

# Intersections and Innovations

Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector



The Muttart Foundation



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ISBN: 978-1-897282-30-4

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# Acknowledgements

For far too long, Canada has lacked a comprehensive resource examining Canada's charitable sector. That has now ended.

The Muttart Foundation has spent many years focusing on building the capacity of charities in this country. The publication of this collection is another contribution to that effort. By understanding more about itself, the sector can continue to develop and find new ways to serve Canadians and those in need outside our nation.

The authors of these essays bring different perspectives on the role and inner workings of Canada's charities. Collectively, they bring an unprecedented insight into the work of organizations whose diversity is exceeded only by their desire to serve.

It is difficult to express adequate appreciation to Dr. Susan Phillips of Carleton University for her leadership of this project. She has been a source of encouragement, persuasion, cajoling and improving authors from across the country. Her efforts now bear fruit as we make this material available to students, academics, practitioners and others interested in the history and future of Canada's charities.

Amanda Mayer of the Lawson Foundation volunteered at the outset to be the administrative overlord of the project, keeping the editors and authors up to date and keeping track of various versions of articles. We are so grateful for her skills, her patience and her friendship.

None of this would have been possible, of course, without the work of authors, themselves academics and/or practitioners. They took time from their schedules to contribute to a resource we hope many will find valuable.

Lesley Fraser did an incredible job in editing the various chapters and ensuring consistency. And Don Myhre of P40 Communications has again brought his talent to the fore in providing an attractive design for a Muttart publication.

The work of all of these individuals has come together in this resource which we dedicate to all of those in, or interested in, Canada's charitable sector.

Malcolm Burrows, President

Bob Wyatt, Executive Director



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### This book may be cited as:

Phillips, Susan D. and Wyatt, Bob (Eds) (2021) *Intersections and Innovations: Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Muttart Foundation

### Individual Chapter Citations

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Phillips, Susan D. and Wyatt, Bob (2021) Intersections and Innovations: Change in Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector. In Susan D. Phillips and Bob Wyatt (Eds.), *Intersections and Innovations: Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Muttart Foundation

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## Part III Innovation and Intersections

### Community and Corporate Intersections

## Chapter 24

# Collaboration: When to Do It and How to Do It Right



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Few would disagree that the practice of governing in human services has changed in the past 30 years, from a context in which governments were more or less the dominant actors devising and implementing policy to one in which policy-making influence is more horizontally distributed among state and civil society agents. Although both governments and civil society organizations have for many years recognized the need to work in more collaborative ways, the increasing pressures to address complex public policy issues are raising the bar on the need to develop more effective means of coordinated, collective action. New forms of collaboration and governance patterns are emerging across a number of policy domains in Canada, including homelessness, child welfare, local economic development, immigrant settlement, urban Aboriginal issues, and even healthcare.

These new patterns of collaboration are in part the *product* of shifts in the philosophy of public management that began in the late 1980s that sought to reduce the lead role of the bureaucracy in managing public problems – a philosophy of governing known as “new public management” (NPM). But, they are also a *reaction against* NPM’s market-based principles that produced increased competition and fragmentation, which failed to solve complex issues and thus proved incompatible with the demands of modern governance (Conteh & Roberge, 2013). Over the past decade, NPM has given way to an approach dubbed “new public governance” (NPG) that legitimizes the role of nonprofits, civil society, and charitable groups in policy-making and its implementation, recognizing the need for their expertise and knowledge to address complex problems.

Although systematic data are hard to come by, various observers argue that the frequency of collaborative relationships between nonprofit organizations and government has been increasing



in recent years, often for the purposes of information- and resource-sharing across the sector, but also from being essentially mandated to do so by government funders to generate system coherence (Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Nichols & Doberstein, 2016; Proulx et al., 2014; Guo & Acar, 2005; La Piana, 2000). Indeed, a “collaborative advantage” is argued to have replaced the emphasis on competition that was at the centre of NPM, prompting both governments and nonprofits to create or facilitate spaces for collaborative policy-making and implementation to accomplish what any single level of government, ministry, or sector acting alone could not (Doberstein, 2016; Huxham, 1993). This presents opportunities as well as challenges for nonprofits and charitable organizations, as many lack the capacity to participate effectively. There are positive signs, however, of constructive engagement and collaboration in various social sectors in Canada.

