Real Change:

The Power of Lived Experience in Seattle's Response to a Homelessness Crisis

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I. Introduction

In 2018, Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project went to the Seattle City Council to testify with a group of homeless and low-income vendors. Each vendor shared their difficult experience re-entering into society after incarceration, and the challenges they faced securing housing. After public comment ended for the proposed Fair Chance Housing Legislation, a councilmember's aide approached the vendors to let them know that their stories impacted the councilmember and influenced her to vote yes and support a stronger ordinance. The law passed to create a more equitable landscape in housing decisions with celebration from the Real Change vendors and staff.

Seattle is in a declared state of emergency over the number of people experiencing homelessness (Barnett). The city has been trying to find solutions, but instead it has generally seen increasing numbers of people living outside. Low-income and homeless people are frequently kept out of the political sphere, and decisions are made that affect their lives without their input. Housed people making the decisions for those experiencing housing instability means that outputs will often not prioritize the actual needs of affected people. This conventional method of decision making in politics also leaves marginalized people unengaged with solutions to community problems. This can further the already isolating reality of experiencing homelessness. Political advocacy and organizing involving the expertise and creativity of low-income and homeless people is more effective than established methods of political change because lived experience provides ideas for more practical sustainable solutions. Using Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project as an example, I will argue that local political change can happen when historically marginalized stakeholders in communities

get involved. The benefits of these marginalized communities becoming more engaged include: an expertise in a diverse range of ideas, a more cohesive community that prompts accountability to people experiencing homelessness, and creative solutions to complex problems.

II.   Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project

Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project (Real Change) is a non-profit organization in Seattle, Washington that serves homeless and low-income people through a street newspaper, *Real Change News*, and political advocacy. Founded in 1994, it exists to "provide opportunity and a voice for homeless and low-income people while taking action for social, racial, and economic justice" (Real Change). Street newspapers have operated around the world since the twentieth century. A research project on *Street Wise*, a sister organization to Real Change located in Chicago, described the desired impact of street newspapers and reports, "when we see and hear more, we are able to stretch, if only for fleeting moments, beyond familiar and taken-for-granted scripts" (Novak and Harter). The homeless and low-income people served at Real Change are called vendors as they buy the paper for $.60 and resell it for $2 plus tips around King County. The most successful vendors sell the paper consistently in the same location to get to know customers and become familiar with the neighborhood. To become a vendor there is a one-hour orientation twice a week with no identification or detailed personal information required. Orientation goes over some rules and expectations which are the only requirements to joining, which makes selling *Real Change News* a low-barrier option for a job. To accomplish its mission, Real Change operates three programs: the vendor center, newsroom, and advocacy and organizing department. Real Change follows a theory of change

that believes that both direct service and activism can work together. Though not a common practice, Bornstein and Davis explain, "activism and direct problem solving go hand in hand" (38). While this paper will focus on advocacy and organizing, Real Change's direct service function through the vendor center and the newsroom are important as all departments frequently interact.

This overview of Real Change is based on the structure that existed at the time of fieldwork in the summer of 2019. There may have been changes to staff positions, organizational layouts, and vendor committees since that time.

Vendor Program

The vendor program exists as both the sales point for the newspaper and a community space for vendors. At the sales desk vendors can buy the paper for $.60 as well as other accessories such as newspaper holders. There are discounts on the paper on Tuesdays, the day before the new paper is printed. Discounts are also given for vendors who sell consistently at higher levels. In addition to the sales desk, which is mostly run by volunteers, there are bathrooms, laptops, and phones for use within the vendor center. There is a free, up-for-grabs table that frequently holds food or miscellaneous donations in addition to a 100-cup coffee urn that is brewed every morning. Vendors have access to a Case Manager who can assist them with accessing housing, healthcare, or other needs. Case management at Real Change is vendor-driven, meaning that vendors must initiate interest in a certain program instead of Real Change prescribing needs. Another feature of the vendor center is a clothing closet that is stocked through community donations. An important piece of the vendor center, beyond any

physical needs or services that may be met there, is the community that is built. In the morning, many vendors come to the vendor center to get to know other vendors, staff, and volunteers over a warm cup of coffee.

Newsroom

Real Change News is a weekly newspaper focused on social, racial, and economic justice. It is written and produced by three staff journalists and an editor, with additional contributions from community writers and interns. As a local paper, it is focused mostly on Seattle issues through the lens of how low-income and homeless people are affected. One of the most popular sections of the newspaper is the vendor profile; conducted and written by volunteers, they interview vendors who express interest or are nominated by their customers. The paper has won numerous journalistic awards, many from the International Network of Street Newspapers (INSP). INSP is an organization that assists new street newspapers in starting and helps share content and ideas between organizations.

The newspaper is influenced by vendors through a weekly open meeting called the Vendor Editorial Committee. This committee meets on Tuesday afternoons to review the previous week's paper and give thoughts and feedback on it over a warm lunch donated each week by a partner organization. Vendors also discuss new story ideas that they could write, co-write with one of the journalists, or hand off to have a journalist write. If vendors are interested in writing a piece for the paper, there is a volunteer in the vendor center once a week to help edit and guide stories. Articles and interviews are one of the avenues that vendors can use to engage with community and tell their stories.

Advocacy and Organizing

The advocacy and organizing department works with and for vendors to create a more just city, county, and state through public awareness and political campaigns. To do this, Real Change runs or partners with other organizations to run social change campaigns. The department also plans and participates in various events with other organizations, such as the annual Martin Luther King Jr. March and supporting union workers in negotiations. Another large event they participate in is the annual lobby day in the state capital of Olympia. Real Change provides transportation and food for vendors so they have a chance to ask lawmakers to focus on issues affecting low-income and homeless people and why it matters.

One impactful campaign from 2019 run by Real Change was the Everybody Poos campaign. The campaign asked the Seattle City Council to add mobile pit stop public restrooms to the next budget. In late 2019, there was a successful outcome of 1.3 million dollars being added to the city budget to pilot staffed public restrooms (Harris). Some of the strategies used to win this campaign were postcard writing to councilmembers, a rally at City Hall, and testifying at hearings about the proposal. As with all campaigns at Real Change, vendors are involved in a multitude of ways. Involvement begins with the Vendor Organizing Committee that meets monthly with the Lead Organizer. These meetings are used to get feedback on project ideas that the Lead Organizer has and to hear other campaign ideas that Real Change could work on. Vendors are also invited to join Real Change at public testimonies at City Hall when there are issues that would impact their lives. Additionally, vendors are sometimes provided materials to talk to customers about campaigns and invite them to join.

