The federal government has an important role to play in homelessness governance, but it has not always lived up to its responsibilities. The first section of this chapter reviews federal involvement in homelessness governance, beginning in 1999, the year the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) was launched. The NHI was a federal program that partnered with local groups to develop emergency responses to homelessness, though the program operated differently in Quebec, where the province has been involved since the beginning. This federal involvement came only a few years after it made significant cuts to social spending, which included eliminating investments in new social housing developments, cuts that are widely said to have contributed directly to a rise in homelessness across the country (Gaetz 2010). The NHI was renamed the HPS (Homelessness Partnering Strategy) in 2007. For the first fifteen years after 1999, it was renewed continually, but only for one- to three-year periods, and local groups were given significant discretion regarding how to use the funding. Then, in 2014, the federal government extended the program for five years while also requiring that 65 per cent of the funding received by big cities be spent on Housing First programs.

In 2017 the federal government introduced a ten-year National Housing Strategy (NHS) and made the fight against homelessness a core part of it. In so doing, it linked homelessness directly with housing for the first time. The NHS increased investments in Reaching Home (the new version of the HPS, which began in 2019); made funding available for ten years; allowed that funding to be spent on a wide variety of interventions, including temporary and permanent housing; and was coupled with significant investments in new housing developments, portable rent allowances, and investments to improve, protect, and renovate existing housing stock. When COVID-19 hit, the federal government responded by increasing funding for the homeless-serving system,
enabling that funding to be used more flexibly, and launching a new rapid housing initiative to allow for quick development of new housing.

The evolving federal involvement in homelessness did not result from a change in institutions or resources; rather, it was powerfully driven by ideas, especially regarding the nature of homelessness. Though the NHI/HPS has been renewed continuously since 1999, the federal government’s involvement in homelessness governance was minimal for nearly twenty years, reflecting its understanding of homelessness as an emergency and as a largely individual and short-term problem as opposed to a structural one. This narrow definition of homelessness also shaped the federal government’s interactions with other actors, notably its direct relationships with local groups; provincial governments were left out of NHI/HPS governance, with the exception of Quebec. The provinces have authority over important structures such as health, housing, and income support; they were not included in federal homelessness initiatives for two decades because homelessness was not understood to be a structural problem. The federal government’s understanding of homelessness has since evolved, away from individual-level causes toward more systemic and structural ones, and includes an acknowledgment of the colonial roots of homelessness for Indigenous people. As a result, its involvement has increased and its interactions with other groups have changed as well: more, longer-term funding has been made available; interactions with provincial governments have increased; and homelessness and housing are linked.

The second section of this chapter reviews the CAEH’s involvement in homelessness governance. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness emerged on the national scene in 2012 with two principal objectives: to support communities in their fight against homelessness; and to steer the federal government toward particular solutions to homelessness, such as Housing First (explained below). The CAEH uses various strategies to influence and participate in policy, including holding well-attended annual national conferences to allow for regular interactions among policy-makers and stakeholders, conducting email campaigns and engaging in sophisticated and targeted lobbying. In mid-2021, the CAEH launched a national non-partisan campaign called Vote Housing. Aimed at all parties during 2021 federal election, the CAEH worked closely with allies and community groups across the country to make housing a ballot box issue, with the ultimate goal of using the pandemic recovery as an opportunity to fix the housing affordability crisis and end homelessness once and for all.

The CAEH’s involvement in homelessness governance has been driven largely by its understanding of homelessness, and to the extent
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that its involvement and interactions with other groups have changed, it has been as a result of the evolution of this idea. As with the federal government, there has been considerable evolution in how key officials with the CAEH understand homelessness – there has been a shift in thinking away from individual causes toward an understanding that structures and systems are central. Partly because of the influence of the CAEH on the national level, we see ideational convergence on the national level when it comes to how homelessness is understood. Drawing on primary sources, interviews with key actors, and several years attending and observing CAEH annual conferences, this chapter traces and explains the involvement of these national actors in homelessness.

The Federal Role in Homelessness

The federal government’s role in homelessness governance can be broken into three periods: 1999–2014, when its involvement was minimal and it granted considerable discretion to the local level; 2014–19, years in which its involvement remained minimal, but it limited the control previously exercised at the local level, particularly in big cities; and post-2019, which has seen the federal government taking a more interventionist and collaborative leadership role. The first era of the federal government’s involvement in homelessness began in 1999, following intense advocacy efforts by groups across the country, particularly in Toronto (Crowe 2019; Layton 2008; S. Scott 2012). This involvement came on the heels of a series of high-impact decisions by Progressive Conservative and Liberal federal governments to cut investments in housing, transfer the administration of existing housing units to the provinces, and cut social funding transfer payments to the provinces (which in turn often made cuts to their own housing expenditures and social assistance) (see Gaetz 2010).

While Canada was not historically a leader in housing policy by any stretch, the federal government, working together with and sometimes in competition with the provinces, had consistently built social housing since the end of the Second World War, at times up to 25,000 units per year (Hulchanski et al. 2009). This all came to an abrupt end in the mid-1990s when the federal government announced that it would no longer fund social housing developments. Jeanne Wolfe writes that “it was never imagined that a system that had taken 50 years to build-up could be dismantled so rapidly” (Wolfe 1998, 131). Yet it was. The cuts to housing developments and transfer of housing administration to the provinces, eight out of ten of which also cut their housing policies, have generally been seen as a turning point in the history of homelessness.
in Canada (Gaetz 2010), given that the number of people experiencing homelessness began to rise across the country in the 1990s and 2000s.

By the late 1990s, “there was widespread agreement that homelessness had reached intolerable proportions, especially in Canadian cities” (Leo 2006, 501). Several events contributed to this crisis situation. These included the tragic and preventable deaths of three homeless men – Eugene Upper, Irwin Anderson, and Mirsalah-Aldin Kompani – on the streets of Toronto during the winter of 1996. This led to changes in local responses to homelessness and drove advocates to put more pressure on senior governments to engage (Crowe 2018). And in 1998, influential Toronto activists on the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, including then Toronto city councillor Jack Layton, worked with big city mayors across the country to declare homelessness a disaster (Layton 2008). Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman was an unlikely leader in this effort (see chapter 7). Led by Lastman, big city mayors across the country agreed to declare homelessness a national disaster. While this declaration by big city mayors did not unlock any emergency funding – which such announcements sometimes do – it drew the media’s attention and fuelled a wave of advocacy for more effective responses to meet the needs of the growing number of people who found themselves without housing (Suttor 2016).

Local groups responded to the homelessness crisis as well as they could, and together with advocates they pressured the federal government for solutions. Advocacy was taking place on the streets, but concerted efforts were taking place behind closed doors as well, including in then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s office. A City of Toronto bureaucrat recalled efforts to get the federal government engaged: “[Anne] Golden, with myself and others, went and met with social policy advisers in the Prime Minister’s Office. These connections were happening behind the scenes” (personal interview 2014). Another City of Toronto actor recalled stressing the urgency of the situation during a meeting with the Prime Minister’s Office: “We said, ‘You have got to do something’” (personal interview 2014). In response to these increasing pressures from advocates and sympathetic insiders in the PMO (Klodawsky and Evans 2014), the federal government appointed a Minister Responsible for Homelessness, the late Claudette Bradshaw, in the late 1990s.