In this context, this chapter asks the following questions: How can nonprofits and charities effectively participate in collaborations with each other and with governments? What are the pitfalls, and how can they be avoided? To answer these questions, this chapter draws on two cases from the homelessness sector in Calgary, Alberta, to illustrate the ways in which nonprofits are involved in government decision-making and policy implementation via collaborations. Based on the lessons learned from these cases, it identifies the potential benefits as well as challenges that nonprofits can anticipate as they contemplate opportunities to collaborate with each other and government, and in and across sectors that connect to their mandate. The central arguments advanced are that collaborations must be conceptualized and designed with intent, in particular matched to the goals they are to achieve, and that collaborations ought to start small, ideally among those with prior working experience and shared philosophy, and build out as necessary to achieve broader system change.

## Growth of Collaborations

Collaboration is the “process by which organizations with a stake in a problem seek a mutually determined solution [by pursuing] objectives they could not achieve working alone” (Sink, 1998: 1188). Genuine collaboration typically involves mutual planning among organizations; the deliberate alignment of goals, strategies, and activities; and the sharing of risks, as well as benefits (Fosler, 2002). Those who have systematically studied why nonprofits engage in collaborations suggest that they are typically motivated by a transformational purpose or desire to increase the broader system capacity by sharing resources (Gazley, 2008; Wood & Gray, 1991). Organizations that are involved in collaborations with each other or the government most often retain independent decision-making powers related to their mandate but also agree to common rules or practices aimed at a larger set of goals established by the partnership.

Most collaborations that involve nonprofits, however, particularly in the human services sector, do not come together by those organizations alone driving the process. Most are led by government agencies, and they are only weakly collaborative in the sense of truly shared authority or resources (Gazley, 2017). As a result, many government–nonprofit collaborations cannot be described as consisting of a partnership among equals. The two case studies in this chapter of collaborations in the homelessness sector in Calgary, Alberta, however, do meet the standard of true partnerships, in that shared decision-making and resource-pooling are central features.



The process of collaboration is often described as consisting of three stages: its formation (input variables), design (process variables), and implementation (outcomes) (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018; Thomson & Perry, 2006; Wood & Gray, 1991). Each stage is characterized by its own distinctive organizational properties, which need to be managed for the collaboration to work effectively (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). In the formation stage, interested potential partners assess the motivation and commitment of others to collaborate, as well as identify the anticipated benefits (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). The design phase focuses on the procedures involved in managing the partnership, which include defining the rules for working together, developing specific governance mechanisms, and agreeing on decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict-resolution processes (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Arya & Salk, 2006; Austin, 2000). The implementation phase focuses on assessing outcomes and measuring the extent to which collaborators have achieved the anticipated goals of the partnership, including the improvement of their clients' well-being, more efficient use of resources, changes in service programs, and program innovation (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018).

## Purported Benefits and Risks

Much of the literature on collaborations is positioned normatively in favour of them, emphasizing their ability to solve problems more effectively while allowing partners to learn from each other. A smaller, but growing, critique cautions that the benefits may not always materialize and, even if they do, that there are potential shortcomings or challenges to collaboration that organizations ought to anticipate.