Organizational Change

When Real Change was founded, it was run as a poor people's organization with significant input and leadership from vendors. Twenty-five years later, the organization is still vendor-focused; however, over the years, it has grown into a sixteen staff organization that is mostly middle-class. There have also been significant formalizations that erect barriers between vendors and staff, inhibiting to some degree authentic interactions and advocacy. These dynamics affect how departments operate and what campaigns are run, often joining other established non-profits in campaigns instead of finding vendor-led ideas. The advocacy and organizing department values the voices of vendors highly. However, there is a low level of vendor engagement. While there is a typical core group that attends most events and Vendor Organizing Committee meetings, there is a lack of involvement from the larger vendor community. The Lead Organizer is interested in higher engagement levels and more impactful ways for vendors to be involved in advocacy and organizing (McCoy).

Fieldwork and Reflexive Commentary

The vendor lived experience snapshots were created out of a strategic planning process at Real Change. The advocacy and organizing department benefits from vendor engagement in various ways. Since there has been an overall decline in meaningful vendor engagement, there is a desire to track what is currently happening and find ways to broaden vendor involvement. The idea for the program was formed after the Lead Organizer was contacted by *The Seattle Times* with a request to find a vendor who was willing to be interviewed, had been incarcerated, and was attempting to find housing. *The Seattle Times* gave short notice and the

Lead Organizer was unable to find someone in that time based on their memory of vendors who would fit the specific experience (McCoy). A lack of tracking experiences from vendors prevented an opportunity for a vendor to tell their story and prevented *The Seattle Times* from including a first-hand experience in their article. The current database used for the department is called Nation Builder, a popular tool for organizing and advocacy work often used in political campaigns. This tool has been used for a couple years at Real Change and the staff in the advocacy and organizing department have recorded interactions with vendors and information about vendors as they learn it, resulting in limited data through a time intensive process. The Lead Organizer and I co-led a committee in the strategic planning process and began working on the vendor lived experience snapshots in the spring of 2019. To get information more efficiently about vendors, we created a survey about different lived experiences to be filled out through an interview about various aspects related to poverty and homelessness and later entered in Nation Builder. For example, every vendor that participated in the survey was asked if they were currently or had ever used Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), formerly known as food stamps. If they had used EBT this was entered on their profile as a tag, and reports can be run to pull every vendor that has used EBT based on the tags.

At the time of the vendor lived experience snapshots fieldwork, I had been working at Real Change for two years as the Operations Associate. My role was mostly administrative, doing both development and office management tasks. When strategic planning was beginning, I was looking for options for fieldwork sites and knew that I wanted to focus on policy work of some sort in Seattle. While discussing the potential of the vendor lived experience snapshots, I was inspired to get more involved with the vendors at Real Change and connect it to my

fieldwork. That summer I worked in the vendor center every Monday to observe the space and

get to know vendors. On Wednesday mornings I helped unload the truck of newspapers and

interviewed vendors for at least an hour. It was both an exhausting and rewarding experience

to hear the stories of the homeless and low-income vendors and continue to get to know them.

Throughout the summer I tried to be aware of my positioning, which is defined as, "all the

subjective responses that affect how the researcher sees data" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater

111). As a staff member at Real Change, my positioning impacted my understanding of the

vendors and the organization. For instance, because of my role, I already knew one vendor that

I interviewed and knew about various problems she had with staff and other vendors. Though I

collected the data in the same way during the interview, the previous experiences skewed my

perception of the stories she shared. Additionally, as a white woman who was raised in a

middle-class household who has never experienced homelessness, this research was conducted

from an outsider's perspective, an etic view. This etic perspective prevents an intimate

firsthand understanding of the issues and may have influenced the information and stories that

were shared, a common risk among cross-cultural research (Merriam and Tisdell 29).

After discussion in our strategic planning committee, an agreement was finalized to

move forward with the vendor lived experience snapshots. We then took it to the staff

leadership team who approved it. The final step before beginning full work on it was to speak

with the Vendor Advisory Board (VAB). The VAB is a vendor elected board that plans an annual

vendor summer picnic, helps with any disciplinary action against vendors that is challenged, and

assists with the Wednesday morning truck unloads. At the VAB meeting, we presented the

reasoning for the project while also showing an example of how we would collect and store the

data. We went over who would run the interviews and how private they would be depending on an individual vendor's comfort level. The VAB was enthusiastically in support of the program, excited about the possibility of more systemized practices of tracking information to increase involvement. One vendor, David, was also excited about the possibility of staff learning more about vendors to understand them better. They had many suggestions of experiences we should add to the survey, including if vendors have pets while living outside, any mental health diagnosis, sleeping in hotels instead of shelters or permanent residences, and if vendors lived outside with children. Not all the suggestions were used, though it was helpful to gauge what was important to this group. The ones left out were because they were focused on issues that Real Change does not work on, such as youth homelessness or there were privacy concerns about asking for a specific mental health diagnosis.

In practice, the information gathered from the vendor lived experience snapshots will be used to pull information about vendors when a specific issue comes up for varying levels of engagement. *Real Change News* can also benefit from this program. Much of the news coverage in the weekly paper is about issues that affect the vendor population. If there are more opportunities to feature vendors regarding how a social or political issue directly affects their life, it can bring more humanity to the problem. Additionally, vendors would be able to learn more about the editorial department and foster more interconnectedness among vendors and staff while stories are being written. Another example of how this program will be used is for upcoming public comments at Seattle City Hall for an issue that affects homeless or low-income people, such as a hypothetical expansion of Section 8 housing voucher applications. Section 8 is a housing voucher system that allows people with housing insecurity or people

experiencing homelessness to have a portion of their rent paid by the state (Section 8). In addition to doing the current practices of the advocacy and organizing department of in-person and email blast announcements to vendors, more personal touches could be made through one-on-one conversations after a list is pulled of vendors who have used or are currently using Section 8. Bridget is one vendor who has used Section 8 and credits it with a base line of stability in her life. In 2019 Bridget tore her rotator cuff, speaking about this set back and the importance of housing she explains, "I'm back to square one, not as bad as it used to be though, at least I have housing now". Asking vendors who are known to have had specific experiences will provide more politically compelling stories in support of a change and help the vendor be involved in an issue that could benefit them personally.

At the beginning of each survey, I discussed with the vendor that their name tied to their information would not be shared, and that for Real Change to use any of their information in a story or advocacy campaign there would first be a conversation about how or if they wanted to share their story. The survey was elective, and vendors were told that they could disclose some answers and keep others private by not answering or skipping a question. To interview vendors, I shared an announcement regarding details of the survey at the monthly all vendor meeting in June. Subsequently, on Wednesday mornings for two months I made an announcement about the surveys and conducted interviews after the truck of papers had been unloaded.

