies a common *place*. A stream of institutional scholarship in the past decade, spearheaded by Christopher Marquis (Almandoz, Marquis, & Cheely, 2017; Marquis & Battilana, 2009; Marquis, Glynn, & Davis, 2007; Marquis et al., 2011), has explored the institutional features of communities: "collections of actors whose membership in the collective provides social and cultural resources that shape their action" (Marquis et al., 2011, p. xvi). Some of this work focuses on communities of interest (e.g., a community formed around an open-source software

product),[8] but Marquis and colleagues mostly attend to geographical communities. Almandoz et al. (2017) define the latter as "those communities that are in some way based upon the shared geography of its members, including neighborhoods, towns, and cities" (p. 193). Notably, this literature delineates a kind of place-bound institutional environment that is conceptually distinguishable from the issue-based, geography-independent organizational field. Indeed, it is easy to imagine how an organization can have membership in an organizational field *and* in a geographical community, and how these contexts might induce differing institutional pressures.

Marquis and Battilana (2009) make a case for geographical communities' institutional forcefulness vis-à-vis organizational behavior. The authors rely on Scott's (1995; 2014) typology of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive "pillars" to identify local mechanisms of institutional control. Marquis and Battilana note how much institutional mechanisms *vary* from community to community, underscoring each community's institutional distinctiveness.

With regard to local *regulative* mechanisms, Marquis and Battilana (2009) observe that there are local public policies—legal regulations, incentives, and administrative bodies charged with supporting certain kinds of organizations. In addition, local public authorities mobilize other local actors to influence organizational behavior. With regard to local *normative* mechanisms, Marquis and Battilana cite research showing that proximity is strongly associated with organizational interaction, which establishes relational channels for binding expectations. For example, local class cohesion (particularly, cohesion of elites in a locale) can influence what is seen as appropriate corporate behavior in a community. Finally, with regard to local *cultural-cognitive* mechanisms, communities can vary in their members' shared understandings of social

---

[8] Under Marquis et al.'s (2011) definition, an organizational field could itself be considered a community—specifically, a community of interest. Recall that Scott (1995) characterized an organizational field as a "community of organizations" (p. 56), which is consistent with this idea.

reality—due to differences in history and tradition, demographics, and physical geographic factors (e.g., climate, geographic dispersion versus concentration, etc.).

Some have flagged the geographical community as an underemphasized context in contemporary institutional theory (Greenwood, Díaz, Li, & Lorente, 2010; Hirsch, 1997; Marquis, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2011). Marquis et al. (2011) attribute this to widespread scholarly preoccupation with globalization, which since World War II has been characterized by increased involvement of national and global actors in community affairs. With these powerful forces in focus, the most fateful arena for organizations would seem to be a societal or global, not local. Hence, it is unsurprising that the organizational field predominates as the level of analysis preferred by institutional scholars. Yet some have called for a course correction, noting the fatefulness of place-based contexts for organizations. "A return to the traditional emphasis on community would be timely," say Greenwood et al. (2010, p. 535).

Foundation 4: Social Practices and Structuration Theory

Giddens' (1979; 1984) structuration theory provides helpful conceptual foundations for understanding institutional work. Structuration theory has proved influential for many sociological subdisciplines, and institutional theory is no exception. At root are questions such as: What are institutions, and how is action implicated? If institutions are so powerful and self-reinforcing (especially through influence on cognition), then how is it possible for action to occasionally deviate, even leading to institutional change? Giddens harmonizes institutions and action by conceptualizing institutions as continually reproduced social practices, which serve as models for action but are also dependent upon new action for their reproduction.

According to Schatzki (2001), social practices are "embodied, materially mediated *arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding* [emphasis added]"

(p. 2). Much could be unpacked from this definition; for my purposes here, I will focus on the phrase emphasized. A practice is an "array of human activity," in that a practice is composed of not just one action but several. These actions are "organized" at two levels: There are patterns and interdependencies among *the actions composing an individual practice* as well as among *practices themselves*. Finally, practices and their constitutive actions are organized around "shared practical understanding." Practices depend upon human skills, but also on the ability of individuals to use and understand these skills. Because a given skill is found in multiple individuals, practical understanding is something that is shared.

Giddens placed practices at the front and center of social life. "The basic domain of study of the social sciences," he wrote, is "social practices ordered across space and time" (Giddens, 1984; p. 2). This includes the study of institutions, as he made clear in his theory of structuration.[9] Structuration theory is an attempt to bridge a longstanding divide in social theory between the study of social objects (e.g., institutions) and the study of subjective experiences. For Giddens, institutions emerge as actors continually reproduce practices, "stretching" them "across wide spans of time and space" (p. xxi). In other words, institutions are instantiated in, and therefore *contingent on*, social practices. Giddens' conversion of "structure" into verb form was, in Scott's (2014) words, "intended to remind us that structures exist only to the extent that actors engage in ongoing activities to produce and reproduce, or change them" (p. 235). But the contingency runs the other way as well, according to Giddens. Practices are informed by actors' knowledge of existing social templates or rules. All competent actors are highly skilled at applying this knowledge to ever-changing social situations; they are, in Giddens' words, "methodological specialists" (p. 18). This recursive aspect of social life—where social structure

---

[9] Structuration can be taken as synonymous with institutionalization (Barley & Tolbert, 1997).

is "both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices"—is what Giddens terms the "duality of structure" (Giddens, 1979, p. 5).

It should be noted that a *geographical community*, and the social templates and rules specific to it, can complicate social practices (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Marquis & Battilana, 2009). For example, local stakeholders could be interested in what local data sources, in particular, reveal about an issue in their locale (e.g., homeless assistance in Nashville), thereby complicating the practice of analyzing data for actors trying to appeal to local stakeholders. Similarly, local philanthropic foundations could be receptive to particular ways of framing homeless assistance (e.g., foundations in Nashville might be more receptive to religious framings than foundations in Seattle), thereby complicating the practice of grant writing for homeless assistance organizations trying to appeal to local foundations. Because a *community organization* is an organization centrally concerned with an issue or issues in its own community, its social practices—compared to those of other organizations (say, the National Alliance to End Homelessness)—are more likely to be influenced by community culture. As community organizations and other actors continually reproduce these local social practices, local institutions emerge. (Below, this is part of my basis for conceptualizing the local organizational field.)

Foundation 5: Institutional Work

Contemporary, "neo-institutionalist" understandings of institutions—articulated well by Zucker (1977) and Meyer and Rowan (1977)—have tended to emphasize the *cognitive* drivers of institutionalization (e.g., taken-for-granted assumptions). This has led some theorists to conclude that the institutions structuring a given context (whether an organizational field or geographical community) are self-reinforcing and eventually make deviant action "literally unthinkable"

absent an exogenous shock (Zucker, 1977). In reaction to some of the deterministic implications of this and the threat of an infinite regression of exogenous origins of institutional change, many institutional scholars tried to account for how institutions and action, especially purposive action, are mutually constitutive in a given context. This "agentic turn" in institutional theory was made easier by the issue-based organizational field and Giddens' (1979; 1984) concept of the duality of structure, but other ideas were influential as well. For example, DiMaggio (1988) proposed that well-resourced "institutional entrepreneurs" can create new institutions, and Oliver (1992) explained how de-institutionalization can result from active organizational resistance to institutions or passive failure to reproduce them. Collectively, these ideas have given institutional scholars conceptual tools to move beyond a characterization of actors as automatons or dopes whose actions are simply a product of cognitive structuring in a field of isomorphic pressures. The research area of "institutional work" is partly a synthesis of these scholarly efforts and partly an expansion of them.

In their seminal article, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) defined institutional work as "the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (p. 216). In doing so, they clarified and expanded institutional theory's conception of purposive action by highlighting a broad range of intelligent practices—from the highly visible and dramatic actions of well-resourced actors (e.g., institutional entrepreneurs) to the invisible and mundane actions of poorly-resourced actors. Lawrence and Suddaby's ideas were influential, spawning a significant body of research into how, why, and when actors work to influence institutions; what affects their ability to do so; and the experiences of actors involved (Greenwood et al., 2017).

Taking a cue from the sociology of practice (Giddens, 1979; Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the study of institutional work is characterized by a dialectical treatment of institutions versus action. On one hand, institutions are constituted in action. Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) conception of institutional work is predicated on an ontology of institutions as well-established patterns of sequenced interaction dependent on actors for their reproduction and for the regulation of this reproduction (Jepperson, 1991). In other words, institutions are *active*, not passive, constructions, and are thus susceptible to change through disruptive action and/or lack of maintenance (Oliver, 1992). On the other hand, institutional work—even disruptive work—is shaped and guided by institutions, because action is embedded in practices informed by shared practical understandings (Schatzki, 2001). The picture painted is one of a recursive relationship between institutions and action, "in which institutions provide templates for action, as well as regulative mechanisms that enforce those templates, and action affects those templates and regulative mechanisms" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 7; see Figure 1.1).

Lastly, a view of agency that acknowledges the purposive action of a wide variety of actors in relationship to institutions is "a significant part of the promise of institutional work as a research area" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1). For example, in their study of the creation of institutions, Zietsma and McKnight (2009) reject the "heroic" conception of the institutional entrepreneur, finding instead "a process of *co-creation* of institutions involving multiple members of the organizational field, who compete and collaborate through multiple iterations of institutional development until a common template becomes diffused [emphasis added]" (pp. 144–145). In a later paper, Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca (2011) tie institutional work to the concept of "distributed agency"—the idea that the diverse efforts of many actors across multiple domains accumulate to give momentum to social change (Garud & Karnøe, 2003).

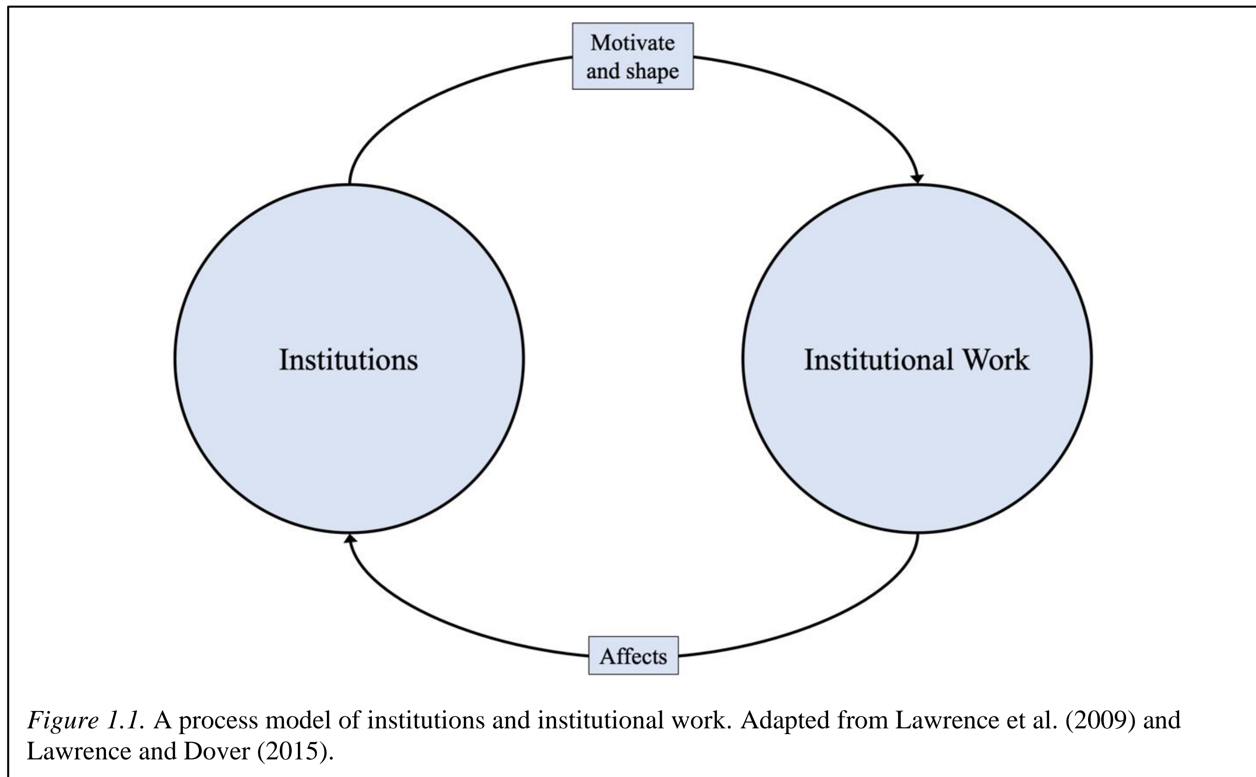

Figure 1.1. A process model of institutions and institutional work. Adapted from Lawrence et al. (2009) and Lawrence and Dover (2015).

With its expansive scope, institutional work "avoids depicting actors as 'cultural dopes' trapped by institutional arrangements, or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1). There is a vast middle ground consisting of actors who have agency but whose actions are more mundane. Furthermore, institutional work is not necessarily "successful." Actors may try—and fail—to create, maintain, or disrupt an institution, or their actions may have unintended consequences. Acting with the *intent* to influence institutional arrangements (purposive action) is both the necessary and sufficient condition for institutional work; *activities*, not necessarily accomplishments, are the subject of study (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009; Martí & Mair, 2009). This broad conceptualization makes room for the agency of actors with relatively limited power and resources.

A noteworthy example of this is seen in Martí and Mair's (2009) essay on the institutional work of marginalized actors, demonstrated by several poverty-alleviation initiatives by the non-governmental organization BRAC in rural Bangladesh. With respect to one initiative, the authors describe a formal legal system that is virtually inaccessible to rural Bangladeshis experiencing poverty, since they cannot afford to pay bribes or wait for the system to slowly settle property disputes. The institutionalized workaround is *shalish*: an informal system of mediation that is dominated by the local male elite. To disrupt the exclusion of poor, rural Bangladeshi women from the system of property rights, BRAC has been encouraging its female members to participate in *shalish*. Moreover, by participating, these women themselves have been consciously contributing to the institution's disruption. Martí and Mair's thesis is that institutional work can be performed by generally overlooked actors, and often in subtle and incremental ways. This is consistent with Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) advocacy for a including a broad spectrum of action in institutional research—though Martí and Mair's focus on non-elite actors is an exception among studies in this research area, as I explain later.

The research area of institutional work is foundational to my case study of Open Table Nashville (OTN) and its community activism. As I will show, many of OTN's activities purposively target local institutions and could be considered institutional work. Thus, it is necessary to explore nuances of this research area. In the next section, I explain how the prevailing analytical separation between the organizational field and the geographical community discourages institutional work scholarship from examining the activities of community organizations, to the detriment of our understanding of institutional dynamics. My construct of the local organizational field integrates these contexts, making it easier to understand the institutional work of community organizations like OTN.

The Institutional Environment of Institutional Work

As discussed above, institutional work is in recursive relationship with institutions; the former affects (or is intended to affect) the latter, and the latter motivate and shape the former. However, we can be more precise about what institutions these are, as different institutions can define different kinds of contexts. Two important contexts in institutional theory are the issue-based organizational field and the geographical community. It follows that institutional work might variably target the institutions of an organizational field or the institutions of a geographical community, and that both field and community institutions might motivate and shape institutional work.

As elsewhere in institutional theory, the research area of institutional work tends to emphasize the organizational field. Nevertheless, there is recognition that the institutional environment of institutional work is more complex and that some of this complexity should be considered. For example, after proposing the concept of institutional work, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) briefly discussed the implications of multilevel institutional systems and organizations' simultaneous embeddedness in multiple organizational fields. Later, Lawrence and Dover (2015) used a case study to explore the importance of place—geographical communities in particular—for institutional work. However, these papers represent exceptions; the continued dominance of the organizational field as the preferred level of analysis has made the research area of institutional work an unlikely place to find studies of community organizations. This hinders our knowledge of institutional work and processes of institutionalization, insofar as community organizations are positioned to influence institutions at the local level.

Multilevel Institutional Systems and Multiple-Embeddedness

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) saw institutional work as taking place in a complex of multilevel institutional systems and multiply-embedded social positions. Their brief commentary on these concepts will set the stage for a more-expansive discussion about the institutional environment of institutional work. The concepts of multilevel institutional systems, multiple-embeddedness, and translation of institutions from one context to another anticipate my later discussion of the local organizational field and its embeddedness within a global context.

I will begin with Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) concept of multilevel institutional systems, which the authors observed in Holm's (1995) historical study of the Norwegian fishery sector. Holm distinguished between two forms of action: action that is guided by institutions, and action that is aimed explicitly at influencing those institutions. Holm saw these as hierarchically ordered; the institutions governing one arena of action were the subject matter for a higher arena of action. For Lawrence and Suddaby, Holm's distinction between forms of action was less important than the multilevel institutional systems that these illuminated.

Holm (1995) illustrated his idea of multilevel institutional systems by explaining how, in the 1930s, the Norwegian government approved the establishment of legally protected fishery monopolies—a hard-won victory for activist fishermen who wanted to market herring collectively, at the expense of established merchants. Throughout this effort, field-level institutions governed practices of selling herring. These institutions were the subject matter of a higher, societal arena of action. That is, the fishermen organized to transform the institutions of Norway's fishery field itself—within which scales of the herring market were tipped in favor of the merchant class. The institutional forces governing this higher arena of action were societal and cross-national: the strength of Norwegian social democracy, the weakening faith in free-

market solutions during the Great Depression, and the growing legitimacy of this particular reform as other North Atlantic nations began adopting it. These institutional forces aided the efforts of the fishermen to change the institutionalized practices of Norway's fishery field.

Citing Holm's (1995) study, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) posited a series of nested institutional arrangements—from group- or organization-level institutions, to field-level institutions, to societal institutions.[10] (Hampel, Lawrence, and Tracey [2017] later flagged the community as an additional level of interest, though with no elaboration.) For Lawrence and Suddaby, a multilevel conceptualization of the institutional environment made room for particular forms of institutional work that connect institutional levels to one another. For example, actors might "translate" a problem identified at the field level of action (e.g., uncoordinated fisherman activity) into the societal level of action, where a solution is devised (e.g., establishing legally protected monopolies); actors might then translate the solution back to the field level, where it takes form as practices (Holm, 1995). Where such acts of translation carry an intent to influence institutions (on one level or another), Lawrence and Suddaby saw institutional work in operation.

Relatedly, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) saw actors as occupying *simultaneous positions in multiple fields*. For example, a faith-based homeless assistance organization (such as my case study, OTN) arguably occupies a position in both a field of homeless assistance and a field of religious life, each governed by its own institutions. This multiple-embeddedness exposes actors to multiple institutional contexts that "provide actors the resources to engage in activities of

---

[10] Although Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) do not explicitly make this connection, their conceptualization of multilevel institutional environments harmonizes with Scott's (2014) conceptualization (organizational sub-system, organization, organizational population, organizational field, societal system, and world system), which other institutional work scholars have drawn upon (e.g., Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009).

contestation and reconceptualization that we refer to here as 'institutional work'" (p. 248). With this in mind, Lawrence and Suddaby urged their fellow scholars to "shed the unfortunate structural assumption that an actor engages only in a single organizational field" (p. 248).

Place and Institutional Work

Another way to shed this assumption is to consider another kind of context altogether: the geographical community. Because the peculiarities of a geographical community yield peculiarly-local institutions, an actor can work to create, maintain, or disrupt institutions at the community level. That is, the geographical community can be a site of institutional work—even if this work is not so ambitious as to directly target the macro-level institutions of an organizational field or a society.

Recognizing this, Lawrence and Dover (2015) examined institutional work and its relationship to place, in two case studies. I will focus on one case study in particular: the development of the Tri-Cities "Mat Program," a program that provided overnight accommodation in churches for people experiencing homelessness in the Tri-Cities, a jurisdiction in Metro Vancouver. In this case, Lawrence and Dover observed actors engaging in institutional work to affect the local meanings of the institution of "human solidarity." Specifically, individuals and organizations purposively acted to expand local conceptions of "us" to include people experiencing homelessness, a population previously seen as "other." Purposive efforts to shift the boundaries of solidarity in the Tri-Cities involved constructing homelessness as a local problem in need of a local solution, as opposed to an exotic problem (characteristic of places like big-city Vancouver) that should be ignored.

The case of the Mat Program is worth elaborating on, for two reasons. First, it is part of an article (aptly and succinctly titled "Place and Institutional Work") that introduces the topic of

place to the research area of institutional work. Accordingly, Lawrence and Dover (2015) grapple at length with the various ways by which place-based communities complicate issues, institutions, and institutional work—laying the groundwork for my later distinction between macro-level and local-level contexts in an organizational field. Second, although the article serves as a course correction to the research area's neglect of the geographical community, it does so while paying no attention to the macro-level institutions of the organizational field and the ways in which these influence local action (including institutional work). I will later argue that Lawrence and Dover's analysis is incomplete in the sense that it omits important nonlocal resources and sources of motivation for institutional work by community organizations and their institutional work.

The case of the Mat Program. The Tri-Cities are a set of three contiguous municipalities that form a distinctive geographical community with a strong identity. Natural geographic barriers surround the Tri-Cities on all sides (creating some separation from the rest of Metro Vancouver), and the jurisdiction itself is well-integrated. Lawrence and Dover (2015) noted that interviewees constantly referenced the Tri-Cities as the relevant political geography, and that there were numerous cultural touchstones to this common identity (e.g., the Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce, a Tri-Cities Visitors Guide, and the newspaper *Tri-City News*). Individuals and organizations in the Tri-Cities often understood themselves in contradistinction to the city of Vancouver; whereas Vancouver was seen as rife with social problems like homelessness, the Tri-Cities were seen as a small, peaceful, safe, and friendly community. Although there were housing-focused groups like the Tri-Cities Housing Coalition and the Tri-Cities Community Planning Committee, nothing like the Mat Program existed; by and large, it was neither desired nor perceived as necessary.

Between 2005 and 2010, a range of individual and collective actors in the Tri-Cities, including community organizations, sought to expand Tri-Cities residents' identification with and sense of obligation to people experiencing homelessness. In Lawrence and Dover's (2015) words, actors engaged in institutional work to influence the institution of "human solidarity." This work took different forms across multiple iterations. First, an eye-popping homeless count conducted by the Hope and Freedom Society (a local community organization) in 2005, combined with *Tri-City News* coverage of the homeless count and related news, established homelessness as a local problem. This in turn led actors, most notably the Tri-Cities Housing Coalition, to advocate local solutions, including the revitalization of the Tri-Cities Task Group on Homelessness.

Out of this task group, and in partnership with local government officials and agencies, the Mat Program developed for the purpose of utilizing social outreach-friendly churches located in residential neighborhoods across the Tri-Cities to accommodate people experiencing homelessness. When organizers realized that churches were not properly zoned for this program, they worked to assuage the concerns of fearful neighborhood residents and applied political pressure to elected officials who made zoning decisions. In this case, institutional work achieved some success; the implementation of the Mat Program was associated with a "significant change" in local beliefs about homelessness and the people who experience it, away from the "considerable fear" community members had previously had (Lawrence & Dover, 2015, p. 376).

Implications for place and institutional work. Lawrence and Dover (2015) identified two ways in which this case of institutional work was tied to place. First, the Tri-Cities acted as a "social enclosure" for the Mat Program. By this, the authors meant that the Tri-Cities was

characterized by a collective identity[11] as well as preexisting routines and resources that established and maintained boundaries around institutional work and the institution it targeted. Because the Tri-Cities were a key marker for the identities of people and organizations in the jurisdiction, it was necessary to construct homelessness as a *local* issue in order to influence the local institution of human solidarity. The work of defining the problem and developing the solution was also informed, enabled, and limited by the preexisting routines and resources of nonprofits, government agencies, and churches in the Tri-Cities. Because the Tri-Cities were a key source of identity, routines, and resources that motivated and informed actors' institutional work, the Tri-Cities served to "contain" institutional work within certain boundaries—both in terms of how actors performed institutional work and what they intended it to affect (a *local* institution).

Second, the churches that participated in the Mat Program were "practical objects" used for institutional work. In this case, they were particularly important and strategic ones: these churches had experience with social outreach, were willing to provide beds to accommodate people experiencing homelessness, and were located in the middle of neighborhoods—in close proximity to community residents whose beliefs about homelessness were targeted. Indeed, the churches were part of what made the Tri-Cities a key source of routines and resources. However, practical objects can introduce complications, and they did so here. Problems with zoning—unanticipated by Mat Program organizers—necessitated unexpected action (spearheading and navigating the rezoning process) with unexpected people (consultants, elected officials, lawyers, etc.). Reflecting on this and another case, Lawrence and Dover (2015) conclude that "places

---

[11] By "collective identity," Lawrence and Dover (2015) meant a "cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285).

complicate institutional work through their ‘concreteness’—their materiality, association with day-to-day routines, and geographic locations” (p. 397).

To summarize Lawrence and Dover’s (2015) case study, places relate to the activities and consequences of institutional work in multiple ways. Places shape emotions and identities, which in turn motivate action—and institutional work is a form of motivated action. Institutional work draws on material and symbolic resources, the availability and quality of which differs from place to place. Finally, the availability and quality of resources in a given place might affect the intended and unintended consequences of institutional work. As theorized early on in the study institutional work, institutions motivate and shape institutional work, which in turn can affect institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009; see Figure 1.1 above). Lawrence and Dover (2015) add places to the mix, conceiving of them as shaping and affecting both institutional work and institutions directly.

Although Lawrence and Dover (2015) did not make reference to Scott’s (2014) institutional pillars, it is easy to see that the Tri-Cities were institutionally defined in a way that Marquis and Battilana (2009) would recognize. Distinct regulatory bodies, normative systems, and shared culture—each affected by the Tri-Cities’ unique geography—are what made the Tri-Cities a social enclosure. These institutional elements helped define and support a *local* institution of human solidarity (distinguishable from that of Metro Vancouver, Canada, or the international community), which local actors could then target. Importantly, some of the most prominent actors in the case were community organizations.

Although insightful, Lawrence and Dover’s (2015) analysis generally ignores how organizations are embedded in global issue-based contexts. While Lawrence and Dover likely wanted to emphasize the local context for the purpose of introducing the topic of place, their

inattention to organizational fields unnecessarily limits our understanding of how the institutional work of Tri-Cities organizations was motivated and shaped. The social practices observed were likely guided, deliberately or not, by global templates for homeless assistance[12]—even as these social practices became complicated by the institutional demands of the locale (e.g., through local zoning regulations). Had Lawrence and Dover seen their case organizations as multiply-embedded in place-based and issue-based contexts, they might have gained additional insights into important motivations and macro-level cultural resources informing organizations' local institutional work.

A Fizzled Discussion About the Institutional Environment

In the research area of institutional work, some attention has been given to complex institutional contexts and to geographical communities, but this is more an exception than a rule. Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) page-long section about multilevel institutional systems and multiple-embeddedness appears to be the most comprehensive discussion about the institutional environment in institutional work scholarship. Lawrence and Dover's (2015) case study is titled "Place and Institutional Work," suggesting the novelty of place (not to speak of the geographical community) in the research area. Indeed, the institutional environment would appear to be a relatively unimportant subject of reflection, judging by its sparse treatment in multiple overviews of the institutional work literature (Hampel et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence et al. 2011)—despite the institutional environment being a core interest of institutional theory. This same literature has largely overlooked institutional work by community organizations. I do not think these are unrelated observations.

---

[12] Examples include templates for conducting a homeless count (e.g., Homeless Hub, 2018), for organizing the community to address homelessness (e.g., Institute of Global Homelessness, 2017), and for providing overnight accommodation to people experiencing homelessness (e.g., U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2017).

Scholars classify the study of institutional work into three research streams: *how* institutional work happens, *who* engages in this work, and *what* constitutes it. The "how" research stream is primarily a typological project focused on explicating the various kinds of *ways* that actors influence institutions. (For example, actors can variably target rhetoric, practices, power relations, moral justifications, taken-for-granted assumptions, and so on.) The "who" stream is concerned with identifying the kinds of *actors* that engage in institutional work. Finally, the "what" stream is primarily focused on theorizing the ontology of institutional work—namely how to distinguish institutional work from institutions (Hampel et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2013).

Characterizations of the "who" stream are revealing in that they largely center on elite actors. According to Hampel et al. (2017), institutional work research can be categorized into studies of actors who target organization-level institutions (e.g., a dress code) and studies of actors who target field-level (or higher-level) institutions. The former category is not pertinent to the institutional work of community organizations. The latter category is "dominated" by actors associated with the professions[13] (p. 569)—who, using their enhanced expertise, legitimacy, and social capital, can directly influence field-level institutions (Suddaby & Viale, 2011). Likewise, Lawrence, Leca, and Zilber (2013) cite professionals as "prominent" actors in the study of institutional work (p. 1025), but they also note a literature on organizational executives. Although the literature on executives tends to focus on organization-level institutions, Lawrence et al. note a study of bank executives who worked to influence U.S. societal institutions during the Great Recession. Nowhere in these literature reviews are community organizations or other non-elite organizational actors mentioned.

---

[13] For example, groups of doctors or nurses (Hampel et al., 2017).

It is also revealing that, aside from Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) initial thoughts on multilevel institutional systems and multiple-embeddedness, a clear focus on *where* institutional work happens in the multilevel and multilayered landscape of social relations is largely missing from the literature. At first, an explicit focus on "where" may seem unnecessary; institutional work can happen within *any* context structured by institutions, and specific contexts (e.g., organization, field) have already been identified. However, institutional theory's assumption that the organizational field is the appropriate level of analysis might explain why community organizations are overlooked. In addition, we know little about how multilevel institutional arenas and multiply-embedded social positions set the stage for institutional work, and how this might shed light on who engages in institutional work and how. This limited attention to context might be explained by institutional work scholarship's focus on organizational actors' practical experiences. However, as Lawrence and Suddaby pointed out, our conceptualization of the institutional environment has implications for how we understand those experiences.[14] How the institutional environment shapes, mediates, and channels social choices is a core interest of institutional theory (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). These choices include acts of institutional work.

I argue that greater attention to the institutional environment of institutional work can increase the salience of community organizations in the research area. Although, conceptually, institutional work makes room for a broad range of actions by a broad range of actors, it is difficult to see the institutional work of community organizations as having standalone significance in an organizational field. As a global, issue-based arena, an organizational field

---

[14] Despite their concluding pages that advocate a nuanced view of the institutional environment of institutional work, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) established the "terrain" of institutional work as "the sets of practices through which individual and collective actors create, maintain, and disrupt the institutions of *organizational fields* [emphasis added]" (p. 220). Although, in that quote, Lawrence and Suddaby were emphasizing the centrality of practices, it is telling that the assumed context was the organizational field.

encompasses an enormous set of actors, likely including elites with national and international sway. In such a context, a community organization is more likely to be seen as part of a distribution of agents—its contribution merely part of a larger accumulation of effort, perhaps led by elite actors. In particular, the embrace of the field level of analysis over against the *community* level of analysis encourages us to imagine community organizations as almost inconsequential, paddling with or against the currents of a stormy institutional sea. Because of this, it is difficult to view the "promise" of institutional work as having been fully realized—to the detriment of understanding those institutional processes sensitive to the purposive action of community organizations.

Reimagining the Organizational Field

By and large, the study of institutional work has assumed organizations to be embedded in organizational fields. However, the field level of analysis is geography-independent and, as such, obscures how institutions and institutional work are influenced by place. Some scholars, recognizing this, have turned their attention to the ways in which organizations are embedded in geographical communities. However, the community level of analysis is place-specific and, as such, can overlook how institutions and institutional work are influenced by a much larger field of organizations formed around a particular issue. How can we straddle these levels of analysis—both pertinent to the study of community organizations and their institutional work?

One approach to answering this would be a research agenda that alternates between the field and community levels of analysis. Such an analytical separation is, so far, the norm in the research area of institutional work. Another approach would be to consider how organizations are *multiply-embedded*, simultaneously influenced by the institutional pressures of the organizational field and the geographical community. Considering both of these contexts at once

can highlight the institutional complexity facing organizations and the cognitive resources available to them (Marquis & Battilana, 2009). Such cognitive resources could help explain how organizations engage in institutional work, as Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) noted in their discussion of multilevel institutional systems and multiple-embeddedness.

Here, I take this idea of multiple-embeddedness a step further. I argue that, where the organizational field intersects with a geographical community, there can be another, more-immediate institutional context in which some organizations are embedded: a *local organizational field*. Just as an organizational field consists of interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system formed around a particular issue (Scott, 2014; Hoffman, 1999), a *local* organizational field consists of interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system formed around a particular issue *as it is locally instantiated*. A local organizational field, like any organizational field, is “a recognized area of institutional life” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), meaning that distinctive formal rules, binding expectations, and shared understandings of social reality govern the action of participating organizations (Scott, 2014)—including their institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Though institutionally distinctive, a local organizational field is embedded within a global organizational field, in the sense that organizations participate in the latter via their participation in the former. To be clear, it is local organizations’ simultaneous embeddedness in a geographical community that configures this multilevel structure. That is, the formation of a local organizational field involves a process whereby co-located organizations negotiate a shared understanding of an issue in light of the material and symbolic culture of their locale (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). This shared understanding can manifest as distinctive local social practices (Gouldner, 1954) which, when continually reproduced, become local-level institutions (Giddens,

1984) that anchor a local organizational field. Like Holm's (1995) multilevel institutional systems, a local organizational field implies "a qualitative break between levels," where macro-level institutions are "translated" into the local context (pp. 400–401). In addition, since an organizational field can intersect with *multiple* geographical communities, there can be multiple local organizational fields embedded within the same organizational field.

This remainder of this chapter is devoted to articulating the local organizational field in further detail and to explaining why this construct can help us better understand the institutional work of community organizations. Because a community organization's social practices center on both issue and place, an analysis that reduces a community organization's institutional environment to an organizational field *or* to a geographical community overlooks important ways in which its work is shaped and motivated. But it is not enough to see community organizations as multiply embedded; without the concept of the local organizational field, it is easy to overlook community-level translations of field pressures into a local issue-based context—translations that (I will argue) create opportunities for community organizations to engage in important institutional work. Since the local organizational field spotlights these very inter-contextual processes, it provides a framework for better understanding how community organizations work to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions.

Theorizing the Local Organizational Field

In this section, I offer theoretical justification for my idea that the institutional pressures of an organizational field can interact with those of a geographical community to configure a local organizational field, characterized by distinctive institutional pressures of its own. I begin with an analysis of how a field of forces can have a multilevel structure by virtue of its overlap or intersection with another field of forces. I then apply this understanding to the *organizational*

field, explaining how its interaction with a geographical community can configure an organizational field with distinct macro and local levels. As part of this effort, I draw on institutional theory to describe the *local* organizational field and the processes by which it can emerge. The promise of the local organizational field is that it can bring the purposive actions of community organizations (including their institutional work) to the foreground without excluding fateful macro-level institutional pressures from the analysis.

Multilevel fields of force. The idea of multilevel fields or social orders is not new (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Hoffman, 1999; Holm, 1995; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Strauss, 1978a). Recall, for instance, Hoffman's (1999) analysis of organizational populations nested within an organizational field and Holm's (1995) description of multilevel institutional systems affecting fishery practice in Norway. Here, I focus on multilevel *fields*. In their book *A Theory of Fields*, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) offer as an example a formal bureaucratic hierarchy—where an office is nested within a division, which is nested within a firm, which is nested within an industry (and so on). Although Lawrence and Dover (2015) do not characterize it in such terms, we might consider the Tri-Cities as a geographically bounded field of institutional forces (Marquis & Battilana, 2009; Mey, 2015) nested within the larger field of Metro Vancouver. A multilevel field could also be non-bureaucratic and non-geographic, as in Bourdieu's (1993) example of a field of art embedded within a field of cultural production. In short, the multilevel field is a versatile construct that could describe a wide variety of institutionally complex social contexts.

Figure 1.2(a) offers a simple depiction of a multilevel field where one context is *nested* within another. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) liken this to a traditional Russian doll. Within a field of interest (Field A), a subfield (X) is distinguishable from the rest of the field, in that it is

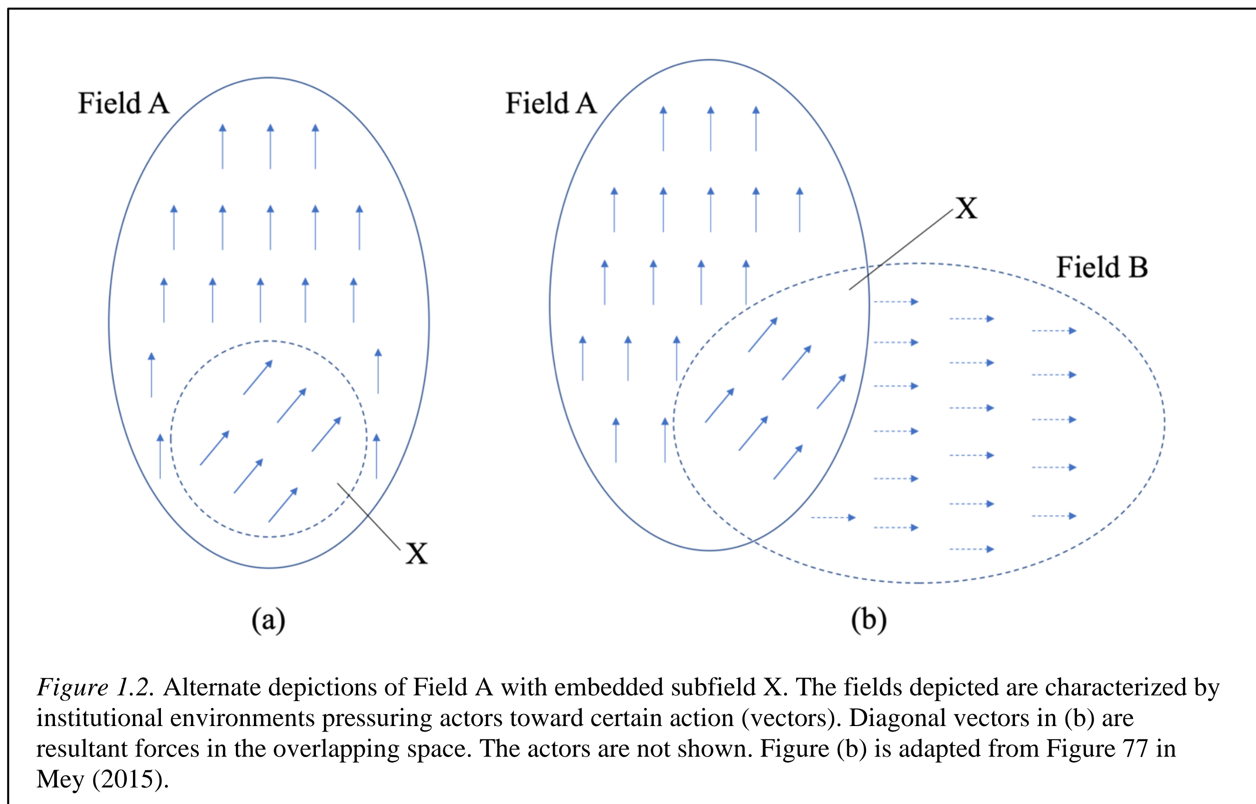

Figure 1.2. Alternate depictions of Field A with embedded subfield X. The fields depicted are characterized by institutional environments pressuring actors toward certain action (vectors). Diagonal vectors in (b) are resultant forces in the overlapping space. The actors are not shown. Figure (b) is adapted from Figure 77 in Mey (2015).

characterized by institutional pressures that are dissonant with those of Field A. For example, suppose we examine a field of homeless assistance and discover that *conservative faith-based* homeless assistance organizations appear compelled to proselytize, distinguishing them from their peer homeless assistance organizations. Suppose we also observe that the institutions governing the field—being largely secular and less conservative—pressure homeless assistance organizations *not* to proselytize. So, why does there continue to be a subfield characterized by proselytization (X) in the field? Figure 1.2(a) does not provide much insight.

Figure 1.2(b) likewise depicts a field that is multilevel, though it departs from a conventional "nested" structure. Instead, the multilevel structure is a consequence of field intersection or overlap (Mey, 2015). That is, another social field (Field B) intersects with Field

A, to the effect of altering the pressures bearing down on actors in the intersection (X).[15] Continuing my earlier example, we could suppose that, while conservative faith-based homeless assistance organizations are pressured *not* to proselytize as members of a (secular) homeless assistance field, they are simultaneously pressured *to* proselytize as members of a conservative religious field (characterized by its own institutions). Such contradictory pressures could empower and inspire conservative faith-based homeless assistance organizations to act differently than other homeless assistance organizations.

I argue that, compared to Figure 1.2(a), the complex institutional environment of Figure 1.2(b) can better explain the agency of actors in X. As Marquis and Battilana (2009) put it: "Having to deal with diverse institutional demands across institutional settings, actors are less likely to take any institutional demand for granted and thereby more likely to take action that departs from existing institutions" (p. 295). More significantly: being exposed to multiple sources of institutional pressure, actors in X gain cognitive resources to engage in *institutional work* (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Multilevel organizational fields. Given the importance of both issue and place for community organizations, I will focus on a particular kind of contextual intersection: the local organizational field. This social context—which corresponds to X in Figure 1.2(b)—is found where an issue-based organizational field (Field A) interacts with a place-based community (Field B), as depicted in Figure 1.3. In other words, a local organizational field is "a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations" (Scott, 2014, p. 106) that are in dialogue around a

---

[15] As Mey (2015) notes, the depiction is overly simplistic and is not meant to convey that the resulting pressures are the "average" of pressures from Field A and Field B. Nor is it meant to convey that the new orientation of actors in X is necessarily *unitary*; to the contrary, organizations can compartmentalize their responses to competing pressures (Binder, 2007). Rather, the point of Figure 1.2(b) is simply that a subset of Field A actors would be pressured to act differently from other Field A actors because of this subset's common membership in another field of forces.

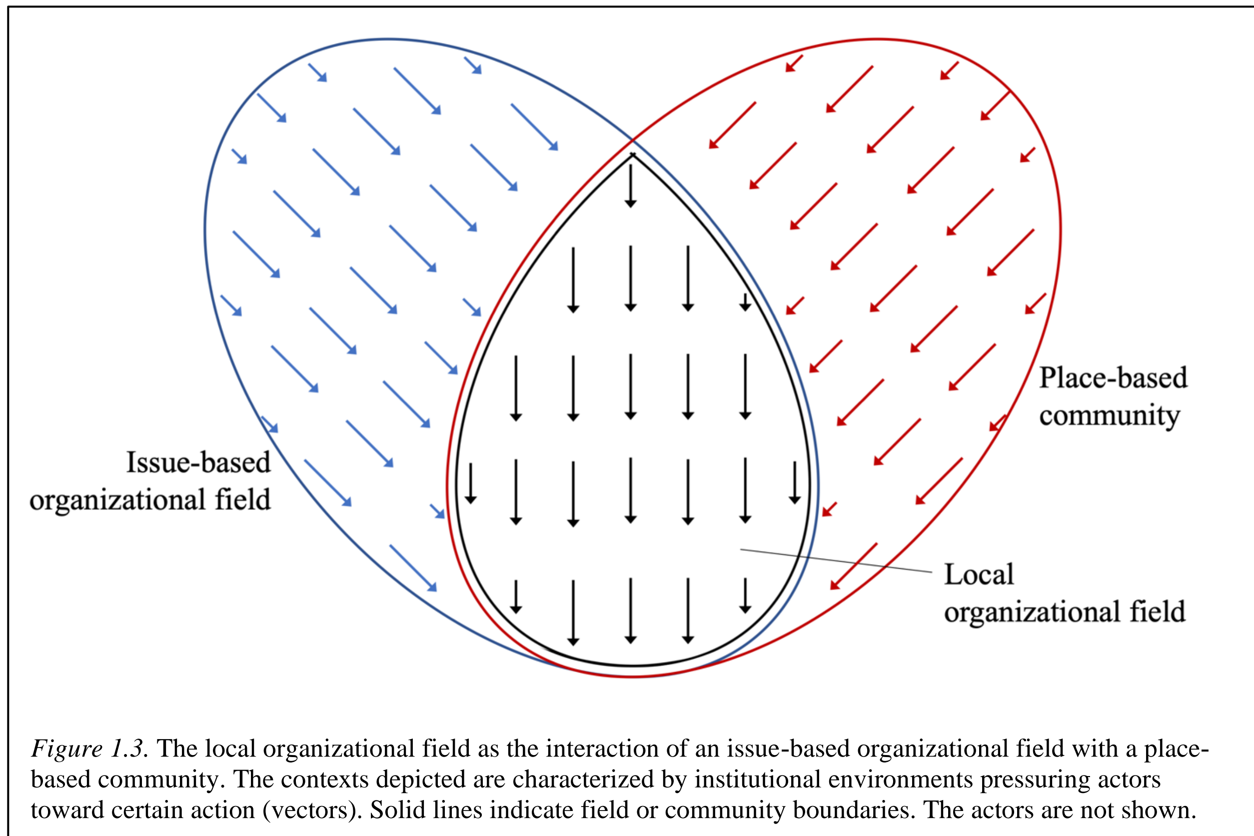

Figure 1.3. The local organizational field as the interaction of an issue-based organizational field with a place-based community. The contexts depicted are characterized by institutional environments pressuring actors toward certain action (vectors). Solid lines indicate field or community boundaries. The actors are not shown.

particular issue or issues (Hoffman, 1999) as instantiated in a geographical community. Since multiple communities can intersect with an issue-based field, we can conceive of a multiplicity of local organizational fields embedded within the same global field.

Simultaneous embeddedness in multiple institutional contexts can create tension for actors, but it can also help facilitate institutional work. Actors in a local organizational field are exposed to the cultural-cognitive and material resources of their geographical community, which can aid them in resisting or influencing the institutions of the global field. The reverse can also be true; actors in a local organizational field are exposed to the cultural-cognitive and material resources of their organizational field, which can aid them in resisting or influencing the institutions of the geographical community. Below, I provide an example of the former in my brief discussion of the organization Communities Creating Opportunity and their work in the

Kansas City community development context. My case study of OTN and their work in the Nashville homeless assistance field is more an example of the latter.

Importantly, co-located organizations in an organizational field do not necessarily form a local organizational field. Like any organizational field, a local organizational field is an institutionally-defined social context (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), meaning it is characterized by institutions—in the form of regulative rules, binding social expectations, and shared understandings of social reality—that govern the action of its member organizations (Scott, 2014). Local-level processes of institutional definition ("structuration") occur as co-located organizations become increasingly interdependent, as the institutional complexity of the field-community intersection increases the information load facing these organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and as local events form and perpetuate shared local understandings around the organizational field's issue (Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017).

These local field-configuring events deserve further comment. They are typically discussed in the context of the structuration of a global organizational field (Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017), but I propose that events can take place locally and configure a local organizational field. Local field-configuring events might include issue-related municipal government meetings, local ceremonies, community coalition or organizing meetings, local protests, workshops for community organizations, and so on. That geographical communities are institutionally defined (Marquis & Battilana, 2009) implies a local environment that could facilitate the *institutionalization* of field configuring events—for example, via local regulations that schedule public hearings related to the issue in question, and local norms of community member participation in such hearings. Notably, these events are relatively sensitive to the influence of a community organization, especially compared to the kinds of events that configure

the global organizational field (e.g., international conferences, congressional hearings, etc.). In other words, community organizations seem better positioned to shape the configuration of the local organizational field than the configuration of its global counterpart.

For an example of a local organizational field, refer back to Lawrence and Dover's (2015) case study of the Tri-Cities. Whereas Tri-Cities residents used to think of homelessness as something abstract and elsewhere, several developments—an eye-popping homeless count, the revitalization of the Tri-Cities Task Group on Homelessness, the Mat Program, and so on—began to catalyze interdependencies among local organizations as part of a local cultural shift toward understanding homelessness as a "Tri-Cities problem." To Lawrence and Dover, this was a story about purposive action to influence the institution of human solidarity; I suggest it was also a story about the structuration of a local organizational field around the issue of homelessness in the Tri-Cities. Presumably, homeless counts and task group meetings functioned (and, through their institutionalization, continued to function) as local field-configuring events. Community organizations were influential participants in this structuration.

What Lawrence and Dover (2015) ignore, but which I want to emphasize, is that this local organizational field was embedded within a *global* organizational field formed around the issue of homelessness. This brings into the scope of analysis macro-level institutional models. The implication is that social practices around homelessness in the Tri-Cities were guided, deliberately or incidentally, by issue-based institutions—even as these social practices became complicated by the institutional demands of the locale (e.g., through local zoning regulations). Had Lawrence and Dover seen their case organizations as embedded in a multilevel organizational field, they might have gained additional insights into important motivations and cultural-cognitive resources informing organizations' local institutional work.

The Local Organizational Field as a Site of Translation

In a local organizational field, community organizations are multiply-embedded in local and macro-level issue-based contexts, each characterized by distinctive institutions—this qualitative break configured by the institutions of a geographical community. Here, I elaborate on what this means. I draw on Gouldner's (1954) *Patterns of Bureaucracy*, as well as on Hallett and Ventresca's (2006) analysis of this work, to explain how actors in a locale can collectively translate a macro-level institution into distinctive local social practices—which, if continually reproduced, could become distinctive local institutions. This is not strictly an organizational field (the actors are individuals, not organizations), but the same concepts apply.

In his classic ethnography, Gouldner (1954) studied institutional change at the site of a gypsum mine in Lakeport, New York. The study centered on the relationship between the mine and its regional office, particularly the conflict between workers and management that emerged when the regional office installed a new site manager to rationalize the mine's production (through bureaucratic rules and a new emphasis on hierarchy). In this context, Gouldner observed three patterns of bureaucracy emerge: a "mock bureaucracy," based on superficial adherence to regional office rules; a "representative" bureaucracy, based on voluntary consent and mutual interest; and a "punishment-centered" bureaucracy, based on enforcement of rules for their own sake.

