The governance of homelessness in Calgary is centralized in the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF). This has not always been the case, and there has been an evolution in the role of all actors – governments and non-governmental groups – in homelessness governance since the 1990s. In the mid-2000s, private-sector actors rallied around the idea of ending homelessness in ten years, funnelling their efforts and lobbying for the orientation of subsequent government investments to the CHF and its implementation plan. Though the CHF has centralized significant power at the local level, key local actors have also been successful at “uploading” responsibility to the province. The Province of Alberta introduced a ten-year plan to end homelessness in 2008, after Calgary’s plan was developed. Calgary-based actors have become influential on the national level in advocating for a National Housing Strategy as well as a Housing First orientation to investments in homelessness. The CHF has also become more inclusive of third-sector and Indigenous groups over time. The municipality plays a comparatively small role in homelessness governance.

The private-sector actors who have been behind many of these important governance and policy changes have significant financial resources at their disposal, and though they do not play an institutionalized role in politics, close, personal connections with senior decision-makers allow them informal but influential access to the political process. But it was ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection that led these actors to commit their time and resources to the fight against homelessness. In particular, we see local actors (policy entrepreneurs) redefining homelessness as an expensive problem to manage and something that can be ended; this idea, animated by a narrow, housing-focused understanding of homelessness, became magnetic and attracted a wide range of groups to collaborate.
Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness have evolved considerably, as the CHF has gone from seeing a limited role for government in ending homelessness to seeing a much more central one. This change has coincided with the CHF’s evolving role in homelessness governance, from one of leadership and ownership to one of partnership and collaboration.

**Homelessness History in Alberta**

The Province of Alberta has gone from a laggard to a leader when it comes to homelessness governance. From the Second World War until 2008, its involvement in housing and homelessness was minimal. The years 2008 to 2019 were a time of increased involvement, including the development and implementation of a plan to end homelessness as well as a plan to end youth homelessness, and then (following a change in government) a Provincial Housing Strategy and Poverty Reduction Strategy. Many of the commitments made under Rachel Notley’s NDP government have been rolled back under Jason Kenney’s United Conservative Party’s governance, and the provincial role has again decreased. In some instances, these changes have been in line with different party ideologies. But we also see significant changes within the same party.

In Alberta, we can clearly see the power of ideas, which drove government decision-making during periods of economic decline and in times of abundance and institutional power. Guided by local advocates and personal relationships with leaders in the oil and gas sector in the mid-aughts, provincial officials were introduced to new ideas about the nature of homelessness and became convinced that it was possible to end it. They were further convinced that ending homelessness would require a significant upfront investment but in the end save money. This framing was driven by a narrow understanding of homelessness, as calculations regarding cost savings tend to focus the most on people who experience chronic homelessness (as opposed to those whose homelessness is more hidden). Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness did not originate at the provincial level; rather, local level entrepreneurs, many of whom were Calgary-based, succeeded in redefining homelessness and used that new definition to build a political coalition of supporters, including powerful actors at the provincial level.

After the Second World War, the Province of Alberta, like other provinces, built social housing in partnership with the federal government. Slowly but steadily, the province added to its housing supply through the 1970s and 1980s, largely targeting this housing at seniors. Indeed,
for much of its history, housing in Alberta was the responsibility of the Minister for Seniors, a clear indication that government-built housing was (and to a large extent still is) for that population. The 1981–2 annual report explains: “More than half of the corporation’s unit commitments, 2,070, were to the Senior Citizens Self-contained Program; a further indication of the priority which the government places on affordable housing for Alberta’s many pioneers” (Alberta Housing Corporation 1982; 3 emphasis added). An additional 366 units of “hotel-like” accommodation for seniors were also included. Less than one-third of the units committed for construction in 1981 (1,138) were through the Community Housing Program and intended for low-income families.

By 1992, there were just under 40,000 units of social housing in Alberta, including municipal non-profit housing that was provincially subsidized (Alberta Ministry of Municipal Affairs 1992), 21,906 units of which were for seniors. By prioritizing seniors who were (and continue to be) framed as “pioneers,” Alberta’s early housing policy made clear its very narrow understanding of its role in producing social protection for those in housing need and those, also narrowly defined, as most deserving. The government’s responsibility to produce social protection was limited to those who were perceived to have done their share, following a model more of social insurance rather than protection. While some government-funded housing was made available for low-income Albertans (approximately 25 per cent), the idea that tended to prevail and guide provincial involvement was that the private sector provided most of the social protection needed by vulnerable people.

Following federal cuts to social housing in the 1990s, the province stopped funding new social housing developments, going so far as to halt developments and commitments already under way. As a result, the province’s social housing stock did not grow during the 2000s. Indeed, Maroine Bendaoud (2016) notes that while a small number of units of social or affordable housing were constructed during the 1990s and early 2000s (drawing on funding that had been dedicated to housing in 1992–3), the province also sold off stock: “The ministry disposed of a total of 35 housing units that were surplus or no longer suitable for the ministry’s housing portfolio” (Alberta Seniors 2002, 26). Some units were built, but some were “disposed of,” meaning the total stock remained virtually unchanged.

In 1992, Ralph Klein was elected premier. He inherited an annual deficit of $3.3 billion and a provincial debt of $23 billion from his predecessor, Progressive Conservative Premier Don Getty (Gregg 2006). Bringing the party back to the “Conservative” side of Progressive Conservative, Klein made the economy his top priority and turned a deficit
into a surplus within a very short time, all without raising taxes. This change in the provincial economy was achieved through cuts, sometimes very deep. This was an ideological project. Social assistance incomes were cut by 20 per cent and eligibility requirements were heightened. In the early 1990s, Alberta already had the second-lowest social assistance rates in the country; by 2003, the province was second to none. Provincial cuts to housing were combined with these drastic cuts to social spending, earning Progressive Conservative Premier Ralph Klein the nickname “King Ralph the Deficit Slayer” (CBC News 2013b; Dabbs 2006). As a result of a growing population in Alberta, a federal freeze on new social housing developments, a booming economy (when not busting), lack of provincial interest in the housing sector, and further social spending cuts, the homeless population began to increase rapidly throughout Alberta in the 1990s and 2000s (Gaetz, Gulliver, and Richter 2014). The government’s actions and inactions during this period made clear that it did not view homelessness as a political or structural problem; rather, it was seen as an individual problem. People experiencing homelessness were met with indifference or worse by provincial public officials (CBC News 2013a).

In 2002, incentivized by the federal government’s new cost-sharing Affordable Housing Agreement, the Government of Alberta committed some funding to housing, matching the $67.12 million (over five years) federal investment. It would continue to match funding as the agreement was renewed. Between 2001 and 2011, Alberta produced 4,308 units of housing (CMHC 2011), much of which was for seniors but some of which was targeted at low-income Albertans and those with special needs (CMHC 2002). These provincial interventions were, however, modest when compared with those of other provinces (see Suttor 2016, 167). This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that by 2006, Alberta had amassed a significant budgetary surplus. But rather than investing that surplus in social policies, the government sent $600 to each Albertan. Nicknamed “Ralph bucks,” this use of a surplus underscores how resources on their own are not enough to drive policy involvement. This may be seen as ideological, and indeed it was consistent with Klein’s conservative agenda to reduce the size of government. But consider the case of BC during this same period: that province, also led by a right-of-centre party, having embarked on a similar cost-reduction exercise a few years earlier, made the different decision to reinvest in housing a few years after making cuts. This comparison with BC makes clear that ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection structure governments’ decisions about what to do with their resources.
By 2007, under the leadership of Ed Stelmach, housing needs were growing across Alberta, particularly in big cities like Calgary and Edmonton (Falvo 2017). Drawing on personal connections to key government officials, including the premier himself, Calgary-based actors communicated their concerns about the growing number of people experiencing homelessness in the province. These actors, primarily from the private sector, succeeded in placing homelessness on the province’s agenda and effectively manipulated ideas regarding the nature of homelessness to convince the province to join its efforts to combat it. Some of these ideas were partial or mistaken, and subsequent work in Calgary and at the provincial level made adjustments in light of an evolving understanding of homelessness, as will be noted below. At this key moment in history, however, homelessness was understood to be expensive and solvable; motivating this understanding of homelessness was a narrow definition of it, one that focused primarily on chronic homelessness and that viewed causes and solutions on the individual level.

In 2007, private-sector actors who had worked with the CHF on its ten-year plan met with influential officials at the provincial level, including ministers and deputy ministers responsible for housing, to explain the logic of an upfront investment to end homelessness and to make the case that this would result in significant long-run savings. As I will explain below, Calgary-based actors, including oil and gas mogul Steve Snyder, had been recently exposed to the idea of ending homelessness by Philip Mangano, former US President George W. Bush’s “point-person” on homelessness. Indeed, Mangano visited all cities under study here and is a key source spreading the idea of ending homelessness across the country. Journalist Susan Scott describes an important meeting in September 2007 between Premier Ed Stelmach and Steve Snyder, who was chair of Calgary’s committee to end homelessness (discussed below):

As soon as [Premier] Stelmach sat down, Snyder drew out a piece of paper and started to scribble diagrams explaining the effectiveness of ten-year plans both in human and economic terms. The catch? They required funding upfront before things could happen … Snyder, of course, had done his homework and had all the facts to back up the request for $1 billion over ten years. It took him twenty minutes to outline his case. “Will this work?,” Stelmach asked. “Yes, it will,” they assured him … Basically, Stelmach committed there and then to make something happen. (S. Scott 2012, 164–5)

As revealed by this focus on the cost-saving promise of ending homelessness, Snyder’s idea regarding the nature of homelessness was narrow, and the involvement he was asking for from the province was
accordingly also narrow (though it was significant compared to what other provinces were doing at the time, and certainly compared to what had previously been done in Alberta, in that it included requests for provincial investments in housing).

One month after meeting with Snyder, Premier Stelmach announced an Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. Yvonne Fritz, a Progressive Conservative MLA representing Calgary as well as Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs, would lead the secretariat; Snyder would chair it, all but ensuring that it would align with and indeed follow the work that had been done in Calgary: “Once again, it was a cut-and-paste job taking the best from other jurisdictions. Snyder brought with him all the knowledge and expertise acquired in putting together Calgary’s recently released plan. They also went to the US” (S. Scott 2012, 167). Plans to end homelessness were showing signs of success in places like Portland and New York, giving committee members confidence in their Housing First approach to ending homelessness, as Snyder explained in an interview: “That gives us confidence, if we can head in that direction, we should get the same results and hopefully we will get there first” (qtd in CBC News 2009).

