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Change the Narrative: Poverty Discourse and Frontline Work in Community-based  
Organizations in Post-Welfare Los Angeles

A degree submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Social Welfare

by

Rachel Wells

2021

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Change the Narrative: Poverty Discourse and Frontline Work in Community-based  
Organizations in Post-Welfare Los Angeles

By

Rachel Wells

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Ananya Roy, Chair

Dominant ideas about poverty shape how social welfare solutions are constructed and how community members are treated when seeking services. At the same time, community-based organizations (CBOs) can reproduce or challenge ideas of poverty through their interactions with community members. Through an ethnographic study of two CBOs in Los Angeles that combine services with organizing, and using a relational poverty framework, this dissertation examined how narratives of poverty were communicated and challenged through frontline work. The two CBOs work in Los Angeles, a city that has a history of radical organizing alongside deep inequality and criminalization of low-income communities and with a post-welfare social service landscape that includes both punitive and supportive policies. As a result, this is an ideal site to study contested ideas in community organizing and social services.

I purposively selected two CBOs that combined services and organizing. CBOs were selected due to their critique of traditional human service provision and their reputation, but they also had a key difference with one CBO having a greater emphasis on organizing and the other having a greater emphasis on services. Data included participant observation from a one-year period at each CBO; 70 interviews of staff and community members across the two CBOs; and a review of organizational documents.

The two CBOs had common repertoires within their frontline work, which resulted in long-term relationships with community members that differed from community members' relationships with other service providers. These more personal relationships resulted in communities of care and a distinct form of service provision, described in this dissertation as "organic service provision". These long-term, supportive relationships then created a space to reframe ideas about poverty and community for staff and community members. Ideas about poverty were influenced by each CBO's organizational mission, history, and neighborhood location, but both CBOs found openings to introduce ideas about poverty across multiple interactions. In addition, CBOs drew from their frontline work to introduce ideas to larger audiences. This study discusses ways that this type of frontline work led to new forms of poverty politics and why both CBOs saw changing narratives and how people talk about poverty as "an issue worth fighting for."

The dissertation of Rachel Wells is approved.

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Edward T. Walker

Ananya Roy, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

## DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Ed Wells, whose love and encouragement have been with me  
always.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	1
Background .....	3
Methodology and Research Design .....	7
Key Terms and Concepts.....	30
Structure for this Dissertation.....	33
<b>Chapter Two: At the Epicenter and at the Fenceline: The Sample CBOs’ Organizational History and Neighborhood Context</b> .....	35
Contexts and Contradictions for CBOs in Post-Welfare Los Angeles.....	37
Sample CBOs and Neighborhood Locations.....	46
Organizational History .....	54
Organizational Positioning Within Neighborhoods .....	67
Organizing from the Fenceline and the Epicenter: Positioning as a Neighborhood Organization within Larger Fields .....	83
Positioning as Neighborhood-based Organizations .....	104
<b>Chapter Three: Narratives of Community in “Organic Service Provision”: Hybrid Frontline Work as a Space for Reframing Ideas of Community</b> .....	108
Repertoires of Frontline Work in Hybrid Organizations .....	110
Research Focus .....	117
Findings	
Core Repertoires of Hybrid Frontline Work .....	119
Distinct Forms of Services and Organizing: The Importance of Organic Service Provision .....	140
Long-term Relationships and Organic Service Provision as a Vehicle for Reframing Ideas .....	158
Conclusion .....	171
<b>Chapter Four: An Issue Worth Fighting for: Alternative Forms of Poverty Politics through Frontline Work.....</b>	<b>173</b>
Poverty Knowledge in Frontline Work .....	175
Research Focus .....	182
Findings	
Working Through Ideas of Poverty at the Frontline .....	183



Spaces of Poverty Knowledge: How Frontline Work Influences Narratives with Other Audiences .....	220
Conclusion .....	245
<b>Chapter Five: Narratives of Poverty in a Post-welfare Los Angeles: Openings for “Truth Telling” through Hybrid Frontline Work .....</b>	<b>249</b>
Summary of Key Findings .....	254
Study Limitations .....	265
Implications for Social Welfare .....	268
Directions for Future Research .....	273
Epilogue and Conclusion .....	274
Appendix A: Events for Participant Observation .....	279
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	282
Appendix C: Programs and Services within Each CBO .....	288
Appendix D: Key Organizations for each CBO .....	289
References .....	293

## Tables

Table 1: Activities and Roles for Participant Observation .....	16
Table 2: Interview Information for each CBO .....	18
Table 3: Sample CBOs .....	49
Table 4: Types of Frontline Work at Each CBO .....	118

## Figures

Figure 1: Audiences for Poverty Knowledge .....	54
Figure 2: Shaping Ideas about Community through Long-term Relationships and Communities of Care .....	159
Figure 3: Shaping Ideas about Poverty through Long-term Relationships and Communities of Care .....	209
Figure 4: From the Frontline to Wider Audiences .....	232
Figure 5: LA CAN twitter post of Darrell Fields Memorial highlighted in LA Taco .....	238
Figure 6: Los Angeles Times coverage of 2019 Homeless Memorial March.....	241

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Pete White, the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), described LA CAN's history during an event in the Freedom Room, which is LA CAN's event and meeting space. LA CAN is a community-based organization (CBO) located in Skid Row, a neighborhood in Los Angeles with a large concentration of unhoused community members and low-income tenants. White discussed how community members living in Skid Row helped to found LA CAN during the 1990s. During this time, White described how mainstream discussions, including those by government officials, portrayed people living in poverty as broken and responsible for their problems. White then discussed how the community members who helped to found LA CAN had a different view on the causes of poverty, and their view was opposite to mainstream ideas that blamed people for their poverty. He stated that changing how people talk about poverty was "an issue worth fighting for." In this discussion, White emphasized the importance of changing narratives of poverty and how this was central to their organizational mission and history. Before sharing this history, White began his introduction to LA CAN with the Frederick Douglass quote of "I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs" in order to highlight LA CAN's focus on action. Here, changing ideas about poverty was "an issue worth fighting for" and they communicated these ideas through action or "praying with their legs".

SBCC, or Strength-based Community Change, is a CBO located in Wilmington, a predominantly immigrant neighborhood of Los Angeles about 20 miles south of LA CAN's office. Compared to LA CAN, SBCC had less of an explicit focus on poverty, but SBCC also argues for the importance of changing narratives. In Spring 2020, SBCC's website referenced



their core values of “every individual has gifts and talents to contribute and that together we build an equitable and just society” and identified changing narratives as key to working towards these values. In line with these core values, SBCC’s website ended with the slogan “Your city, your story, your voice, change the narrative.” Whether they were changing how people talked about poverty or emphasizing the gifts and talents of low-income community members, both CBOs saw changing narratives as a key part of their work. As the two CBOs sought to change narratives, they also promoted a different way of working with community members compared to other human service organizations. As organizations that “prayed with their legs”, the two CBOs introduced ideas about poverty and community through their frontline work with community members.

In this dissertation, I examine how these two community-based organizations (CBOs) challenged or shaped ideas about poverty. A CBO’s work with community members occurs within a specific local and political context and this context shapes and constrains their work. CBOs in Los Angeles work in a city known for radical and progressive organizing alongside deep inequality and criminalization of low-income communities. These organizations are part of a social welfare field shaped by post-welfare policy and poverty governance. As organizations navigate competing ideas and frameworks between progressive organizing and poverty governance, community-based organizations can challenge, shape, or re-produce ideas about poverty through their work with community members. For this dissertation, I asked *(How) is this combination of service provision and community organizing a distinct type of frontline work? How are narratives of poverty communicated and challenged at the community level through services and organizing?* and *(How) can community-based organizations offer an alternative*

*conceptualization of poverty?* I focused on frontline work because it is a key setting where community members interact with staff. At the same time, this frontline work is also influenced by a CBO's mission, funding requirements, and poverty governance. As these community-based organizations managed ideas about poverty while managing different funding and policy requirements, I asked whether this hybrid frontline work that combined services and organizing was a distinct form of frontline work and how this distinct form provided a space for contesting ideas about poverty and people living in poverty. I examined the role of a community-based organization in responding to or shaping ideas about poverty and community; decisions and tensions due to conflicting narratives of poverty; and the resulting poverty knowledge in frontline work.

### **Background**

Ideas about poverty and how poverty is constructed as a social problem have significant influences on social welfare policy and programs. In turn, community organizations can produce and reproduce ideas about poverty through frontline work practices with community members. I use O'Connor's definition (2016) of poverty knowledge of "a way of defining and otherwise encountering the social problems presented by overlapping economic, racial, gendered, and ethnic inequalities" (p. 170). The concept of relational poverty is used as a framework to examine poverty knowledge within frontline work. Instead of seeing poverty as a measure of income or a set category, this framework focuses on how different relationships and processes are involved in producing poverty, inequality, and forms of marginalization (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). Service delivery happens within the context of post-welfare poverty governance, which refers to a devolution of government services to the local level, a reduction in funding, market-

based service delivery, and an emphasis on paternalistic policies that include increased work obligations and hold low-income individuals as primarily responsible for their problems (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Soss et al., 2011; Schram, 2015). Dominant ideologies within poverty governance define poverty as due to individual behavior (Katz, 2013; 2015) and through this narrative of poverty, poverty is seen as a separate issue from inequality and from the institutions and processes that produce poverty (O'Connor, 2001). While relational poverty helps to show how institutions and processes uphold dominant ideologies, this framework also examines how activism can contest these categories and ideologies. CBOs can challenge ideas, refuse normative categories, or offer new possibilities through “unthinkable poverty politics” (as discussed in Elwood & Lawson, 2018). At the same time, they are working within a social service infrastructure that constrains how CBOs can challenge ideas.

The two CBOs in this study are hybrid community-based organizations (CBOs) that aim to advance narratives that differ from dominant ideas within poverty governance. I define CBOs as organizations that have both a geographic focus and a mission that addresses the concerns of marginalized community members (as described in Marwell, 2004). As hybrid CBOs that combine services with organizing and see their services as part of social change (e.g. Hyde, 2000; Meyer, 2010), these CBOs present ideas about the problem of and solutions to poverty that differ from national discourse (e.g., Gates, 2014; Stuart, 2016). However, CBOs still implement these approaches while embedded in systems of poverty governance. As organizations navigate contradictory frameworks of poverty, I examined whether and how CBOs can offer alternative conceptualizations of poverty through frontline work and change narratives, or if they reproduced existing ideas.

## **Study Purpose and Setting**

This ethnographic study examined poverty discourse within frontline work that combined community organizing and service delivery and whether CBOs could offer alternative conceptualizations of poverty through this combination of services and organizing. In studying poverty discourse and poverty knowledge, I examined how poverty is defined as a problem and how discussions categorize people and low-income communities (O'Connor, 2001). These categories and definitions contain other concepts so I examined how discourse incorporated ideas such as structural factors, work, social capital, community, and inequality. My research questions focused on poverty discourse within frontline work that combined service provision with community organizing. This combination of services and organizing is a distinct way of working with communities (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006), so I identified unique aspects of this hybrid combination and whether this combination is poised to offer new forms of poverty knowledge. While I began my study with specific research questions, I discuss later how research questions were modified through prolonged engagement with fieldwork with the two CBOs.