As described by Gouldner (1954), these patterns of bureaucracy came into force and acquired their meaning through local worker-worker and worker-manager interactions. For example, management formalized a no-smoking rule on the work site but only enforced this when an inspector from the regional office visited (mock bureaucracy). Workers and management implicitly agreed to this arrangement, with workers sanctioning their peers who

smoked when the inspector was around. In a different example, management instituted a new program of safety rules and achieved worker buy-in by explicitly agreeing to let workers participate in the day-to-day administration of the program (representative bureaucracy). Workers voluntarily participated, and the arrangement created a degree of rapport and solidarity between workers and management. In a final example, the new manager began to strictly punish worker absenteeism, even on slow workdays (punishment-centered bureaucracy). This along with strict enforcement of other rules engendered worker resistance and, eventually, a strike—leveling a blow to the manager's perceived legitimacy and ability to lead.

In short, macro-level institutional pressures changed day-to-day practice for workers in the gypsum mine, but partly on the workers' terms. "Bureaucracy" was, more than a formal system of rules, a malleable system of negotiated social practices. Hallett and Ventresca (2006), drawing on symbolic interactionist Anselm Strauss (1978b), characterized the gypsum mine's transformation as the emergence and stabilization of a new "negotiated order," a term that captures how the concrete social interactions (negotiations) among workers themselves and between workers and management catalyzed new patterns of practice that were distinct to this mine. Put differently, local actors collectively "translated" the macro-level institution of bureaucracy into a set of social practices that came to define the locale.

If we were to stop the analysis here, we might consider the industrializing gypsum mine to be somewhat buffered from the context of industrialization, but might come short of explanations why. Perhaps (we might speculate) workers resisted and negotiated bureaucratization due to their attachment to the mine's previous negotiated order. However, this would not fully explain workers' *ongoing* attachment to the old order; why their resistance to the

new order was particularly steadfast; or why a distinctive social order came to characterize the *mine* rather than, say, a subgroup of workers at the mine.

Important context is provided if we consider that the local mine was embedded in a geographical community defined by institutions at odds with bureaucratization (Gouldner, 1954; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). In a chapter devoted to the mine's community setting ("Oscar Center"), Gouldner noted that, prior to the mine's bureaucratization, "relations between supervisors and workers mirrored their community ties," which were defined by sociability and egalitarianism (p. 40). This, along with other details about Oscar Center's institutions,[16] provides insight into the cognitive resources that later motivated and enabled workers to resist bureaucratization. The local mine, as the intersection of Oscar Center and the industrial context, was a place of institutional contradiction and conflict. The workers and managers at the local mine, being located in this intersection, felt this pull-and-tug. As a result, the local mine became characterized by a distinctive institutional environment that in some ways deviated from the broader industrial context and in some ways conformed to it.

Based on their reading of Gouldner (1954), Hallett and Ventresca (2006) proposed new ways of conceptualizing institutions and action. One was a recognition that *institutions* are multiply-embedded, in both local- and macro-level contexts (e.g., the gypsum mine and industrialization, respectively). By this, Hallett and Ventresca meant that the mine's bureaucratic institutions were shaped both by situated negotiations at the mine and by the postwar ideal of bureaucracy. In addition, *social action* in the mine was multiply-embedded, as it was shaped

[16] For example, Gouldner (1954) noted: "Being with their own families, among their friends, living in their own home, rooted in their own neighborhoods, are significant values to these workers. *They are not yet men of the market, perpetually 'on the make,'* but are still, very much, men of the community and loyal to its traditional values [emphasis added]" (p. 38).

both by the institutional pressures of industrialization and the institutional pressures of the local community. We might add that social action was also shaped by more-proximal institutions—mock, representative, and punishment-centered bureaucracies—that came to define the intersectional space.

Gouldner's (1954) case study illustrates the concept of multiple-embeddedness. It also illustrates, with detail, how the pressures of a global context and the pressures of a geographical community can interact to produce distinctive local institutions at the social intersection. I argue that the translative processes taking place in local organizational fields are analogous to what Gouldner observed in the Oscar Center mine and can lead to local instantiations of field institutions. Moreover, the actors in this intersection can be active participants in this process.

The Local Organizational Field as a Site of Institutional Work

The concept of multiple-embeddedness in local- and macro-level contexts can be applied to the institutional work of community organizations. To illustrate, I will discuss Speer and Christens' (2011) analysis of the strategic action of Communities Creating Opportunity (CCO), a community organizing group representing 25 local faith-based organizations in Kansas City, Missouri. Although Speer and Christens did not analyze CCO's work from the perspective of institutional theory, the case study contains an important lesson: understanding CCO's simultaneous embeddedness in both a local- and macro-level issue-based context is critical for understanding CCO's institutional work. I suggest this lesson can be applied to the institutional work of community organizations, broadly.

Speer and Christens (2011) describe the case as follows. In 2004, seeing a window of opportunity following the hiring of a new city manager, CCO convened a public meeting at a neighborhood church in an effort to directly engage the public and city officials on the issue of

housing and community development. Centering the narratives and logics of community residents, CCO broadcasted its support of specific goals: more accountability for city government and landlords; protection of community members from predatory mortgage lenders; creation of a local government program for repairing homes; and an overall approach to development that strengthened neighborhoods, not that simply built new housing. Two weeks after this event, the city manager announced a complete restructuring of the city's Housing and Community Development Department; existing staff were moved to other departments, and new staff were hired who would be more beholden to community residents and less so to outside interests. After analyzing public documents, media coverage, and qualitative interview data, Speer and Christens attributed this "substantial change in an important community system" partly to CCO, whose initiative had left a clear imprint on public discourse in the days leading up to the city manager's announcement (p. 425).

We could recharacterize CCO's initiative as an attempt to change the institutionalized practices around housing and community development in Kansas City, such that they would be more responsive to the needs of everyday community residents and neighborhoods. This institutional work was multifaceted and targeted key local systems corresponding to Scott's (2014) "pillars." First, in proposing formal systems of accountability, protection, and government service, CCO advocated new *regulative* institutional systems in Kansas City. Second, in spotlighting community residents as development's most important stakeholders and in lobbying for better resident oversight over government programs and landlords, CCO sought to disrupt the locale's *normative* institutional systems. Finally, CCO used the narratives and logics of local community residents to reframe development as an issue of neighborhoods and not just individual homes, and it used a public forum to center the city's debate around particular

concerns; in taking these actions, CCO tried to revise the locale's *cultural-cognitive* institutional systems.

Given what we know from Speer and Christens' (2011) account, CCO's attempt to influence Kansas City's regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems was met with some success. Although it is unclear if this ultimately led to new, enduring practices around housing and community development in Kansas City, CCO clearly engaged in institutional work. Moreover, this work was locally embedded, as it was motivated and shaped by the material and symbolic resources of the community.

Furthermore, CCO engaged in this work while embedded in a global, issue-based organizational field.[17] At least three characteristics of their work indicate this. First, according to Speer and Christens (2011), CCO's initiative was partly motivated by the findings of a series of audits of the local housing department, including a joint audit by the city and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Second, Speer and Christens mentioned that CCO declined to give "center stage" to "experts or housing professionals" (p. 415)—a detail which implicitly positions CCO in a global professional context. Finally, Speer and Christens saw CCO's initiative as "an example of an organization pushing back against [globalization] processes" (p. 417), presumably involving national and global actors with a stake in Kansas City's housing and community development practices (e.g., bond rating agencies, housing developers, and so on).

The case of CCO illustrates how the institutional work of community organizations can be both locally and globally embedded. On one hand, in trying to influence institutionalized

[17] This appears true, at least, with respect to this particular strategic initiative. Under a conception of fields as dynamic and situational (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), CCO's organizational field could change depending on what is at stake in the moment.

practices, CCO was attentive to nonlocal actors, not just local ones. CCO, the city government, outside experts, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, unspecified national/global actors: All were participating in a common meaning system around the issue of housing and community development, thus comprising an organizational field (Scott, 2014; Hoffman, 1999). On the other hand, it appears that CCO directly targeted a *local* institution and the local mechanisms that supported it, with community resources (e.g., the narratives of local residents, the use of church space, and so on) being integral to this work. Ignoring the global context would shroud some of CCO's key sources of motivation and obstacle, whereas ignoring the local context would shroud CCO's institutional work entirely. A fuller picture emerges when we consider CCO to be multiply-embedded. Similar to the practices that Gouldner (1955) observed in the gypsum mine, local practices in Kansas City were shaped both by CCO's participation in situated negotiations at the local level and by an global ideal of housing and community development.

Furthermore, the CCO case study suggests a *local organizational field* consisting of interdependent organizations (e.g., the 25 member organizations of CCO, Kansas City's Housing & Community Development Department, etc.) in dialogue around housing and community development in Kansas City. CCO, the community organizing group at the center of the case study, was embedded in both this local organizational field and in the global organizational field formed around the issue of housing and community development. The concept of the local organizational field emphasizes this multiple-embeddedness and encourages an analysis that attends to both local- and macro-level contexts. The public meeting convened by CCO at a neighborhood church would be an example of a local field-configuring event. Indeed, the

authors' analysis and conclusions center on how this event successfully shaped the shared understandings of local actors regarding the issue of housing and community development.

Implications for the Institutional Work of Community Organizations

Like the workers and managers in the Oscar Center mine, and like the community organizations with a stake in housing and community development in Kansas City, actors in a local organizational field are embedded in three relevant, overlapping contexts. One is the global organizational field that governs action related to the issue in question. Another is the geographical community that governs action related to the place in question. And last is the local organizational field itself—a site where macro-level issue-based institutions are collectively translated into local practices and institutions.

To influence action in a local organizational field, actors might try different strategies. They might try to affect local issue-based institutions *directly* by targeting how macro-level institutions are translated locally. This would be analogous to gypsum miners targeting the rules, norms, and shared beliefs negotiated at the mine itself in order to influence what punishments are acceptable and unacceptable, or to delegitimize punishment-centered bureaucracy altogether. Alternatively, actors might try to affect local issue-based institutions *indirectly*. One approach could be to target the institutions of the geographical community that are fateful for the local organizational field. This would be analogous to gypsum miners targeting the rules, norms, and shared beliefs of the city of Oscar Center—for example, by advocating a city ordinance that would regulate punishment in local workplaces. Another way in which actors might try to affect local issue-based institutions indirectly would be to target the institutions of the organizational field writ large. This strategy seems less likely to be attempted or to succeed; it would be analogous to workers at the Oscar Center mine trying to affect the legitimacy and/or meaning of

bureaucracy in the industrial context, with implications for workers everywhere (including at the Oscar Center mine).

For community organizations, the prospect of directly influencing macro-level field institutions is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine. A notable example is the community organization Pathways to Housing, which successfully prototyped new practices of homeless assistance that disrupted the homeless assistance field (a story that I narrate in the next chapter). Still, this kind of grand attempt to influence macro-level institutions is not the only way to imagine the institutional work of community organizations. As Speer and Christens' (2011) analysis of CCO showed, locally-targeted work is still meaningful. This is a form of work that the local organizational field construct draws attention to, which will be clear in my case study of the institutional work of Open Table Nashville (OTN).

Conclusion

In order to establish the theoretical foundations for understanding the institutional work of Open Table Nashville (OTN), this chapter explained how community organizations can influence institutions, from the perspective of institutional theory. I situated this effort in the research area of institutional work, which emphasizes the intelligent efforts of actors to influence institutions while being themselves embedded in an institutional environment. However, I found that this research area's assumptions of the institutional environment impeded analyses of community organizations and the ways in which their actions are implicated in institutional processes. Hence, I proposed the concept of the local organizational field, which draws attention to a local-level arena of action while not discounting powerful macro-level institutional forces. I concluded that this analytical frame could encourage institutional scholars to take community organizations and their institutional work more seriously.

In making this argument, I heavily relied on case studies that illustrated key concepts and ideas—for example, Hoffman's (1999) case study that introduced the issue-based organizational field, Lawrence and Dover's (2015) case study that introduced the importance of place for institutional work, and a pair of case studies that illustrated actors' multiple-embeddedness in local- and macro-level contexts (Gouldner, 1954; Speer and Christens, 2011). Similar qualitative study of institutional work in the community arena could shed light on how community organizations try to influence institutions and the extent to which these efforts contribute to an organizational field's institutional dynamics. More than simply an interesting academic exercise, a case study of a community organization and its institutional work in relation to a local organizational field could provide useful strategic insight for community organizations convinced that improving the lives of community residents calls for institutional intervention.

As subsequent chapters will show, the local organizational field is a useful construct for understanding the institutional work of the community organization OTN. I believe this case study of OTN's purposive actions in and around its local organizational field might help institutional scholars and community activists better understand the complex interrelations between institutions and action. This, in turn, could inform future action. The local organizational field construct adds connective tissue between institutional theory and existing understandings (built largely by other disciplines and supported by activists' intuitions) that community actors are positioned to make lasting impacts on certain kinds of social practices—even after accounting for powerful macro-level pressures.

CHAPTER 2

Subject Matter, Research Questions, and Methods

Homelessness has become a social fact in many places, especially in post-industrial societies and in recent decades (Mair, 1986; Mitchell, 2013). In the U.S., at least 580,466 people experienced homelessness on a given night in 2020 (HUD, 2021), and millions more—as many as 100 million—are without housing globally (Institute of Global Homelessness, 2017). Unsurprisingly, how to best assist people experiencing homelessness has become a topic of debate featuring a variety of stakeholders: from macro-level actors like national governments, research firms, and special interest groups to local actors like municipal governments, community organizations, and people experiencing homelessness themselves. At stake is how resources are allocated in local communities, with material implications for people experiencing homelessness.

The issue of homeless assistance and how it is practiced locally can be analyzed in different ways. On one hand, a macro-level analysis would emphasize how institutional models are imposed upon actors across a variety of locales. As certain debates about homeless assistance resolve in favor of one model of practice or another, the contention recedes from cultural consciousness—giving rise to reified formal rules, binding expectations, and taken-for-granted assumptions about which models are and are not acceptable or legitimate (Scott, 2014). Such processes of institutionalization would seem exceedingly difficult for local actors to try to initiate, maintain, disrupt, or otherwise influence. On the other hand, a local-level analysis would highlight the creativity and intentionality that local actors can bring to the practice of homeless

assistance, with fateful implications for the community systems that most-directly affect the livelihoods of people experiencing homelessness (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). This is particularly important for understanding the work of *community organizations*—nonprofit or grassroots organizations that represent segments of a geographical community and are focused on addressing particular problems within that community.[18] However, by focusing on the local, this kind of analysis would ignore how macro-level institutions inform and limit the ways in which local actors imagine and practice homeless assistance.

Thus, the macro lens and the local lens each offers a useful, if incomplete, way of understanding the relationship between community organizations and organizational practice around a given issue. With a case study, I hope to demonstrate how these levels of analysis can be integrated in empirical research, and how community organizations can be thought of in new ways as institutionally significant actors. My focal organization is Open Table Nashville (OTN), a nonprofit community organization located in Nashville, Tennessee. OTN participates in a global community of interest around the issue of homeless assistance—an *organizational field* structured by formal rules (e.g., U.S. federal laws and administrative rules), prescriptive norms (e.g., best practices), and shared beliefs about social reality (e.g., about what constitutes "homelessness," what its underlying causes are, etc.). It is an arena of action with well-resourced actors and institutions that cut across geographic boundaries. But though this global context is relevant, OTN is principally concerned with homeless assistance *in Nashville*. In this, OTN is not alone; many other organizations have a stake in this particular issue in this particular place and regularly interact with each other, forming what can be considered a *local organizational field*.

---

[18] Examples include human service organizations, faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations or groups, union-related groups, and organizing groups (Bess, Cooper, Perkins, & Jones, 2011).

Direct provision of assistance to people experiencing homelessness defines much of OTN's day-to-day work. As Chapter Three will explain in more detail, these activities include basic survival assistance (food, shelter, clothing, etc.), navigation of Nashville's labyrinthine service systems, and basic housing retention supports. In 2017, OTN began to expand its direct services by building the Village at Glencliff: a development of 22 "micro homes" intended as bridge housing for people recently discharged from the hospital or who are at high risk of death if they continue living without shelter. In offering these services and being present with people before and after their experiences of homelessness, OTN is directly implicated in homeless assistance practices. In this respect, OTN is not much different from a typical homeless service provider.

What makes OTN an interesting case from a *social policy and practice* perspective is that, in addition to direct service provision, OTN routinely engages in multiple kinds of formal activities expressly devoted to influencing institutional models that enable and constrain homeless assistance. These activities are described in Chapters 4 and 5; they include educating community members, lobbying local policymakers, participating in existing regulatory structures, and engaging in direct action (e.g., public protests) to bring about alternative community practices that, in OTN's view, could reduce social inequities and end cycles of homelessness in Nashville. Such activities are not unique for a community organization, but they are certainly unusual for a homeless service provider. A closer study of OTN will demonstrate how homeless service providers, beyond simply practicing homeless assistance, might attempt to influence the institutional scaffolding that shapes homeless assistance itself. In OTN's case, proximity to people experiencing homelessness has engendered unique expertise, motivations, and priorities that inform the organization's institutional work. This has positioned OTN to leave

a distinctive imprint on local advocacy and community organizing, potentially affecting local policy and practice.

What makes OTN an interesting case from an *institutional* perspective is that it is a community organization whose institutional work defies analysis within the typical social contexts assumed by institutional theory. In Chapter One, I described the organizational field and the geographical community, and how these are distinct contexts that scholars often use to frame their analyses of institutions and institutional work. The organizational field is the context most often assumed. However, if we were to consider OTN's activities in relation to the macro-level institutions of the homeless assistance field, these activities would lose their institutional significance, since OTN makes few attempts to influence macro-level field institutions. This analytical frame would also constrain our focus to OTN's activities in the homeless assistance context, specifically, even though OTN frequently participates in other relevant contexts (e.g., community development). To address these problems, we could instead focus on OTN's activities within the geographical community of Nashville, across a variety of local issues (not just homeless assistance per se). However, this would lead us to overlook the significance of OTN as a homeless outreach nonprofit influenced by the macro-level institutional pressures of the homeless assistance field.

The reason that OTN exemplifies these analytical shortcomings is because OTN purposively participates in the global community of homeless assistance organizations while eschewing the ways in which local members of this community tend to be siloed from other issues that define social policy and practice in Nashville. The utility of my conceptual framework—anchored in my concept of the local organizational field as an organized environment responding to conflicting institutional pressures—is that it provides a way of

centering OTN's institutional multiple-embeddedness and its purposive reactions to institutional complexity. So viewed, the actions of OTN and other community organizations can be institutionally meaningful, even in the midst of macro-level institutional pressures. Such a view is all but absent in the institutional literature, which either extricates community organizations from organizational fields or ignores community organizations altogether.

My case study highlights some of OTN's efforts to institutionalize Housing First and related practices in its locale. Housing First is a rights-based paradigm of homeless assistance that quickly gained national and global legitimacy after its emergence in the 1990s. OTN advocates Housing First and also tries to influence features of the local community (most notably, the chronic shortage of affordable housing) that are broader than the issue of homeless assistance but nonetheless constrain Housing First practices in Nashville. My case study's analysis of OTN's work will demonstrate how community organizations can meaningfully act to influence the institutional processes of an organizational field, even if this institutional work and its potential effects are localized.

With the theoretical background provided in Chapter One, the present chapter provides my study's subject matter background, research questions, and methods. I begin by describing the homeless assistance field and development of one of its institutions, Housing First, which OTN advocates and has been trying to institutionalize in Nashville. Even though Housing First is not OTN's exclusive focus of institutional work, it is a significant one, and even OTN's activities that are not explicitly about Housing First still have clear implications for the local instantiation of that institution. For example, when OTN advocates alternative affordable housing practices in Nashville, this has implications for the availability of a key resource—housing stock—that is necessary for Housing First to be successful. Consequently, Housing First is an institution to

which my analysis repeatedly returns, and its characteristics and nuances deserve some explanation. As will be clear, it is an institution that is global in scope but subject to local definition and legitimacy.

The development of Housing First is illustrative of a conflict of paradigms in the homeless assistance field: a "staircase" paradigm that sees housing as leverage for compelling behavioral change versus a rights-based paradigm (Housing First) that offers permanent housing with few strings attached and privileges the perspectives and preferences of people experiencing homelessness. At the global field level, Housing First can be viewed as an institutional success story, having largely displaced the staircase paradigm as preferred policy and best practice. However, as is evident in Nashville, the institutionalization of Housing First can be more complicated at the local level. A local advocate of Housing First, OTN helps bring these complications to light—and provides an example of a community organization's efforts to institutionalize homeless assistance practices locally. These efforts are described more fully in Chapters 4 and 5. But for these to make sense, OTN's field and community contexts must be introduced.

Contextualizing the Institutional Work of Open Table Nashville

As theorized in Chapter One, the local organizational field construct assumes the interaction of two contexts: an organizational field writ large and a geographical community. My case study situates Open Table Nashville (OTN) within a local organizational field; consequently, it is necessary to explain both the field and community contexts of OTN's institutional work and how these contexts interact. I identify these as the homeless assistance field and the geographical community of Nashville, respectively. In this section, I explain what I see as the broad contours of this homeless assistance field—a global arena of action formed

around the issue of homeless assistance—and its evolution in recent decades with respect to a rights-based approach to homeless assistance called Housing First. Following this, I scale down to the geographical community of Nashville and introduce its unique homeless assistance context as being simultaneously embedded in the global homeless assistance field. I conclude with a high-level overview of OTN's activities in this multiply-embedded context and share my reasons for believing that OTN is a worthy case study of a field-embedded community organization that works to influence local institutions, with implications for the local enactment of a macro-level field institution (Housing First).

The Homeless Assistance Field and Housing First

In this case study, I will assume an organizational field formed around the issue of homeless assistance. That is to say, many organizations and individuals have a stake in how resources for people experiencing homelessness are allocated. For them, a system of meaning facilitates dialogue (friendly or otherwise) about which related practices are legitimate and acceptable, and which are not. This is both informative *and forceful*—formally, through rules; informally, through binding expectations; and implicitly, through shared understandings. Organizations susceptible to these institutional pressures can be considered members of the homeless assistance field. Prominent examples include the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the advocacy organization National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), the peer-reviewed journal *Housing Policy Debate*, and the U.N. Working Group to End Homelessness, to name only a few. The field also includes many organizations that are much less well known than these, such as homeless service providers like OTN.

Like all fields, the homeless assistance field is a limited communicative context. It more or less takes for granted the structural conditions producing homelessness and looks for solutions

in planning and managing resource allocation (see Burt and Spellman [2007], NAEH [2019], and USICH [2018] for examples; see Mitchell [2013] and Willse [2015] for critiques). Debates and questions center on what *forms* of assistance should be funded (e.g., Culhane & Metraux, 2008), how assistance should be *targeted* (e.g., Shinn, Greer, Bainbridge, Kwon, & Zulderveen, 2013), how it should be *coordinated* (e.g., HUD, 2015), how it should be *tailored to subgroups* (e.g., Kuhn & Culhane, 1998), how to reduce its *costs* (e.g., NAEH, 2017), and so on. The field's institutional pressures define the bounds of debate and tip the scales in favor of certain practices over others. Mandates, incentives, and other tools of coercion establish formal rules for homeless assistance. Professional networks impose binding expectations such as "best practices." Jargon, categories (e.g., "chronic" homelessness), and other cultural-cognitive constructs naturalize particular assumptions and understandings about who receives what kind of assistance and how. The homeless assistance field includes government agencies, service providers, technical assistance providers, research organizations, advocacy organizations, and other actors susceptible to these institutional pressures. This includes people experiencing homelessness, who must ultimately accept or reject offers of assistance.

My case study focuses on a particular institution of the homeless assistance field: Housing First. This requires further specification, as Housing First is a contested construct with an array of meanings. Since Housing First is endorsed by prominent field actors and tied to funding, there is an incentive for service providers to claim they are aligned with it, even if they are not (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020).

On one hand, Housing First can refer to a general philosophy or paradigm of homeless assistance (Schiff & Schiff, 2014). As a paradigm, it is often juxtaposed over against the more-traditional "staircase" (a.k.a. "treatment first" or "housing readiness") paradigm of homeless

assistance (depicted in Figure 2.1). The staircase paradigm insists on transitional, rehabilitative "steps" between homelessness and permanent housing—with advancement along this continuum and continued access to housing being contingent upon compliance with prescribed treatment as well as abstinence from drugs and alcohol. An operating assumption of the staircase paradigm is that homelessness is a consequence of pathological behavior, and that the promise of permanent housing (or, later in the process, the threat of housing loss) should be leveraged to "correct" this behavior (Padgett, Henwood, & Tsemberis, 2016; Pleace & Bretherton, 2012). The Housing First paradigm rejects this assumption.

Sometimes, the term "Housing First" is used to describe, simply, placement in permanent housing without preconditions. However, it is perhaps more precise to call this "housing-led" (a.k.a. "low-barrier") assistance. The Housing First paradigm goes further—not only insisting on

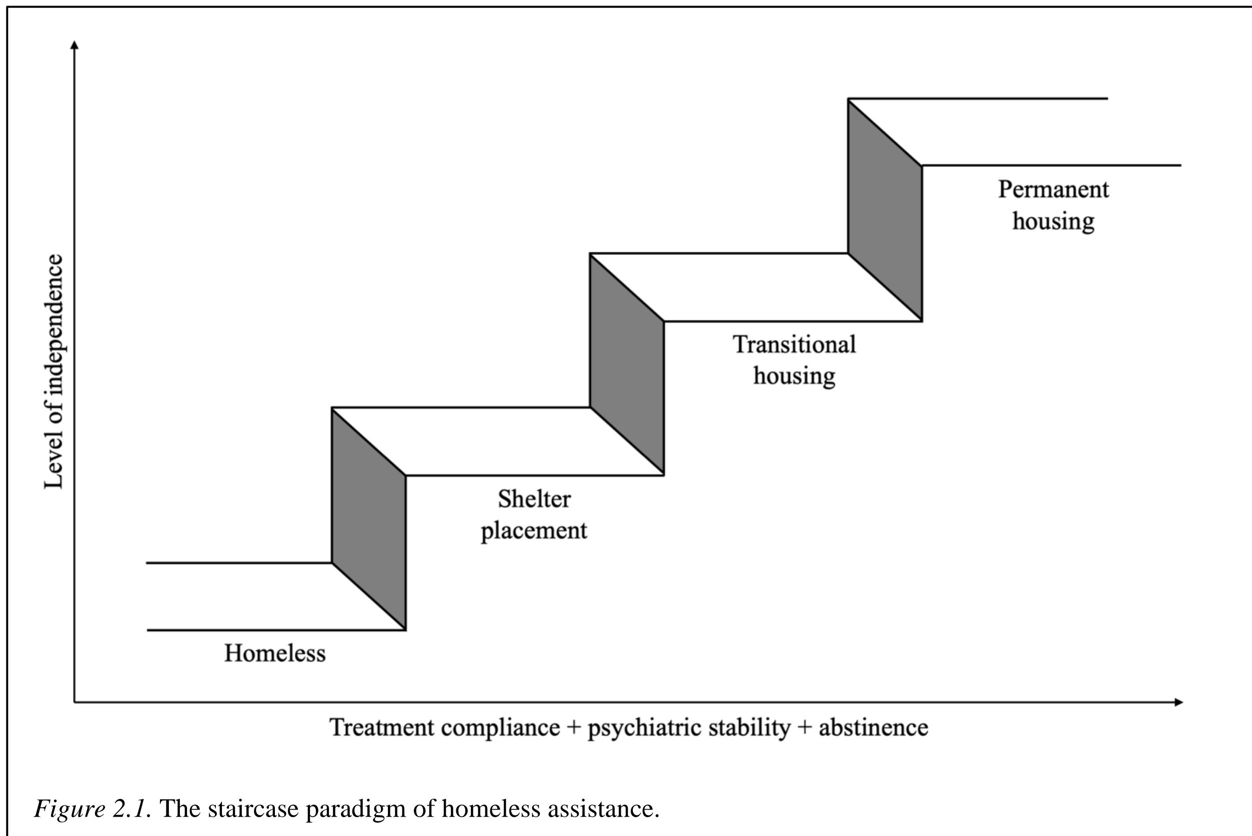

Figure 2.1. The staircase paradigm of homeless assistance.

permanent housing without preconditions, but also on *continued* access to housing independent of treatment and abstinence. This reflects two operating (often explicit) assumptions of the Housing First paradigm: that housing is a right (not an earned privilege or a means of leverage) and that consumer choice with respect to service participation is paramount (Lancione, Stefanizzi, & Gaboardi, 2017; Padgett, et al., 2016; Schiff & Schiff, 2014; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004). Thus, housing-led assistance can be considered a broader category that encompasses Housing First (ECCH, 2010; Pleace & Bretherton, 2012) or, put differently, a necessary but insufficient component of Housing First.

In addition to a general paradigm, Housing First can refer to specific program models (Schiff & Schiff, 2014). Here, there can be substantial ambiguity as to what "counts" as Housing First or what its "core" practices are. Some Housing First programs place their participants in congregate housing, others in scattered-site apartments. Some provide intensive direct support services like psychiatric assistance, while others provide only basic supports and facilitate connections to other services in the community. Some target or prioritize one subpopulation or another. As a result, observers sometimes distinguish one or more Housing First program subtypes. The archetypical Housing First program model, and the model most responsible for legitimizing the Housing First paradigm, is arguably "Pathways" Housing First—developed and promoted by the community organization Pathways to Housing (Padgett et al., 2016; Pleace & Bretherton, 2014; Tsemberis, 2010).

For organizations in the homeless assistance field, the Housing First paradigm can be a useful cultural-cognitive resource—a ready-made package of principles and practices. But it is important to note that Housing First is not simply a collection of ideas that exist in the cultural ether; it is a template for homeless assistance that has steadily gained legitimacy and taken-for-

granted status in its organizational field. This development was by no means inevitable, as it benefited from the institutional work of organizations like Pathways to Housing (Padgett et al., 2016) amidst countervailing institutional pressures at the societal (U.S.) and field levels. The remarkable emergence of Housing First as a macro-level institution of the homeless assistance field amidst countervailing macro-level pressures provides necessary background for understanding the significance of OTN's attempts to influence the local instantiation of Housing First in Nashville. In other words, OTN's institutional work at the local level is, in some ways, part of a larger story of the institutionalization of Housing First throughout the field.

Countervailing Societal Pressures. The U.S. is a context where public relief for subsistence needs, including housing, is almost always conditional and tied to the perceived "deservedness" or "worthiness" of the beneficiary. Indeed, it has always been the case that some Americans are deemed at fault for their poverty and thus morally unfit for public relief (Handler, 1990; Handler & Yeheskel, 2006; Quigley, 1998). Often, this is tied to one's apparent unwillingness to support oneself—evidenced by idleness, substance use, criminal behavior, and other pathologies popularly believed to explain poverty (Wax, 2000). As Mitchell (2013) summarizes:

> The deserving were those willing to accept responsibility for their condition, accept charity or other interventions with a proper degree of humility, begin the hard work of getting clean and grasping hold of the lowest rungs of the labor market, and never backsliding. The undeserving poor were all the others. (p. 945)

This fault line dividing deserving from undeserving has typically been the same fault line demarcating eligibility for public relief. Deeply rooted reciprocity norms (Wax, 2000) and cyclical efforts to regulate class and racial hierarchies (Handler, 1990) have reinforced this institution in the American imagination.

In the 1980s, the fault line between worthy and eligible for public relief on one hand versus unworthy and ineligible on the other began to be renegotiated in favor of a more restrictive and paternalistic system of public relief (Handler, 1990). For example, in his widely read book, the political scientist Charles Murray (1984) distinguished between “ethical” assistance for the laid-off worker and “unethical” assistance for the “drone” who refuses to work. In another influential book, the academic Lawrence Mead (1986) argued for a revised “social contract” by which an individual’s failure to meet “serious work and other obligations” voids society’s reciprocal obligation to meet subsistence needs (p. 3). Mead saw in this social contract an opportunity to leverage relief for the benefit of the social order by compelling beneficiaries to become independent, productive members of society. A decade later, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (a.k.a. “Welfare Reform”) baked this paternalistic vision of the social contract into the nation’s welfare policy.

The Staircase Paradigm of Homeless Assistance. Meanwhile, the 1980s and 1990s saw the “structuration” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) of a homeless assistance field in the U.S., in response to rapidly growing numbers of people experiencing homelessness—especially women, families, members of racial minority groups, and individuals with severe mental illness (Baxter & Hopper, 1982; Rossi, 1990). At first, dominant responses to this phenomenon emphasized the need to build emergency shelters and housing. However, these soon gave way to an emerging culture that pathologized homelessness and favored paternalistic forms of homeless assistance (Main, 2016; Mitchell, 2013). Government agencies, from the federal level to the local level, played a key role in this. The development of a staircase-like approach to homeless assistance in New York City, and its subsequent diffusion, is illustrative.

In February 1992, New York City's Commission on the Homeless (the "Cuomo Commission" after its chair, Andrew Cuomo) published an independent report of recommendations for policies and programs addressing the problem of homelessness in New York City. Significantly, the Commission sought to *organize* the local development and allocation of homeless housing and support services in order to transition New Yorkers from homelessness to permanent housing in a coordinated, stepwise approach not unlike that depicted above in Figure 2.1. To this end, the Commission recommended a three-phase "continuum of care" system: emergency shelter, followed by transitional housing, followed by permanent housing. Specifically, a select number of small emergency shelters would serve as "reception centers" where case managers would assess the needs of resident families and individuals. On this basis, case managers would refer their clients to various transitional programs, which would focus on building clients' self-sufficiency and employability. Those who rejected their service plans would be referred to general emergency shelters, where shelter staff would "repeatedly encourage" them to reconsider (NYC Commission on the Homeless, 1992, p. 38). Finally, after complying with their service plans, families and individuals would be eligible for permanent housing or permanent supportive housing, with the latter reserved for those with severe mental illness or HIV/AIDS. According to Burt et al. (2002), the Commission's proposed blend of housing and services was "one of the first articulations" of a continuum of care (p. 6).

According to Main (2016), the Cuomo Commission report helped usher in a paternalistic era in New York City homelessness policy—based on beliefs that there was "something wrong" with New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, that this underlying pathology needed to be corrected through rehabilitation, and that permanent housing should be leveraged for this purpose. In denying assistance to those perceived as non-compliant, the new staircase-like

continuum of care system harmonized with the recently reinvigorated societal divide between worthy and unworthy poor. Echoing Mead (1986), the Cuomo Commission maintained that “a social contract and a mutuality of obligation must exist between those receiving help and society at large” (NYC Commission on the Homeless, 1992, p. 15). In other words, housing assistance was something to be earned. Those who did not fulfill their rehabilitative obligations and position themselves to become independent and productive members of society were unworthy—or, in the parlance of the homeless assistance field, “unready”—to have their permanent housing publicly subsidized (Dordick, 2002).

The Cuomo Commission report has been cited as the beginning of a sea change—what Mitchell (2013) calls “the Great Ideological U-Turn”—in U.S. homelessness policy. “With the issuance of the Cuomo Commission report in 1992,” O’Flaherty (1996) argues, “the cry for ‘therapy, therapy, therapy’ replaced ‘housing, housing, housing’ as the buzzword response in the United States to the problems of the homeless” (p. 297). This was likely helped by Andrew Cuomo’s tenure as Assistant Secretary of HUD from 1993 to 1997 and his tenure as HUD Secretary from 1997 to 2001. Indeed, in 1994, HUD began using its grant programs to coerce communities to adopt the continuum of care approach, with guidance sometimes borrowing language verbatim from the Cuomo Commission report (HUD, 1994; Supportive Housing Program, Shelter Plus Care, and Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation, 1994; USICH, 1994). Communities across the U.S. responded to HUD mandates by self-organizing into formal Continuums of Care (CoCs), each CoC representing a geographical jurisdiction (typically a city, county, or metropolitan area) within which there was a system of coordinated homeless

assistance.[19] Benefiting from HUD's homeless assistance grants, about 4,400 transitional housing programs were operating in CoCs nationwide by 1996, compared to only about 1,900 permanent housing programs (Burt et al., 1999). Dordick (2002) connects the widespread take-up of the staircase approach to broader changes in social policy during the Clinton administration that de-emphasized safety nets and entitlements while invoking "the responsibilities of those receiving aid to better themselves and become independent" as part of a social contract (p. 9). By the end of the decade, the staircase approach was ubiquitous in the U.S.

The Origin, Legitimation, and Diffusion of Housing First

In October 1992, just a few months after the Cuomo Commission report was published and a few months before the incoming Clinton administration would appoint Andrew Cuomo to his position at HUD, a community psychologist named Sam Tsemberis founded the community organization Pathways to Housing. In an interview with Main (2016), Tsemberis recalled the frustrations of referring people to hospital psychiatric wards and then repeatedly seeing them return to the streets of New York. Anxious to try something different, he and his team of psychologists decided to apply an approach to psychiatric rehabilitation whereby the team would learn what the individual wanted and then work with him or her to achieve it. As it happened, what almost everyone wanted was a place to live, first—before considering treatment.

Taking this preference seriously, Tsemberis and others developed a housing and treatment model for people experiencing chronic homelessness, "based on the belief that housing is a basic right and on a theoretical foundation that includes psychiatric rehabilitation and values

---

[19] Today, the term "Continuum of Care" and its initialism "CoC" no longer connote a system of phased assistance such as that articulated by the Cuomo Commission. Instead, they generally refer to a kind of jurisdiction (within which there is a "menu of options" for homeless services) and a kind of administrative body (responsible for regulating such a jurisdiction) (Locke, Khadduri, & O'Hara, 2007, p. 8). Going forward, to capture the original connotations of the continuum of care model, I refer instead to the staircase approach.

consumer choice" (Tsemberis et al., 2004, p. 651), going so far as "radical acceptance of the consumer's point of view" (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000, p. 489). The model attempts to fulfill participants' right to housing and honor their choices through the provision of low-barrier permanent housing plus optional services and no drug/alcohol abstinence requirements. Furthermore, the housing provided is scattered-site (i.e., not concentrated in one place), allowing participants additional choice regarding which home and neighborhood they move into. The model supports recovery goals defined by participants themselves, not by clinical assessments (Tsemberis, 2010). Pathways' innovative approach, initially called Consumer Preference Supported Housing (Tsemberis & Asmussen, 1999), eventually became known as "Housing First"—in clear contradistinction to the ubiquitous staircase approach. Years later, as the meaning of Housing First became increasingly muddled and contested, some suggested that the Pathways model be referred to as "Pathways" Housing First (Padgett et al., 2016; Tsemberis, 2010). Yet Pathways' strict separation of housing from services, its refusal to require abstinence, its belief that housing is a basic right, and its emphasis on consumer choice endured as a common characteristic of many Housing First approaches.

Given the institutional headwinds to rights-based homeless assistance in New York City and in the U.S. during the 1990s, one might not have expected Housing First to displace the staircase approach as the dominant paradigm of homeless assistance at the macro level. Yet it arguably did—benefiting from coercive, normative, and mimetic processes of institutionalization. Normative processes were important early on, as the Housing First paradigm gained professional legitimacy through multiple research studies, especially a randomized trial that helped establish the Pathways model as a "best practice" over against the staircase model

(Gulcur, Stefancic, Shinn, Tsemberis, & Fischer, 2003; Tsemberis, et al., 2004).[20] Absent this experimental evidence, the Pathways model "arguably … would never have spread" (Shinn, 2016, p. 241). Coercive processes were also important, as several national, state/regional, and local governments began incentivizing or even mandating community adoption of Housing First, often with the help of technical assistance provided by Pathways to Housing staff (Padgett et al., 2016). This was driven in part by growing awareness of the exorbitant public costs of chronic homelessness (Culhane, 2008; Pleace & Bretherton, 2012). Mimetic processes can be seen in some organizations' decisions to independently model themselves after Housing First approaches—a good example being Seattle's Downtown Emergency Service Center. Today, Housing First programs (with varying degrees of fidelity to Pathways Housing First) exist in communities across the U.S. as well as in Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Portugal, and Sweden (Busch-Geertsema, 2013; Housing First Europe Hub, 2020; Padgett et al., 2016). In fact, some of these countries have made Housing First the centerpiece of their national homelessness strategies (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Padgett et al., 2016).

A key event in the institutionalization of the Housing First paradigm in the U.S. was the 100,000 Homes Campaign, which launched in July 2010 and urged communities across the U.S. to move people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing under a Housing First approach. According to Leopold and Ho (2015), the Campaign understood Housing First to mean "offering permanent housing right away, with case management and optional support

[20] In the U.S., Housing First's status as a best practice in the homeless assistance field achieved new heights upon securing unequivocal federal endorsement during the Obama administration. For example, in the first *Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, USICH (2010) named Housing First "the solution" to chronic homelessness (p. 18), citing Housing First's "documented success … over the traditional continuum of care model" (p. 49).

services provided as needed, rather than conditioning housing on sobriety, treatment, employment or other milestones" (p. 7). Although the Campaign's approach differed from Pathways Housing First in some key ways,[21] it ensured that the Housing First paradigm was taken up by communities and organizations throughout the U.S. In June 2014, the Campaign concluded, having housed 105,580 people in 186 communities—including in Nashville, Tennessee.

Housing First in the Nashville Context

As reviewed above, "Housing First" is a contested construct in the homeless assistance field. For some, it is the Pathways model; for others, it is a general paradigm. For still others, it simply means housing-led assistance. These ambiguities and contradictions at the macro level have led to variations in definition and practice at the local level. In their descriptive study of three Housing First programs, Pearson, Locke, Montgomery, and Buron (2007) describe Housing First as "not a single model …, but rather a general set of features that communities may interpret somewhat differently" (p. 17). When the Nashville chapter of the 100,000 Homes Campaign launched in 2013, Housing First became subject to community interpretation yet again.

In the present study, the pertinent "version" or instantiation of Housing First is the one that has developed in Nashville—my focal geographical context. This instantiation, along with the *local* institutions and material factors that have helped shape it, are what most directly

---

[21] The 100,000 Homes Campaign heavily emphasized stipulations foreign to the Pathways model: participating communities were to create a homeless registry and prioritize housing placements based on severe health risks and length of homelessness. In addition, although the Campaign emphasized consumer choice to receive or not receive services, it did not promote consumer choice in other aspects of services provision (such as in setting goals and priorities). Finally, the Campaign did not make an explicit rights-based case for Housing First; instead, it utilized a technocratic framing: homelessness was a problem to be solved, and participation in the Campaign was part of the solution (100,000 Homes Campaign, 2010).

concern the local players highlighted in my study (more so than Housing First's status as a macro-level institution). These local players—generally speaking, a community of organizations with a stake in homeless assistance in Nashville—comprise an institutional meaning system, or a local organizational field, that could be called the "Nashville homeless assistance field." A detailed discussion of the Nashville homeless assistance field, including its social boundaries, is part of what I will be discussing in Chapter Four. But before doing so, it is important to clarify what I mean by "Nashville" and its homeless assistance context. I will then introduce Open Table Nashville (OTN): a member of that context and an illustrative case study of local institutional work by a community organization.

Defining the Nashville Context. By Nashville, I mean the joint jurisdiction of the city of Nashville and Davidson County. To draw the geographical boundary as such is not an obvious decision, as "Nashville" could describe one of several levels of geography: the city of Nashville, Davidson County, or the 14 counties of the Nashville Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Each of these, to varying degrees, is characterized by proximity and shared culture that could support local institutions through normative and cultural-cognitive mechanisms. Regulatory contexts are easier to distinguish; coercive mechanisms are less obvious at the city and MSA levels but well defined at the county level. The city of Nashville and Davidson County are jointly governed by the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County and its agencies ("Metro Nashville"), establishing a consistency in formal rules that supports county-level institutions and distinguishes the county from the wider MSA. For example, the Metropolitan Housing Trust Fund Commission leverages an affordable housing trust fund to incentivize and regulate the development of affordable housing in Nashville and elsewhere in Davidson County (Metro

Nashville, 2019), whereas there is no counterpart to this elsewhere in the MSA or at the MSA level (Housing Trust Fund Project, 2020a; Housing Trust Fund Project, 2020b).

Indeed, Metro Nashville exerts influence over many aspects of community life: housing, law enforcement, hospitals, jobs, transit, schools, land use, and so on. Furthermore, by facilitating actor interaction within the county (e.g., through public hearings), Nashville-Davidson regulations help strengthen county-level normative and cultural-cognitive mechanisms, reinforcing the county's institutional distinctiveness. A "social enclosure" such as this can introduce resources (e.g., buildings convertible to emergency shelters) and complications (e.g., zoning restrictions) for homeless assistance—enabling and constraining local homeless assistance practices in the process (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). Because of this, it is plausible to view homeless assistance organizations in Nashville and Davidson County as simultaneously embedded in two institutional contexts: the (global) homeless assistance field and the Nashville-Davidson community.

Generally speaking, Nashville-Davidson homeless assistance organizations do not interpret this complex institutional environment alone, but together: as a distinct sub-field or sub-community of organizations with a stake in homeless assistance as instantiated in Nashville and Davidson County. This sub-community is structured by multiple Metro Nashville entities, but especially by the formal social body known as the Nashville-Davidson County Homelessness Continuum of Care (CoC). Membership in this body is open to "community partners … dedicating to ending homelessness" through "planning and managing effective homeless assistance resources and programs" in Nashville and Davidson County (pp. 1–2). Identification of homeless assistance as a Nashville-Davidson issue was also helped along by the formation of

the Metropolitan Homelessness Commission in 2005 and its subsequent activity (though the Commission merged with the CoC's governance board in 2018).

What has developed for Nashville-Davidson homeless assistance organizations (CoC members and non-members alike) is a community life routinely punctuated by events where local rules, expectations, and shared beliefs about homeless assistance are negotiated and broadcasted in support of particular local practices.[22] Insofar as these practices are reproduced over time, they become local institutions that govern responses to the complex institutional environment structured by the higher-level pressures of the homeless assistance field, on one hand, and those of the Nashville-Davidson community, on the other. That is to say, this organizational community is a good candidate for a local organizational field, with Nashville and Davidson County as the configuring geographical context.[23] For the sake of simplicity, I refer to these as the Nashville homeless assistance field and Nashville, respectively.

Figure 2.2 depicts these overlapping contexts (the homeless assistance field, Nashville, and the Nashville homeless assistance field). Chapters 4 and 5 will elaborate upon this diagram and provide empirical examples of how these contexts are distinct but connected. This will include an analysis of the (sometimes fuzzy) "boundaries" between contexts that help configure a local organizational field. Organizations embedded in all three contexts have a stake in different sets of institutional systems, which can be incongruent—affording opportunities for unique kinds of institutional work at the local level. These organizations include OTN.

---

[22] Examples of such events include the CoC General Membership Meeting (monthly), Homelessness Planning Council meetings (monthly), Youth Action Board meetings (weekly), the Pathways to Housing Nashville Symposium (biennial), the Point-in-Time Homeless Count (annual), and the Annual Homeless Memorial. (The Pathways to Housing Nashville Symposium appears to be coincidentally named, as it bears no clear relation to the New York-based community organization Pathways to Housing.)
[23] More-exclusive or more-inclusive communities of homeless assistance organizations (e.g., at the city level or the MSA level, respectively) may exist but are not as well structured.

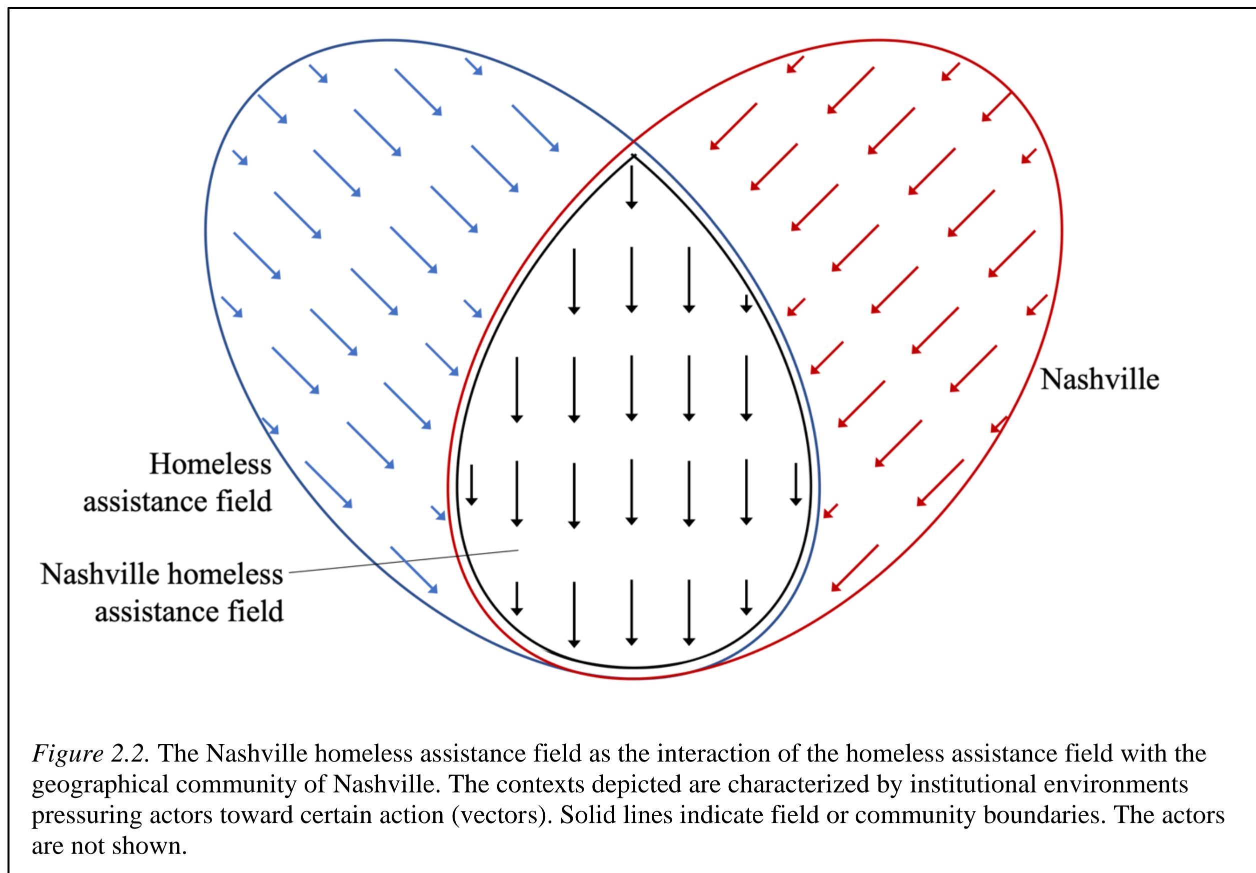

Figure 2.2. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville. The contexts depicted are characterized by institutional environments pressuring actors toward certain action (vectors). Solid lines indicate field or community boundaries. The actors are not shown.