In March 2009, following the implementation of seven local plans to end homelessness across Alberta, the province introduced a ten-year plan to end homelessness, the first such provincial plan in the country. Informed by a Housing First philosophy, the plan listed five priority areas for action: “Better information; aggressive assistance; coordinated systems; more housing options; effective policies” (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness 2008, 18). It promised to house 11,000 homeless Albertans within ten years and estimated that to do so it would need to construct some 8,000 new units of affordable housing specifically for people experiencing homelessness. In addition to this commitment to housing, the plan insisted on a new approach to ending homelessness:

Addressing homelessness requires integrated, cross-ministerial work, and efforts from a number of sectors and social organizations. It will also require a fundamental change in thinking. This is the crux of the Plan for Alberta. The Plan changes the way homelessness is addressed. Rather than spending money on more shelter spaces to accommodate more homeless Albertans, the Plan shifts the system to focus on housing and moving the homeless to more self-reliance. (Alberta Secretariat for Action On Homelessness 2008, 7)

An important part of Alberta’s efforts, then, was extensive coordination between levels of government and within the local service system.
Alberta was an early adopter of this coordinated approach to homelessness, particularly between the provincial government and local groups, but also at the local level and within the provincial administration as well. There are important strengths to this approach, and Alberta should be given credit for identifying the need to work across departments at the provincial level as well as across scales of governance in its efforts to fight homelessness (Quebec has also made efforts to coordinate different departments at the provincial level). In the end, the plan did not succeed; even so, Alberta’s intergovernmental, multilevel, internal coordination is (along with Quebec’s effort) an important case study in the importance of coordinated and collaborative governance.

In Alberta’s plan, the causes of homelessness were seen to be multiple, though no formal definition was given: “The reasons behind the increase in homelessness are many and complex, rooted in fiscal, social and policy decisions over many years” (Alberta Secretariat for Action On Homelessness 2008, 2). The plan also identified four “types” of homelessness: chronic, transient, working, and family. Alberta’s plan is the only one considered in this book to include the category of “working” homelessness. Like the broader definition, this understanding of “working homelessness” hints at structural causes and reveals an important assumption made by those writing the plan – that people experience homelessness because of a simple inability to access housing. This assumption was bolstered by some evidence from the local level, notably a study titled *Homeless Not Jobless* by a large homeless shelter in Calgary that found that many homeless people were working part- or even full-time. Indeed, interviews with key local and provincial actors suggested that many private-sector actors in Calgary felt that the increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness was in part due to their own efforts to create a booming economy in an environment that did not have enough housing for everyone attracted to the city for work (Calgary Drop-In 2007; personal interviews). On the one hand, this is naive, as homelessness is much more complicated than that. Yet on the other, it is also insightful and opens the door to a way of understanding homelessness much more broadly and as simply related to poverty and the unaffordability of housing. This “type” of homelessness has not appeared in any other Alberta plan since 2009.

The problem of homelessness was further conceptualized, repeatedly and in great detail in the plan, as costly. The provincial approach consistently noted that ending homelessness was “socially the right thing to do” but also insisted that “ending homelessness also makes economic sense for Alberta taxpayers” (Alberta Secretariat for Action On Homelessness 2008, 8). To elaborate on the cost savings, the plan
noted that the Government of Alberta was incurring direct and indirect costs related to homelessness, claiming that a person experiencing chronic homelessness cost taxpayers over $114,000 a year and that 3,000 people in the province were experiencing chronic homelessness. By contrast, the cost of providing housing and services to a person experiencing chronic homelessness was around $34,000 per year. Other forms of homelessness were less costly to “manage” as well as less costly to resolve, resulting in less significant cost savings, but savings nonetheless; an “employable” person was estimated to cost the system $21,600 per year while homeless, but the cost of providing housing and services would be $6,000 per year. In insisting that homelessness is an expensive problem and by going into such great detail about the costs associated with managing versus ending homelessness, government officials revealed that their understanding was narrow and that efforts would be focused on people experiencing chronic homelessness and thus assumed, by the province’s own calculations, to be most costly.

The Alberta plan also included a definition of what it means to end homelessness: “Even though there may still be emergency shelter available for those who become homeless, those who become homeless will be re-housed into permanent homes within 21 days” (Alberta Secretariat for Action On Homelessness 2008, 14). If achieved, this would mean the eventual closing of a significant number of homeless shelters in the province. This was an incredibly audacious goal given what studies have shown about the average length of chronic homelessness (710 days in Ontario [Aubry et al. 2013], 471 in BC [Rabinovitch, Pauly, and Zhao 2016]). The budget for Alberta’s plan was $3.316 billion over ten years (Alberta Secretariat for Action On Homelessness 2008, 11) but promised that ending homelessness would save $7.1 billion by 2019.

Seeking to update and adapt its plan, and responding to a recommendation of the Homelessness Secretariat (which had created the plan), in 2012 the province established an Interagency Council on Homelessness. Inspired by similar American institutions, the council was designed to bring different perspectives and stakeholders together to develop holistic solutions to homelessness and to advise the province on how to implement its ten-year plan. One of the actors involved described the council as “a very large cross-section of people. It has shelter providers, housing first providers, community-based organizations, private-sector people, police commissions, housing management bodies … There is a lot of diversity, and it is both rich and challenging” (personal interview 2014). This actor went on to note that the council included very senior members of the Alberta government, including five
deputy ministers (senior government officials are not usually included on similar American bodies, making the Alberta model comparatively more inclusive and collaborative [Doberstein and Reimer 2016]).

An immediate concern raised by the Interagency Council in March 2013 was youth homelessness. An actor involved on that council noted that certain groups had been overlooked in the original provincial plan: “We are constantly looking at how to make the plan successful. There were gaps, specialized populations that were not being served” (personal interview 2014). Following the council’s recommendation, in 2015 the province developed and implemented a plan to prevent and reduce youth homelessness. This youth plan was directly coordinated with the broader plan to end homelessness and was seen as important to its success:

The 10-year plan states that Albertans from specialized groups, including homeless youth, are dealing with particularly challenging issues, and require targeted responses to be rehoused. Supporting Health and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness aligns and is integral to work being led through the 10-year plan. The Youth Plan represents the next step in the 10-year plan and is a targeted response to a specialized population. (Government of Alberta 2015, 4)

A five-year review of the ten-year plan again identified “risks to the Plan’s success,” this time stressing the need to recommit to government-funded housing: “Development of new affordable housing for those experiencing homelessness has not kept pace with needs” (Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness 2014). The following year’s progress report identified “an approximate $1 billion shortfall in capital housing investments required to achieve the goals of Alberta’s Homelessness Plan” (Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness 2015, 17). The Interagency Council recommended that the Government of Alberta develop and implement a provincial housing strategy and prioritize housing supports.

Indeed, it was clear that the government was contributing to the 11,000 promised units of affordable housing, but they were not being targeted as promised. Interviews reveal that early on, the province succeeded in housing more than 9,000 previously unhoused people (personal interview 2014). Yet the number of homeless people remained high across the province. This is in part because the province fell far short of creating 8,000 new units specifically for people experiencing homelessness, as it originally committed to doing, meaning the affordable and supportive housing stock did not grow enough to permanently include all those experiencing homelessness. In 2009–10, for example,
2,899 units of housing were developed, but only 933 were for homeless people (Housing and Urban Affairs 2010); in 2010–11, 1,936 units of housing were developed, 581 for homeless people. In other words, about one-third of the new units developed in Alberta were for homeless people, as opposed to the promised two-thirds, meaning provincial contributions to supportive and deeply affordable housing stock were nowhere near what they needed to be in order to fulfil the promise to end homelessness.

While these risks to the plan’s success were being identified, the political winds in Alberta were changing, leading to the historic election of the NDP in 2015, led by Rachel Notley, after more than four decades of governance by the Progressive Conservatives. Under the NDP, the plan to end homelessness fell off the provincial government’s radar; it was mentioned specifically in the PCs’ 2009–12 fiscal plan (see Alberta Finance 2009, 35), yet it was not mentioned at all in the 2013–16 fiscal plan, nor was it in the NDP’s 2017–20 plan. Perhaps this was partly because the plan, by every indication, was not headed toward success. Indeed, the ten-year plan did not achieve its promised result of ending homelessness: the 2018 coordinated homeless count identified 5,735 people experiencing homelessness in the province (Turner Strategies 2018). The NDP government did not engage directly with the ten-year plan to end homelessness; however, it did recognize the increased need for housing and responded to an important recommendation from the Interagency Council by introducing a Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy in 2017. In that strategy, the province promised to invest $1.2 billion over five years in housing with the goal of creating 4,100 new and regenerated housing units by 2021 (2,100 new units and repairs to 2,000 existing affordable housing units) (Alberta Seniors and Housing 2017). Though the plan noted that it sought to help people “graduate” from Housing First programs into more independent forms of housing, it did not specifically identify ways of reducing or ending homelessness, or even the need for supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness. Rather, it focused on increasing the availability of affordable and government-supported housing and making that housing more inclusive and mixed.

After four years of NDP governance, the political pendulum swung back to the right. After winning the provincial election in 2019, Jason Kenney’s right-wing United Conservative Party cut funding to emergency homeless shelters in the province and announced a review of affordable housing (CBC News 2019a). Tellingly, the review sought to identify ways to minimize the government’s involvement and specifically to make it more efficient and more reliant on the private sector:
“[The review panel’s] work was guided by 3 questions: 1) How can we get more value for government spending on housing? 2) How can government address housing needs through the private sector? 3) What are the reasons people need subsidized housing and what role should government play?” (Government of Alberta 2020). The second question was a direct nod to ideas aligned with conservative ideology regarding the responsibility to produce social protection. Notably, according to provincial officials, the lead actor in social protection as it related to housing ought to be the private sector, with the province limiting itself to a support role.

**Calgary Homelessness History**

The local government in Calgary is not very involved in homelessness governance; indeed, of all municipal governments studied here, Calgary is the least involved by far. Calgary was the first city in the country to conduct a regular homeless count, beginning in the 1990s, but even that minimal role was transferred to the CHF in the mid-2000s. The city was an early supporter of the CHF’s ten-year plan to end homelessness and helped build an influential coalition of local actors to implement it and get the province on board. But this role was a supporting one, and even a former mayor of the city has said repeatedly that efforts to fight homelessness must be led by the business community. Under former Mayor Naheed Nenshi, the City of Calgary increased its involvement in poverty reduction, and though the city remains minimally involved in homelessness, Nenshi later became a powerful advocate for efforts to end homelessness as a part of broader COVID recovery efforts.