## **Sample and Setting**

For this study, I selected two hybrid CBOs located in two different neighborhoods within Los Angeles: Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and SBCC Thrive LA. These two CBOs are hybrid organizations that combine two organizational forms: service provision and community organizing (with organizational form defined by their social movement strategies, similar to Minkoff, 2002). This combination results in distinct forms both of service provision (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006; Meyer, 2010) and of organizing (Anasti, 2017; Gates, 2014). While the two CBOs did not refer to themselves as hybrid organizations, they both described

their approach as different than traditional human service organizations. Moreover, their critiques of traditional service provision were part of the origin and history of each organization. However, they worked with audiences, such as funders, who had program requirements and potentially differing narratives. While these two CBOs had a strong connection to their community member base, they still had power differences between staff and community members. These two CBOs provided an opportunity to see how CBOs navigated contradictory ideas about poverty and offered a different form of services and organizing while operating within post-welfare poverty governance, and whether this form of frontline work provided a way for CBOs to shape ideas about poverty.

The two CBOs in this study are located within Los Angeles, at a specific historical conjuncture that includes both a legacy of radical and progressive organizing as well as the current post-welfare period. Los Angeles has a history of progressive organizing that includes multi-racial coalitions and immigrant organizing (Gottlieb et al., 2006; Pastor, 2001; Pulido, 2002; 2006) and a current infrastructure for coordinating among progressive organizations (Nicholls, 2003). CBOs that are connected to this history bring this paradigm from progressive organizing to their work in social welfare. While Los Angeles is seen as a site for progressive organizing, this work also happens in a city with deep inequality (Gottlieb et al., 2006) and with poverty management strategies that include involvement of police and criminalization of low-income communities (e.g. Blasi et al., 2007, Stuart, 2011). CBOs that are providing social services are not necessarily connected to progressive organizing. As part of post-welfare policy, DeVertuil (2006) describes a social service landscape in Los Angeles characterized by indirect support, contracting out to community-based organizations, and fragmentation of services.

Services are concentrated in certain neighborhoods that include both supportive and punitive policies concurrently, such as services and supportive housing alongside criminalization (DeVertuil, 2006; 2015). One of the study CBOs, LA CAN, works in a neighborhood that is a service hub, including “mega-shelters” that could operate with “coercive benevolence” (Stuart, 2016 p. 57). While this neighborhood is a service hub, with high rates of homelessness and concentrated poverty, services are not sufficient to meet residents’ basic needs such as housing. These political, economic, and geographic aspects of the historical conjuncture within Los Angeles affected ideas of poverty within the two CBOs. I discuss the neighborhood contexts in greater detail in Chapter two, but both CBOs interacted with larger social service organizations that had different underlying ideas about poverty. With these multiple and often competing contexts, this was an ideal site to study contested ideas in community organizing and social services. Through examining ideas of poverty within frontline work, this dissertation provides a case of the co-construction and re-construction of poverty knowledge.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

For this study, I used qualitative methods, specifically ethnographic methods, as they are ideal for understanding the context or setting of frontline work. The multiple methods and ongoing interactions that are part of ethnography also help to develop a complex, detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2013). Critical ethnography can be used to examine how power and inequality are maintained, question surface assumptions and ideas of neutrality in social welfare, and to develop research that contributes to social change and to discourses of social justice (Creswell, 2013; Madison, 2011). This type of ethnography also strives to give community members more authority throughout the research process, while also recognizing

how a researcher's positionality shapes this research (Creswell, 2013). Ethnography as critique does not refer to assigning value or determining whether something is right or wrong. Rather, critique is a method to defamiliarize taken-for-granted, familiar practices and examine the "ways that thoughts and actions rest on taken-for-granted-assumptions and the consequences of both the examination of familiar and its defamiliarization have for the way things are" (Holston, 2008, p 35). Through studying everyday frontline practices and the ideas within these practices, this method helped to examine how CBOs navigate contradictions between ideas within activism and in poverty governance and whether or how their form of frontline work offered alternative ways of working within communities.

### **Research Questions and Sub-Questions**

Specifically, my initial research questions were:

- 1) How are narratives of poverty communicated and challenged at the community level through services and organizing?
  - How do organizations define the community in which they work?
  - How do a history and trajectory of a nonprofit shape or influence their ideas about poverty?
  - How do nonprofit staff and community members conceptualize and work with ideas about poverty?
  - What are the contradictions that nonprofit staff encounter when integrating service with organizing and trying to challenge ideas about poverty? What decisions do they make in this context?
- 2) (How) can CBOs offer an alternative conceptualization of poverty?

Through these two research questions, I aimed to examine whether frontline work, specifically frontline work that combines services and organizing, can be a key moment for contesting poverty knowledge. I looked at whether and how organizations can reframe poverty knowledge through frontline work, as opposed to simply reproducing dominant ideas. My sub-questions examined their broader context and how both staff and community members would bring in ideas. The two CBOs varied in whether they had an emphasis on service or an emphasis on organizing and on their approaches to addressing poverty, so I expected that the two organizations would face different tensions and decisions when trying to meet their mission.

While the questions above were my original questions, through ongoing interactions at both CBOs, I identified additional related questions. To understand how CBOs talked about poverty, I first needed to examine repertoires within their frontline work that combined service provision and organizing. I asked (*How is this combination of service provision and community organizing a distinct type of frontline work?*) and then identified aspects of this frontline work that enabled the two CBOs to communicate narratives. Through fieldwork, I identified how CBOs used their frontline work to communicate and shape narratives with larger audiences, so I then explored this process in greater detail. To examine how CBOs can offer alternative conceptualizations of poverty, I asked how CBOs draw from frontline work to promote narratives with wider audiences and the challenges and tensions that can subsequently occur.

### **Case Selection**

I selected the two CBOs- Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and SBCC- due to their critique of traditional service provision and due to their reputation. SBCC's acronym has changed meanings, but SBCC currently stands for Strength-based Community



Change. As an intensity sample, the two CBOs were strong examples of the phenomenon of interest, and thus information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). While both cases were selected as strong examples of CBOs that seek to challenge narratives, I also selected two CBOs that had key differences that could affect their narratives and forms of engagement with community members. I discuss case selection in greater detail in chapter two, but I selected one CBO (LA CAN) had a greater emphasis on organizing and one CBO (SBCC) that had a greater emphasis on service provision. Due to this key difference, the two CBOs differed in their mission and funding. In addition, the two CBOs worked in different social welfare and neighborhood settings. LA CAN worked with houseless community members and low-income tenants. Located in a service-dense neighborhood, LA CAN participated in housing justice coalitions and was a more activist organization within homeless services fields. SBCC was located in Wilmington, a neighborhood in Los Angeles that had fewer services providers. Working with many low-income families, SBCC interacted within children and family services fields. This difference in target population and neighborhood provided an opportunity to see how CBOs interacted in multiple fields within social welfare.

### **Data Collection**

I used ethnographic methods that included participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and document analysis to examine the activities and routines that comprise frontline work (Emerson, Fretz, & Snow, 2011) and shared meanings within organizations (Creswell, 2013). The different methods complemented each other to present a richer picture of frontline settings. For example, I further explored concepts that initially emerged in participant observation during interviews. Through interviews, document review, and

discussion of previous events during observations, I also documented the historical context for both CBOs' current work. Due to research questions and scope, data collection focused on frontline work and organizational discourse. I recognize the influence of funders and have captured this information through interviews with staff and conversations that arose during observations; however, data focused primarily on the two CBOs and their frontline work.

I had a staggered timeline for data collection in order to spend the time developing relationships at each site. Additional information on my timeline is discussed below, but for both sites, the majority of data collection lasted one year. With the exception of meetings with senior level staff to discuss emerging findings, I finished data collection by December 2019 and had completed much of my analysis before the COVID pandemic. However, since both CBOs were active in supporting community members during the COVID pandemic, I collected their social media responses from March 15 – June 1, 2020 to document narratives and activities during this time. This latter data were not part of the main analysis, but I used this data to frame the conclusion chapter.

### ***Access and Entry into the Site***

My entry into each site and my role depended on the organization. Before starting data collection, I attended multiple events and met with nonprofit staff to identify and select organizations, so I included these field notes to understand context. While I was introduced to both CBOs through UCLA faculty members, I had a different process for gaining access to each site. For SBCC, after talking with the Executive Director, I attended a staff meeting in Summer 2017 where I introduced myself and presented my research goals. I attended a few SBCC events in Fall 2017, before officially beginning data collection in January 2018. LA CAN had worked

with other PhD students on their dissertations, and based on these prior experiences, staff shared expectations for researchers. We discussed how I would serve as a volunteer and active participant before agreeing on dissertation research. I began attending committee meetings and LA CAN activities in December 2017 and then met with the Executive Director to discuss this research in July 2018. I presented my research to LA CAN committees and then began data collection at LA CAN meetings in Fall 2018, while also including notes from public events prior to the start of official data collection. I was an active volunteer at LA CAN and continued this relationship after data collection. While I was primarily an observer at SBCC, I formed relationships with staff and community members as I saw them across multiple events. For both CBOs, relationships extended outside of research. Staff from both CBOs served as guest speakers for my courses and I introduced each CBO to UCLA undergraduate students who were planning volunteer events.

The methods of data collection varied at each site. I had a base level of interviews, participant observation, and document review for both sites, but I conducted more participant observation at LA CAN and conducted more interviews with SBCC. This was partly due to my entry into each site and the goals of each organization. My role as an ongoing volunteer, as well as the transit accessibility and proximity to Skid Row, resulted in more observations at LA CAN. In contrast, SBCC had expressed interest in the results of my interviews. SBCC also had a larger staff and community member base, so I completed more interviews to better capture this variation. While I had different ratios of participant observation to interviews, for both CBOs, I used a combination of methods to gather multiple perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of context and key processes.

### *Participant Observation*

A key part of ethnographic research is participating in routines and developing relations through participant observation and then documenting activities in a systematic way with field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Snow, 2011). For participant observation, I primarily focused on events and activities that included interactions with community members, such as community events and meetings with community members involved with organizing. I also observed staff meetings and partnership meetings to better understand decisions that could shape frontline work. Table 1 describes the different categories of events and then Appendix A lists the meetings and events that I observed at both sites.

At LA CAN, I had a routine presence at their weekly housing committee meetings, where low-income tenants met to plan tenant outreach and housing justice campaigns and events, and a semi-regular presence at their bi-monthly resident organizing meetings. I also served as a volunteer for LA CAN's weekly legal clinic and assisted with the Downtown Women's Action Coalition meetings. I did not take field notes for the majority of my legal clinic interactions as I did not have consent to record my interactions there. However, these weekly interactions helped to strengthen relationships. For SBCC, where my presence was less routine, I attended meetings for 11 different community groups that were part of SBCC's community organizing programs (including their Roots of Community Collaborative and community garden gatherings). For five of these groups, I attended multiple meetings to better observe processes and build relationships. SBCC had just begun their year-long Roots of Community campaign as I started data collection, so I attended multiple events for the Campaign launch, including an advocacy workshop, tree planting, and campaign kickoff. I also attended regional meetings and SBCC's county-wide

meetings that brought together active community members from across Los Angeles County. While I only attended some group meetings once, I then saw community members at larger community meetings and was able to build relationships across multiple settings. Some SBCC meetings were held in both English and Spanish with translations provided, while other meetings were held primarily in Spanish. I had a basic understanding of discussions in Spanish, but I recognize that I missed some meanings in these settings. Even when I did not have all the meeting content, I documented how community members interacted with each other and content that staff and community members chose to translate, recognizing that choosing to translate specific details signified information that they saw as important.