In 1998, Minister Bradshaw embarked on a cross-country tour to learn more about homelessness. This tour would inform her understanding of homelessness and shape the involvement of the federal government and its interactions with other actors for decades to come. As noted earlier, advocates across the country were declaring that homelessness had reached crisis levels, thus defining the problem in emergency
terms. Christopher Leo writes that “by the time the federal government took note of the problem, it was defined, in the public mind as well as in the minds of government officials, as an urban crisis requiring an emergency response” (Leo 2006, 501). Fran Klodawsky and Leonore Evans note that out of this context came an important decision regarding the program design: “The tour convinced Bradshaw of ... a focus on the ‘absolute homeless,’ those living on the streets and in the emergency shelters, and thus on homelessness in the country’s largest cities” (Klodawsky and Evans 2014, 86).

It is no exaggeration to say that homelessness had become a life-or-death situation in many big cities, and not just in the cold of the winter months; the heat of the summer can be deadly as well (Withers 2021). Those living on the streets were at risk, and indeed some had died. The anger generated by those deaths led some advocates to push for an immediate response to the emergency of homelessness. But it also – inadvertently perhaps, for advocates also sought housing-based solutions – allowed the federal government to overlook the structural and political causes of homelessness and to bypass deeper reforms to the housing system and the broader social safety net. Guided by assumptions that homelessness was an individual-level emergency, the National Homelessness Initiative developed by the federal government prioritized relief for people experiencing chronic homelessness, most of whom were living on the streets or in emergency shelters. This led to the expansion and improvement of that emergency system, especially shelters. The long-term hope, of course, was for people to find housing of their own, but the program’s initial impulse was to respond to the crisis as it had been defined, by finding ways for the local homeless-serving system to better meet emergency needs and prevent future deaths.

For many advocates who espoused a more structural definition, it was clear early on that the federal government’s homelessness initiative would be separate from housing initiatives and, indeed, that the federal government would continue to limit its involvement in the development of social or affordable housing. This absence of housing in the federal response to homelessness infuriated advocates to no end, who believed homelessness resulted from cuts to housing policy in the first place. Michael Shapcott, a Toronto-based advocate with the TDRC at the time, recalls frustrating interactions with Bradshaw as she was on the cross-country tour:

The fiction they kept promoting was that homelessness had nothing to do with housing. That it was the result of personal pathology, people became homeless because they are alcoholics, they are crazy ... [Federal officials]
said “We are not going to provide any funding for housing because there is no credible research that demonstrates that a lack of housing causes homelessness.” It was an astonishing position to take. Minister Bradshaw went across the country to these big community forums. I went to almost half of them myself … She was a smart person, she knew a lot better. I would say “What are you going to do about housing?” and she would say “Oh Michael, you know that housing has nothing to do with homelessness.” And of course, everyone in the room would go “Oh that is so stupid!!!” (personal interview 2014)

Informed by this narrow, individualized, emergency-based definition, the governance structure of the NHI would bypass provinces outside of Quebec and instead involve local actors in the development of solutions. Meeting with service providers and advocates, Bradshaw came to appreciate the expertise of local groups, and she committed to designing a federal homelessness response that would allow them “a lead role in planning, deciding on and administering any funds that would be made available” (Klodawsky and Evans 2014, 86). This federal-level recognition of the value of local expertise is significant, and the strong involvement of local groups in the planning process is one of the reasons the NHI is sometimes seen as an early example of place-based policy-making (Bradford 2014). But it also let the provinces, and broader structural reform, off the hook.

In other words, ideas about the nature of homelessness shaped ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection: homelessness was not understood to be a structural problem requiring the social policy might of the provinces, but rather as a problem requiring urgent alleviation and thus only the expertise and comparatively limited capacity of local service providers. Because it understood homelessness narrowly and in emergency terms, the federal government concluded that only emergency solutions to homelessness were required, solutions that could be developed on a short-term basis by local groups aided with federal funding. This understanding and the direct federal–local relationship would remain standard for nearly two decades.

Following her consultations across the country, Bradshaw introduced the National Homelessness Initiative, a cautious short-term homelessness-fighting program focused mainly on individual-level interventions. The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), an important component of the NHI, was effectively a transfer of $305 million over three years to community-driven efforts to alleviate or prevent homelessness. Most of this funding was for the ten largest cities in the country, with a small portion going to smaller communities.
Through the NHI, each community was allocated a specific amount of funding. While communities had control over the development of plans, this approach to homelessness established the federal government as the system’s “metagovernor” (Bradford 2014; Doberstein 2016), with the power to change funding requirements or amounts, governance dynamics, and, crucially, to define the problem. While communities had significant discretion, limits to their activities were implicit in terms of the time communities had to accomplish their projects (three years) and the small amount of funding each community was allocated. In other words, not nearly enough time or money was made available for the structural changes many advocates insisted were needed to respond effectively to the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Separate streams of funding were available for what at the time were called “Aboriginal communities” and for youth homelessness; each stream received $59 million in funding over three years. The original program required funding for “Aboriginal communities” to be administered through Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreements, meaning any emergency responses to homelessness were required to also have a focus on employment. This imposed an additional burden on communities seeking to respond to the immediate needs of Indigenous homeless people. By 2001, changes were made so that “Aboriginal community” funding was not required to involve an employment dimension, but the first three years of NHI funding for Indigenous groups were largely unspent because of this disastrous governance arrangement imposed by the federal government (20 per cent of available funding for Aboriginal communities was spent in three years, compared to 85 per cent of funding for designated communities [HRDC 2003]).

Large communities that received federal NHI funding were (and still are) required to develop community plans for homelessness and were (and still are) required to cost-match the federal government’s contributions. Plans are created by a Community Advisory Board, a locally developed governance council comprised of experts, advocates, and service providers from the community. Once approved, community plans on homelessness are implemented in one of two ways. The first is through the Community Entity model, whereby federal funding is transferred to an existing agency (such as the United Way) or municipality (in the case of the City of Toronto and many other Ontario municipalities). The Community Entity issues a call for proposals for projects that align with the Community Plan, selects the programs to be funded, and oversees implementation. The second model of implementation is the Shared Delivery model, a model chosen by Vancouver for ten years as well as by other mid-sized cities such as Winnipeg. In this model,
the Community Advisory Board teams up with a federal bureaucrat to jointly choose projects to be funded. The federal government plays a supporting role but generally follows the advice of the advisory board as closely as possible (Doberstein 2016). The federal government is responsible, alongside the local board, for distributing the funding and monitoring local progress.