Open Table Nashville (OTN)

That there is a discernible local institutional context centered on homeless assistance suggests an accessible target for a community organization interested in making an enduring mark on homeless assistance practices. In the homeless assistance field, macro-level institutions like Housing First and the staircase approach can be contingent on local interpretation, local legitimacy, and local resources; thus, local institutional processes can become fateful for how homeless assistance is put into practice. To engage in meaningful institutional work, a community organization need not target Housing First *qua* macro-level field institution (though this is what Pathways to Housing did in its efforts to create and strengthen the Pathways Housing First model). Rather, a community organization can find purpose in targeting Housing First *qua*

local-level field institution, whether directly (by targeting the rules, norms, and beliefs of the local homeless assistance field, as Chapter Four will explore) or indirectly (by targeting the rules, norms, and beliefs of the geographical community that enables and constrains the local field, as Chapter Five will explore). Housing First, then, is sensitive not just to global and societal processes, but to an interaction of local processes within a community organization's immediate sphere of influence. This is illustrated by the work of Open Table Nashville (OTN), the community organization at the heart of this case study.

Founded in 2011, OTN is a small community organization (with eight full-time staff at time my study began), heavily dependent on volunteers (Giving Matters, 2019). As Chapter Three will show, OTN engages in direct provision of a rights-based approach to homeless assistance that is well aligned with the Housing First paradigm. In addition, as Chapters 4 and 5 will show, it has also engaged in a number of activities expressly devoted to influencing local institutional systems that enable and constrain Housing First in Nashville.

As Chapter Four will narrate, OTN became heavily involved with the Nashville chapter of the 100,000 Homes Campaign—dubbed "How's Nashville"—when local government agencies launched the campaign in 2013 (How's Nashville, 2019b). OTN's work in the community during the How's Nashville campaign was enough to get it noticed. In 2014, the CBS show *60 Minutes* reported on the 100,000 Homes Campaign and the Housing First philosophy in a 14-minute segment, featuring How's Nashville—and OTN (Cooper, 2014). In 2015, the *Nashville Scene* named OTN "Best Nonprofit" in its perennial "Best of Nashville" issue. In the final year of the How's Nashville campaign, OTN received the "Catalyst for Change" award for its work in the community, at the Center for Nonprofit Management's 2016 award ceremony for nonprofits in Middle Tennessee (The Healing Trust, 2019). These accolades did not necessarily

result from OTN's involvement in How's Nashville, but they do underscore OTN's visibility and perceived effectiveness in its activist work.

I was one member of the community who noticed OTN during this time. My acquaintance with them began at a mayoral forum on homelessness that OTN organized in the spring of 2015, during Nashville's mayoral campaign. Impressed with this well-attended event, I interviewed two staff members and two affiliates of OTN as part of a small qualitative study on political activism related to the issue of homelessness. That summer, I volunteered as an intern for OTN, assisting them in various activities related to direct service provision. What kept me interested in OTN was their belief in rights-based homeless assistance, their deference to the perspectives of people experiencing homelessness, and their participation in local efforts to effect institutional change. In fact, the latter is what sparked my interest in how a community organization can participate in institutional work. There are numerous ways in which OTN has engaged in institutional work—some of which have become formal, regularized activities of the organization—motivated by its ethic of rights-based homeless assistance. How this relates to the field institution of Housing First is what this case study is about.

To make sense of OTN's activities, a useful starting point is OTN's own system of differentiation. OTN self-identifies as "a nonprofit, interfaith community that disrupts cycles of poverty, journeys with the marginalized and provides education about issues of homelessness" (OTN, 2022a). Within this mission statement (and evident in the structure of OTN's website, as well) are three organizational imperatives: journey, educate, and disrupt.

"Journey" refers to OTN's direct service provision activities (e.g., survival assistance and housing assistance) and their grounding in a non-authoritarian, companion-like approach to assisting people experiencing homelessness. Chapter Three will explain this further, as it is a

window into OTN’s organizational culture. OTN’s commitment to “journey” with Nashvillians experiencing homelessness showcases their embrace of rights-based homeless assistance and their alignment with the Housing First paradigm. These, in turn, are suggestive of the motivations behind their institutional work in the community.

As part of its “educate” imperative, OTN offers formal education about poverty and homelessness through trainings, urban immersions (guided tours of downtown Nashville), speaking engagements, and group volunteer activities. Some of these “education sessions” (e.g., the winter outreach training) appear aimed at reproducing preferred practices of direct homeless assistance, whereas others (e.g., speaking engagements) can be more abstract in their subject matter and less focused on practical skills. Some of the trainings are offered to the public under OTN’s initiative, but other trainings and education sessions are provided to groups upon request. According to its website, OTN facilitates education sessions “with the goal of promoting personal transformation and systemic change” (OTN, 2022b). Left unsaid but clear nonetheless, the intended subject undergoing this “personal transformation” is not the person experiencing homelessness (a-la staircase model), but the relatively well-resourced individual whose own beliefs and values are connected to institutionalized systems that perpetuate homelessness. Thus, OTN’s education sessions are apparent expressions of institutional work. Moreover, while the sessions are offered locally, they are targeted to a broader population than the issue-focused members of the Nashville homeless assistance field. That is, the target population does not consist merely of service providers and other active participants in the homeless assistance field, but a broader swath of community members such as high school students, church members, and so on. This suggests that the targeted institutions are those of the geographical community,

broadly (outlined in red in Figure 2.2). This Nashville-targeted institutional work is explored more in Chapter Five.

Finally, OTN embraces a "disrupt" imperative. Specifically, OTN works to "disrupt cycles of poverty and homelessness" by advocating changes in public policies. This policy work targets five areas: (1) affordable housing plus Housing First; (2) ending the criminalization of poverty and homelessness; (3) equitable community development; (4) health care affordability and accessibility; and (5) ending mass incarceration plus restorative and transformative justice (OTN, 2022c). To maintain a focus on Housing First and its components (e.g., permanent housing), my case study will focus primarily on advocacy area #1 and, to a lesser extent, advocacy area #3. OTN expresses its advocacy in a variety of ways—for example, through formal and informal participation in the activities of the Nashville CoC (discussed in Chapter Four) and collaboration with local community organizing groups around the topic of affordable housing (discussed in Chapter Five).

Whereas OTN's education activities are more solitary, their disruption activities are more collaborative. OTN names local and/or national partners for each advocacy area, indicating that OTN sees interorganizational relationships as important for its disruptive activities. For example: with respect to advocacy around affordable housing and Housing First, OTN sees partners in the local groups Nashville Organized for Action and Hope (NOAH); Welcome Home Nashville; A Voice + Nashville Rising; and the People's Alliance for Transit, Housing, and Employment (PATHE), as well as in the national groups National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH); U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH); National Coalition for the Homeless; National Low Income Housing Coalition; and the Poor People's Campaign.

Some of OTN's activities are not easily categorizable under "journey," "educate," or "disrupt." When I asked OTN's interim co-director if there are education-related activities not listed on OTN's education webpage, she mentioned that OTN writes op-eds and works closely with local reporters, journalists, and filmmakers to raise public awareness around OTN's focal policy issues. She also mentioned OTN's "Know Your Rights" trainings for residents of homeless campsites and tenants facing eviction or displacement. Later, she mentioned these same activities when I asked a similar question about OTN's disruption and advocacy activities. It is easy to see why. Education, disruption—these can blur together. Education can be disruptive to belief systems, and disruptive advocacy can facilitate learning.

OTN's activities—of all types—manifest in the Nashville homeless assistance field, specifically. I have already mentioned two of them: OTN's service provision activities and their participation in the How's Nashville campaign. In addition to these, OTN has voting membership in the Nashville CoC, attends CoC General Meetings, sits on various CoC committees, participates in the CoC's annual homeless count, has been represented on the Homelessness Planning Council (the top governing body of the CoC), and has worked closely with the Council to produce the Strategic Community Plan (the "core values" of which mention Housing First). OTN also helps organize the Annual Homeless Memorial service every December and is dependent on the CoC and its members (as well as first responders and others) to report the names of people in the homeless community who died during the preceding twelve months. In addition, OTN is highly invested in maintaining up-to-date knowledge about the homeless assistance field; it regularly makes referrals to homeless assistance organizations that offer services OTN does not provide, and it maintains a comprehensive resource guide for people in need of assistance—publishing an updated edition (in booklet form) each year.

Through its participation in the CoC and its bilateral relationships with other homeless assistance organizations, OTN is an active member of the community of organizations that comprise the Nashville homeless assistance field. However, some of OTN's education and disruption activities suggest that it sits uncomfortably in the field of homeless assistance (where activities revolve around planning and managing resources earmarked for addressing homelessness). Although OTN engages in multiple forms of homeless assistance and advocates for Housing First practices, it also tries to disrupt broader community institutions that it views as underlying drivers of cyclical homelessness. Implicit in this is a belief in the *limitations* of Housing First and of the homeless assistance field more broadly: that the institutions of *OTN's geographical community* are a key factor preventing Housing First from transforming the local homeless assistance system into one where everyone who wants a home can have one, as a matter of right. This view is not original; others elsewhere have commented on the fatefulness of community institutions for implementing Housing First (e.g., USICH, 2016) and ending homelessness (e.g., Burt & Spellman, 2007). However, OTN's work represents a *change effort* that could potentially inform the activities of likeminded community organizations, in Nashville and elsewhere.

As I will try to demonstrate in this study, OTN's activism is an example of institutional work by a community organization in an organizational field. In institutional theory, this is an oft-neglected combination of activity, actor, and setting, which I have argued hinders our understanding of institutional processes that connect macro-level field models to local practice. With the help of the local organizational field construct, I will show how OTN's work implicates a macro-level field institution (Housing First) even though it targets local institutional systems. Moreover, OTN's culture of rights-based homeless assistance motivates it to step *beyond* the

local homeless assistance context and direct its institutional work toward other local issues—while remaining relevant to Housing First. Because of this, OTN is an exemplar of how a community organization can try to influence an organizational field's institutional processes.

Research Questions

In what ways can a community organization engage in local institutional work while embedded in an organizational field? To begin to answer this question, I conducted a case study of the community organization Open Table Nashville (OTN) and its institutional work, with a focus on OTN's discourse and activities from its founding in 2010 to August 2020. As noted above, OTN has publicly signaled a favorable disposition toward Housing First (my field institution of interest) in Nashville, Tennessee (my place of interest). Thus, my references to "institutional work" imply purposive efforts to strengthen or maintain Nashville practices consistent with Housing First or, conversely, to disrupt practices inconsistent with Housing First. With this case, my intent is to demonstrate the relevance of geographical communities and community organizations for field institutions. To help structure the analysis, I utilized my proposed construct of the local organizational field—an intersectional space that integrates field and community contexts.

In conducting this case study, I focused on two dimensions of "institutional work": cultural-cognitive drivers, on one hand, and social activities, on the other. Culture and cognition are related to one another because the perspectives of individual organization members contribute to and reflect the shared beliefs and values that define the organization's culture. Cultural-cognitive drivers and social activities are both integral to the "purposive efforts" that define institutional work in the literature. Methodologically, it made sense to differentiate them

since activities are empirical while culture and cognition are less so. Below, I structure my research questions accordingly.

Cultural-Cognitive Drivers of OTN's Institutional Work

Although OTN's public mission to advocate "Housing First" in Nashville suggests an intent to help institutionalize Housing First, I wanted to achieve a more-robust understanding of OTN's cultural-cognitive alignment with the Housing First paradigm. Is OTN's advocacy of Housing First merely lip service given to a field institution, or is it a product of deeper convictions shared by OTN members? To what extent is OTN's conception of Housing First consistent with field definitions? Answering these questions seemed necessary for establishing the purposiveness behind OTN's institutional work and this work's relevance to the Housing First paradigm.

So, I was interested in how OTN's Housing First advocacy might be *motivated* by what OTN members believe to be true and what they think is right. This invited an exploration of their organizational culture. I was also interested in what Housing First *means* to OTN members, so that I could better understand *what* they advocate. As I noted above, OTN's top advocacy area is "affordable housing plus Housing First" (OTN, 2022c). However, what OTN means by "Housing First" was not obvious, as the homeless assistance field is replete with competing definitions and models. Without examining OTN's own interpretation, it would have been difficult to understand the set of homeless assistance practices OTN has been trying to institutionalize in Nashville.

These research interests can be summarized in the following question: To what extent are OTN's idealized homeless assistance practices (including members' own conception of

"Housing First") consistent with the Housing First paradigm? From this, three research questions were derived:

1(a). What are key aspects of OTN's culture of homeless assistance, and how do these align (or not align) with Housing First?

1(b). How do OTN members describe Housing First?

1(c). How do OTN members' descriptions of Housing First compare to common conceptualizations of Housing First in the homeless assistance field?

Together, these questions were a useful prerequisite to understanding OTN's institutional work in the homeless assistance field. Question 1(a) examined the extent to which OTN can be considered a member of the homeless assistance field in the first place. All three questions sought to clarify exactly OTN is advocating when it advocates Housing First, as well as what drives this advocacy.

Activities Comprising OTN's Institutional Work

Next, I turned to the *activities* that comprise OTN's institutional work related to Housing First. Some bounding was needed; an exhaustive analysis of OTN's institutional work might have needed to account for the institutions of innumerable contexts that OTN members try to influence (e.g., various religious contexts, the non-profit sector, and the multiplicity of contexts in which individual OTN members are embedded). Consequently, I applied a narrower analytical framework that drew on the local organizational field construct to emphasize and differentiate three institutional contexts that I identified a priori: the homeless assistance field writ large, the Nashville homeless assistance field, and the geographical community that configures this qualitative break. Based on my own background review, I understood OTN to be positioned within all of these interacting, overlapping contexts—each structured by distinct institutional systems with the potential to influence and be influenced. My central focus was how the

institutions of these contexts have informed OTN's institutional work, along with how OTN has strived to affect these institutions.

My research questions about OTN's institutional work were divided into two sets: OTN's attempts to influence the institutional systems of the Nashville homeless assistance field and OTN's attempts to influence the institutional systems of the broader Nashville community. I begin with the former:

2(a). How has OTN acted directly to influence the local institution of Housing First?

2(b). How has this work implicated the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems of the Nashville homeless assistance field?

2(c). How has this work been limited by the institutions of the broader community of Nashville?

Question 2(a) focuses on the activities that comprise OTN's institutional work in the Nashville homeless assistance field. Answering this entailed describing discrete actions that OTN has taken in the community, as well as describing these actions in theoretical terms as forms of institutional work. Question 2(b) focuses on how these activities can be framed in terms in terms of their potential influence on the formal rules, binding expectations, and shared beliefs of the Nashville homeless assistance field. Question 2(c) focuses on the limitations of OTN's institutional work in the Nashville homeless assistance field, due to external pressures from elsewhere in the community.

Next, I asked similar questions related to OTN's attempts to influence the institutions of the broader geographical community:

3(a). How has OTN acted to influence local institutions that are not specific to homeless assistance?

3(b). How has this work implicated the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems of the geographical community of Nashville?

3(c). How has this work implicated the local institution of Housing First?

Question 3(a) focuses on the activities that comprise OTN's institutional work in the broader community of Nashville. Specifically, I considered activities in Nashville that were external to the homeless assistance context but that implicated Housing First practices. These consisted of activities targeting local affordable housing regulations and activities targeting public perceptions of who "deserves" housing. Question 3(b) focuses on how these activities can be framed in terms of their potential influence on the formal rules, binding expectations, and shared beliefs of the broader community of Nashville. Finally, Question 3(c) seeks to understand how OTN's efforts to influence the institutions of the broader community might, in turn, influence the local institution of Housing First.

In studying OTN's institutional work, it is important to emphasize that I was looking for examples of *efforts*, not necessarily *accomplishments.* Influencing institutions is often a long-term project, sometimes involving an accumulation of efforts from multiple organizational actors. This means that apparent success might not be attributable solely to OTN but also to other organizational actors who share similar goals, which my focus on OTN might obscure. Also, apparent *lack* of success during this study's relatively short observation window might not be indicative of what will happen in the long term or of what might be happening that is unobserved. (As one of my OTN informants told me: "The system can be slow to respond, but it doesn't mean that work is not happening. And it doesn't mean you can't keep pushing forward.") Some impacts—for example, changes in how the public perceives people experiencing homelessness—might take time to manifest in observable phenomena.

Thus, my primary focus was to identify examples of what OTN has been *trying* to do. This is sufficient for my argument that community organizations have agency in organizational

fields, instead of being the "automatons" implied by much of institutional theory. Nevertheless, in the following chapters, I do point out some instances where OTN appears to have been influential. Such episodes suggest that community organizations can be meaningful *players* in a field's institutional dynamics, even if their influence is limited to a single locale.

Methodology

To understand OTN's culture of homeless assistance and local institutional work, I employed case study methodology. Although OTN is not a highly unusual or unique case from an institutional perspective, it can be an instrumental case (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that demonstrates the phenomenon at the heart of this dissertation: local institutional work by a community organization embedded in an organizational field. OTN members constituted my units of analysis. A focus on individual members was warranted because my research questions called for an examination of OTN's culture, including members' beliefs, values, intentions, and motivations. As noted above, the study of institutional work involves the study of activities, but it also involves the study of subjective phenomena that distinguish rote activity from purposive *work*. Thus, the subjective perspectives of individual OTN members were crucial for answering the research questions. Together, these perspectives helped me better understand the singular case of OTN the organization. Although individual perspectives sometimes differed, there were common themes that can be said to represent the organization as a whole.

Because of my case study's interest in the subjective perspectives of individual OTN members, it relied heavily on an interview approach to data collection—a method designed "to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). These lived worlds included the activities OTN members engage in; interviews helped uncover what these activities are and what

they mean to the participants. To supplement my interviews, I also directly observed a selection of OTN activities and collected archival data. I analyzed data using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches.

Sampling and Data Collection

For my study, I collected three types of data: interviews of OTN members, observations of OTN activities, and archival records of OTN activities. The interviews provided rich insight into the cultural-cognitive drivers of OTN's work, but interview data were limited in that they represented OTN at a particular snapshot in time. This especially true due to high organizational turnover; by the time I finished my study, OTN still employed only three of the eight staff members I interviewed. Consequently, observations and (especially) archives were important for triangulating themes about OTN. Below, I detail my sampling and data collection strategies for each data type.

Interviews. This study adopted a purposive sampling strategy that targeted individuals who could be considered formal members of the organization OTN. I created an initial list of members in February 2020 by consulting OTN's website, which named all nine staff members and eight board members who were associated with OTN at the time. However, I also wanted to account for individuals who participated in other formal organizational roles. To this end, I consulted with OTN's interim co-director, Lindsey Krinks. Knowing the basic contours of my research plans, she recommended that I also interview OTN's three interns; a former board member who remains a key volunteer; and three collaborators on community education, which OTN considers an "Education Team." (These collaborators are not considered staff; they play an advisory role, drawing on their own experiences of homelessness to assist OTN's community education efforts on a voluntary basis.) This totaled 24 potential informants. I had no exclusion

criteria for participation. Of the potential informants, I was able to interview 8 of the 9 staff members, 2 of the 8 board members, 3 interns, and 1 education collaborator—that is, 14 of the initial pool, with a heavy staff representation. Two of the staff members were OTN cofounders; due to their leadership and long tenure, I considered them key informants and heavily relied on them in some sections of Chapters 4 and 5.

With each informant, I conducted an initial interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Sometimes, a 30-minute follow-up interview was sought for the purpose of verifying details, confirming my interpretations, and asking follow-up questions. The initial interview was semi-structured, guided by a general order of questioning and a bank of questions designed to elicit how the informant understood Housing First, the relevant institutional environment, OTN's culture of homeless assistance, and OTN's institutional work.

My question bank consisted of three sections: basic information about the informant and OTN's activities (Table 2.1), the informant's conception of Housing First (Table 2.2), and the informant's perceptions of OTN's institutional work as it related to Housing First (Table 2.3). Each section was designed to begin its questioning broadly, to elicit the informant's understandings in his or her own words (as much as possible). Sometimes, initial questions yielded rich responses that rendered later questions redundant. Conversely, informants sometimes declined to elaborate in sufficient detail, prompting further probing. The bank offered narrower questions that I could draw upon in this latter kind of situation. I also allowed myself flexibility to depart from the question bank if needed, to follow a theoretically relevant train of thought.

Table 2.1

Question Bank for Getting to Know the Informant and OTN

<u>Question 1:</u> What is your role at Open Table? How long have you been in this role?

<u>Question 2:</u> What were you doing before you started working with Open Table?

<u>Question 3</u>*:* Why is homelessness an important issue for you?

<u>Question 4:</u> What activities are you involved with at Open Table? What is Open Table trying to accomplish with [activity X, Y, Z …] in our community, in the long term?

<u>Question 5:</u> From your own experiences or your conversations with others, what are some activities or events in the past that Open Table helped lead and that Open Table is proud of?

<u>Question 6</u>*:* Imagine that money and time are not an issue. Of Open Table's current activities, are there any that you would like to see expanded or improved? Are there any *new* activities that you would like to see Open Table start doing?

Since my methodology relied heavily on interviews to understand the perspectives of OTN members, I will explain my choice of questions and interview structure. I will begin with the questions intended to obtain basic information about the informant and about OTN's work in the community (Table 2.1). Questions 1 through 3 were relatively easy questions intended to establish rapport with the informant. They sometimes also provided insight into non-focal institutional contexts that were motivating and shaping the informant—that is, contexts other than the homeless assistance field and the geographical community of Nashville. For example, some informants cited their religious background in explaining why they care about assisting people experiencing homelessness (not surprising, given that OTN describes itself as an interfaith organization). Although religious contexts are beyond the scope of this study, their unsolicited emergence in the data contributed to my assessment of the study's limitations and possible areas for future research. Insofar as these alternative contexts have motivated and shaped OTN's institutional work, my understanding of OTN's institutional work will have been limited.

Questions 4 and 5 attempted to understand OTN's work in the community, from the informant's perspective. Question 4 aimed to identify specific organizational activities. To aid the informant and to ensure that a meaningful activity was not forgotten, I came prepared with a typed list of activities that I had identified as being within OTN's scope of work (see Appendix A). I asked the informant to circle the activities with which they had at least some involvement. (They also had the option of writing down an activity if it was not on the list.) Thus, Question 4 focused on OTN's present activities with which the informant was most familiar. Similarly, Question 5 focused on OTN's past activities that were most salient in the informant's mind during the interview. My allusions to spans of time and to the community context in both questions were meant to encourage the informant to think beyond the immediate situational goals of their activities and beyond the organizational context of OTN—hopefully, in the process, narrowing the informant's attention to ways in which OTN has tried to influence community or field institutions over time. Later in the interview, I provided the informant opportunities to elaborate further.

Question 6 asked OTN informants to imagine desired organizational expansions. The intent of the question was to better understand OTN's priorities and ideal practices. This gave OTN members an opportunity to think beyond OTN's limitations toward new ways that the organization's values could be realized. In practice, I usually asked this question at the very end of the interview, after existing organizational activities had already been discussed.

The goal of the second section of the interview (Table 2.2) was to draw out the informant's conception of Housing First, such that it could be compared with the various ways in which Housing First was described in the literature. For example, did the informant see Housing First as synonymous with housing-led (a.k.a. low-barrier) assistance, or did they see it as

Table 2.2

Question Bank for OTN's Conceptualization of Housing First

Question 7: When you hear the words "Housing First," what comes to mind?
Question 8: In your view, what is it that makes Housing First *different* from other ways of assisting people experiencing homelessness?
Question 9: Why is Housing First important to Open Table? What about Housing First is compatible with Open Table's beliefs and values?
Question 10: How did you first learn about Housing First?
Question 11: Is there an organization in this community (other than Open Table) that you think is a good role model for how to put Housing First into practice? What about an organization in some other community? What makes these organizations good role models?
Question 12: Is there a *community* that you think is a good role model for how a community should put Housing First into practice? What makes this community a good role model?
Question 13: What do you think is needed to run a successful Housing First program?
Question 14: In your view, what would disqualify a homeless program from being labeled "Housing First"?
Question 15: In your view, are there some people in the homeless community who are *not* a good fit for a Housing First program? [If yes:] What makes them not a good fit? [If no:] Could you explain why you think everyone is a good fit?
Question 16: What kinds of behaviors should or should not get someone kicked out of a Housing First program?

something closer to the Pathways model of consumer-driven housing assistance plus services? Specific questions were designed to elicit this. Questions 7 through 9 prompted the informant to explain Housing First *before* my questions about specific Housing First components could influence their responses. These broad questions were meant to identify formal definitions, juxtapositions, or underlying beliefs or values that the informant had been exposed to, whether from OTN or elsewhere.

Still, without further probing, the informant might have been unable to put Housing First into words or fully articulate their understanding of the model. Because of processes of mimetic isomorphism, we know that organization members often look for guidance in existing forms of

practice found in their organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, Question 10 prompted the informant to explain how they first learned about Housing First, while Questions 11 and 12 prompted the informant to point to Housing First exemplars (both inside and outside their local community). Drawing the informant's attention to concrete examples of Housing First implementations was intended to help the informant recall features of the Housing First model that they might not have initially remembered. These questions also began to establish key local and nonlocal relationships that OTN has with the homeless assistance field, which may have later helped the informant recall ways in which OTN targets field institutions. Finally, Questions 13 through 16 asked more-pointed questions about what Housing First looks like programmatically. This included the resources required (e.g., available housing units and support services) as well as any specific practices seen as incompatible with a Housing First approach. If needed, Questions 15 and 16 also probed whether the informant associated Housing First with behavioral requirements before or after placement in housing.

The goal of the third and last section of the interview (Table 2.3) was to understand the informant's perception of OTN's institutional work: the ways in which it has directly and indirectly targeted the institutions of the local homeless assistance field. Again, I started with a broad question. Since a formal advocacy area of OTN is "affordable housing plus Housing First," I assumed that OTN is interested in Housing First becoming a more-common practice in the community. Thus, Question 17 prompted the informant to explain how OTN is trying to bring about this change. This sometimes led to a wide-ranging discussion about topics from OTN's leadership in the Nashville-Davidson Continuum of Care to OTN's advocacy of affordable housing. I also wanted to revisit the activities that were most salient for the informant earlier in the interview—especially the goals of these activities as they related to institutional

Table 2.3

Question Bank for OTN's Institutional Work

Question 17: In your view, what is preventing Housing First from becoming a more common practice in our community? Has Open Table been trying to do something about this?
Question 18: Earlier, you mentioned a long-term goal of [activity X, Y, Z…]. [Brief recap of what the goal was.] Do you see this goal as related to Housing First? If so, how?
Question 19: Earlier, you mentioned a *past* activity or event that you think best illustrates or represents what Open Table is trying to accomplish. [Brief recap of that activity or event.] In your view, was this activity or event related to Housing First?
Question 20: Think about the other local organizations assisting people experiencing homelessness in this community. [Prompt for some organization names.] How much agreement do you think there is that Housing First is the right approach? [If some disagreement:] What do you think are the sources of disagreement?
Question 21: Does Open Table try to persuade or convince other organizations that they should follow a Housing First approach? If so: where, when, and how?
Question 22: When persuasion fails, does Open Table try to *put some pressure* on organizations to follow a Housing First approach? If so: where, when, and how?
Question 23: I noticed on Open Table's website that one of Open Table's advocacy areas is "affordable housing plus Housing First." In your view, how are affordable housing and Housing First related? Has Open Table been trying to do something about affordable housing?

work and Housing First. This was the purpose of Questions 18 and 19. Since Housing First is an explicit area of advocacy for OTN, I did not view these as leading questions. However, I made sure to pay attention to pauses, qualifiers, and other signs of an ambiguous or doubtful connection between a given activity and OTN's interest in Housing First.

If needed, Questions 20 through 22 prompted the informant to explain OTN's understanding of, and relationship with, the institutions of a specific community of organizations: the Nashville homeless assistance field. The purpose of these questions was to narrow the informant's attention to the institutional pressures of the local field rather than those that characterize the broader community of Nashville. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the meaning system of the homeless assistance field facilitates debate about Housing First vis-à-vis

competing institutions like the staircase approach. I alluded to this debate in my questions. Question 20 acknowledged possible disagreement among local field organizations about Housing First and prompted the informant to speculate about conflicting institutional pressures. Question 21 introduced OTN as a player in this debate, asking about OTN's efforts to influence the normative systems of the local field. Question 22 asked about OTN's efforts to influence the regulative systems of the local field. I did not have a question that explicitly probed about efforts to influence cultural-cognitive systems, because I expected that other questions (e.g., Question 17) would elicit explanations of how OTN tries to raise awareness about Housing First and make a case for it.

Finally, Question 23 asked about the connection between Housing First and the issue of affordable housing. Given that a formal advocacy area of OTN is "affordable housing plus Housing First," this connection had often already come up by this point in the interview. Nevertheless, as it is an important connection for OTN, it was important to revisit the topic. This was a final opportunity to learn how OTN has been targeting the institutions of the broader geographical community, especially those related to affordable housing, as part of an indirect effort to strengthen the local institution of Housing First.

It was rare that I asked all 23 questions in a given interview. The question bank was designed as a tool for moving the conversation forward if elaboration was minimal or if certain key topics had seen little or no discussion. In addition, I sometimes found it appropriate to ask questions not included in this question bank or to phrase questions differently, depending on what was being discussed.

Observations. In addition to conducting interviews, I sampled activities to observe. This was important because, in addition to asking OTN members for their subjective accounts of their

activities, I wanted to make an independent effort to understand those activities more directly. Because many of OTN's observable activities are video recorded, my inability to directly observe an activity in person was sometimes made up for with an opportunity to observe a recording. In addition, some activities—namely, OTN's trainings for members of the public—had slideshows I could access, even if I had not attended. Consequently, there was some overlap in my data collection efforts related to observations and archives.

At the outset, I limited my observations to events, meetings, and other activities that were open to members of the public, for the sake of convenience and to avoid situations where I might compromise confidentiality. I defined the scope of observable activities to be those that OTN was organizing, co-organizing, or merely participating in. Furthermore, I considered observing an activity if it was flagged by a study participant or advertised through some official OTN outlet (i.e., through OTN's website, social media pages, email listservs, or other communication outlet that speaks for the organization). The activities I initially considered for observation are listed in Table 2.4. Those I was able to observe (either in person or virtually) are bolded.

Certain activities were not observable during the data collection period, for a few reasons. Some activities simply did not occur within my observation window due to their infrequency.

Table 2.4

Observable OTN Activities of Interest

- CoC General Meeting
- **CoC committee meetings**
- Speaking engagements
- **Urban immersions (educational tours of Downtown Nashville)**
- Group volunteer activities
- Citywide Stations of the Cross (an annual "urban pilgrimage" and guided meditation on Good Friday)
- **Advocacy & Policy Training**
- **Direct action (rallies, protests, etc.)**
- **2019 Annual Homeless Memorial**

Note. Activities in boldface are activities I was able to observe (in person or virtually).

For example, OTN hosts a large fundraiser every October, but my observation window was in late winter and spring. In addition, my ability to observe was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in mid-March, observable public activities (e.g., community meetings) were no longer held in person. Eventually, some of these activities occurred virtually, and I was able to watch them from a distance—effectively folding them into my archival research. A benefit of this was that the calls were recorded and published online, so I could rewatch them as needed. However, in the early weeks of the pandemic, there was a period when virtual meeting protocols and schedules had not yet been established, leaving community members to interact via conference calls that were not open to the public. My ability to observe was sharply curtailed during this time. However, by that point, I had already directly observed some activities in person: an Advocacy & Policy Training, an urban immersion, and the 2019 Homeless Memorial.

When I observed an event in person, I took contemporaneous field notes, which I then expanded upon within 48 hours of the observation. I did not observe activities in which participants had an expectation of privacy, such as one-on-one meetings between OTN informants and members of other organizations. Instead, observations were limited to events or meetings that any member of the public was welcome to observe. Not everything about OTN informants' activities and interactions with others were recorded; I focused on details that added to my understanding of OTN's institutional work. This sometimes required that I write down limited information about the individuals with which OTN participants were interacting—namely, their affiliations and general characterizations of their interactions or conversations as they related to OTN activities. Brief informal interviews with OTN participants sometimes occurred spontaneously during observations to solicit their contemporaneous interpretations of the activities and events that I was observing.

Archives

Finally, I sampled archives to collect (Table 2.5). I was dependent on OTN members to access some organizational documents, such as training materials. However, most other archival sources I could easily access via the Internet. I searched for mentions of OTN in newspaper articles, television station articles, and other articles published online, as well as in posts on the How's Nashville and Metro Nashville Facebook pages. I searched OTN's Facebook page for posts relevant to Housing First and affordable housing. I subscribed to OTN's emails. I searched the Metro Nashville YouTube page for videos of events that informants mentioned in their interviews. None of the collected archives contained confidential, private, or otherwise sensitive information.

A key part of this process was collecting articles published online. Altogether, I collected 187 articles in which OTN was at least mentioned, published between April 24, 2011, and August 6, 2020 (Table 2.6). I found these articles primarily via the website search engines of prominent local news organizations; since *The Tennessean* emerged as a key source, I also subscribed to the Tennessean Archives. In addition, I used Google to search for "Open Table

Table 2.5

Archival Sources

- Newspaper articles, television interviews, videos of public hearings, films, and other media featuring OTN representative(s)
- Social media posts from OTN's official Facebook account, including photos and recordings of public events, a video tour of OTN's headquarters, calls to action, and fundraising campaigns
- Content sent to OTN's email subscribers
- PowerPoint slides, documents, and other media used for trainings
- Footage of the 2019 Annual Homeless Memorial
- Videos published on Metro Nashville's YouTube channel
- Photos of an OTN art gallery I observed while attending an urban immersion

Table 2.6

Sources of Articles Collected in which OTN Was at Least Mentioned

Source	Count of Articles
The Tennessean	73
The Nashville Scene	28
WPLN	13
WSMV	13
WKRN	12
Nashville Pride / Pride Publishing Group	7
WTVF	7
The Tennessee Tribune	6
GCA: The News	4
WZTV	3
Nashville Business Journal	2
Style Blueprint	2
Al Jazeera America	1
Capital & Main	1
CBS National News	1
GreenMatters	1
HuffPost Canada	1
Memphis Flyer	1
Nashville Post	1
Next City	1
NFocus	1
Nonprofit Quarterly	1
Out and About Nashville	1
Patch	1
The All State	1
UM News	1
The Washington Post	1
WDEF Chattanooga	1
WKNO FM	1

Nashville" and for the names of prominent OTN members. Although the vast majority of collected articles came from local news sources, I found a smattering of articles from other locales and from national news sources. These articles could be categorized as news (n = 168), opinion (n = 16), organizational profile (n = 3), and event description (n = 3). Furthermore, the prominence of OTN in these articles varied. Five op-eds were authored by OTN members themselves. Another two articles were petitions or letters that OTN cosigned. Of the remaining articles, OTN was either featured (n = 44), quoted (n = 73), or mentioned (n = 64), in descending order of prominence. Since these invariably described OTN's public activities or opinions, I

considered all of them to be relevant to my study. Even if article content did not directly relate to Housing First or affordable housing, it helped me better understand the totality of OTN's priorities in the public eye.

In addition to searching for articles, I used a variety of search terms to identify posts on OTN's Facebook page relevant to their advocacy area of "affordable housing plus Housing First." Such terms included: "Housing First," "permanent housing," "affordable housing," "Barnes" (the name of Nashville's affordable housing trust fund), "How's Nashville," "housing is a human right," "housing ends homelessness", "housing saves lives," and their hashtag counterparts. Some of these (e.g., "Housing First") were identified a priori while others (e.g., "housing saves lives") were added as I observed them during the search process. I was especially interested in posts with videos, since the videos often elaborated upon the post content. For each relevant post, I documented the written content, took notes on the video content, and transcribed key sections of videos. I followed this process for 205 relevant Facebook posts, of which 202 had a video attached. Most of these were posted between the dates January 18, 2015, and May 7, 2020. I also found one posted in January 2013.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of interviews, notes from observations and interviews, digital copies of written archives, and notes and transcriptions from video archives were analyzed using NVivo software. Below, I describe my approach to coding the data and analyzing the codes.

I used an inductive, open coding approach to assign *in vivo* codes to informants' descriptions of their idealized homeless assistance practices, including Housing First. When a code became particularly significant and/or frequent, I considered making it a major category; when this happened, I re-analyzed the data to determine if other initial codes might fit under this

category. Throughout this iterative process, I created and maintained code notes consisting of my own interpretations, including any connections to theoretical constructs. At this point, I began to find what could be called major features of OTN's approach to homeless assistance and OTN members' perspectives on Housing First. Once all data were analyzed per this "focused coding" process (Charmaz, 2006), I compared the findings with the various ways in which the Housing First paradigm is described in the literature.

To analyze data related to OTN's institutional work, I integrated inductive and deductive coding approaches. Similar to my approach with OTN's culture of homeless assistance, I used an inductive, open coding process combined with focused coding to develop major *in vivo* subcategories of OTN's activist activities in the community. In writing my code notes, I identified any institutional systems that OTN's activities appeared to be targeting—that is, regulative, normative, or cultural-cognitive systems of the local organizational field and/or of the broader geographical community.

As the coding progressed, I categorized codes as being related to OTN's culture of homeless assistance, the Nashville homeless assistance field, or the broader geographical community. These analyses became Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the study, respectively. In each analysis, I used my codes to describe OTN's institutional work from informants' perspectives. In writing Chapters 4 and 5, I discussed how OTN's work related to the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems of the context in question. To aid this, I selected samples of activities that seemed relevant to Housing First and were prominent in my data.

After finishing my manuscript, I tried to strengthen the credibility of my findings by asking my informants to validate my interpretations, a process known as member checking. First, I provided copies of the full draft manuscript to my two key informants (OTN cofounders).

These copies contained hyperlinks and comments that identified the informants' quotes. I asked these key informants to review their quotes as well as the Introduction section, which summarizes the study. Next, I emailed the other informants (except for one former intern that I was not able to contact). Each of these informants received a two-paragraph summary narrative, the study's table of contents, and the informant's quotes along with the surrounding context. I gave key informants at least one month to review the manuscript and other informants two weeks to review their quotes. To date, 1 of 2 key informants and 8 of 12 other informants have responded (approvingly or with minor revision requests).

Conclusion

In the background above, I explained how the Housing First paradigm disrupted the staircase model's dominance and became an institution of the homeless assistance field. In the U.S., the 100,000 Homes Campaign contributed to the Housing First paradigm's institutionalization, in part by catalyzing local campaigns like How's Nashville. This local campaign provided a new opportunity for Housing First to become established as a Nashville institution. My theoretical framework implies that the institutions of the geographical community might enable or constrain Housing First's local institutionalization. At the intersection of these pressures, community organizations like OTN can engage in various forms of institutional work to influence Housing First or other relevant local institutions.

This theorized context—a local organizational field configured by the issue-based institutions of a global organizational field and the place-based institutions of a geographical community—brings attention to local-level institutions and processes that are fateful for the institutionalization of macro-level models of practice (like Housing First). As I argued in Chapter One, this attention to the local makes it easier to conceive of and analyze the institutional work

of community organizations embedded in an organizational field. I expect that this applies to community organizations like OTN that are embedded in the field of homeless assistance. As this study will argue, such organizations and their institutional work, even work that is local in scope, can be relevant for the institutionalization of the Housing First paradigm.

The conclusion of my study will revisit these ideas by using the case study findings to discuss the relevance of community organizations for institutions and institutional work. Much is at stake in OTN's institutional work; the local organizational field framework will bring this into sharper focus, by connecting local and extra-local interests. OTN's institutional work was not expected to yield observable impacts on institutions during the study time frame—but my analysis of their work does indeed suggest some influence, and it also shows what future accomplishments might be possible. Specifically, we can imagine how OTN's work, if successful, would matter for the Housing First paradigm—either by way of *direct* influence (e.g., on the paradigm's interpretation and legitimation among actors in the local homeless assistance field) or *indirect* influence (e.g., on other Nashville institutions that help enable or constrain the local homeless assistance field). Community organizations elsewhere could learn from what OTN is trying to accomplish and the strategies they are employing. Future research might follow an organization like OTN for a longer period of time and report observations of how the organization's institutional work is or is not achieving its intended goals.

CHAPTER 3

OTN's Culture of Homeless Assistance

"One of our big phrases is that we journey along with people. We're not walking in front of them or walking behind them, but we are side-by-side."

As the previous chapter narrated, the Housing First paradigm steadily gained legitimacy in the 2000s as an alternative to the staircase model of homeless assistance. By 2010, the homeless assistance field was buzzing with optimism about the potential of Housing First for ending homelessness. Research evidence for Housing First—mostly affirming, and sometimes conclusively so—had been accumulating for more than a decade, catching the eyes of advocates, service providers, research professionals, and government agencies around the world. Housing First projects had launched in Canada, Portugal, and Sweden; Denmark and Finland were further along, having already incorporated Housing First into their national homelessness strategies. In 2010, this diffusion continued, especially in the U.S. For example, this was the year when Washington, D.C. announced that Housing First would be the District's primary homelessness policy and when the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans began implementing the Housing First approach for HUD-VA Supportive Housing programs. Meanwhile, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2010) unequivocally endorsed Housing First in its inaugural *Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, and Common Ground (a New York City-based nonprofit) launched the 100,000 Homes Campaign at the summer conference of the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The year 2010 was also when divinity school graduates and local activists in Nashville, Tennessee founded Open Table Nashville (OTN) to "disrupt cycles of homelessness" in their local community. From the beginning, the "core" of OTN's work has involved directly assisting people experiencing homelessness, a project emboldened and made nimble by a grassroots funding structure and institutional support from the United Methodist Church. Its *culture* of homeless assistance emerged from a progressive moral universe insisting upon human equality, commonality with "the other," and universal access to housing as a basic human right. These convictions—lent urgency by the daily homeless outreach experiences of its staff members—led the organization to reject the assumptions underlying the staircase model, which dominated Nashville at the time. It seemed obvious to OTN founders that *all* people experiencing homelessness deserved homes, that they deserved homes sooner rather than later, that their autonomy and self-determination needed to be respected in the process, and that they deserved to be supported during and after their transitions into housing. Clearly, this is an organizational culture that aligns well with the Housing First paradigm.

Yet, OTN members did not become aware of Housing First until around 2013, when local city officials started planning a Nashville chapter of the 100,000 Homes Campaign (soon dubbed "How's Nashville"). OTN's initial lack of exposure to Housing First suggests a peripheral relationship with the global homeless assistance field, in favor of closer ties to a variety of social and political systems in Nashville. However, once Nashville joined the 100,000 Homes Campaign, OTN became a leading Housing First advocate in Nashville—almost overnight. (OTN's involvement with How's Nashville will be discussed in the next chapter.) And when the national press came to report on the implementation of Housing First in Nashville, OTN was its face (Cooper, 2014). Exposure to Housing First—along with its social-scientific evidence base

and cultural momentum—gave OTN an opportunity to legitimize its own model of assistance and to become a more-central player in the Nashville homeless assistance field.

The present chapter addresses my research aim of understanding OTN's idealized homeless assistance practices—key cultural-cognitive drivers of the organization's institutional work. To this end, the chapter describes OTN's culture of homeless assistance and its alignment with the Housing First paradigm. It draws upon interviews with all of OTN's current full-time staff members (including two of its co-founders), two board members, three interns, and a local activist with homelessness experience who has collaborated with OTN since its founding and now formally advises the organization. I found that OTN's core commitment of "journeying alongside people," though distinct from Housing First, has aligned OTN with the Housing First paradigm in several respects. The organization itself recognizes this.

Describing OTN's culture of homeless assistance helps to establish OTN as a practitioner of homeless assistance and a member of the homeless assistance field. OTN's culture is also important to subsequent discussions of OTN's institutional work related to Housing First. When OTN tries to institutionalize "Housing First" in Nashville, what exactly is it targeting (in terms of practices)? And why do OTN members feel so compelled? Answering these questions will paint a fuller picture of the cultural and cognitive drivers of OTN's local institutional work. When Chapter Four describes OTN's activism in the Nashville homeless assistance field and Chapter Five describes OTN's activism in the broader community, it will be easier to understand *why*.

Below, I share the results of two thematic analyses. The first is an analysis of how OTN members characterize the practices of homeless assistance they idealize. The second is an analysis of how OTN members characterize "Housing First" and what they believe with respect to the various Housing First principles introduced in Chapter Two.

"Journeying Alongside" People Experiencing Homelessness

"One of our big phrases," a staff member told me, "is that we journey along with people." It is a metaphor worth chewing over. To "journey" means to travel; it implies movement from one place to another. The intended destination is usually known, but the exact route and the time required can be indeterminate. To journey "along with" or "alongside" means to accompany someone in this effort. It is different from "sending off" or "bidding welcome." The act of journeying alongside requires, on some level, a commitment to companionship as space is traversed.

OTN frequently uses the journeying metaphor to describe its brand of street outreach—what it calls "relational outreach" (OTN, 2022d). The latter is an umbrella term that includes all of OTN's direct interactions with people experiencing homelessness, from initial contact to housing navigation to housing retention. However, more than a set of activities, "journeying alongside" communicates a desire to identify with the positionality of another and to assist them, with empathy, as they learn to find their way. (Mostly, but not always, the destination is permanent housing.) This way of seeing people and being with people is something that OTN members find to be highly salient about the organization. In some cases, it is what drew them to OTN in the first place. As one staff member put it:

> Open Table, to me—I was always very drawn to it because of how particularly it worked with people and … how it's, "we're journeying with people." … It just felt so all-encompassing to me as an organization; not just, "You need this thing. Here's your thing. Bye." It wasn't transactional in a way that I think I saw a lot of nonprofits—or more of like church work, from what I had known before, where it can be a little more one-time or short-term. But this was all about relationships and very relational.

The practice of journeying is central for OTN. It informs and motivates the organization's embrace of Housing First and its institutional work in the community. Consequently, it is important to understand its key facets, five of which were prominent in my data. I will describe

these facets in turn, before commenting on OTN members' aspirations for taking this journeying work a step further. The section will conclude with remarks on the tensions between service provision and OTN's ideals.

Facet 1: "We See Them as Friends"

For OTN, the work of journeying alongside involves a particular way of *seeing* Nashvillians experiencing homelessness. This, in turn, shapes how the organization views its responsibilities with respect to homeless assistance. For at least one staff member, it was what makes OTN distinctive as a homeless service provider:

> We journey alongside people, and we encourage them; we try to empower them to do things instead of us trying to fix it for them. Other organizations, I mean… I guess the best word is, they kind of see them as clients. We see them as friends. We don't see them as people to fix.

Empowering, not fixing; calling them "friends," not "clients." The informant casted OTN's work in terms of what it *is*, but also in terms of what it is *not*—implicitly positioning OTN within a field of actors engaging in alternative practices. This hints at OTN's membership in an organizational field, which I have termed the homeless assistance field.

The term "friend" is an unusual one in the homeless assistance field, where other terms predominate. For example, many service providers—following HUD's jargon—refer to "clients"; others, such as Pathways to Housing, refer to "consumers." In contrast, every conversation I had with OTN members revealed an emphasis on the word "friend." (At one point, an informant corrected themselves midsentence to refer to "friends" instead of "people.") This led me to inquire of a staff member:

> *Interviewer:* I noticed that you refer to "our friends" experiencing homelessness, and I've noticed that several people at Open Table that I've talked with so far used that word, "friend." And I was wondering if that's intentional, if there's an intentional reason why you use that language.

> *Informant:* It's not mandated, but it is intentional, and they *are* our *friends*. … And … when you look at people as your friends, it's hard to otherize them. ... [T]hey deserve the same things that all of our other friends deserve. You know, health and housing and stability and good things. So, I think it's both the fact that we do have personal relationships with so many of our quote-unquote "clients" … But also, it helps us remember that they're human beings. They are not "others." They are not "those people." They are our friends.

For this informant, the language of friendship both *reflects* and *shapes* staff members' relationships with the people they serve.