In addition to meetings with community members, I also observed ongoing interactions, events for community members and the larger public, as well as events and actions that were planned by community members. (See Appendix A for a list of events and actions.) For LA CAN, I attended Skid Row community events, including a Labor Day Block party for the Skid Row community and the 2019 Women's Retreat, and events for a larger public such as a Poor Peoples campaign rally held at LA CAN. Through volunteering, I participated in multiple actions with LA CAN, such as City council hearings, press conferences before the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting, outreach events concerning tenant rights, and the Homeless Memorial March. For SBCC, I attended multiple community events that were held either in the parking lot outside SBCC's office, such as an I Heart Wilmington birthday celebration, or at the SBCC community garden, such as a 2018 Fall Harvest Festival activity. SBCC also had a large annual festival in a nearby park in Wilmington in 2018 and 2019 and I attended the festival both years. In addition, I attended volunteer activities such as community cleanups or tree plantings as

well as events planned by community members, such as family activity days. I was not as involved in planning activities with SBCC compared to LA CAN. I volunteered for two SBCC events, but I primarily attended as an observer. For both CBOs, I attended their annual Gala, which provided a way to observe how each CBO communicated narratives to a larger audience.

I recorded field notes after each observation. For many activities, it was not feasible or could interfere with relationships to take field notes on site. Instead, I took a step-wise approach with mental notes or quick jotting in the field and then I wrote detailed narratives later (as described by Snow & Anderson, 1987). In field notes, I kept observations and reflections in separate sections. I also documented asides and commentaries that arose during field notes in a separate section (Emerson et al., 2011). As part of field notes and memos, I documented my own activities, including how I gained access to each site, my roles within each organization, my interactions with people at each event, and how I found out information when observing. During observations, I talked with staff and community members about events, including their reactions and interpretations of events. I did not record conversations but I documented these conversations as part of field notes. I did not include names in my field notes, but through descriptions, some staff members are still identifiable. Thus, I was careful as to how I wrote notes and I removed some information during writing to maintain confidentiality. I did not document interactions when I did not feel that I had consent.

The majority of events were in-person events; however, I attended a few virtual events with LA CAN after the pandemic. I attended these events after I completed the majority of my analysis but I have included them as field notes and as part of my conclusion.

Table 1:

<i>Activities and Roles for Participant Observation</i>		
	SBCC	LA CAN
Role in Organization	Primarily participant observation/ Volunteer for a few events	Active volunteer and member of Housing Committee Weekly volunteer with legal clinic
Observational Activities	Community leader meetings Community group planning meetings	Housing committee core member meetings/ Community leader retreats General Committee meetings Resident organizing meetings
	Volunteer days or community-led events Community visioning sessions Community events and workshops	Marches and community actions City council sessions Community events
	Fundraisers/ Annual events	Fundraisers/ Annual events
	Community organizer staff meeting	

***Semi-structured and Unstructured Interviews***

**Interview sample.** After participant observation was underway, I then added both semi-structured and unstructured interviews to complement participant observation. I completed 70 interviews from the two organizations: 55 interviews at SBCC and 15 at LA CAN. As anticipated, I collected more interviews at SBCC due to their size and their interest in the findings from interviews. For each organization, I selected participants so that the sample included a range of perspectives from each organization, including senior level staff, front line staff, and community members. The majority of interviewees were active in frontline work, either as community member participants or as staff members. Even though senior-level staff may be less involved with frontline work on a daily basis, due to the organizational culture for both CBOs, senior-level staff were participants in events and had formed strong relationships

with community members. In addition, senior-level staff helped to provide historical perspective and share information on key challenges. For both CBOs, I interviewed community members who had been active participants, but I also included community members who were newer to programs. I interviewed multiple community members who were part of the same committees for LA CAN and the same Neighborhood Action Councils (NACs) for SBCC, and then interviewed staff who worked with these community members. This allowed me to further document interactions and to gain multiple perspectives on similar events. Many staff members either lived in or grew up in the community in which they worked. This interview set included six community members who transitioned from volunteers to staff members and then an additional community member who transitioned to staff after the interview.

Table 2 includes basic information about interviews, including their relationship with the organization and length of interviews. Within SBCC, I interviewed 35 community members and 20 staff, including 11 staff who had grown up in the community or lived in the community at the time of the interview. In addition, the remaining staff interviewees had similar experiences or grew up in similar communities to the communities they worked in. Interviews of community members were often shorter than staff interviews, with a range of 14 – 72 minutes and a median time of 34 minutes, with some interviews ending earlier due to timing or their children’s schedules. For staff interviews, the median time was 51 minutes, and interviews ranged from 35 to 79 minutes. 26 of the SBCC interviews were conducted in Spanish and 29 interviews were conducted in English. For many of the interviews conducted in English, interviewees were also fluent in both English and Spanish. For LA CAN, I conducted 15 interviews: 12 community members and 3 staff. All three staff had lived or currently lived in Skid Row. Many of the 12



community members were active community members; five community member interviewees had previously been interns with LA CAN. LA CAN interviews ranged from 24 minutes to 65 minutes, with a median time of 40 minutes. All LA CAN interviews were conducted in English.

Table 2:

<i>Interview Information for each CBO</i>		
	SBCC	LA CAN
Number of Interviews	20 staff; 35 community members 55 total interviews	3 staff; 12 community members 15 total interviews
Median time	51 minutes for staff; 34 minutes for community members	40 minutes
Location for interviews	SBCC Main office (N = 19) SBCC Garden (N = 7) Park or other outdoor setting (N= 19) Coffee shop or restaurant (N = 5) Municipal govt. meeting room (N =5)	LA CAN office (N =12) LA CAN rooftop garden (N = 2) Los Angeles Public Library (N = 1)

\*All locations were chosen by participants. Interviews for LA CAN were all conducted in Skid Row or downtown Los Angeles. For SBCC, 26 interviews were conducted in the neighborhood of Wilmington. Other interviews were conducted in Long Beach and South Bay cities outside of Wilmington (N = 15); South Los Angeles and Compton (N = 7); East Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley (N=2); and San Fernando Valley and Antelope Valley (N = 5).

**Interview content.** As part of ethnography, the interactions leading up to the interview and the setting were a key part of the context. I documented how people learned about interviews, the interactions to set up the interview, and any interactions after the interview. As interviews included community members and staff who worked together, I also documented relationships between interviewees.

Interview protocols are listed in Appendix B. Interview protocols differed slightly between community members and staff, but common questions asked how they first got involved with the organization and why they stay involved; how the CBO's work had an impact on the

community; how their participation had affected them; and any challenges that they saw for the CBO. Sample questions for both community members and staff included: *Has organizing changed your views on poverty? What are some of the challenges you see with these programs?* and *What does community organizing mean to you?* Additional questions for community members included: *Can you tell me about how you first heard about the organization? What were the reasons you kept coming back?* and *How has organizing affected you and your family?* Additional staff questions included: *How was your experience of their programs compared to what you were expecting? What are key ideas that you try to share with community members as part of organizing? What are key supports that organizers need?* and *What else does the organization need for this work to be successful?* In addition to the interview protocol questions, I asked about prior events or meetings when relevant. For Executive Directors or long-term staff, the first part of the interview used a life-history format to chronicle the organization's founding, challenges, and evolution. I then added questions about the overall organization, such as: *What are core values that underlie your work?* and *How do you discuss your work with funders?* While key topics were similar across the two sites, I revised questions slightly for LA CAN. For example, I added the question *What does building power mean to you?* since I had heard this phrase during observations. Based on conversations with the Executive Director, I also added the question *What does poverty mean to you? How do you define it?*

**Interview recruitment and process.** For community members, I primarily identified potential interviewees through observations and ongoing interactions. For SBCC, I made announcements at five different community meetings and active community leaders also shared interview information with other community members. In addition, staff and community

members recommended people and provided contact information. For LA CAN, I made announcements at three different planning meetings and then made personal invitations to community members who weren't able to attend these planning meetings. I primarily recruited staff members through email, but also used phone to invite some staff to participate. Two staff with SBCC did not respond, but one of these staff members left SBCC shortly after I asked about an interview. All community members and staff were eligible to participate as long as they were over 18 and could complete the interview in either English or Spanish. While recruitment was open to anyone who was interested, I reviewed the interview list at multiple points and conducted targeted recruitment to add missing perspectives. I offered community members \$20 as an acknowledgement of their time but I did not offer compensation to staff.

Interview locations took place at a setting chosen by the interviewee. For SBCC, 26 interviews took place either at a private room within the SBCC main office or at a private space at the SBCC garden in Wilmington. For community members or staff who did not live in Wilmington, interviews took place at a community center, local park, or a coffee shop. Some interviews occurred directly after a community meeting and at the same location of the meeting. For LA CAN, 14 of the 15 interviews took place at the LA CAN office, either in a private meeting room, their rooftop garden, or a staff member's office when he was out for that day. Before beginning the interview, I shared a Study Information sheet that was in English for LA CAN and in both English and Spanish for SBCC with the interviewees. After reviewing this sheet and answering any questions, interviewees gave verbal consent for the interview. I kept all interview subjects' participation confidential to reduce any pressure to participate, but some interviewees shared with other people that they had participated.

For LA CAN, all interviews were in English and I conducted all interviews. For SBCC, interviews of community members in Spanish were conducted by an MSW student fluent in Spanish. I met with each MSW student prior to them conducting interviews to discuss overall research goals and key topics and questions. I was also present for their first interview to observe interactions and answer any questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The majority of interviews in Spanish were transcribed first in Spanish and then translated into English, but some Spanish interviews were transcribed directly into English through on-the-fly translation. I worked with UCLA MSW students and undergraduate students to transcribe and review transcribed interviews for any errors.

### ***Document Review***

I reviewed both publicly available as well as internal organizational documents. I used these documents to help construct an organizational history and add additional perspectives on events that I attended. Because documents were designed for a range of audiences, I also used documents to examine how the two CBOs communicated narratives to different audiences. In addition, news media provided a way to examine how CBOs sought to influence larger conversations and if and how other organizations adopted the CBOs' narratives. The following processes were used to collect documents:

**Organizational websites and emails.** I captured each CBO's website at designated points in time: August 2019 for LA CAN and September 2019 for SBCC. Both organizations have revised their website since then, so I captured screenshots of LA CAN's revised website in October 2019 and SBCC's revised website in May 2020. While a full social media review was not feasible due to the volume of material, I also documented their bio or About sections of

social media, such as LA CAN's bio for their twitter page or the About section and profile photos for SBCC Community Organizing's Facebook page. I was on both CBOs' email lists, which provided a chance to collect all emails sent out to the general public. From January 2018 – February 2020, I collected all emails sent through their general mailing list, including 28 emails from SBCC and 10 emails from LA CAN.

**990 tax forms.** Through a Guidestar Premium subscription, I was able to download 990 forms for LA CAN from 2003 until 2017 (the most recent year available as of Spring 2020) and 990 forms for SBCC from 1997 until 2017. Due to the focus on frontline work, I did not do an in-depth funding analysis, but annual revenue listed on the 990 forms helped to track changes in funding. 990 forms included a mailing address so I also used forms to determine when an organization had moved to their current location.