While this main pool of NHI funding can be used for programs for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness, the NHI continues to have a separate stream of funding for “Aboriginal Communities” (changed in 2017 to “Indigenous Communities”). Indigenous groups are not required to develop community plans in order to access funding, though some do, and they are not required to cost-match. For overseeing and distributing federal funding, a Community Entity is the only option for Indigenous communities, though in Quebec, Indigenous groups interface directly with the federal government when applying for funding from the Indigenous homelessness stream. Implicit in this separate funding stream and governance structure is the idea that Indigenous people experience homelessness differently and for distinct reasons and that Indigenous groups are best-placed to understand that experience and develop appropriate solutions. This appreciation of the expertise of Indigenous-led groups is significant, yet the resources needed to implement meaningful solutions, a longer (and more predictable) timeline, and partnerships (where appropriate) were all lacking. Furthermore, local and Indigenous-led groups were not involved in a crucial step of the program’s design: defining what homelessness is.

To further complicate matters, control of and access to federal funding has been governed differently in Quebec from the beginning.¹ The NHI/HPS bypassed nine of the ten provinces, whereas the Province of Quebec is deeply involved in NHI/HPS operations. Community plan development in Quebec is done by community groups, but decisions as to which programs will be funded are made by a bilateral committee comprised of provincial and federal officials rather than by a community-based agency as is the case in other provinces. This gives the program an intergovernmental flavour in Quebec, as opposed to one of co-governance with community groups; the influence of ideas about federalism is pervasive (see chapter 8 for more details on NHI/HPS operations in Quebec).

The NHI rolled out in 1999 in most Canadian cities, but it took until 2001 for Indigenous communities to see the funding and for the province and federal government to reach a Canada–Quebec agreement regarding the program’s operations in Quebec. The Canada–Quebec
agreement has been consistently renegotiated and re-signed each time the federal program funding has been reapproved. Early on, relations between the different parties, including local third-sector actors, were difficult (personal interviews). Over time, however, plan development and implementation has become routine. Interestingly, the operations of the NHI/HPS in Quebec today stand as one of the longest and likely most successful examples of multilevel governance, precisely because the province demanded a seat at the table.

In a discussion about how the HPS operates in Quebec, a federal bureaucrat interviewed for this book paused for a moment to reflect on the practice of federalism over the course of the NHI/HPS: “I just want to say I find it really strange that the other provinces don’t argue for the Quebec model. The previous government really offered that asymmetrical federalism to everybody, and no one else took it up. And I always think that’s kind of funny … [Provinces] can come to me and say ‘I want to negotiate the Quebec model’ and I would have to say ‘Okay, great’” (personal interview 2018). The actor continued to express disbelief that Quebec is the only province that pushes back: “I always just find it funny that no one really fights for the Quebec model. Occasionally they might ask for more and we go ‘no’ and they are just like ‘okay.’ Why wouldn’t they be more vocal?” This is indeed interesting, and likely reflects one of two things: either provinces are not jealous of this area of jurisdiction, or perhaps provincial officials do not see homelessness as structural and therefore requiring their involvement.

The first NHI ran from late 1999 to 2003 and was then renewed for another three years, from 2003 to 2006, and again for one year from 2006 to 2007; all of these renewals were under Liberal governments. After being elected in 2006, the federal Conservative government maintained a strikingly similar degree of involvement in homelessness governance. They changed the name of the NHI to the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and extended it for two years from 2007 to 2009 with similar levels of funding as in the past ($134.8 million per year). The governance dynamics, which afforded extensive discretion to the local level, also remained the same, as did the cost-matching requirements, leading many to suggest that the name change was simply a rebranding exercise (Klodawsky and Evans 2014; personal interviews). The HPS included a more focused effort on homelessness prevention; it also prioritized “a shift from emergency to longer-term solutions” (ESDC 2014, 35), though this was not accompanied by increased funding or an extended time frame, nor was it linked with housing policy, which would have been required to prevent homelessness or implement longer-term solutions in any meaningful way.
It is worth pausing here, technically in the middle of the first era (1999–2014), to review what was known at the time about the NHI/HPS operations. Reviews of the first ten years of the NHI/HPS identified several strengths and weaknesses. In its early years, the NHI led to the opening of a number of homeless shelters across the country, including homeless shelters specifically for Indigenous people, and early evaluations showed that the program was effective at meeting some short-term needs of the homeless population (Webster 2007). An early program review also noted increased capacity for fighting homelessness across the country. Indigenous communities, however, did not develop capacity as quickly as non-Indigenous networks largely as a result of institutional roadblocks imposed early on by the federal government (HRDC 2003).

A key strength of the program was the discretion it afforded local-level actors: “the greatest value of the HPS lies in its direct support to communities’ local capacity to address homelessness and its encouraging of a collaborative approach to setting priorities, identifying needs and gaps in services and programming, and allocating funding” (ESDC 2014, 23). This model of devolving authority to local groups was also looked on positively by people interviewed for this book. One of them stressed that “in the bad old days, the government would just tell communities what to do. And they didn’t always know what was best for Red Deer or Montreal or St John’s. [The NHI/HPS] approach was actually quite brilliant: let the local communities set the priorities” (personal interview 2014).

However, program reviews also highlighted important limitations of the NHI/HPS. A significant one related to funding levels, which were wholly insufficient to comprehensively meet the needs of the homeless population. Also, community groups were critical of the time lines they faced; recall that the program was renewed continuously but never for more than three years – an insurmountable barrier to long-term planning (HRDC 2003; 2008). A 2003 review of the NHI found that “spending on emergency services was disproportionately high relative to their ranking on community priority lists … Projects addressing emergency needs (such as soup kitchens) were relatively easy to implement once funding had been allocated, compared to services meeting more long-term needs (such as mental health or employment supports)” (HRDC 2003, 23). Some groups even prioritized projects that could be completed within that time frame, as opposed to projects that best met local needs. Important to note here is the evidence of a profound and enduring disagreement in terms of the nature of homelessness: federal government officials viewed it as an individual-level, short-term problem
that was only in need of emergency solutions. Community and other on-the-ground groups disagreed; they understood it to be structural, requiring increased funding to be made available and over a longer period of time – crucially, for investments in housing.

Moreover, some saw the NHI as designed with only a small number of big cities in mind. According to Leo and August, the NHI was unable to meet local needs in Winnipeg, where homelessness takes a different form than it does in larger urban centres: “The mandate of the [NHI], however, was written to address the problems of such centres as Toronto and Vancouver, growth magnets with hot housing markets. The conditions of funding proved too narrow for slow-growth Winnipeg, precluding the types of solutions that are more likely actually to alleviate homelessness there” (Leo and August 2006, 2). Leo and August note that the NHI had been developed to support communities with high numbers of people living in absolute homelessness on the streets, and that its design had not considered different environments, like Winnipeg, where “housing is likely to be priced so low that, in older neighbourhoods, it does not pay to maintain it. With housing that is decaying but affordable, street people may be less in evidence” (Leo and August 2006, 5).