OTN's language of friendship might suggest a peripheral relationship with the homeless assistance field. However, repeated reference to "clients" suggests some familiarity with the field's cultural-cognitive constructs. OTN's language of friendship and its rejection of service-client nomenclature also underscore the organization's conscious resistance to "transactional" relationships. The emphasis on saying "friend" idealizes a relationship that is less predicated on services and more predicated on mutual affection and trust. Whereas a client relationship ends when services are not being rendered, a friendship continues. For OTN, the friendship ideal blurs (but does not ignore) differences in socioeconomic station, and it draws attention to a common humanity. It helps bring OTN members "alongside."

Facet 2: "We Meet People Where They Are"

Friendship is preceded by *meeting*, and OTN has a particular way of characterizing this initial contact. OTN members say that they "meet people where they are." It is a refrain that can be found on OTN's website and across many of my interviews. Indeed, OTN members appear to take it for granted as a turn of phrase; for example, one staff member summarized OTN's practice of outreach as: "go to folks, meet them where they're at, getting to know them, making contact, developing those relationships, building that trust and reputation with those individuals, and then navigating those who are willing and ready into housing options." As part of a larger

practice of outreach, "meeting them where they are" seems important, and it happens early. But what does it mean?

For OTN, there are many dimensions to meeting someone where they are. Its website indicates that this practice happens "geographically, mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually." Informants stressed these varied dimensions as well; one informant added "medically," which emphasizes the physical and perhaps also the mental. "Meeting people where they are" is a phrase layered with meaning, referencing multiple distinct practices.

Going to Them. There is a literal sense to meeting someone where they are: the "geographical" sense of *going to* people experiencing homelessness rather than expecting them to come to a central office for assistance. Unlike many homeless outreach organizations, OTN holds no outreach office hours. Instead, OTN's outreach workers walk up to campsites, canvass streets, swing by apartments, visit hospital rooms, go to court hearings, and travel to other local places where OTN's "friends" are located at a given moment. As a result, the organization's outreach workers tend to work out of their cars and spend much less time at OTN's headquarters compared to administrative staff.

Meeting Their Immediate Needs. In another sense, to meet someone where they are is to perceive and meet *their immediate needs*—that is, to engage in personalized, day-to-day assistance that recognizes "where" the individual exists experientially. Meeting immediate needs may or may not be directly related to permanent housing; for example, it may include assistance securing "social security cards or birth certificates to be able to get them into housing" or basic resources such as "a pair of socks or sometimes … a food box." Other common immediate needs include coping with or escaping dangerous weather, finding medical help, and accessing financial or employment resources. In addition, some needs are immaterial. Emotional needs

motivate OTN's pursuit of outreach relationships that are based on friendship and co-presence. Spiritual needs are relevant as well. One staff member explained why OTN embraces an "interfaith" identity, as opposed to a secular one:

> I had worked with a secular nonprofit before, and there was no possibility of holistic healing, of incorporating conversations... If people wanted to talk about faith, we couldn't do it there. And a lot of people, especially in the South, have a lot of baggage with their faith and are wrestling with that. So, we have had, for instance, interfaith street chaplains that can help people as they're processing major losses in their life—like, on their deathbeds, doing end-of-life care, helping plan memorials and funerals for individuals in the city. That kind of—people aren't just brains, heads, and hearts; there's a spirit in us, too, that grapples with big questions.

Whenever possible, OTN tries to meet needs directly. In lieu of this, OTN connects people to other organizations in the community that can better meet the need.

In trying to meet immediate needs, OTN has also made efforts to fill gaps in Nashville's inventory of temporary shelter options. On a weekly or monthly basis (depending on the time of year), OTN partners with local churches to create "resource shelters": designated church facilities where people experiencing homelessness can receive basic resources and services from OTN staff, plus a place to sleep. In addition to resource shelters, OTN launched The Village at Glencliff: a community of 22 "micro homes"—each consisting of a bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom—as places of medical respite and bridge housing for people experiencing homelessness who are particularly vulnerable. The newly constructed micro homes are located on the property of Glencliff United Methodist Church (which also provides OTN with its office space). Although The Village has since become an independent 501(c)(3) organization, it began as an OTN initiative. OTN members do not include shelter and housing provision in the organization's "core" activities, but The Village illustrates how OTN has made significant efforts to provide some temporary shelter options—as part of a larger project of doing what it can to meet the immediate needs of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, OTN has tried to maintain its direct assistance efforts as much as possible. Connecting their "friends" to healthcare is all the more important, especially when they have COVID-19 symptoms. The need for basic resources has expanded; because of the economic disruption, some of OTN's "friends" who were *formerly* experiencing homelessness are newly in need of food and other supplies. While doing all of this, OTN members are trying to follow CDC guidelines for safe interactions.

Meeting the immediate needs of people experiencing homelessness accounts for many of OTN's outreach activities. These activities are resource intensive and often require a high level of staff reactivity. However, they are important to OTN's mission of meeting people where they are. Meeting immediate needs is one way of parachuting in to where someone is on their personal journey, establishing and maintaining an interpersonal connection through prompt and meaningful offers of help.

Suppressing Expectations. Finally, to meet someone where they are is to suppress one's *expectations* for them—namely expectations for how they should behave or what goals they should strive for. That is, an outreach worker tries to join the journey that their prospective friend *is already on*, rather than coercing them to take a different route or change their chosen destination altogether. For example, multiple informants talked about getting people into housing "if that's what they choose." Consistently, informants expressed a desire to respect the autonomy of the people they work with. Respect for autonomy also happens to be a key principle of Housing First.

Related to this, of course, is the issue of alcohol and substance use. In the homeless assistance field, policies and practices around alcohol and substance use are a common way for people experiencing homelessness to lose their autonomy; with the staircase model still

prevalent, it is common for service providers to leverage the promise of housing to coerce people to stop using and to seek treatment. OTN members uniformly reject this approach. For OTN, meeting someone where they are means respecting the decisions they have made for themselves—just like we would a friend's.

Facet 3: "Developing That Relationship"

"Meet people where they are" is a refrain that summarizes OTN's general way of interacting with Nashvillians experiencing homelessness, particularly in and around the first point of contact. After contact is made and the outreach worker begins to learn where the individual is at in his or her journey, the outreach worker begins a longer-term project of "developing that relationship." This attempt at building a genuine friendship is a way for OTN to meet an individual's emotional and social needs. It is also a way of laying relational groundwork that can facilitate additional forms of assistance.

In interviews, one thing that OTN members stressed was that these relationships are *genuine*. As one staff member working on the administrative side had observed:

> People doing direct service—they know folks by name, and they see them regularly just like you see other friends. And I've only been there a short time, and I'm not working on the front lines, but—they hug people and wish them a Merry Christmas and a Happy Birthday, celebrate weddings and birthdays and *loss* with them.

For OTN, this has a practical side: it helps build trust.

As mutual trust is established, it becomes easier for OTN members to *learn* the needs and goals of the people they are encountering—especially when these needs and goals are related to sensitive issues like intimate partner violence, health problems, mental illness, and addiction. In addition, mutual trust facilitates receptivity to OTN's assistance and makes it easier for outreach workers to urge individuals toward certain behaviors and decisions. Under a typical worker-client relationship, behavioral intervention might be seen as a threat to the client's autonomy;

however, OTN's emphasis on friendship helps organization members see it in a different light. One informant spoke about this with respect to the issue of substance use, specifically:

> We certainly want—we fully advocate for a person to have agency over their own life, to be an autonomous person that can choose for themselves. … But we also want to advocate for their wellbeing as a person. … I think that's part of the trust element in our work—of our relational model of meeting them where they are, no expectations, building trust and developing that relationship. And when you have that trust and that relationship, conversations around substance abuse maybe could happen. ... I think we would do that with our own friends, right?

Indeed, the act of building a relationship is difficult to separate from OTN's homeless assistance practices.

Facet 4: Mobilizing Them in the Direction of Housing

Meeting people where they are and building relationships based on mutual trust are activities that make it easier to meet a variety of needs—but for OTN, the need for housing is paramount. "Obviously," a staff member told me, "we want to get people into housing. If you had to boil down what our goal is, that's the big one." This is not surprising, given the organization's common refrain that "housing ends homelessness." Specifically, this means *permanent* housing, as opposed to transitional housing and other time-limited arrangements. As Chapters 4 and 5 will detail, much of OTN's community-facing work is aimed at trying to strengthen local institutional supports for permanent housing assistance, underscoring how central it is to OTN's conception of individual wellness.

Even so, concerns about autonomy and self-determination can override the goal of permanent housing, as one of the outreach interns emphasized:

> Everyone has the right to self-determination. So, if they're not ready to get into housing, and they want to stay on the streets, that's okay. We're still going to walk with them and support them in whatever they need, while they're there, you know? So, we definitely don't decide people's needs for them. They are able to do that themselves. And we just come behind them and support them as best we can, once they determine what it is they need or want.

Several staff members concurred, though one outreach worker made clear that they still "encourage" a goal of housing: "I think that I encourage people, but I don't really force it on them if they say, 'I don't want an apartment.' Most people don't [say that], but some do." This outreach worker told me a story of a woman that the outreach worker helped move into housing over the course of two years. After a series of medical treatments, the woman ended up in an assisted living facility, which HUD and others consider to be "permanent housing." However, when I asked whether the woman's living situation was "permanent," the outreach worker did not cite these authorities, but instead cited the *woman's* perspective: "She was never really interested in getting into an apartment-type setting, so I mean that was permanent for her." For OTN, the people being assisted are ultimately the ones who define the goals and determine whether a given living situation is satisfactory.

Nevertheless, OTN members are aware of a clear trend: most of their "friends" want housing, and they want it in the form a private, independent setting like an apartment. So, the next task is usually to *get* someone into housing. Consequently, the role of *housing navigation* is often attached to the job description of OTN's outreach workers. Although consistent with the journeying metaphor, "housing navigation" is not a term unique to OTN; it is common in the homeless assistance field. For example, housing navigation is recognized as a best practice by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As explained by the nonprofit Hub for Urban Initiatives, housing navigation primarily involves "helping a household that is homeless develop a housing plan, address the barriers identified during the plan, and acquire documentation and complete forms required for housing." To "address the barriers identified" means for the housing navigator to "facilitate 'active' linkages" between the person experiencing homelessness and community-based services related to health, mental health, benefits, employment, transportation,

and so on (VA, 2016, p. 9). In Nashville, the metropolitan government's Homeless Impact Division organizes monthly "housing navigator meetings"—optional trainings attended by representatives of local homeless service providers, including OTN.

When I asked one of OTN's outreach workers what housing navigation consists of, the response was consistent with field understandings of the practice:

> Gosh. It feels so all-encompassing and really comprehensive. I feel like it touches on a lot of things; so, it's not just finding a pathway for someone to get into housing … I think I can speak on behalf of most folks at Open Table, if not all: we want to touch on any and all things related to securing that person's housing and making them feel a lot more secure in that transition process.

The outreach worker explained that the first steps in housing navigation often involve basic administrative tasks needed to secure housing, such as helping the individual obtain an original birth certificate or fill out a housing application. But there is more to housing navigation than addressing administrative barriers:

> You also need to begin to address other issues that an individual might be experiencing or having. That could be mental health related issues, could be domestic violence, it could be substance abuse, alcohol use, relationships that are hindering them. Just speaking to a lot of different things. And it could be that person with some awareness of those things that are in their life—walking with them through that self-awareness, and starting to build them up for success in those areas in the long run.

This imperative to "build them up for success" exceeds the boundaries of friendship and introduces more of a social-work dynamic, but OTN's respect for autonomy helps it to avoid paternalism. The outreach worker indicated that non-coercive means are used to steer individuals toward circumstances that, from OTN's perspective, benefit their wellbeing; in "walking with them through that self-awareness," OTN outreach workers use their skills and expertise to help the individual recognize and frame problems—which can then, with consent, lead to linkages with appropriate community services.

Though OTN members believe that barriers to housing should not exist (since housing is a basic human right), not everyone in Nashville feels the same way. As discussed in Chapter Four, available evidence indicates that Housing First is still not universally accepted in Nashville and that the staircase approach to homeless assistance still holds currency among some local service providers (including the largest homeless shelter in Nashville). Thus, OTN members often find themselves in a position where they must help their "friends" work around disagreeable local policies. One outreach worker discussed a common kind of interaction with local housing providers:

> I will maybe produce some proof that [my friend has] made these steps to improve their life. I don't think that should be necessary—but for these other folks that are making the decisions, sometimes it's helpful. I don't want you to go to treatment [for substance use] unless it's your idea to go to treatment. But if you have been to treatment, I'm happy to say… Let's get that paperwork so I can bring it into these people and say, "Look. He's been to treatment two times since we made this application. If you could just give him a house, he could go again."

As this situation shows, housing navigation can benefit from prior efforts to "build that relationship." The outreach worker got to know the person being assisted, and in the process learned about the past treatments. This allowed the outreach worker to make a stronger case for housing that individual, albeit on the housing provider's terms. In addition, as noted above, OTN sometimes finds it necessary to "build them up for success"—mitigating or removing personal hindrances that make them seem unready for housing in the eyes of others.

For a host of reasons, navigating someone into housing can be "a waiting game" lasting weeks or months, and sometimes years. Getting necessary documentation in order can produce substantial delays, barriers can prove momentarily insurmountable, and housing options can be difficult to find. During this stretch of time, OTN continues to meet people where they are, as an outreach worker explained to me when summarizing their job responsibilities:

> I do outreach with people who are chronically homeless and steer them into housing, if that's an appropriate place for them, and keep them alive and kicking until they get there—fill the needs that I can for them until they get there, whether that's clothing or supplies or camping stuff, doctor's appointments or anything.

Thus, for OTN, housing navigation often blends together with ongoing provision of resources and other services.

As OTN's "friends" work toward and wait for housing, a question remains: Where do they stay in the meantime? Some benefit from nightly stays in local emergency shelters, like the Nashville Rescue Mission. However, for others, a conventional shelter is inappropriate—whether because of personal traumas, work schedules that are incompatible with shelter curfews, desires to keep families (and pets) together, or some other reason. Moreover, shelter beds can be scarce and using them can pose health risks, especially in the era of COVID-19. Thus, the issue of *outdoor encampments* is important for OTN. When staying in a shelter is not an option, an encampment can provide a consistent and predictable residence while an individual is waiting to get into housing. For OTN, this is helpful for working through the process of housing navigation, which for some people is complicated and necessitates multiple rounds of follow-up. Predictable residence is also helpful for meeting other needs as they arise, such as health-related needs. In addition, encampments can serve as an important source of community for people who would otherwise lack it, which can aid mental and emotional health. Finally, staying in a camp can be an expression of "people's autonomy—for their ability to say that, 'This is my place where I live; this is my home.'" Even though encampments are not considered a desirable permanent residence for most of OTN's "friends," an encampment can be a valuable waystation on one's journey to housing.

Facet 5: Helping Them Retain Housing

"I think I can speak on behalf of most folks at Open Table, if not all: We want to touch on any and all things related to securing that person's housing …," an outreach worker told me. They continued:

> … and making them feel a lot more secure in that transition process. But also, just, on that future road to future-proof things. I don't want to just throw them into an apartment or house or room and them not really know how to go forward, or to put it on another organization or program.

The outreach worker was talking about how the journey to housing does not really end when housing is obtained; the journey continues, because housing can always be lost. This is especially true in the vulnerable period when OTN's "friends"—particularly those coming out of *chronic* homelessness—are acclimating to housing and learning how to sustain themselves in their new environment. Basic skills that many of us take for granted, such as mailing a rent check, sometimes need to be taught. The newly housed individual or household may need anything from financial assistance with utilities to psychiatric assistance for severe mental illness. This is why OTN aspires to continue journeying with many of its "friends" after housing is secured.

OTN sees the attainment of housing as an important moment that marks the beginning of a new phase in an individual's journey. Housing navigation ceases and housing *retention* begins. The outreach worker scales back their involvement, and the *retention coordinator* comes into the picture. But because the outreach worker has developed a relationship with the newly housed individual, this is not always easy—as one outreach worker described:

> It's hard, and I should speak for myself, but I develop very real friendships and relationships with these folks, so it's hard to drop them off and then not ever see them again, obviously; but I think at that point it's an extended outreach. That's when we, as outreach workers and housing navigators at Open Table, begin to step above and beyond in that realm. We do that in other realms, too, so it's not too foreign to us.

At the time the outreach worker shared this with me, OTN was without a retention coordinator. It was a position that developed later in OTN's life as an organization, and it was a position that was dropped during recent organizational restructuring. Consequently, OTN's outreach workers often step into the housing retention role—particularly at the beginning, when the "friend" is still transitioning into their new environment.

Compared to street outreach and housing navigation, helping someone retain their home is less complicated. When the retention coordinator position was filled, OTN would help their housed "friends" set personal goals and milestones, then continuously evaluate progress. Without this position filled, coordinating housing retention is more a matter of making sure that housed "friends" are connected to available services in the community—case management, employment services, psychiatric services, drug treatment, and whatever other services they consent to. OTN also offers direct assistance to cover the occasional rent payment or utility payment. The goal of these efforts is to ensure that people do not return to the street, in need of housing navigation services once again.

Imagined Possibilities for Service Provision

As conveyed by my review of OTN's "journeying" work, OTN aspires to provide a variety of services to Nashvillians experiencing homelessness, all while fostering deep human connections. This does not include OTN's advocacy efforts, some of which I detail in subsequent chapters. Yet, at the time of my analysis, OTN currently had only eight full-time staff members, one part-time staff member, and three interns. The organization benefits from an army of volunteers—but nevertheless, ever since I became familiar with OTN in 2015, I have been surprised by how much OTN's staff members have on their plate. Indeed, multiple OTN staff report wearing "a lot of hats" and feeling stretched thin. In my interviews, the word "scrappy" is

a common descriptor applied to the organization. To an extent, this scrappiness seems to be a point of pride, but staff also perceive its costs. In my interviews, my final question usually asked informants about the ways in which they would like to see OTN grow as an organization, assuming money and time are not an issue. Most commonly, informants suggested additional staff and increased specialization.

Recently, progress in these areas has already been made. For example, months before my study began, OTN hired a Director of Development. Prior to this, staff members had each assumed a higher level of responsibility for fundraising—especially the Operations Coordinator, who organized OTN's big annual fundraising event five years in a row. When the new Director of Development came on board, the Operations Coordinator was able to shed that responsibility and focus on other administrative tasks. Another key recent hire was the Executive Assistant. This has allowed staff to offload miscellaneous office work, including "weird minutiae, like day-to-day things or requests," that used to take their time away from other key tasks. The Executive Assistant has also created a more-streamlined process for receiving and managing in-kind donations (e.g., socks and sleeping bags), which has enabled outreach workers to be more efficient in getting supplies into the hands of the people they are assisting.

In my interviews, OTN members imagined what additional growth might look like. A common wish was for more outreach workers. At the time of my analysis, there were two—one covering the south side of Nashville, and the other covering the west side. Several OTN members imagined full-city coverage, with outreach workers offering services in all four quadrants. (One informant imagined a *team* of outreach workers in each.) In addition, several informants suggested restoring the retention coordinator position—or even hiring multiple people to perform this role. This would allow outreach workers to better specialize in street

outreach and housing navigation, and it would allow OTN to more-adequately follow-up with and support newly housed "friends." Another informant suggested splitting up the outreach role such that separate staff members specialize in street outreach, housing navigation, and resource navigation. OTN's recent hiring decisions and members' suggestions for future growth underscore how homeless assistance is OTN's core responsibility.

Tensions Between the Friendship Ideal and Service Provision

In journeying with Nashvillians who are experiencing or have recently experienced homelessness, OTN insists that it sees "friends," not "clients." For OTN, this is in part a reflection of true friendships and in part a reminder of shared humanity. However, OTN's relationships with its "friends" are not developed in a vacuum, but within the context of service provision. Inevitably, this introduces a degree of dependency—or, as one informant puts it, "a power dynamic." This rubs against OTN's egalitarian ideal. Unsurprisingly, part of what the organization struggles with is how to "break that [power dynamic] down a little bit."

One way that OTN tries to do this is through its rhetoric. Use of the word "friend" is one example. As shown above, OTN sometimes uses the language of friendship to reframe service provision as being akin to a caring friend's intervention. Another example is OTN's language around power. The organization's emphasis on "empowering" rather than "fixing" people is a way of communicating a belief that people experiencing homelessness should determine the course of their own journeys, with OTN staff assisting with the means. Relatedly, the organization has adopted the mantra, "power with, not power over." It is a recurring attempt by staff members to remind each other that they should be *sharing* power, not *leveraging* it over the people they are trying to assist. OTN members are aware that the threat of an unbalanced power

dynamic is never neutralized, despite their best efforts. This is why OTN incorporates its relationship ideals into its daily jargon.

OTN's Embrace of Housing First

OTN's practice of journeying informs its attachment to and advocacy of the Housing First paradigm. As a young organization, OTN was not aware of—and consequently, not explicitly connected to—Housing First. However, in the advent of the How's Nashville campaign, OTN began to strongly align itself with this paradigm. Indeed, the organization helped steer the How's Nashville campaign itself. In its trainings of new outreach workers and in some of its trainings offered to the public, OTN began to explain and endorse the Housing First approach to homeless assistance. In its advocacy work, OTN's foci came to include "affordable housing plus Housing First." The Housing First paradigm has influenced how OTN views and discusses its own practices and ideals and, in turn, has come to represent a collection of practices that OTN has been trying to institutionalize in Nashville.

This section explores how OTN members interpret Housing First, why they believe it is important, and how these views are informed by the organization's culture of "journeying alongside." The section concludes by comparing OTN's conceptualization of Housing First with how it is conceptualized elsewhere. This will provide some indications as to how OTN is connected to the homeless assistance field. It will also provide important context for subsequent chapters about OTN's institutional work. For example, when OTN advocates "Housing First," what exactly is it advocating, and what is motivating this advocacy?

How OTN Interprets "Housing First"

When interviewing an OTN member for the first time, I always asked some form of the question, "When you hear the words 'Housing First,' what comes to mind for you?" All

informants had heard the term before and had an idea about what it meant. The open-ended phrasing of the question allowed them to share their preconceived interpretations without my own interpretation getting in the way. As an interview progressed, the conversation would invariably turn to OTN's *advocacy* of Housing First; often, informants connected the term to specific practices or systems that OTN advocates, thereby providing additional clues about how informants interpreted the term. As I interviewed more people, a picture began to emerge about what the organization finds most salient about the Housing First paradigm. First and foremost, OTN interprets Housing First to mean low-barrier or housing-led assistance. But there is also recognition that Housing First includes continuing assistance after housing is secured.

"Housing First" Means Housing Bar None. The most common response from informants was that Housing First involves low-barrier or housing-led assistance. One informant referred to this as "a wide-open front door." Often, it was the first thing OTN members associated with Housing First. Informants talked about the "wide-open front door" in similar but distinct ways: as a practice of *nondiscrimination*, as a rejection of *preconditions*, and as a matter of properly *sequencing* housing and services.

Some informants talked about Housing First as a model whereby housing is open to anybody and everybody—without discrimination according to status, condition, or situation. As one outreach worker explained:

> What comes to mind for me is: No matter what conditions or situations a person might have or be experiencing, getting them into a stable housing … situation … that creates stability and consistency, safety, for an individual. And that idea of "bar none," for no reason—not if you are on the [sex offender] registry or were incarcerated or have a felony or have a mental health condition, or... Just going down that list, "bar none"; having Housing First options to me means having places for those folks where people aren't going to turn them away or say, "No."

Another outreach worker shared a similar perspective:

> I continuously advocate for Housing First, and to me that means: It doesn't matter how intoxicated you get on a day-to-day basis or how much trouble you've been in, how many felonies you have; I think you should get a key to an apartment and move in it and then start from there to help solve your problems, whatever those happen to be.

For the first outreach worker, barriers for sex offenders were particularly pernicious. The scarcity of housing in Nashville combined with restrictions on where sex offenders can live make housing almost unattainable for sex offenders who are experiencing homelessness. But Housing First implies the availability of housing that does not bar this or any other population.

In addition to opposing the exclusion of certain categories of people, OTN members talked about how Housing First is incompatible with preconditions, particularly requirements related to sobriety and program participation. When I asked a staff member what might "disqualify" an organization from being able to claim they are a Housing First program, they responded:

> Requirements that would cause people to take drug tests or participate in a program… Guidelines that they have to follow… I'm trying to think of... I don't know if I can think of anything else. The drug testing stands out to me because there is an organization—a housing organization in town that started out as Housing First and then now drug tests you and sits you down in front of a panel of judges to decide whether or not you are fit to be in housing.

Another informant dubbed these kinds of requirements "speed bumps to getting people into housing" and distinguished them from administrative requirements, such as identification documents. For this informant, "speed bumps" are not compatible with Housing First, but administrative requirements *are*, particularly when their purpose is to secure a lease.

OTN members also talked about low-barrier housing in a way that emphasizes sequence: Housing First means housing, first. As one informant put it, housing is "the first ingredient." That is to say, housing assistance should begin immediately, even if job needs, psychiatric needs, alcohol/drug treatment needs, and other needs are not yet being met.

"Housing First" Has Post-Housing Implications. For most informants, low-barrier assistance is the salient feature of Housing First, but some expressed that there is more to Housing First than that. For one of OTN's outreach workers, Housing First means providing low-barrier housing, "and from that place of adequate shelter (in the sense of food, water, shelter)—continuing that care with that individual or family to make that more sustainable and make them less vulnerable and insecure housing-wise." Another staff member made a similar connection:

> Our work with folks is: We want to move you into housing, and we want to keep you in housing—which is another piece of Housing First, I think. We don't want to just be able to have an apartment for you to move into. We want to be able to resource you to stay in the apartment that you have. And I think that the whole retention element of keeping people in housing is something that's important.

So, there is some evidence that OTN connects Housing First to permanent housing (as opposed to, say, transitional housing) and assistance aimed at housing retention.

By and large, OTN members did not have much to say about program requirements after housing is secured. This is unsurprising, given that OTN's direct assistance activities focus most heavily on getting people *into* housing, with housing retention sometimes being added on. However, one informant explicitly emphasized Housing First's incompatibility with certain program participation requirements. After I asked about what might "disqualify" an organization from claiming the Housing First label, the informant began by commenting on preconditions but then pivoted to discuss program participation requirements after housing is secured:

> I think requirements to get into housing can always be questionable. There's some agencies that will do, like, "We provide housing, but here's the church service you have to go to, to do that. Here's the rehab program you have to do while you're doing the house…" Not necessarily to say that those always aren't good or couldn't be Housing First, but I think some of those things, I would want to know more about.

For this informant, an important distinction was that programs and services themselves are not necessarily incompatible with Housing First; at issue are the *requirements*.

Other informants were ambiguous about the linkage or lack thereof between Housing First and program requirements. When asked what the words "Housing First" brings to mind, an outreach worker replied, in part:

> I think you should get a key to an apartment and move in it and then start from there to help solve your problems, whatever those happen to be. And I also think that if not quitting drinking is your choice, then you should not quit drinking, be able to live your life however you want to like everybody else.

The informant endorsed the principle that continued access to housing should not be contingent on abstinence, but it is ambiguous whether the informant saw this as part of the meaning of Housing First or whether it is simply the informant's opinion. Similarly, when I asked another outreach worker about whether a Housing First program would "kick someone out" for behaviors like using drugs, they were hesitant: "I think I can only speak to my opinions on that. If I worked and spent a lot of time on that side of post-housing, I might have stronger beliefs on it?" The outreach worker continued, opining that evicting someone on account of drug use may sometimes be justified "if done compassionately, empathetically"—especially if "I wasn't able to be my healthiest self and did things to not only jeopardize my situation but the situation of those around me." But this outreach worker acknowledged uncertainty: "I don't know, but that's a huge gray area, though. I'm speaking in such an abstract that those words could be taken as really forgiving or much too strict." Generally, it was difficult for informants to make a confident connection between Housing First and the principle that continued access to housing should not be tied to program requirements.

What Motivates OTN's Alignment with Housing First

Housing First is not merely something that OTN is familiar with, but also a paradigm that the organization is fully committed to practicing and advocating. The OTN members I interviewed were forthcoming, and often passionate, about what motivates their alignment with

the Housing First paradigm. Partly, motivation stems from beliefs in the paradigm's sensibility and professional legitimacy. In addition, motivation stems from a conviction that Housing First is imperative—because housing is a basic human right, because housing is an essential need, and because following Housing First practices is the morally right thing to do.

Housing First Is Sensible. OTN sees Housing First as fundamentally reasonable and intuitive. It "just makes a lot more sense" and "seems so obvious," said one informant; the logic behind it is "not that hard," laughed another. This likely has something to do with how the organization practices homeless assistance—how it "journeys" with the people it encounters. "Meeting people where they are" suggests that if someone is expressing a desire for housing but is not quite ready to address other aspects of their wellbeing, then housing assistance should go forward; other services can wait until the individual is ready. The language of *friendship* also informs OTN's views, as one informant suggested: "Housing First is important to OTN, first of all, because we're talking about our friends. We want them to be in secure housing." From OTN's perspective: We would want our conventional friends to find housing immediately, rather than be forced to stay on the streets longer than they have to; why should we not want the same for others?

Some informants cited their own experiences to explain why Housing First makes sense. One told me a story from a past job: about meeting a man experiencing homelessness whose situation was obviously unsafe and unhealthy. At some point, an outreach worker was able to move the man into an apartment. The informant talked about the transformation they witnessed:

> I remember a week or less after he moved in, he came in the office and looked completely different. And the more I would see him after he had been in, the more life came back into his eyes, and the more, like... He was healing, but it wasn't just the scrapes that he had from getting beat up; but it was, like, he had a safe place to be, and he hadn't had a safe place to be in a super long time.

Although this particular person was uniquely memorable, he represented a frequent kind of experience for the informant:

> I saw a lot of people there who just, totally… It was such a difference was made when they got into housing, to when they weren't. And the opposite; if someone lost housing, you could really see a huge change after that too.

For OTN, this kind of experiential evidence is part of what makes Housing First seem like an instinctive response to homelessness.

Even when OTN members did not cite particular experiences, they fervently stressed a causal connection between housing access and subsequent improvement in wellbeing. In my interviews with them, OTN members leaned heavily on the logical and intuitive force of their argument that housing "creates that foundation of support" from which issues like unemployment, substance use, and mental illness can be tackled. To them, this connection was sensible and clear. As one informant put it:

> Homelessness is not a simple issue. Few of these issues are. But it's like a Gordian Knot, so it's not like you can just untie; you really have to cut it. And the easiest way to cut it, in my opinion, is to get people in housing first, to get them stabilized. And once you can get people into housing, you can help them plant roots. And once you start those roots, then they can grow and flourish from there, in terms of ... In my opinion, you have to be somewhere stable to get stable healthcare, to have running water, consistent access to running water, to be able to take medications like you're supposed to. Have regular access to proper hygiene for healthcare. To work on mental health.

In the above quote, Housing First is depicted as reasonable; the informant walks through the mechanics of the Housing First approach, using specific examples to flesh out its logic. The informant also utilizes analogy and metaphor, which help make Housing First feel more familiar and intuitive: Housing First is analogous to cutting a Gordian Knot, and housing is a way of grounding someone such that they can "plant roots" and "grow and flourish from there." As these and other examples in my data show, OTN members mobilized a variety of arguments and linguistic devices to make sense of Housing First.

Housing First Is Proven to Work. In addition, OTN members sometimes cited the professional authorities of the homeless assistance field to justify Housing First. The model is "proven" and "evidence based" and shown to work "not only in the U.S., but in Europe and other places." Research studies were cited approvingly. For informants, the salient takeaway from this evidence base was that Housing First "works," that it is effective. Specifically, it reinforced OTN members' understandings that the Housing First approach leads to housing stability and improvements in wellbeing.

Sometimes, OTN members mentioned other aspects of the evidence base. One informant talked about the cost considerations:

> *Interviewer:* How did you first learn about [Housing First]? Was it through OTN?
>
> *Interviewee:* Yeah, it was probably through OTN. I mean, I've read a lot of studies from all sides, but probably that's my first experience with Housing First, is through OTN.
>
> *Interviewer:* Do you remember what you learned through those studies, what they said?
>
> *Interviewee:* I guess that … it's—I hate to say "less expensive"—but that it's less expensive for Housing First, to put a person into housing and then wrap them with support services. From a cost perspective it's less costly.

The informant "hates to say" that Housing First is less expensive—not because this is an undesirable feature, but presumably because of the informant's discomfort with using a market logic to justify access to housing. Still, it is useful evidence for OTN's reliance on field norms.

Housing First Is Imperative. OTN informants spoke of the Housing First paradigm as not just a good idea, but as imperative. This message was conveyed from a few different angles.

Firstly, the Housing First paradigm is imperative because housing is a basic human right. As mentioned above, this rights-based view of housing is foundational for OTN and predates its attachment to Housing First. After explaining that OTN rejects preconditions for housing, one informant commented: "I think that's the whole element of just meeting people with dignity and

meeting people with the assumption of, 'You already deserve all these things just because you exist.'" Another informant said something similar: "We need to be getting people in. I think that speaks to Housing First, not having a certain income per year and still deserving a place to live." For OTN, Housing First recognizes the deservedness inherent in everyone, simply because they are human.

Secondly, the Housing First paradigm is imperative because housing is an essential need. Through their daily outreach experiences (especially winter canvassing) and through their leadership of the Annual Homeless Memorial, OTN members are acutely aware that being without a home can lead to suffering and death. For one informant, this is something that motivates OTN's attachment to Housing First:

> You can tell when people are at the end of their life. And I've had people say to me, "I can survive this if I just had a roof over my head." And so, I think all of those experiences is what keeps OTN in that Housing First mode, because they've seen so many people die and suffer greatly at the expense of just having a roof or key to lock the door, and a bathroom.

Housing is essential for human survival—and for OTN, this lends greater urgency to Housing First practices. They are necessary for meeting the most basic and most urgent needs, for meeting people where they are.

Lastly, the Housing First paradigm is imperative because it is "the right thing to do." This can be inferred from how OTN advocates affordable housing as the paramount form of homeless assistance. Being an interfaith organization, OTN often frames the housing imperative in a moral light. I have observed that, in religious and spiritual contexts, ordained staff members sometimes don their clerical collars and preach the immediate need for universal housing. At the 2019 Annual Homeless Memorial, which OTN organizes, one staff member explicitly connected the season of Advent to the contemporary period of waiting for "a better world" where housing is available to *all* people. At an educational event where an OTN staff member was leading a

church group on a tour of downtown Nashville, I observed the staff member appeal to biblical principles while discussing the injustice of housing inequity. In my interviews with them, OTN members were less explicit about the morality of housing; but in other contexts, the moral dimension seems to animate the organization.

Assessing OTN's Cultural-Cognitive Alignment with Housing First

As reviewed in Chapter Two, the term "Housing First" can refer to a general paradigm of homeless assistance, or it can refer to specific program models (like Pathways Housing First) that operate within that paradigm. The Housing First paradigm insists on permanent housing without preconditions; provision of optional support services after housing is secured; and continued access to housing independent of abstinence and participation in services (especially rehab and psychiatric treatment). Its oft-explicit operating assumptions are that housing is a basic human right and that consumer choice with respect to service participation is paramount. The paradigm explicitly rejects the staircase approach, which makes housing access contingent on demonstrations of housing "readiness" as well as ongoing behavioral compliance with program requirements. Housing First program models are more specific in their operationalization of Housing First, often insisting that certain programmatic elements—e.g., scattered-site housing or the provision of optional psychiatric support services—are integral to what Housing First is.

Going into their interviews with me, OTN members knew that some of my questions would center on Housing First. However, they likely were not prepared to give me a thesis on the nuances of Housing First and the finer points of Housing First programming, especially since OTN is an outreach organization and not a housing provider. Moreover, I did not have time to exhaustively probe informants' understandings of these nuances. All this was expected. However, informants did have the opportunity to characterize Housing First in their own words

and to elaborate if they wished. In addition, my collection of archival evidence (e.g., OTN's training materials) allowed for the inclusion of details about Housing First that may not have made it into interview responses. Consequently, I was able to draw some conclusions about the aspects of Housing First that are most salient for OTN, as well as the specificity of OTN's strongly held convictions about Housing First, based what I observed and did not observe.

First, nowhere in my interview or archival data did I observe reference to a specific Housing First program model (whether that of Pathways to Housing, Seattle's Downtown Emergency Service Center, or some other Housing First exemplar). Nor did I observe explicit connections made between Housing First and specific programmatic elements. Instead, OTN members characterized Housing First in more-general, paradigmatic terms—sometimes in contradistinction to elements of the staircase approach. This suggests that OTN members see Housing First as a relatively large umbrella of homeless assistance practices, bounded by an overarching philosophy.

Next, I observed that, for OTN, the most salient dimension of the Housing First paradigm is its rejection of preconditions, in favor of housing-led assistance. This is not surprising, given that this dimension is tied to the literal meaning of "Housing First" and given that, in the homeless assistance field, Housing First is often *reduced to* housing-led assistance. In interviews, OTN members characterized housing-led assistance in several different ways: as a rejection of discriminatory gatekeeping, as a rejection of behavioral preconditions, and as a sequencing that prioritizes housing before support services. These varied responses suggest a robust understanding of the paradigm's housing-led assistance dimension.

However, for OTN, Housing First is not *merely* housing-led assistance. It also involves *permanent* housing assistance, including provision of support services after housing is secured,

to aid housing retention. This connection appeared in interviews with multiple informants, though it was not emphasized to the extent that housing-led assistance was emphasized. Notably, informants were less certain about the principle of *continued access* to housing *independent of* abstinence and participation in services. Indeed, there are indications that this feature of Housing First is a somewhat peripheral one for OTN. This is unsurprising, given that OTN minimally participates in direct housing assistance and given that the organization is currently without a housing retention coordinator (who would be the person to directly encounter this kind of issue). However, available data suggest that OTN extends its respect for autonomy and self-determination to circumstances where its "friends" are in housing.

In addition, OTN ties Housing First to a belief that housing is a basic human right and, relatedly, to a conviction that all people are inherently deserving of housing. In interviews, OTN members did not say explicitly whether these beliefs are *necessary* components of Housing First. However, informants frequently cited these beliefs as *motivations* for OTN's alignment with the Housing First paradigm. The implication is that OTN members consciously recognize Housing First as a fulfillment of a rights-based conception of housing.

Besides OTN's explicit understanding and endorsement of Housing First, there are other indications that the organization is aligned with the Housing First paradigm in its beliefs and practices. OTN's work of "journeying alongside"—including its emphases on "meeting people where they are" and having "power with, not power over"—reveal a strongly held belief in choice-driven service provision that respects the autonomy and self-determination of people experiencing homelessness. For example, while OTN members advocate permanent housing in their daily outreach interactions, they ultimately respect individuals' decisions not to pursue this goal—despite the organization's strongly held beliefs in the essentialness and effectiveness of

housing assistance. In fact, my informants frequently highlighted this principle of respecting choice, without any prompting from myself. This commitment to choice-driven service provision is consistent with the Housing First paradigm and distinguishes OTN from many other organizations that claim to adhere to Housing First principles.

In addition, OTN's culture of homeless assistance goes beyond the Housing First paradigm in ways that are consistent with the specific model of Pathways to Housing (i.e., Pathways Housing First). It should be noted, first, that OTN is a very different organization from Pathways. The former emerged from a religious context, and the latter from a social scientific one. The former is heavily focused on street outreach, housing navigation, and provision of basic resources, whereas the latter is much more involved in the direct provision of housing assistance and psychiatric services. Moreover, OTN emphasizes informal service relationships with its "friends," whereas Pathways maintains relatively structured relationships with its "consumers" or "clients" in the context of a manualized program (Tsemberis, 2010).

However, some cultural similarities are noteworthy. For example, a fundamental principle of the Pathways model is "respect, warmth, and compassion" for all individuals assisted. In a pithy summary of this principle, Tsemberis's (2010) manual of Pathways Housing First quotes a client's testimony that "the staff members treat us all as if we were family" (p. 19). Elsewhere in the manual, Tsemberis writes that, "Overall, our purpose is to create the program equivalent of unconditional love" (p. 18). These affectionate ways of seeing and relating with the individuals being assisted are similar to OTN's ethos of friendship, empathy, and identification with "the other."

OTN is aligned with another fundamental principle of the Pathways model: commitment to clients. This principle stresses the need to maintain long-term relationships with assisted

individuals, even when this might be difficult—such as when an individual is hospitalized or incarcerated, when their experience of homelessness extends for years, or when they return to homelessness. In my interviews, OTN members frequently affirmed this kind of commitment to their "friends." Such commitment is made easier by the fact that outreach workers do not hold office hours but physically travel to "meet people where they are." When working with any particular "friend," OTN members resist feelings of hopelessness, and they do not make the relationship contingent on that individual's cooperation with outreach workers' guidance.

OTN's Positionality in the Homeless Assistance Field

In discussing OTN's practice of journeying and its relation to Housing First, this chapter has begun to show how OTN is not an isolated organization but is embedded in a *field* of actors—specifically, one formed around the issue of homeless assistance. Housing navigation and Housing First are key field practices that OTN is aware of and has adopted. In interviews, OTN members described regular interactions with key field actors like housing providers and people experiencing homelessness. OTN members also repeatedly distinguished their organization from other homeless service providers, suggesting that these are some of OTN's peer organizations. Moreover, in making these distinctions, OTN members demonstrated an awareness of alternative field practices, such as hierarchical language conventions (e.g., "clients") and transactional service provision (e.g., church service attendance in exchange for housing assistance). Chapter Four will make some of OTN's field relationships more explicit.

However, it bears mention that OTN is not a typical actor in this institutional space. OTN "journeys alongside" people experiencing homelessness in ways that sometimes explicitly reject field norms, and OTN's cultural distinctiveness among homeless service providers was something that informants repeatedly emphasized. Across my interviews, archives, and

observations, I noticed two organizational factors that seem particularly influential for enabling OTN's distinctiveness in the homeless assistance field: OTN's grassroots funding structure and its embeddedness in a progressive religious context.

To maintain a maximally flexible and responsive organization, OTN is intentional about where it seeks funding. It eschews government grants as well as any other funding sources with regulations or administrative burdens that might draw limits around OTN's approach to homeless outreach. Instead, OTN is heavily dependent on the United Methodist Church, local churches, and individual donors for funding. Glencliff United Methodist Church, in addition, has provided OTN with office space as well as land for OTN's micro homes project (the Village at Glencliff, now an independent organization). As one informant put it, the religious partnerships "are our bread and butter."

Consequently, OTN largely avoids dependency on resources that channel regulatory pressures from the homeless assistance field. This allows OTN greater freedom to protect the autonomy of its "friends" in ways that it sees fit. As one staff member explained, it even allows OTN to have greater freedom in meeting immediate needs:

> I think OTN has a freedom to help people in the moment. I have—just as an example, if I meet somebody out here in this parking lot who can't get their prescriptions filled and they need insulin or anything really, I have the power to make the decision to go get those prescriptions filled. … [W]ith OTN, I make decisions about who I put on my case load, who I help throughout the day, and if a person comes to me and says, "I need some adult diapers," I can literally walk into Dollar General and buy those for that person.

The informant contrasted this with the situation of other local service providers (including the informant's former employer) who, more so than OTN, are hampered by bureaucratic red tape that slows or restricts organizational responsivity to the varied needs of people experiencing homelessness. It could also be what allows OTN to highly responsive in its community activism, as Chapter Five illustrates well.

OTN's religious ties also hint at its connections to normative and cultural-cognitive systems outside of the homeless assistance field. Several of OTN's staff members (including cofounders) and interns have come from divinity schools. Some are ordained. As Chapter Five will show, some are adept at wielding the vocabulary and moral compass of progressive Christianity to advocate on behalf of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness. OTN's embeddedness in a progressive religious context allows it to draw on norms and beliefs that are different from what the Nashville homeless assistance field has to offer, making it less likely that OTN members uncritically accept local beliefs about homeless assistance (like the staircase approach). Ultimately, this puts OTN in a better position to try to influence local homeless assistance institutions.

Conclusion

Overall, it is easy to see why OTN has come to embrace "Housing First" as a slogan and as a philosophy of homeless assistance. In many ways, Housing First overlaps with OTN's relational model of "journeying alongside." As the community of Nashville became aware of Housing First and joined other U.S. cities in the 100,000 Homes Campaign, OTN may have seen an opportunity to boost the legitimacy of what it was already doing. Exposure to Housing First provided OTN with shared language and a shared construct with which to communicate its own practices and deeply held beliefs. This has become particularly useful for OTN's education initiatives and advocacy efforts.

Indeed, OTN's work of "journeying alongside" people experiencing homelessness does not end with direct service. OTN's involvement in direct service informs and motivates its efforts to influence the institutional systems of the Nashville homeless assistance field as well as other institutional systems defining the geographical community. As the next chapters will show,

such institutional work is a vital part of OTN's work as an organization. One informant explained why institutional concerns are connected to OTN's work of journeying, commenting specifically on activities related to direct action:

> It's hard to do a lot of direct service without feeling compelled to affect the broader system that is creating the reasons you're doing the direct service. … Also, the people that we work with often are the ones who want to lead the direct action, or are the ones who are calling for, "What can we do about this? How can we organize around this?" So, in some ways, the direct services—it's the same [as advocacy and direct action], if you're doing it with people.

For OTN, the work of journeying creates imperatives beyond direct provision of homeless assistance. As the next chapters will show, these imperatives include institutionalizing Housing First practices in the homeless assistance field and disrupting other community institutions that limit it.

CHAPTER 4

OTN and the Nashville Homeless Assistance Field

"I liked that [the local meeting] was really organized. So, it wasn't just like every organization doing their own thing, but they all came together. Like, even though they were separate bodies, they all had the same goal: to impact homelessness around the city."

So far, I have provided an overview of the organization Open Table Nashville (OTN), including its culture of homeless assistance that in many ways is aligned with the Housing First paradigm. As Chapters Two and Three made clear, OTN is embedded in a global homeless assistance field structured by a distinct institutional culture. Macro-level models (e.g., housing navigation and Housing First), national advocacy organizations, and federal regulators (e.g., the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness) have structured the context in which OTN talks about homeless assistance and puts it into practice. OTN does not explicitly try to influence these macro-level models and nonlocal actors; it is simply reactive to them. In some ways, OTN goes along with macro-level pressures, and in other ways it resists them—perhaps helped by its grassroots funding buffer and its dual membership in a religious context. If my analysis were to end here, an institutional scholar might view OTN as an interesting case of nonconformity or as an illustration of the limits of isomorphism, but not much more. It is not a particularly convincing example of an organization empowered to target the institutional processes of a field.

However, such an analysis would overlook key mechanisms for institutionalization at the local level. Why do some field practices become institutionalized in some places but not others, or in some places more quickly than others, or in some places more thoroughly than others? Variables analysis can identify community-level predictors—characteristics that might make

communities and their member organizations more or less susceptible to field-level isomorphic processes (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures that bring organizations into conformity with an institution). Under the field theoretic, this would be analogous to a particle's charge making it more or less susceptible to the forces of an electromagnetic field. But the possibility of a field topology complicated by *community*-level isomorphic processes, which shape how field institutions are locally enacted, is not supported by current theoretical constructs. This severely limits explanations for *how* institutionalization happens at the local level.

In the present chapter, I lean on two case studies of OTN activism to convey a *local* organizational field—a theoretical construct that introduces mechanisms for the local institutionalization of field practices. I describe these case studies from the perspective of OTN members, with some independent corroboration. The first case study highlights the distinction between the local and global levels of OTN's organizational field. The second case study highlights the distinction between actors in OTN's local organizational field and other local actors outside of it. Both cases provide intriguing examples of OTN's local institutional work, which has roots in OTN's culture of homeless assistance (described in Chapter 3).

In addition to its explanatory power, I argue that the local organizational field construct allows for a more agentic view of OTN's potential for institutional work in the homeless assistance field, by identifying various local institutional processes that OTN targets. As part of this argument, I situate OTN within the *Nashville* homeless assistance field. In Chapter Two, I introduced the Nashville homeless assistance field and explained how it is embedded within the global homeless assistance field. As I define it, it is a community of homeless assistance organizations, including OTN, with a common interest in the issue of homeless assistance *in*

Nashville. This community of interest is itself an organizational field, albeit geographically constrained. As I will show, OTN—motivated by its rights-based culture of homeless assistance—has tried to influence the institutional processes of the Nashville homeless assistance field, through a variety of means.

As part of this work, I will make the case that the Nashville homeless assistance field is a social environment with distinctive institutional pressures—experienced by organizations with an interest in homeless assistance in Nashville, but not experienced by organizations without this interest. These local field pressures are configured in part by particular *events* (local conferences, public meetings, etc.). A sweeping survey of the Nashville homeless assistance field and its many players and systems is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, my goal is convey that this context possesses key features of an organizational field (despite being limited to a locale), and that this is important to the study of institutional work. From my analysis of interviews and archives, OTN clearly engages in institutional work targeted to the local field level. This work does not directly implicate the global field, but it nevertheless has potential to impact how Nashville homeless assistance organizations understand and practice homeless assistance. The standard organizational field framework would lead us to miss these institutional dynamics entirely.

To make this argument, I provide some examples of how OTN members see their organization as connected to other homeless assistance organizations in Nashville. As one board member put it, OTN has "good partnerships with people in the community, with other [homeless service] providers, because they recognize that different organizations have a different focus, but we all speak into the same issue." I also comment on some ways that OTN tries to influence local institutional processes specific to homeless assistance, actions that I am characterizing as

institutional work. I do this through two case studies that bring to light different kinds of local institutional work.