**Social media and event publicity.** I did not have conduct a full social media review, but I collected social media related to events that I attended, both publicity before an event and media coverage after the event. I also collected event fliers that were handed out during events and meetings. Event fliers were primarily collected through social media, but I also collected fliers from each CBO's office. These documents were added to field notes about the events.

**Organizational documents.** I collected a range of documents including meeting handouts, newsletters, petitions, and position statements. The majority of the documents were from meetings that I attended. Many documents were public documents such as newsletters for a SBCC program, a press release for a LA CAN press conference, and a LA CAN position statement. Other documents collected were more internal, including a contract that SBCC asked community participants to sign in 2018 and materials for staff organizers. Documents also

included brochures and fliers from before my data collection period, such as a previous brochure for SBCC's community organizing program and an LA CAN flier for an organizing campaign in the early 2000s. For each document, I recorded the overall goal of the document and intended audience.

Both CBOs produced videos during my time. These videos were especially common with LA CAN as a documentary filmmaker started working with them at the same time that I began volunteering. In addition, I identified earlier videos from before my observation period that were either on the CBO's website, shared by CBO staff, or shared during events. I recorded the YouTube links and descriptions of these videos.

**Newspaper articles.** I collected newspaper articles that featured the two CBOs during my observation period, with LA CAN most likely to be featured in newspaper articles. I included articles about LA CAN from the *Los Angeles Times*; *LA Taco*, an independent Los Angeles news source; the *Guardian*; *Curbed Los Angeles*, a site focused on urban planning, neighborhoods, and real estate; *CityLab*; as well as local news stations. In addition to news articles from my observation period, I looked for earlier newspaper articles to provide a historical context. For LA CAN, earlier newspaper articles were primarily from the Los Angeles Times, but also included the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a weekly Black-owned newspaper. For SBCC, I included articles from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Daily Breeze*, a newspaper for the South Bay/ Harbor area of Los Angeles.

The majority of documents were collected by December 2019. While the pandemic occurred after the data collection period, both organizations were actively responding to the

pandemic and promoting their core values and narratives through social media. Because of this, I collected social media posts that occurred between March 15 – June 1, 2020.

### ***Timeline***

Using a staggered start date, I collected data with each organization for primarily one year. For SBCC, the majority of data collection happened during 2018, but I completed remaining staff interviews in 2019. I also attended additional events in 2019 to include more county-wide events and larger community events and to chronicle SBCC's increased emphasis on advocacy during this year. For LA CAN, the majority of data collection was between October 2018 and September 2019, but I continued with remaining staff interviews and observing key events until January 2020. At each site, I started with participant observations, and then began semi-structured interviews while participant observation was underway. I conducted preliminary analysis during fieldwork so that I could adjust fieldwork strategies or interview questions as necessary. Preliminary analysis also helped to identify missing perspectives and to conduct targeted recruitment for interviews.

### **Analysis and Rigor**

I kept detailed field notes throughout the process, so I had a combination of field notes, organizational documents, and interview transcripts that were all stored securely online through Box. I wrote memos throughout data collection, including memos of emergent findings and initial patterns from ongoing field work; memos that recorded impressions and key themes from interviews; and integrative memos that made connections between fieldnotes and interview excerpts and emerging findings (Emerson et al., 2011). Memos also allowed me to identify key events or examples that illustrated themes (Fetterman, 2010). As these themes emerged, such as

the role of political education in frontline work or the importance of long-term relationships between community members and each CBO, I then completed additional rounds of analysis to document additional instances in the data and compare across them.

I documented each CBOs' broader context for their frontline work, which included their role within organizational fields, comprising of their relationships with other organizations, politicians, and funders, and their role within their neighborhood. This context also included each CBO's historical conjuncture and how this had shaped practices and assumptions (as discussed in Goldman, 2006; Holston, 2008; Roy, 2012) and the specifics of the time period of this study. To document organizational fields, I documented when and how other organizations and government agencies were mentioned in interview transcripts or during meetings or events, as well as which organizations and government officials attended each CBO's events. This helped to identify coalitions that each CBO was part of and to map out relationships between organizations. I conducted an organizational timeline through interviewee and participants' descriptions of previous events, which allowed me to identify events that community members and staff saw as significant. I then supplemented these descriptions with data from newspaper articles and interviews with senior level staff.

As an ethnographic study, these multiple methods of analysis, including memos, mapping, and identifying key events, happened concurrently (Fetterman, 2010). Through these multiple methods, I documented patterns and key relationships, compared data and categories, and identified assumptions and areas for additional analysis (Charmaz, 2014). I also compared narratives in frontline work, challenges, and key decisions between the two CBOs, as well as identified key themes and processes across the two organizations. I examined multiple types of



frontline activities, noting how and when different approaches had common processes or characteristics and the variation within frontline work. With a range of pre-existing ideas on poverty within each CBO, I also looked for differences and similarities between and within community members and staff members in a single organization.

This study included prolonged engagement in the field, rich descriptions, and triangulation through multiple interviewees and types of data collection (Creswell, 2013). As opposed to viewing triangulation as a way to verify findings, I used triangulation to capture alternate viewpoints and meanings and to understand how different organizational actors approached these processes and made decisions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Identifying differences through triangulation also helped to identify key tensions. Rich descriptions helped to determine transferability of key processes and themes to other settings. In an era with sudden policy changes, the specific time frame could include or omit specific policy changes and threats to communities, which could affect challenges and decisions. I chronicled information about the study time frame and how that shaped context, including political factors, such as the 2018 election, and organizational events, such as the loss of staff. The two CBOs worked within a Los Angeles policy context and they both received funding from foundations that viewed themselves as supportive of grassroots efforts and community organizing. Thus, these CBO were located in a specific mode of poverty governance and worked with narratives that may differ from other cities. As I used this specific case to generalize to theory and larger processes, I included the role of this local context and timing and used thick, rich descriptions.

I also used multiple methods for validity that are part of critical ethnographic research. I shared emerging findings with the Executive Directors at both sites as a form of member

checking. Since I planned on using both CBO's names in this dissertation and subsequent papers, sharing the findings from my time with each CBO was also a key part of transparency. Drawing from critical theory, I included an evaluation of my role in this research and how positionalities shaped data collection and analysis (Madison, 2011). I used Angen's concept (2000) of ethical validation to examine political implications of publishing my findings, especially since I name both organizations, and how findings could affect relationships with other organizations. I also reflected on how I could thoughtfully incorporate different perspectives and compare across CBOs with different missions and histories. Both CBOs have strong core values and LA CAN had an explicit political orientation; thus, I considered how my representations and my descriptions of each CBO were in line with their orientations. I assisted with community-based research focused on action as part of my time at LA CAN, but as part of ethical validation, I also reflected on how this research that was more theoretical and focused on discourse could lead to action and change.

## **Ethical Considerations**

### ***IRB Process and Consent Process***

This study received IRB approval through UCLA's IRB review board, with the UCLA students who conducted interviews and who helped with interview transcription all listed on the IRB application. Both executive directors gave permission to conduct this research and I documented when and how consent happened. As I was also observing and interviewing staff and community members, each interview had a separate consent process where interviewees reviewed a study information sheet and provided verbal consent. I discussed my research with the different LA CAN committees before beginning data collection and introduced myself as a

researcher when attending SBCC planning meetings. I attended some events where I did not feel that I had consent, such as conducting intakes with the LA CAN legal clinic. As a result, I did not include information from these events in my field notes.

At an organizational level, I discussed confidentiality with both Executive Directors and they gave permission for the CBO to be named. Since both CBOs were selected as unique organizations, we discussed how CBOs would be identifiable even without using their name. Both Executive Directors, Pete White at LA CAN and Colleen Mooney at SBCC, gave permission to use their name when writing up findings as they had a public role. I kept the participation and responses confidential for all other participants and I did not record names during observations to limit identifiable information. However, active community members could still be identified based on their comments and it was even more challenging to limit identifiable information for staff members. Because of this, I was careful on how I reported data. I shared quotes from the directors of each organization so that they could see how I was using their quotes. Because LA CAN was a smaller organization and community members were involved long-term, interviewees were more likely to be identified through their quotes. I met with key staff at LA CAN to discuss how I was using quotes. In addition to IRB and consent protocols, I recognize that community members spent a significant amount of time with me; thus, reciprocity is a key ethical consideration (Fetterman, 2010). As part of this research, I looked for ways that my time and research could be beneficial for organizations, such as volunteering my time or sharing information that CBOs could use.

### *Positionality in Research*

Examination of one's positionality is critical when representing the experiences of community members, and this includes examining not only our own identity, but also the intentions, methods, and possible effects of the research (Madison, 2011). I came to this research after nonprofit work experience where I experienced challenges with providing services that treated community members with dignity and respect under limited resources. While my professional nonprofit experience focused less on community organizing compared to the two CBOs in this study, I had a basic familiarity with these types of organizations through personal relationships with nonprofit staff and volunteer work in Detroit. My previous nonprofit experience and relationships helped me to gain rapport with nonprofit staff but also shaped how I asked interview questions and analyzed the data. While I have nonprofit experience, I have not had the experience of seeking services, nor have I faced houselessness or evictions, and this could affect power dynamics with community members. As an active volunteer with LA CAN, I built relationships and had a presence on the site. I do not necessarily see my presence as a weakness, but this affected the data that was gathered. I documented my presence as part of field notes and discuss this later in the dissertation.

Crane (2015) describes poverty knowledge as “an exercise in social and political power, historically unaccountable to those it theorizes and represents” (p. 345). Critical poverty studies includes an awareness that one cannot separate our research from relationships of power that are often the subject of this research (Crane, 2015). With this framework, I was mindful of my role and how I worked with community members in collecting data, theorizing, and reproducing poverty knowledge. I was a white woman entering primarily Latinx and Black spaces. I feel that

I gained trust with community members and formed friendships as I worked with community members on campaigns. I also identify as a member of LA CAN after my time as part of multiple committees but I still had an outsider's perspective as a White woman who was newer to Los Angeles and had not experienced houselessness or faced eviction. Consequently, I write from this mixed insider/ outsider position. I have a deep appreciation for the time that staff and community members spent with me during this research, but as a researcher from an elite university, interactions could be in unequal relationships. In some settings, I was also interacting with community members in vulnerable moments. Through data analysis and writing, I was mindful that I was not giving voice but interpreting their experiences. Information was shared with me when I was actively involved with the organization, but ultimately as I spent more time writing, I became less involved with the organizations. Thus, I aimed to be thoughtful in how I developed themes and findings with their experiences.

### **Key Terms and Concepts**

Throughout this dissertation, I use specific terminology to refer to broader concepts. I use these terms throughout the dissertation due to the reasons below.

#### ***The Use of Discourse and Narrative***

While literature has looked at poverty discourse (e.g. Katz, 2015), I often use the term narrative when discussing the findings of this study. Schramm (2015) describes how discourse includes the underlying interpretive context and what is unsaid as much as what is specifically said. I refer to discourse to examine underlying values and beliefs within narratives and how knowledge was constructed, but during observations, the word narrative was commonly discussed at both sites. Both CBOs referred to changing narratives and how this was part of their

mission. For example, I documented instances where staff and community members at LA CAN specifically mentioned “our narrative” during meetings and SBCC mentioned changing the narrative on the most recent version of their website. This study examines discourse at both CBOs, but since narrative reflects how CBOs saw their work, I often use that term when discussing findings.