Given the differences in local housing markets, Leo and August argued that Winnipeggers were more likely to experience relative rather than absolute homelessness; that is, comparatively few people are unhoused but more are likely to be drastically underhoused. The types of interventions required to improve their situation, many of which were directly related to housing (as opposed to emergency shelters), had been precluded in NHI/HPS programming because of how it defined homelessness. That narrow definition meant that “no concrete provisions [were] offered to move the homeless into secure tenure. In practice, the program institutionalizes homelessness rather than seeking strategies for moving as many as possible out of those woeful circumstances” (Leo and August 2006, 9; emphasis added). James Hughes, who ran the Old Brewery Mission in Montreal from 2004 to 2008 and returned to that position in late 2020, agrees with this analysis, noting that in its early days “the [NHI/HPS] continued to focus principally on building the sector’s capacity to sustain individuals suffering through homelessness, rather than on preventing homelessness in the first place” (Hughes 2012, 5; emphasis added).

Despite criticisms revealed during the government’s own program review, NHI/HPS governance, time lines, funding, and definitions remained relatively unchanged for fifteen years. The tide started to turn, albeit slowly, in 2008, when the recently elected federal Conservative
government announced an extension of the HPS to 2011, as well as an investment of $110 million over five years in a research project related to homelessness (2008–13). Specifically, the federal government funded a large, randomized controlled study of Housing First, an emerging and promising homelessness intervention. The federal government established research teams in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Moncton to study the effectiveness of Housing First. Titled the At Home/Chez Soi project, this research would directly inform the federal government’s understanding of homelessness and would prove highly influential in structuring its future involvement in the policy field.

Housing First is typically targeted at people who experience chronic homelessness. While some community groups in Canada have for years espoused the core tenets of Housing First (Lupick 2017a; Withers 2021), the idea is often credited to Sam Tsemberis, a Canadian psychologist who tested the model in New York City and showed its effectiveness not only as a solution to homelessness but as a cost-saving measure as well. Housing First is in many ways a change from traditional approaches to homelessness, which required homeless people to be sober and in otherwise stable health (especially with respect to mental health) before being accepted into permanent housing. These requirements were, according to Tsemberis, significant barriers preventing people from exiting homelessness, particularly people who experience chronic homelessness.

Housing First flips the order of operations, putting housing at the beginning rather than the end of a person’s transition out of homelessness. In Housing First programs, individuals are immediately given access to permanent housing and are offered social supports in that environment. Besides making a strong social justice statement that individuals have the right to immediately access housing, the Housing First model claims that this approach is less expensive than the previous model, especially over the long term. Because of the need for readily accessible and low-barrier housing, Housing First programs typically use private-market housing instead of social housing; there can be requirements for accessing social housing, such as sobriety, and there are often long wait lists as well. Private-sector housing can be accessed more quickly, especially if community groups already have relationships with private landlords, though problems can still exist in private-market housing, including for drug users (Housing First espouses harm reduction principles; see Withers 2021). Dependence on private-sector rental housing means that the units are often scattered throughout the city, including in suburbs; the model of housing is therefore sometimes called “scatter site,” which results in previously
unhoused people living throughout the city, as opposed to in “congregate” settings, in which previously unhoused people live in the same building. This can be an attractive feature of Housing First for someone who wants to move to a different neighbourhood. The reality of housing markets in urban contexts across Canada, however, is that choices are very limited. International studies show that Housing First is most effective in environments where social and affordable housing is more readily available (Henley 2019).

The federal government put the claims about long-term success and cost savings associated with Housing First to a literal test. For the At Home/Chez Soi project, 2,148 homeless people were recruited from Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver to participate in the study. They were divided into two groups, with around half of the participants (1,158) receiving the “treatment,” a Housing First intervention. The others were in a control group; for them, nothing changed, and they navigated the homeless system as they had before. Besides being divided into control and treatment groups, participants were also evaluated according to their “support needs”: very high, high, and moderate. Participants from both treatment and control groups took part in extensive and regular follow-up interviews over the course of the study so that researchers could track their housing stability as well as a host of other factors, such as interactions with police, use of emergency medical services, and quality of life.

At the end of the study, the researchers came out strongly in support of Housing First as an effective and potentially cost-saving approach to homelessness: “Housing First can be effectively implemented in Canadian cities of different size and different ethnoracial and cultural composition … Housing First rapidly ends homelessness” (Goering et al. 2014, 1). The research team carefully detailed the costs and associated savings of Housing First (HF): “Over the two-year period after participants entered the study, every $10 invested in HF services results in an average savings of $9.60 for high needs and $3.42 for moderate needs participants” (1). A small minority, 10 per cent of participants, were considered to have very high support needs, and for this group, cost savings were significant: “every $10 invested in HF services resulted in an average savings of $21.72” (1).

The At Home/Chez Soi study provided powerful evidence that Housing First was an effective and cost-saving measure for ending homelessness, particularly chronic homelessness. There was some controversy, of course, including over the experimental method used. Furthermore, the question of who would fund the housing and continued social supports for people involved in the study after the end of the
study period was an important concern. In many cases, provinces or municipal governments had to step in to continue funding these supports once the federal study (and the funding it made available so as to test Housing First) ended.

These findings directly informed the federal government’s decision to renew the HPS in 2014 for five years, the longest funding period in the program’s history. However, the renewed HPS contained much more direction for community groups from the federal government than it had before, another example of increased funding transfers made available but with conditions attached. Up until 2014, communities had been afforded autonomy to design local homelessness plans according to their needs (within the obvious strictures of time and funding); after that year, however, the HPS stipulated that large cities must dedicate 65 per cent of their HPS funding to Housing First programs (this requirement did not extend to “Aboriginal communities”).

This orientation to Housing First and focus on more targeted interventions was also a response to earlier critiques that the NHI/HPS led not to a decrease in homelessness but rather, in the words of Leo and August (as well as Hughes), to “institutionalized” homelessness. Further, Hughes noted that after more than $1 billion in investments in homelessness since 1999, “it is difficult to conclude that homelessness was shrinking. If anything, it seemed to be growing ... In cities where homelessness counts were regularly conducted, the numbers were definitely rising” (2012, 6–7). Indeed, studies of emergency shelters during this period show an increase in the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness between 2005 and 2016. Ideas operating through environmental mechanisms created the space for the discussion of new approaches; old approaches weren’t working, enabling new ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protect to take hold and lead to changing governance dynamics.

In the Toronto Star, Sam Tsemberis and Vicky Stergiopoulos, a lead investigator with At Home/Chez Soi, applauded the federal decision to prioritize Housing First: “it’s no wonder the federal government supports Housing First: it is highly effective and can save money” (Tsemberis and Stergiopoulos 2014). The emphasis on cost savings is important, and offers insights into how the Conservative government understood homelessness. Claims that ending homelessness could save money needed qualification or at least specificity; researchers were always clear that Housing First would result in cost savings for only 10 per cent of the homeless population – that is, for people who experienced the most chronic form of homelessness. According to the study, Housing First would not result in cost savings when it came to people
viewed as having moderate support needs, and it would break even for those with high support needs. Insisting that Housing First can save money made clear that the target of program interventions would be a very narrowly defined group of people (though advocates of Housing First are quick to insist that prioritizing people who experience the most severe form of chronic homelessness will, over time, enable the system to respond much more quickly and effectively to people experiencing shorter periods of homelessness.)