The city’s limited involvement in homelessness has been in part for institutional reasons, but actors in Calgary tend to overstate those reasons. It is true that the city has no formal jurisdiction for housing and that its housing-related powers are weak, but the same can be said for Montreal, which has recently increased its involvement in homelessness despite these institutional constraints. As I will explain, ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection have led the municipal government in Calgary to stand back in the fight against homelessness and instead support and advocate for other actors, first the province and then the CHF.

The city’s involvement in homelessness governance has been minimal. Even so, it is interesting that Calgary was the first big city in the country, by well over a decade, to regularly conduct homeless counts. Beginning in 1992, it began doing so every two years; this continued until 2008, when the responsibility was transferred to the CHF.
counts run by the city were designed to measure visible homelessness only, though the methodology for who that included would expand slowly and then suddenly in 2004. To help guide the counts, the city adopted a housing-based definition of homelessness: “Homeless persons are considered to be those who do not have a permanent residence to which they can return whenever they so choose” (Community and Neighbourhood Services, Policy and Planning Division 2006, 1). This strict emphasis on permanent residence, with no mention of adequate or affordable housing, meant that people living in overcrowded or unsafe environments were not necessarily considered homeless. This was a narrow understanding of homelessness, though the inclusion of choice (“whenever they so choose”) opens up the definition to a broader interpretation; people living in unsafe environments to which they cannot always return, for example, may be considered homeless.

In 1992, the homeless count included a survey of about twenty services providing emergency shelter to people experiencing homelessness. The survey included questions regarding shelter occupancy rates, as well as an observational count of people sleeping outside; it identified 447 people experiencing homelessness, five of whom were identified as sleeping outside (Policy and Planning Social Research Unit 2004). Through the 1990s, the counts gradually collected more information about people experiencing homelessness, including “observational” information regarding age, sex, and “racial features.” The subjective nature of the data collection (surveyors were asked for their observations, as opposed to asking people how they identified) renders these results highly questionable. The counts between 1992 and 2002 revealed a steady increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness, reaching 1,737 in 2002, including 117 people on the streets.

Significant changes were made to the city’s methodology in 2004, including the inclusion of an additional thirty-one services (which already existed in the city but had not been included in past counts) and an expanded street survey. This was in response to a community plan on homelessness, The Calgary Community Plan (reviewed below), which “resulted in the inclusion of many facilities and services that were not surveyed in previous counts” (Policy and Planning Social Research Unit 2004, iii). This had significant implications for the 2004 results and how they would be compared with past and future results. A perceived dramatic rise in the number of homeless people in Calgary would eventually be deployed to create a frightening, but exaggerated, scenario of a rapidly growing homeless population. Homelessness was growing rapidly during this period, to be sure, but putting the numbers in their proper context reveals that the growth, particularly after 2004, was
overstated. Indeed, there were reasons to believe that the trend was reversing:

In total, 2,597 homeless persons were enumerated [in 2004] … This represents an overall growth rate of 49% from 2002. However, had the number of facilities and service agencies surveyed in 2004 not been increased (by 138%) … the growth in homelessness over 2002 would have been only 23% – a substantial drop from the 2002 increase of 43% and a reversal of the “over 30% growth rate” trend seen in the preceding four counts” (Policy and Planning Social Research Unit 2004, iii; emphasis added)

The report went on to note that this was a cause for optimism, given the reversal of past trends, but that the good news risked being overshadowed by the stark increase in the final number.

In 2001, the province consolidated the provincial and municipal housing societies and transferred the responsibility for administering housing to municipalities (though the province kept the responsibility for funding housing, making this transfer not as disastrous as the Ontario government’s decision to transfer administration and funding responsibility; see chapter 6). To bring coherence to its housing interventions, the City of Calgary adopted a Corporate Affordable Housing Strategy in 2002, which identified a continuum of housing ranging from emergency shelters to homeownership and specified the city’s role in producing social protection across that continuum. Informed by the results of city-run homeless counts, which showed growing numbers of people experiencing homelessness, the Corporate Affordable Housing Strategy proposed that Calgary develop a homelessness strategy with the objective of clarifying the respective roles of the city, the Calgary Homeless Foundation, and the province (City of Calgary 2002). This was in part a response to a challenge faced by the city: the province was refusing to cover the costs associated with emergency shelters. The municipal government was left to provide emergency assistance to growing numbers of people needing emergency housing, an increasingly complex and expensive endeavour. To the extent that the city was involved in homelessness governance at this point, it was minimally and begrudgingly; the Homelessness Strategy was designed specifically to further limit the city’s involvement by pressuring the province to step up and fund. Ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection led city officials to seek to limit their role in homelessness; city officials now made clear that they viewed the province, not municipal government, as primarily responsible for producing social protection for those experiencing homelessness (including the provision of emergency shelters).
To develop the Homelessness Strategy, municipal officials first held a “deliberative dialogue” with people living in Calgary to determine how they understood homelessness and to ask for their perspectives on what the municipal role in homelessness should be. Tellingly, the title of the dialogue was “Who should pay to shelter the homeless?,” an indication of how core ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection were in guiding city actions. The conclusion of these deliberations was that the city had a responsibility to meet the emergency needs of those experiencing homelessness when the province would not do its share. Participants expressed scepticism that the province would do what was needed, however, and insisted that the city must be prepared to fill the gap:

Not only does the province have the constitutional mandate to see that the most basic needs of Albertans are met, but it also has responsibility for many areas that affect homelessness ... However, citizens are not confident that the Province will fulfil its role ... There must be a City budget allocation for homeless shelter costs when the Province’s allocations are insufficient. If this means increased taxes, the increase should be specified as necessary to fund care of the homeless because of the Province’s insufficient allocations. (Hargroup Research and Consulting 2004; emphasis added)

Though this was from the perspective of people living in Calgary, it is interesting to note their insistence that homelessness was not the city’s responsibility and that the city should step in only when absolutely necessary. What’s more, this suggested that when the city was forced to act (and spend), it should be prepared to assign blame to the province.

In addition to the deliberative dialogue, the city also consulted with key stakeholders, again asking who was responsible for paying the costs associated with emergency shelters. Immediately apparent was how few stakeholders were engaged during this consultation: when municipal homelessness plans and strategies were being formulated in Vancouver and Montreal, even during the early 2000s when homelessness was only just emerging as an important issue, hundreds of people and stakeholders were consulted. In Calgary, only three stakeholders participated – so few that they can be listed here by name: the CHF, the Salvation Army (an emergency shelter), and the Mustard Seed (an emergency shelter). The purpose of the engagement was to resolve the question of who should pay. In response, CHF CEO Terry Roberts clearly pointed to the province: “We are glad to see that it is the intention of the City to remain a key participant, even though the primary responsibilities lie with other orders of government” (Roberts 2004).
John Rook, writing on behalf of the Salvation Army, pushed for a centralized but collaborative approach: “Imagine what would happen if all funds received federally, provincially, and locally were the autonomous responsibility of one body. Then prevention, care and cure could all be part of a single, integrated plan which would also result in considerable cost savings throughout the entire system” (Rook 2004). Rook was describing the model that would eventually take hold in Calgary, with the CHF centrally controlling funding. Rook would become the CHF president a few years after writing this letter.

Floyd Perras, operating officer with the Mustard Seed, wrote a strongly worded letter in which he expressed some disagreement regarding the responsibility to produce social protection, accusing the city of not doing nearly enough: “There is much talk that homelessness is a provincial responsibility. Well homelessness is all our responsibility” (Perras 2004). He continued to push the city to increase its involvement, or at least to be more proactive and then request reimbursement from senior governments – an indication that he agreed that senior governments should ultimately be responsible:

The buck is just continuing to get passed off or blamed on another department or level of government. Who has the courage to say the buck stops here and we will take [sic] of our people. I believe the City of Calgary should take action and incur costs and if they feel it is provincial or federal responsibility send them a bill and if they do not pay take them to court. How important is it this winter to ensure everyone has a warm place to sleep. (Perras 2004)

In 2004, the city tabled its Homelessness Strategy, which was shaped by these ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection. Clearly, the city was seeking to limit its involvement in homelessness: “This Homelessness Strategy is an important clarification because care of the homeless falls clearly within the mandate of the Province of Alberta (Canadian Constitution 92:7) but is a very local issue, and one which the municipality often feels pressure to address” (Community Services 2004; emphasis added). It stressed that the city should continue to advocate for the province to invest, but if the province would not, “contributions of City resources should be publicized as the City covering Province’s cost” (Calgary Neighbourhoods 2004). Incredibly, the city’s involvement in homelessness governance during this time was limited to strategizing ways to limit its involvement and push the province to act. And though the city’s involvement in the homeless counts was significant, even reports of the counts noted that providing homelessness services
was not a responsibility of the municipal government, illustrating how deeply held this idea regarding the responsibility to produce social protection was at the time, and how that responsibility was believed to lie with the province: “Municipalities are not mandated to provide for the basic needs of residents such as food, shelter, health care, or education, which are provincial responsibilities” (City of Calgary 2008).

City officials accepted, albeit reluctantly and only when absolutely necessary, a role in funding some services for those experiencing homelessness. However, by 2008 the CHF was gaining strength and in the process of creating a ten-year plan to end homelessness. In 2008, the city transferred the responsibility to conduct the homeless counts to the CHF. The CHF has been organizing the counts ever since, and the city’s involvement has remained minimal. A Calgary city official said that this transfer from the city to the CHF was in keeping with the city’s role in social issues: “The purpose of [the community and neighbourhood services that conducted the early homeless counts] unit was really to identify emerging issues, do the research, bring it to light. And then, in an ideal world you can transfer it to the community to own and to move forward. You might say that this is an example of how this has worked really well” (personal interview 2014). We again see the idea here that the city should not lead the fight against homelessness. But there was a more significant shift in its understanding of the responsibility to produce social protection. Until the mid-aughts, the city viewed the province as primarily responsible; that changed in 2008, when city officials came to see the CHF as the lead actor. This change happened, as I will note below, as the CHF was growing in influence and began to develop and implement a ten-year plan to end homelessness.