Over the course of the summer I interviewed twenty-four vendors. Since the surveys were mostly yes or no questions, some were quick. Other vendors, when asked a question, would be reminded of when they used a service or had an experience and told a story along

with answering the question. Many vendors would ask for definitions of services as there are

many names, both official and unofficial, for resources. The most commonly used service was

EBT with all but four vendors using it currently or in the past. Even with sensitive topics,

vendors seemed willing to share and some were excited about the possibility of things changing

in the future. For example, Polly was formerly incarcerated and therefore has faced difficulties

in obtaining stable housing and employment. Even though these were difficult topics to discuss

in an interview, Polly ended it by saying she was happy to "provide any information that would

help." There was significant variety in previous advocacy involvement and involvement with

Real Change activities. Some vendors had worked on political and social issues for most of their

lives and some had never engaged with political movements. Some vendors had limited

engagement with Real Change events and some did not know Real Change worked on political

issues at all and were mainly focused on selling the newspaper. On a broader scale, these

interviews and observations made me excited and curious about what information is available

regarding how effective change can happen from the bottom of the power ladder. There are so

many incredible, poignant stories that I heard within three short months of conducting

interviews and socializing with vendors. The amount of knowledge about social service and

political programs is vast when one has lived through them. How much more could be

uncovered and put together with more time and effort? How much change could be affected if

these stories were genuinely listened to on a large scale throughout Seattle? There is so much

pain and power in these stories, but the expertise that lives within each of them holds a wealth

of possibility for how things could be improved.

The research done was in service of Real Change's advocacy and organizing department and works as a case study of how to further integrate the lived experiences of marginalized populations into political advocacy work. Qualitative research was the most useful vehicle as it allowed for more subjectivity to build relationships with vendors and focus on narratives from vendors during the interviews and observation time in the vendor center. Qualitative research also has a focus on those affected by social wrongs in trying to create solutions instead of solely collecting data (Merriam and Tisdale 12). All vendor names mentioned in this paper have been changed for privacy.

III.   Homelessness in Seattle

Seattle has been in a declared state of emergency for the homelessness crisis since 2015, initiated by the former mayor, Ed Murray, and city council at that time (Barnett). King County, the county Seattle falls in, defines homelessness as anyone sleeping outside, in shelters, or in their vehicles (Count Us In). Since 2015, the number of homeless people in the county has fluctuated with increases each year until 2019 when there was a slight decrease. Every January, there is a count done overnight to track the number of homeless people in the county called Count Us In run by All Home as part of the King County government. As All Home points out, "The annual total is usually two to three times the point-in-time estimate. Instead, the point-in-time Count provides a "snapshot" that quantifies the size of the population experiencing homelessness at a given point during the year" (Count Us In). Though imperfect, it is the most consistent metric available to track levels of people experiencing homelessness. From the count last year, 11,199 people were experiencing homelessness on January 25, 2019.

The count is a significant factor in how much funding assistance Washington state receives from the federal government and influences where county money and assistance will be spent.

In a follow up survey with a portion of those counted, 64 percent reported having either a physical or mental condition (Count Us In). Additionally, top self-reported primary events that led to homelessness chosen from a list were loss of a job, alcohol or drug abuse, eviction and relationship separation or divorce (Count Us In). This survey confirms the myriad of reasons that people can end up living on the street or in a shelter. The above issues often compound on each other when one experiences homelessness. Cathy experienced this snowball effect when she became homeless. During our interview Cathy explained how she came to be sleeping on the street. Cathy came back to Seattle from living in Louisiana when a car accident killed her brother. She and her husband ran out of money while here and have been living on the streets for three years. Cathy's family lives in a small town not far from Seattle, but since her husband is black, she regretfully stated, "they don't really like black and white together". Cathy's family distanced her and her husband from their resources. Both Cathy and her husband struggled to find consistent work while living outside and finally received a housing voucher after over a year on the waiting list. The voucher is suitable for any market-rate rental, but they received the voucher in late July and were still looking for an apartment in September. Several of the places they looked have required two years renting history in Seattle, dismissing their previous renting history in Louisiana (Cathy). Cathy sees this as clear discrimination against people experiencing homelessness. At the end of the interview Cathy joked that when she got housing, we would never see her again, she was never going outside again.

The survey also showed that those experiencing homelessness are disproportionately people of color compared to the general population, in addition to a significant amount of people in the LGBTQ + community (Count Us In). This exemplifies the added challenges that are faced by marginalized identities, both in creating financially stable livelihoods and getting out of homelessness. Looking specifically at the impacts of race on homelessness, there are clear correlations. The structures of racism and classism are deeply intertwined; it would be nearly impossible to address homelessness without also addressing racism. In a recap of a panel of homelessness experts, Johnson summarizes:

> We can't solve housing without addressing racism, "homelessness comes from the breakdown of many systems," Hayden says of her 30 years in the field. "And all of them are grounded in racism." The data backs this up. American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander families are three times more likely to experience homelessness than White families. For Black families, it was seven times.

People of color face high institutional barriers that keep them impoverished. Additionally, there is a burden of perceptions and prejudice from other people living in poverty and our broader society. This racialized system affects vendors at Real Change as well. Mitch, a black man who sells Real Change, noted this saying that he frequently has to code switch, which is "the practice of shifting the languages you use or the way you express yourself" (Thompson). Mitch exemplified this as he explains, "I have to be black in the hood and white while selling the paper". Having to code switch prevents him from being able to fully express his cultural identity or be his full self which can take a mental toll. The personal effects of racism in having to change behavior while selling *Real Change News* are part of a wider system that has left Mitch

without a personal or public social safety net. A social safety net is access to resources;

personally, this means either having assets or family and friends that could help after an

emergency. A public safety net means governmental resources that provide money, housing, or

jobs when these things cannot be acquired individually. Both safety nets are critical after

traumatic experiences such as job loss or the ending of a relationship. Without these safety

nets there is a greater risk of experiencing homelessness and having added difficulties to finding

housing again. Lacking a social safety net affects every race but there are systemic issues in

every area of life in America that leaves black and native populations particularly vulnerable to

experiencing homelessness. The insufficient safety net available to people of color is still deeply

ingrained in American society and has had an outsize influence on poverty and homelessness.

The Racial Equity Institute's workbook shows how prevalent and currently unavoidable the

disparities are between races in America asserting:

> Racial inequity is called by different names in different systems: E.g., racial disparities in
>
> health, the achievement gap, disproportionately, etc. Yet all these names describe the
>
> same thing. While racial relationships have improved over time, systemic racial
>
> inequities have not, and in some cases, such as wealth, the disparity between white and
>
> black Americans continues to widen.

To work on issues of homelessness and poverty means working at the intersections of race and

class. The disproportionate amount of people of color experiencing homelessness shows the

broader systemic issues contributing to poverty.