### ***The Use of Community or Neighborhood***

Community and neighborhood are two distinct concepts and I acknowledge that community can be broader than a geographic location. The term community can also be used by decision makers and government to signify participation and legitimize decisions, but without clear boundaries or an acknowledgement of power differences (see Levine, 2017). Participants at both CBOs frequently used the term community to refer to the neighborhood and the group of residents who were organizing together. Participants with SBCC frequently talked about their community and the idea of community was emphasized in discussions by SBCC staff. At LA CAN, staff and community members also emphasized that Skid Row was a community to counter negative portrayals of Skid Row. Consequently, I use the term community when this was the word used during interviews or during participant observation and the term neighborhood when specifically referencing geographic location. I primarily use the term community to reflect its usage at both CBOs.

Both CBOs identified with the communities in which they were located and based: Skid Row for LA CAN and Wilmington for SBCC. However, both organizations identified connections with many other communities, such as LA CAN describing a connection to South LA and Historic South Central LA and SBCC identifying communities around a common

affinity, such as parents whose children attended the same elementary school. Thus, the use of community can refer to their neighborhood or to these common affinities.

When talking about active volunteers or participants with both CBOs, I also use the term community member. The majority of volunteers and people using programs at LA CAN or SBCC were residents of that neighborhood. However, there were participants from outside the neighborhood who shared similar challenges, and they were identified as core members of the organization. Because of each CBO's emphasis on community, I refer to participants as community members. While some staff also lived in the neighborhood, I refer to them as staff members (as opposed to community member) to designate their paid role within the organization.

### ***Houseless and Houselessness***

During my observations at LA CAN, staff and community members discussed the use of houseless or unhoused instead of the term homeless. As a staff member described, for community members in Skid Row, their tent was their home. While their tent was their home, they did not have a house. Thus, I use the term houselessness instead of homelessness and houseless or unhoused instead of homeless. There are a few exceptions when I use the term homeless. When I refer to specific quotes where participants referred to homeless or homelessness, I used the same terms as interviewees. When I am describing organizational fields, I refer to the homeless services field. LA CAN and more progressive organizations have adopted the terms unhoused and houseless, but I had not seen this shift with the more mainstream organizations in Los Angeles County during my observation period. Thus, I refer to the homeless service fields to refer to the larger set of organizations addressing houselessness.

## **Structure for this Dissertation**

Before presenting my key findings, I first discuss the organizational history and positioning of each CBO to provide a context for their frontline work. In Chapter Two, I discuss their history and key events, as told during observations and interviews. The two CBOs were located in different neighborhoods, and their role as a community-based organization varied based on their mission, history, and neighborhood location. I discuss how the two CBOs served as neighborhood organizations, with LA CAN located in “the epicenter of human rights violations” and SBCC located within a fenceline community. I then discuss how each CBO brought their neighborhood identity to their partnerships at the city-wide level and how this identity shaped their positioning in fields such as Child and Family Services for SBCC and Homeless Services for LA CAN.

This positioning provides the context for their frontline work, and Chapters Three and Four present findings on this hybrid form of frontline work, how CBOs can shape this poverty knowledge, and why they saw changing ideas as important. For Chapter Three, I examine hybrid repertoires of frontline work, discuss how these hybrid repertoires resulted in relationships that differed from traditional service provision, leading to a form of “organic service provision,” and describe the challenges with this type of hybrid work. The relationships and communities of care that were developed through organic service provision provided a space for community members and staff to work through ideas, so I discuss how hybrid frontline work helped to reframe ideas of community. In Chapter Four, I focus on ideas of poverty and the different ways that CBOs shaped poverty knowledge and offered new forms of poverty politics through frontline work. I examine how staff and community members worked through poverty knowledge through



ongoing interactions. There were key differences in the poverty knowledge that guided the two CBOs, but both CBOs found openings to introduce new ideas. I then look at how CBOs drew on their frontline work to shape narratives for larger audiences.

Both CBOs continued to provide support and community as well as promote narratives during the COVID pandemic. In the concluding chapter, I discuss how each CBO continued their mission and commitment to their community during the pandemic. I offer implications for social welfare through identifying how the two CBOs provided a distinct form of services and how they used openings both with community member and with larger audiences to advance new forms of poverty politics. As Pete White from LA CAN described that changing how people talk about poverty was an “issue worth fighting for”, I conclude with discussing the importance of changing narratives of poverty.

## **Chapter Two: At the Epicenter and at the Fenceline:**

### **The Sample CBOs' Organizational History and Neighborhood Context**

SBCC's 2018 annual fundraiser gala was about to begin with staff, community members, funders such as United Way of Greater Los Angeles, labor unions, and representatives from the oil refineries in the Wilmington area sitting at the different dinner tables. The gala emcee started the program by describing how SBCC is different than other organizations. He commented that SBCC is not a social charity organization, but a social change agency. He described how other organizations' annual fundraisers talk about everything that is wrong in a community. In contrast, he commented that SBCC tries to scale what is right, describing a different approach than other organizations. Later, SBCC's Executive Director acknowledged community partners of SBCC who were invested in the neighborhood of Wilmington. She highlighted partnerships in a fenceline community, including how a labor union, refinery and community college all worked together to help community members obtain jobs at one of the major employers in the neighborhood, the local refineries.

In turn, the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) honored key community partners at their 2019 annual event, the Freedom Now Awards Fundraiser. Prior to introducing the award winners, they played videos with testimonies from the award winners. The Executive Director and founder of Homeless Health Care Los Angeles was receiving an award as a community partner in Skid Row. In his video testimony, he smiled and referred to how LA CAN bites the hand that feeds them. After showing this video, the Executive Director of LA CAN, Pete White, described LA CAN's relationship with Homeless Health Los Angeles and their long-standing partnerships in Skid Row. After this introduction, Homeless Health Care's

director then received his award from LA CAN and he clarified his earlier video remarks. He stated that LA CAN doesn't just bite the hand that feeds them, "they baste and sauté it." Through this light-hearted comment, he identified LA CAN as an organization that isn't afraid to fight back. SBCC and LA CAN differed in how they were described, but both CBOs were portrayed as unique organizations, with LA CAN not being afraid to speak back or SBCC highlighting residents' strengths and "scaling what is right."

In this chapter, I discuss these two CBOs' contexts, examining their history and their current positioning within their neighborhood and broader organizational fields, such as homeless services fields or child and family services fields within Los Angeles. I examine the role of each CBO's location, with LA CAN at the "epicenter" and SBCC at the "fenceline". LA CAN's social media refers to Skid Row as an epicenter for policing and human rights violation. This neighborhood is also an area with concentrated poverty with a dense service infrastructure, so I use epicenter to refer to a neighborhood where residents have dealt with the effects of post-welfare policy and criminalization at a higher intensity. Fenceline is used in environmental justice to identify working-class communities of color next to factories, similar to the neighborhood of Wilmington. As discussed later, this fence also indicates a separation. I first discuss literature on the historical conjuncture and conflicting influences for CBOs and then describe how I selected the two organizations as my sample. I present a brief organizational history and discuss each CBO's role within their neighborhood and relationships with their core community base. Their neighborhood context combined with their mission and core values influenced how each CBO was positioned as a community-based organization. In the epicenter of Skid Row, LA CAN worked with low-income tenants and houseless residents to speak out

against the practices of other service providers and institutions. In contrast, SBCC focused on the strengths and assets of residents who were often excluded from processes and “scaled what is right” in their fenceline communities. Both LA CAN and SBCC then brought this community-based or neighborhood identity to their relationships with funders and within organizational fields. I situate the two CBOs in these different contexts and examine how this positioning sets the stage for their work with community members and their narratives of poverty.

### **Contexts and Contradictions for CBOs in Post-Welfare Los Angeles**

The two organizations in this study, SBCC and LA CAN, are community-based organizations, which Marwell (2004) describes as organizations that have both a geographic focus and a mission that addresses the concerns of marginalized community residents. This definition includes a range of CBOs including membership organizations or more direct service focused organizations. Both CBOs in this study are hybrid CBOs that combine service provision with community organizing; Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005) describe how these hybrid organizations have values that differ from or challenge dominant values. As low-income community members face marginalization and exclusion due to external political decisions in which they have limited power, this combination of services and organizing is a way to respond to their political environment and conditions for community members (Gates, 2014; Camp & Heatherton 2012; Hyde, 1992). This mission, that includes responding to the current political environment, can shape a CBO’s structure and how they work with community members (Minkoff & Powell, 2006). However, CBOs can also play a role in poverty governance at the local level (e.g. Miller, 2014). CBOs will be shaped by their dependence on funding, and this funding could result in community-based organizations moving away from organizing roots into

a more professionalized approach (e.g. DeFilippis, 2004). The CBOs in this study are situated in these multiple and sometimes conflicting contexts, including their missions and community values, funding constraints, a CBO's role in post-welfare poverty governance, and Los Angeles specific fields for progressive organizing and poverty governance.

### **CBOs in a Post-welfare Moment**

CBOs are operating in a specific historical context, or conjuncture, which Camp (2012) describes a moment “in which political, economic, ideological, and geographic forces take a distinct shape” (p. 656). While debates around professionalization or cooptation of community organizing due to funding were common prior to policy changes due to welfare reform, (e.g. Jenkins, 1998; Smith & Lipsky, 1993), the two organizations work in a post-welfare time with a specific type of poverty governance. In describing the post-welfare state, Soss et al. (2011) discuss a racialized system of poverty governance that includes an emphasis on paternalistic policies with increased work obligations, the use of discipline to enforce requirements, and a reliance on market-based service delivery. As opposed to solely eliminating services, Brenner and Theodore (2002) discuss how this dismantling of national welfare systems is accompanied by moments of creation, through privatized approaches to social service provision and a devolution of government services to local levels. This contraction in social welfare services is accompanied by a rise in the carceral sector and criminalization of poverty (Wacquant, 2009; 2010). Both criminal justice and social welfare actors are a part of poverty management (Miller, 2014; Stuart, 2016; Wacquant, 2010), and non-police actors also take on policing responsibilities (Desmond & Valdez, 2013; Miller, 2014). Because of these relationships between criminal

justice and social welfare actors, low-income individuals must navigate both systems concurrently.

This political environment shapes multiple aspects of social welfare, from defining needs and implementing strategies to program evaluation (Reisch & Jani, 2012). In this context, Schram (2015) describes social welfare as depoliticized, assimilated to power, and focused on managing disposable populations. With discourse that focuses on dependency and individual responsibility, social welfare policy treats poverty as separate from inequality. Consequently, people living in poverty become a “medicalized other” in need of treatment for welfare dependency (Schram, 2015, p. 105). In this environment, Stuart (2016) describes punitive policies attached to the idea of “saving the poor.” Local governance will also influence work at the community level. Murphy (2009) examines homeless policy in San Francisco to find examples of ambivalent poverty management. The city had a progressive political regime with compassionate rhetoric, but their service programs included punitive policies, and this ambivalent management within one city resulted in contradictory interventions. DeVertuil (2015) describes a Los Angeles social services as including both punitive and supportive services, so the city of Los Angeles also contains contradictory interventions. Within multiple modes of poverty governance and opposing approaches to social services, CBOs are working within different, and often contradictory, narratives of poverty.