City officials were strong supporters of the ten-year plan and contributed to its development. David Bronconnier, who was mayor of Calgary while the ten-year plan was being developed, has stated repeatedly that fighting homelessness is not and should not be the responsibility of the city of Calgary: “It couldn’t be a City of Calgary solution; it had to be a community-based solution” (qtd in S. Scott 2012, 55). A senior city official confirmed this in an interview: “I said ‘Look, I was born and raised in this city. This will not be successful if it is the mayor standing up and saying ‘I am going to run it.’ It needs to be seen as a community-driven initiative. It needs to be owned by the community” (personal interview 2014). To specify what they meant by “community,” they added: “It needs a private sector business leader to lead.”

Mayor Bronconnier’s support of the plan was important to its evolution, for it signalled that it was a serious plan with support of people across society. But even city councillors who were interested in
homelessness contended that other actors were better positioned to respond to the needs of the homeless population. Responding to a question about why the municipality was not involved in homelessness governance, a Calgary city councillor first insisted, in keeping with a long line of city officials before them, that homelessness was not a matter of local jurisdiction: “Officially, the city doesn’t really do anything with homelessness. It is not the city’s role, not the municipal government’s role to deal with homelessness. It is fully provincial or federal sphere. The city doesn’t officially play in the homeless world” (personal interview 2014).

When pushed to consider that homelessness could be seen as the responsibility of a number of actors and does not fall neatly into any single jurisdiction, this councillor acquiesced:

There are a lot of things that the city does that are not in its jurisdiction, but it steps in and does it out of necessity. Hell, we were just talking about that this morning in Council. We haven’t done it [with respect to homelessness] because we actually have some active and strong organizations – the CHF, the Drop-In Centre, the Mustard Seed – that are working reasonably well. So we support them as opposed to stepping in and doing the job ourselves. (personal interview 2014)

Many highly placed actors, even those deeply interested in and sympathetic to the issue of homelessness, limit their involvement because they understand that the CHF has assumed leadership of the issue and is better positioned to produce social protection.

To be clear, the City of Calgary’s institutional powers are limited. The city obtained density bonusing powers in 2013, but that has not led to much affordable housing, in part because rental and condominium developments in Calgary have been slower to roll out than in Vancouver and Toronto. Former Mayor Nenshi tried to use the power of persuasion to convince developers to contribute to affordable housing in the city, but with little success (Mason 2014). Cities in Alberta were given power over inclusionary zoning in 2017 through amendments to the Municipal Government Act, which will allow Calgary to apply leverage to current and future developments so as to generate affordable housing. While these powers could be used in a meaningful way in the future, especially if private-sector development expands, they were not available to the city when the CHF was gaining power. And in any event, these powers are weaker in Calgary than they are in Vancouver and Toronto.

With respect to density bonusing, the city’s ability to forge agreements is limited to certain neighbourhoods, and developers are given the choice
of which public amenity they will give. As affordable housing is expensive, public amenities tend to be public art (Barrett 2014). Furthermore, Calgary developers may not even be interested in entering into DBAs or building new developments that require, through inclusionary zoning by-laws, something in return. These agreements eat into their profits, especially because developers can always build less dense developments at the edge of the city (where land is plentiful, unlike in Vancouver).

In other words, land in Calgary is not as limited as it is in Vancouver and Toronto, so developments can and do sprawl. A senior official at the Calgary Housing Corporation put this very plainly in an interview. Walking over to their corner-office window, they said to me:

Look anywhere you want, look at the skyline. The only place that has high-rises is the core of the city. When you look everywhere else you won’t see more than 2 or 3 stories… When you get ten feet out of Vancouver heading east, you run into Burnaby, then Coquitlam, and on and on. Ten feet outside of Calgary in any direction, you are in fields. So the land has a different pressure. [In Toronto and Vancouver] you can’t go out, so you have to go up. In Calgary, we can keep going out, there is no one for hundreds of miles. (personal interview 2014)

The value of the density bonusing power in Calgary’s context is thus limited by the ready availability of land on which to build new developments. In this context of increasing population, low vacancy rates, and rising housing prices, rental housing is becoming somewhat more common as developers have begun to see value in rental developments (Mason 2014), though not nearly enough are being built to meet the acute need for rental and affordable housing in Calgary.

When it comes to conceptions of local government, officials in Calgary have historically seen a limited role for the municipality beyond day-to-day, bread-and-butter issues. A former senior official with the city acknowledged that municipalities are sometimes left to deal with issues that no one else wants to, such as homelessness, and said that in a sense this is appropriate, as municipalities are well positioned to intervene: “In fairness to other orders of government, local governments generally speaking can respond much quicker than a provincial or federal government. Cities are the closest to the people” (personal interview 2014). They went on, however, to stress that in their opinion, the city’s role tends to be day-to-day – “this building, the bus that just went by, that police officer, the water that made this cup of coffee” are responsibilities of City Hall, whereas what they called “larger issues” like employment are provincial ones.
None of this is meant to imply, however, that city officials are not bothered by homelessness or do not feel compelled to act. The resistance to funding emergency shelters is well-documented and goes back nearly two decades, but that does not mean the city is disengaged from all areas of social policy. Under Mayor Nenshi, the city adopted a Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2011. Working in partnership with Vibrant Communities Calgary and the United Way, Calgary has extended its involvement in poverty reduction to 2023. The plan *Enough for All 2.0* seeks to reduce poverty rates in Calgary by 30 per cent by 2023 and, in so doing, ensure that “all Calgarians live in a strong, supportive, and inclusive community; all Calgarians have sufficient income and assets to thrive; all Indigenous People are equal participants in Calgary’s future” (Refresh Steering Committee 2019). With this project, the city is seeking to work inclusively and collaboratively to reduce poverty. In this instance, the city has remained involved in poverty reduction instead of fully passing it off to a foundation, as one city official noted tends to happen.

The city’s Corporate Affordable Housing Strategy (2016–25) is another example of increasing involvement in the production of social protection. That strategy notes that other cities, such as Vancouver and Regina, are making significant contributions to affordable housing, and concludes that Calgary, too, must take more meaningful action (City of Calgary 2016). This interest in increasing its involvement in housing and poverty reduction is meaningful and speaks to a willingness on the part of city officials to engage in areas extending beyond their delineated powers. As made clear by Nenshi’s efforts for a City Charter, which were successful in 2018, city officials are seeking more powers so as to play a larger and more meaningful role. In light of what we just learned about the city’s reluctance to involve itself in homelessness, this may seem puzzling. Ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection explain why this is so. The city has been particularly reluctant to become involved in homelessness because other actors, first the province and then, more enduringly, the CHF, have been seen as primarily responsible for producing social protection for those experiencing homelessness. The CHF has a particularly important role in this history and in structuring the actions of municipal, provincial, and even federal governments, and it is to this final piece of the puzzle that we now turn.

**Civil Society**

The private sector is more involved in homelessness governance in Calgary than in the other cities in this study. The third sector was organized outside of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) in the 1990s,
but the CHF slowly, then suddenly, took up more space in homelessness governance in the mid-aughts. There were two important changes in the involvement of local groups in homelessness governance: first, in the mid-2000s the CHF significantly increased its involvement in homelessness governance; then, in the mid-2010s, local actors, led by the CHF, began lobbying more aggressively for increased senior government, particularly federal involvement. Much of the following section, therefore, considers how the private sector channelled its involvement in homelessness governance through the CHF.

The private sector’s strong involvement is in part a function of its substantial resources, notably its financial resources and business knowledge, as well as the informal, personal connections many business leaders have with senior government officials. Leveraging personal connections, private-sector actors have been able to convince local and provincial governments to support and invest in their efforts. They also brought money and expertise to the table. But the availability of resources does not on its own explain the significant involvement of the private sector; to fully understand this, we also have to consider ideas. Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection exerted a powerful influence on these changing governance dynamics. In the mid-2000s, there was broad (but not universal) agreement across scales of government and sectors that the responsibility for ending homelessness is not a sole or even primary responsibility of government and that there is and should be a leadership role for the private sector. Over time, actors have come to see a more substantial role for governments in the production of social protection for people experiencing homelessness, and the CHF has become more proactive in building relationships and interacting with local groups and senior governments. This change in the CHF’s involvement and interactions with other actors was driven by key officials at the CHF as they broadened their understanding of homelessness. Though homelessness has always been understood as directly related to housing, and though there has consistently been a prioritization of people who are chronically homeless, there has also been an important shift in focus, from individual causes in the early aughts to more structural and systemic causes in the mid-2010s.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, before the CHF gained significant influence in homelessness governance, third-sector groups in Calgary were organized in the area of homelessness. Drawing on the expertise and local knowledge of service providers, in 1996, city councillor Bob Hawkesworth and PC MLA Bonnie Laing led an Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness; as the name suggests, this was designed to be a temporary body created to address homelessness in the city. This committee
was concerned about the increasing number of people experiencing homelessness and set out to understand the problem by conducting a number of influential studies, including *Homelessness in Calgary* and the Street Speaks survey (Doberstein 2016). The committee eventually changed its name to the Community Action Committee on Housing and Homelessness (CACHH) and would remain influential for more than ten years. It brought together not just service providers but also an impressive number and variety of sectors across the city, creating a space for organizations to learn from one another and to collaborate. With eight subsections representing different sectors and interests, it was, according to Doberstein, “the most elaborate community deliberative process of decision making on homelessness programs among the networks compared in Canada” (2016, 141).

Working with the CHF, the committee created a plan on homelessness, the *Calgary Community Plan 2004–2008*. The community plan used the UN’s definition of homelessness, which distinguished between “absolute” and “relative” homelessness and noted that all homeless people have two things in common: “the absence of safe, affordable housing and the experience of poverty” (CHF 2004, 6). In linking the experience of homelessness with poverty, and in insisting that homelessness results not just from a lack of housing but from a lack of “safe” housing and poverty, this early community plan adopted a definition of homelessness that was comparatively broad in both the Canadian context and the Calgary context. While the plan noted the importance of prevention and of prioritizing services for people who experience homelessness despite no perceived “barriers” to housing (such as untreated mental illness or drug use), it proposed to focus the majority of its resources (62.5 per cent) on people with so-called multiple barriers who experience chronic homelessness.