The decision to limit local discretion was not universally applauded, however. Some groups object to the prioritization or classification of any group (Withers 2021) and opposed this increasingly targeted approach to homelessness immediately (RAPSIM 2013). It was fiercely challenged in Quebec by an influential and long-standing advocacy group, the RAPSIM, which pushed for a “generalist” HPS that would allow funding to be used for a variety of projects and equally for anyone considered homeless by Quebec’s broad definition (as had been the case in the past) (RAPSIM 2013c). In this conflict between Quebec actors and the federal government, we can see the importance of ideas around the understanding of homelessness, as well as challenges regarding the responsibility to produce social protection. Local actors in Quebec disagreed with the federal government’s orientation toward Housing First – a disagreement arising from the very different understanding of homelessness espoused by the RAPSIM (see chapter 8) – and also disagreed with the principle of federal direction to local actors. The RAPSIM pushed the co-governing province to reject the requirements, but provincial officials eventually agreed to the federal government’s Housing First orientation; implementation would be co-governed by the province and federal government, but with the federal government remaining the dominant “meta-governor.”

For nearly twenty years, the NHI/HPS was a short-term and poorly funded program. The National Housing Strategy, introduced in 2017 and implemented shortly afterwards, marked a significant departure from this past and the beginning of a new era in federal involvement in homelessness. The HPS has again been renamed – Reaching Home – and has been redesigned and implemented in the context of a broader housing strategy. Funding has been increased to $2.2 billion over ten years, meaning long-term funding is finally guaranteed, a demand of local groups for two decades. And while the federal government has identified outcomes for the first time in the program’s history, including substantial reductions in chronic homelessness, the requirement that 65 per cent of funding be directed toward Housing First has been removed (though the federal government remains highly supportive of
Housing First as an intervention). This reflects an effort to “keep decision making at the local level and give communities greater flexibility to address local priorities and achieve results for the most vulnerable within their communities” (ESDC 2020).

The process leading up to the adoption of the NHS and Reaching Home directives involved extensive consultations with community groups and a commitment from the very top to respond to community input. An actor involved in consultations with community groups spoke with some light-hearted frustration for the minister responsible for overseeing the development of the NHS: “We got to the end [of the consultations] and the minister, being the minister that he is, he said, ‘I want you to go out to communities again and validate the report, that this is truly what they think.’ I’m like, ‘No. It’s over. The end … We’ve heard from literally thousands and thousands of people, which is huge for any topic to get that kind of response’” (personal interview 2018).

Following the adoption of the NHS, an expert advisory committee was struck to, among other tasks, recommend a definition of homelessness for adoption federally. An actor involved in NHS development explained the enthusiasm on the part of community groups for participating in that committee: “For other advisory committees they get like 100 applicants. We got over 800 applicants for our advisory committee” (personal interview 2018). The committee was inclusive and included people with lived experience, Indigenous leaders, and people from all regions of the country, including the North. And in a sense, the advisory committee was a team of rivals. Tim Richter of the CAEH and Pierre Gaudreau of the RAPSIM both sat on the committee, representing groups that have tended to be strongly at odds over homelessness program priorities and implementation, as future chapters will show. In recruiting both of them to the committee, the minister responsible for the NHS displayed an effort to develop a policy that would not alienate anyone. Looking at the details, it seems that a compromise was indeed struck: the Housing First requirement was removed from the federal homelessness program, a demand of the RAPSIM since 2014; yet at the same time, the NHS adopted the Canadian, not Québécois, definition of homelessness. It also includes a separate, but short, definition of homelessness among Indigenous people.

While the definition that was recommended and adopted is highly similar to the one created by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, it contains several important changes. It is significant that someone who has been homeless for six months is now understood to be chronically homeless, whereas in the past most definitions assumed this time period to be one year. This is a substantial broadening of the
definition of chronic homelessness and will allow more people to be prioritized. It is also significant that the definition specifies that anyone living in an unsheltered location, an emergency shelter, or staying temporarily with others for six months is considered chronically homeless. This last category, hidden homelessness, was not prioritized by the NHI/HPS, which focused on visible forms of homelessness (either on the streets or in emergency shelters). The definition has therefore broadened considerably, but has also remained consistent with the earlier definitions motivating federal government actions, which define homelessness as a lack of housing.

Interviews with key actors illustrate that there has also been a profound shift in the ideas of main actors regarding the responsibility to produce social protection and federalism, ideas that drove increased federal government involvement in 2017: “There is always debate about whether housing and homelessness are provincial jurisdiction or federal jurisdiction. The minister and this government believe it’s shared jurisdiction … The previous government saw housing and homelessness as provincial jurisdiction and they were really getting out of the game so to speak. We were supposed to be winding this program down … so if there had not been a change in government, we would not be having this conversation because I would have a very small team and we would be working towards the end” (personal interview 2018).

The re-engagement of the federal government followed a change in the party in power in 2015, as the Liberal Party defeated the previously ruling Conservative government. There are important ideological differences between the two parties, but party ideology alone does not explain this re-engagement; recall that it was also the Liberal Party that fully dismantled the federal government’s commitment to a housing program in the 1990s and initially limited involvement in homelessness as well. Evolving ideas regarding shared responsibility for housing and homelessness led to a reinvigoration of the program. The actor referenced above went on to note that key federal government officials, including ministers and the prime minister, see themselves as leaders, not just collaborative partners, in the production of social protection. Community engagement was extensive, but in terms of making decisions, the federal government would maintain the power of the pen: “You have to have close relationships with the people delivering the services. Though there are times when I say ‘No, you guys are wrong’ and you have to be able to stand your ground” (personal interview 2018).

Federal investment does not amount to what advocates say is required to end homelessness. Even so, motivated by ideas that homelessness is a structural problem and that the federal role in producing social
protection for the homeless is one of leadership, the federal government has increased its involvement in homelessness governance and taken important steps toward allowing communities to move away from alleviation efforts in favour of enduring solutions. This includes working with provinces to create more housing options, including rent allowances and contributing funding to the development of new housing units of affordable housing. The success of these programs will depend on funding but also on the ability of all actors to stay at the table. And of course, just as Reaching Home and the NHS were being implemented, COVID-19 hit; while the country was being thrown into a lockdown and Canadians were being told to stay home, advocates pushed the government to keep the needs of people without homes front of mind. A few weeks into the lockdown, the federal government announced an additional $157.5 million for communities through Reaching Home. This funding allowed for increased flexibility for community groups to fund general health and medical services (previously ineligible expenses), cost-matching requirements were waived, and groups were allowed to fund projects outside of their immediate service boundaries to reduce the spread of COVID-19 between communities. As a part of its fall economic update, the federal government announced an additional $236.7 million for Reaching Home (CMHC 2020).

These efforts, before and during the pandemic, have involved direct relationships between the federal government and local communities, except in Quebec, where the province is also involved. Meanwhile, the federal government has also worked on bilateral agreements with the provinces to build new affordable housing, protect and renovate existing social housing, and introduce portable housing allowances to be used in private-market housing. In the context of COVID-19, the federal government introduced the Rapid Housing Initiative, a $1 billion program to create as many as 3,000 new permanent units of affordable housing. All cities under study in this book have benefited from the Rapid Housing Initiative, using that funding to purchase and make available modular housing (prefabricated housing that is quick to assemble and less expensive to build); to rent or purchase hotels to create isolation centres, shelters, or temporary housing; or to otherwise make immediate contributions to affordable housing availability (PMO 2020).