As government services are contracted out and provided at the local level (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Soss et al., 2011), community-based organizations play a specific role in poverty governance, including delivering and implementing government services. Not only are community-based organizations delivering services, but through deciding how services are

implemented, Brodtkin (2013) describes how street level organizations advance political change indirectly and serve as mediators of politics. While Brodtkin discusses organizations that directly implement services through government funding, Fairbanks (2009) looks at how informal street-level organizations and frontline work are part of poverty governance through his discussion on unsanctioned recovery houses. Recovery house operators formed relationships with social welfare actors to secure resources and legitimacy. These informal recovery houses become key social welfare actors in low-income neighborhoods, providing informal services in the absence of formal support (Fairbanks, 2009). While street actors exercise agency, Fairbanks argues that this agency and reactions to policies falls along certain lines, and informal street level organizations help maintain poverty governance at a local level.

As hybrid organizations that include community organizing, the two CBOs in this study may not see themselves as within poverty governance and may seek to disrupt government processes. Even when CBOs are not direct service providers or see their work as challenging post-welfare policy, hybrid CBOs could still be what Gilmore (2007, p. 47) describes as “in the shadow of the shadow state”. This builds off Wolch’s (1990) concept of the shadow state where nonprofits provide direct services that were previously provided through government. These hybrid CBOs may not receive government funding to be part of the “shadow state,” but they still work with the clients of service organization as well as with government-funded providers; thus, they are in the “shadow of the shadow state.” Community members that they work with may also have to navigate carceral systems and informal poverty management systems, so a CBO’s relationships within poverty governance could affect a CBO’s work with community members.

## **Funding Streams and Relationships with Multiple Audiences**

In addition to the influence of poverty governance, a nonprofits' reliance on various funding streams and their relationships needed to secure funding could shape the organization's structure and behavior (Marwell, 2004; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). INCITE: Women of Color (2007), a collective of scholars and activists, coined the idea of a nonprofit industrial complex. By this, they mean the inter-connected relationships between state actors, funders, and nonprofits reliant on funding that help to maintain unequal power relationships. These relationships also shape the goals and strategies of progressive organizing so that nonprofits do not challenge structural inequality (INCITE, 2007). Foundations promote more professionalized norms (Gilmore, 2007) and these norms and frameworks will influence how an organization operates (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Quinn et al., 2014). This professionalization in advocacy nonprofits has occurred alongside an increase in evaluation tools and performance metrics from funders. However, these metrics are often less suited to fund long-term organizing efforts (Walker & Oszkay, 2020), which will shape organizing efforts.

Government and foundation funding sources will communicate ideas about poverty through the types of programs and services that they fund, requirements within programs, and evaluation standards. For example, when government performance measurements for welfare agencies included goals for job placements but not job quality, this sent a message to agencies and staff as to what was important (Brodkin, 2011). With defined limits for giving, foundation funding served to channel radical social movements and professionalize movements (Jenkins, 1998). These funding requirements and an emphasis on more professional approaches could also influence ideas within organizing. Kohl-Arenas (2015) discusses the influence of private



foundations that provided money for community initiatives, as foundations offered money for poverty alleviation that excluded ideas of addressing structural inequality. Through funding community initiatives, foundations and community organizations negotiated meanings for key ideas related to their work with poverty alleviation (Kohl-Arenas, 2015). Even if a foundation viewed themselves as supporting community organizing and alternative narratives, CBOs will face tensions with funders due to unequal power relations. This power imbalance could affect how CBOs and funders negotiate any differences in meanings (Kohl-Areas, 2015), which could shape which programs and organizing approaches are funded.

Funding sources and requirements will vary depending on a CBO's work. CBOs could receive more resources for their service provision activities compared to advocacy or organizing, but providing services is more resource intensive compared to organizing (Minkoff 2002; Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006). An organization will then depend on these funding sources. By avoiding a funding source when funding requirements did not match their mission, a CBO had fewer compromises due to funding requirements but then faced greater resource constraints and inconsistent funding (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006). Funding choices result in different opportunities and challenges. Thus, when a CBO faces a choice of becoming more professionalized to receive funding or not receiving funding for their efforts, either choice affected an CBO's ability to enact social change (DeFilippis, 2004).

A CBO's organizing and advocacy efforts can lead to funding for needed services, but this new funding could change organizational structures and relationships with community members. Kelley, Lune, and Murphy (2005) describe a CBO focused on HIV/ AIDS that, as a result of prior organizing efforts, received government funding to provide needle exchange

services. While these new services were in line with their existing mission and the CBO's focus on harm reduction, the addition of formalized services changed organizational practices (Kelley et al., 2005). CBOs advocated for needed services but then funding for services included additional requirements. Organizations had to then decide whether to oppose changes, to try to influence requirements, or to accommodate to meet government requirements (Matthews, 1995). While funding for services could lead to increased professionalization and cooptation, other research discusses how professionalization could create new opportunities for smaller organizations. Anasti (2017) examines CBOs that work with individuals who are involved in sex work as an example of a small underground organization, which are organizations that provide non-sanctioned human services or services to populations engaged in illicit activity, that formed relationships with larger human service providers. Anasti (2017) argues that while these relationships and professionalization presented challenges, these processes also increased a small organization's ability to engage in policy change. As an underground organization increased professionalization, they shifted positions within organizational fields and more radical political organizations arose in their place (Anasti, 2017). CBOs must balance tensions around potential services and funding requirements, as well as their relationships with funders, formal service providers, and other activist organizations.

### **Historical Conjuncture for Los Angeles CBOs**

Both CBOs for this study are situated within a city that has a history of radical organizing alongside poverty containment and punitive social policies, making this an ideal place to study how organizations navigate these differing contexts. CBOs could be connected to the Los Angeles activist infrastructure described in Chapter One that draws from a history of multi-racial

organizing. While prior leftist organizations disbanded, their legacy includes coalitions and organizations that formed from these earlier organizing efforts (Pulido, 2002). These contemporary organizations are better funded than earlier organizations with access to foundation funding (Pulido, 2006) so current organizations have built on this history of organizing while navigating relationships with funders. CBOs can draw from this history and current infrastructure for organizing and this will influence their work with community members.

While CBOs are connected to social movements, these movements also exist in relation to current poverty governance and power structures (Roy, 2015). Social service organizations that are part of poverty governance will operate with a different framework compared to CBOs focused on progressive organizing. Human service organizations are unevenly located throughout Los Angeles (Allard, 2009; Hasenfeld et al., 2013), but Los Angeles contains dense service infrastructures within neighborhoods such as Skid Row. Within this service-dense neighborhood, Stuart (2016) describes the role of mega-shelters and larger service organizations that combined punitive and rehabilitative approaches and framed homelessness as due to individual failing. Alongside social service provision, Stuart (2011, 2016) describes an emphasis on criminalization. Police have targeted efforts in the neighborhood of Skid Row, such as the Los Angeles Police Department's Safer Cities Initiative that was designed and promoted as a "broken windows" policing strategy, based on the theory that tolerance of minor crimes would then lead to more serious crimes. Designed with assistance from George Kelling of the Manhattan Institute and then launched in 2006, this initiative targeted Skid Row residents for arrests of smaller offenses (Blasi et al., 2007). This initiative was marketed a "homelessness reduction strategy" with increased policing and services, but there were minimal services

alongside a significant increase in funding for and deployment of police. In the first year of the Safer Cities Initiative, Skid Row residents were between 48 to 69 times more likely to receive a pedestrian citation compared to residents in other parts of Los Angeles (Blasi et al., 2007). With a high concentration of both service providers and police, authors describe partnerships between business interests, police, and larger service providers (Reese et al., 2010; Stuart, 2011), such as police providing residents with a choice of either being arrested or participating in mandated nonprofit services. While not all organizations within Skid Row subscribed to a framing that included partnerships with police, larger service providers in the neighborhood drew from this logic (Stuart, 2016).

Within this neighborhood context, CBOs will respond and try to shape policies. Thus, CBOs are both shaped by these contexts and then attempt to shape both organizational fields and neighborhood-specific practices. Through research with LA CAN, one of the CBOs in this study, Dozier (2019) and Camp (2012) describe how LA CAN sought to challenge approaches to homeless policy that emphasized criminalization and surveillance of houseless community members. However, as activist organizations seek to change policing practices, institutions then respond and alter practices. Community activists organized and called attention to practices of over-policing and succeeded in changing policing practices. However, in a push and pull response, police institutions responded through developing new surveillance methods, altering the terrain and interactions within fields (Dozier, 2019).

In this dissertation, I build on Dozier (2019) and Camp's (2012) research on how activist organizations challenge policing practices to examine how these organizations also seek to challenge poverty knowledge within social welfare and the importance of changing these ideas. I

also examine how hybrid practices, specifically a combination of organizing with services, are part of a service infrastructure at the neighborhood level. The social service infrastructure of Skid Row has been described in the studies mentioned above. I extend on this research to examine and compare CBOs in two neighborhoods, one at the epicenter and one at the fenceline. While this second neighborhood at the fenceline has a lower density and different types of service providers compared to Skid Row, CBOs still play a role in providing services and poverty governance. I examine the multiple influences on the two study CBOs, including their mission and specific neighborhood location, and how these contexts shape their interactions within coalitions and larger fields in Los Angeles.

### **Sample CBOs and Neighborhood Locations**

To provide context for the findings in Chapters Three and Four, this chapter examines how the two organizations are positioned within their neighborhood and within different organizational fields and how their neighborhood and field positions influence each other. I look at each CBO's positioning and relationships within different organizational fields in Los Angeles, specifically fields for homeless services; tenant rights; and Black activism for LA CAN and within the field of children and family services for SBCC. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define an organizational field as "organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life (p. 148)" and Scott (1994) adds that organizational fields also include a common meaning system as well as more frequent interactions between organizations within a field compared to organizations outside of the field. The concept of fields can be applied to business settings, where fields include suppliers, regulatory agencies, and organizations that produce similar products (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but the concept of organizational fields

can also be applied to social service fields. For example, the homeless services field in Los Angeles includes the different nonprofits that receive funding and provide services for houseless community members, advocacy organizations, foundations and government agencies that fund services, as well as government agencies that frequently interact with nonprofits and houseless community members, such as the Department of Mental Health or Sanitation. I also examine key moments for each organization's history and how this history has shaped their current role. LA CAN discussed a connection to Black radical thought while SBCC discussed a connection to immigrant communities, so I examine how racial and ethnic identity shapes their relationships and positioning.

### **Nonprofit Selection**

This study focuses on two CBOs that combine services and organizing and see themselves as challenging dominant narratives. I selected two organizations after a combination of observing nonprofit events, foundation grantee lists, and meetings with nonprofit staff. I used foundation grantee lists to develop a list of nonprofits because foundations can be a source of funding for community organizing and advocacy as compared to government. Foundations can confer legitimacy, indicating that these organizations have achieved some level of success (Hammack & Anheier, 2013). Since foundations also carry ideas about poverty (Kohl-Areas, 2015) and can mandate specific frameworks and modes of operation (Hwang & Powell, 2009), this also provided a chance to study how CBOs work with outside ideas and frameworks. Key informants helped to identify three foundations based in Los Angeles likely to fund local community organizing and advocacy efforts- Liberty Hill Foundation; California Endowment,

and the California Community Foundation, and one additional foundation with an emphasis on equity- the Weingart Foundation.