The first case study is about the How's Nashville campaign, which tried to mobilize support for the Housing First paradigm in Nashville. As a member of the How's Nashville team, OTN tried to influence cultural-cognitive, regulative, and normative institutional systems at the local level in order to make Nashville a place where Housing First practices could be institutionalized. Similar to Holm's (1995) historical study of the Norwegian fishery sector (described in Chapter One), this work involves an interaction between two different levels of action: in this case, the global, geography-independent level of the field and a local level of the field. In the How's Nashville campaign, local actors (including OTN) worked to translate the field institution of Housing First into local practices, such that a local Housing First institution has started to become identifiable. The local organizational field construct highlights the distinction between global and local levels of the field.

Figure 4.1 depicts this global/local distinction. The "boundary" of the Nashville organizational field (in black) is a social boundary that distinguishes (a) the community of organizations with a stake in homeless assistance in Nashville from (b) other organizations without this dual interest. It is a social boundary defined, in part, by geographic location. For example, a homeless shelter in Johannesburg would be a member of the global homeless assistance field (outlined in blue) and subject to its pressures (blue arrows); but without a stake in homeless assistance *in Nashville*, it would not be a member of the distinct organizational community represented by the Nashville homeless assistance field. On the local side of the global/local boundary highlighted in Figure 4.1, the pressures of the global field are collectively interpreted and reinforced (or resisted) by Nashville homeless assistance organizations, which

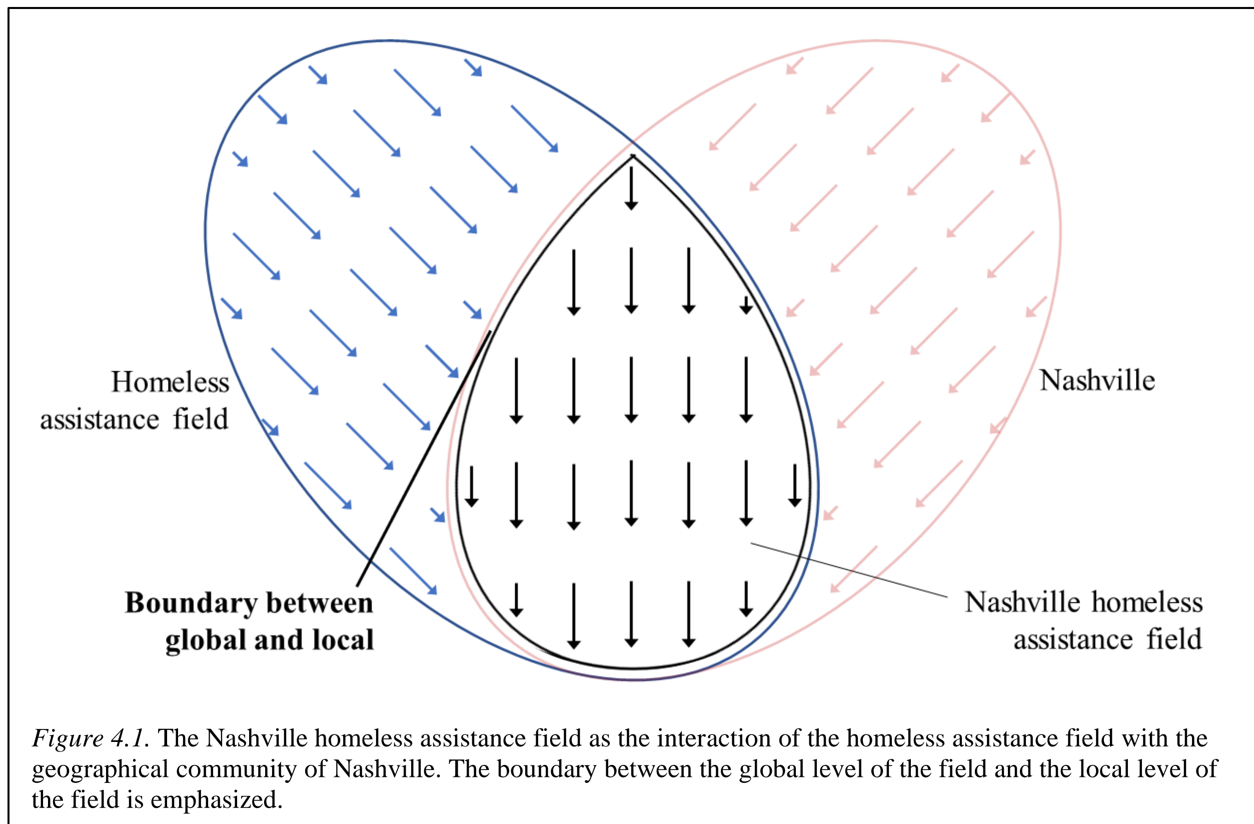

Figure 4.1. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville. The boundary between the global level of the field and the local level of the field is emphasized.

helps determine how field pressures are experienced locally (black arrows). This is the institutional process that I call "local translation." As OTN's participation in the How's Nashville campaign illustrates, a community organization can try to influence this translative process—a form of institutional work that I call "local translation work."

This chapter's second case study explores the Nashville homeless assistance field's *local limits*. If the Nashville homeless assistance field is *place*-bounded, with homeless assistance in Nashville being distinct from homeless assistance elsewhere, it is also *issue*-bounded, with the local homeless assistance community (and its institutions) being distinct from the rest of Nashville. To unpack this, I analyze OTN's involvement in the Nashville-Davidson Continuum of Care (CoC) and particularly the CoC's interaction with other Nashville actors in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the CoC, including OTN, tried to strengthen the

limited influence of homeless assistance institutions on local public health and emergency management practices with respect to people experiencing homelessness. In this case study, the local organizational field highlights how the issue-based social world that OTN and other Nashville homeless assistance organizations inhabit is culturally distinct from the rest of Nashville.

Figure 4.2 depicts this cultural distinction between Nashville organizations with and without a stake in the issue of homeless assistance. For example, a public health organization in Nashville would be a member of the geographical community (outlined in red) and subject to Nashville's place-based institutional pressures (red arrows); but without a stake in *homeless assistance* in Nashville, it would not be a member of the distinct organizational community represented by the Nashville homeless assistance field. On the homeless assistance side of the

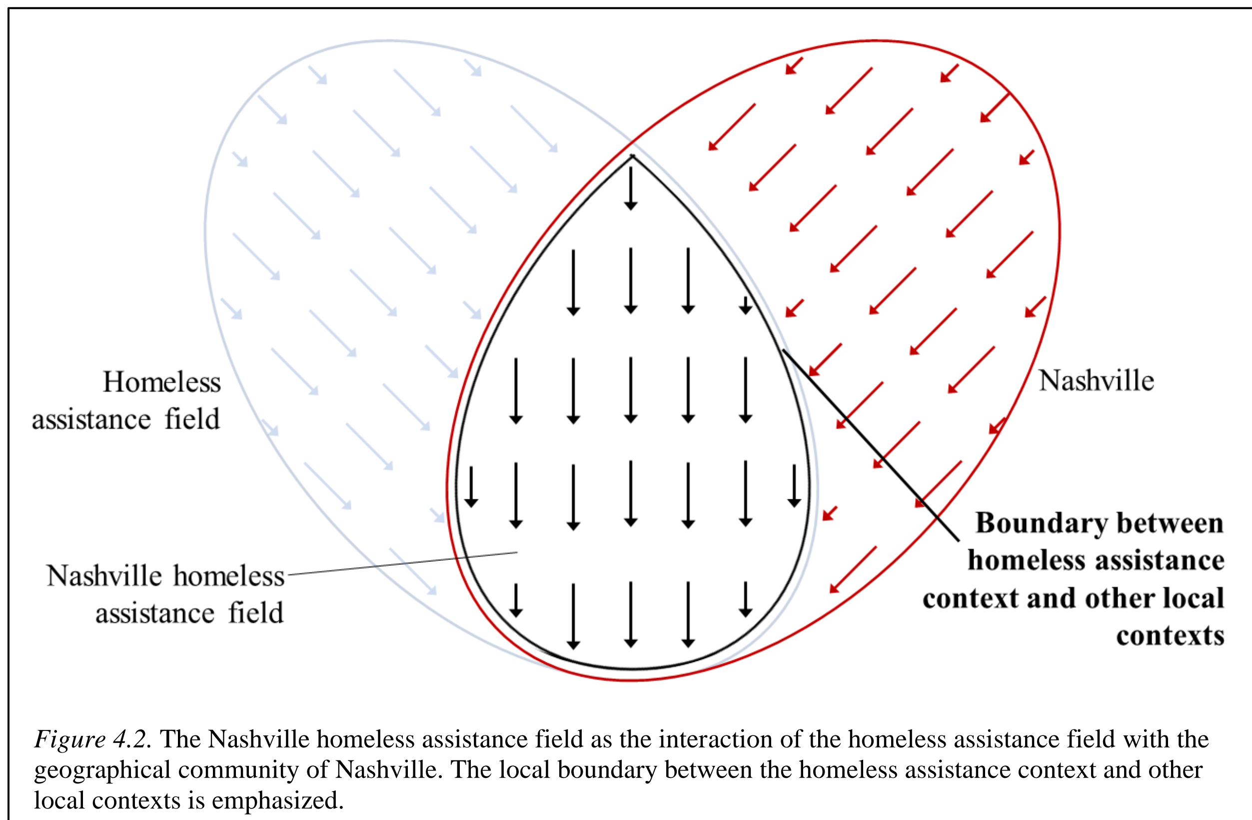

Figure 4.2. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville. The local boundary between the homeless assistance context and other local contexts is emphasized.

cultural boundary highlighted in Figure 4.2, the pressures of the geographical community influence how homeless assistance practices are institutionalized locally (black arrows). I will elaborate upon this in the next chapter, since this begins to diverge from the homeless assistance context. In the present chapter, the case of OTN and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how actors can attempt to *defend* the cultural boundary of the local homeless assistance field by asserting the relevance of local homeless assistance institutions in situations where this is contested. I call this "local boundary maintenance."

In both case studies, I try to make plain how the Nashville homeless assistance context can be viewed as a local organizational field. Whether through the How's Nashville campaign or the CoC, local events brought OTN and other organizations together to form shared understandings of the legitimacy of certain homeless assistance practices. Institutional systems specific to both issue *and* place can be identified. This, in turn, allows for an institutional analysis of OTN's attempts to influence these local systems.

Local Translation Work: Housing First in Nashville

Chapter Two described how the 100,000 Homes Campaign helped to institutionalize Housing First at the national level in the U.S. Nashville joined this campaign in 2013, at the behest of the Metropolitan Homelessness Commission. This local initiative—dubbed "How's Nashville"—adopted a Housing First philosophy to homeless assistance (White, 2018). Because Nashville homeless assistance organizations are embedded in the homeless assistance field writ large, it is likely that some local awareness of Housing First preexisted How's Nashville. However, How's Nashville is a good starting point for understanding Housing First's translation into Nashville's institutional context, since the campaign did much to establish the local institutional supports for Housing First. In addition, OTN's purposive involvement in Housing

First's local institutionalization, both during and after the campaign, is an example of community-level institutional work embedded in a global field context.

The local organizational field is a useful construct here, because it identifies the organizational community with the most direct hand in the local enactment of field institutions like Housing First. Through its own formal rules, norms, and taken-for-granted beliefs, this community shapes how member organizations respond to field pressures. Are local resources (e.g., housing vouchers and available apartment units) mobilized such that local organizations can effectively implement Housing First? What institutional processes are in place to achieve (or prevent) this resource mobilization and Housing First implementation? For example, are local laws or administrative rules in place to direct local funding streams appropriately (regulative process)? Are there strong local networks that foster expectations for organizational practice, whether rooted in moral, professional, or other sense of obligation (normative process)? Do local organizations reflexively dismiss Housing First as "not something that can be done here," or do they see examples to the contrary (mimetic process)? Varying community answers to questions such as these could help explain why the institutionalization of Housing First practices varies from place to place.

In identifying local, field-embedded institutional processes, the local organizational field construct illuminates local opportunities for community organizations to engage in meaningful institutional work—but does so without shifting attention from the institutional pressures of the global organizational field. Housing First is still a field institution, but the community context, not just the global context, is fateful for Housing First's institutionalization in Nashville. Brought together in relationship by their shared interest and shared geography, homeless assistance organizations in Nashville have organized to collectively determine what community practices

are needed to respond to the pressures of the global field. Thus, the Nashville homeless assistance field mediates macro-level field pressures, shaping local practices that may support or undermine a community-level Housing First institution.

In the present section, I discuss the local translation of Housing First—beginning with the How's Nashville campaign, which several OTN informants viewed as significant for the city and for OTN as an organization. The section is structured around two questions; to answer them, I rely primarily on the recollections of key OTN informants (though I also attempted to corroborate what I could from archival sources). First, what were some signs of a bourgeoning local-level Housing First institution derived from the macro-level model? To answer this, I discuss interactions between the Nashville homeless assistance field and the homeless assistance field writ large, the articulation of Housing First that resulted, and examples of local institutional mechanisms that have helped support this articulated local model. Second, how has OTN purposively participated in this process of local institutional creation and maintenance? To answer this, I discuss how OTN members see their organization as an agent in this institutional story. Indeed, although OTN is one of thousands of community organizations embedded in the global field of homeless assistance, OTN members see their local institutional work around Housing First as meaningful for their community of Nashville homeless assistance organizations. When integrated into contemporary institutional theory, the local organizational field construct helps tell this story.

How's Nashville and Housing First

In partnership with other local organizations, the Nashville Metropolitan Homelessness Commission launched the How's Nashville campaign in early 2013. How's Nashville worked to better organize the local system of homeless service provision—helping service providers to

prioritize the most vulnerable Nashvillians experiencing homelessness and to provide assistance guided by Housing First principles. How's Nashville partners helped people experiencing homelessness identify available housing units, rapidly move into housing, and make rent and utility payments, in combination with case management. To be successful, the campaign had to find local funding streams for housing vouchers as well as landlords who would accept those vouchers under the campaign's terms.

In sharing their recollections of OTN's involvement in the How's Nashville campaign, some OTN informants mentioned key events and dynamics associated with the local institutionalization of Housing First. In their telling, it was a time when relationships among Nashville homeless assistance organizations were being reconfigured and resources were being reallocated in support of a new local practice. Although I supplemented interviews with archival research, a thorough accounting of these events is not possible absent interviews with other local actors. Since my data came primarily from interviews with OTN members, the emphases below are decidedly OTN's and skew toward events that involved OTN members. Nevertheless, exploring OTN's particular perspective of the institutional environment helps drive home the point that OTN saw local institutional processes at work. Establishing this recognition is a prerequisite for analyzing OTN's *purposive* efforts to *influence* local institutional processes, discussed later.

Connections to the global field. Housing First is a global practice, a macro-level field institution. I want to make explicit how the How's Nashville campaign and local conceptions of "Housing First" are connected to this macro-level institution. Nashville homeless assistance organizations were not implementing new practices in a bubble; they were informed by practices

and actors outside of Nashville. Establishing this is essential to understanding how Nashville homeless assistance practices are embedded within a global field context.

In 2013, shortly after the How's Nashville campaign began, a small group of community leaders attended multiple trainings put on by the 100,000 Homes Campaign, including "boot camps" in San Antonio and Chicago. The trainings are notable for strengthening local cultural-cognitive systems in support of Housing First in Nashville. For example, one OTN member characterized the trainings as helpful for learning how a community could streamline housing navigation to make it as "low barrier" as possible. (Recall that low-barrier housing assistance is a key component of Housing First, and the most salient one for OTN.) Likewise, in its first progress report on the How's Nashville campaign, the Metro Homelessness Commission credited the trainings with catalyzing "a collaborative team effort creating momentum and setting goals for Nashville," while also establishing formal ties between local team members and the global field through "ongoing network opportunities with peer cities and federal partners" (Nashville Metropolitan Homelessness Commission, 2013a). At the encouragement of training organizers, the Nashville participants created a goal to house 200 people in 100 days under a Housing First approach (Nashville Metropolitan Homelessness Commission, 2013b).

Following their experiences at the national trainings, the How's Nashville team and other local actors worked to adapt the macro-level institution of Housing First to their local homeless assistance system. To start, they engaged in collective interpretive work, comparing Housing First against existing local practices. One OTN member outlined this interpretive process, which involved a broader set of local homeless assistance stakeholders:

> So, this planning team or whatever, that was going to these trainings, came back [to Nashville and met] with a group of folks from here, folks on the ground… Like, outreach workers, whatever; case managers … And [we] came up with a list of asks by doing a map. Like, we did a visual map of what it took for someone to get—if they were

> experiencing homelessness currently—how long it took them to get to housing. And there was a map, just like a roadmap. It looked like a game, with steps along the way—like Candy Land or something. And it had everything that you had to do. And so, we [had] learned in these [national] training sessions, like, what steps are real and which ones are bullshit, basically.

This map exercise shows the direct connection between the global field and the local Housing First practices that were beginning to develop. According to this OTN member, the expertise imparted at national events was brought to bear on existing local practices, legitimizing some and delegitimizing others.

Meanwhile, the How's Nashville campaign developed guidance for community partners. Archived webpages describing this guidance offer some clues as to how Housing First was formally conceptualized by local campaign leaders—and how it was consistent with field conceptions of Housing First. The guidance helped established some of the key local assumptions under which campaign participants operated.

Most explicitly, How's Nashville rejected the staircase (a.k.a. "housing readiness") approach in favor of housing-led assistance plus supportive services. The campaign's official housing strategy instructed: "House people as soon as possible then put in place services to keep people housed. This approach believes that every person is housing ready. Housing is a human right." Although a rights-based conception of housing assistance was affirmed, the housing strategy did not explicitly rule out conditioning housing assistance on services participation or abstinence from drugs and alcohol (How's Nashville, 2015a).

Nevertheless, there are no indications that How's Nashville allowed participating service providers to leverage the promise of housing assistance or the threat of eviction to compel abstinence or participation in treatment. To the contrary, the campaign emphasized consumer choice, particularly with respect to support services. Its housing strategy instructed:

> Expect and give front-line staff autonomy to build trust first by engaging people where they are and placing decision-making power in the hands of the people they help. … Invest in being able to assist a person on the path the person chooses for him/herself, rather than in a particular program model that is selected for them. … Keep the relationship a form of friendship, partner for professional services. … Maximize our ability to help and focus on the long-term success of participants by allowing and expecting each person to do all they can to assist him/herself. (How's Nashville, 2015c)

This emphasis on consumer choice, while light on details of organizational practice, was aligned with the consumer-driven ethos of the field institution of Housing First.

Another clue about the How's Nashville campaign's conception of Housing First can be found in its guidance for participating landlords. Since the campaign housed its consumers on the private market, private landlords were key partners. Landlords were advised that How's Nashville residents "will be expected to abide by the same rules and regulations as … other residents" (How's Nashville, 2015b). Furthermore: "While people who have experienced homelessness may need a little adjustment time, they are permanent residents until they choose to move. Please treat them as you would any other renter" (How's Nashville, 2015c). These instructions appear to rule out any treatment or abstinence requirements for maintaining housing.

How's Nashville's emphasis on housing-led assistance, a rights-based conception of housing assistance, consumer-driven service provision, and nondiscriminatory treatment by landlords indicates the campaign's alignment with the macro-level field institution of Housing First. Thus, the How's Nashville campaign can be interpreted as an attempt to articulate a local version of the Housing First paradigm as it was widely conceived of in the homeless assistance field (alongside other practices associated with the 100,000 Homes Campaign, such as the use of a vulnerability index to prioritize people for assistance). However, the campaign did more than articulate; additional institutional supports helped Housing First practices take hold in Nashville.

Creation of Institutional Systems. Translating a field institution to a local context involves not just articulating field practices for a local audience, but also establishing social

pressures that impel or enable local actors to *produce and reproduce* these practices, such that the practices become a local institution over time. According to contemporary institutional theory, this involves the emergence of new institutional systems—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive—that facilitate the continued reproduction of the practices. This can also entail the *weakening* of institutional systems supporting a competing local institution. In this case, the creation of local institutional systems supporting Housing First went hand in hand with the disruption of other systems supporting the status quo (the staircase approach). The locality of these institutional systems suggests a distinctive local institutional environment (a local organizational field) embedded in the global field.

I have already touched on one of the ways that local cultural-cognitive supports for Housing First began to develop, from OTN's vantage point: the guided process of institutional interpretation (as seen in the "mapping" event), which helped community members conceptualize local Housing First practices. However, cultural-cognitive systems involve more than simply the existence of conceptual frameworks; they are also defined by beliefs in what is and is not possible or achievable. For example, one of my OTN informants recalled the frustration of hearing local leaders "give us some bullshit blow-off answer" about why Housing First would not work in Nashville.

As this informant recalled, local skepticism prompted How's Nashville leaders to "go to the source" (of the policies and best practice recommendations associated with Housing First). They sought to ask national experts: "This is what we want to do; is this possible? Yes, or no?" The expectation was that such experts would respond, "Absolutely, it's totally possible." Indeed, this was borne out. For the informant, this was one of the benefits of attending the national trainings organized by the 100,000 Homes campaign. The trainings, accompanying interactions

with influential field-level stakeholders, and stories of other communities' success with Housing First helped to validate local advocates' sense that implementing Housing First in Nashville was achievable.

For this informant, the national trainings were also useful for transforming existing local *regulative* systems associated with the staircase approach to homeless assistance and establishing new regulative systems in support of Housing First. After the How's Nashville team returned to Nashville:

> We [now] had reasons to tell [other community leaders] like, "These are bullshit steps. We do not have to do this. This is not a federal mandate. Change the policy." Right? "We have gone to a national training … and [the trainers] said, 'This can be different.' So, let's do that."

Backed by influential field stakeholders and institutions, and having translated the 100,000 Homes training material into a local "map" of housing navigation steps, local leaders advocated changes to local public policy. OTN informants brought to my attention an instance where this was successful: limited integration of Housing First with Section 8 housing vouchers. Before How's Nashville, these vouchers were fully controlled by the Metropolitan Development and Housing Authority (MDHA). To get a voucher, a person experiencing homelessness would have to get on the waiting list; and to get on the waiting list, this person would have to submit an application. However, the waiting list would be closed for long periods of time, sometimes years. This resource constraint was (and still is) a major barrier to rapidly moving people into housing. However, at the urging of How's Nashville leaders from the Metro Homelessness Commission and the Metro Homeless Impact Division, MDHA began providing the campaign with a fixed number of Section 8 vouchers per month—what one of my informants called "fast-track vouchers." How's Nashville then worked with landlords to accept these vouchers and offer units of housing to the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness, absent special behavioral

contingencies like sobriety requirements. Thus, local leaders effectively secured a source of funding for Housing First practices.

Finally, in addition to cultural-cognitive and regulatory systems, Nashville saw the development of local *normative* systems in support of Housing First. In their interview with me, one OTN member recalled a time when "there was no collaboration" among local homeless assistance organizations; "*these* people did not talk to *these* people, did not talk to *these* people... Like, 'No, you can't trust them.'" The informant attributed this to a hypercompetitive funding environment pitting organizations against each other. If anything, local organizations expected to compete, not collaborate.

According to this informant, forming "a collaborative system," in which working together would be a binding expectation, was a big emphasis of the How's Nashville campaign. Indeed, there are indications that stakeholders saw collaborative norms as vital to the success of Housing First. In its presentation at the campaign kick-off, the Metro Homelessness Commission (2013c) stressed that "collaboration among stakeholders" was directly related to the community's success in helping individuals obtain and retain permanent housing. Joint street canvassing efforts and weekly interorganizational workgroups (one for housing, one for street outreach) would help the community identify the people most in need, "line up" housing and service resources, "reduce time from street to lease," and identify support services that could help people stay housed. Thus, "homelessness can be solved" under a Housing First approach "if we … work together."

For the OTN informant who said there was once "no collaboration" among local organizations, it was the How's Nashville campaign that sparked a change in culture. The campaign's organizational partners—comprising a large slice of homeless assistance

organizations in Nashville—"became like a *family*, sort of. We were working towards a common goal. It was so beautiful. … It was just all these different entities finally working together that had not trusted each other before." This emergence of collaborative norms was yet another development that began to support a local Housing First institution in the Nashville homeless assistance field. For example, through the new Housing Workgroup, Nashville homeless assistance organizations worked together to identify new sources of housing that could accommodate Housing First practices (Figure 4.3).

This account of the early days of the How's Nashville campaign depends heavily on one organization's perspective and is far from complete. However, it underscores how this was a time of change, involving many community actors who were working to define and establish local Housing First practices. Even if they did not label them as such, key OTN informants perceived institutional mechanisms through which a local Housing First institution began to be established. The arena of action was the intersection of homeless assistance and the geographical community of Nashville. In other words, the local organizational field was the defining social structure within which these institutional processes occurred.

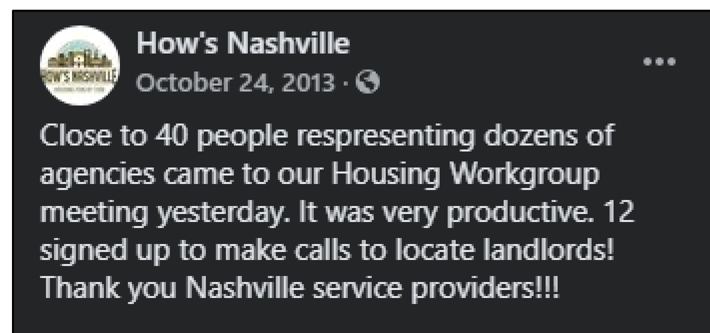

Figure 4.3. Facebook post by How's Nashville during the first year of the campaign.

OTN's Efforts to Institutionalize Housing First in Nashville

As OTN informants described the institutionalization of Housing First in Nashville, they characterized OTN as an active participant in this process. In their telling, they were not on the sidelines; rather, they were collaborators offering unique contributions to the collective effort. In this section, my goal is to describe these contributions, in the eyes of key informants. OTN members worked (with others) to establish Housing First during the How's Nashville campaign, and they have continued this work since. This activity could be characterized as institutional work performed by a community organization, targeted to the Nashville homeless assistance field.

Efforts During How's Nashville. According to *The Tennessean*, OTN played "an integral role" in the How's Nashville campaign (Tamburin, 2014). It was one of nine members of the How's Nashville Steering Committee when the campaign launched and was the first member listed on the steering committee's web page (How's Nashville, 2019b). When I asked an informant to summarize OTN's unique contribution to the campaign, they replied: "People were tired, I think. And I think that we were a group of people that brought a whole lot of energy." The informant attributed this energy to OTN's rights-based, justice-oriented approach to homeless assistance—which "fired some people up." Given OTN's own cultural-cognitive alignment with the Housing First paradigm, OTN's active involvement in the How's Nashville makes sense. Together with other local organizations, and under the leadership of local government actors, OTN saw How's Nashville as a vehicle to institutionalize Housing First in the Nashville context. This is why, when I asked OTN members about the organization's efforts to advocate Housing First, they often cited OTN's involvement in the How's Nashville campaign.

According to OTN informants, OTN was active in How's Nashville from almost the very beginning, working closely with the Metro Homelessness Commission (particularly Will Connelly, the director of the Commission who spearheaded How's Nashville). When I asked a key informant about what being on the steering committee entailed, the informant discussed the How's Nashville team's initial recognition of the need for local legitimacy and, relatedly, the need to participate in 100,000 Homes Campaign trainings. OTN was involved in these discussions and sent staff members to the national trainings alongside other How's Nashville team members (Figure 4.4). This "planning team" returned to Nashville and organized a "roadmap" workshop with a larger group of local stakeholders. As noted above, this was an important way in which cultural-cognitive mechanisms were used to legitimize Housing First in Nashville. OTN members indicated that their organization was intentionally involved in this process.

Subsequently, the How's Nashville team presented the roadmap and policy recommendations to other community leaders. As one OTN informant narrated:

> We showed the map, we showed where we wanted barriers [to housing] pulled out so that [housing navigation] could go quickly, showed how much more quickly it would go because of that. One of us—I think, Will [Connelly of the Metro Homelessness Commission]—made that presentation, and then I made the presentation of the policy

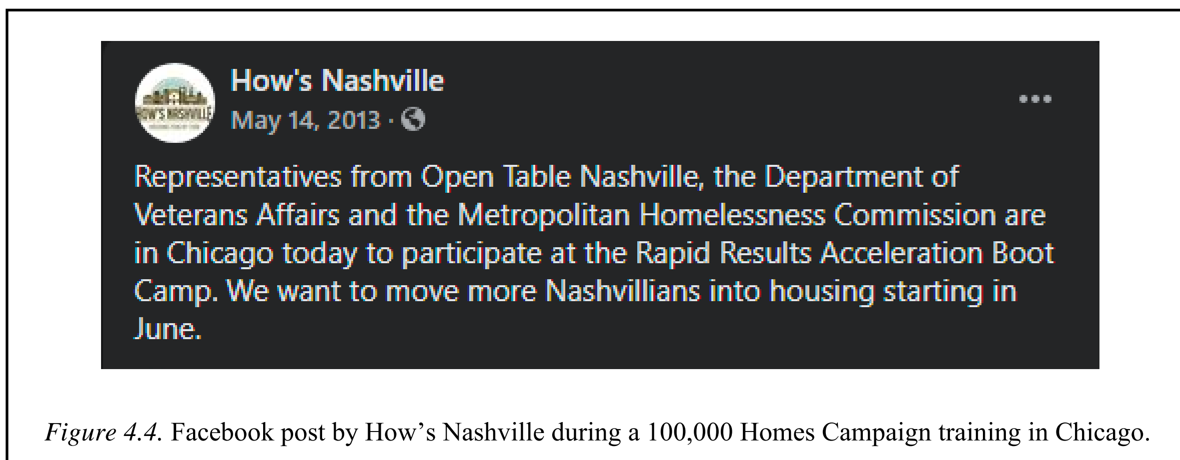

Figure 4.4. Facebook post by How's Nashville during a 100,000 Homes Campaign training in Chicago.

> changes to the politicians that were there. When I say "politicians," it was, like, the Vice Mayor and [City] Council people and other community leaders.

I have been unable to confirm which policy changes the OTN member advocated in this presentation. However, the intent—to influence regulatory systems in support of Housing First—is clear. An OTN staff member gave the presentation and indicated OTN's involvement in planning the event, which was directed at local policymakers.

Finally, I saw indications that OTN was involved in strengthening local norms in support of Housing First. The importance of interorganizational collaboration, and a community system in which this is strong, was something that several OTN informants mentioned as an ideal that the organization works toward. It was a prominent theme in my data generally, and it came up organically during a key informant's discussion of the How's Nashville campaign. As detailed above, this informant described a pre-campaign status quo in which community organizations did not work well together, but which the campaign tried to address. Indeed, as suggested by archival documents, the campaign explicitly relied upon the development of collaborative norms among homeless assistance organizations in Nashville—both between public and nonprofit organizations and among nonprofit organizations themselves. The informant placed OTN in the middle of this effort—"building this collaborative system and working on relationships"—by identifying early conversations between OTN and How's Nashville's public leaders where this was discussed. "I would say that a huge amount of energy went into building those relationships," said this informant, "which I'm really fortunate to have been able to do." With OTN on the steering committee, it is not surprising that they would have been involved in a planned relationship-building effort.

Ongoing Efforts. Thanks to participation by Metro Nashville government and many local homeless assistance organizations (such as OTN), the How's Nashville campaign likely

bolstered Housing First's legitimacy in Nashville. But this legitimacy seems precarious, and the paradigm's status as a local institution is weak relative to some other locales. Nashville has not mandated Housing First in its homeless assistance field,[24] nor have Nashville organizations consistently adopted Housing First practices on their own. An evaluation of the Nashville homeless assistance system, commissioned by Metro agencies and carried out by an out-of-state consulting firm, had this to say about the acceptance of Housing First among Nashville homeless assistance organizations in 2016:

> While the providers in Nashville appear to have a solid understanding of Housing First, opinions expressed in the interviews suggested that there is a broad spectrum of practice in this area, with some programs strongly aligned with Housing First principles and others operating more on … a Housing Readiness [staircase] model. (Focus Strategies, 2016, p. 18)

This finding suggests a relatively uncontested local interpretation of Housing First; the same cannot be said about its local legitimacy.

It is difficult to know whether the status of Housing First in Nashville has changed since Focus Strategies' evaluation in 2016, though it remains a salient topic in the local field and maintains support from local regulators. Nashville Continuum of Care (CoC) General Meetings have facilitated noteworthy discussions about Housing First (MDHA, 2017; MDHA, 2018). Housing First was a prominent theme of the June 2019 symposium organized by the Homeless Impact Division of Metro Nashville. In July 2019, the Homelessness Planning Council (the top governing body for homeless assistance in Nashville) included Housing First among the "underlying values" of its Strategic Community Plan. In his "State of the Metro" address in April 2022, Mayor John Cooper announced he was committing Nashville to being "a 'Housing First'

[24] Some jurisdictions have done this, California being one prominent example (Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council, 2016).

city" as part of a new $50 million plan to address homelessness (Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, 2022).

Yet the staircase model still shows its local influence. For example, the largest homeless service provider in Nashville maintains a Life Recovery Program designed to help men and women "make better life choices" and "understand the reasons they struggle with addiction, homelessness, and other broken lifestyles." Upon graduation, participants can apply to live in the provider's transitional housing program, where they will "begin the transition to independent living" (Nashville Rescue Mission, 2022). Indeed, transitional housing remains a fixture of the CoC; while the CoC reported 1,749 permanent housing beds[25] in 2021, it reported 493 transitional housing beds as well (HUD, 2021a).

One of my informants had a similarly mixed view about how well Housing First has been institutionalized in Nashville. On one hand, many key actors of the local homeless assistance field have embraced Housing First:

> There's a really big appreciation for and support of and advocacy for affordable housing and Housing First approaches, basically. I think, a lot of people—like Park Center, like Mental Health Co-Op, like Metro Homeless Impact Division, like Open Table—I think we are all for Housing First.

On the other hand, Housing First lacks legitimacy among other important actors. For the informant, the most salient example was nonprofit affordable housing providers—collectively an important source of housing resources for the homeless assistance system—who maintain eviction practices inconsistent with Housing First. Other actors, like some homeless outreach groups, provide basic services to people experiencing homelessness but "have no idea what

[25] That is, rapid re-housing beds plus permanent supportive housing beds.

Housing First is." A second informant told me that most landlords in Nashville are still very risk-averse, unwilling to take chances on people with criminal histories.

This is why, after the end of How's Nashville, OTN continues to advocate Housing First and works to make it a stronger institution of the Nashville homeless assistance field. For example, in response to housing providers' eviction practices, OTN has had to "bring on attorneys at some points for people that they were evicting, to try to represent them against the attorneys for the housing complex." This is an attempt to use the local regulatory system to enforce a minimum standard of compliance with Housing First practices. In other situations, OTN continues to try to strengthen local cultural-cognitive systems in support of Housing First. For example, I attended an "Advocacy and Policy Training" that OTN organized for the benefit of interested community actors, and this training included an explanation of and advocacy for Housing First practices. The training also explicitly endorsed key Housing First principles, such as the belief that "housing is a human right." Finally, as I will explain in the next chapter, OTN's persistent advocacy of affordable housing is an indirect but clear way that OTN works to make Housing First a stronger local institution.

All this institutional work—from the time of the How's Nashville campaign to the present—is centered on a field institution: Housing First. However, the institutional work described above was not targeted to macro-level actors and processes. As part of the How's Nashville steering committee, OTN tried to convince its peers in Nashville that Housing First was doable in Nashville, specifically. OTN made their presentation of policy changes to local politicians, not to federal homeless assistance regulators. OTN worked to strengthen collaborative norms among a local set of homeless assistance actors, not *all* homeless assistance actors. And OTN continues to target homeless assistance practices in Nashville. This is because

local processes matter for Housing First's translation into the locale. For OTN, local institutional work is meaningful, its embeddedness in a global homeless assistance field notwithstanding.

Local Boundary Maintenance: Nashville Homeless Assistance Amidst COVID-19

In the previous section, I described a case of a macro-level field institution (Housing First) being translated into the Nashville homeless assistance field. In that example, OTN worked with others to influence the institutional processes of the local field in order to strengthen a local Housing First institution—a process I referred to as institutional "translation" from a global level to a local level. In the present section, I describe an example of local field members (including an OTN representative) trying to bring local homeless assistance institutions to bear on local emergency management and public health actors who were interacting with the homeless population during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the unique vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness to COVID-19 exposure, emergency management and public health actors in Nashville had taken the lead on assisting and managing this population, but with little input from many actors typically associated with the Nashville homeless assistance field. Some consequent practices became incongruent with homeless assistance field institutions, prompting a group of local field members to assert the relevance of these institutions. In short, these field members had a particular understanding of the cultural "boundary"—that is, the limits of influence—of the local field (Figure 4.2, above), and they were trying to defend this boundary in a particular situation. I call this "local boundary maintenance."

Before narrating this case, it is necessary to discuss the Continuum of Care (CoC): the administrative body that was OTN's vehicle for this instance of local boundary maintenance. Although OTN's primary focus is direct assistance to people experiencing homelessness, its members spend a significant amount of time participating in CoC activities. OTN members view

this as a means of getting information about goings-on in the homeless assistance field; but more significantly, they view CoC involvement as a means of influencing local homeless assistance practices. As I will discuss, CoC activities serve as field-configuring events where organizational relationships are forged and shared understandings about homeless assistance practices emerge. My case study of CoC meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic will illustrate this local institutional dynamic and make the case that the Nashville homeless assistance field is an arena for local boundary maintenance.

OTN's Involvement in the Nashville Continuum of Care

As explained in Chapter Two, the term "Continuum of Care" has come to describe both a *jurisdiction* wherein homeless assistance planning takes place and an *administrative body* that organizes this planning. This planning structure is common throughout the United States and emerged in the 1990s at the incentivization of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Continuums of Care (CoCs) are prioritized for federal funding to the extent that CoC activities are consistent with federal requirements. This resource dependence is a primary mechanism through which some homeless assistance field institutions (e.g., point-in-time homeless counts and, to some extent, Housing First) have become established in Nashville.

Briefly, an important distinction needs to be made. I am not claiming that the Nashville-Davidson CoC is synonymous with the Nashville homeless assistance field. I leave room for local field members who are not formal members of the Nashville-Davidson CoC, such as people experiencing homelessness, religious communities that provide shelter, and homeless assistance organizations that are simply uninterested in what CoC membership offers. I also leave room for

local field activities and interactions outside of the CoC administrative context.[26] What I am claiming, instead, is that CoC activities can serve as field-configuring events—in that they catalyze inter-organizational relationships, disseminate information, establish regulations, and create binding expectations for local organizational practice. For my purposes, CoC events are a convenient study, because they are highly visible and are useful for demonstrating how Nashville homeless assistance organizations comprise a local organizational field.

My focus on the CoC is also due to OTN's involvement. In my interviews, four different OTN members referenced their individual participation on one CoC committee or another. One OTN cofounder has been a member of the Homelessness Planning Council, the governing body of the CoC, for years. These groups meet regularly, usually once a month. Although OTN members have ambivalent feelings about the CoC (their activist inclinations leaving them frustrated with the CoC's bureaucratic limitations), they see CoC events as opportunities to collaborate with other local organizations and to influence local homeless assistance policies and practices. In the COVID-19 case study I describe further below, CoC events also facilitated attempts to reinforce the influence of the local homeless assistance field.

How CoC Events Are Field-Configuring. As a community of organizations, a local organizational field is defined by inter-organizational relationships. In Nashville, CoC events help catalyze inter-organizational relationships; indeed, this is what makes the CoC important to many OTN members. One of OTN's interns attended some of these meetings and described them

[26] My study of OTN illuminated numerous examples of local homeless assistance activities that do not take place entirely in the CoC context. To cite a few: Multiple OTN members have served on the board of a local advocacy group called the Nashville Coalition for the Homeless. Every year, OTN members help organize the Nashville Homeless Memorial, which is a collaborative effort that involves a broad swath of local individuals and organizations attuned to homelessness and homeless assistance. And every year, OTN updates its "Where to Turn in Nashville" guide to homeless assistance resources in the Nashville area, a publication that is dependent on OTN's ability to recurringly collect information from other local organizations about the resources they provide.

as "a lot of hustling, a lot of connecting people to other organizations and other resources." For this intern and another intern, what stood out was the interactive nature of CoC activities and the variety of organizations represented in those activities. As one of these interns succinctly put it:

> I liked that [the CoC meeting] was really organized. So, it wasn't just like every organization doing their own thing, but they all came together. Like, even though they were separate bodies, they all had the same goal: to impact homelessness around the city.

In other words, the CoC meeting catalyzed organizational interaction around a shared interest: a particular issue ("homelessness") in a particular place ("the city"). This is the cultural-cognitive nexus of the local homeless assistance field.

In addition, four OTN members (all staff) talked about their participation on various CoC committees. One OTN cofounder admitted to having an initial skepticism about the CoC, seeing it as largely irrelevant to OTN. However, the CoC's social importance convinced this cofounder to think otherwise:

> I finally realized what [the CoC] was and that it was more than just about the people who got [government] money; it was the whole Continuum of Care! For the city! And like, we're a part of that! … And so, I think I did want us to be involved, because I think it's another one of those relationship-building pieces where we have to be able to be in relationship with all the people … We have to be able to work with everyone across the spectrum, and that means going to those CoC meetings and participating in them.

A sense of community with other homeless assistance organizations is evident from this quote. This is an important detail, as an organizational field is a *community* of organizations—implying regular interaction, shared interest in an issue, and some sense of mutual obligation.

CoC events further configure the Nashville homeless assistance field by how they facilitate shared understanding among local organizations and help develop local institutional pressures. One OTN staff member put it this way:

> There are a lot of issues with the bureaucracy of the CoC. It doesn't make quick movement possible, which sometimes crisis situations demand. But it *is* a body that has brought together a whole lot of different [local organizations] in a way that other bodies haven't been able to do. And so, there's a huge collaborative potential there, right?

> *There's huge potential for more interfacing, for more relationships, for more… getting on the same page together as a community—whether that's about more affordable housing or the Housing First models or other evidence-based practices, and really pushing those through.* So, I do think there's potential there. [emphasis added]

There are several important things to note here. First, the informant explicitly referenced an existing "community" of organizations that the CoC had "brought together," citing this as a positive aspect of the CoC. Important conditions were now in place to support "more interfacing" and "more relationships" between local organizations. This would facilitate "getting on the same page together as a community"—that is, coming to a collective understanding about certain field-level homeless assistance institutions (like Housing First) and collectively working to institutionalize them ("really [push] those through") in Nashville. Clearly, for this informant, this goal was a work in progress. But what is significant is the informant's knowledge of field institutions and their legitimacy broadly, paired with a recognition that these institutions had not yet been established or "pushed through" in the local context. To the informant, the CoC was helping to configure a community of organizations with the potential to collaborate and facilitate this local institutionalization. In other words, the CoC meetings were field-configuring events. Specifically, they were helping to configure a Nashville homeless assistance field.

Earlier in this chapter, I introduced the Nashville homeless assistance field through the events associated with How's Nashville. The remainder of the present section analyzes a series of CoC meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of my aims is to show how participating homeless assistance actors represent part of a community of organizations with a shared interest in Nashville homeless assistance and a distinct set of social pressures we could call institutions. My other aim is to introduce a form of institutional work—local boundary maintenance—that is possible when a local organizational field is limited in its local influence.

The Homelessness Planning Council's Initial Response to COVID-19

As explained above, the Nashville Continuum of Care (CoC) emerged from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) response to homelessness in the 1990s. Through stipulations attached to CoC funding, HUD has required communities to adopt certain homeless assistance practices, including Housing First. However, many HUD requirements are purposely open to interpretation and specification by communities. To translate these requirements for the Nashville context, the Nashville CoC has a voting membership of local organizations that participate in CoC decision making. Among other activities, this includes electing members to the Homelessness Planning Council (HPC): a local body that governs CoC operations and prioritizes local organizations for federal funding, giving it substantial influence over local homeless assistance practices. CoC members elect 14 CoC representatives to the HPC, alongside 11 individuals appointed by Nashville's mayor and vice mayor.

One elected member of the HPC is an OTN cofounder named Ingrid. Though OTN's executive director for several years, she was in the process of leaving OTN at the time I was collecting data. She would become the first executive director of the Village at Glencliff—a new nonprofit that began as OTN's short-term housing program. In the following case study, I describe some of Ingrid's involvement with the HPC during this transition period. Since her participation on the HPC is public record, I am using her name. As a cofounder and longtime leader of OTN, Ingrid's imprint on OTN was significant, and is still fresh. Consequently, I view her involvement on the HPC as relevant to understanding OTN's culture and institutional work.

This section describes the initial response of the HPC to the COVID-19 pandemic and how Ingrid participated in this response. Here, I seek to demonstrate two things. Firstly, I explore a particular social boundary of the Nashville homeless assistance field: the boundary that

separates the field from the broader community of Nashville. In the meetings I analyzed, the HPC engaged in *local boundary maintenance*, in that it sought to defend the relevance of homeless assistance institutions in a situation where this was contested. Secondly, I explore how Ingrid, the OTN cofounder, participated in this process and tried to steer the response of the HPC itself. This section is informed by recorded video conference calls that I reviewed after they had taken place. The HPC's meetings are public record and are posted on Metro Nashville's YouTube page.

First HPC Meeting During the COVID Lockdown. On May 13, 2020, the HPC met for the first time since COVID-19 lockdowns began. (The April meeting had been cancelled.) This meeting was unprecedented in that it was conducted virtually. The first order of business was a roll call vote to suspend the Council's in-person mandate. This was easily approved by the 20 members present, including Ingrid.

Over the preceding two months, homeless assistance in Nashville had been significantly altered by the pandemic. The difficulties of housing navigation—for example, finding willing landlords—intensified. Existing emergency shelters reduced their capacities, and some winter overflow shelters shut down ahead of schedule. In the wake of these changes, outdoor encampment populations grew. Outreach organizations scrambled to distribute sleeping bags, set up sanitation stations around the city, and mitigate food assistance disruptions. Social distancing protocols at the Nashville Rescue Mission—the city's largest homeless shelter—reduced the Mission's capacity and its ability to meet demand for services. Partly at the Mission's request, Metro established a Social Distancing Shelter at the Nashville Fairgrounds (a 100,000 square-foot complex near downtown) on March 26th.

In a departure from typical homeless assistance practice in Nashville, the Nashville Office of Emergency Management (OEM) led the operations of the Fairgrounds shelter, closely coordinating with the office of Mayor John Cooper. The Metro Public Health Department assisted with health and sanitation protocols, and the Homeless Impact Division of Metro Social Services helped with shelter staffing. The Fairgrounds shelter consisted of three temporary, tiered facilities: one for healthy guests, one for people awaiting COVID-19 results, and one for people who had tested positive. Though city officials maintained that the shelter met CDC guidelines, some homeless advocates remained concerned about the shelter's reliance on communal or congregate spaces, as well as the heavy-handed enforcement of quarantine requirements for people in the COVID-positive facility. (In the days leading up to the HPC's May meeting, one man left the shelter's quarantine. The police arrested and jailed him, and the District Attorney's office charged him with escaping a "penal institution"—a felony.)

Despite Metro's stepped-up involvement in local homeless assistance, the HPC was largely left out of the loop. Neither the Mayor's Office nor OEM had consulted the body about the development or operation of the Fairgrounds shelter, and HPC members were in the dark about the shelter's conditions. To many HPC members, this was part of a pattern (predating the pandemic) of the Cooper administration sidelining the HPC on important matters related to homelessness. During the May 13 meeting, Metro Councilman and HPC member Freddie O'Connell voiced his frustrations:

> We are a *planning council*. As far as I can tell, there has been nothing about our local response to COVID-19, from a public health standpoint, that has engaged this governance body to participate in any planning. … The Fairgrounds shelter process has been entirely managed by OEM, with no guidance from the HPC or any of our committees. We [as a city] have departed from best practices and guidance from federal and state agencies as well as national advocates and providers, and there have been few explanations as to why.

To put it differently, O'Connell expressed concern that city officials were disregarding the regulations and norms of the homeless assistance field, with an implication that this was undesirable (especially since Metro offered no justification). At the intersection of local public health and local homelessness, O'Connell asserted the jurisdiction and relevance of the regulatory structures of the Nashville homeless assistance field.

Others on the call expressed this sentiment using different words, or otherwise communicated their agreement with O'Connell. Members voted to create an ad hoc committee—a COVID-19 response task force—that would meet in the coming days to get more answers from the City and draft a letter to the Mayor's Office. Ingrid, the OTN cofounder, was tapped to be on the task force.

Task Force Meeting 1. On May 21st, the task force gathered virtually for its first of three initial meetings. Members agreed that the meetings should culminate in a list of concerns and recommendations regarding the Fairgrounds shelter, the City's general response to homelessness during the pandemic, and the City's use of new short-term funds from the federal government's COVID rescue package (the CARES Act). These would be attached to a letter submitted to the Mayor's Office. The main concern discussed was the HPC's exclusion from city planning and information sharing. Judith Tackett, Metro Social Services' representative on the HPC, informed the rest of the task force that although her agency had helped to staff the Fairgrounds shelter, the agency was "not at the table" with respect to planning the shelter's operations. According to Tackett, the shelter was following the minimum CDC guidelines, but was not necessarily following best practices from a homeless assistance perspective.