What is interesting about the Rapid Housing Initiative is that, like the NHI/HPS and Reaching Home, it involves a direct relationship between the federal government and local communities; provinces outside of Quebec have been overstepped. While the weaknesses in the housing and homeless-serving systems long predate the pandemic, the pandemic resulted in large numbers of vulnerable people needing
housing immediately, either because shelters were no longer an option or because of threat of eviction. In other words, the weaknesses in the welfare state were pre-existing conditions, but the trigger for the immediate, urgent need was the pandemic. During this global public health emergency, speed of action was critical, and because of the immediate, life-and-death nature of the need, there was no time to reform systems. In a sense, bypassing provinces during the emergency stage of this response was appropriate because unhoused people faced a genuine crisis. This approach also sheds further light on how this direct federal-local approach may have been inappropriate in the past; homelessness was indeed a crisis, but the cause of the rise in homelessness across the country in the 1990s and 2000s was not an external shock creating an urgent and immediate need, but rather a failure of systems and policies.

The federal government has been consistently involved in homelessness since 1999. Funding has rarely increased and certainly has never reached the levels that advocates say are needed; nevertheless, federal bureaucrats point out with some pride that the program was never eliminated or even cut (personal interview 2014). That the funding did not change even during times of economic decline is a testament to the importance of ideas over resources. Until 2014, the federal role in homelessness was minimal, reflecting its emergency and individualized understanding of homelessness. Changes in 2014 to prioritize Housing First programs reflected some changes to the understanding of homelessness as a costly and fixable problem. The introduction in 2017 of a National Housing Strategy further underscores the importance of ideas regarding the nature of the problem and the responsibility to produce social protection; these ideas cannot be said to be purely ideological, for the changes were made by the Liberal Party, which introduced the original NHI in 1999. As I will explain below, advocacy around homelessness by key actors, importantly including the CAEH, were also instrumental in pushing ideas about homelessness, and the federal responsibility in efforts to combat it, onto the radar of key federal officials.

**Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness**

The CAEH emerged in Calgary in 2012. It originally focused on local action but has become increasingly influential at the national level as well. Other groups have also exercised influence on the national level, including the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. But the CAEH has become a long-standing, powerful, national agenda-setting organization. The understanding of a small number of key officials – led by founding
CEO Tim Richter – regarding the nature of homelessness has evolved significantly since its origins, but the CAEH has been consistent in prioritizing people experiencing chronic homelessness, its support of Housing First, and on the need for local groups to coordinate their interventions. The CAEH has advanced particular solutions to homelessness, ranging from prioritizing veterans’ homelessness to a National Housing Strategy, and has powerfully employed ideas to persuade others to join its efforts to end homelessness. The CAEH has done this mainly by defining (and redefining) homelessness, showing the power that understanding the problem can wield in driving the actions of governmental and non-governmental actors through multilevel governance. Its work can be divided into two short eras: 2012 to 2016, during which its actions were oriented largely toward helping community groups end homelessness; and 2016 to the present, during which CAEH leadership has advocated much more on the national level, particularly for structural and systemic changes to end homelessness.

Calgary-based but nationally focused, the CAEH is a national advocacy group boasting nearly 200 community partners across the country. Its mission is to “prevent and end homelessness in Canada,” and it seeks to do so by ensuring that “all Canadians have a safe, decent and affordable home with the support necessary to sustain it” (CAEH 2020b). The CAEH has always adopted a housing-based definition of homelessness, though it has evolved and expanded considerably since 2012. Former president of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) Tim Richter was the founding CEO of the CAEH; he entered the field of homelessness policy in the mid-2000s, developing Calgary’s first plan to end homelessness (see chapter 6). Prior to this, he had a successful career in government relations for TransAlta, a major oil and gas company based in Calgary. His work as a lobbyist (combined with his background in political science) have provided him with important insights into how to interact effectively with governments; it also allowed him to build up a powerful network of what he calls “the unusual suspects,” including private-sector actors, in the fight against homelessness (Scott 2012). Richter’s skills as a lobbyist have allowed the CAEH to become highly effective in its targeted interactions with governments at all levels, but especially the federal government.

The CAEH has invested substantial energy in Canada-wide campaigns, the first of which was to support communities in the development and implementation of local ten-year plans to end homelessness. The same year the CAEH launched, it published A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years (2012), intended to serve as a roadmap for communities across Canada to develop their own ten-year
plans to end homelessness. The Canadian plan was “directly derived from a document of the same name developed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) in the United States” (CAEH 2012, 3). *A Plan, Not a Dream* confidently championed the idea that it is possible to end homelessness: “Everything you need to know to end homelessness is known in your communities or is available from others. There are many effective partnerships at the community level that engage government, non-profit agencies and private sector groups in innovative initiatives. And the financial resources exist” (CAEH 2012, 3). It continues: “What’s missing is a practical community-based approach that shifts the focus from managing homelessness, to a system focused on ending it. We need to move from crisis responses (like shelters and soup kitchens) to solutions – permanent, appropriate, safe and affordable housing with the support necessary to sustain it” (3).

Evident in these early CAEH efforts are ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection. *A Plan Not a Dream* was not about structural change; tellingly, the first “essential” item in a community’s efforts to end homelessness was planning. The CAEH boldly claimed that the resources existed to end homelessness and that they simply needed to be put together in a way that would allow people to exit homelessness. For example, the plan noted that to end homelessness, people need income support, so communities should connect them to *existing* rent supplements and career-based employment services as opposed to arguing for a basic income or some other form of living wage. People leaving prisons and the child welfare system often end up homeless, so communities should *manage those exits* so that people enter housing instead of re-enter homelessness, as opposed to reforming those systems. And people need housing, so communities should work with private market landlords to help homeless people access *available* housing as opposed to creating new affordable housing, making that private sector housing affordable through rent supplements. These specific examples reveal guiding assumptions regarding the responsibility to produce social protection: governments had simultaneously done enough and not enough – they had done enough because the resources (income supports, affordable housing) existed, but not enough because they were not being managed and organized properly. The problem was more technical than structural; required, then, was someone to put it all together at the local level.

With support from the CAEH, a few Plans to End Homelessness were developed across the country, and they made a number of contributions to local efforts to combat homelessness; for example, new community groups were organized, and attention was drawn to the importance
of data-driven approaches. But except in Medicine Hat, Alberta, none of these plans succeeded in ending homelessness in ten years, though some plans did succeed in halting or reversing what had been a rapid increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness, as was the case in Calgary (CHF 2018). Following earnest but ultimately unsuccessful efforts to turn the CAEH plan to end homelessness into a reality across the country, and facing evidence that existing plans would not succeed, the CAEH pivoted, turning its attention to other campaigns.