In terms of the benefits that may accrue to nonprofits, particularly those in human service domains, the so-called collaborative advantage is among the most alluring. Advanced principally by Huxham (1993), the collaborative advantage is characterized by actions and achievements not possible by one agency or organization working alone. This has been described as a “synergistic effect” where partners observe greater effectiveness from their activities than they would gain acting alone (Kooiman, 2000: 150; Kouwenhoven, 1993: 120). Thus collaborations may help to address shared problems more effectively (Gazley & Brudney, 2007), possibly mitigate against disputes in the sector (Gray, 1989), and build a stronger sense of community (Snively & Tracy, 2000). And there are potential benefits to individual organizations, including cost savings, organizational learning, and the diffusion of risk (Bamford, Gomes-Casseres, & Robinson, 2003; Buono, 2003; Linden, 2002).

Gazley and Brudney (2007) surveyed hundreds of nonprofits in the US state of Georgia about their experiences with collaborations with each other and with governments; they found that positive outcomes are “frequent and shared by most organizations” (410). Among the top benefits noted by respondents were service improvements and increased citizen satisfaction and trust in government. Nonprofits see the benefits mainly as a tool for achieving their mission through influencing public policy, while for government the main benefits were to enable them to attain goals that they could not achieve on their own (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018: 11). Yet collaborations do not always bring the same or equal benefits to all participants, and multiple problems have been well documented (Peters, 1998). These problems can often be avoided, however, primarily by ensuring the mutuality of interests and opportunities for both parties to gain by the partnership.



The most significant potential problems of inter-organizational cooperative efforts are mission drift, the possible loss of institutional autonomy or public accountability, co-optation of actors, the difficulty in evaluating results (compared to a single organization's efforts), and the expenditure of considerable institutional time and resources in supporting collaborative activities (Gray, 2003; Shaw, 2003; Ferris, 1993; Grønbjerg, 1990). Gazley and Brudney (2007) also point to both the commitment of organizational resources to planning and maintaining inter-organizational relationships and the potential accountability challenges. Interestingly, when surveyed, nonprofit executives generally reveal stronger negativity toward inter-sectoral partnerships than do their counterparts in the public sector, who tend to view them overwhelmingly positively (Gazley & Brudney 2007). Proulx et al. (2014) also warn that collaborating organizations risk their reputations, lose some control over their activities, and are often involved in unequal exchanges where one partner must provide more resources than the other (see also Snavely & Tracy, 2002), which can undermine trust and jeopardize organizations' survival.

And not all collaborations are created equal, of course. Some collaborations are with just one other government or nonprofit organization; others have several or many collaborators. Gazley and Brudney (2007) found in their survey that respondents who have worked in larger and more complex partnerships are most likely to identify potential problems regarding the quality of the relationship or a loss of other resources. Finally, and critically important, is that many organizations will find their missions incompatible with government activities; indeed, some organizations are created in opposition to government policy. Assuming that all nonprofit organizations desire a partnership with government would mistake the historical role of the nonprofit sector more generally. There are other reasons, mandate questions aside, for a nonprofit to not engage with government in collaborative efforts, including the lack of capacity – both staff resources and time – and that various objectives of organizations are not compatible with partnering.

With the potential benefits and pitfalls of collaborative activity among nonprofits and governments elaborated, the cases of collaboration in homelessness services in Calgary can help illustrate the tensions inherent in this work and provide key lessons about collaborations in practice.



# Case Studies of Collaborations in Homelessness Services in Calgary, Alberta

The Government of Canada's Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy is premised on organizations forming collaborations (of varying size and complexity) in order to obtain funding from the federally funded, but community-administered, program. Further, the program structurally mandates the creation, in each eligible city and community, of a "community advisory board" (CAB), which typically consists of civil society and nonprofit leadership to devise a locally defined homelessness strategy (though within constraints set by the Government of Canada). The justification for the inclusion of civil society actors in the governance of this program is that generally they are more connected to the issues on the ground than public servants, and can thus offer a diversity of lived experience, information, interpretations, priorities, and perspectives about what works and is worthwhile in terms of policy (Head, 2008; Edelenbos & Klijn, 2006). The issue of homelessness in Canada in recent years has thus been nearly entirely subsumed by rhetoric (and government mandates) surrounding collaboration among the many nonprofit organizations that receive government and charitable funds to provide housing and services.