To learn more about the shelter's current operations, members resolved to invite someone to the next meeting who could explain what was going on. Ingrid suggested someone from OEM,

and others agreed. To assist in drafting recommendations, members suggested researching how other cities had been responding to homelessness during the pandemic. Multiple members provided examples of other communities that, to their knowledge, were doing something innovative. Hewing closely to OTN's culture of homeless assistance, Ingrid flagged the importance of compassion and trauma-informed care. Responding to these thoughts, O'Connell, the councilman, urged:

> This is the stuff we should be doing in Nashville. I want to come to this and look at what comports with the vision that people around this table have done, that's consistent with some of [Vanderbilt professor and HPC member] Beth [Shinn]'s research, that honors all of the on-the-ground stuff that Ingrid knows about... And that we come out with our own local playbook.

Another member, Marc Overlock, advised that the letter of concerns and recommendations avoid homeless assistance jargon that HPC members used so fluently—like "ESG" and "AMI." He wanted it to be written so that people unfamiliar with the terminology could follow along. "It's going to get out into the community," he said. "And we want it to have, not just legitimacy, but make it 'sticky,' as Malcolm Gladwell said."

Applying my framework, we can see here the beginnings of a process of negotiation among local field members, including the OTN cofounder, to translate nonlocal models of COVID-19 homeless assistance into the Nashville context (a process that I emphasized in the previous section about the How's Nashville campaign). Nonlocal models were not enough on their own; it was necessary to develop "our own local playbook." Notably, the OTN cofounder actively participated in this process and was leaned upon for her "on-the-ground" expertise (which OTN members have worked hard to cultivate). Thus, normative influences came not only from outside Nashville, but also from within. In addition, members of the HPC task force were aware that their recommendations were aimed at people outside of their own discursive community; the target audience would not understand the usual jargon. Though this interaction

would be local—Nashvillians with Nashvillians—HPC members sensed a social and communicative boundary, beyond which the legitimacy of homeless assistance institutions was less certain. It could be said that HPC members were beginning to engage in "local boundary maintenance" by familiarizing interfacing actors with Nashville's homeless assistance institutions.

Task Force Meeting 2. The second task force meeting took place the next day, on May 22nd. The group had invited two outside authorities to join: Chief Jay Servais of the Metro Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and Dr. Gill Wright of the Nashville Public Health Department. In addition to seeking information from them, task force members sought to impress upon them the relevance of the HPC for responding to this crisis. This, itself, was breaking new ground; at one point, Dr. Wright admitted: "I didn't know until yesterday that there was a [Homelessness] Planning Council." This was one of many instances that exemplified friction between different cultural-cognitive systems: those of the Nashville homeless assistance field versus alternative systems elsewhere in Nashville.

For example, the language used during the meeting seemed to reveal implicit biases held by the guest officials, which some HPC members found transparent and objectionable. Although signaling compassion in some respects, Chief Servais frequently referred to the shelter as being divided into "corrals," evoking pens for cattle or horses. When asked why the city decided to press charges against the man who had left the shelter's quarantine area, Servais responded that people who have COVID and return to their encampments are "a weapon." (This latter comment prompted a rebuke from an HPC member present.) There was additional othering language—such as frequent references to "they" and "them" (which another HPC member noted in a

subsequent meeting). In contrast, HPC members were careful to characterize shelter residents as human beings and neighbors.

In addition, dialogue brought to light conflicting taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate *practices*. This, in turn, created an opportunity for institutional work. At one point during the meeting, Ingrid (the OTN cofounder) and Servais discussed the use of hotel rooms as an alternative to the Fairgrounds for people awaiting COVID test results or in quarantine. Ingrid began by noting that Launch Pad (another homeless assistance organization in Nashville) had been putting people up in hotel rooms for weeks. Why could OEM not do the same? After all, many universities and hotels in Nashville were empty and could surely spare the rooms. Servais responded that, for some special cases, OEM utilized hotel rooms. But he pushed back:

> *Servais:* Just to be devil's advocate, just to talk... In [the Fairgrounds shelter], if someone's experiencing that kind of pain [from COVID], then I've got Saint Thomas [Hospital] there to transport them to the hospital to get them the care they need. How do I know if they're having that pain in a hotel room if I... [Pauses.] But you do wellness checks, apparently, in a hotel room, right? Just like we do after the tornado, when we go door-to-door everywhere, right? And did wellness checks. I guess that's kind of the system you would use there.
>
> *Ingrid:* Well, that's what we're doing right now, just with [homeless] encampments, as we're handing out food. There's outreach workers in town that do that.

Later in the meeting, Ingrid reiterated this point to both Chief Servais and Dr. Wright:

> So, there is a group of folks who, in Nashville, do this every day anyway, who have relationships with people in encampments, who are caring for folks—who would actually be willing to care for folks in hotels. If outreach workers were told, "Hey, all your people are going to this hotel," they would be like, "Hallelujah, praise the Lord, we can go take care of them in a hotel instead of on the streets." But just so you know: That *is* a resource.

Despite this advocacy, neither Ingrid nor other HPC members secured a commitment from Servais to increase utilization of hotel rooms. Nevertheless, the attempt, and the learning that it appeared to facilitate in real time, is noteworthy. By appearances, the OTN cofounder was successful in disrupting Servais' taken-for-granted assumption that increased utilization of hotel

rooms was not viable. Moreover, by highlighting local models of a preferred practice, the OTN cofounder was channeling a mimetic pressure of the local field.

Soon, the conversation turned toward how OEM might try to facilitate permanent housing, not just emergency shelter. (Recall that permanent housing is a key component of Housing First.) Dr. Barbara DiPietro—a guest on the call from the National Healthcare for the Homeless Council (based in Nashville)—asked how the City was using COVID resources for permanent housing. Servais responded that this was something that his team was just now getting to. ("The talks are starting.") He indicated that the Mayor's Office had begun to initiate these meetings, though implicitly without the intent of including the HPC. This response left HPC task force members unsatisfied. "The Mayor's Office doesn't do HMIS and housing for the homeless community in this town," Ingrid interjected. "You might let them know they don't know what they're talking about. [Laughs]." Her reference to a field concept—"HMIS" [27]—was left unexplained, underscoring this point.

Throughout the May 22 call, the HPC's task force members reiterated the sentiment that the HPC should be "at the table" and that the authorities running the Fairgrounds shelter would benefit from the accumulated knowledge of Nashville's homeless assistance field—not only the knowledge of the HPC, but of the local outreach workers "on the ground." Task force members asked questions about the operations of the Fairgrounds shelter, about who was making decisions, and about why HPC was not being consulted. Chief Servais and Dr. Wright expressed a desire for the HPC's input but did not commit to include the HPC as a participant in the decision-making processes pertinent to the Fairgrounds shelter. They offered to attend HPC

---

[27] "HMIS" stands for Homeless Management Information System. It is a data repository of homeless assistance data that Continuums of Care are required to implement if they receive HUD funding. An HMIS is often used for planning and for learning basic information about the homeless population of a given community.

meetings to solicit guidance, but this was unsatisfactory to task force members who wanted to be more proactively included in the City's COVID response insofar as it involved people experiencing homelessness.

Task Force Meeting 3. During the task force's third and final meeting on May 26th, the group debriefed from the previous call and discussed the next steps for sending a letter to Mayor's Office. This call was notable for Ingrid's efforts to push for the inclusion of permanent housing in the HPC's recommendations. As the HPC advocated for the relevance of homeless assistance institutions in Nashville's COVID-19 response, Ingrid attempted to make permanent housing assistance the focus of this boundary maintenance. This was not surprising given OTN's culture of homeless assistance and alignment with the Housing First paradigm, discussed in the previous chapter.

The first example of this effort came up when Ingrid reported that she had visited the Fairgrounds shelter a few days earlier. Speaking to her fellow task force members, she described her takeaways:

> One thing … that seemed like a shock to Jay [Servais] and the rest of the team when we went and visited the other day was the fact that when I mentioned *housing* as the answer instead of just shelters, he was like, "Oh!" It's like it hadn't even crossed his mind—[others laugh]—that permanent housing would be an appropriate answer to this. And how much money... I was, like, running off the amounts of money that they were spending on staffing and shelter and all the different things, and hospital stays, too—and his mind was blown.

She continued, shifting her focus to the task at hand:

> So, I just think it's something we have to continue to push as *the answer*, like... *Housing* is the answer. Now, if you can't get your shit together and do that, here are the twelve other things that we can do [related to short-term assistance]. But I still think that [permanent housing] is not people's number one go-to, and we need to continue to *make that* people's number one go-to.

Responding to Ingrid, the chair of the HPC, Paula Foster, mused that in focusing on short-term interventions, Servais was thinking like "an emergency management person." (Servais was, in

other words, a member of a different organizational field, defined by its own cultural-cognitive systems.) Perhaps, suggested Paula, the task force could study the cost savings of permanent housing in these circumstances. The suggestion was noncommittal.

Ingrid's comment about the centrality of permanent housing seemed to hang in the air. So, she continued to press the point. She noted the likelihood that COVID-19 would be around for quite a while longer. During the next winter, it would likely further complicate the city's seasonal emergency assistance for people experiencing homelessness. This would be expensive. So, "why not start on investing in housing" at this point, using the federal COVID relief funds to get ahead of the anticipated winter emergency response? "I just think we always need to make the first—like, the first answer is housing," concluded Ingrid. "Always." This time, Paula followed along. The "first bullet point," Paula suggested, should advise that the city secure more permanent housing for people without homes.

In the end, the final draft of the recommendations did not make permanent housing so central. Instead, it placed greater emphasis on short-term concerns, like including the HPC in city planning and relying on hotel rooms more than congregate shelters. However, Recommendations 4 and 5 urged the Mayor's Office to leverage its regulatory powers to increase the community's permanent housing resources (see Appendix B). The document also included a plug for permanent, housing-led assistance as an alternative to continued reliance on congregate shelters: "Research establishes that housing without barriers and with supportive services ends homelessness." It is difficult to know whether the inclusion of this content was due to Ingrid's advocacy, as she was not the only Housing First advocate on the task force. Nevertheless, her attempt to shape the HPC's interaction with the Mayor's Office is clear.

Toward the end of the call, Ingrid tried the clarify the tactics the HPC would use to get the mayor's attention. The task force had decided on developing a letter to the Mayor's Office (with attached recommendations) as well as an op-ed for public distribution. Ingrid suggested that it would be more considerate for the HPC to send the letter to the mayor first, before publishing an op-ed. The other way around "would piss him off." She proposed that the HPC give the Mayor's Office a deadline to respond. Others on the call agreed and formed a consensus to send the letter on May 27th with a response deadline of June 1st. If no response was received, or if it was inadequate, then the HPC would submit the op-ed to the newspaper.

Special Called Meeting of the HPC. Having reached a consensus on what they wanted to disseminate, the task force submitted three documents to the full Council for review: a letter to the Mayor's Office, a list of recommendations to be attached to the letter, and a modified version of the letter that could be submitted to the newspaper as an op-ed. On May 27th, the HPC met to discuss the documents and to take a vote on the task force's recommended next steps. This meeting was notable for the HPC's debate around appropriate tactics and the OTN cofounder's attempts to disrupt norms and taken-for-granted assumptions.

Early in the meeting, an HPC member—representing the Nashville Rescue Mission—raised some concerns. He had received the task force's documents the previous day and discussed them with the Mission's CEO, Glenn Cranfield. By the time of the meeting, Cranfield had written a formal response to the task force's proposed plan. Below is an excerpt of this response, which the Mission representative read aloud:

> "Nashville Rescue Mission will not sign off on the letter to the Mayor's Office or on the letter to the editor. In my opinion, there are better ways to seek greater partnership and collaboration than being antagonistic. Once all other options have been exhausted, then perhaps a letter to the editor or to the City Council may be appropriate. But until then, an approach of respect and expectation of partnership and collaboration seems to be a better approach."

Because of these concerns, the Mission would be voting "No." They did not specify what about the letter struck them as "antagonistic."

The Mission's stated position prompted several minutes of discussion. Multiple HPC members gently pushed back, particularly against the allegation of antagonism. Some observed that the current draft of the letter was much less antagonistic than earlier drafts. Others remarked that, in their view, the current draft was not antagonistic at all. One member sought to find a way to ameliorate the Mission's concerns so that the HPC could arrive at a unanimous decision, even if that meant delaying action to allow time for more negotiation. This latter view did not gain traction; the predominant spoken opinion was that the situation at hand was urgent and that the Council would have to proceed without the Mission's support if forced to choose. Nevertheless, HPC members debated whether the Mission had a valid concern. Was June 1st too soon a deadline? Should there be a deadline at all? Should one or more HPC members leverage "back channel" relationships with the Mayor's Office to soften the letter's impact? Should some things be phrased differently?

Despite the varying opinions, a common thread in this discussion was an unstated assumption that confrontational action was undesirable. At this point, Ingrid jumped in, seeking to make this assumption explicit and to frame "agitating" action as appropriate to the situation, even if it was perceived as antagonistic:

> ["Agitator" is] a great word, I think. Particularly in situations where our friends' lives are at risk. I don't think that two and a half months into a pandemic is too fast to act, for our community—right? We've been ignored for two and a half months.

Continuing, she sought to clarify the expectations of the June 1st deadline. She emphasized the need to bring the Mayor's Office into alignment with a particular normative framework—one that prioritizes human rights and includes the HPC as a central player in matters of homeless assistance:

> It's not that by June 1st everything needs to be fixed. It's: By June 1st, we need an acknowledgement that [the HPC] exists to advocate with [Nashvillians experiencing homelessness]—and *agitate* with [them], I think—to make sure that their human rights are being upheld. … So, for me—I hear the hesitation with some folks, but to me it's intolerable that we've gone this long.

Ingrid's comment seemed to reinforce a building momentum among Council members to move forward with the task force's plan, without substantive changes to the letter. Except for the Mission representative, all HPC members voted in favor of sending the letter by the end of the day, keeping June 1st as the deadline for the Mayor's Office to respond.

OTN's Boundary Maintenance

In the case described above, an OTN member (Ingrid) participated in local boundary maintenance as part of the CoC's Homelessness Planning Council (HPC). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, other community actors from the issue contexts of emergency management and public health were suddenly interfacing with the Nashville homeless population, which was particularly vulnerable to the virus. Practices emerged that were heavily informed by emergency management and public health frameworks—as seen in the structure and operation of the Fairgrounds shelter. HPC members, including Ingrid, felt strongly about the relevance of their organizational community and the importance of a homeless assistance framework for addressing this problem. They asserted their field's ideas, values, and best practices in order to shape the practices of local actors interfacing with the field's cultural boundary—namely, local emergency management and public health actors who were unfamiliar with homeless assistance institutions.

The OTN representative was an active participant in this boundary maintenance, but also tried to shape *how* homeless assistance institutions would be asserted. As the HPC was debating what recommendations to make to the mayor, Ingrid repeatedly stressed the centrality of

permanent housing. As HPC members questioned whether proposed tactics were too "antagonistic," Ingrid argued for the appropriateness of antagonistic tactics in light of the life-and-death stakes for their "friends" experiencing homelessness. Thus, she not only participated in boundary maintenance; she sought to shape what this boundary maintenance would be.

The Complication of Place

In this chapter, I have tried to explain how a geographical community can complicate the institutional dynamics of an organizational field—particularly, through the emergence of a unique institutional context (a local organizational field) at the intersection. A geographical community can *focus* field pressures, making field institutions *more specific* as actors try to "translate" them into a locale. This can be seen in the How's Nashville team's attempts to identify and delegitimize local barriers to housing based on what they had learned in the national trainings, as well as in the HPC's recognition that a "local playbook" was needed for assisting the Nashville homeless population during a pandemic. In addition, and worthy of further discussion: A geographical community can *constrain* field pressures, making field institutions *less influential* in the locale than they might otherwise be. As Lawrence and Dover (2015) observed, place complicates institutions. This is no less true of field institutions, and it is part of what makes a local organizational field a distinct institutional space.

In the case studies above, it is clear that OTN members worked to influence the institutions of the Nashville homeless assistance field because they believed that such change was possible and potentially impactful for their "friends" experiencing homelessness. However, there are indications that the local field, and hence OTN's institutional work, could only accomplish so much. Similarly, institutional theorists can only *see* so much if their analysis is limited to an organizational field. For a fuller picture, it is necessary to contemplate how other

institutional systems of a geographical community—i.e., those *not* specific to the field's issue—influence how field institutions are or are not locally enacted.

This consideration of how communities complicate field institutions is something that I found in my interview data. For example, one OTN informant perceived place-based limitations with respect to the How's Nashville campaign:

> *Interviewer:* So, you were around when the How's Nashville campaign started, right? I think that was back in 2013?
>
> *Informant:* Yeah, I was here.
>
> *Interviewer:* What do you remember about, from around that time? Was there an excitement about doing something new? What do you remember?
>
> *Informant:* They tried to sell it as something new, as doing something. But then, there was always something that held them back. …
>
> *Interviewer:* … You mentioned that they had certain barriers—like, one of the barriers was that they didn't really know what they were doing, and they had to try to figure out what other cities were doing. What other things do you think prevented them from actually being bold around Housing First?
>
> *Informant:* Money. Money. And then the other thing is...
>
> *Interviewer:* Like, not having enough money?
>
> *Informant:* Not having the money, and then not being able to... The [local] government has land, they don't want to get... Land has to be allocated to build. And since 2002, they've built 30 parks. But no housing.

"No housing" was an exaggeration. But the informant's point was clear: The extreme shortage of affordable housing in Nashville has prevented the homeless assistance field from moving people into housing quickly (or at all)—a linchpin of the How's Nashville campaign and of Housing First. This external limitation, and OTN's attempts to disrupt it, will be a central focus of the next chapter.

Place-based constraints on the homeless assistance field can also be seen in the case study of the HPC's initial response to COVID-19. Although Ingrid, the OTN cofounder, was largely

successful in her attempts to shape how the HPC engaged in boundary maintenance, this boundary maintenance apparently did not accomplish its goals. There were some small successes, such as how the second task force meeting appeared to help Chief Servais learn about some of the field's best practices; however, the recommendations that the HPC made to the Mayor's Office were ultimately not taken up. The HPC continued to be largely left out of the loop with respect to the city's COVID-19 response, and this continued to limit the reach of homeless assistance best practices. One can imagine how this might have played out differently in other communities—depending on the local dynamics, the resources available, the actors involved, and so on.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I situated OTN in an organizational context that I am calling the Nashville homeless assistance field. This field consists of a multiply-embedded community of organizations with a shared interest in homeless assistance in Nashville. On one hand, this community is embedded in a global field of homeless assistance and subject to the macro-level pressures of its issue-based institutions. On the other hand, this community is embedded in the geographical community of Nashville and subject to the pressures of its place-based institutions. At this intersection, I argued that a unique institutional system exists—one providing greater or lesser legitimacy to various homeless assistance practices in this particular place. I paid special attention to the *boundaries* of this institutional space: a geo-cultural boundary distinguishing between macro and local levels of the homeless assistance field and a cultural boundary distinguishing between different issue-based contexts in Nashville.

With OTN situated in the Nashville homeless assistance field, rather than simply the homeless assistance field writ large, it is easier to see it as an agentic actor with the potential to

influence the field's institutional systems. Without the local organizational field construct, we would overlook the many instances of institutional work in this chapter. In particular, we would overlook OTN's involvement in the *local translation work* that aimed to establish Housing First as an institution of the locale. We would also overlook OTN's *local boundary maintenance* that aimed to reinforce homeless assistance institutions in a new situation introduced by COVID-19. These kinds of actions are meaningful, especially if we want to understand the institutionalization of homeless assistance practices in a local community like Nashville. But a macro-level analysis of field institutions and actors—the norm in institutional research—would focus more on the actions of elite actors (e.g., professional associations and government agencies) and less on community organizations like OTN. The local organizational field offers a new way to understand downstream processes of institutionalization and the local actors critical to those processes.

In addition, the local organizational field introduces the complicating factor of place and its constraints on field institutions. I touched upon this idea in the case study of How's Nashville, which described how Housing First was dependent on the availability of affordable housing, as well as in the case study of the HPC's COVID-19 Task Force, which described the field's limited influence on certain local homeless assistance practices during the pandemic. The complication of place is explored further in the next chapter. Although OTN sees potential in the Nashville homeless assistance field to enact its favored homeless assistance practices (most notably Housing First), OTN recognizes that the field itself has limitations.

As a result, OTN has tried to generalize its work and become assertive other Nashville contexts. Since Nashville, generally speaking, includes many organizational actors without an interest in homeless assistance, and since its institutional systems mostly do not pertain to

homeless assistance directly, I consider Nashville to be a local institutional space that is distinct from the homeless assistance field. Nevertheless, the geographic community of Nashville impinges upon the Nashville homeless assistance field. The next chapter views this from OTN's perspective and considers the implications of the general geographical context for homeless assistance practices in Nashville.

CHAPTER 5

Beyond the Issue of Homeless Assistance: OTN and Nashville, Broadly

"We are always trying to get people into housing, but we're not just trying to house people … That's part *of what we do. We're trying to create a radical culture of care in our city where there's more housing, there's more equity, there's more justice, there's less people needing the charity work—because there* is *justice."*

The previous two chapters distinguished between practicing homeless assistance, on one hand (Chapter Three), versus working to influence institutionalized practices of homeless assistance, on the other (Chapter Four). For OTN, a promising paradigm of homeless assistance is Housing First—in which permanent housing assistance is offered immediately, without being conditioned on the recipient's behavior or acceptance of treatment. This is often juxtaposed against the staircase approach, in which people must prove their "readiness" or deservedness for housing assistance in order to receive it or continue receiving it—e.g., by demonstrating sobriety. As I have discussed, Housing First is highly compatible with OTN's own culture of homeless assistance; indeed, they have demonstrated this through their involvement in the How's Nashville campaign and their strident advocacy for moving people into permanent housing in the years since, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. OTN's attempts to bring the Nashville homeless assistance field into greater alignment with the field institution of Housing First is an example of their local institutional work.

In the present chapter, I discuss how OTN thinks and acts *beyond* the issue of homeless assistance, while still largely confining this work to the local community of Nashville. The way OTN talks about it, it is a distinction between "charity work" and "justice work." For them, the

practice of homeless assistance is important—indeed, it dominates the budget and energies of the organization, especially during seasons of extreme weather and emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, OTN encourages its staff to influence local homeless assistance practices in formal capacities, such as via involvement in Continuum of Care committees. However, *justice work*—purposive efforts to "disrupt" broader social systems that perpetuate "cycles of homelessness"—is part of what OTN members see as truly distinctive about their homeless assistance organization. This institutional work is motivated by their personal relationships with people experiencing homelessness and by their conviction that homelessness has systemic roots—which a narrow focus on homeless assistance can obscure.

Here, I describe how OTN's activist work targets local-level institutional systems that bear down upon actors across the broader community of Nashville-Davidson County, not simply those who have a stake in the issue of homeless assistance. These place-based institutional systems—regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems represented by the red arrows in Figure 5.1—constrain the local homeless assistance field nested within. In my data, two prominent examples of place-based institutions relevant for Housing First are (a) the socially restricted supply of affordable housing in Nashville and (b) the community's inertia with respect to helping people seen as "undeserving." The first half of this chapter will offer a summary of how OTN understands these dynamics; the second half will provide examples of how OTN targets them in its "justice work." As in previous chapters, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive explanation of how OTN members think and act, but to highlight what is *most salient* for OTN across my collection of in-depth interviews, media archives, and field notes.

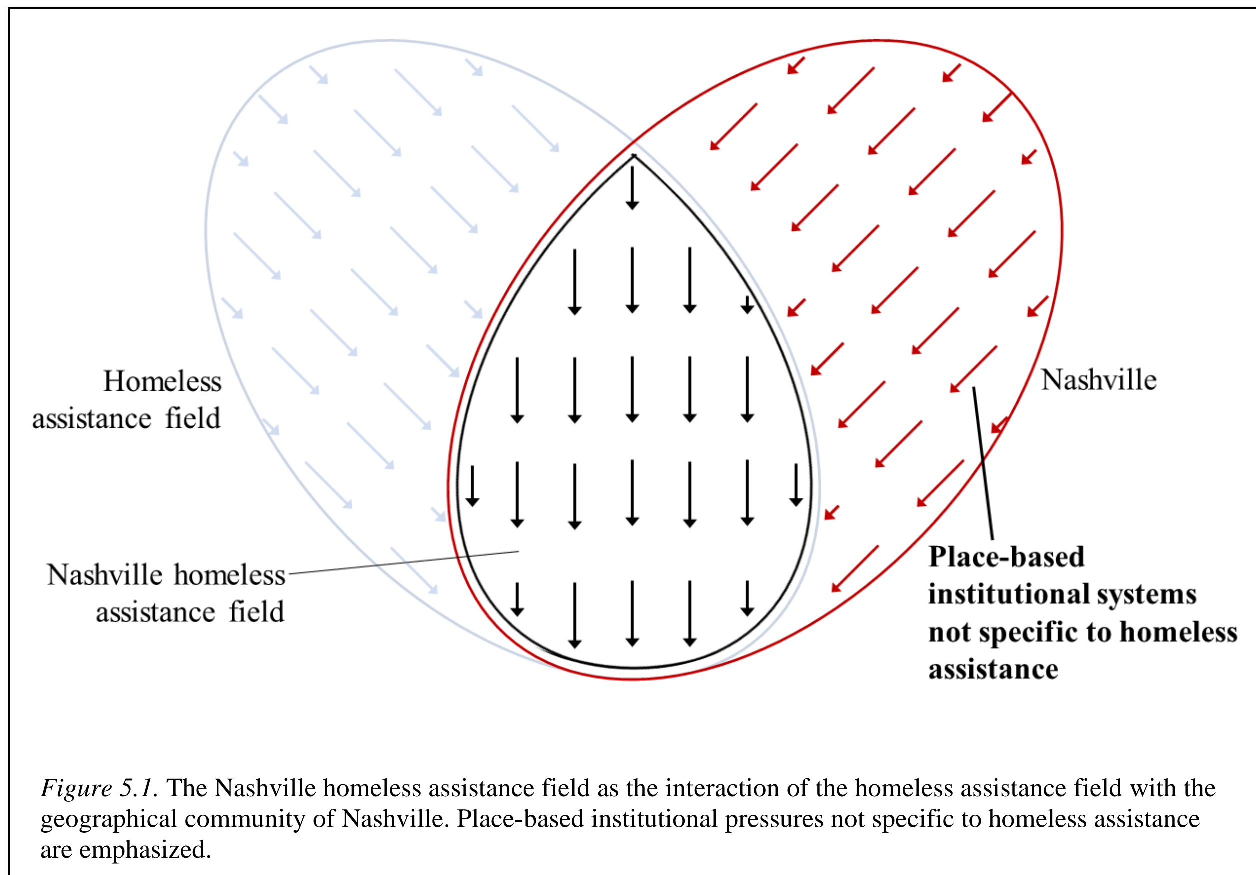

Figure 5.1. The Nashville homeless assistance field as the interaction of the homeless assistance field with the geographical community of Nashville. Place-based institutional pressures not specific to homeless assistance are emphasized.

For OTN, homelessness and many other social ills are outgrowths of a culture of *inequity* (of a social, political, and economic sort). Chapters 3 and 4 showed how OTN has strived for equitable practices in the Nashville homeless assistance field, narrowly. Here, I discuss examples pertaining to the community of Nashville, broadly. The first is Nashville's growing affordable housing deficit—that is, the gap between affordable housing needed and affordable housing available for low-income Nashvillians. OTN most-readily explains this inequity as a function of community development practices and related regulatory systems that contribute to runaway rent inflation. Second, and further out in the causal chain, OTN flags problematic normative and cultural-cognitive systems that *undermine* the affordable housing stock upon which Housing First is premised and *reinforce* community expectations of deservedness upon which the

staircase approach is premised. Consequently, I group the affordable housing deficit and related regulatory systems in one subsection, while devoting a separate subsection to normative and cultural-cognitive systems.

OTN's analysis of its institutional environment informs and motivates the actions OTN members take to influence community-level institutions that are not specific to homeless assistance. The second half of the chapter will discuss some of the strategies that OTN uses to disrupt institutional systems at the community level. OTN groups these strategies into two main categories: education and advocacy-and-organizing. I will discuss each of these in turn, paying special attention to OTN's understandings of how these have the potential to lead to institutional change. The aim of this is to demonstrate that OTN's institutional work in the broader community is complex, planned, meaningful, locally targeted, and field-relevant. Even when community organizations are operating outside of the focal field of study, their actions might still be relevant for the institutions of that field; indeed, this can be strategic.

As part of this discussion, I will introduce the concept of "bridging work": purposive efforts to facilitate communication and interaction between two institutional contexts in order to influence the institutions of one or the other. Specifically, I will discuss how OTN tries to act as a link between (a) the Nashville homeless assistance field and (b) other local issues and contexts in order to enable change within the Nashville homeless assistance field. Although OTN is, at root, a homeless assistance organization, it has close ties to a related but distinct organizational community centered on the issue of affordable housing in Nashville. OTN also generalizes its work to appeal to a Nashville public with diverse interests.

Bridging work is distinct from the "boundary maintenance" I introduced in Chapter Four. The difference lies in what actors in the focal field are targeting. As I conceptualize it, local

boundary maintenance seeks to establish a certain situation or a certain kind of situation as being subject to the local organizational field's institutional pressures. Existing institutions of the local organizational field are not so much the targets of change as they are the means of change. In the example I gave, members of the Homelessness Planning Council asserted that the operation of the Fairgrounds shelter should be subject to the HPC's oversight and that the local public health and emergency management authorities managing the shelter should follow best practices that discourage congregate shelter and encourage permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. In contrast, with bridging work, focal actors cultivate connections between multiple distinct institutional contexts in an effort to influence the institutions of one or the other. My examples in this chapter include OTN's efforts to disrupt practices that fuel the affordable housing deficit as well as their efforts to disrupt the public's ignorance about homelessness and individualistic values (which are characteristic of the broader community); these efforts are aimed in part at reducing barriers to equitable homeless assistance practices (which are characteristic of the Nashville homeless assistance field, specifically). Such efforts are focused less on establishing the preeminence of the focal context and more on navigating and manipulating an external context. In short, boundary maintenance tries to *reinforce* the local field boundary; bridging work *crosses over* it.

Consequently, in this chapter about OTN's bridging work in the broader community, the Housing First paradigm recedes into the background. As an institution of the Nashville homeless assistance field, Housing First does not readily translate to issues that are not specific to homeless assistance. However, as the previous chapter touched upon, Housing First is constrained by community factors outside of the homeless assistance field, and this is something that OTN recognizes. This chapter dives deeper into those factors, particularly those that OTN

members see as most prominent. As OTN works to influence the institutional systems of the broader Nashville community, it indirectly works to remove barriers to the institutionalization of Housing First practices in the Nashville homeless assistance field. Although OTN members do not have single-minded focus on Housing First (their community goals being more wide ranging), their work in the broader Nashville community is partly motivated by the constraints it imposes on the Nashville homeless assistance field and on equitable homeless assistance institutions like Housing First.

OTN and the Problem of Local Inequity

OTN members sometimes go out of their way to stress that they are not focused solely on the issue of homelessness but are more broadly concerned with the problem of inequity and its various social, political, and economic instantiations. In their Advocacy and Policy Training, a slide quoted Audre Lorde: "There is no single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." In the "urban immersion" I observed, a staff member told their tour group that OTN is "in the housing community" but partners with people "from other spheres"—for example, the spheres of racial justice, economic justice, healthcare access, LGBT+ rights, and immigrant rights. The idea of "collective liberation" is something that regularly comes up; its usage implies not just liberation for people experiencing homelessness, but liberation for *all* who are held captive by an inequitable society. As one of OTN's cofounders explained to me, these issues of inequity constitute the "systemic roots" of homelessness and housing injustice, and therefore "we try not to silo ourselves, which I think a lot of [homeless assistance] agencies do." This helps explain why OTN collaborates with a wide variety of organizations in the metropolitan area, not just organizations in the homeless assistance field. One could say that OTN touches many different local organizational fields.

This broad, intersectional pursuit of equity notwithstanding, my analysis of archival, observational, and interview data revealed clear *emphases*—specific inequities that capture much of OTN's attention. As discussed in Chapter Four, OTN members identify inequities with respect to homeless assistance, especially the predominance of staircase-like approaches to assistance and even the absence of a robust homeless assistance framework altogether (in situations like the COVID-19 emergency assistance). Not only do these inequities make housing navigation more difficult, but they also promote a local culture that undermines the autonomy and self-determination of people experiencing homelessness. For OTN, these inequities are exacerbated by local regulatory systems governing community development practices and, in turn, affordable housing—a key resource for the homeless assistance field. All of the above are anchored in community norms and shared beliefs that discourage assistance for those deemed undeserving.

Although some OTN members cite national- and state-level drivers of inequitable community development, discussion overwhelmingly centers on *local* drivers. This emphasis does not necessarily reflect an attribution of outsized importance to the local level; rather, it seems to reflect how Nashville-Davidson County is the primary arena in which OTN sees itself as a player. As it will anticipate my discussion of OTN's local institutional work, this section summarizes OTN's analysis primarily in terms of local dynamics.

Local Regulatory Systems and the Affordable Housing Deficit

On OTN's t-shirts and in their social media hashtags, and throughout their public and private discourse, it is common to see and hear the slogan "housing ends homelessness." As explained in Chapter Three, the sensibility of this stance is part of what motivates OTN members' embrace of Housing First. Thus, it is unsurprising that a core issue—perhaps *the* core issue (other than direct homeless assistance)—for OTN is the growing affordable housing deficit

in Nashville. Moreover, as a policy-minded organization, they place much of the onus for corrective action on the shoulders of local *regulatory* systems, namely Metro government.

Across my data sources and informants, the centrality of affordable housing came up again and again as an explanation for why people are pushed into homelessness and why it is difficult for them to escape from it. Rising rents lead to evictions, with few places left to turn—even with the aid of housing navigators. This imposes a significant material limitation on OTN's attempts to bring the local homeless assistance field's institutional systems into closer alignment with the Housing First paradigm; indeed, it constrains the local field itself. In the words of a cofounder, local field members "can set up the *best* way to manage data [on homelessness], the *best* way to get people into housing—but if there's no freakin' housing, they're not moving anyone forward." Thus, practices that affect affordable housing stock, not just homeless assistance practices, are squarely within OTN's sphere of concern.

Defining "Affordable Housing." Before exploring this further, it is worth asking: What *is* affordable housing? Because its meaning is sometimes inclusive of housing that remains inaccessible to people at the very bottom of the income scale (e.g., people experiencing homelessness), OTN is particular in how it defines the term. Organization members do not appear to contest the common notion that housing is "affordable" if it accounts for less than 30% of household income. Rather, what members take pains to make clear is that true affordable housing is housing that is affordable to a household making less than 60% Area Median Income (AMI). In other words, affordable housing is not simply what police officers, teachers, and other members of the blue collar and middle-class workforce can afford; it is housing that low-income households can afford as well. Perhaps for clarity's sake, OTN sometimes refers instead to "low-

income housing." They sometimes also place special emphasis on low-income housing for people who are in the 0–30% AMI range.

The Issue of Runaway Inflation. According to OTN, the gap between the number of affordable housing units needed and the number of affordable housing units available has grown every year since the organization was founded. There are a host of underlying causes at the root, spanning public policies, norms, and common mentalities held by the public and its leaders. But when it comes down to it, the proximal problem is an interaction of material factors: runaway rent inflation coupled with long-running wage stagnation that puts housing increasingly out of reach.[28] (Rents, rather than home prices, are what most preoccupy OTN and the low-income Nashvillians it serves.)

Here, I focus on rent inflation as the primary material factor that OTN cites to explain the affordable housing deficit. Although wage stagnation factors into the equation, it is a far less salient topic in my data. When OTN members did bring up wage stagnation (e.g., in their Advocacy and Policy Training), they primarily attributed it to a low minimum wage. Other possible contributing factors to wage stagnation—say, weak labor unions—were not readily discussed. This is not to say that OTN members could not have provided such an analysis if asked; rather, it appears to be an indication that OTN's foci lie elsewhere (at least, at the time of my interviews).

The Driving Factor of Inequitable Development. As evidence of rent inflation, OTN cites recent increases in average rent as well as a fair market rent that is exorbitant for low-

---

[28] This analysis of Nashville's affordable housing gap is not unique to OTN. For example, in its 12-part "Costs of Growth and Change" series, *The Tennessean* discussed at length the problem of skyrocketing rents and stagnating wages underlying Nashville's ever-worsening "affordable housing crisis" (Plazas, 2017). Similarly, in the first of three publicly funded pamphlets on "Understanding Nashville's Housing Crisis," local contributors cited "low wages, rising rent" as the key factor (Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, 2018, p. 8).

income Nashvillians. For OTN, rent inflation refers to the steady increase in the amount of rent demanded of low-income residents. The higher rents rise, and the less that wages keep pace, the less affordable housing there is for Nashvillians. When OTN talks about rent inflation, it primarily faults two interacting factors: loss of existing affordable housing stock coupled with insufficient development of new affordable stock. If loss was steady but with plenty of new stock to make up the difference, or if new stock was hard to come by but people were able to maintain their affordable rent levels, then rents for those at the bottom might be unaffected. It is *inequitable* development that fuels the problem.

How hyper-development leads to gentrification. For OTN, the loss of existing affordable housing can be attributed primarily to hyper-development and resulting gentrification. By "hyper-development" (or simply "development"), OTN means the breakneck community development associated with Nashville's booming luxury, tourist, and entertainment industries. High-end housing developments, in particular, are criticized frequently: in OTN members' interviews with me, in their interviews with news media, in their op-eds, and in their Facebook posts. This kind of development is singled out because it often has the direct or indirect effect of steadily replacing low-income housing and displacing their residents—the phenomenon known as gentrification. As an OTN member explained during a public hearing on Mayor Megan Barry's controversial transit infrastructure plan: "We're moving Nashville out of Nashville. People can't afford to live here anymore" (Garrison, 2018).

OTN members, like others, see hyper-development as a relatively recent phenomenon in Nashville, really taking off after the city's recovery from the devastating 2010 flood. By 2013, the New York Times had dubbed Nashville the nation's new "it" city (Severson, 2013). Accompanying this newfound status was an influx of new residents and capital—the ongoing

material catalyst for a new, dizzying pace of community development. For OTN's education collaborator, the ubiquitous cranes dotting the city skyline serve as an ever-present reminder of "two Nashvilles."

How regulatory systems intensify gentrification. OTN does not oppose growth and development per se, but rather the ways in which local regulatory systems intensify inequitable development practices that lead to gentrification. Such intensification can happen when Metro government and the quasi-local Metropolitan Development and Housing Authority (MDHA) subsidize the kinds of high-end development projects mentioned above. OTN is particularly keen on highlighting misuse of tax-increment financing (TIF). The purpose of TIF is to incentivize private developers to build "publicly-beneficial projects" in a particular area of town (MDHA, n.d.). In exchange for locating their projects in the specified district, the city refunds a portion of developers' taxes. As OTN's Advocacy and Policy Training explains, TIF "is supposed to be a tool to help revive under-resourced communities through public money." Instead, the city "abuses" TIF by "subsidizing wealth" and incentivizing flips of existing affordable housing. For example, TIF has been used to replace low-income apartments with luxury apartments, instead of financing new affordable housing or amenities that would benefit existing low-income residents. "With these advantages," argued one of OTN's then-interns, in an op-ed published by *The Tennessean*, "high-rises have artificially increased the price of housing, displacing many residents" (Scholer, 2019).

Opportunities for Metro to replace lost affordable housing. Nevertheless, says OTN, there are ways that local government can use its budgetary powers to fund the construction of new affordable housing and counterbalance gentrification in the process. This is already being done, but not anywhere near enough. "We have a net loss every year because of the development

that's been going," an OTN cofounder told me. "So, even when MDHA builds a new place with 40 units, we've already lost more than that through gentrification and development." OTN members believe it is within Metro's power to turn this around and meet the housing needs of all Nashvillians, especially those experiencing homelessness. In an op-ed published by *The Nashville Scene*, a staff member wrote: "The city spent more than $620 million on Music City Center—surely we can find $500 million to build 20,000 units of affordable housing for our neighbors and children living in the worst conditions imaginable" (Lester, 2016).

For OTN, an obvious way the city can close the gap (or at least begin to) is by dedicating more of its budget to the Barnes Housing Trust Fund, which offers grants to nonprofit housing developers for the construction of affordable housing. This is sometimes broadly defined to include housing units affordable for residents making up to 120% AMI—but in OTN's view, this is better than nothing. "Housing advocates [in Nashville] fought for almost ten years for [a housing trust fund], and we finally have one," said an OTN staff member who was involved in that fight. "But now, the fight is funding it." The Barnes Fund is a salient issue for OTN members, coming up in several of my interviews with them as well as in news interviews. For example, when I asked an intern about aspects of local policy and culture that come up in conversation among OTN members, the intern replied, "I mean, the Barnes Housing Trust Fund is huge." Although the city dedicates approximately $10 million of its annual budget to the fund, it is an order of magnitude less than what OTN and other local housing advocates say is necessary to close the affordable housing deficit. And, as the second half of this chapter will make clear, cuts to the fund are always a threat.

Inequity's Roots in Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Systems

As explained above, OTN often juxtaposes the affordable housing deficit and the chronic underfunding of the Barnes Housing Trust Fund against the hundreds of millions of dollars funneled to community development that favors wealthy interests (e.g., Metro subsidies or public land swaps for things like luxury apartments, the soccer stadium, and Amazon's operations center). This practice of "subsidizing wealth" while affordable housing languishes is cited as a glaring example of local inequity. In explaining this and other inequities that face Nashvillians experiencing homelessness, many OTN members have referred to the community's overriding commitment to growth and profit. For example, an intern mused that "some people, I think, especially just the city in general—the money is more important to them than the people." This has implications for OTN's institutional work. A staff member wondered aloud that the connection between homelessness and affordable housing should be obvious to city leaders—but "how do you make them *act* on it?" How do you actually make them prioritize the interests of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness? This is a question about the community's *normative* systems. For OTN, a big part of the answer lies in challenging community members' values and taken-for-granted beliefs (Figure 5.2).

This section explores the normative and cultural-cognitive systems that OTN sees at the root of many systemic problems facing Nashvillians who experience homelessness. In their public-facing discourse, OTN members tend to characterize these problems in material and regulatory terms (e.g., gentrification and criminalization). The relevance of normative and cultural-cognitive systems is more implied, seen in OTN's eagerness to educate the public or to apply public pressure through the media. However, in my one-on-one interviews with them, OTN members were much more explicit about the significant barriers presented by local norms

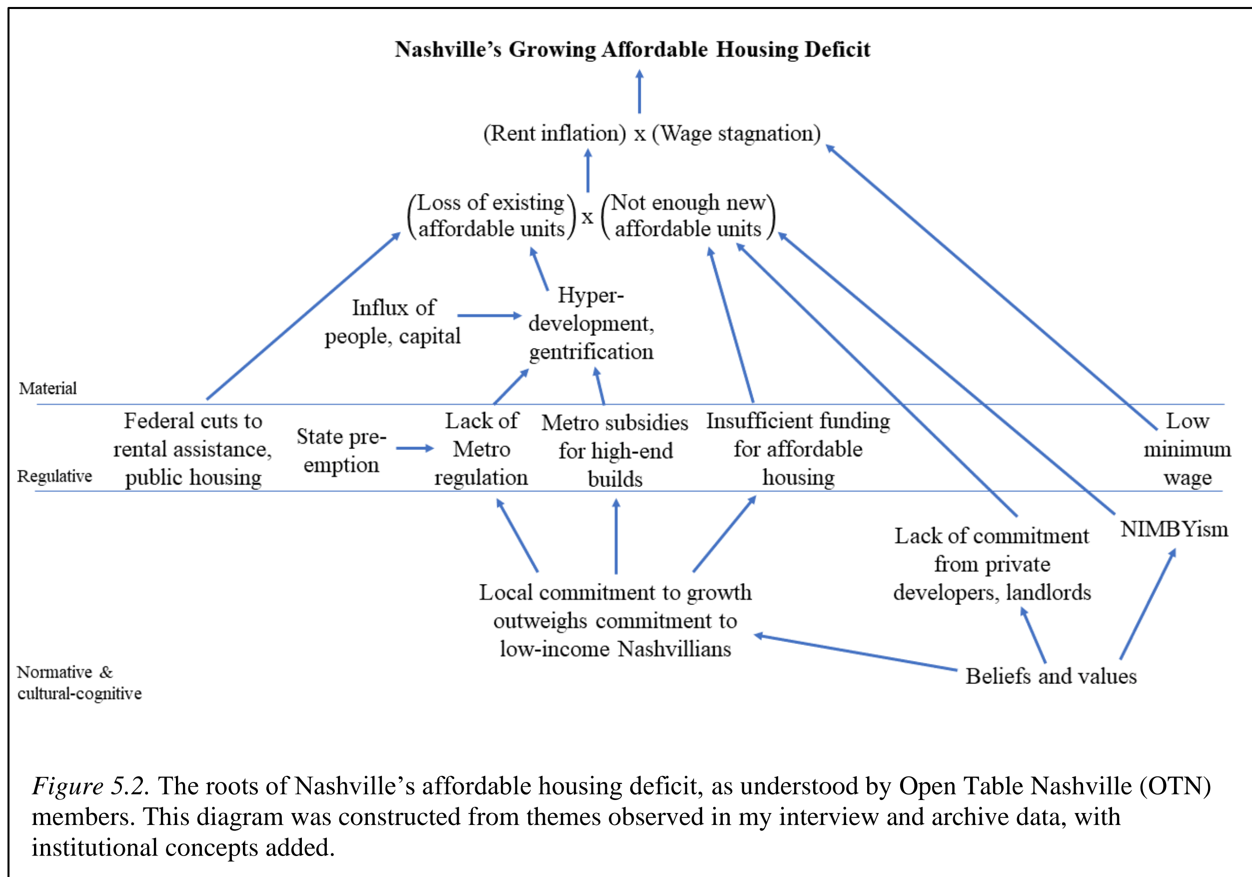

Figure 5.2. The roots of Nashville's affordable housing deficit, as understood by Open Table Nashville (OTN) members. This diagram was constructed from themes observed in my interview and archive data, with institutional concepts added.

and taken-for-granted beliefs. Consequently, the following section relies heavily on my interview data.

Local Normative Inequities. For OTN, the effects of inequitable normative systems extend beyond the affordable housing deficit into many other aspects of community life important to people experiencing homelessness. For example, OTN members talk about norms underlying homeless encampment eviction and other forms of criminalization, viewing Metro's use of police power as an expression of the city's commitment to downtown business interests over against the wellbeing of people on the streets.

This inequity of commitment manifests in numerous other ways. OTN's education collaborator provided a poignant example related to the Homeless Memorial bench near the

riverfront in downtown Nashville, which the city had installed years before to memorialize the lives of people who had died as a result of homelessness:

> [W]e had the NFL Draft, and they moved the bench. You know, after we dedicated it and everything. It was like holy ground for us. But it was about making money for Davidson County. And they ended up putting it back—because I called them, and I wrote something, and I said something. But it should have never been moved.

For this informant, the memorial bench was sacred: representing the lives of departed friends and loved ones. But this sacredness ultimately did not matter to Nashville-Davidson County; "making money"—that is, attracting capital to the city by accommodating the 2019 NFL Draft, which Nashville hosted—mattered more.

For OTN, problematic normative systems not only explain the actions of city leaders, but the actions of ordinary residents as well—especially in the form of "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) sentiments. OTN has had intimate experience with NIMBYism in the form of neighbors' intense opposition to OTN's micro-home initiative, the Village at Glencliff (see Langston, 2017; Knight, 2017; Mason, 2017; McCarthy, 2017; Meyer, 2017; Ward, 2017). Thus, it is unsurprising that OTN's Advocacy and Policy Training devoted a slide to the problem of NIMBYism, citing the Village experience (Figure 5.3). The training also framed NIMBYism as a barrier to the general development of affordable housing in the community. The figure shows a cartoon depicting community residents who "support" the development of affordable housing, but only "over there."[29]

Ways of Thinking. In my interviews, OTN members would often offer their perspectives (sometimes unprompted) on *why* city leaders and other community members are generally not

---

[29] In a news article about the planned Village at Glencliff, a neighbor is quoted as saying: "I'm afraid that these homeless people are going to bring their friends and they're going to end up in my backyard … I think there's plenty of areas in Nashville that it could be built instead of in our backyard" (Hourigan, 2017).