A second campaign, launched in June 2015, set out to house 20,000 homeless people across the country in three years. These efforts were locally based and not funded by the CAEH, whose role was to encourage and support those efforts through training and workshops and to track the collective efforts. While much of this work would have been done otherwise, the CAEH facilitated collaboration between communities, encouraged them to orient funding to permanent solutions like Housing First, provided them with considerable support, and managed to secure $885,000 from the federal government to “scale up” its efforts (CAEH 2018). Announcing in 2018 that 21,254 individuals had been housed over the course of the campaign, the CAEH seized the momentum and launched the Built for Zero campaign, “an ambitious national change effort helping a core group of leading communities end chronic and veteran homelessness – a first step on the path to eliminating all homelessness in Canada” (CAEH 2020a).

Over the course of these campaigns, the CAEH underwent significant change, particularly in terms of how it engaged with other actors. Changes in involvement and interactions were motivated primarily by changing ideas about the nature of homelessness. The CAEH had focused on supporting local communities in its first few years, but in 2016, Richter turned more and more attention to engaging senior governments, particularly the federal government. That year, the beginning of the second era in the CAEH’s involvement, Richter registered as a lobbyist for the CAEH, powerful evidence of evolving ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection. The private market was no longer seen as capable of meeting housing needs with only minimal government support; the federal government was now understood as having an important, perhaps central, role in the production of social protection for people experiencing homelessness. As a lobbyist, Richter sought to convince the federal government to increase its involvement in homelessness governance. He has several entries in the Canadian Registry of Lobbyists; up until 2007, of course, he had lobbied on behalf of TransAlta Corporation, so he was familiar with the process and had significant expertise communicating with governments as the lobbying
record shows. In 2016, he began lobbying the federal government on behalf of the CAEH, including to provide funding for that organization, to adopt a Housing First approach to existing homelessness investments, to prioritize ending homelessness among veterans, as well as for a National Housing Strategy that would encompass a meaningful right-to-housing approach.

Since late 2016, nearly 200 communication reports (official lobbying disclosures) have been filed on behalf of Richter and the CAEH. A close look at those records points to the targeted lobbying strategy from which the CAEH benefits. Documented lobbying efforts include written and oral communications as well as “grassroots communications.” Those efforts have been aimed at a wide variety of institutions and individuals, including the Senate; the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC); Finance Canada; the Prime Minister’s Office; individuals closely involved in housing policy such as Toronto MP Adam Vaughan, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Ahmed Hussen; and members of all political parties except the Bloc Québécois. Richter strikes with precision, and rapidly; given the priority of ending veterans’ homelessness, he was always in touch with the minister for that portfolio. The lobbying registry indicates that he communicated on behalf of the CAEH with Jody Wilson-Raybould on 15 January 2019, one day after she was named Minister of Veterans Affairs.

In tandem with efforts to prioritize ending veterans’ homelessness, Richter’s lobbying increasingly focused on the need for a National Housing Strategy. In a recent webinar to promote the CAEH-led campaign, Recovery for All, Richter recalled that an official in the Prime Minister’s Office had told him “your advocacy made [the National Housing Strategy] happen” (Richter 2020). This comment was not just in reference to Richter, and he did not present it in the webinar as such; rather, it was in reference to the broad movement of people, many of whom were mobilized by the CAEH, who had advocated for a National Housing Strategy (though certainly groups not allied with the CAEH advocated for a NHS as well).

That movement, however, was combined with a highly sophisticated approach to lobbying and an ability to maintain good relationships; a key actor in the NHS’s development said unprompted in an interview that “Tim Richter and I talk twice a week” (personal interview 2018). Richter’s skill at maintaining relationships with powerful individuals in most parties is an important reason why the CAEH has become such a powerful organization, and evolving ideas regarding the structural, not individual-level, causes of homelessness have led
the CAEH to engage more aggressively with the federal government. There are criticisms of this approach, including self-censoring criticism of the government and making more moderate as opposed to radical demands. But if the government’s involvement is seen as key to efforts to combat homelessness, this approach has been highly effective in getting the government on board.

Changes to the rules governing the non-partisan activities that charities and non-profits, such as the CAEH, can engage in were introduced in 2018. The previous rules had restricted what non-profits could do in terms of advocacy (technically, “public policy dialogue and development activities”); now, charities can engage in unlimited activities, though they cannot support a particular party or politician. With this space opened up, the CAEH has ramped up its activities, launching national campaigns to pressure the federal government to invest in housing and to build an end to homelessness directly into its COVID-19 recovery. The Recovery for All campaign sought to ensure that the rebuilding efforts in the wake of the pandemic would include the promise to end homelessness through “bold investments in housing, homelessness and income support to end homelessness in Canada, once and for all” (CAEH 2020c). Though the campaign only lasted a few months, it is significant because of the demonstrated evolution in ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection. Long gone is the assumption that governments have done enough in terms of housing affordability and income security; instead, the federal government was being called upon to commit to a major investment in new affordable housing developments and income supports.6

With the impending federal election in 2021, the CAEH again pivoted: Recovery for All was rolled up, or perhaps rather morphed into Vote Housing, an election-oriented campaign. Vote Housing was a national non-partisan campaign to make housing a ballot box issue. Turning his eyes again to the political system and making political demands, Richter teamed up with Zain Velji, a Calgary-based organizer with a track record for managing successful political campaigns, including for former Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi. Vote Housing’s demands were similar to those of Recovery for All; they included 300,000 units of affordable housing and 50,000 units of supportive housing over ten years. The program also emphasized urban, rural, and northern Indigenous housing, along with demanding an expansion of rental assistance as a means to reduce core housing need.7 While the CAEH was deeply involved in the campaign, it was a collaborative effort with other networks, including the Canadian Lived Experience Leadership Network.
and Indigenous-led networks. Furthermore, past campaigns, including Built for Zero, had a small presence in Quebec; by contrast, Vote Housing was national in scope, with allies in Quebec and bilingual campaign materials.

Complementing its lobbying and organizing efforts, the CAEH since 2013 has run an annual conference to end homelessness, which has become an important policy-making venue. It is designed to share the mission of the CAEH, recruit partners and members, launch campaigns, make important announcements, and spread knowledge about the fight against homelessness. Beginning in 2013 in Ottawa, these conferences have become an important venue for policy-makers and community stakeholders to meet, learn, discuss, and collaborate. Over time, they have become more inclusive, though the Housing First orientation remains, as does the emphasis on learning from one another, with a focus on learning from American experiences.

Academic and housing activist Emily Paradis has examined the importance of the annual CAEH conference from a critical perspective, writing that the conferences are “discursive sites in which framings of homelessness are defined, circulated and consolidated; as sites of governance, in which policy-makers and non-governmental actors develop policy and program responses; and as sites of contestation, in which people facing homelessness claim space for oppositional perspectives” (Paradis 2016, 99). They particularly consider the 2014 conference in Vancouver, a pivotal moment in the history of the conference and of the CAEH as well. A group of activists, some of whom were conference attendees, protested the conference itself and called for “a major mobilization to confront, expose, and oppose the government policies and NGO industries that manage homeless, low-income and Indigenous people without challenging or disrupting the systems and social conditions that cause homelessness and poverty” (Paradis 2014). The protest was uncomfortable, Paradis explains: “It was a surreal scene: outside in the courtyard, dozens of homeless people and allies, waving red banners and chanting; inside the glass causeway above, hundreds of conference delegates, enjoying wine and salmon skewers. And between us, a line of police and hotel security, barricading the lobby. Two groups of people working to end homelessness, one being ‘protected’ by armed police from the other” (Paradis 2014).