As mentioned above, the Count Us In survey had a list of options for reasons of homelessness, mirroring a common practice when running intake with service providers. What these lists often do not include are reasons for homelessness such as: insufficient wages, lack of affordable housing, or available jobs. The list on Count Us In's survey includes, "could not afford rent increase", which is the closest option to framing the cause as a housing market failure. Interestingly, the next question on the survey asked what would help them obtain permanent housing and 75% of respondents said that more low-income housing would be the best solution (Count Us In). Framing is important for both the public perception of homelessness and for those experiencing homelessness in how they understand their situation. Focusing on individualized problems that lead to homelessness blurs the large gaps in the safety net that America is missing. Giridharadas studies how our global economic systems have perpetuated vast power and wealth divides and how those divides have afforded those with money an outsize influence on the solutions to social ills. He saw this in a meeting with a room full of former Wall Street executives who changed career paths to work on saving the world with the wealth they gained. He describes the process of finding solutions saying, "the question of building more inclusive economies would be atomized into endless subcategories, until the human reality all but vanished" (Giridharadas 132). Though there is a reality of needing to tackle issues one at a time, if issues are simplified to a micro level there is a high risk of the macro issues such as affordable housing or living wages being ignored.

The city of Seattle has tried various solutions for the homelessness crisis. It has become one of the most common talking points of both politicians and citizens over the last five years

(Beekman and Gutman). Though the focus on the problem of homelessness has increased, the solutions have yet to create long term change.

IV.   Responses to Homelessness

America has created a hegemonic vision that poverty is an acceptable part of the economy, an unfortunate reality that cannot be changed. Hegemonic vision is defined as: "the process by which people learn to live and love the dominant system of beliefs and practices" (Moe-Lobeda Ch 4). This vision keeps cultural norms and expectations running and Moe-Lobeda emphasizes that the danger of this arguing it has a, "deadening impact on social change" (Ch 4). Adewunmiju sees this vision clearly and observes:

> The free market economic system that is operating in many societies is intended to serve the bourgeois at the detriment of the poor and the peasants who are in the majority of worlds' population. The desire for gain and meeting human needs are conflicting issues in free market economy.

Under a neoliberal hegemony, "the public sphere is overtaken by private interests" (Nygreen). Private industries have made it acceptable to profit off the poverty of others. For example, the housing industry is profit driven and in the most extreme cases profits off both evictions and the desperation that many feel to take any housing available to them, even if it is of poor quality and too expensive. Desmond saw some of the issues with the housing market during a year of ethnographic research following families living in low-income housing, many who ended up being evicted and owing fees to landlords on top of the costs of needing to find new housing (Ch 4). Corporations also profit off low-wage workers. With low federal minimum wage requirements, companies can pay low wages with few benefits. The chief executive officer and

management have a fiduciary responsibility to prioritize making money for stakeholders instead of taking care of employees and those that use their product or service.

Stemming from this hegemonic vision, as a nation, is the modern response to homelessness which focuses on individualizing problems and using diagnostic and medical systems to fix them. This phenomenon manifests as diagnosing individual symptoms of homelessness and focusing on micro issues instead of analyzing broader influences of homelessness in the United States. An individualized response is culturally ingrained in America, seen in a high individuality score on Hofstede's cultural index. Identifying a trait of individuality Hofstede asserts, "neither practically nor psychologically is the healthy person in this type of society supposed to be dependent on a group" (91). The expectation of an individualized nation means that successes and failures are contributed to individuals alone. Frequently done through the very system meant to help those experiencing homelessness, individuals are evaluated for what they did to get where they are now, while accessing social services. When someone arrives at a shelter, employment program, or other service, there is often an intake interview that helps inform the staff on what issues the individual has and needs to work on as well as determine their eligibility for the offered services. With intensive case management these issues discovered during intake are often tackled as the primary cause of homelessness. For example, if someone comes who is an alcoholic, their alcoholism can be the central issue that is tackled. This style of help ignores the fact that many housed people are also alcoholics and becoming sober may not lead to housing and solving their homelessness. Even when case management is not run in a way that strives to fix people, it is run as a way to get individuals connected to services, housing waitlists, job placements, or access to food banks or EBT

services. While important to help individuals, especially when they desire resources to lead a

self-defined higher quality of life, solely focusing on this minimizes the significant impact that

broader structural issues have on homelessness incidences in the United States. One helpful

way of looking at this structure is an allegory from the Racial Equity Institute: if you are a

groundskeeper in charge of a pond and fish continue appearing dead on the shore, what do you

do? Do you begin asking what that fish did to die? Or do you begin looking at what is happening

in the pond and at a deeper level, what is happening in the groundwater that is sourcing the

pond? While caring for the single fish is often critical for survival, without changing something

deeper, fish will continue to get sick.

Getting to the groundwater of poverty is threatening as it begins questioning the very

structures that America was built on, especially with racial and class hierarchies. This can be

difficult to tackle because there are many people profiting from structures that keep groups

impoverished and marginalized. This is relevant when it comes to funding non-profits and

projects striving to address root issues of homelessness and poverty. As Joyaux, an expert in

fundraising, notes about the struggles of funding deeper social change movements, "Lots of

donors give to direct service and don't want to make systemic change. Systemic change means

questioning the status quo, and a lot of donors are the status quo" (7). Even if it is not about

the ultra-wealthy who hold much of the money in this country, others in the middle of the

economic ladder have relative privileges that are not secured as a given. These relative

privileges effectively keep individuals focused on issues that impact their personal bottom line

versus recognizing the overall positive gains from systemic change. This is especially poignant

when looking at homelessness. Almost eighty percent of Americans reported in 2018 that they

are living paycheck to paycheck and do not know how they would cover an emergency

requiring liquid assets (Reich). Since that is a daunting reality to acknowledge, it helps to keep

narratives of those experiencing homelessness centered around personal failures or assuming

that those in the lower class are not following the rules (Palmer). Average Americans can then

be reassured that they would not fall into such behaviors to secure the sense of safety humans

crave. An alternative to these disparate and individualized solutions is movement building

centered on those who have experienced the problems and the systemic issues that led to

them.

V.   Why Lived Experience

To eliminate homelessness in Seattle and nationwide we need to upend the current

hegemonic vision. To re-imagine what homelessness is, a movement must challenge the

narratives which assign blame to the individual and instead explore how homelessness has

impacted and affected those living within it and the structures that led to homelessness. To

begin this process there needs to be more attention paid to those who have lived experiences

of the issues. Lived experience of homelessness for this paper is defined as an individual or

group that has survived and or is still involved in a situation that impacts or exacerbates

homelessness; for example, being rent burdened, facing job insecurity, underemployment,

sleeping on the streets, in shelters, living in vehicles, tent encampments, tiny house villages, or

permanent supportive housing. Organizing and advocacy centered around people with lived

experiences of homelessness brings a level of expertise and creativity which those who have

not experienced it cannot contribute. Their input can also help build deeper community and

trust between the housed and unhoused alike through coalitions and social change movements.