This chapter zooms in on two examples of collaboration from Calgary, one stemming from top-down, government-mandated collaboration and the second a bottom-up process of nonprofits voluntarily working together. This research is documented in full in Doberstein (2016), with comparative analysis of similar collaborations in Vancouver and Toronto, which involved extended participant observation of collaborative activities and 70 interviews with key players in nonprofit and government agencies from 2011 to 2015.

The Calgary Homeless Foundation, which is the delegated authority for federal and provincial funding in the city, requires collaboration among housing providers to facilitate a system of coordinated access for those seeking subsidized housing. The Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre (SORCe) emerged from the efforts of nonprofits themselves to coordinate the activity of the various agencies that provide an array of services associated with housing needs, such as drop-in centres, employment services, detox programs, and counselling. Both illustrate the demonstrable benefits that arise from collaborative efforts, in direct contrast to what was transpiring prior to their existence, but also that nonprofit participants face some distinct challenges navigating these efforts.

## Case Study: Coordinated Access and Assessment (CAA)

Calgary was one of the first major cities in Canada to institutionalize a comprehensive, coordinated system of assessment and access to housing, though it was the last among cities in Alberta, in part because of the larger scale of homelessness and complexity in Calgary. As a central part of the strategy around systems-planning involving sectors connected to homelessness, the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) devised and implemented a system of coordinated access and assessment (CAA) for subsidized and supportive housing in late



2013. The purpose of CAA is “to facilitate a standardized process of assessment and centralized point of entry to the Housing First programs to address homelessness in Calgary” (CHF, 2013). It is designed as a triaging model to meet the needs of the most vulnerable first, as well as a diversion mechanism to reduce unnecessary new entries in the homelessness system.

A CAA system aims to solve a number of problems in the housing and homelessness service sector. The first problem is that it is very difficult to measure how clients are being served across the various housing programs in the city without a mechanism to track their experience. Without tracking data from all housing and service providers, there was limited accountability among agencies for the programs they offer. The second problem that CAA aims to solve is the temptation among agencies to “skim the cream,” selecting clients who are less vulnerable and thus more easily served, leaving the most chronically homeless underserved. Third, in the absence of CAA – when agencies have their own assessment procedures and independent waitlists – there is limited information on what housing programs and services the client has used in the past that were perhaps not appropriate for their experience; this is inefficient for both the clients and the agencies. CAA attempts to standardize data collection for those seeking housing to better match acuity and needs to specific housing programs, thus helping people in desperate need of housing and support services to move successfully through the system faster (CHF, 2013).

CAA has been implemented in Calgary under the leadership of the CHF, which by virtue of its funder status (mainly from provincial and federal spending programs, and a smaller portion from charitable funds) is able to shift the behaviour of agencies that receive their funds for Housing First programs. All CHF-funded agencies that offer housing must participate in CAA as part of their service contracts. While there was consultation on implementation, the decision to move toward CAA was controversial among some segments of the sector, in part because it demands significant time investment from agencies and its success depends entirely on actual housing units being available in which to place clients – historically a key limiting factor in big cities.<sup>1</sup> That said, a system of coordinated access and assessment was an objective specified in the original 10-year plan from the CHF, published in 2008, beginning first with agencies shifting to a standardized “homeless management information system” (HMIS) in 2011, with the clearly defined goal to leverage HMIS to move toward coordinated intake and assessment in Phase 2, a key community-derived priority (CHF, 2011).