The 2004–8 plan developed by the CACHH highlighted the need for more housing in Calgary, specifically the need for 1,000 transitional units and 2,000 non-market units. The insistence on the need for transitional housing is important, as it indicates that this plan followed the “treatment first” model. The plan itself defined transitional housing as “short or long-term accommodation while assistance is obtained to address problems such as unemployment, addictions, mental health issues, educational deficits, physical and cognitive disabilities, and domestic violence” (CHF 2004, 9). Before accessing permanent housing, people experiencing homelessness were in many cases required to pass through this transitional phase, which, in the treatment-first model, was implemented to ensure they were “housing ready.” As I will explain below, only a few years later, the CHF would position itself in
total opposition to this approach. Yet when the 2004 plan was first introduced, the CHF was tasked with implementing it.

Though the CHF began to increase its role in homelessness governance in 2006, it was originally set up by prominent Calgary businessman Art Smith in the 1990s when he was distraught to learn about increasing homelessness in the city (Scott 2012). Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection, strongly linked at this time, drove this involvement of private-sector leaders. According to the CHF documents recounting this history, Art Smith was a giant in the city, referred to as an “elder statesman” (CHF 2008) and earning the nickname “Mr Calgary.” He cared for his city and the people who lived there. These accounts also suggest that he was driven by an understanding of homelessness that was partial and viewed it as largely resulting from a housing shortage. He also felt that the business community, having created so many jobs, was responsible in that it had attracted people to the city at a time when there was not enough housing. It followed, for Smith, that the private sector held some responsibility for finding solutions. John Currie, a former oil and gas executive, told Calgary-based journalist Susan Scott, “[Smith] thought corporate Calgary could solve [homelessness]” (quoted in Scott 2012, 16).

Smith’s wife, Betty Ann, reinforced the perspective that Smith felt business had a responsibility for the sudden increase in homelessness in Calgary. Scott writes: “[Smith’s wife] Betty Ann adds that Smith felt that corporate Calgary was largely responsible for the crisis by ‘painting a golden picture of the West enticing people to come. And, they did. They piled their families into cars and came’” (16). Behind this were important assumptions about the nature of homelessness – that it was about a lack of housing supply. Furthermore, and this is a common theme in a number of interviews and documents regarding private-sector involvement more generally, there was a sense that Calgary was becoming a great city, and that homelessness, for economic and public perception reasons, stood to get in the way of that. There was a group of businesspeople who believed they were helping transform Calgary into a major city: “[Smith] was part of that group and if he saw anything that would detract from becoming that city, he would jump on it” (16).

Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the private sector’s responsibility for addressing it led Smith to work with a small group of friends and allies to build the CHF. Things started off somewhat modestly, with a limited private-sector role. Smith took to lobbying friends in the oil and gas industry and the provincial government for contributions ranging from $1 million investments to office space to get the foundation up and running. In the 1990s and early 2000s,
the CHF was involved in raising awareness about homelessness and starting a few small pilot projects, but homelessness did not become a significant issue on the public agenda until the mid-2000s, when the number of people experiencing homelessness began to grow quickly. Noticing this, a few key entrepreneurs, including oil and gas mogul Jim Gray and then-president of the CHF Terry Roberts, felt compelled to do more with the CHF to respond to the needs of those experiencing homelessness. Doing more, however, required a coalition, and they set about building one. Specifically, Roberts knew that the CHF needed a powerful coalition, including private sector buy-in, to respond more effectively to the needs of those experiencing homelessness; to that end, he invited Philip Mangano to hold a breakfast event in Calgary in 2006. Mangano had been US President George W. Bush’s point-person on homelessness in the United States, and this lent him authority in policy discussions and credibility with the business community in particular. The goal was to attract private-sector support for the mission to build the CHF into a more powerful agency capable of ending homelessness.

Mangano’s visit to Calgary had the intended effect of galvanizing powerful groups to rally around the goal of ending homelessness. Key to his pitch was a different way of understanding homelessness. Central to this story are ideas; homelessness would be redefined in Calgary in 2006 and then promoted across the city (and the country) to facilitate the construction of powerful coalitions. At the breakfast event, Mangano made what is often called the “business case” for ending homelessness. This new way of understanding homelessness had two important dimensions: the fact that it is possible to end, not manage, homelessness, and that doing so would save money: “Mangano spoke passionately about the economic case for addressing chronic homelessness and about a new ten-year planning model that was showing some remarkable results south of the border” (Calgary Homeless Foundation 2008, 44). This involved orienting services to people experiencing chronic homelessness and adopting the Housing First approach, which would provide immediate access to permanent housing with supports. This approach was effective, Mangano insisted, and would result in cost savings.

Ending homelessness through a ten-year plan based on a Housing First approach stood in contrast to the way things were being done in Calgary at the time: recall that the 2004–8 plan developed by the CACHH identified the need for new transitional housing, identifying that form of housing as the first step out of homelessness before permanent housing. Following this redefinition of homelessness, and a belief in the promise of Housing First, actors involved with the CHF created a new committee comprised mainly of private-sector groups,
which would draft a new plan motivated by these ideas. The CACHH was thus sidelined as a growing coalition, led by private-sector actors, committed to ending homelessness.

At the breakfast in Calgary, Mangano was well-received by the crowd, particularly by the business-sector attendees: “Excitement rippled through the business crowd; they looked like they ‘had discovered the moon,’ recalls a social worker. Roberts remembers thinking that the visit was at just the right moment to give the cause a boost and that Mangano had the credentials in the US to prove ten-year plans could work” (Scott 2012, 74–5). CHF reports identify this event as the spark for future action, not mentioning the previous community-based work that had been done since the 1990s to respond to homelessness (CHF 2008). Won over by Mangano’s redefinition of homelessness and the idea of ending it (and saving money while doing so), Gray and Wayne Stewart, who had replaced Terry Roberts as CEO of the CHF, set about using the idea to build a coalition committed to that goal, specifically a plan to end homelessness in ten years.

This marked the beginning of a prolonged period of private-sector involvement, even leadership, in homelessness governance in Calgary. This involvement of the private sector in homelessness governance was in part due to the financial resources at its disposal. Drawing on the example of a pilot project the CHF wanted to run, but that was being held back by a lack of funding, an actor explained the significance of these resources for enabling action and involvement: “[A pilot project we wanted to run] was going to cost $400,000 and we didn’t have the money. We had a sense that the money was coming, we had put in a grant application. Then one of the guys on the committee said, ‘$400,000 eh? If you don’t get the money, I’ll write you the cheque. Just start’” (personal interview 2014). Using the example of Mayor Nenshi’s poverty reduction strategy, which is a partnership between the city and the United Way, as a contrast to the CHF, an actor explained: “[Mayor Nenshi] constructed the poverty reduction strategy and it had to represent all facets of community … He has two co-chairs, they are pretty good but they are not CEOs … Neither one of them could write a cheque for $400,000. So we are fumbling around, playing on the edges, running pilots, and I don’t think we have helped a poor person yet” (personal interview, 2014). Saying that private-sector leadership was needed to make the CHF successful, this person concluded, “We know that in Calgary. We know that is how you get things done.”

There was a further sense that business-sector expertise was needed in the fight against homelessness. This is not, to be clear, information about the homeless population or the most innovative solutions to
homelessness; rather, it is about project management. Reflected in many interviews and directly in the early plans was the sense that the resources required to solve homelessness – health care, rental housing, social services – were already mostly available in Calgary but were not being properly used or accessed. The private sector just needed to put things together. Given their experience managing complex problems and the guidance they had received from Mangano, private-sector leaders were considered to have valuable expertise in this respect. And while the private sector does not have an institutionalized role in policy-making at the provincial or local level, their informal, personal connections with senior policy-makers, including premiers and mayors, have allowed them to in many ways drive the public agenda, as noted earlier in this chapter (Feng, Li, and Langford 2014; Miller and Smart 2012).

Yet these resources still needed to be oriented to the fight against homelessness. Powerfully directing these resources toward homelessness in the mid-aughts were ideas. Private-sector actors were motivated by the idea that social protection production should not be left to governments alone. A former president of the CHF was clear that the private sector’s role in this process was key: “In my view, major changes to policy in something as revolutionary as ending homelessness, the impetus for those changes rarely comes from within government. It is the political influence of players in different communities. But typically, if you look at major changes in policy, there is an external stimulus” (personal interview 2014). Interestingly, this “external stimulus” and the private sector’s role in policy development ultimately led to a re-engagement with governments, albeit in a limited way at first that did not involve major institutional or structural changes.

Another actor was more pointed: “The problem with government, and you can quote me on this, is it’s bureaucratic. Process becomes more important than results” (personal interview, Stewart 2014). Curious about these views regarding the responsibility to produce social protection, I asked him: “Is government better suited to ending homelessness than a foundation?” He responded: “Really?! Who is going to say that?” I replied: “Government people.” “They are full of shit!,” he replied, adding that “we do more with less.” A former president of the CHF had a slightly different view, explaining that the foundation was not giving the provincial government a reason not to act, but in fact was doing the opposite: “In Calgary, the CHF taking on a plan to end homelessness and the other seven cities were able to get the Province of Alberta to commit to ending homelessness specifically. So it’s the opposite of letting the government off the hook, it is making them accountable for the things they should have been doing anyway” (personal interview 2014).
Indeed, the province and the municipal government were persuaded to support the ten-year plan and then the province was persuaded to adopt its own and to increase investments in supportive and affordable housing. So while the government has a role to play in producing social protection, it is interesting to note here that the private sector saw itself playing a leadership role in guiding government toward the right solutions. Yet even this is consistent with ideas regarding a limited role for government in the production of social protection: the province became involved but followed the advice of private-sector actors in what to do.

Though important, ideas regarding the limited role of government in the production of social protection do not explain the drastic increase in private-sector involvement in homelessness governance, which would turn the CHF into a much more powerful organization than it had originally been designed to be. A second idea, a particularly magnetic one – that ending homelessness is possible and will save money – led to the creation of a powerful local governance network committed specifically to ending homelessness. After the breakfast with Mangano where the business case for homelessness was made, Steve Snyder, the influential CEO of TransAlta, was asked to oversee the effort to develop a ten-year plan to end homelessness in Calgary. Snyder was recruited to lead the plan’s development in part because of his position in the community and his extensive network; recall that it was Snyder who had sat down with Premier Stelmach and persuaded him to invest provincial money in housing and homelessness. At first, Snyder resisted, recalling to journalist Susan Scott that his initial response to being asked was “No, I don’t know anything about [homelessness]. I’m an observer. I don’t know the facts. I’m not qualified. I’m just a business guy.” But when presented with the business case, and with the idea that homelessness can be ended, “I knew then they had me” (qtd in Scott 2012, 92).