Expertise

Those who have experienced the worst of this country are the ones that have the most wisdom to change it. Unfortunately, these are not the people that are currently being listened to when looking for solutions to homelessness. Frequently, there are 'experts' who have worked in the field of homeless services for a long time. In the 1990s, there was a shift in the industry serving people experiencing homelessness, and it became a professionalized field that required educational degrees and years of experience. Lyon-Callo is an ethnographic researcher who worked in a homeless shelter and questioned why the current services were not helping people exit homelessness. Outlining the changes in the field, he explains, "Staff are hired and trained as experts focusing their reformative efforts on the 'special issues' of veterans, drug abusers, homeless teens, homeless women etc" (Lyon- Callo 111). This focus on experts who study the solutions, often without lived experience of the issue, encourages the continuation of individualized treatment of homelessness and allows experts to debate on the best ways to treat the problems without getting to the root issues at play.

The expertise that is gained from experiencing the trials of being homeless will have more uncompromising and promising solutions. People who have lived experience of marginalization will be able to speak to what is needed to change. When there are proposed changes to programs or new initiatives for combatting homelessness, those who have been marginalized need to be the experts in the room. This would help prevent an oversimplification or dehumanization of those experiencing homelessness that can happen when they are kept

out. Movements do not need to be solely made up of those with lived experience, as allies to those experiencing injustice should be included. People who have not experienced homelessness can still have a desire for better outcomes for their community, city, and state. In any movement there should be a diversity of backgrounds and experiences with a focus on the common goals of the group. When focused on common goals, everyone in the group can use their strengths, resources, and expertise to move forward together. Social change should include more than just those experiencing injustice, but they should not move forward without meaningful engagement from those with the lived experience. Tara Moss, a director at Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion in Seattle, began working in the sphere of social justice after an internship at a needle exchange program. The program was a place where people using drugs intravenously could exchange their dirty needles for clean ones to prevent the spread of infectious disease. This program was led by a woman who was formerly a drug user, and Moss observed throughout her time there that the directors ability to connect with those using the needle exchange program was unparalleled compared to other staff and volunteers. This experience set Moss on a career path that sought to build social service programs that provided autonomy for those marginalized in society. One of the guiding principles throughout the work she has been involved in is, "expertise shows up in different ways" (Moss). Allowing people to exercise their inherent autonomy allows expertise to flourish.

A recent candidate for Seattle City Council, Shaun Scott, saw the value in the idea of lived experience expertise during his campaign in 2019. He believed that to truly represent the people and fight injustice, you must either have experienced the adverse outcomes of injustice or surround yourself with those who have (Basu et al.). This is especially relevant to

homelessness because of public perceptions that housed people know what every person experiencing homelessness' problem is. Villanueva, a Native American man working to decolonize philanthropy, posits:

> Deep authentic knowledge doesn't come from reading some stats, reports, or articles; it doesn't even come from a site visit to that community. It comes from living inside that community and experiencing that issue for oneself. (143)

Similarly, Real Change vendors hold a wealth of knowledge about social programs, living on the streets, and solutions on how to move forward. This expertise was clear in my interviews as the answers to my questions were often accompanied by stories which added a depth to the issues which could not otherwise be understood.

Lany personifies the strengths of expertise that Real Change vendors hold. Lany has been a vendor for over five years, she has lived in King County for her whole life and grew up in a low-income household. In the two years that I worked at Real Change, Lany had moved on and off the streets participating in various housing programs that ended up, for various reasons, not working out long-term. During the summer of the interviews, she learned that her long-term boyfriend had been cheating on her and she would need to leave their stable housing in order to get out of the relationship. After a tenuous few weeks of staying with her ex, she found a new housing arrangement and fortunately avoided going back to sleeping on the street. In addition to selling *Real Change News*, Lany has worked with a couple of housing rights organizations in the area to tell her story and push for change. Using her expertise, Lany has worked to show lawmakers and the public how difficult acquiring stable housing in a wealthy county can be. Her expertise is in the difficulties obtaining housing and how the systems

providing housing can often lead to people being back on the street. Stories like Lany's give face to the statistics reported on the vast numbers of people who are unable to independently pay for a place to live and thus end up on the street. It also challenges the narrative that one bad thing causes homelessness. Lany's story exemplifies how it is often a lifetime of challenges and being born into a low-income family which lead to a person having sparse options for stable housing.

Real Change has an average of 300 vendors selling the paper around the county each month. Each of these vendors holds varied, painful, and incredible stories. This expertise is present but underutilized and represents a view of how there needs to be a change in solutions for social issues. In this process there needs to be humility in admitting that no one has all the answers but individually everyone holds valuable knowledge (Easterly). Successful world changers can build others up by encouraging everyone to share in the change making and use their expertise.

Creativity

The second benefit of advocacy and organizing with impacted communities is the creativity in solutions that can be found when groups are diverse, inclusive, and open. Working with people that have lived experience of homelessness brings together groups with vastly different backgrounds and priorities. Experiencing homelessness does not create one need, it creates an interconnected web of needs. Variety can make it difficult for a group to determine priorities and move forward toward succinct goals. Variance between issue areas, campaigns, and movements requires contextualization that helps creativity thrive. Different contexts require distinct solutions based on location or groups involved. Contextualization allows for the

space and creative energy that is needed to create long term change. This is not a phenomenon unique to homelessness organizing, as it has been apparent with other large movements as well. Adrienne Marie Brown uses Occupy Wall Street, a movement occurring shortly after the American recession of 2008, as an example of similar cohesion problems that required creative solutions. The Occupy Movement had many varying voices because of the breadth of people affected by the stock market crash and subsequent housing crisis (Brown 112). This breadth called for a conversation, a national reckoning about how our economic and social safety net systems are not working and need to be changed (Brown 113). The organizers realized that the range of people joining the movement had great potential and allowed rapid growth and spaces for everyone to voice their desires, creating a movement that became broader and more impactful. Bringing together parties with varying backgrounds is also a significant basis for David and Tom Kelley in their work to encourage creativity in problem solving. The practice of coming together illuminates problems and solutions that people with the same knowledge base or people trying to solve problems individually would not be able to see as easily. Additionally, once creative energy starts flowing, it can easily spread between people to grow innovative ideas (Kelley and Kelley 184). Similarly, Brown sees the variety as a benefit, suggesting, "The more people who cocreate the future, the more people whose concerns will be addressed from the foundational level of the world" (158).