CAA hinges on the use of standardized means to assess the acuity of clients seeking housing, and for this CHF demands that agencies use a standard assessment tool to collect self-reported information on the client regarding their needs and vulnerabilities – the same tool in use in Toronto. The focus is on serving those with the most acute needs first and accurately matching the client to appropriate resources. A client must complete an assessment to be entered into consideration by one of the three placement committees of CAA – adults, youth, and family – which meet weekly to place clients in available housing programs. The placement committees are co-chaired by a CAA coordinator funded by CHF and a CHF representative and are principally constituted by staff representatives from the relevant nonprofit housing agencies funded by CHF; they decide collectively who among the client list will be matched to available and appropriate housing units and program spots. Thus, at the program level, there are small collaboratives of agencies that collectively problem-solve and deliberate over the appropriate placement of clients in housing programs.



What are the key lessons that have emerged from this collaboration, both the benefits and pitfalls experienced by those involved? One key lesson is that resistance to government-mandated collaboration among nonprofit agencies delivering services can be mitigated by providing agencies latitude to shape the nature of the collaboration, and retaining a key decision-making role for them within it. This not only signals to nonprofits that the funders take their expertise and experience seriously, but also brings them to the table to realize spillover benefits of collaboration. For example, the added benefit of CAA, according to one nonprofit respondent I interviewed, is clear: “All the players trying to end homelessness who offer housing sit at the same table and look at this database and work together.”<sup>2</sup> Placement committees represent not only an opportunity to place clients in appropriate housing, but also by meeting weekly, agencies are able to maintain a real-time database of the status of the clients waiting for housing and routinely explore the opportunities outside of the CAA system for housing and services.

My observations of the placement committees in action in 2015 confirmed that agencies are open to resource exchange and partnerships to fit a client’s needs, demonstrating an impressive problem-solving dynamic in the context of extraordinarily scarce resources. When interviewed, most involved agencies reported efficiency gains with respect to assessment and spoke positively about the more “objective” and accountable method by which clients are placed into housing. It is important to understand as well that the information collected on clients is used not just for placement. It is also used to understand where the gaps in the system are (in a quantifiable, non-anecdotal way), which can be used to demonstrate investment need to senior levels of government. Most involved with CAA would agree with the sentiment offered by one respondent: “I think it [does] do a better job of identifying gaps in services to the homeless population.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite these key lessons emerging from interviewing many of those involved, there remain a number of limitations to this type of collaboration that serve lessons for nonprofits. The first is that this is fundamentally collaborative *coordination* of existing services, and while this may provide efficiency gains at the margins, it cannot itself solve problems like homelessness that are fundamentally shaped by scarce resources. That is, CAA merely generates a single, long list of housing waitlists, which is ineffective without any major new investments in actual housing units. In the four placement committee meetings I observed, there were no more than a handful of openings in each – and *very* long lists of clients in need – and in one of the meetings there were no housing openings into which to place a client. This dynamic was also observed by Norman and Pauly (2016), who evaluated the Centralized Access to Supported Housing (CASH) program in Victoria, BC. In these cases, the sophistication of the CAA process is undermined by the lack of capacity in the social housing system. This can generate frustration among nonprofit participants if their expectations of CAA are misaligned with its core purpose, which is to systematize a process of housing placement previously conducted independently by each agency.

Yet on the other hand, another respondent in Calgary says, “At first I was really against [CAA]. Now I find it’s nice in the sense that when somebody’s homeless you don’t have to call 10 different programs to try to get them on a waitlist. So there’s a lot less of that, making calls and checking in all the time,” which speaks to the efficiency gains but not the outcome gains.<sup>4</sup> CHF was not surprised that CAA implementation was met nearly instantly with a lack of affordable- and supportive-housing vacancies and resistance from some community partners, despite what



some in the community suggest. In early CAA planning documents, CHF officials were clear that “this will not solve the bottleneck issue (more need for housing than there is space). However, this will help to manage waitlists, triage as best we can, identify gaps, information to advocate for more funding, lack of housing in the city” (CHF, 2013).