I created a list of 39 Los Angeles nonprofits that combined social services with community organizing through this combination of local foundation grantee lists and meetings. I also met with staff from 10 community-based organizations to present initial research ideas and collect information on progressive organizing within Los Angeles. Meetings discussed how CBOs combine service provision and community organizing, whether and how narratives of poverty shape an organization's work, potential challenges, and other organizations to contact. Through documenting how staff referred to other CBOs, I was able to map out key relationships between CBOs, identify CBOs that were seen as key organizations, and develop initial ideas for organizational fields. Through these conversations, I was also able to identify key factors for organizations, such as how an organization's original emphasis on service or organizing would shape their current hybrid work, as well as key concepts related to narratives and organizing styles.

Through meetings with both nonprofit organizations as well as website descriptions, I then developed a purposive sample of two nonprofits working in Los Angeles that integrate community organizing with service provision: Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and SBCC Thrive LA. The two organizations had different origins and emphases, with SBCC classified as an organization that would be primarily service provision while including organizing and LA CAN described as primarily community organizing that includes services. The two organizations also work with different populations, and as a result of these differences, the two organizations vary in how they address poverty. Despite key differences, both

organizations had a critique of traditional service provision and described a unique approach to services and organizing. Table 3 lists the two organizations with information such as whether they have an emphasis on services or on organizing and overall budget.

<i>Sample Organizations</i>		
	Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN)	SBCC Thrive LA
Level of Service/ Organizing	Organizing/advocacy that includes services	Services that include organizing
Neighborhood/ Focus Area	Primarily Skid Row; also public housing developments in South LA	Office and multiple efforts in Wilmington, but also works with community efforts county-wide
Primary Population	Current and formerly homeless individuals; low income tenants	Low income families
Budget (2016)	1,803,085 (29.7% from government sources)	6,088,014 (84% from government sources)
Budget (2017)	1,087,309 (40.7% from government sources)	5,404,551 (77.1% from government sources)
Primary Focus of Observations/ Interviews	Housing committee activities and tenant assistance; community planning processes	Relationship-based community organizing; community planning processes

***Key Differences: Mission and Funding***

While both organizations describe themselves as having an approach that contrasts from traditional human service agencies, the organizational mission, including the role and emphasis on community organizing, varies between the two organizations. The CBOs have other differences, but I focus on an emphasis on service or on organizing as a key difference that will affect ideas about poverty. LA CAN, the organization with a greater emphasis on organizing,



was described as a more activist organization by key informants and this organization grew out of and was informed by the Black radical tradition. SBCC, which originally stood for South Bay Center for Counseling, started as a small organization focused on therapy but with core values that focused on the role of relationships and community-led solutions. These core values influenced the development of their community organizing program and their approach to services and organizing. With a greater emphasis on either service or organizing, the two CBOs also differ in their relationships to Los Angeles activism and within poverty governance.

Due to their different approaches and emphases, the overall funding composition and strategies vary between organizations. SBCC, with a higher level of service provision and a history with government contracts, has a higher percentage of funding from government sources. LA CAN, with a higher level of organizing and advocacy, has a smaller overall budget. While the two CBOs interact with different funders due to their approaches to addressing poverty, they share some funders, such as both organizations receiving money from the California Community Foundation for 2020 census outreach. This variation in both mission and funding provided a key opportunity to study differing influences on frontline work and poverty knowledge.

### **Neighborhood Location for the Two CBOs**

The two CBOs are located in two different neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Neighborhoods have different levels of concentrated poverty, access to social services, pressures from displacement, and histories of immigration, segregation, and activism, which could shape an organization's work at the neighborhood level. SBCC is based in Wilmington, a predominantly immigrant working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles (86.6% Latinx) that sits among oil refineries in the South Bay. Both union leaders as well as SBCC staff referred to

Wilmington as a fenceline community due to its proximity to refineries. The term fenceline communities is used in environmental justice organizing, referring to communities, often working-poor communities of color, located next to plants that emit hazardous waste (Bullard, 2005). With the third largest oil field in the United States, the LA Times referred to Wilmington as “an island in a sea of petroleum” (2016). These refineries were also described during interviews as the largest economic asset in the area and SBCC helps community members from the fenceline communities to access employment opportunities at the refineries.

Wilmington has a lower annual income and higher poverty rate compared to adjacent neighborhoods such as San Pedro and Harbor City. SBCC has their largest organizational presence in Wilmington, but they also work with communities that border Wilmington, including the city of Carson and the Los Angeles neighborhood of Harbor City. Through their community organizing program, SBCC also works with community members across LA County.

LA CAN is largely based in Skid Row, a neighborhood described earlier as a service hub where community members face threats of over-policing and displacement (Stuart, 2016). Earlier government decisions regarding poverty containment, such as a 1976 Containment Plan that directed housing and social service facilities to be relocated to Skid Row, have resulted in this high concentration of services (Reese et al., 2010). This neighborhood has a high concentration of houseless residents, both residents living in mega-shelters and unsheltered residents living in tents, as well as low-income tenants. Skid Row and the adjacent downtown neighborhood have a high concentration of residential hotels or single-room occupancy (SRO) units, which LA CAN staff referred to as the “housing of last resort” in organizational brochures. Due to downtown’s proximity to Skid Row, downtown business interests have formed partnerships with police. With

initiatives such as the Safer Cities Initiative mentioned earlier, residents in Skid Row have experienced a high police presence. In addition to their location in Skid Row, LA CAN has worked with public housing developments in South Central Los Angeles and their website states that their constituency is “extremely low-income and homeless people, primarily those living in Downtown LA and South Central LA” (“About Us”, n.d.). In addition to city-wide partnerships, LA CAN is also a member of the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP), a coalition of organizations across the West Coast that work with houseless individuals and seek to address root causes of poverty and homelessness.

Both of the organizations are open to the broader community, but due to their locations and origins, the two CBOs primarily work with different populations. LA CAN works with many houseless community members as well as low-income tenants living in Skid Row. Many of the tenants live in the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units and some tenants have had earlier experiences with houselessness. SBCC works in immigrant neighborhoods, and they work with many low-income Latinx families. Their evolution included programs focused on families, resulting with active community members who are parents or grandparents. While I did not collect income levels, some families with SBCC may be above the poverty line but still “near-poor” or as one interviewee described, “barely making it.”

I use the concept of fenceline for SBCC and epicenter for LA CAN to discuss the role of their neighborhood location. These two terms arose during data collection, with SBCC staff using the term fenceline at their annual Gala and the term epicenter coming from the LA CAN’s twitter bio of “Fighting for Human Rights from the epicenter of Human Rights violations”.

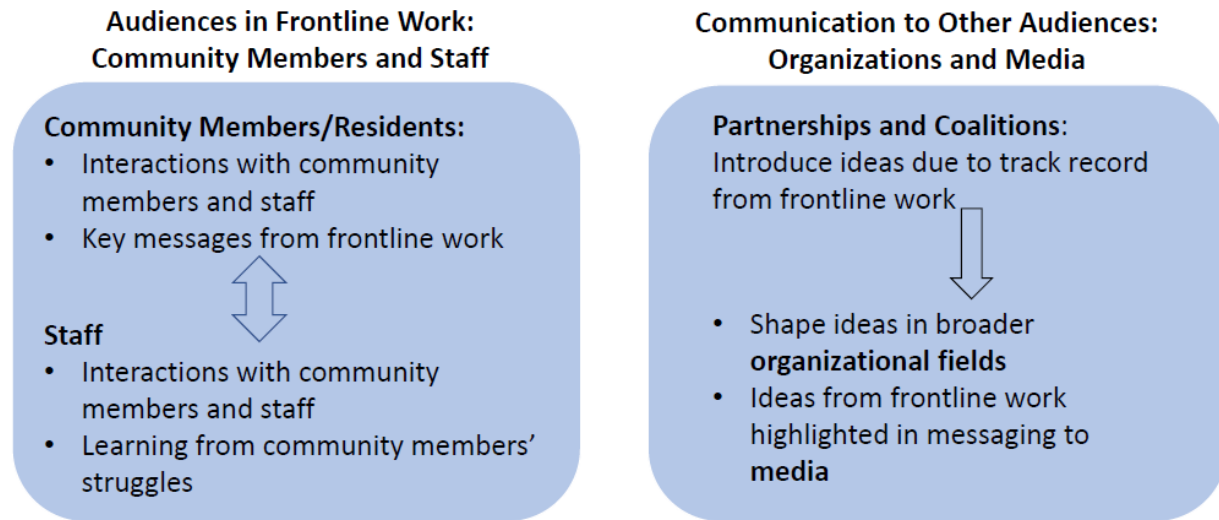
Fenceline is a term from environmental justice organizing, but the imagery of a fenceline also

indicates differences between two sides and a clear demarcation. In this location, SBCC serves as a bridge and highlights the strengths of residents on one side of the fenceline. In LA CAN's location, the epicenter is a central area for concentrated poverty and policies that focus on the criminalization of poverty. In this epicenter, community members have dealt with the effects of structural racism and post-welfare policy at a higher intensity. In addition, LA CAN has core principles that community members at the epicenter should be leading organizing efforts. Both CBOs differ from other organizations in their neighborhood so it is not solely location that shapes a CBO's practices. I look at how this location, either at the fenceline or at the epicenter, intersects with each CBO's mission and commitment to their community member base to explain how the two CBOs serve as community-based organizations.

From this location and mission, I also examine how each CBO communicates to multiple audiences, including community members and staff as well as communicating ideas in broader organizational fields. Figure 1 highlights the different audiences for poverty knowledge throughout this dissertation. Staff and community members were two important audiences for frontline work, and Chapters Three and Four discusses interactions with staff and community members in greater detail. As I discuss the two CBOs' neighborhood context and positioning within neighborhoods fields, other key audiences included organizations through partnerships and coalitions, funders, and media. I will expand on how the two CBOs communicated to these audiences in Chapter Four.

Figure 1

*Audiences for Poverty Knowledge: How CBOs Share Ideas through Frontline Work*



### **Organizational Setting: How Each CBO Serves as a Neighborhood Organizations**

I first examined each CBO's organizational history and how they had evolved within their neighborhood. Community members and staff discussed key events that helped to construct an organizational timeline. While this is not an exhaustive history, I present a brief history that highlights key events shared by staff and community members.

#### **Los Angeles Community Action Network**

In the Freedom Room, the larger space at LA CAN for community events and larger meetings, a staff member discussed LA CAN's history to event attendees at a city-wide Poor People's Campaign event in December 2018. In her introduction for this event, she commented that "today we're standing in the shadows of 25 residents of downtown LA," referring to the residents who helped to start LA CAN. Their website also acknowledges these original residents who came together "to stand together, organize and become a force in the community that demands change" ("History of LA CAN", n.d.). While LA CAN purchased their current location

on 6<sup>th</sup> St close to Gladys Park in 2015, they initially formed through meetings at the Rossmore Hotel, a Single Room Occupancy hotel across the street from their current location. LA CAN's Executive Director, Pete White, referred to the founders having an orientation in the late 1990s that contrasted from other members of the progressive community who at that time didn't see homelessness as a social justice issue. In contrast, community members who were coming together to form LA CAN believed that the causes of homelessness and poverty were political. Communities members living in the neighborhood drew from personal experiences with policing and their concerns with new developments in the downtown area. Through these experiences, they also recognized problems with how poverty was talked about and how people living in Skid Row were portrayed. White described organizing based on their experiences in the epicenter: "We were canaries in the coal mine but we were canaries with teeth." At an event introduction, White commented that over twenty years later, and after location changes and facing resistance from state institutions, "we're still here."