The boost of creativity shows the value of bringing people with lived experience into groups of professionalized experts. While trying to create solutions to big problems, there needs to be a setting aside of the career knowledge of what has or has not worked. Similar to starting a new enterprise, co-creating a new future will need ideas that may be risky but with

confident planning and direction could change things significantly (Lynch and Walls 53). New

ideas need time to germinate and grow into something substantial. As new ideas are being

presented, automatic discouraging statements that things will not work will slow down the

forward motion and squelch creativity. Though it may be a culture shift to value both academic

answers and personal experience, it is this cross section that could bring about tremendous

change. Burk saw this in her research on domestic abuse in the queer community and how

people experiencing it have been ignored. Her research peers were hesitant to listen to those

without degrees, but when they did, they gained significant insight about experiences people in

the queer community had even without the statistical data to back them up (Burk). With the

information gained from hearing from people living the situation being researched, they were

able to see a more holistic picture of the problem and find more creative solutions than pure

numerical data could have provided (Burk).

Real Change has a community with demographic diversity, variety in experiences, and

clear creativity in the vendors utilizing services. When I attended the Vendor Advisory Board

(VAB) the group was excited to bounce ideas off each other. In the VAB meeting when

introducing the idea of the vendor lived experience snapshots there was a plethora of ideas to

add or change, as well as suggestions about how to encourage involvement and maximize the

comfort of vendors willing to participate in interviews. Throughout the interviews it became

apparent that the vendors have had to think of creative solutions to their problems daily in

order to survive some incredibly difficult situations throughout their lives.

Chanel is friends with a staff member at Real Change and came to the office on a

morning that I was conducting interviews. Even though she was not a Real Change vendor, the

interview was fruitful in getting to know more about the experience of living in an RV. During the interview I heard about her ideas for a campaign that ensures people living in cars and RVs have safe options for parking and amenities such as running water. When living in a car or RV, it is common for people to receive tickets and citations because of the limited parking in a big city. Chanel explained the impact of this phenomenon, asserting, "We wouldn't be homeless if they stopped towing our homes". It is also common for cars and RVs to be towed after too many tickets have gone unpaid or a vehicle has been left past the parking limit (Archibald). Working with other RV residents in Seattle, Chanel had come up with the idea of the "no movement movement", new parking lots for people to park and work together in a self-governing fashion. The creativity for this movement that so deeply affected her life was apparent as she sang some of the theme songs she had created for the movement to the tune of "Closing Time", "moving time you have to leave and you can't park here" (Chanel). What the movement was missing was resources and momentum. After the interview I passed on Chanel's information to one of Real Change's reporters and a story was written about her movement. Archibald describes Chanel's vision and reports, "she hopes it will become the Trailer Trash Park: A space that RV dwellers can call home, where they can pay rent, access utilities and generally be treated like any other renter". If Chanel's story was listened to and acted on, there could be more creative ways of helping our neighbors living in RVs.

As Real Change continuously engages with vendors, they foster the creativity that every individual possesses. The creativity that living through social injustice creates brings about new ways to advocate for change. Creative ways to advocate change are effective tools in keeping campaigns fresh in the minds of the decision makers (Bobo). Real Change holds an advantage in

that they offer a variety of outlets for activism. Since there is a weekly newspaper, vendors have the opportunity to write articles and op-eds about their experiences. If they are not interested in writing, they are able to attend city council hearings, speak to council members, or support campaigns by collecting signatures and talking to their customers about community issues. This variety of outlets allows people to plug in to places that they will find the most satisfaction, unleashing their potential.

Community

A final benefit to centering people with lived experience in movements for change is the community that is built, countering the all too frequent "disaffiliation from the community" that occurs in addition to the other perils of homelessness (Nemiroff). Building community is both the input to build strong movements and the output of organizing and building collective power.

When looking at building community to begin movements Wagner and Cohen lay out three responses to experiencing homelessness from their research on affiliation and political mobilization and how it impacts identity. Wagner and Cohen define three common identities that they observed in their research with people experiencing homelessness: the individual, the militant, or the incrementalist. The individual is careful to distance themselves from other homeless people, sorting others into the good and bad homeless. Militant people associate strongly with the experience of being homeless and use this to build community among peers (Wagner and Cohen). The incrementalist lays somewhere in between, being involved with some movements but still maintaining a belief of the deserving and undeserving poor (Wagner and Cohen). It is clear from their research on identity and affiliation that people will only get

involved in movements if they identify with the issues at hand and release shame attached to it. Identification is not something that can be forced but once one can identify with a campaign there is higher ownership of its outcomes, both positive and negative (Petre). Seeing others be involved and get results can destigmatize the realities of homelessness and build camaraderie.

Strong identification with an issue has been used in other human rights movements. There is an effort to get people to identify the strengths or beauty in a group so that they are seen as more worthy of respect from the general public. The Poor Peoples Campaign (PPC) was launched in 1967 with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at its helm. Focused on getting to root issues of economic inequality in America, the PPC worked in multifaceted ways to challenge the status quo (Freeman). The campaign, though it faltered after King's assassination, is a prime example of being able to bring people to identify with the societally negative label of 'poor' and to build the collective power to ask, why are we poor? Using the answers to that question, the campaign worked to demand better treatment and change (Freeman). Serving as a way to hold society accountable, a strong community forces others to see that the problem is larger than the individual. It also destigmatizes the shame that can be associated with being poor when there is a community to connect with.

Since so much of the narrative around homelessness is personal failure and individual problems, coming together with communal efforts can help show a different narrative to housed and unhoused people. With this built community there is more stability and potential for people experiencing homelessness to help each other out and share resources and information.

A study done by Boulianne and Brailey looked at how community attachment and civic engagement interacted. Specifically, how much connection one feels to their community and if this affects how willing they are to engage in civic activities. This connection is important in grassroots organizing efforts as people are getting involved because there is a threat to their communal livelihood; if people do not feel connected to their community, there will be lowered interest in getting involved to improve situations. Community civic engagement not only brings about greater outcomes for the city but also builds bonds among community for a healthier society (Boulianne and Brailey). Cohesive campaigns show the local government and the larger society that injustices inflicted against marginalized communities will be met with passionate activism and protest. Being able to come together and make those changes can inspire confidence in the future when other issues come up. This inspiration for action follows Moe-Lobeda's theory of change which asserts, "structural injustice transcends individual agency, it does not transcend collective agency" (Ch 9).