So perhaps the most important lesson, particularly for funder-convened collaborations among nonprofits, is that there must be clarity on the purpose of the collaboration and efforts to persuade and demonstrate to nonprofits that there will be collective and individual agency benefits to joint work.

## Case Study: Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre (SORCe)

SORCe (previously abbreviated as SCORCe) launched in June 2013 in Calgary and has a different origin story from CAA in that it was driven by the nonprofit agencies themselves. In response to an expansive, though largely uncoordinated, set of homeless-serving agencies in Calgary, in 2012 leaders within organizations and agencies dealing with the homeless began to brainstorm how the system could be better coordinated at the organizational level. While the CAA system, discussed earlier, coordinates housing programs, there was no mechanism to coordinate the activity of all the other agencies that provide an array of services associated with housing needs such as drop-in centres, employment services, detox programs, counselling, and the like. Emerging from these discussions was the recognition that “an over-arching mechanism was needed to coordinate the efforts of all the agencies. This grassroots, community, collaborative approach to mobilizing existing resources and relationships was SCORCe” (SORCe, 2014).

SORCe, located in the downtown core of Calgary, serves as a centralized referral point to programs and services offered in the community. While it operates a centralized site of referral, it is the product of grassroots organizing and collaboration among agencies, rather than a top-down forced marriage by a senior government or CHF. SORCe is unique because it has no external funding; its (prime real estate) institutional space is donated by the Calgary Police Service (CPS) out of the CPS’s own budget and is staffed, remarkably, by a rotating set of employees from 17 homeless-serving agencies. The conception of SORCe was, perhaps surprisingly, driven by the CPS, and in particular Inspector Curtis Olson, under the leadership of former police chief Rick Hanson. CPS and city bylaw enforcement officers grew increasingly frustrated by the ineffectiveness of dealing with the homeless population via ticketing and enforcement and “wished we could have somewhere we could take them and introduce them to people that might be able to help them.”<sup>5</sup> Hanson received praise from a number of respondents interviewed; they cited major shifts in the past few years from the CPS in terms of their interactions with homeless people. One remarked that “[Hanson] does not want his officers dealing with people who are sick, who have addictions and mental health and need to be connected with resources and supports and not arrested and cycling in and out of jail, which is fantastic.”<sup>6</sup> And while there certainly remain officers who prefer traditional enforcement, and not acting as brokers for services, the thinking of Chief Hanson and Inspector Olson has filtered down to the ground level. For example, rather than issue a ticket for failing to pay the transit fare, transit police may talk with the person, learn they have just been evicted and have nowhere to go, and take them to SORCe so they can connect to services.



The philosophy behind SORCe represents a conceptual shift from a “program-centred” thinking to a “client-centred” thinking, which means that “individuals seeking services are not ‘your client’ and ‘my client’ [but] it’s everybody’s client who we’re trying to find what [program] is the best fit [for].”<sup>7</sup> The idea is to provide a single point of access for individuals in need, staffed by individuals specially trained with knowledge of the service landscape to make appropriate referrals that will result in a simpler experience for the client and faster access to services. The initial step for most individuals upon their arrival at SORCe is an assessment of need, which may proceed to a formal assessment – the mechanism of CAA to receive housing funded by CHF. Also, an individual may receive targeted referrals to non-CHF housing opportunities, mental health and addiction treatment, employment and training, as well as transportation as required. In some cases, staff working at SORCe will be able to begin service enrollment immediately and provide transport, rather than rely on a cold referral and hope the person goes to the agency down the road.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, the latest year for which data are publicly available, SORCe helped 4,955 clients and in 2017 received a Community Justice Award from the Alberta Justice and Solicitor General, who cited SORCe as “an innovative collaboration of community-based organizations working together to support vulnerable Calgarians ... [and] on the front line of ending homelessness in Calgary” (Alberta Justice and Solicitor General, 2017: 14).