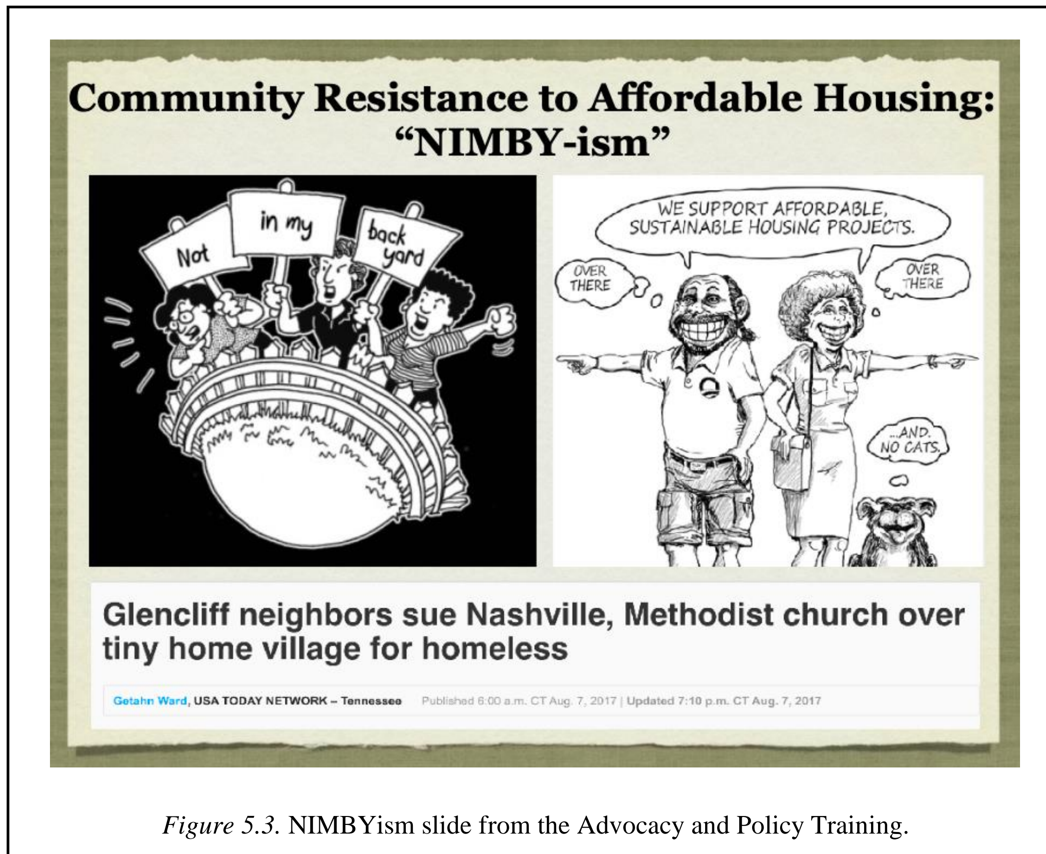

Figure 5.3. NIMBYism slide from the Advocacy and Policy Training.

committed to the interests of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness. Many cited a range of values, unformed beliefs, and incorrect beliefs held by many community members—reinforced by broader cultural systems like individualism and capitalism. One OTN member referred simply to "ways of thinking." According to several OTN members, these local internalizations of macro-level cultural systems can engender judgmental assumptions about "homeless people," including a sense that these people are fundamentally different from you and me (what one intern referred to as an "us and them mentality").

For OTN members, these assumptions reduce people experiencing homelessness to unfavorable stereotypes or caricatures that rob them of the depth and complexity that make them fully human. Thus, it is easier for the public to view people experiencing homelessness as undeserving of assistance and undesirable to have in proximity. This can sap community

members, including policymakers, of interest and motivation to help them. Worse, it can lead to hateful, controlling, and/or violent action by individual community members or by the state. For OTN members, this interaction of normative and cultural-cognitive elements—lack of understanding, uncaring attitudes, and macro-level cultural influences—enables a kind of community inertia that favors inequity of commitment and perpetuates cycles of homelessness. I will discuss these elements in turn.

Lack of understanding. OTN members see community members' ignorance or lack of understanding as a root problem that perpetuates cycles of homelessness in Nashville. This ignorance can take the form of *unformed* beliefs about homelessness and what to do about it. In my interview with them, one staff member conjectured that most people care about the issue of homelessness but do not know what to do about it. Another staff member mused that a lack of understanding about Housing First is a plausible explanation for why it has not taken deeper root in Nashville. An intern told me that some people don't understand the extent of the need or "the effect that homelessness has on people." A third staff member thought there is not enough understanding about how the city's recent economic growth has fueled homelessness and erected barriers that prevent people from getting out of homelessness. In addition, ignorance can take the form of *incorrect* beliefs about homelessness and what to do about it. A staff member told me that some people have "already built this set of ideas about what homelessness is and what's going on with those folks they see on the street corner, and it's usually wrong." For example, community members might believe that people experience homelessness through their own fault. Community ignorance motivates OTN's emphasis on community education, which I will describe later in the chapter.

Uncaring attitudes. For OTN, a factor contributing to cycles of homelessness in Nashville is that many community members hold uncaring attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness. Speaking to me, an intern insisted: "I think it's not just they don't understand [the systemic reasons for homelessness], but they don't see the importance of it or the importance of caring." Signaling that opinions on this are not uniform, one staff member pushed back a bit: "I would like to think that there aren't a whole lot of people that don't care. … I think a large hunk of the population that can appear apathetic is overwhelmed by the issue." However, several OTN members cited uncaring attitudes as a significant problem that is distinguishable from ignorance.

For OTN members, uncaring attitudes can manifest as an absence of individual-level priority, attention, or motivation—in a word, apathy. Some OTN members are also clear that *a felt aversion* (antipathy) toward people experiencing homelessness, not just apathy, explains problematic forms of community action and inaction toward the homeless population. Antipathy can be quite active, intense, and violent. As a staff member explains:

> It's not just a passive, "Oh, we've not really thought about these people [experiencing homelessness]." It's an active, "I don't want them. Not in my backyard. You have no right." They insert judgment here, which becomes a basis for pushing them away, giving them less, believing that they deserve less.

According to this informant, a prescriptive belief ("they deserve less") flows from feelings of judgment. Although the informant did not explicitly make this connection, it is a belief associated with the staircase approach to homeless assistance, which OTN opposes. Another informant made a more-explicit connection to models of homeless assistance. Asked why Housing First isn't more common, this cofounder said: "The fact that housing is so expensive here. I think that nobody wants to, quote on quote, 'waste that on homeless people.' I mean, just to be quite honest, I think that's really what people think." The salience of uncaring attitudes for

OTN helps explain why their education efforts try to bring community members closer to direct experiences of homelessness, as I will describe in further detail later in the chapter.

Cultural influences. To some extent, ignorance and uncaring attitudes bubble up from a macro-level cultural fountainhead—what informants variously referred to as "individualistic American ideals"; "a Western American, individualistic thing"; a "pull-yourselves-up-by-your-bootstraps type of mindset"; "traditional ways of thinking"; and "a good-old-boy mentality of, 'If you don't earn it, you shouldn't have it.'" These descriptions can be summed up in the term "individualism." Critiques of individualism were widespread in my interview data.

For several OTN members, individualism leads to stereotypes and "preconceived ideas" about homelessness and the people who experience it, which in turn lead to judgmental attitudes toward the homeless population. As one staff member put it:

> I think the general public—"Joe Q. Public"—perception is that all homeless people are drunks, that they are bums, that they are smelly, that they don't want to work, that they're lazy, that they're drug addicts, that they're all "crazy."

Whatever the specific stereotypes are, they boil down to a common perception that people experience homelessness due to their own failings or defects, according to OTN members. In the eyes of many community members, people experiencing homelessness must deserve their current circumstances, making them unworthy of certain forms or degrees of help. Thus, individualism contributes to negative feelings toward people experiencing homelessness, motivates harmful action toward them, and stifles community members' instincts to extend help and care. Much of OTN's institutional work involves disrupting community members' internalizations of these beliefs and values.

Bridging Work: Disrupting Local Inequities Linked to Homeless Assistance

So far, I have presented an account of how OTN understands the problem of inequity (of a social, economic, and political sort) as it affects Nashvillians who experience homelessness. Most prominently, this inequity takes the form of the affordable housing deficit and local institutional systems that contribute not only to this deficit but to Nashville's general commitment to growth and profit over against the interests of people experiencing homelessness. These perceptions and beliefs of OTN members inform and motivate their purposive efforts to bring about local institutional change—specifically, changes that would weaken local material and cultural barriers to Housing First and other equitable homeless assistance practices. In this section, I discuss prominent examples of these efforts, focusing on activities that OTN conducts in the community of Nashville but *outside* of the sub-community that is the Nashville homeless assistance field. As part of this discussion, I note where OTN members are explicit about the institutional targets of these activities, leaving no doubt that OTN engages in community-level institutional work.

OTN "pushes for change" in community institutions through various means, most importantly: educating, advocating, and organizing. Activities include holding a variety of kinds of education sessions, inviting community members to participate in winter canvassing efforts, organizing the Annual Homeless Memorial, making direct appeals to local public officials, and engaging in direct action (often in collaboration with local allies outside of the Nashville homeless assistance field). Through these activities, OTN's reach extends beyond the issue of homeless assistance; for example, the organization has been a key player in local efforts to boost the Barnes Housing Trust Fund, as well as efforts to disrupt community assumptions and norms connected to homelessness in general. This activism targets *community*-level institutional

systems that constrain the homeless assistance field and prevent the Housing First paradigm from becoming more-fully realized in Nashville-Davidson County.

OTN's community activism is guided by "the escalation of tactics" (Figure 5.4). Compared to its work in the local homeless assistance field (see Chapter Four), OTN's work in the broader community spans these five tactics a little more evenly. For example, OTN is more likely to use more-confrontational Tactics 4 and 5 with the City Council and the Mayor (compared with, say, the Homelessness Planning Council). Even so, when engaging in community activism, OTN begins with the less-confrontational tactics of educating community members, lobbying decision-makers, and mobilizing allies—escalating and de-escalating as circumstances warrant.

"Escalation of Tactics"

1. **Educate yourself and others** about the issue. Listen. Research. Understand the problem and viable solutions. Raise awareness.
2. **Identify** decision makers and **ask** them for change. *If change doesn't happen...*
3. **Mobilize**. Connect with allies. Petition decision makers via emails, calls, letters, signatures. *If change still doesn't happen...*
4. **Leverage public pressure** via media, demonstrations, rallies, and marches. *If change still doesn't happen...*
5. **Heighten pressure**. Civil disobedience.

The "escalation of tactics" isn't always linear like a ladder. It's circular like a spiral with different parts overlapping.

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." -Mahatma Gandhi

Figure 5.4. "Escalation of Tactics" slide from the Advocacy and Policy Training.

Accordingly, it would be misleading to suggest that OTN applies equal emphasis to each of these tactics in the broader community. Instead, the organization's emphasis might best be thought of as weighted more heavily toward the earlier tactics. Education, which falls under Tactic 1, is an independent arm of OTN and accounts for a large share of the organization's institutional work. Advocacy and organizing together comprise another arm of OTN, which can range from actions to raise awareness (Tactic 1; e.g., the Annual Homeless Memorial) to civil disobedience (Tactic 5). In this work, de-escalation is generally preferred to escalation.

An important part of OTN's institutional work, across its tactics, is that it *acts as a link* between the Nashville homeless assistance field and other local issues relevant to homelessness, especially affordable housing. According to an OTN cofounder:

> There's not a lot of people in the homeless service providing community that really are still working with advocates on the affordable housing work. We are one of the only groups that really have deep roots in both communities—both the advocacy-and-organizing community and the service-providing community.

Here, this cofounder claims a distinctive positionality for OTN, one that straddles two distinct contexts and facilitates interconnection. OTN's expertise in community issues beyond homeless assistance and its expertise in tactics of community activism enables it to teach and lead across this boundary:

> What I've found is that the [homeless] service providers *want* to know; they want to have tools. They're just overwhelmed, and they don't know who's doing the advocacy work and they don't know what's going on in the city. They're disconnected from it. … We try to be a link there.

To put it in terms of institutional theory, these service providers are part of an organizational field that provides a meaning system centered on the issue of homeless assistance. Through various educational and memorial activities, some of which are reviewed below, OTN tries to link local field actors and their meaning system to unfamiliar practices and networks connected to other issues in the broader community. This cross-context *bridging work* isn't done simply for

the benefit of members of the Nashville homeless assistance field; it has the goal of bringing resources of the local homeless assistance field to bear on these upstream community issues.

Bridging work goes the other way as well; in working with community organizations and community members outside of the Nashville homeless assistance field, OTN tries to advocate for the interests of Nashvillians experiencing homelessness and to raise the salience of the homeless assistance imperative within community dialogues around issues like affordable housing. Multiple examples discussed in the pages below reference OTN's collaborative relationship with the community organization Nashville Organizing for Action and Hope (NOAH), a prominent local advocate of affordable housing. Another kind of example is OTN's work to educate the general Nashville population about homelessness and why they should care. This kind of bridging has the goal of bringing a variety of community resources to bear on the local homeless assistance field—for example, in the form of new "affordable housing" stock that is truly affordable for the 0–60% Area Median Income (AMI) demographic that OTN and other homeless assistance organizations serve.

This section considers OTN's work to educate, advocate, and organize—with subsections ordered roughly according to the escalation of tactics. As will be clear, this is *institutional* work, informed by OTN members' understandings of the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems that maintain inequitable practices around housing and homelessness in Nashville-Davidson County (discussed in the first half of this chapter). Through this work, OTN members hope to change many of the formal rules, binding expectations, and shared taken-for-granted beliefs that define their broader geographical community. I begin with OTN's education practices and conclude with a discussion about advocacy and organizing. (Advocacy and organizing are discussed together, because they are closely related.) What I hope to convey is

that OTN's institutional work cannot be adequately understood apart from a community-level analysis—one that extends beyond the field of local and nonlocal actors who have a direct stake in the issue of homeless assistance. To make this case, I focus particularly on OTN members' understandings of the links between their organizational activities to broader community institutions.

OTN's Strategies of Education

As mentioned in Chapter Two, community education is one of OTN's foremost organizational imperatives. One informant told me that an OTN leader had recruited her to join OTN's board specifically for her "experience in educational leadership and in community work." Indeed, there is much for her to advise on. OTN members facilitate speaking engagements, lead "urban immersions" (immersive educational tours of Downtown Nashville), conduct public trainings, and organize group volunteer activities. These are the formal activities that OTN calls "education sessions" (OTN, 2022e). OTN members also see some of their other activities (e.g., winter canvassing) as educational for volunteers who participate, even if these are not expressly undertaken for the purpose of education. This section explores how OTN members see their organization as an organization that educates, and what makes this education effective. I start by explaining OTN's didactic education strategies and its efforts to make homelessness "personal" for community members. I conclude by describing an education session that I observed firsthand: one of OTN's urban immersions.

For OTN, education complements advocacy and organizing. While advocacy and organizing primarily target normative and regulatory systems, education primarily targets normative and *cultural-cognitive* systems that perpetuate cycles of homelessness in Nashville. An OTN cofounder explained to me the systemic implications of education:

> We can't break cycles of poverty—like, disrupt these larger systems that crush our people—without first *understanding* those. There has to be some kind of analysis of what's gone wrong and what needs to happen to change it. Again, if people don't understand homelessness and poverty, then we can't disrupt those cycles on a larger scale. So, we really see education going hand-in-hand with systemic transformation.

Similarly, an OTN board member cited "commitment to just education and awareness" in answer to my question about OTN's "goals, in the long run, to effect systemic change." Framed this way, OTN's education efforts can surely be considered institutional work. Moreover, although many individuals and groups from outside Nashville-Davidson County (and even outside Tennessee) have attended OTN's education sessions, these sessions always take place in Nashville-Davidson County, and members of OTN's geographical community are primarily those who are targeted. In other words, education is another example of how OTN's institutional work is particularly local.

Didactic Education. For OTN, the practice of structured explanation or teaching, infused with moral imperatives, is a way of addressing problematic belief systems and value systems. This may be termed "didactic" education. Here, I discuss three goals of OTN's didactic education that I found in my interview data: countering ignorance about homelessness, countering uncaring attitudes, and offering templates for action to those who are eager to assist OTN in its institutional work.

Countering ignorance. Exposing community members to new, corrective information about homelessness and the people who experience it is a primary goal of OTN's education efforts. Informants mentioned specific misconceptions that they routinely encounter in the community—for example, that the primary cause of homelessness is addiction or alcoholism, that people experiencing homelessness are simply lazy and will not get a job, or that one's commitment to sobriety "proves that you really want [a home] and you are working hard." In the

eyes of OTN members, beliefs such as these can sap city leaders and other community members of interest and motivation to assist people experiencing homelessness, as explained above.

Reflecting on this, OTN members emphasized the importance of conveying information about the systemic and root causes of a person's homelessness (e.g., loss of a job), barriers to housing, the survival knowledge and skills of people who experience homelessness, the evidence supporting Housing First practices, and the systemic disadvantages that accumulate for marginalized groups. For OTN members, information such as this can go a long way in helping community members see homelessness anew and helping them understand why there is a need for community interventions. Facts are often conveyed through storytelling; OTN regularly facilitates firsthand and secondhand narration of neighbors' homeless, pre-homeless, and post-homeless experiences, thereby boosting the information's legitimacy and minimizing its abstraction.

Countering uncaring attitudes. Education can do more than make people knowledgeable about why there is a need to act; it can *motivate* action. To this end, OTN's education activities purposely work to disrupt community members' internalizations of "traditional" belief systems and value systems associated with individualism and capitalism. This includes challenging the centrality of *individual choice* in personal narratives. Indeed, OTN's education efforts are careful to stress how external events, not simply our choices, determine our circumstances. An implication is that people experiencing homelessness are less deserving of blame and, conversely, more deserving of the community's assistance. Relatedly, OTN is determined to disrupt the "otherization" of people experiencing homelessness. The organization strives to impress upon relatively privileged community members that they themselves are not so unlike people who have lost their homes, and that "you're so much closer to homelessness than you

even think that you are." Like OTN's language choices (e.g., person-first language), these teachings are designed to foster empathy and blunt uncaring attitudes.

OTN's education efforts—indeed, *all* of its activities—are also informed by the moral view that everybody is "created with worth and value." According to one cofounder, helping community members reach this same realization is an important, and gratifying, goal:

> Seeing the light bulbs, whether it's in the education setting where people just "get it" all of a sudden—get that people are human and that all we have to do is affirm people's humanity and treat people with dignity … —or whether that's on the streets, and all of a sudden people get that they matter. … That's one of the best feelings in the world.

OTN members try to spark this realization in various ways. Generally, they take care to use humanizing language when talking about homelessness and the people who experience it—especially emphasizing person-first language, strength-based storytelling, and the use of relational terms (e.g., "friends"). In addition, they sometimes try to connect homelessness to alternative belief systems and value systems; for example, I observed one OTN member appeal to biblical principles when leading a Christian youth group on an urban immersion. As explained in more detail below, OTN members also try to make homelessness a "personal" issue for community members by centering the "lived experiences" of OTN's friends in didactic contexts and facilitating direct exposure to homelessness (e.g., by inviting community members to participate in winter canvassing). These practices resist a tendency of American culture to reduce a person's worth to his or her economic contribution.

Offering templates for action. People may have knowledge about homelessness and a desire to act, but there can still be a missing piece: knowing *how* to act or what to do. As an organization, OTN offers community members various templates for action related to direct assistance and advocacy. According to one staff member, it is important to educate people about small-scale action that is doable and meaningful. Because the problem of homelessness is so big,

people might get overwhelmed when they think about the systemic solutions required. This staff member stressed that there are "daily solutions"—manageable actions that can be performed on a daily basis, which cumulatively make a meaningful impact. Examples include calling a senator (advocacy) and giving someone a bottle of water (direct assistance). Similarly, a cofounder explained to me the importance of giving community members "action items," both on a "personal" level (e.g., what to do when seeing someone in need on the street) and on a "systemic" level (e.g., "pushing for whatever campaign is going on right now, whether that's funding for the Barnes Fund or ending the criminalization of homelessness"). Educating people about these opportunities helps dispel the notion that "there's nothing I can do about" homelessness and the apathy that results.

OTN's many training offerings are probably the best example of an OTN effort to equip interested community members with actionable knowledge. The Advocacy and Policy Training, which OTN hosts at least once a year, is illustrative. As advertised on social media (and as confirmed in OTN's PowerPoint slides and through my in-person attendance), the training covered the following topics:

- "Moving toward models that advocate WITH people rather than FOR them."
- "Giving an overview of what's happening on the ground with affordable housing and policy changes in Nashville."
- "Equipping participants to effectively navigate Metro Council and State Legislature."
- "Empowering participants to organize for change in their communities."

Typically, an OTN staff member leads the training while several others help with logistics. As noted in the bullet points above, an important part of the training is to provide participants with practical strategies to effect change, including: utilizing local editorial pages as a means of advocacy, practicing the escalation of tactics, reaching out to public officials, and "getting involved" with existing community organizations (including OTN), among others. When I

attended the training, there were about forty community members present, and the training lasted two-and-a-half hours. Multiple guest speakers were given several minutes of speaking time each—including representatives of NOAH and PATHE (local advocacy groups that focus more on housing policy), an individual experiencing homelessness, and the Vice Mayor of Nashville (Jim Shulman).

At the training, I observed a variety of community members present, some of whom are directly involved in homeless assistance. To one OTN cofounder, it is important that such members are present:

> We … are trying to move homeless-service-providing agencies further in what they're doing—to say, "Toxic charity is toxic." If our nonprofits aren't breaking the cycles of poverty, we're just perpetuating them. And that's what the nonprofit industrial complex does. It gets the funds to benefit ourselves, and we build nicer and nicer buildings and get bigger and bigger staffs, and we're always trying to meet the need and address the symptoms instead of addressing the root causes—which are the lack of affordable housing, the lack of health care, the lack of adequate wages, and all kinds of other things. So, we've been a bridge there ... Our Advocacy and Policy trainings have been successful and popular in that sense, because we're trying to move them forward into thinking about those bigger systemic issues too.

This is an example of what I am calling "bridging work"—a term coined from this passage in my interview. Here, it takes the form of equipping homeless nonprofits with knowledge about systems and practices outside of the homeless assistance field. This is done to enable them to engage in activism around "bigger systemic issues"—that is, beyond the issue of homeless assistance.

Making Homelessness Personal. In my interviews, nearly all OTN members emphasized the educational significance of (as one informant put it) "taking the issue of homelessness itself from the theoretical to the personal." The organization tries to do this in a variety of settings, including its trainings, resource shelters, urban immersions, winter canvasses, speaking engagements, fundraisers, and Facebook posts. Making homelessness "personal" for

community members happens through centering the stories and experiences of OTN's "friends" and facilitating direct exposure to homelessness. For OTN, these strategies have the potential to "de-otherize" people experiencing homelessness and, in the process, break down epistemic and affective barriers to individual-level change. (This can happen in all kinds of settings, not just structured education sessions.) For OTN, this individual-level change has the potential to accumulate over time and meaningfully impact the shared values and beliefs in Nashville-Davidson County.

Centering "lived experiences." According to OTN members, a highly effective means of education is to hear about "lived experiences" of homelessness. Some informants cited this as a factor in their own learning. When analyzing their characterizations of this impact, I picked up on epistemic and affective dimensions. That is, encountering "lived experiences" can be uniquely informational and uniquely motivating. I will discuss these in turn.

Often, informants talked about epistemic impacts: how interactions with OTN's "friends" can help city leaders and other community members *understand*. Mostly, the mechanisms behind this are seen as intuitive, needing little explanation; people experiencing homelessness are, naturally, better able to convey knowledge about their own experience. However, some informants elaborated. One intern shared how merely collaborating with people experiencing homelessness in structured education activities is intrinsically educational:

> I think that because Open Table elevates and includes the voices of people who experience homelessness or have lived through homelessness… I think that's a way of educating other parts of the general public, by saying, "This person is also capable of teaching you about what it's like to be homeless. They're far more qualified than I am."

This message was made explicit in the Advocacy and Policy Training I attended, where an individual experiencing homelessness and Vice Mayor Jim Shulman were both invited to present their "expert advice."

Furthermore, the *content* of what these educators have to say is impactful. A person's mind "just sort of opens up" as they hear about homeless experiences firsthand, according to a staff member. This is valuable not just for skeptics, but for allies as well. As an intern explained to me, learning directly from OTN's "friends" can "reaffirm already-held beliefs" for those who don't need convincing. For OTN, these potential epistemic impacts are worth pursuing across the organization's formal activities, since lack of understanding is a key barrier to local institutional change.

Multiple informants implied that exposure to "lived experiences" does more than open up minds; it can *provoke* community members to engage in needed action—implicitly because of the affective implications of getting to know people and encountering their humanity. One outreach worker stressed: "I've said so many times: If the public could meet my people, this wouldn't be happening. It wouldn't be happening. They would be demanding that we build housing for folks." Sometimes, OTN members try to approximate this kind of meeting by channeling their "friends," conveying their stories secondhand to people who might be emotionally impacted. However, the organization unambiguously prioritizes *firsthand* storytelling. One OTN staff member explained why:

> I think it's much easier to say, "I don't care about this," when it's someone telling you something about someone else. It's harder when the person is telling you about their life right in front of you—or at least I hope so, at least for some people.

Nurtured, this kind of emotional connection can cognitively reorient an individual toward his or her regulatory environment. "If you have a relationship with somebody," an OTN cofounder told me, "you're going to be more apt to pay attention, because the decisions made politically are going to affect that person—more than you." Thus, education is an important way of fighting the apathy and antipathy that stymies local institutional change, including change related to affordable housing.

Of my informants, the education collaborator is the only one who has personally experienced homelessness and who participates in OTN educational activities as someone with "lived experience." In my interview with him, he explained how his experience of homelessness has made him a "poverty scholar" with unique knowledge about homelessness and the political system that perpetuates it. He also explained to me how his *bodily presence*, not simply his special knowledge, helps facilitate learning in OTN's education sessions. For example, he said he sometimes invites session participants to touch his arm or his hand, then uses this as an opportunity to point out that nothing bad came out of this; homelessness is not a "disease," so there is no reason to treat "homeless people" like lepers. Similarly, he explained to me how his physical appearance (e.g., the way he looks well-dressed and intelligent) disrupts audience assumptions about what "'homeless' was supposed to look like." Finally, this OTN collaborator explained how sharing his experiences in person *helps to establish trust* with the audience: "I have no reason to lie, because I'm right here, standing in front of you." These comments stress, in various ways, the educational importance of firsthand accounts of homeless experiences. As I reviewed above, other OTN members agree.

Direct exposure. Direct exposure to experiences of homelessness is another way to take homelessness "from the theoretical to the personal." Asked if there are "ways of educating people that staff have been dreaming about," one intern shared their personal opinion that opportunities for direct exposure should be expanded:

> I don't know what the other staff has been dreaming about. But an idea—or something that I have in mind—is if there was a person who would take volunteers out to do outreach, like ride-alongs, so that they could see us [in the field] on a firsthand basis. Because a lot of the education that [OTN is] doing right now is very sit-in, or trainings and things like that. Or the urban immersions, or the camp cleanups. But one of the things I heard from a volunteer group that came from this university was that, "Oh, we didn't meet anybody." And that's the key; *meeting a person is what makes the difference*. [Emphasis added]

Other informants did not emphasize the importance of direct exposure in the education process as heavily. However, like this intern, several informants strongly endorsed the view that direct exposure could matter for epistemic and affective change, and cumulatively, systemic change—especially insofar as direct exposure facilitates direct interaction with people experiencing homelessness.

Mostly, informants talked about *winter canvassing* as an activity that facilitates education through direct exposure. Multiple informants speculated that if certain people (e.g., the mayor, city council members, or other community members) were to participate in a winter canvass, then maybe their perspective would change or they would begin to care. Asked how OTN and its allies "can change the priorities of the city around affordable housing," one staff member cited (among other things) canvassing's transformative power:

> Gosh, I think every politician and every council member in this city should canvass one night, boots on the ground, direct service work ... Sometimes we have this 30,000-foot view of things, and then when you're actually down in it—it changed my perspective. … You can't come back from that [unchanged], because you have the stories and the names and the faces—and once that happens, then *I would think it would change the way that you wanted to do things.* [Emphasis added]

Similarly, when speaking about Vice Mayor Jim Shulman and the important partner he has been, a different staff member revealed an assumed causal relationship between canvassing and understanding: "He's been canvassing with us before, so he seems to understand and get it."

Case Study: An Urban Immersion. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to observe one of OTN's urban immersions. It is useful to share my field notes of this experience for triangulation purposes; they show that the identified social problems and strategic responses to these problems that OTN members emphasized in my interview and archival data are consistent with my own observations. Indeed, the urban immersion touched on a broad range

of community-level issues important to OTN and showcased many of the educational strategies discussed above.

On the day of the urban immersion, I met the OTN immersion leader in the lobby of Nashville's Main Library, in Downtown Nashville, at 9 AM—immediately after the front doors opened to the public. A small local group (one adult, three children) rolled in right behind me. The immersion leader greeted the Nashville group and informed them that another group (soon arriving) is faith-based and that she would likely be using "language of faith" at times in order to connect with these religious students. In fact, OTN is interfaith, she noted.

Before long, the other group arrived, bringing 15 undergraduate students from a United Methodist Church (UMC) university in a neighboring southern state. The immersion leader led us up the stairs to the third floor, where a library employee unlocked a large private room with a mix of orange and purple cushioned chairs. The chairs were already arranged in a circle, and we found seats.

Once everyone settled, the immersion leader began what would be a wide-ranging discussion about homelessness—highly structured, but with frequent opportunities for student questions. "What do all unhoused people have in common?" she asked. "Lack of money," replied a student. The leader responded that this is not necessarily true; some people experiencing homelessness have money. Another student chimed in: "They don't have homes?" Exactly; "housing ends homelessness," said the leader with a nod and a gentle laugh, as if to underscore that the answer to homelessness is disarmingly simple.

"What did y'all notice when you drove into Nashville?" asked the OTN leader. Someone from the UMC group mentioned construction and new builds. The leader affirmed this answer and proceeded to explain how Metro government is not prioritizing the right things by funding

luxury apartments and subsidies to Amazon. She shared the story of a friend of hers who was forced to leave her outdoor encampment when Metro Nashville destroyed it. Although this friend eventually succeeded in getting an apartment, a developer soon bought the property and informed the tenants that rents were being raised (beyond what they could afford) and that the tenants had 30 days to move out. The immersion leader likened Nashville's housing situation to a game of "musical chairs": There simply aren't enough homes! "The justice work is getting more chairs in the game."

The discussion continued—touching on housing, racism, the criminal justice system, local government policy, and how these all interconnect with homelessness. At multiple points, the leader stressed that when it comes to understanding homelessness, we need to see the forest, not just the trees. We can't just consider homelessness in isolation; it is interconnected with many other issues of injustice.

Soon thereafter, the leader transitioned to faith. "Y'all are a Christian group. What do the prophets say about [injustice]?" she asked, before identifying herself as a chaplain. After hearing some of the students' answers, the leader offered several Bible verses from the books of Amos, Jeremiah, and others having to do with justice, fair treatment of the poor, fair wages, and caring for the orphan and widow. Her point: "We can't just do the charity work of our faith, or else we'll perpetuate unjust systems." When our communities care about profit over people, she asserted, things are "out of whack."

As our time in this library room drew to a close, we rose from our chairs and filed out. We descended the marble staircase to the ground floor, across the lobby, and out to the street. After stopping to answer some student questions, the leader walked us down Church Street, eventually stopping in front of Stay Alfred at 505: a 45-story luxury apartment hotel that opened

in 2017. There is a plaque outside the building acknowledging the people who helped make the building possible, including the developer. The leader pointed out to the group that Nashville taxpayers are missing from this plaque. She segued into tax increment financing and how the taxpayer is implicated in financing these projects.

We continued walking down the street and stopped to gather in front of an old church. The leader acknowledged that this church is an important partner for OTN on the issue of homelessness, but she pointed out the spiked, locked metal gate that bars access to the steps and front door. “If Jesus tried to sleep on these steps on a cold, rainy night, he would be turned away or arrested,” she said. We went around the side to find an alternate way into the church.

Inside the church, we decamped in what appeared to be a classroom. Before resuming discussion, the leader walked us to a nearby room where OTN has set up a gallery highlighting various forms of inequity related to homelessness. The gallery room was small and, with about ten of us inside at a given time, cramped. We slowly milled about, looking at the exhibits—including photos, posters, news articles, drawings, handwritten letters and cards from OTN’s beneficiaries, and other items. Attached to some of the exhibits were labels providing explanation and context (Figure 5.5).

Back in the classroom, we resumed discussion and participated in an activity called “Could you make it on the streets?”—designed to teach us about the (implicitly surprising) skills and labor that characterize a life of homelessness. Eventually, we left the church and retraced our steps to the Main Library. Our terminus was the library’s Civil Rights Room. Large, often dramatic photos from Nashville during the Civil Rights Era were displayed on its walls, near carefully curated books. A circular seating area in the middle of the room had counters and cushioned stools meant to evoke the lunch counters at Woolworth’s—the site of iconic 1960s

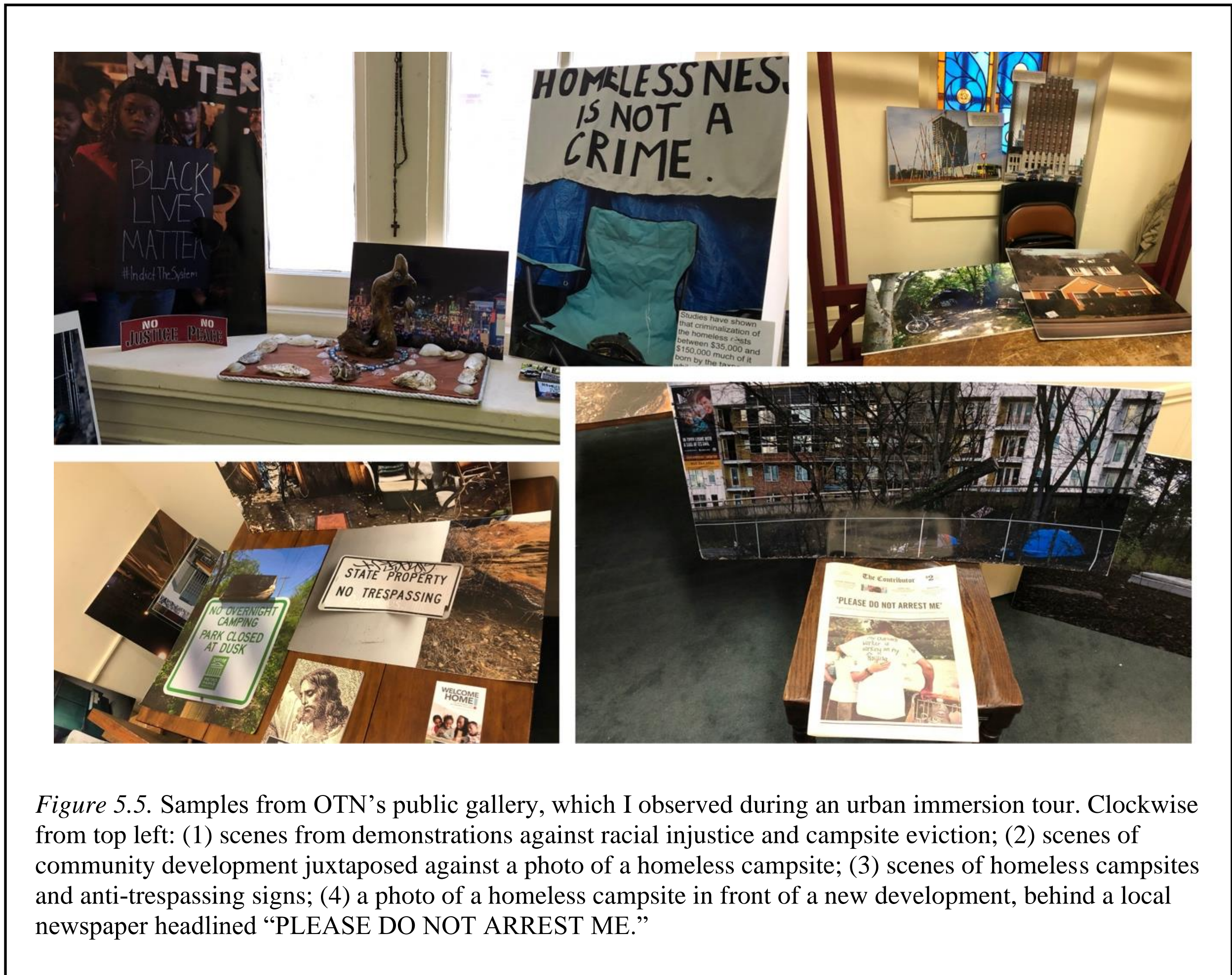

Figure 5.5. Samples from OTN's public gallery, which I observed during an urban immersion tour. Clockwise from top left: (1) scenes from demonstrations against racial injustice and campsite eviction; (2) scenes of community development juxtaposed against a photo of a homeless campsite; (3) scenes of homeless campsites and anti-trespassing signs; (4) a photo of a homeless campsite in front of a new development, behind a local newspaper headlined "PLEASE DO NOT ARREST ME."

protests for racial justice. Slowly, we all congregated and found seats around the circle. We debriefed and recapped the need for systemic change across multiple issues.

The urban immersion I observed was consistent with OTN's education strategies as well as with OTN members' perceptions of problematic local-level institutional systems. The immersion was suffused with information designed to shift attendees' understandings of homelessness—for example, the reasons why people experience it, and the skills and labor that characterize that kind of life. These efforts, along with appeals to attendees' faith and claims of shared social positionality between attendees and people experiencing homelessness, were consistent with OTN's expressed intentions to disrupt community members' internalized beliefs

and values associated with individualism. Finally, the immersion brought homelessness "from the theoretical to the personal" by frequently inviting attendees to empathize with that experience and by centering specific experiences through storytelling.[30] Content-wise, the immersion emphasized the centrality of affordable housing, the issue of tax increment financing, the necessity of a multi-issue framework, the problem of inequitable community development, and more—all consistent with characterizations of the central problems and solutions highlighted by OTN members in my archival and interview data.

In some ways, urban immersions are illustrative of OTN's broader education portfolio. Across this portfolio, OTN acts the host—marshalling its organizational resources to develop, advertise, and lead educational events (often on a recurring basis), which community members can choose to attend. During these activities, messaging is targeted inward, at participants. This is unlike OTN's advocacy and organizing activities, which are much more collaborative and public—and where messaging is targeted outward, often through news media outlets, at community members who are not activity participants. It is to these activities I now turn.

OTN's Strategies of Advocacy and Organizing

For OTN, advocating and organizing are distinct but often dovetail. Advocating means "bringing that message"—or, "voic[ing] public support" for (or opposition to) a practice or policy, even if OTN does so alone. Organizing, on the other hand, is more about building and exercising power. Organizing often involves advocacy, but it is more fundamentally about "collaborating and building coalitions" with other organizations and mobilizing people within OTN's sphere of influence (e.g., its social media followers and its peer homeless assistance

---

[30] OTN's urban immersions are typically jointly led by an OTN staff member and a co-leader who has "lived experience" of homelessness. However, in the immersion I was able to observe, the co-leader had a family emergency and could not join us.

organizations). This is why, for OTN members, "advocacy and organizing" are often mentioned together but viewed as different kinds of efforts. The primary targets of OTN's advocacy and organizing efforts are the local regulative and normative systems that perpetuate cycles of homelessness.

OTN's advocacy is often collaborative, and its organizing is intrinsically so. Most of OTN's partnerships are with *local* organizations and community members. Local partners important to OTN's work include organizations that focus on various forms of inequity as well as churches (especially in the United Methodist denomination). In addition, OTN collaborates with a range of individuals—which together can be categorized as local policymakers and members of the general public. Policymakers include Vice Mayor Jim Shulman and Metro Council members who are friendly toward OTN's aims. Meanwhile, members of the general public are sometimes recruited to lobby, petition, or join direct actions. In its collaborations, OTN sometimes plays leading roles, other times supporting roles—in either case, bringing its own agenda to bear.

This section reviews prominent examples of OTN's advocacy and organizing activities, including collaborations with other local actors who have a stake in the institutions of Nashville-Davidson County. Each example highlights different tactics that OTN uses to influence community-level institutions. The first kind of activity, *memorializing*, is a way of meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of people experiencing homelessness, but also a way of raising awareness in the broader community about the consequences of homelessness. The second kind of activity, *lobbying*, is a way of directly petitioning decision-makers to make changes to regulatory systems. The final kind of activity, *direct action*, is a way of applying pressure to regulatory and normative systems through public protest and civil disobedience. Together, these

activities comprise the advocacy-and-organizing arm of OTN, which complements its education work in attempting to make community-level institutions more favorable to the Housing First paradigm, especially through the reduction of the affordable housing deficit.

Memorializing Those Who Have Died. OTN regularly organizes public memorials for un-housed or formerly un-housed Nashvillians who have recently died. These are semi-structured events characterized by meditations on individual lives, faith-based symbolism, and calls to rectify social inequities. Occasionally, OTN will help organize a memorializing event that centers on a particular person (e.g., Torres, 2020). More prominent, however, is the Annual Homeless Memorial, which OTN organizes. The Memorial can be viewed as an example of bridging work; it invites the participation of homeless assistance organizations but also of other community members, and it connects the issue of homelessness to broader concerns about equity and affordable housing.

Case Study: The 2019 Homeless Memorial. The Annual Homeless Memorial typically lasts from 9 AM to 11 AM on a brisk Saturday in mid-December, with breakfast food and/or coffee provided by the Nashville Rescue Mission. From the event's location in Riverfront Park, a half-circle of attendees gathers in front of a microphone, listening, while a series of Nashvillians commemorates the lives lost over the course of the calendar year. Prayers are prayed, poems are read, and songs are sung. All around are the symbols of Nashville' wealth and urban development: in front of the crowd, and beyond the Cumberland River, Nissan Stadium (home of the Tennessee Titans); behind the crowd, the entertainment district of Broadway Avenue and its rows of honky-tonks, adjacent to downtown skyscrapers. Social workers, prominent local politicians (sometimes the mayor and always a Metro Council member or two), local media, people experiencing homeless, and other interested community members comprise those in

attendance. Since 2015, I have attended five of these events. Here, my focus will be the Homeless Memorial occurring on December 21, 2019. (For additional reference, I have a copy of a video recording.)

On this day in 2019, speakers included Vice Mayor Jim Shulman, Councilman Freddie O'Connell, representatives of Nashville's homeless service provider community, and others. Throughout the event, attendees clasped pamphlets that OTN distributed at the onset of the Memorial; these listed all the names of those who were known to have died in the past year (97 people in 2019). To compile the names, OTN solicited the help of homeless service providers and other community actors (such as first responders) to ensure that people who had died would not be forgotten.

At a designated point in the service, two individuals took turns calling out the names into the microphone one by one, each followed by a collective response of "presente." As an OTN staff member explained to the crowd, this response signifies that "the people that we've lost in the struggle—the struggle for housing, for healthcare—are not lost, they are not gone; they are still here with us … charging our present and fueling our future work." This "reading of the names" was followed shortly after by an "open mic" where anyone was welcome to approach the microphone and say what was on their heart. Several people experiencing homelessness took up the opportunity. They shared stories of their loved ones, aired out indictments against an unjust social system, and pleaded for change. Some told jokes, others shed tears—while everyone else listened in respectful silence.

Throughout the service, OTN members connected this time of remembrance to issues of social inequity, regularly utilizing the language of faith and morality. An OTN cofounder, donning a clerical collar, played the role of emcee, introducing speakers and moving the service

along. At the beginning, this cofounder gave a short, prepared introduction. She spoke about "this sacred and liminal time" of the year—including Advent, "which is a season of longing and waiting and watching for a better world …, of wanting to see the lowly lifted up and the hungry filled with good things." Another OTN staff member read Jan Richardson's poem about the inevitability of "the blessed light that comes." A third OTN member exhorted: "Something has got to change; we come here every year. And this is a moral right: … to have food, clothing, and a dwelling place—called shelter. … We need to put *the people* before *profit*." Later, the cofounder spoke again, in remembrance of a recently passed friend, telling how he had helped his homeless encampment organize and stave off closure by Metro government.

Like OTN's education sessions, the Homeless Memorial provides opportunities for people experiencing homelessness to speak for themselves. Being able to speak on a public platform, with prominent community members present, uninterrupted, with minimal regulation—this is a rare but important opportunity. For OTN's education collaborator, it helps to humanize people experiencing homelessness in the eyes of others:

> We don't have a place where we can speak, the homeless community. And [the Homeless Memorial] is a platform where we're celebrating the lives of people that were touched by being misplaced, and we can say what we want to say. And we invite the political figures, and we invite everyday people and businesspeople to come, and even some of the people that claim they want to help the homeless that aren't even there—but we get a chance to speak, say what needs to be said. *And that's to show that we have feelings, we can talk, we can communicate, and these are your brothers and sisters whether you want to realize it or not.* [Emphasis added]

In this way, the Annual Homeless Memorial is more than a chance to draw attention to the deadly outcomes of an uncaring, inequitable system. It is also a way that OTN tries to stir community members to care about their unhoused neighbors who are still alive. OTN does this by humanizing people experiencing homelessness and by appealing to religious norms.

Lobbying Public Officials. As part of its advocacy and organizing efforts, OTN spends much time lobbying local public officials, whether one-on-one or in public forums. More than a form of advocacy, lobbying is comprised of targeted efforts to push specific actors toward specific actions. OTN's lobbying is sometimes situational (i.e., in response to an unfolding situation) and sometimes ongoing (i.e., in response to a perpetual problem that is more entrenched and/or taken for granted).

In pushing for changes in how local government operates, OTN targets various kinds of regulatory levers—which may be categorized as public policies, protocols, structures, and budgets. Policies include ordinances or other actions taken at the county level. Protocols include the rules by which certain departments (e.g., law enforcement) operate. Structures include committees, oversight boards, teams, departments, and other entities that have direct influence over how policies are enacted and which protocols are developed. For all of these aspects of governance, OTN sees the budgeting process as very important, as it reflects Nashville's priorities. Every year, OTN is present at budget meetings to help shape the budget that is ultimately presented to City Council.

Much of OTN's lobbying efforts are focused on the Metro Council (the legislative branch) on one hand, and the Mayor's Office and executive branch agencies on the other. One OTN cofounder told me that OTN has "really great ties with City Council" and, like other informants, emphasized the importance of getting to know Council members. Long-term relationships can gain OTN allies, which can aid further lobbying and other forms of advocacy. For example, Vice Mayor Jim Shulman came to speak at OTN's Advocacy and Policy Training, sharing advice on how to engage with lawmakers. Recall that both Shulman and Councilman Freddie O'Connell, another long-term partner, agreed to speak at the Homeless Memorial.

OTN's relationship with the executive branch has been more difficult, most notably due to instability in the Mayor's Office. Megan Barry had a short tenure, followed by David Briley with a short tenure, followed by John Cooper who (at the time of my interviews with OTN members) was still new to office. Both OTN cofounders that I interviewed cited this instability as a reason why local lobbing has been difficult lately. As one explained, a new mayor might come up with a new plan for affordable housing, and OTN will work with the administration to influence the plan—only for a new administration to come in, forcing OTN to begin relationship-building, education, and advocacy anew.

Case Study: Planning Commission Meeting. As an example of OTN collaborating with other community organizations to lobby public officials, an informant pointed me to a meeting of the Metro Planning Commission, a recording of which has been published on YouTube. The meeting provided an opportunity for the public to comment on a proposed redevelopment plan for the Dickerson South corridor of East Nashville, a rapidly gentrifying part of the city. For the planners, this represented "a unique opportunity to create one of Nashville's safest and most attractive streets" (Mazza, 2019). Others in the community, such as OTN, were wary of the plan's potential to displace residents—particularly residents of Riverchase Apartments, an affordable housing complex in the redevelopment zone. OTN's skepticism is not surprising, given their view of hyper-development as a key driver of the affordable housing deficit.

Together with Nashville Organized for Action and Hope (NOAH) and the People's Alliance for Transit, Housing, and Employment (PATHE), OTN participated in the negotiations to shape the plan. These groups were able to secure a verbal agreement that the mixed-use development slated to replace Riverchase would maintain roughly the same number of affordable units. However, a remaining point of concern was that this agreement, being verbal, would not

be binding. So, OTN and its partners sought to support the plan while at the same time creating an opening for public pressure should the developer not keep their word.

During the Planning Commission meeting, commissioners solicited public comment for and against the plan. A representative from NOAH spoke in support. Soon thereafter, an OTN staff member approached the microphone to register OTN's opposition, and implored Commission members to keep a focus on affordable housing in this and future developments:

> This opposition is more symbolic. [OTN has] been a partnering group with the neighborhood groups—with NOAH, with PATHE. And we're really excited about the discussions that have happened. But we're really concerned about the lack of any in-writing affordability requirements for this corridor. … Because even though NOAH has talked with the developer about 150 units of affordable housing staying at Riverchase, there's nothing in writing. No affordability limitations have been set. We don't know if we're talking 0-to-30 AMI [Area Median Income], 80-to-120 AMI. … So, we ask you to continue to work with the city to push affordability requirements in redeveloping zones, because that's the only way that we're going to be able to work with the folks that are on the bottom, and we don't want to see them getting pushed out.

This public comment is consistent with OTN's focus on affordable housing, particularly units in the 0–30% AMI range. As noted earlier in this chapter, the distinction between AMI ranges (sometimes with a focus on the 0–60% AMI range) is a key part of OTN's advocacy. It is a distinction that disrupts what OTN members view as a taken-for-granted definition of "affordable housing" that some community members hold, which keeps housing out of reach for many low-income residents, including people experiencing homelessness. OTN's actions in this case study are an example of bridging work, because OTN sought to connect local affordable housing systems to the particular concerns of the Nashville homeless assistance field.

Although OTN and NOAH appeared to be on opposite sides during the Planning Commission meeting, this was strategic and coordinated. An OTN intern (who had been in attendance) explained to me:

> We [OTN and NOAH] worked together and had camaraderie … Our mission was to have a public record that says, "*This* person [the NOAH representative] said that verbal

> agreements have been made between the developer and the community. And *this* person [the OTN representative] said that no accountability has taken place yet between this developer and this community." Because later, when it gets down the road, should the developer choose not to follow through …, there's a public record of it now.

In other words, there were parallel levels of strategy to this lobbying effort. On one level, OTN pressed for a local normative system in which low-income housing requirements would be routine in this and other redevelopments. On another level, OTN and NOAH were establishing a record that could facilitate direct action—in the form of leveraging public pressure—should the affordable housing assurances not be honored, vague as they were.