The community that Real Change has already built among vendors is an incredible starting point for more vendors to get involved and continue building collective power. There are groups of the most involved vendors that have sincere and impactful relationships with each other. With more engagement, those smaller groups can be extended to more vendors to be part of an intentional community. Even if vendors do not currently have the ability to devote significant time to campaigns or working on the newspaper, if there is a trustworthy community, there will be a culture of support and a higher potential for involvement in the future. Trustworthy community is exceptionally important within a vulnerable population as the trauma and unknowns of experiencing homelessness and poverty decreases the stability in

people's lives. Being a trustworthy community at Real Change means that there is as much consistency in resources and relationships as possible. Building trust with vendors also means that everyone that comes through Real Change is treated as fully human instead of just as problems; even when delivering consequences for breaking rules or having difficult conversations, this is a central idea in the Arbinger Institute's theory of leadership (36). While the Arbinger Institute is focused on employees and organizations, it is applicable when working with people in any situation. Treating vendors with respect and kindness builds trust for everyone in the Real Change community as it provides a safer space for everyone to be themselves.

Rae has been a vendor for several years and exemplifies how community found through Real Change can change a life. Rae immigrated from the Philippines to Seattle with her husband. When her husband passed away shortly after moving, she had a hard time making ends meet and ended up living on the street for some time before being introduced to Real Change. After selling the newspaper outside of a grocery store and building relationships with her customers one of her customers offered her a room in their home rent free. With her job selling *Real Change News* and a part time job at a department store, in addition to the stability of free housing she was able to save enough to move into low income housing where she currently resides (Rae). Throughout the interview Rae credited Real Change with the stability she feels in her life now. The community that was found through the staff, the other vendors, and her customers offered different things to her. Though different, these various communities have each played a part in helping her restructure and restart her life after the tragedy of losing her husband and the subsequent homelessness endured. Rae is now happy to share her story

and has worked with the reporters at *Real Change News* numerous times to tell her story to the public.

While the vast majority of vendors are not receiving offers of housing from their customers, the variety of relationships that Real Change can foster is a starting point to building change for individual vendors and broader political change. Homelessness can be an isolating experience and having a space that allows autonomy and access to channels that could change the realities of homelessness can have a meaningful and hopeful impact.

VI.   Building Movements

Building successful movements utilizing the expertise, creativity, and community of those with lived experience of homelessness requires intentional co-creation and accountability. Social change movements hold great variety but the benefits of group investment and trust that can be built through co-creation and accountability applies to every campaign. Using two outside successful campaigns I will show how people with lived experience participating in movements can have a significant impact.

Co-Creation

To harness the three strengths laid out above of expertise, creativity, and community, there needs to be new models of leadership. New leadership is needed because current designs that hold sharp hierarchies often exclude the voices of the most vulnerable. As mentioned earlier, there has been an increase in the professionalization of people working in homeless services. While there are benefits to the wisdom of those who have worked in the homelessness services field for significant time or hold degrees in specialized topics, these can

quickly become prohibitive, keeping those with lived experience from decision making positions. Similar to international development work, there is a needed shift in ideas coming from those in the context of the development work. Willis has seen that a strategy of allowing people to choose what they need most creates new solutions. In her own work there have been improvements when, as she says, "local people have a greater say in what activities are carried out" (Willis 109). This new leadership must be collective in decision making and action. Successful leadership builds on a group's strength and mitigates weakness, relevant to advocacy campaigns as well, knowing the strengths of the group and how to utilize them is critical.

When coming together to make social change, there needs to be deep identification with campaigns for them to be successful and sustainable. Kuenkle sees participation as key in collective leadership. She maintains, "people implement what they helped co-create" (Kuenkle 128). Co-creation must go beyond tokenism which allows only a couple of people living within a minority to be in the room. It must foster a deep involvement from people with vastly differing identities and experiences. To make change, we must be diverse when looking for solutions, which Kuenkel asserts, "is the key prerequisite for success in collaborative sustainability initiatives" (152). Diversity includes socioeconomic, racial, gender and sexuality variety in groups that are working to find creative solutions. Ideally, there is diversity in a variety of identities so that solutions can meet the widest range of needs. Diversity is an asset to any campaign and focusing on building movements full of diversity and people with lived experience creates an environment with great potential.

Once movements have been formed, efforts can be made to focus so that the strengths of expertise, creativity and community can be fully utilized. For example, at Real Change, to find common goals within campaigns, vendors could work with advocacy staff to co-create logic models for how campaigns will flow. A logic model can be used as a tool in discovering what needs to be done and the steps to get there (W.K. Kellogg Foundation). A logic model "represents the program in terms of inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes" which creates a clear pipeline of the campaign direction (Funnell and Rogers). Utilizing logic models allows vendors and staff to have mutual engagement that fosters higher buy-in as opposed to campaigns that are previously created only by staff that they can join. Planning meetings would be the space for creative brainstorming among vendors for how they would like to get involved and what strategies would be most effective. As Bobo instructs in a guidebook for social change campaigns, all organizing tactics should work towards a common goal (48). The tactics of organizing should be varied so that they can reach many audiences; some of the tactics will be to pressure law makers and some will be used to create more community awareness and engagement. All together they are the practical steps laid out in the logic model focused on looking at, "what will be different if this project is successful" (PMD Pro 22). In addition, these tactics lead to the actual changes and commitments needed from governments, corporations, and other special interests.

To build community at Real Change and truly co-create, campaign meetings and the execution of various strategies should be group efforts among vendors and staff that allow for team building and bonding. Additionally, there is a customer community that can be utilized to involve a different demographic, deepening the co-creation of a movement. Customers that

purchase *Real Change News* care about the issues surrounding homelessness in Seattle and

providing opportunities for involvement builds cross-class movements that send a powerful

message of solidarity. Solidarity across class shows decision makers that those who are not

directly affected by an issue care and are watching the proposed solutions.

Real Change follows and learns from organizations and individuals fighting for a more

just society. The below campaign success shows how co-creation can be utilized and how

expertise, creativity, and community can benefit and fuel a movement. Pellow sees the power

of political and social movements to make change in the lives of those experiencing poverty and

racism in America and globally. Waste incinerators are built in low-income neighborhoods

across the world with the assumption that marginalized communities will not have the power

to reject it. As NBC reported, "The organization and influence in wealthier zip codes exact a high

political price on any legislator that attempts to build these unwanted projects" (Gwash and

Schroeder). This is one example of the rampant environmental racism that damages both

current living conditions and the health of generation to come for those living in poverty. Waste

incinerators are an unfavorable addition to a community because of the side effects that can

come from having them around. Incinerators produce significant air pollution in the area and

have negative effects on the ground where any runoff goes. Pellow, describing one of the

dangers of waste incinerators, states, "Mercury is released into the environment primarily by

power plants and waste incinerators polluting the air and is then deposited into the oceans and

other waterways, where humans and other animals ingest it" (Ch 1). The Mothers of East Los

Angeles, MELA, which consists of concerned constituents in the neighborhood and their allies,

formed a large campaign that targeted a proposed toxic waste incinerator in LA (Pellow Ch 4).