Having been won over, Snyder set to work building the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH), which was tasked with overseeing the development of a plan to end homelessness. Tim Richter, a former oil and gas lobbyist with TransAlta, was approached to lead the development of the ten-year plan. Richter accepted and has been one of the most powerful leaders in the field of homelessness ever since. These leaders were key to the development of a powerful coalition in Calgary, a city where private-sector leadership is needed to “get things done,” as was explained in many interviews. This is consistent with past studies of urban governance in Calgary, which have found that influence is not evenly spread among private-sector actors; instead, there are a small number of people – around 300, according to the title of one book chapter on urban governance in Calgary – who exercise
considerable influence (Feng, Li, and Langford 2014). While I did not hear mention of a specific number of influential people, several people I interviewed told me there is a small number of influential actors in Calgary and that if you want to get something done, you need one of them on board. A former CEO of the CHF told me: “Calgary has some very big, very wealthy, heavy hitters who try to run things. They only get one vote, but they have tons of influence. More than anywhere I have ever worked. And they want it their way. So you have got to get those guys on your side” (personal interview 2014). Steve Snyder, by all accounts, is one of those people who can get things done, so long as he can be won over. Roberts and Gray won him over with the idea of ending homelessness, and he set to work building a coalition, and influencing government, to implement that vision.

The idea of ending homelessness was used to build a larger coalition. Snyder and the oil and gas CEOs he recruited to the CCEH and the CHF undoubtedly felt a human concern for homelessness (personal interviews 2014). But over and over again in interviews, people identified the idea that homelessness could be ended and that money could be saved in the process as key to their decision to join the coalition to develop and implement the plan to end homelessness. One actor who had previously refused to align with the plan explained how they were ultimately won over to the effort:

I was approached by two people from the CHF… They walked into my office and said: “We would like to invite you to join a committee to end homelessness in ten years.” I said: “You are going to end it? I am used to people walking in the door and saying ‘we have a problem with homelessness let’s cut it back by 25 per cent or something like that’… So I said “I’ll join and do whatever I can.” … It costs you less money, you save money. There are people out there who have no faith, but they understand economics. The current situation costs $110,000 but our solution costs $45,000. They understand there’s a big change there. There is a lot of savings here.

This same idea was used to convince others to join the coalition: “We just said ‘Hey, this is a cost saving measure’” (personal interview 2014).

The idea of ending homelessness also attracted service providers, reflecting the power of a magnetic idea to attract a wide range of groups. Perhaps some were attracted to the idea of ending homelessness by its money-saving potential, but for others in the homeless-serving sector, the idea was attractive for its human rights and social justice orientation to homelessness. Coming from this second perspective was Alpha House, an important ally in the CHF’s efforts and itself something of a
black sheep in Calgary because of its commitment to harm reduction. It was the lowest-barrier shelter in a city where many churches and other faith-based services required sobriety and ran abstinence-based programs. Working with a population that was excluded elsewhere, often because of intoxication, service providers with Alpha House were quickly on board with the idea of ending homelessness through permanent, Housing First solutions. Kathy Christiansen, the Executive Director of Alpha House, told Scott: “I always thought it was weird that you shouldn’t be housed, especially with addictions, that you had to earn the right through sobriety” (qtd in Scott 2012, 78). Permanent housing, rather than transitional housing or more shelter spaces, as a solution to homelessness was intuitive for the people at Alpha House, who were early supporters of the CHF as a result of their ideational agreement on the idea of ending homelessness through Housing First. Their support lent community credibility to the effort.

Yet these powerful, magnetic ideas also pushed some actors away from the CHF in the early days of the ten-year plan’s development. Actors that did not join in the CHF efforts also referred to this magnetic idea – and their opposition to it. One actor who opposed the CHF’s plan early on laughed when I asked whether it is possible to end homelessness: “Oh god no” (personal interview 2014). This actor went on to explain the role shelters play: “I don’t think closing shelters is the issue, nor should it be. I think shelters play an important role in providing wraparound services to individuals. And I can only speak for our shelter, but I know that when there is a need, we will create a program to address the need” (personal interview 2014). Though this disagreement was profound, actors who disagreed with the CHF’s approach were unable to effectively challenge the CHF because they failed to craft a counter-narrative powerful enough to win over and draw the support of influential private-sector actors in the city. In other words, they were unable to identify ideas that were powerful enough to build a coalition of their own and counter those advanced by the CCEH and the CHF. As a result, previously powerful actors, including community groups with significant influence and experience in the area of homelessness, such as the Drop-In Centre, were marginalized early on by the CHF and its governance network.5

Though the coalition that was built included third-sector groups, senior leadership of the CHF would become dominated by the private sector. This was following a recommendation from the CCEH (led by Snyder) (CHF 2008). A former CEO of the CHF said in an interview: “We said okay, we’ll get input from [service providers and community groups], but not on the leadership team. So those people were on the subcommittees” (personal interview 2014). This is in contrast
Multiple Barriers

to the CACHH, which existed in the 1990s and directly involved service providers and put their expertise to use for developing solutions to homelessness. The decision to prioritize private-sector leadership on the board was criticized by some community groups, including the Executive Director of a large shelter, who felt that the CCEH and the CHF were ignoring their expertise during the development of the new plan:

We have been in the business for almost fifty-three years … Look at the homeless foundation, they have had a number of people leading the organization, CEOs, who wanted to bring in a business model. The board was more heavily weighted with people from the business community. They felt that we didn’t know what we were doing. That it needed a business model to turn homelessness around. What they didn’t realize is just how complex human behaviour is. (personal interview 2014) 

The development of the CHF plan was led by private-sector representatives. It involved community groups, to be sure, but it was heavily influenced by American plans to end homelessness, as confirmed in interviews and CHF documents: “We were importing a model from the US, hook, line, and sinker. Everything was off the shelf. We relied a lot on the [American] National Alliance to End Homelessness and Housing First stuff. We constructed our plan to end homelessness following the essentials of the American model and adapting it to Canada and to Calgary” (personal interview 2014; see also CHF 2008). With a powerful leadership committee, guidance from American cities, and support from enough service providers to run pilot projects and participate in the plan’s implementation, the first version of the CHF’s plan was introduced in 2008. It was bold in its language, promises, and targets: “Efforts to end the homelessness crisis have focused in recent years on increasing the number of beds, shelters, and services available to the homeless. These efforts have increased our capacity to manage homelessness. We believe a new approach is needed to end it” (CHF 2008, 6). Those approaches included a strong focus on Housing First, which showed (and continues to show) promise in helping people experiencing chronic homelessness to access and maintain housing.

Targets were audacious. They included “the elimination of family homelessness in two years, the retirement of 50 percent of Calgary’s emergency shelter beds within five years, an 85 percent reduction in the chronic homeless population within five years with the complete elimination of chronic homelessness in seven years, and a reduction in the maximum average stay in emergency shelters to less than 7 days by the end of 2018” (CHF 2008, 3). This is similar to what had been promised
in the provincial plan, evidence of cross-level and sector collaboration during this period, albeit to achieve an all but impossible target. The first principle of the plan was cast as follows: “Ending homelessness is a collective responsibility. This includes those experiencing homelessness who must take personal ownership and accountability in ending their homelessness” (CHF 2008, 9). There would also be heavy reliance on the private sector: “This is not a plan that expects government to shoulder the full burden” (CHF 2008, 2). As a principle, “the use of markets will be maximized by involving the private sector in the implementation of our 10 Year Plan” (CHF 2008, 9). The role of individuals and the private sector in the production of social protection was built right into the plan.

The plan called for major policy changes, but a close read reveals that those changes were not the systemic changes that advocates have long called for, such as increased social assistance incomes and, crucially, government investment in housing; rather, they involved tweaks around the edges of policies and systems. For example, in the ten-year plan there was no demand for government-built, or at least government-supported, housing. Rather, to limit the government’s investment in housing and to maximize “the use of markets,” the plan insisted that the members of its powerful leadership committee lobby governments for legislative changes to provide the city with density-bonusing and inclusionary-zoning powers. These changes would place the primary responsibility for building housing on private-sector developers. Furthermore, rather than reform systems often viewed as “creating” homelessness, such as the child welfare system and the justice system, the plan proposed to manage people’s transitions out of these systems so they would have access to housing.

The plan used facts and figures to rally support around the goal of ending homelessness and the need to do so. The plan estimated that if nothing was done about the growing number of people experiencing homelessness in the city, 15,000 people would be experiencing homelessness in Calgary by 2016. This was based on past homeless counts, which reported a 30 per cent increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness every two years since the early 2000s. Homelessness was rising rapidly in Calgary, and it is clear that something needed to be done, but the suggestion that it would reach 15,000 people by 2016 was unfounded. Recall that changes to the city’s methodology between 2002 and 2006 resulted in a broader definition of homelessness and the inclusion of services that had been excluded in previous counts, and this created the appearance of a large jump in the number of people experiencing homelessness. A 2004 homeless count reported that when
the difference in methodology was factored in, the 30 per cent rise in homelessness appeared to be reversing in 2006. Furthermore, the 2008 count, conducted just as the plan to end homelessness was being implemented, identified 3,601 people experiencing homelessness, compared to 3,436 in 2006. So there were indications that even before the plan was implemented, growth in the number of people experiencing homelessness in Calgary had slowed. This is not to say that homelessness was not a problem, or even a crisis. It is, however, important to note that the calculations regarding cost savings that were so influential in driving private-sector involvement were likely exaggerated and that the tremendous growth seen in the early 2000s appeared to be slowing.

Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness were powerful during this period and drove the creation of a strong coalition of actors that worked to end it. Understandings of homelessness and of whose responsibility it is to produce social protection have evolved considerably in recent years, going far to explain important changes in multilevel governance dynamics in Calgary since 2008. The CHF’s ten-year plan was rewritten in 2011 and again in 2015. This was not unanticipated; the 2008 plan had divided implementation into three stages and noted that changes would be made based on what had been learned. The first update was released in 2011, and noted that changes to the plan had been made based on the need for “added attention to the unique needs to vulnerable subpopulations, including youth, women, families and Aboriginal peoples” (CHF 2011, 2). Interviews confirmed that much had been learned about the homeless population between 2008 and 2011: “We had to make the changes because we learned so much more about the population … We didn’t have the right assumptions, but we were close” (personal interview 2014). The updated plan also tightened its focus on prevention while shifting more resources toward those in greatest need. The update was based on wide consultations, in the course of which the community was provided with broad opportunities to contribute, though Indigenous groups were only minimally involved (see below). The updated plan maintained the commitment to Housing First as well as to the audacious goal of retiring the majority (85 per cent) of the shelter beds in the city and reducing the maximum shelter stay to seven days by 2018.