SORCe thus represents an innovative, grassroots effort to collaborate at the organizational level to generate more system cohesion and coordination. But there are challenges associated with this type of collaboration. First, this was driven by an unlikely policy entrepreneur (the former police chief) who had unique outside perspective of the work of the sector and was in a position to be a first-mover in terms of broader change, which garnered trust among those in the sector. As such, it is not clear that this collaboration would have occurred in the absence of critical convening leadership. It is apparent when interviewing SORCe-participating agencies that the police, bylaw, and transit enforcement changes would need to come in concert with systemic changes to service coordination to assist them. Thus, even so-called bottom-up collaboratives need conveners who enjoy broad respect in the sector – and especially in this case, a commitment of convening resources in the location of SORCe – to get up and running.

Second, practically speaking, with no external funding SORCe’s hours of operation are limited to regular working hours from Monday to Friday, which, while convenient for staff, may not align with homeless people’s service needs and patterns.<sup>9</sup> This is a challenge to an unfunded collaboration because extending or modifying these service hours is very difficult, as it involves diverting even more staff resources away from previously agency-specific work. Few agencies may be able to justify this. Also, SORCe primarily serves to coordinate existing services, which means that it is inherently limited by the capacity of the system, without any independent mechanism to initiate broader change, much like CAA. Although this last criticism is somewhat belied by a recent expansion at SORCe to add a 27-person mental health team in the same location, funded by Alberta Health Services, after demonstrating that “clients at SCORCe will often be referred to a psychiatrist or a physician but for a variety of reasons don’t follow through with treatment,” and thus more collaborative partners were needed to close the gap in services for the target population.<sup>10</sup>

All that said, it is an important example of cooperation that aims to operate a central window of entry to services – and a good reminder, despite the challenges associated with it, that a program or approach should not be condemned if it fails to solve the homelessness problem wholly on its own.



# What Nonprofits Need to Know about Collaborations

Despite the enthusiasm for the concept of “collaborative advantage” in the literature and in professional practice, this advantage is too often not realized because of the complexities of managing collaborative efforts (Huxham, 1993). Nonprofits contemplating engaging in partnership or collaborative efforts with each other or government must, on one hand, be convinced that collaboration is essential to the fundamental objectives of their work. On the other hand, they need to come into these efforts with a clear understanding of the challenges of doing this kind of work successfully.

There are several takeaway messages from the literature and these two case studies of homeless-serving agencies in Calgary. The first is that it is critical that trust among agencies and government is cultivated before (and then, of course, during) collaborations. In the case of Calgary, prior to the development of these concrete collaborations among agencies in 2013, the community had been incrementally organizing toward system approaches for five years prior, with sustained efforts to bring the nonprofit community together to identify policy priorities, and even prior to that, the Government of Canada’s Reaching Home strategy had been structurally uniting these groups toward a collaborative orientation with regard to planning. Prior joint experience is an essential part of successful future concrete collaborations, and thus nonprofits should start with small efforts to exchange resources and build out from there (Lambright, Mischen, & Laramee, 2010). This can be done through a process of socialization, which includes workshops, collaborative work, and conferences (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018). In these settings, staff and leadership are exposed to other agencies, begin to think about new goals and work procedures, and better understand and articulate their role in a broader system. With scarce and precarious funding from government and charitable foundations, nonprofit service agencies exist in a competitive environment, so it takes time and effort to reposition agencies as partners toward the same goal, rather than competitors. The decision to cooperate with others is both cognitive and psychological, and much research suggests that trust levels are likely to be shaped by prior experiences (Gazley, 2008; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Once nonprofit leadership and staff understand the potential that lies in collaboration, blurring boundaries and giving up autonomy might not seem so intimidating (Proulx et al., 2014).