This campaign was done with significant collaboration from other environmental and social justice groups, especially with other people of color led organizations. This collaboration brings about more creativity and community buy in, which is crucial in any organizing work. MELA was able to successfully block the construction of the waste incinerator, protecting their community's immediate livelihood and the health of future generations. The community that was built from this campaign led to continued campaigns by MELA and a deep pride in the community. MELA also used creativity in the strategies executed to stop the incinerator plans including always wearing white scarves during events, as well as weekly marches in the neighborhood (Sahagun). To prevent harm for their community, co-creation was used as the basis of demanding change.

Accountability

When working on social change with such diversity and collective power, there must be structures for accountability to provide safe conditions for movements to progress responsibly. In the context of Real Change, accountability should flow from staff to vendors and vendors to staff. The Core Humanitarian Standards define accountability as "the process of using power responsibly, taking account of and being held accountable by ... those who are affected by the exercise of such power". To operationalize accountability there should be a focus on communication, participation, and feedback.

Communication is essential when campaigns are being decided on and when there are changes to strategies or directions. Accountability cannot function without communication. When there is interest in forming a new movement or campaign at Real Change, additional pushes to invite people to the Vendor Organizing Committee should be made. In order to build

trust with vendors there should regularly be open conversations about what options there are

for a campaign, including what commitment to this campaign would look like. Being honest

about how long various meetings or strategies will take allows vendors to make informed

decisions about involvement and build trust for future involvement.

Participation in campaigns brings diversity and thus strength which moves the issue

forward. At Real Change this looks like encouraging a broader group of vendors to get involved

in the advocacy department. This was a central motivation in conducting the vendor lived

experience interviews, to be able to learn more about the vendors and seek them out for

engagement on issues that directly impact them. One significant barrier for organizing and

advocacy with people experiencing homelessness is the lack of monetary resources. Cress and

Snow saw this in their research on social movement organizations and state, "Given their

overwhelming poverty, homeless individuals are able to provide little more than their voices

and physical presence". While the presence and voices or those with lived experience are

invaluable in many ways, it is difficult to move campaigns forward without resources. Though

Real Change is a small non-profit with a tight budget, there are advantages to the established

name in the community. The budget has funds for advocacy and organizing built into it which

means that vendors who participate in advocacy events will consistently have a meal with a

drink and, when needed, a bus pass to and from events.

Feedback is critical for accountability and to ensure sustainability for the future of the

campaign. Real Change is no different, and vendors should have a clear idea of where they can

go to give feedback, especially if the accountability is lacking. In addition to in the moment

feedback, there should be intentionality in gathering any involved parties for a debriefing of

strategies throughout a campaign and a larger conversation after a campaign has been completed. Evaluating projects gives a space to reflect on successes and areas that can be improved in the future. For vendors, this is also a space to continue building community and look to what is next for the future of continuing the work.

Seeing the benefits of accountability to community, a group of people experiencing homelessness in Olympia, Washington organized against a harmful homeless encampment sweep in 2019. A homeless encampment next to a bridge was given a notice that it would be swept and everyone in it would be forced to move on. Since the residents of the camp had no better options of where to move to and had their own leadership structures in the camp, they built awareness with the city council and testified at the next hearing set to decide if the sweep should take place (James). The city council stopped the sweep with the qualification that the unsanctioned camp would work with a local church to set up official leadership and plans for waste removal (James). This group used their expert knowledge on the available resources for people experiencing homelessness and showed the Olympia City Council that there were no other viable options for housing at the time. Community was also used as a tool for collective power, had this been an individual experiencing homelessness it would have been much more difficult to compel City Council against action. Being in a large group speaking against the sweep helped show the public and government the humanity of those experiencing homelessness, a basic dignity that is often taken from those without housing (Hyde). The movement in Olympia learned how to build accountability between each other to mobilize and with the broader community as they negotiated more humane treatment. The benefits of listening and following those with lived experience can flourish with accountable structures.

VII. Conclusion

The United States has a dominant accepted ideology that a portion of the population will live in poverty and without homes. The acceptance of this inequality, even when not consciously acknowledged, has made way for an individualized response to the collective societal failings that create homelessness. When questioning why individuals experience homelessness, there is less attention paid to the deeper systemic issues that allow poverty and homelessness to thrive. These societal ills have not been escaped or resolved in Seattle, a politically liberal city that has attempted compassionate solutions. Seattle has mostly seen a continual rise in people experiencing homelessness in the last five years (Count Us In). As these problems continue, the voices of those who experience poverty and injustice have been marginalized and left out of planning. To change this, we need campaigns led by people with lived experience of homelessness. Political advocacy and organizing involving the expertise and creativity of low-income and homeless people is more effective than established methods of political change because lived experience provides ideas for more practical sustainable solutions. The benefits of marginalized communities becoming more engaged include: an expertise in a diverse range of ideas, a more cohesive community, and creative solutions to complex problems.

Real Change formed in response to rising homelessness in Seattle in the 1990's to provide immediate low-barrier employment opportunities for low-income and homeless people while also providing a news source focused on social justice. Real Change was a space for collective political action to advocate for changes in the city, county, and state. Growing from a small startup that had significant input from vendors to an established twenty-five-year-old

organization, there has been a shift in how the work is done; however the mission of "providing opportunity and voice for low-income and homeless people while taking action for economic, social and racial justice" remains the same (Real Change). In an effort to spark more involvement from vendors in 2019, I conducted interviews with vendors to learn about their experiences in a project called the vendor lived experiences snapshots. The information can be used to ask vendors if they are interested in getting involved in sharing their testimony in front of Seattle City Council, writing articles for public education, or attending the Vendor Organizing Committee to get involved in events longer term. Whatever the issue or impetus for the involvement request, the vendor lived experience snapshots provide a more efficient way to utilize the politically moving stories that vendors hold.

The vendor lived experience snapshots function as a starting point for bigger plans for more engagement. Real Change wants higher levels of vendor participation so that those with lived experiences of injustices can be center to the solving of problems through change campaigns and movements. The benefits of centering advocacy and organizing efforts on those with lived experience are expertise, increased creativity, and greater community. With co-creation and accountability, movements can be built to change public perceptions and lived realities. Real Change is in an ideal place for lived experience led campaigns to be run as the community is already there: a diverse community that holds the expertise and creativity to bring about greater change to Seattle. The current vision of those experiencing poverty and homelessness discounts the humanity and value of those living it. To change this narrative, we need movements that are based on the ideas of those most affected. Only when we can truly listen

and follow those with the lived experiences of homelessness will we be able to move into real

change.

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