The number of people experiencing homelessness had declined in Calgary, an important achievement. By 2015, however, it was clear that many of the CHF’s original goals would be difficult to achieve, including the ultimate goal of ending homelessness (no matter how it was defined). Results of the 2014 homeless count concluded that there were 3,555 homeless people in Calgary on the night of 16 October (two years later, the number would remain virtually unchanged, at 3,430) (Turner
After an additional four years of experience working with service providers and the homeless population, in 2015 the plan was again rewritten and, this time, largely reframed. The new plan made clear that important assumptions had changed significantly regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection. Importantly, the plan adopted the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) definition of homelessness, which identifies causes as individual-level but also systemic and structural. The 2015 plan insisted that approaches to homelessness must “meet those at risk or experiencing homelessness where they are at and offer them real choices when it comes to services and housing. There is no ‘one size fits all’ housing or support program: our approach has to be nimble and adaptive to the needs of unique individuals” (CHF 2015, 1).

Rather than identifying goals or milestones, as had been done in the two previous versions of the plan, the 2015 update instead noted several “conditions for success” (2015, 4) as well as “critical risks” (2015, 6). These were some of the biggest changes to the plan and made clear how drastically the understanding of homelessness and ideas about the responsibility to produce social protection against it had changed. Conditions for success now included substantially increased government funding for housing and homelessness services (rather than simply plans to lobby for inclusionary zoning powers announced in the 2008 plan), intra-governmental alignment, coordination across ministries and departments, and more significant systems reform. The significance of these ideational changes was evident with income supports, for example. Whereas the first version of the plan suggested changing regulations regarding income support eligibility, notably regarding additional income-earning exemptions and liquid asset retention, the 2015 plan now suggested increasing these incomes through more generous income supports, access to living-wage employment, and poverty reduction measures more broadly. Critical risks to the plan’s success now included a growing and aging population, and again, the 2015 plan insisted that additional funding would be required to mitigate these risks.

Marking a significant evolution in understanding of the responsibility to produce social protection, the 2015 plan called upon several government partners to do more: “Unlike previous updates of the Plan, this is first and foremost a call to action to our system partners to take ownership of their accountabilities and to own this community effort. An effective and coordinated strategy for responding to homelessness will necessarily have to grapple with the myriad of social issues that accompany housing instability, including mental health, addictions, poverty, family violence, child intervention and justice system involvement.” The plan continued:
“To ‘turn off the tap’ into homelessness, a coordinated effort among the service delivery agencies and government departments involved in these areas is critical to advance progress” (2015, 10). In previous versions of the plan, the CHF had positioned itself as leader and champion; where it called on government support, it was to fund the implementation of its plan and to make minor policy changes such as to allow inclusionary zoning. By 2015, the days when the CHF sought to limit government involvement and claimed that all the tools were already available were long gone. The CHF was now asking the government to shoulder a much more significant burden and greatly increase its involvement.

A 2018 Collective Impact Report reviewing the results of the 2008 plan makes these ideational evolutions even clearer and came out even more strongly for system reform than even the 2015 update: “The higher incidence of homelessness among those who exit the Children’s Services system requires us to examine how that system prepares young people for transitions to adulthood … The higher incidence of people experiencing mental illness in shelters compared to the general population would suggest a gap in the health care system related to this vulnerable population” (Turner, Balance, and Sinclair 2018, 34). Homelessness was no longer viewed as an individual level problem, but rather as a deeply structural and systemic one. This was a significant ideational change. Another important evolution in the nature of the problem of homelessness related to shelters. Across the country, homeless shelters are controversial and people disagree on what their role is and should be. The CHF had come out strongly in 2008 with its promise to close 85 per cent of emergency shelter beds. Looking back, CHF actors note that this was a mistake: “One of the most noteworthy key lessons over the past decade was the failure to recognize the essential role of emergency shelters in our homeless-serving system. We have learned increasingly how critical emergency shelters are in our system of care” (Turner, Balance, and Sinclair 2018, 53). This acceptance that shelters are necessary and always will be marked an evolution in the understanding of homelessness and what it means to end homelessness, and an appreciation of the need for a strong and permanent safety net.

As these documents make clear, following the experience implementing the ten-year plan to end homelessness, which made significant contributions to the homeless-serving system but did not achieve its ultimate goal, the ideas of key CHF officials evolved. It is of course to be expected that people learn from experience. Yet this was more than tinkering with implementation or adding or expanding programs: there had been changes in the fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of homelessness and whose responsibility it is to produce social
protection. Homelessness was now understood not as an individual issue or something related to economic growth in Calgary, but rather as a consequence of policy decisions and structural failures. It followed that solutions could not simply involve putting services together, for those services themselves were the problem; required instead were substantial reforms, government investments, and commitments.

NHI/HPS

The story of NHI/HPS implementation in Calgary has in many ways mirrored the evolution we saw regarding the role of the CHF in the production of social protection, especially in terms of the CHF’s expanding definition of homelessness and its relationship with other actors. The CHF has been the Community Entity (CE) for federal NHI/HPS funds for both the designated community and the Indigenous community from the very beginning of the program. When the federal government announced NHI funding in 1999, including the requirements for a community advisory board (CAB), a community plan, and a community entity (CE) to administer the funds, existing actors in Calgary quickly snapped into place: the Calgary Action Committee on Housing and Homelessness (CACHH) would become the NHI/HPS CAB, and the CHF would be the CE, responsible for overseeing the funding. An Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH), established in 1996 as a part of the Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness’s work, would become the CAB for the Indigenous community and the CHF would eventually become the CE for the Indigenous community. While the CACHH had a formal role developing a community plan, the CHF developed its own community plan in 2008, effectively diminishing the influence of the CACHH within the NHI/HPS process.

The fact that the CHF – with its own board – was also the CE for the designated and Indigenous communities and needed to follow the advice of separate CABs (per federal funding requirements) made for a difficult institutional arrangement:

The intention of the CABs makes a lot of sense when you may have a municipality governing the CE’s function. Having an independent community advisory group to advise into that space makes a lot of sense. When you’re a non-profit, we already have a board of directors which should and do fulfil the need of the community advisory group. There is some tension around that – our board of directors are all independent community members, and I’ve got this other advisory body. Who am I supposed to listen to? (personal interview 2018)
Interesting here is that the CHF’s board is primarily private-sector representatives, whereas the CAB is comprised of service providers and community groups. These groups (the CHF board and the CAB membership) are actually comprised of different people representing very different sectors; yet in Calgary, “community” and “private sector” are often conflated, hence this actor’s insistence that the CHF board can perform the role assigned to CABS.

The CACHH disbanded in 2014 and is no longer the designated community’s CAB. An actor with the CHF explained that “[the CACHH] wasn’t really advancing the agenda anymore, it was too fragmented and disorganized. There were too many competing agendas” (personal interview 2018). This actor stressed that the CHF had also changed considerably in terms of its relationship with community groups throughout Calgary since the early aughts, and the CACHH as the voice of the community was less needed in light of this. As noted earlier, ideas regarding the nature of homelessness have changed considerably since the early aughts, with key officials at the CHF shifting from an individualized understanding to a more structural one. This had led to collaborative relationships with other groups in the city: “There’s been a huge move to acknowledge that the CHF is one player of many who are influencing and/or partnered in this whole movement to end homelessness. We control some of the funding, but we control nowhere near all of it” (personal interview 2018). This actor, who is involved with HPS operations at the CHF, continued: “We aren’t the funder. We are one funder, and an influential one. But there have been a number of conversations around really positioning the CHF in a new light. That has changed [since 2008] and I think you’d find a very different relationship here within the community.”

When asked who else is responsible, they pointed to various government ministries at the provincial and federal levels, stressing that ending homelessness in Calgary is not something that a single agency or foundation can do. They later said this change came about from what they called a “big learning” from ten years’ experience implementing the CHF plan to end homelessness: “That holy shit, this requires everybody on the wheel!” (personal interview 2018). In light of this, the CHF now sees itself as more responsive to community needs, as evident in its evolving relationship with the city’s two CABS.

This evolving relationship and understanding of the need for “everybody on the wheel” is visible in the CHF’s new relationship with the network representing Indigenous-led services in the city, ASCHH. In the early to mid-aughts, the relationship between the CHF and the Indigenous CAB was fraught. A member who had served for a long time
on the Indigenous council repeatedly referred to the early relationship between the Indigenous CAB and the CHF as “a dictatorship” (personal interview 2018). When I asked whether input from the Indigenous community had been sought in the development of the CHF’s original ten-year plan on homelessness in 2008, this person laughed, and then explained that the lack of consultation was the reason why the ASCHH had written its own plan. Though some Indigenous CABs have written plans for federal funding (including in Vancouver), Calgary was the only city in Canada with a separate ten-year plan to end Indigenous homelessness during this time.

Calgary’s Indigenous plan to end homelessness was, and remains, influential across the country. It includes a definition of Indigenous homelessness that centres Indigenous culture: “The Definition of Aboriginal Homelessness: Self-identifying Aboriginal persons (including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) of any age, situated as a single person or within a family who is lacking permanent nighttime residence with appropriate cultural recognition supports. This includes individuals ‘precariously housed’ within institutions settings such as jails, prisons, and unstable, unsafe, and/or inappropriate child intervention settings” (ASCHH 2012, 5). This definition is much broader than the definition being used by the CHF at the time, not only in its insistence on cultural supports, but also in its inclusion of people who are precariously housed. It remains influential, though more recently it has been adapted to include elements of Thistle’s definition (Atlohsa Family Healing Services 2020).