Direct Action. Finally, OTN's advocacy-and-organizing arm includes direct action. For OTN, direct action—whether it is a rally, protest, or other form of public confrontation—is about people power. By trying to work with others in the community to achieve political ends, OTN rarely acts alone. Sometimes, OTN takes the lead in direct action; other times, it plays more of a supporting role.

Speaking to me, one OTN cofounder insisted that direct action has always been a last resort for OTN, in that organization members prefer to work things out in a non-confrontational manner. ("We would always, always, always go to the table first and have a direct conversation with whoever it was that we were having a beef with.") The preference for lobbying seems to be made possible by OTN's cultivation of relationships with city officials. For an OTN cofounder, this is partly a matter of principle:

> I do not want someone to surprise me, and I will not surprise someone else. … That is to me, like, zero integrity. And if you're going to come at me, let's talk about it. Right? … If we can't figure it out, then we're going to need to raise some awareness about it [laughs].

The preference for lobbying is also a matter of pragmatism; when things escalate to the point when a public protest becomes necessary, this takes time away from more-useful actions OTN could be taking. This preference for less-confrontational forms of action is consistent with the

“escalation of tactics” described above. Nevertheless, direct action is an important way that OTN sometimes tries to force change to local regulatory systems.

Case Study: Rally for the Barnes Fund. As an example of direct action in OTN’s advocacy and organizing work, I will discuss OTN’s public activism over the course of a two-week period in December 2019, including a rally jointly organized by OTN, NOAH, and PATHE. Compared to the Homeless Memorial and the Metro Planning Commission meeting, OTN’s actions during this period exhibited more-confrontational tactics. The target of this activism was the Barnes Housing Trust Fund—a frequent topic in my one-on-one interviews with OTN members and in the newspaper archives I analyzed. As explained above, OTN members see the Barnes Fund as an important way that local government can replace affordable housing units lost to hyper-development. It has long been a subject of OTN’s lobbying efforts with local legislative and executive branch officials.

On December 3rd, 2019, in response to budget constraints, Nashville mayor John Cooper slashed the Barnes Fund budget nearly in half—from $9.5 million to $5 million. Many in Nashville, not least OTN and its partners, were outraged that the Barnes Fund was on the chopping block at all. In his mayoral campaign, Cooper had run on a promise to *expand* the fund—something OTN had been advocating for years. Now, the opposite was occurring. Moreover, the *way* the Barnes Fund cut occurred seemed to blindside affordable housing advocates and developers alike, as the decision was announced only an hour before Barnes Fund grants were to be awarded to selected projects. Because matching grants were on the table, the $4.5 million cut to the Barnes Fund would be multiplicative. OTN and other affordable housing advocates felt betrayed.

The day this decision was publicized, OTN told its Facebook followers to "stay tuned" for a call to action (Figure 5.6). In a sign that OTN saw the Barnes Fund as connected to the issue of homelessness and to Housing First-related principles, the post included references to OTN's core beliefs that housing ends homelessness and that housing as a human right. The promised call to action came on December 13th in an email sent to OTN's subscribers, and then again on December 16th in a post to OTN's Facebook page. OTN called on its followers send an email to the mayor and his senior advisor, demanding that they "#RestoreTheFund immediately." To assist this, OTN offered an email template composed by their partners at NOAH.

Through OTN's December 16th Facebook post, I learned that OTN, NOAH, and PATHE were organizing a public rally scheduled for the next day, to pressure the Cooper administration to change course. I decided to attend—and when the day arrived, I drove to the Metro

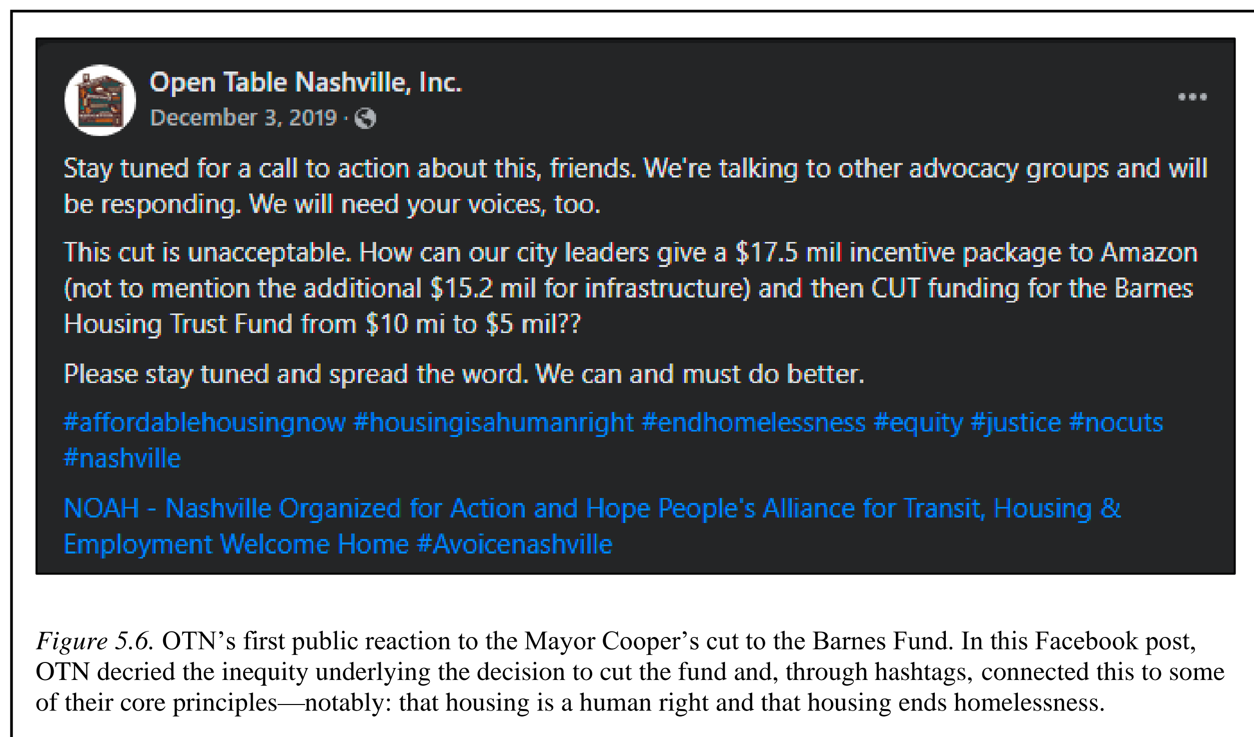

Figure 5.6. OTN's first public reaction to the Mayor Cooper's cut to the Barnes Fund. In this Facebook post, OTN decried the inequity underlying the decision to cut the fund and, through hashtags, connected this to some of their core principles—notably: that housing is a human right and that housing ends homelessness.

Courthouse. In addition to courtrooms, the building houses the City Council chambers and the mayor's offices. On this particular day, the public square in front of the Courthouse was the site of protest.

When I arrived, it was 4:50 PM. The sun had already set, but there was still a bit of daylight. About ten people were gathered in front of the Courthouse, including several OTN staff members and members of NOAH. Event organizers began setting up a microphone and small podium on the Courthouse steps. The crowd quickly grew in number, with a steady stream of people arriving.

A few minutes after 5 o'clock, the event began. The co-chair of NOAH's Affordable Housing Task Force gave her planned opening remarks, measuredly delivered. Next, OTN cofounder Lindsey Krinks was invited to the microphone. She introduced a bit more energy, her tone suggesting indignation. Our city's budget is a *moral* document, she stressed. "We're no longer interested in crumbs from the table of Nashville's prosperity," she continued—castigating existing normative systems. She connected the Barnes Fund to the issue of homelessness.

Krinks then started a chant, one that some in the crowd were clearly already familiar with; a handful of people instantly shouted the response. The rest of the crowd quickly caught on, joining in during successive repetitions:

Krinks: When housing is under attack, what do we do?

Crowd: STAND UP, FIGHT BACK!

Krinks: When housing is under attack, what do we do?

Crowd: STAND UP, FIGHT BACK!

And on it continued. (Later in the night, another speaker from a different organization would begin this chant again.) Krinks concluded her Barnes Fund speech with an announcement for the

upcoming Annual Homeless Memorial. People are dying as a result of the housing shortage, she reminded the crowd.

My description of OTN's work during December 2019 is a snapshot of OTN's yearslong fight to increase the city's investment in the Barnes Fund. My aim is not to determine the extent to which this fight has been successful, but to describe an instance of institutional work that was targeted to the broader community of Nashville (that is, to a place-based community of organizations more extensive than the local homeless assistance field). As I have shown, OTN's Barnes Fund activism has sometimes escalated to the tactic of direct action. In the case described above, OTN and its allies were in a defensive posture, seeking to resist a sudden change to the regulatory status quo. However, over the long term, OTN has been trying to permanently change local practices such that the Barnes Fund would receive much *greater* funding than it has received under the status quo. (I noted this earlier in the chapter, in my discussion about OTN and the problem of inequity.) In other words, there have been times when OTN's work on this issue has looked like institutional maintenance, even if the longer-term effort is more about institutional disruption.

OTN's Barnes Fund activism is another example of bridging work. It is clear that OTN is not simply trying to influence regulative and normative systems related to affordable housing; they are doing so to alleviate a housing bottleneck that is making Housing First ideals unattainable and keeping their "friends" on the street. As part of this activism, OTN members have engaged with local stakeholders of affordable housing, including actors who are not directly tied to the homeless assistance field. They have also become fluent in the *meaning systems* associated with affordable housing—policies, terminologies, financial structures (i.e., the Barnes Fund), and so on. For OTN, this is part of what it means to break out of the "silo" of homeless

assistance, and it is intimately connected to their day-to-day work of navigating people from homelessness to housing.

Conclusion

This chapter covered a lot of ground. Its overarching goal was to demonstrate OTN's attentiveness to the institutions of its geographical community, beyond the issue-specific context of the homeless assistance field. More than capturing OTN's attention, community-level institutional systems were the targets of OTN members' efforts to achieve systemic change in matters of housing and local beliefs and values. These efforts were *purposive*, motivated by a complex analysis of local inequity that sees homelessness as inextricably tied to broader community-based systems. In other words, they constituted institutional work.

OTN's efforts took the form of observable activities, many of which are documented in archival evidence and given additional meaning by my in-depth interviews with OTN members themselves. Specifically, I provided examples of how OTN worked to influence local institutional systems related to affordable housing, ignorance about homelessness, and internalizations of individualistic worldviews. Sometimes, as tends to be the case with their education sessions, OTN acts independently; other times, as is the case with many of their advocacy and organizing activities, OTN collaborates with other community members. The tactics that I observed in my data ranged from raising awareness to lobbying to direct action.

It is a critical point of this study that OTN engages in institutional work to affect place-based institutional systems that exist outside of the homeless assistance field. As Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated, OTN is unequivocally part of this field. At its core, it is an organization that (a) provides direct assistance to people experiencing homelessness, (b) is part of a community of homeless assistance organizations in Nashville, and (c) is embedded in a global field of issue-

specific resources (e.g., the Housing First paradigm) and constraints (e.g., funding structures). However, to ignore OTN's place-based work that takes place outside of the homeless assistance context would be to offer a woefully incomplete picture of OTN's strategic work.

This not only matters for understanding OTN as an organization, but for understanding its potential impact on the institutions of Nashville-Davidson County writ large—as well as the implications of this for Housing First and other institutions of the Nashville homeless assistance field. Chapter Four noted that place complicates field institutions, and the present chapter dove deeper into the relevancies of place. From OTN's perspective, material realities (like the affordable housing deficit) and cultural systems (like local internalizations of individualism) in Nashville help establish the playing field for local homeless assistance organizations, making it difficult to practice Housing First and rapidly move people into permanent housing. Situating OTN in an organizational field only, consistent with much of institutional scholarship, would have led to an overlooking of place-based institutional processes fateful for homeless assistance practices in Nashville.

Relatedly, a lens of multiple-embeddedness can expand our understanding of the forms of institutional work that community organizations can engage in. For example, I brought to light OTN's "bridging work." As described above, this bridging work is premised on the idea that a community organization can cultivate communication and interaction between its local organizational field and other contexts in its geographical community. In my examples, OTN members illustrated two avenues of bridging work. One avenue connected homeless service providers to broader community issues and practices, seen especially in OTN's Advocacy and Policy Training. Another avenue connected a broad range of ordinary citizens, municipal

officials, and advocates (e.g., NOAH and PATHE) to the concerns of the homeless assistance field (e.g., affordable housing for people with income in the 0–60% AMI range).

The construct that facilitated this chapter's analysis was the local organizational field. In this chapter, I focused on one configuring element of the local organizational field: the place-based institutional pressures that can bear down upon an issue-based context. As they have indicated in their rhetoric and through their actions, this is something OTN members themselves recognize (albeit not in terms of institutional theory). What remains is to re-evaluate the local organizational field in light of this fuller understanding of OTN's work in the geographical community, and to briefly explore its conceptual limitations for understanding my data. This is the subject of the concluding chapter.

DISCUSSION

This case study considered how a community organization might engage in meaningful institutional work in an issue-based organizational field. To begin, I made the case for a multi-level conception of an organizational field, characterized by local-level institutional processes. I argued that the institutions of a geographical community can interact with an organizational field, configuring a local context that I called a “local organizational field.” I defined a local organizational field as a community of organizations with an interest in a particular issue in a particular place, with organizations collectively understanding and responding to the simultaneous issue-based and place-based institutional pressures that they experience. I suggested that incorporating this construct into empirical research could illuminate how community organizations are well positioned to try to influence the institutional processes of an organizational field, even if these efforts are locally targeted.

To demonstrate this, I employed a case study methodology to study examples of institutional work by a community organization, Open Table Nashville (OTN), in relation to a context I called the Nashville homeless assistance field. I located this context at the intersection of the global homeless assistance field and the geographical community of Nashville-Davidson County. The case study showed that much of OTN’s institutional work can be viewed in relation to the social boundaries of the Nashville homeless assistance field. With its local translation work, OTN worked with others to develop a local articulation of the macro-level institution of Housing First while establishing institutional supports for this articulation. With its local boundary maintenance, OTN worked with others to defend the local applicability of homeless assistance institutions during the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the

applicability of permanent housing. With its bridging work, OTN worked with others to influence community institutions outside of the homeless assistance context—especially institutions related to affordable housing and community development—in order to enable the institutionalization of Housing First practices in the homeless assistance field. These findings are predicated on the Nashville homeless assistance field being a social environment with distinct institutional processes and boundaries. This implies that, absent the local organizational field construct, OTN's institutional work would have been obscured or that some discipline other than institutional theory would have been needed to understand this work.

Indeed, other disciplines—for example, social movement theory, community psychology, or discourse theory—could have offered meaningful contextualization for OTN's activist work. Social movement theory could have characterized OTN's work as part of a local collective effort to build power in order to influence the distribution of housing resources in Nashville. Community psychology could have characterized OTN work as targeting exosystems (e.g., local regulatory structures) and macrosystems (e.g., social beliefs and values) that affect the well-being of people experiencing homelessness. Discourse theory could have characterized OTN's work, especially its education and advocacy strategies, as efforts to shape the local structures of power by targeting how community members understand and talk about people experiencing homelessness. By making more room for the work of community organizations in *institutional* theory, I hope to add an additional tool to the theory toolbox for activist community organizations seeking to impact entrenched social practices. Institutional theory—with its integration of regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional systems, along with its nuanced understandings of the recursive relationship between institutions and action—offers a powerful way to frame and focus this activist work. This is all the truer in light of this study's

theoretical contributions, which offers local targets for institutional work in a community organization's field.

Limitations

The primary purpose of this study was to demonstrate, in a number of ways, how a community organization can try to influence the institutional processes of its organizational field. To guide my analysis, I made a variety of theoretical claims: (a) at the intersection of an organizational field and a geographical community, there can be a distinctive institutional environment understood as a local organizational field; (b) macro-level field institutions can undergo processes of collective translation and subsequent maintenance when being enacted in a local field; and (c) a variety of place-based institutions can constrain a local organizational field, hindering the local translation and local maintenance of field institutions. These claims contextualized OTN's work and identified local institutional targets for this work. However, thorough empirical exploration of these theoretical claims was beyond the scope of this study.

As a result, OTN, as my instrumental case, dominated my empirical research; meanwhile, I relied heavily on theory and OTN members' own views of their social world to understand how OTN's actions were socially embedded. I tried to corroborate what I could through my direct observations and collection of archives. However, there was no escaping that my data revolved around OTN and heavily weighted the perspectives of OTN members. Thus, in my narration of institutionally significant events in Nashville and in the Nashville homeless assistance field, OTN had outsized centrality. In truth, OTN members are among the first to admit that OTN has been one of many local players trying to influence local institutional systems, and that sometimes OTN has not been among the most dominant players. This rich tapestry of community actors and their interrelationships is something that my methodology obscures.

Two examples warrant mention. In Chapter Four, I discussed OTN's efforts to institutionalize Housing First in Nashville, including its participation in the How's Nashville Campaign. Because of my focus on OTN, I did not emphasize the leading role of the Metro Homelessness Commission (particularly its then-director, Will Connelly). I also passed over the contributions of other key How's Nashville partners like Park Center (a nonprofit that serves people who have mental illness and substance use disorders and those experiencing homelessness) and Freeman Webb (an affordable housing developer). Judith Tackett, through her leadership of the Metro Homelessness Commission and the Metro Homeless Impact Division, has also been a key player. And there are others, still. OTN's work related to Housing First was meaningful and worth highlighting, but this should not give the impression that OTN was the driving force behind Housing First's local institutionalization.

Chapter Five offers another example. When discussing OTN's advocacy and organizing work related to affordable housing, I repeatedly mentioned their collaborations with Nashville Organized for Action and Hope (NOAH) and the People's Alliance for Transit, Housing, and Employment (PATHE). Both NOAH and PATHE advocated for affordable housing at the Planning Commission meeting, and both helped lead the direct action related to the Barnes Housing Trust Fund. Again, OTN's contributions were worth highlighting, but this should not give the impression that OTN was spearheading these activist efforts. NOAH and PATHE are full-time affordable housing advocates and, in this area, arguably have more influence than OTN. Nevertheless, because of my focus on OTN and the homeless assistance field, it made sense to emphasize OTN's actions during these events.

A second limitation of my study is that, despite the attention I devoted to OTN, I only scratched the surface of OTN's activities. Consequently, the organizational portrait I painted of

OTN is incomplete. Due to space limitations, it was necessary to focus on specific examples of their work. From the outset, I limited my attention to a particular advocacy area of OTN's: "affordable housing plus Housing First." However, other advocacy areas are highly important to OTN as well, and their work related to those areas could have been explored. For example, a whole case study could be devoted to OTN's institutional work around the issue of homeless encampments in Nashville. In response to this issue, OTN has used a variety of education, advocacy, and direct-action strategies to delegitimize punitive law enforcement practices while legitimizing encampments as sites where homeless outreach and housing navigation can take place. This is arguably a form of local boundary maintenance, since OTN and its partners have been trying to defend the applicability of homeless assistance institutions in a kind of situation where this is contested. As OTN's social media accounts and their interviews with local media make clear, defense of encampments is an important part of OTN's identity. However, OTN's boundary maintenance during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic provided better documented examples of OTN collaborating with other local field structures and local field members (particularly through the Continuum of Care), which was thematically important for Chapter Four. Consequently, I chose to highlight an OTN cofounder's participation on the Homelessness Planning Council, informed by hours of video footage and supporting archival data.

A third limitation was my simplistic portrayal of OTN's institutional environment. Although this portrayal was more nuanced than simply situating OTN in an organizational field, I nevertheless focused on three overlapping contexts when in fact OTN's institutional environment is much more complex. For example, as mentioned at various points in my study, OTN is embedded in a religious context. This is seen in the support of the United Methodist

Church for OTN's work, in the religious training of some of its cofounders, and in its identity as an interfaith organization. My case study undoubtedly left much to explore regarding the cultural-cognitive, normative, and material resources (e.g., OTN's office space at Glencliff United Methodist Church) that a religious positionality has afforded OTN in its institutional work. Thus, in addition to OTN's location at the intersection of an organizational field and a geographical community, a third context—a field of religious life—intersects as well. We could also consider the contextual influences of the nonprofit sector, the American South, and progressive political communities, to name a few.

Related to this, I articulated a two-level conception of the homeless assistance field, though this institutional environment is arguably more layered. As alluded to in the case study, there might indeed be *three* levels of the homeless assistance field worth differentiating: global, national, and local. The national level was at the periphery of my analysis but was alluded to when I mentioned federal regulative structures and the U.S.-focused 100,000 Homes Campaign. It is likely that translation of macro-level institutions happens at the national level, not just at the local level. In the U.S., a fourth level—the state level—could also be important, as can be seen in the example of Utah or California, where the state plays an active role in regulating homeless assistance.

Future Research

In this study, the local organizational field was my primary theoretical contribution. When applied to a case study, this construct helped me identify examples of local institutional work—local translation work, local boundary maintenance, and bridging work—in which community organizations are well positioned to participate. I believe the local organizational field, as well as other conceptions of a multi-level organizational field, could guide additional

research projects that yield many other insights for institutions and institutional work. Below, I offer a few suggestions.

First, future research could expand on the present study, exploring additional facets of institutional work by individual community organizations. My study was limited in that my observational data were collected over the course of only a few months, making it difficult to assess the extent to which observable OTN's institutional work was successful. Because institutions are characterized in part by their longevity, a longer observation window is necessary to assess the effectiveness of institutional creation, maintenance, or disruption efforts. Although archival and interview data provided me with information on events in the past, it was dependent upon the selective reporting of actors without my research agenda and upon the memories of my interviewees. An ethnography could follow the institutional work of one or more community organizations over a longer period, potentially observing direct evidence of institutional impacts while maintaining a rich understanding of the purposive efforts of these organizations.

Second, as I demonstrated in this study, the local organizational field construct is useful for identifying new forms of institutional work, especially local-level work. Subsequent research could study community organizations in any of innumerable other local organizational fields. This might help identify other forms of local institutional work for which community organizations are well positioned. Identifying additional forms of local institutional work would be useful for institutional scholarship, as it would further illuminate institutional processes at work at the local level. This would strengthen the theoretical connections between macro-level institutions and local practice. In addition, this knowledge could be useful for community organizations seeking to make institutional impacts in their locales. A robust understanding of

local institutional process would help local actors identify targets and strategies for institutional creation, maintenance, and disruption.

Third, my case study focused on a single organization's experience in its local organizational field, but future research could analyze a local organizational field as the primary subject of study. Studying a local organizational field would require a different methodology; the researcher would need to understand the positionalities and/or perspectives of a variety of local field organizations, not just one. Therefore, semi-structured interviews with individual organization members, as I did here, might not be feasible. More appropriate data collection methods might include interviews targeted to organization leaders, surveys targeted to a broader swath of local field members, archival data on the most visible aspects of local interorganizational collaborations, or observational research on the subtleties of local field members' interactions in the community. Qualitative analysis could identify homogeneities of the local organizational field that distinguish it from other contexts or heterogeneities of the local organizational field that complicate local institutional translation and the negotiations characterizing that process. Network analysis could identify the network of a local organizational field at a particular point in time and provide insights into how network characteristics (e.g., the existence of subgroups) and node characteristics (e.g., an organization's centrality in the network) might relate to the local field's institutional processes and the propensity of local field members to engage in institutional work.

Finally, another fruitful line of inquiry would be to investigate how community organizations might be purposively involved in the creation of *macro*-level field institutions. Although community organizations might not have the resources to participate in institutional creation at the macro level (e.g., by engaging with national media or by lobbying Congress), they

are sometimes able to conceptualize or prototype a new model of practice at the local level.[31] To the extent that the new model is legitimized by other actors and diffused across the field, the community organization could be said to have spurred the creation of a new field institution.[32] Researchers might consider how local organizational field processes could play an enabling role. The "social enclosure" of a geographical community, along with local-level translation processes, could act as a buffer—weakening field pressures experienced by local organizations and enabling them to imagine and enact new practices.

Most institutional scholarship has focused on how institutions influence social action. Where there is interest in the reciprocal causal relationship, scholars have mainly attended to the actions of elite actors and the implications of these actions for the macro-level institutions of organizational fields. I have argued that a rich body of research could center on the work of community organizations to influence local institutional processes (and perhaps even institutional processes beyond the locale) while still considering how these organizations are embedded in global organizational fields. This argument sees community organizations as relevant to institutional scholarship and expresses a hope that institutional researchers will pay more attention to these organizations' local activism.

---

[31] As discussed in Chapter Two, the community organization Pathways to Housing was instrumental in the institutionalization of Housing First. This process arguably began with Pathways' conceptualization of and application of Housing First in New York City, before research evidence and regulatory pressures began to legitimize the model and its underlying homeless assistance paradigm more broadly. This initial spark was critical; according to Nelson et al. (2021), the developers of the Pathways model provided new ideas that met the need for an evidence-based alternative to the prevailing staircase approach to homeless assistance. The authors consider this "conceptualizer-innovator" role as important to processes of policy change.

[32] Here, I am thinking of something similar to the creation of "proto-institutions": "new practices, technologies, and rules [that] are institutions in the making; they have the potential to become full-fledged institutions if social processes develop that entrench them and they are diffused" throughout an organizational field (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002, p. 283). For Lawrence et al., a proto-institution is most likely to develop in a "collaborative context" characterized by cooperative, interorganizational relationships that rely on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control. I suggest that a local organizational field can be such a context, within which community organizations can engage in the work of prototyping.

REFERENCES

Almandoz, J., Marquis, C., & Cheely, M. (2017). Drivers of community strength: An institutional logics perspective on geographical and affiliation-based communities. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (pp. 190–213). London: SAGE.

Barley, S. R., & Tolbert, P. S. (1997). Institutionalization and structuration: Studying the links between action and institution. *Organization Studies*, *18*(1), 93–117. http://doi.org/10.1177/017084069701800106

Baxter, E., & Hopper, K. (1982). The new mendicancy: Homeless in New York City. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 52*(3), 393–408.

Bess, K. D., Perkins, D. D., Cooper, D. G., & Jones, D. L. (2011). A heuristic framework for understanding the role of participatory decision making in community-based non-profits. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *47*(3-4), 236–252. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9396-8

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive Sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1991). Institutional origins and transformations: The case of American community colleges. In W. Powell & P. DiMaggio (Eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (pp. 337–360). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*(7), 513–531.

Burt, M. R., Aron, L. Y., Douglas, T., Valente, J., Lee, E., & Iwen, B. (1999). *Homelessness: Programs and the people they serve*. Retrieved from Urban Institute website: https://www.urban.org/ sites/default/files/publication/66286/310291-Homelessness-Programs-and-the-People-They-Serve-Findings-of-the-National-Survey-of-Homeless-Assistance-Providers-and-Clients.PDF

Burt, M. R., Pollack, D., Sosland, A., Mikelson, K. S., Drapa, E., Greenwalt, K., … Smith, R. (2002). *Evaluation of Continuums of Care for homeless people: Final report* (pp. 1–216). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research.

Burt, M., & Spellman, B. (2007). Changing homeless and mainstream service systems: Essential approaches to ending homelessness. In D. Dennis, G. Locke, & J. Khadduri (Eds.), *Toward understanding homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Busch-Geertsema, V. (2010). *The Finnish national programme to reduce long-term homelessness: Synthesis report*. Retrieved from E.U. European Commission website: https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=8181&langId=en

Busch-Geertsema, V. (2013). *Housing First Europe: Final report*. Retrieved from Habitat for Humanity website: https://www.habitat.hu/files/FinalReportHousingFirstEurope.pdf

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Cooper, A. (Correspondent). (2014, February 9). 100,000 Homes: Housing the homeless saves money? In A. Court (Producer), *60 Minutes*. New York: CBS News.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Culhane, D. (2008). The costs of homelessness: A perspective from the United States. *European Journal of Homelessness, 2,* 97–114.

Culhane, D. P., & Metraux, S. (2008). Rearranging the deck chairs or reallocating the lifeboats? Homelessness assistance and its alternatives. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *74*(1), 111–121. http://doi.org/10.1080/01944360701821618

DiMaggio, P. (1988). Interest and agency in institutional theory. In L. Zucker (Ed.), *Institutional patterns and culture* (pp. 3–22). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147. http://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Dordick, G. A. (2002). Recovering from homelessness: Determining the “quality of sobriety” in a transitional housing program. *Qualitative Sociology*, *25*(1), 7–32.Handler, J. F. (1990).

European Consensus Conference on Homelessness. (2010). *European Consensus Conference on Homelessness: Policy recommendations of the jury.* Retrieved from European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless website: https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2010/12/10/policy-rvv-jjkgkgk?bcParent=27

Fligstein, N., & McAdam, D. (2012). *A theory of fields*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Focus Strategies. (2016). *Nashville homeless system assessment report and recommendations*. Retrieved from Nashville-Davidson County website: https://www.nashville.gov/document/ID/fe83a3ae-55b7-4eb8-a558-92abb9e3ff53/Focus-Strategies-Nashville-Systems-Performance-Report

Garud, R., & Karnøe, P. (2003). Bricolage versus breakthrough: Distributed and embedded agency in technology entrepreneurship. *Research Policy*, *32*, 277–300.

Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory*. London: Macmillan Education LTD.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Giving Matters. (2019). Open Table of Nashville, Inc. Retrieved from https://givingmatters.civicore.com/opentablenashville

Gouldner, A. (1954). *Patterns of industrial bureaucracy*. New York: Free Press.

Greenwood, R., Díaz, A. M., Li, S. X., & Lorente, J. C. (2010). The multiplicity of institutional logics and the heterogeneity of organizational responses. *Organization Science*, *21*(2), 521–539. http://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1090.0453

Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Lawrence, T. B., & Meyer, R. E. (2017). Introduction: Into the fourth decade. In *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 1–23). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. http://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280669.n22

Gulcur, L., Stefancic, A., Shinn, M., Tsemberis, S., & Fischer, S. N. (2003). Housing, hospitalization, and cost outcomes for homeless individuals with psychiatric disabilities participating in continuum of care and housing first programmes. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *13*(2), 171–186. http://doi.org/10.1002/casp.723

Hallett, T., & Ventresca, M. J. (2006). Inhabited institutions: Social interactions and organizational forms in Gouldner's *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*. *Theory and Society*, *35*(2), 213–236. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-006-9003-z

Hampel, C. E., Lawrence, T. B., & Tracey, P. (2017). Institutional work: Taking stock and making it matter. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 558–590). London: SAGE

Publications Ltd. http://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280669.n22

Handler, J. F. (1990). “Constructing the political spectacle”: The interpretation of entitlements, legalization, and obligations in social welfare history. *Brooklyn Law Review*, *56*(899), 899–974.

Handler, J. F., & Hasenfeld, Y. (2006). *Blame welfare, ignore poverty and inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hargrave & Van de Ven. (2009). Institutional work as the creative embrace of contradiction. In T. B. Lawrence, R. Suddaby, & B. Leca (Eds.), *Institutional work: Actors and agency in institutional studies of organizations* (pp. 120–140). London: SAGE.

Hirsch, P. M. (1997). Sociology without social structure: Neoinstitutional theory meets brave new world. *American Journal of Sociology*, *102*(6), 1702–1723. http://doi.org/10.1086/231132

Hoffman, A. J. (1999). Institutional evolution and change: Environmentalism and the U.S. chemical industry. *The Academy of Management Journal*, *42*(4), 351–371. http://doi.org/10.2307/257008

Holm, P. (1995). The dynamics of institutionalization: Transformation processes in Norwegian fisheries. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *40*(3), 398–422. http://doi.org/10.2307/2393791

Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council, S. B. 1380 (2015–2016), Chapter 847 (Cal. Stat. 2016).

Homeless Hub. (2018). *Point-in-time count toolkit.* Retrieved from https://www.homelesshub.ca/toolkit/point-time-count-toolkit

Housing First Europe Hub. (2020). *Housing First in Europe.* Retrieved from

https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/what-is-housing-first/housing-first-in-europe/

Housing Trust Fund Project (2020a). *City housing trust funds 2020.* Retrieved from https://housingtrustfundproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/City-htfund-admin-and-date-2020.pdf

Housing Trust Fund Project (2020b). *County housing trust funds 2020.* Retrieved from https://housingtrustfundproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/County-htfund-admin-and-date-2020.pdf

How's Nashville. (2015a). *Our housing strategy.* Retrieved from http://web.archive.org/web/20150301234957/http:/howsnashville.org/housing-strategy/

How's Nashville. (2015b). *First management participation in How's Nashville* [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://web.archive.org/web/20150919023755/http://howsnashville.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Hows-Nashville-First-Management-Criteria.pdf

How's Nashville. (2015c). *FAQ for landlords.* Retrieved from http://web.archive.org/web/20150301234951/http://howsnashville.org/fqa-for-landlords/

Institute of Global Homelessness. (2017). *Understanding homelessness.* Retrieved from https://ighhub.org/understanding-homelessness

Jepperson, R. L. (1991). Institutions, institutional effects, and institutionalism. In W. W. Powell & P. J. DiMaggio (Eds.), *The New Institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 143–163). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Kuhn, R., & Culhane, D. P. (1998). Applying cluster analysis to test a typology of homelessness by pattern of shelter utilization: Results from the analysis of administrative data. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

Lampel, J., & Meyer, A. D. (2008). Field-configuring events as structuring mechanisms: How conferences, ceremonies, and trade shows constitute new technologies, industries, and markets. *Journal of Management Studies, 45,* 1025–1035.

Lancione, M., Stefanizzi, A., & Gaboardi, M. (2017). Passive adaptation or active engagement? The challenges of Housing First internationally and in the Italian case. *Housing Studies*, 1–18. http://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2017.1344200

Lawrence, T. B., & Dover, G. (2015). Place and institutional work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *60*(3), 371–410. http://doi.org/10.1177/0001839215589813

Lawrence, T.B., Hardy, C., & Phillips, N. (2002). Institutional effects of interorganizational collaboration: The emergence of proto-institutions. *The Academy of Management Journal, 45*(1), 281–290. http://doi.org/10.2307/3069297

Lawrence, T. B., Leca, B., & Zilber, T. B. (2013). Institutional work: Current research, new directions and overlooked issues. *Organization Studies*, *34*(8), 1023–1033. http://doi.org/10.1177/0170840613495305

Lawrence, T. B., & Suddaby, R. (2006). Institutions and institutional work. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. B. Lawrence, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organization studies* (2nd ed., pp. 215–254). London: SAGE.

Lawrence, T., Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. (2011). Institutional work: Refocusing institutional studies of organization. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *20*(1), 52–58. http://doi.org/10.1177/1056492610387222

Leopold, J., & Ho, H. (2015). *Evaluation of the 100,000 Homes Campaign*. Retrieved from Urban Institute website: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/44391/2000148-Evaluation-of-the-

100000-Homes-Campaign.pdf

Lewin, K., & Cartwright, D. (Ed.). (1951). *Field theory in social science*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Locke, G., Khadduri, J., & O'Hara, A. (2007). Housing models. In D. Dennis, G. Locke, & J. Khadduri (Eds.), *Toward understanding homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Lucretius. (1969/2001). *On the nature of things* (M. Ferguson Smith, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (Original work published ca. 55 B.C.E.)

Main, T. J. (2016). *Homelessness in New York City: Policymaking from Koch to de Blasio*. New York: New York University Press.

Mair, A. (1986). The homeless and the post-industrial city. *Political Geography Quarterly*, *5*(4), 351–368.

Marquis, C., & Battilana, J. (2009). Acting globally but thinking locally? The enduring influence of local communities on organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *29*, 283–302. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2009.06.001

Marquis, C., Glynn, M. A., & Davis, G. F. (2007). Community isomorphism and corporate social action. *The Academy of Management Review*, *32*(3), 925–945. http://doi.org/10.2307/20159342

Marquis, C., Lounsbury, M., & Greenwood, R. (2011). Introduction: Community as an institutional order and a type of organizing. In C. Marquis & R. Greenwood (Eds.), *Communities and organizations* (pp. xi–xxix). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Martí, I., & Mair, J. (2009). Bringing change into the lives of the poor: Entrepreneurship outside traditional boundaries. In T. B. Lawrence, R. Suddaby, & B. Leca (Eds.), *Institutional work* (pp. 92–119). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, J. L. (2003). What is field theory? *American Journal of Sociology*, *109*(1), 1–49. http://doi.org/10.1086/375201

Martin, J. L. (2011). *The explanation of social action.* New York City: Oxford University Press.

Mazza, S. (2019). East Nashville's longtime red-light district readies for transformation. *The Tennessean.* Retrieved from https://www.tennessean.com/story/money/2019/06/06/east-nashville-dickerson-pike-redevelopment-metro-planning/1332013001/

Mead, L. (1986). *Beyond entitlement: The social obligations of citizenship.* New York: Free Press.

Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency. (2017). *Continuum of Care (CoC) Governance Committee: Wednesday, April 12, 2017.* Retrieved from http://www.nashville-mdha.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CoC-Governance-Ctee-2017-Agenda-April-12-2.pdf

Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency. (2018). *CoC General Meeting minutes: July 19, 2018.* Retrieved from http://www.nashville-mdha.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CoC-General-Meeting-Minutes-2018-July-19-DRAFT.pdf

Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County. (2022). *Mayor John Cooper's 2022 State of the Metro Address.* Retrieved from https://www.nashville.gov/departments/mayor/news/mayor-john-coopers-2022-state-metro-address

Metropolitan Human Relations Commission. (2018). *Understanding Nashville's housing crisis: Part 1: "Affordable" for who?* Nashville, Tennessee: Metropolitan Human Relations Commission. Retrieved from https://filetransfer.nashville.gov/portals/0/sitecontent/Human%20Realations%20Commission/docs/publications/HousingGuide.pdf

Mey, H. (2015). *Field-theory: A study of its application in the social sciences* (2nd ed.; D. Scott, Trans.). New York: Routledge. (Original work published in 1972.)

Meyer, J., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *The American Journal of Sociology*, *83*(2), 340–363.

Mitchell, D. (2013). Homelessness, American style. *Urban Geography*, *32*(7), 933–956. http://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.32.7.933

Murray, C. (1984). *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950–1980.* New York: BasicBooks.

National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2017*). Ending chronic homelessness saves taxpayers money* [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Cost-Savings-from-PSH.pdf

National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2019). *Solutions.* Retrieved from https://endhomelessness.org/ending-homelessness/solutions/

Nashville Metropolitan Homelessness Commission. (2013a). *Progress report – January to June 2013.* Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20170217113616/https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/SocialServices/docs/hc/Reports/Progress%20Report_071613.pdf

Nashville Metropolitan Homelessness Commission. (2013b). *9:30 AM, July 12, 2013.* Retrieved from

https://web.archive.org/web/20170211142124/https://www.nashville.gov/document/ID/5b3492cf-8f04-4fa0-a7b9-68be8f272a34/Full-Commission-Minutes-July-12-2013

Nashville Metropolitan Homelessness Commission. (2013c). [Untitled] [PPTX file]. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20170211142124/https://www.nashville.gov/document/ID/5b3492cf-8f04-4fa0-a7b9-68be8f272a34/Full-Commission-Minutes-July-12-2013

Nashville Rescue Mission. (2022). *Life Recovery Program.* Retrieved from https://nashvillerescuemission.org/services/life-recovery-program/

Nashville Scene. (2015). *Best nonprofit.* Retrieved from https://local.nashvillescene.com/publication/best-of-nashville/2015/people-places-and-events/best-nonprofit

Nelson, G., Aubry, T., Estecahandy, P., Laval, C., O'Sullivan, E., Shinn, M., & Tsemberis, S. (2021). How social policy can influence homelessness policy: Experiences from Europe, Canada, and the United States. Part I – Problems and solutions. *European Journal of Homelessness, 15*(1), 131–157.

New York City Commission on the Homeless. (1992). *The way home: A new direction in social policy*. New York: The City of New York.

O'Flaherty, B. (1996). *Making room: The economics of homelessness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Oliver, C. (1992). The antecedents of deinstitutionalization. *Organization Studies*, *13*(4), 563–588. http://doi.org/10.1177/017084069201300403

100,000 Homes Campaign. (2010). *The 100,000 Homes Campaign playbook: A toolkit for finding and housing vulnerable people*. Retrieved from

https://web.archive.org/web/20150316170321/http://100khomes.org/sites/default/files/images/100khomes_Playbook_v1.0.pdf

Open Table Nashville. (2018). *Leadership.* Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20181230141343/http:/opentablenashville.org/leadership

Open Table Nashville. (2022a). *Open Table Nashville.* Retrieved from http://opentablenashville.org

Open Table Nashville. (2019b). *About.* Retrieved from http://opentablenashville.org/about

Open Table Nashville. (2022b). *Education.* Retrieved from http://opentablenashville.org/initiatives/education

Open Table Nashville. (2022c). *Advocacy.* Retrieved from http://opentablenashville.org/advocacy

Open Table Nashville. (2022d). *Street Outreach*. Retrieved from https://opentablenashville.org/street-outreach

Open Table Nashville. (2022e). *Education Sessions.* Retrieved from http://opentablenashville.org/education-sessions

Padgett, D. K., Henwood, B. F., & Tsemberis, S. J. (2016). *Housing First: Ending homelessness, transforming systems, and changing lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plazas, D. (2017). A dilemma for renters in Nashville. *The Tennessean.* Retrieved from https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2017/02/26/dilemma-renters-nashville/98267702/

Pleace, N., & Bretherton, J. (2012). *What do we mean by Housing First? Categorising and critically assessing the Housing First movement from a European perspective.* Slides presented at the European Network for Housing Research Conference, Lillehammer,

Norway. Retrieved from https://www.slideshare.net/FEANTSA/juha-kaakinen

Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. M. (2001). Collective identity and social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology, 27,* 283–305.

Quigley, W. P. (1998). Backwards into the future: How welfare changes in the millenium [sic] resemble English Poor Law of the Middle Ages. *Stanford Law & Policy Review, 9*(1), 101–114.

Rosenfeld, L. (1969). Newton's views on aether and gravitation. *Archive for History of Exact Sciences, 6*(1), 29–37.

Rossi, P. H. (1990). The old homeless and the new homelessness in historical perspective. *American Psychologist, 45*(8), 954–959.

Schatzki, T. R. (2001). Introduction: Practice theory. In T. R. Schatzki, K. K. Cetina, & E. V. Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (pp. 1–14). London: Routledge.

Schiff, J. W., & Schiff, R. A. L. (2014). Housing First: Paradigm or program? *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, *23*(2), 80–104. http://doi.org/10.1179/1573658X14Y.0000000007

Scott, W. R. (1995). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (1st edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Shinn, M. (2016). Methods for influencing social policy: The role of social experiments. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 58,* 239–244.

Shinn, M., Greer, A. L., Bainbridge, J., Kwon, J., & Zulderveen, S. (2013). Efficient targeting of homelessness prevention services for families. *American Journal of Public Health*,

103(S2), 324–331. http://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013

Shinn, M., & Khadduri, J. (2020). *In the midst of plenty: Homelessness and what to do about it.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Speer, P. W., & Christens, B. D. (2011). Local community organizing and change: Altering policy in the housing and community development system in Kansas City. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *22*(5), 414–427. http://doi.org/10.1002/casp.1132

Strauss, A. (1978a). A social world perspective. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction, 1*, 119–128.

Strauss, A. (1978b). *Negotiations: Varieties, contexts, processes, and social order.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Suddaby, R., & Viale, T. (2011). Professionals and field-level change: Institutional work and the professional project. *Current Sociology, 59,* 423–442.

Supportive Housing Program, Shelter Plus Care, and Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation; Single Room Occupancy Program for Homeless Individuals, 59 Fed. Reg. 24252 (May 10, 1994) (to be codified at 24 C.F.R. pts. 582, 583, & 882).

The Healing Trust. (2019). *2008 – 2019: Award finalists and winners.* Retrieved from https://www.healingtrust.org/beyond-grantmaking/awards/

Tolbert, P. S., & Zucker, L. G. (1983). Institutional sources of change in the formal structure of organizations: The diffusion of civil service reform, 1880-1935. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *28*(1), 22. http://doi.org/10.2307/2392383

Tsemberis, S. (2010). *Housing First*. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing.

Tsemberis, S., & Asmussen, S. (1999). From streets to homes: The Pathways to Housing Consumer Preference Supported Housing Model. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, *17*(1-

2), 113–131. http://doi.org/10.1300/J020v17n01_07

Tsemberis, S., & Eisenberg, R. F. (2000). Pathways to Housing: Supported housing for street-dwelling homeless individuals with psychiatric disabilities. *Psychiatric Services*, *51*(4), 487–493.

Tsemberis, S., Gulcur, L., & Nakae, M. (2004). Housing First, consumer choice, and harm reduction for homeless individuals with a dual diagnosis. *American Journal of Public Health*, *94*(4), 651–656.

U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. (1994). *Continuum of Care*. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books?id=SbBQdRS9IMoC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. (2015). *Coordinated Entry policy brief* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/4427/coordinated-entry-policy-brief/

U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. (2021a). *HUD 2021 Continuum of Care homeless assistance programs: Housing Inventory Count report: Nashville-Davidson County CoC* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_HIC_CoC_TN-504-2021_TN_2021.pdf

U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (2021). *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. Part 1: Point-in-Time estimates of homelessness* [PDF file]. https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2010). *Opening Doors: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. Retrieved from

http://web.archive.org/web/20101117081446/http://www.usich.gov/PDF/OpeningDoors_2010_FSPPreventEndHomeless.pdf

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2016). *Housing First checklist: Assessing projects and systems for a Housing First orientation* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Housing_First_Checklist_FINAL.pdf

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2017). *Key considerations for implementing emergency shelter within an effective crisis response system* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/emergency-shelter-key-considerations.pdf

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2018). *Home, together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Home-Together-Federal-Strategic-Plan-to-Prevent-and-End-Homelessness.pdf

U.S. Interagency Council on the Homeless. (1994). *Priority, Home! The federal plan to break the cycle of homelessness.* Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books?id=eSfC-UbC-yoC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Wax, A. L. (2000). Rethinking welfare rights: Reciprocity norms, reactive attitudes, and the political economy of welfare reform. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, *63*(1–2), 257–297.

Willse, C. (2015). *The value of homelessness*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Wooten, M. E., & Hoffman, A. J. (2017). Organizational fields: Past, present, and future. In R.

Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd ed., pp. 55–74). London: SAGE.

Zietsma, C., & McKnight, B. (2009). Building the iron cage: Institutional creation work in the context of competing proto-institutions. In T. B. Lawrence, R. Suddaby, & B. Leca (Eds.), *Institutional work* (pp. 143–177). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zucker, L. G. (1977). The role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. *American Sociological Review*, *42*(5), 726. http://doi.org/10.2307/2094862

APPENDIX A

Open Table Nashville (OTN) Activities List

- CoC General Meeting
- CoC committee meetings
- Speaking engagements
- Urban immersions
- Group volunteer activities
- Direct action (rallies, protests, etc.)
- Public meetings or events organized by community partners
- Annual Homeless Memorial
- Social media
- Media outreach
- Annual point-in-time count
- Resource shelters
- Fundraising
- Event organizing
- Advocacy & Policy Training
- General Volunteer Training
- Beginner Homeless Outreach Training
- Navigating the Resources 101 training
- Trauma-Informed De-Escalation Training
- Know Your Rights trainings
- Winter Outreach Training
- "Where to Turn in Nashville" resource guide
- Campsite defense
- Street outreach
- Resource navigation
- Housing navigation
- Winter canvassing

APPENDIX B

Homelessness Planning Council (HPC) Recommendations for COVID-19 Response

Nashville Davidson County Continuum of Care Homelessness Planning Council (HPC) Recommendations Related to On-going Policies for the COVID-19 Response for Those Experiencing Homelessness
May 27, 2020

Planning. The Homeless Planning Council (HPC), established by City ordinance in compliance with directives from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, exists to implement a coordinated approach to ending homelessness in Nashville. The Homelessness Impact Division (HID) in the Department of Social Services represents expertise within Metro government. Both should be part of immediate decision making and long-term planning.

- **Recommendation 1 (Planning)**: Include at least one representative of HID, one representative of the HPC, and one person with lived experience of homelessness at all future meetings/discussions regarding the Fairgrounds Shelter and Metro's ongoing COVID-19 response related to people experiencing homelessness.

Housing and Services: Research establishes that housing without barriers and with supportive services ends homelessness. Congregate housing spreads COVID-19.

- **Recommendation 2 (Housing):** Provide low barrier non-congregate shelter, such as hotel rooms, dormitories, etc. for the quarantine and care for people without homes who cannot identify an alternative shelter (to include an encampment).

- **Recommendation 3 (Services):** Use outreach workers and bring primary health care, behavioral/mental health, addiction services and treatment, case management, and support services delivered with harm reduction and trauma informed principles to all isolation/quarantine sites.

- **Recommendation 4 (Funding):** Request FEMA cost-sharing for sole occupancy housing and support services through the state's Master Disaster Declaration. Use federal CARES Act dollars for additional expenses.

- **Recommendation 5 (MDHA):** Request MDHA to give priority in allocating all housing resources (vouchers, public housing units, housing assistance) to people experiencing literal homelessness, especially those who are medically vulnerable or experiencing domestic violence.

Legal. The arrest and jailing of a person leaving the quarantine shelter bred mistrust among people experiencing homelessness.

- **Recommendation 6 (Legal).** Adopt a policy against criminal arrest for individuals who violate quarantine orders absent probable cause to believe they acted intentionally to expose another person to a risk of infection.

Equity. People of color who contract Covid-19 are dying at a rate nearly two times that of the general population.

- **Recommendation 7 (Equity)**. Engage stakeholders from communities of color to address COVID-19 disparities.