Conference attendees, some of whom were attending the conference on a lived experience scholarship paid for by the CAEH, participated in, spoke at, and organized the protest: “we were defying protocol and polite etiquette, in protesting the very meeting that we had been invited, and paid for, to attend” (Jarrett 2016). Many on the inside at the
conference were sympathetic: “Participants in the event that was the target of the protest [were] actually standing alongside and in agreement with the people protesting, who had some very valid input and direction to give to the professionals filling the seats in the workshops and speaking events. This was a momentous time, and the energy filling the air that evening and for the rest of the conference was buzzing with new possibilities” (Jarrett 2016).

Protesters were eventually invited inside and continued organizing. They created space for themselves, demanded power, addressed conference attendees, and insisted on the need for their voices to be included in CAEH operations and future conferences. The protest could have been avoided had dissenting voices been included from the beginning; however, a permanent rupture between community groups and the CAEH was avoided. CAEH leadership and board members with strong credibility among community groups demonstrated openness and an ability to listen and evolve. The Lived Experience Advisory Council developed in the wake of the protest, and in 2020 a Lived Experience Leadership Network was created and became an allied network of the CAEH. It would be influential in future campaigns, including Vote Housing.

Governments use CAEH conferences not just to make announcements but also to develop policy with direct input from community groups. For example, the 2018 conference in Hamilton, held during the lead-up to the implementation of the NHS, included a round-table session led by federal officials soliciting community input in the identification of which policy outcomes should be measured and prioritized. Politicians also attend the conference, to give keynote addresses and make policy announcements as well as to listen. The annual conference is as close to an institutionalized venue as a non-governmental organization can create. Through it, the CAEH has carved out a powerful place for itself in the governance of homelessness in Canada. While the conferences are in theory inclusive – anyone who wishes can attend – significant barriers remain in terms of conference fees (upwards of $600 for people who are not presenting) and the time and funding required to travel to the conference, which is held in a different city every year. Because of these barriers, the conferences tend to be for government officials as well as executives and staff from service providers that have the resources to participate.

Though the conferences are expensive and elite, efforts have been made to create inclusive spaces at them, including gender identification on name tags, tables during meals specifically for people with lived experience, and a quiet room for those who feel anxious.
or uncomfortable in the conference space. People with lived experience present regularly at the conferences, engaging directly with policy-makers, and people with lived experience are on the board of the CAEH. This space was not initially offered, but once it was demanded, the leadership of the CAEH adapted and brought protesting voices in. In doing this, the CAEH turned a significant threat to its legitimacy into an ally, increasing its strength in the community. This has strengthened the CAEH and also limited threats from the outside, which Withers (2021) may consider a demobilizing tactic to undermine the effectiveness of social movements advancing a different, more radical perhaps, agenda. The CAEH is very much a mainstream organization; they do not criticize capitalism and look to governments for solutions. It is true that in winning over some of its opponents, the CAEH may have made it more difficult for a radical housing justice movement to take hold nationally.

These numerous campaigns illustrate the CAEH’s adaptability, especially its ability to remain relevant following difficult early years in which the promised plans to end homelessness did not lead to the changes that had been envisioned. And while they have not secured an end to chronic homelessness, many communities – notably in Alberta, where the CAEH is most influential – have seen significant reductions in the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness. The CAEH has remained consistent over time in its prioritization of chronic homelessness; insistence on the promise of Housing First; and belief in data-driven responses to homelessness, including homeless counts as well as more coordinated and sophisticated systems of data gathering, such as By-Name lists (CAEH 2018). CAEH actors are also consistent in their belief that ending homelessness will save money. But the group’s interactions with other actors have changed over its relatively brief lifespan; it is moving away from individualized understandings of the causes of and solutions to homelessness toward more structural and systemic ones. The CAEH has further broadened its understanding of homelessness through its appreciation of the different realities of homelessness for Indigenous individuals, including an acknowledgement of its colonial roots (CAEH 2020; 2021).

Housing and Homelessness: Conclusions

Resources and institutions matter to these two national actors – the federal government and the CAEH – but ideas have been the driving force behind their involvement in homelessness governance and their interactions with other actors. Having eliminated investments in
affordable housing and made cuts to other parts of the welfare state in the 1990s, the federal government was slow to respond in a meaningful way as homelessness emerged as a new social risk. Where it did act, through the NHI (followed by the HPS), ideas regarding the nature of homelessness were instrumental in shaping its response. Though the program has been funded non-stop since 1999, that funding has never been permanent; investments were, until 2019, only for short periods; and they were wholly inadequate to make any meaningful contribution to the availability of affordable housing. That was by design and by definition; for decades, federal officials did not view homelessness as an outcome of political and policy decisions. It was, rather, seen as a short-term and individualized emergency.

This idea was also reflected in the NHI/HPS governance dynamics. A narrow and emergency-based understanding of homelessness helps to explain the federal government’s decision to bypass the provinces – which have policy responsibility for many areas that are structurally related to homelessness such as health, social assistance, child welfare, and housing – and instead work directly with the local level. For nearly twenty years, efforts to fight homelessness were divorced from housing policy (and social policy more broadly) and bypassed provinces, reflecting the idea that homelessness is not caused by structural issues such as a lack of affordable housing or a frayed welfare state. This idea led federal officials to play a minimal role in the production of social protection. With the introduction of the National Housing Strategy in 2017, which has increased investments in homelessness programs, extended the time period of funding to ten years, directly linked homelessness with housing, and which partners with provinces in the production of housing, we see an evolving understanding that homelessness is related to housing and requires structural and systemic changes.

The CAEH has become a powerful voice representing service providers and people experiencing homelessness; since the early 2010s, it has evolved into an influential policy-making actor in its own right. It has consistently defined homelessness as the absence of housing and has insisted that chronic homelessness must be the first priority of interventions. Its understanding of the nature of chronic homelessness has broadened considerably, and that has influenced not only the solutions it proposes but also its understanding of the responsibility to produce social protection, leading to more collaborative interactions with the federal government in particular. In its early days, the CAEH encouraged local groups to use existing resources more effectively and efficiently, arguing that everything that was needed to end homelessness was already available. To the extent that changes to systems were
proposed, they were minimal and around the edges. This has changed considerably: the CAEH has come to see homelessness as a more complex and systemic problem that requires new resources and sweeping systemic and structural changes, including a guaranteed minimum income and substantial new investments in housing. The CAEH has succeeded in engaging governments, and along with other groups across the country, it has recently pushed for the first National Housing Strategy in nearly thirty years. Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection have become broader and have allowed the CAEH to not just lobby and coach community groups but also to meaningfully partner with governments in shaping homelessness policy.