An actor involved with the Aboriginal Standing Committee noted that they wrote their own plan because the CHF was not responsive to feedback they had offered while the original CHF plan and the 2011 update were being written:

That’s why we did our own plan, to be honest … We gave a bunch of feedback and then we went to take the feedback to [the CHF] and they go “Oh, no. We’ve got it written. It’s already done. It’s being published.” They didn’t take any of our feedback. There was a page and a half that was developed, but again it was from a colonial view, it wasn’t from the committee’s perspective or an Indigenous perspective. (personal interview 2018)

After this, the ASCHH decided to do their own plan. An actor recalled that once it was complete, the CHF would not recognize it for years:

[The CHF] didn’t want us to publish it. They didn’t want us to put it out. They said “publish it as a report, it’s not a plan.” …At the time, they said
“Well, we can’t fulfil any of these recommendations,” and we said, “We never asked you to fulfil the recommendations, we didn’t ask you to be a part of this plan” (personal interview 2018).

Not until 2015, after a change in leadership at the CHF, was the ASCHH plan recognized by the powerful CHF, at which point the relationship between the CHF and the ASCHH began to improve. A member of the Indigenous CAB explained: “We’ve started to build an extremely positive relationship [with the CHF], because that was where the other problem was. It was a dictatorship for a number of years” (personal interview 2018).

ASCHH members have learned from the past and are now more assertive when it comes to their role in homelessness governance in Calgary and with the CHF. This includes not letting the CHF take anything for granted. For example, an actor with the Aboriginal Standing Committee explained that they had no choice in the CHF becoming their CE and thus responsible for distributing federal funding for the NHI/HPS: “[The CHF] was always the Community Entity. It wasn’t defined by us, for example. It was just dictated to us that this is your CE now, by the government” (personal interview 2018). When an opportunity arose for the Indigenous Standing Committee to vote on the continuation of this arrangement (CABs can vote on the continuation of their relationship with their CE one year prior to funding renewal), they were not provided with enough notice to make a change: “Service Canada didn’t alert us [to the vote]. We didn’t know about it, nobody informed us about it. So when it came down to it, we were late in making our vote” (personal interview 2018).

Explaining that they weren’t going to let that happen again, this person continued:

So this time, I’ve already informed the [CHF] and Service Canada, I said “it’s likely we are not gonna change, because the relationship is there and the processes are there. But, at the same time, we wouldn’t be doing due diligence if we didn’t explore all our options.” And so we are gonna have conversations with the city, the United way, we’ve had a conversation with the CHF. What we’re doing is just gathering information so an informed decision can be made. Versus it being one choice, one option.

This was acknowledged by non-Indigenous officials at the CHF as well: “We will be seeing our Indigenous CAB and leadership in the Indigenous community saying, ‘Hey, we should be self-governing this. Why would we have a non-Indigenous agency like the CHF continue to be
the CE?’ Which would ... yeah ... There’s a very good argument to be made there, but also a complex political and operational and deliverable space to be navigated and negotiated” (personal interview 2018).

The importance of Indigenous voices being included throughout the policy-making process and provided with the necessary resources to implement solutions on their own was made clear by an actor involved with the Indigenous Steering Committee. This person said there is what they believe to be a sincere commitment to implementing Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action among community groups, including those that are not Indigenous-led. While this was viewed positively, they expressed some concern as well, worrying that this rush to incorporate Indigenous culture into non–Indigenous-run services might be damaging: ‘It’s almost out of desperation, it’s like people want this checkbox toolkit around reconciliation” (personal interview 2018). They gave an example of why autonomous and adequately resourced Indigenous-led service providers is so important. Using the example of a sweat lodge, they noted that for people who are using drugs or have not been sober for long, it can be dangerous from a spiritual and physical perspective for sweat lodges to be led by a non-Indigenous person, insisting that there are healers that are specific to dealing with people that are under the influence of alcohol and drugs, for example. So, we’d have somebody who really had that experience, who’s really capable of taking someone who’s still using, who can’t just stop, and bringing them into the sweat lodge to heal them. But it’s a different perspective than having a general sweat lodge and allowing people who have not had the sufficient clean time. Because there’s a safety issue in that, physically. And there’s a spiritual safety issue there as well. (personal interview 2018)

This actor also discussed the relationship between the Indigenous Standing Committee and the federal government: though the CHF is the CE, there is a Calgary-based Service Canada representative to liaise between the federal government and Indigenous CAB members. They noted that on a high level, the relationship with the federal government is strained, but emphasized that on the ground, relationships were better:

Our representative of Service Canada, she’s been on the ground with me [for years], and we work together. She comes to us all the time to say, “What do you guys think? Really? What’s your feedback to us on how this is working?” And she’s a voice, she’s taking it back and saying this is how we see it, this is how our community is seeing it ... Overall, I think that in Calgary we feel very heard. (personal interview 2018)
Conclusion

Compared to the other cities studied here, Calgary has grown rapidly in terms of both physical size and population, exploding from 768,082 in 1996 to 1,239,220 in 2016 (Statistics Canada 2001, 2016). Throughout those years, the province was largely disengaged from the area of affordable housing. Between 2001 and 2009, the city actually lost 7,500 units of rental housing, mostly through conversions to condominiums (CMHC 2010). As the city’s population began to rise, so did rents and housing prices, resulting in a housing crunch. This housing and market dynamics are important context, but government actions and inactions also mattered, profoundly so, in that the failure to keep up with the need for affordable housing resulted from federal and provincial decisions to stop investing in it.

The governance of homelessness in Calgary is centralized in the Calgary Homeless Foundation. That foundation, which was founded in the 1990s and expanded its influence in the mid-aughts, was created primarily by private-sector elites. It has been the lead agency in homelessness governance in Calgary, though its role has changed considerably since 2008. The CHF has since retreated from its leadership role; it has prioritized collaborations and relationships since the mid-2010s and, crucially, has become an important advocate for increased government funding and system reform. Ideas regarding the nature of homelessness and the responsibility to produce social protection have driven these changes.

For much of the postwar period, the province was minimally involved in producing social protection for those in housing need, making only modest contributions to affordable housing and targeting that housing at seniors. After the federal government stopped investing in housing in the 1990s, the province followed suit, even halting projects that had already been promised. As a result, the stock of affordable housing decreased across the province, particularly in Calgary. After a change in leadership of the governing Progressive Conservative party and in response to local activism, led powerfully by the CHF in the mid-2000s, in 2008 the province introduced a ten-year plan to end homelessness, the first province to do so (by about a decade). Its involvement included investments in housing; however, an Affordable Housing Strategy would not be introduced until 2017, under an NDP government.

Institutions and resources alone do not explain the evolution in provincial involvement. Even with federal dollars on the table in the early 2000s, a substantial surplus (following Klein’s “slaying” of the deficit), and jurisdictional authority, the province remained uninvolved in housing and homelessness governance. It took efforts by local actors,
who redefined homelessness as a costly problem that could be ended, to push the province to become involved. This shift in involvement was due not to a change in resources, but rather to changing ideas; as this chapter has made clear, this change in ideas was facilitated by Calgary-based policy entrepreneurs (inspired by Mangano) who redefined homelessness and used that new definition to attract provincial officials to their coalition. We also see the importance of personal connections in Alberta, perhaps more so than anywhere else. Private-sector actors did not have an institutionalized role in policy-making in the early to mid-2000s when actors were organizing around homelessness; rather, private-sector individuals drew on personal connections with key government officials to push government involvement and investment, a dynamic also observed in BC. In this sense, the story of the governance of homelessness confirms that in Alberta, private-sector actors are at times more influential than public ones (Feng, Li, and Langford 2014).

The City of Calgary is minimally involved in the governance of homelessness; the city conducted homeless counts in the 1990s but transferred this responsibility to the CHF in 2008. This minimal involvement was for a number of reasons. Historically, Calgary has had few institutional powers (such as density bonusing and inclusionary zoning) to contribute to the fight against homelessness, which means there are few tools to use in the governance of homelessness. In recent years, that has changed somewhat: the municipality has been granted inclusionary zoning powers, which may increase its ability to contribute to the affordable housing stock (if it is willing to use that power). But like density bonusing, inclusionary zoning powers in Calgary are weak given the city’s geographic landscape, in that there is always more land to develop on the edge of the city. The municipal government is thus under institutional and resource constraints, but ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection have also structured its involvement. Since the early 2000s, city officials have sought to limit their involvement in homelessness governance, seeking greater provincial leadership and expressing a grudging willingness to become involved only when the province would not. In 2007–8, as the CHF became increasingly powerful, the city continued to limit its involvement and instead supported and advocated for the leadership of the CHF.

The CHF has had considerable power and influence since 2008, both in Calgary and nationally. It was built into the powerful foundation it is today by private-sector actors who drew on their resources, including financial and political connections, to develop a powerful governance network. Yet ideas have been powerful forces as well, including ideas regarding the responsibility to produce social protection. Especially early
on, the private sector believed that to win their battle against homelessness, “You take it out of government,” reflecting the idea that governments do not necessarily have a leadership role to play in the production of social protection. This idea was especially powerful because governments in Alberta, both local and provincial, agreed to some extent.

The CHF’s influence has long been buttressed by powerful and magnetic ideas regarding the nature of homelessness as a problem that can be ended, and regarding the responsibility to produce social protection. Those ideas served as a powerful coalition magnet after Mangano proposed this redefinition of homelessness during his visit to the city. Entrepreneurs used those ideas to build a powerful coalition, one that included actors who had not previously been allied. Actors who disagreed with the CHF’s efforts failed to win the support of influential actors in Calgary’s governance and were marginalized. More recently, though, ideas about homelessness have evolved considerably and, along with them, the CHF’s interactions with other actors. As the first version of their plan was being developed, CHF officials sought to maximize the role of markets and did not expect extensive government involvement. As the plan was being implemented, key officials came to understand and appreciate the importance of collaborative governance. Driven by the CHRN’s more complex definition of homelessness, one that focused less on individuals and more on structures, the CHF sought to collaborate with more actors. The CHF has been willing to adapt and has updated its plan regularly. Senior officials reflect on past mistakes and even failures and have committed to implementing lessons learned into future efforts to reduce homelessness. Its definition of homelessness has become more inclusive and complex over time, though it remains focused on housing (as opposed to community or poverty).

Local governance networks that implement the federal NHI/HPS have consolidated the CHF’s position of power in Calgary, but we also see an evolving relationship with these groups, including the one between the CHF and the ASCHH. The CHF became the Community Entity for the federal funding, including Indigenous funding. Isolated from the development of the first two versions of the CHF plan, the ASCHH developed its own plan, a Plan to End Aboriginal Homelessness in Calgary. The CHF’s relationship with Indigenous groups has improved since 2015, as Indigenous people continue to seek increased involvement and collaboration and as the CHF learns to recognize and value their expertise.