The second takeaway is that the size of the collaboration must also be thoughtfully constructed and only as large as is needed to achieve the objectives of the partnership. SORCe, for example, started with the most prominent 14 housing and service agencies in Calgary. After the first few years of activity, additional agencies joined the collaborative, and more are expected in the future, allowing the group to grow incrementally and as need reveals. For example, recall that a large mental health team has now joined the collaborative in direct response to the effects of that missing link in the service system SORCe was offering. If the collaborative had started at more than 30 partners, it almost certainly would have faced more difficulty than with an incremental ratcheting up of the scope of their activity. Observers of collaborations caution that the size and nature of the partnership can influence its outcomes, and while larger and more complex partnerships can be harder to manage, they can bring essential institutional resources, and even political support (Gazley, 2010). Thus it is a delicate



balance between constructing an appropriately sized collaboration for the goals of the partnership and including a broader set of actors to effect larger systems of change, but the focus in the early days ought to be to bring together nonprofits and actors with a history of working together and shared philosophies and mandates.

Third, agencies have to be prepared to adjust elements of their activities in order to make the collaboration more than simply an aggregation of their individual efforts. The promise of the collaborative advantage is achieving goals not possible without the collaboration. But this can be difficult for some agencies with long histories and clearly established mandates and practices. One participant from Calgary's CAA collaborative suggested that with CAA, "you have to be willing to say doing better means that you [previously] did something that wasn't as good ... and that you have to let go of what [you were] doing." This implies putting individual brand or reputation aside in this context. But it can also mean sharing your best practice or innovation that others are unfamiliar with (or may reject based on ignorance or skepticism). Dressler (2016), who also studied Calgary's CAA, noted that there is a "delicate balance of program autonomy and collective decision making that must be maintained to ensure the active and willing participation and engagement of program staff" (25). And even in a similar collaborative effort in Victoria, participants claimed that "it's created a much-improved relationship between housing providers because they're all part of the selection process" and that "the relationship between the housing providers and the [funding] health authority has strengthened" (Norman & Pauly, 2016: 46).



# Conclusion

Human services are requiring greater collaboration among nonprofits and government. This is especially true in the context of homelessness, in part because it is a classic case of a field in which nonprofits have historically played a dominant role in service provision but are increasingly involved with government in relationships and collaborations that extend far beyond their traditional contractual relationships and into policy development, system planning, and coordination. The two Calgary cases – coordinated access and assessment (CAA) and Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre (SORCe) – reveal that collaborations are demanding on the state and civil society. And while they can at times be frustrating for those involved and require careful design and management, it is also clear that traditional institutions of policy-making, driven by traditional government contractual relationships alone, are simply not up to the task of ending homelessness.

The cases provide several important lessons for nonprofits regarding what to expect and manage when devising or participating in a collaborative effort as informed by the experiences in Calgary. First, the convener of collaborations, whether it is a government or a civil society actor, must provide clarity on the purpose of the collaboration and make efforts to persuade and demonstrate to nonprofits that there will be collective and individual agency benefits to joint work. The second lesson is the importance of cultivating trust from past experience, starting small and building to an ideal size, depending on objectives. And third, nonprofits must be prepared to change some long-established practices toward the pursuit of system-wide, not just organizational, goals.

While homelessness was examined in the chapter, there are a growing number of policy domains in Canada characterized by such collaborative patterns, including child welfare, local economic development, immigrant settlement, urban Indigenous issues, and even healthcare, each with their own nonprofit histories, dynamics, and pressures, that will shape how collaborations in those sectors develop and thrive.



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# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Confidential interview, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Confidential interview, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Confidential interview, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Confidential interview, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Jody St. Pierre, personal interview, April 25, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Confidential interview, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> The Calgary Public Library has also partnered with SORCe to create a new “restricted” library card that can be used by anyone without a fixed address, allowing such individuals access to computers, as well as training programs and workshops that the library offers free of charge, like resumé writing, interviewing skills, and budgeting (confidential interview, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Confidential interview, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> “Calgary police host new addictions clinic for city’s homeless.” CBC News. May 31, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-homeless-addictions-clinic-1.4138754>



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