Community members and staff identified events and campaigns that were key events in LA CAN's history, and community members highlighted examples of opposition and of success. A staff member shared the story of a battle against private security officers who were part of the Los Angeles Downtown Industrial Business Improvement District (BID) early on in LA CAN's history. For this campaign, LA CAN worked to prevent BID officers from carrying guns, require sensitivity training, and increase the diversity among BID officers. When LA CAN moved their office to the historic core of downtown, one staff member described increasing efforts on preserving housing downtown. In the Historic Core of downtown, building owners were trying to evict low-income tenants and convert residential hotel units to more expansive luxury

apartments, and an LA CAN brochure described this conversion as threatening to “eliminate this precious housing of last resort.” A staff member described the significance of these housing efforts: “we said that once people lose their housing that's it. Once they come and they remove you out of your community, you ain't coming back.” Community members discussed participating in earlier campaigns, such as stopping illegal evictions at the Alexandria Hotel, where building owners tried to evict tenants through shutting off gas and electricity, as well as advocating for a city-wide policy to preserve residential hotel units. Community members highlighted other examples of LA CAN’s housing campaigns, such when one community member commented that they “stopped us from having to pay \$5 for the doggone guest fee”. Here, he was referring to LA CAN’s successful efforts to stop residential hotels in Skid Row from charging guest fees to tenants by arguing that these guest fees were an illegal rent increase.

Community members also highlighted their experiences with marches and performances, such as marching to protest police violence when a Skid Row community member, Charly “Brother Africa” Keunang, was killed by police in 2015; Take Back the Night marches to call attention to violence against women in Skid Row; and a production of the Vagina Monologues by women in downtown and Skid Row. LA CAN gained a reputation for their organizing work and one interviewee shared how he learned about LA CAN in the early 2000s. After he was complaining about his interactions with BID officers, a neighbor told him that he should talk with LA CAN:

I asked ‘Who is LA CAN?’ He (the person who recommended LA CAN to him) said, ‘Oh, it's this group of crazy people that's always running back and forth from city

hall with the police chasing them. They're always behind them.' I was like, 'Oh, yeah? Sound like my kind of people.'

Alongside organizing efforts, staff and active members of LA CAN discussed opposition from businesses and police. Community members discussed instances where other LA CAN members were threatened by police and faced court charges as a result of marches, including when a LA CAN member was charged with a felony after blowing a noise-maker during a march (Dozier, 2019). As White described resistance to LA CAN activism during an event, he referred to another staff member who faced “the full weight of the state” due to criminal charges as a result of his activism. When the LA CAN office was located on Main St, interviewees described tense moments with the business community. One interviewee mentioned people who were against what LA CAN were doing, including cops and members of the downtown business improvement district. Another interviewee referred to their earlier Main St location as a crowded space with multiple tenants in the building and recalled a confrontation on the sidewalk. This pressure and confrontations with businesses on Main St continued until a staff member stated that they were “gentrified out of downtown.” LA CAN had to leave their place on Main St and this staff member described how the Business Improvement District sent information to downtown landlords asking them not to rent to LA CAN. With less than 30 days left on their lease, LA CAN was able to buy their current building on Sixth Street.

While many community members shared stories around marches and campaigns, they also shared stories around the growth and changes of services. In addition to organizing efforts, LA CAN’s key service early on was a weekly legal clinic where community members could receive legal advice, along with a monthly ticket clinic to address quality of life citations for



houseless community members, such as sleeping on the sidewalk or jaywalking. Their legal clinic, which an LA CAN poster described as having a goal “to remove barriers to involvement that our members and constituents are facing on a daily basis”, had existed in their Main Street office. I heard multiple stories of a packed legal clinic in their small Main Street office, where volunteers stayed until 10 p.m. to help everyone. In addition, staff shared stories of informal services through relationships with community members, such as writing a letter on behalf of a core LA CAN member who was at risk of losing housing. Through these efforts, services evolved on an informal level to support their members.

Their legal clinic and market, as well as many of their organizing efforts, were based in Skid Row. However, LA CAN also described the South Central Los Angeles neighborhood<sup>1</sup> as part of their community and included South Central residents as key members in their mission statement. LA CAN described a connection between South Central and Skid Row communities through how residents, particularly Black residents, have been displaced from South Central Los Angeles to Skid Row. A New York Times article referred to the “historic displacement and fracturing of black communities in South Los Angeles” and described a straight line from “the history of redlining to today’s homelessness crisis” that have resulted in Black community members becoming homeless at a rate eight times higher than other racial and ethnic groups in Los Angeles, often displaced into Skid Row (Patel, Arango, Singhvi, & Huang, 2019). LA CAN

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<sup>1</sup> At a city-wide and government level, areas that were historically referred to as South Central are now referred to as South Los Angeles. Both terms are used and residents have preferences for both terms. I heard South Central used during field notes, often to represent a historically Black community. I have used South Central when that was the term used by interviewees. I also use Historic South Central to represent a smaller region within the wider South LA area.

staff identified this connection to South Central Los Angeles and described their work as “moved by the Black experience” As White described, “If Black folks aren’t picked up, lifted up, no one else will be.” (Quoted in Muhamed, 2017). As part of an earlier coalition of CBOs that worked with public housing tenants, LA CAN organized tenants in the Pueblo del Rio public housing development in historic South Central, as well as in Jordan Downs housing development in the Watts neighborhood in South Los Angeles. LA CAN previously operated a weekly market close to the Pueblo del Rio housing development although this market had ended before my observation period. In addition, they have built partnerships with activist organizations throughout the city, which I discuss later in this chapter.

### *LA CAN Today*

From an organization with a 2004 budget of \$177,382 at their Main St office, LA CAN has moved to a new location 0.7 miles from their Main St location and further away from downtown, and increased to a 2016 budget of 1,803,085, then a 2017 budget of 1,087,309. As a front desk staff member described to a visitor who had stopped in on a Friday and asked about the organization, they are a “fightback organization”. LA CAN has continued actions against business improvement district policies and their staff and community members are a regular speaking presences at Police Commission meetings. They have fewer immediate confrontations with the downtown business community at their new location, but their language calling out policing practices and structural racism built into policing institutions has remained the same. LA CAN added community programs such as their Thursday market and an arts and culture program. Community members who were involved since their earlier locations on Main St have remained as active members, along with newer community members becoming involved.

Through the different campaigns, the organization has grown in budget and status and multiple members referred to their status and seat with the United Nations as a significant accomplishment. Due to this relationship with a United Nations special rapporteur as well as with faculty at different universities, one interviewee commented that “Brother Pete (White) is raising the bar”. Today, LA CAN remains at the “epicenter of human rights violations”, and they speak from this center to city-wide organizations as well as to the United Nations,.

The organization has undergone changes, but LA CAN remains a “fightback organization” organizing from the epicenter. While the organization has expanded, community members commented that they are less likely to make recruitment phone calls and their planning processes for their Residential Organizing Committee meetings changed compared to their earlier days on Main St. I also personally witnessed changes during my data collection period. I worked most closely with LA CAN’s housing committee, where LA CAN members, primarily low-income tenants, met weekly to plan tenant outreach, campaigns for specific residential hotels, and upcoming policy campaigns. I describe the committee process in greater detail in the following chapter, but through planning meetings, community members gained training on tenant rights and community outreach skills as well as formed friendships with other attendees. During my time with the housing committee, we evaluated what the next steps should be after a campaign loss related to a 2018 ballot initiative and staff changes. The housing committee dealt with loss of staff and capacity changes, while LA CAN has gained staff in other areas and increased their focus on arts and culture.

## **Community Organizing at SBCC**

SBCC Thrive LA (originally South Bay Center for Counseling) is currently located in Wilmington, a Los Angeles neighborhood in the Harbor region of Los Angeles County, but they support community organizing groups in communities across Los Angeles County. While I primarily focus on their history and work within Wilmington, I also include a history of their community organizing program, as this program helps illustrate SBCC's positioning as a community-based and resident-driven organization. SBCC's main office is currently at Wilmington and this office is the site of multiple programs and community events, but the organization was previously located in El Segundo and Manhattan Beach, two communities in the South Bay of Los Angeles County that have a higher median income than their current neighborhood and a larger white population. As the name South Bay Center for Counseling (SBCC) suggests, SBCC originally focused on counseling. By the time I began data collection, they were primarily referred to as SBCC instead of their full original name of South Bay Center for Counseling. SBCC's core values enabled them to evolve into the hybrid service-organizing CBO that they are today. Executive Director Colleen Mooney described how early on in their history, they were "people who really believed in the power of relationships." A small grassroots organization, SBCC focused on hiring staff that were "able to walk in the shoes of the person that they're working with."

SBCC started in Manhattan Beach but then moved to El Segundo, and then to Wilmington. By 1997, they were in El Segundo and listed their address as the El Segundo office

for their 990 tax forms<sup>2</sup>, and then had moved to Wilmington by 2013. Earlier, when they were located in Manhattan Beach, SBCC established connections with their county supervisor and received their first county government grant to work across Los Angeles County. With this grant, SBCC increased their work with low-income communities. This prompted the organization to assess how their new work aligned with their core values, and Mooney described how they realized that “you're not fixing poverty with therapy. And that, again, led to another sort of redefinition. Well, what are our core values? And what are we really talking about here?” At this time, SBCC staff met John McKnight with the Asset-Based Community Development Institute and learned about the principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). SBCC identified alignment with the CBO’s values and the ABCD principles that each resident has gifts and talents and that through creating neighborhood groups, residents can form relationships and address issues in their neighborhood together. These principles formed the basis for SBCC’s community organizing program and then their later work in the Wilmington neighborhood.

Through First 5 Los Angeles, an independent public agency funded by a statewide tobacco tax that focuses on the development and well-being of children from before birth until age 5, SBCC received their first grant for community organizing. Through developing their relationship-based community organizing program, staff described trying a lot of things that did not work and then learning and evolving along the way. This flexibility and ability to adapt

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<sup>2</sup> Years for location changes were determined through the address listed on each CBO’s 990s tax forms that were downloaded from Guidestar Premium. The earliest available year was 1997, at which point SBCC had moved to El Segundo.

remained a key aspect of SBCC's work. As SBCC began to engage community members through this grant, their core constituency often consisted of community members who had not been involved with other organizations. As Mooney described, "we weren't working with the people who run the PTA, we worked with the people who never went to a PTA meeting. And we learned a lot from those guys about what matters." SBCC's relationships with government officials had been important for earlier grants and programs. Through bringing residents together from different parts of the county, SBCC began to create a county-wide network. SBCC could bring community members out to events and encourage residents to testify at different hearings, and this network of residents who could show up for events strengthened their relationships with government officials. Through this process, SBCC saw the elevation of their neighborhood-based groups as a political force.

SBCC had their community organizing program when they were still located in the South Bay city of El Segundo,. However, even before this move, SBCC was working with Wilmington residents through their work in the Los Angeles County Service Planning Area (SPA) that covered the South Bay and Harbor area of Los Angeles County, referred to as SPA 8. Through their work in SPA 8, SBCC identified the oil refineries as an asset for employment but also that many people who lived in the fenceline communities near the refineries did not have the training required for work in the refineries. SBCC formed partnerships with key institutions, including the labor union, refineries, and the Community College district to train community members for positions within the refineries. During this time, SBCC moved from their El Segundo location to their Wilmington location. When SBCC was in El Segundo, they had less foot traffic at their office but instead went out into communities. While SBCC staff continued to go to different

communities, through moving to Wilmington, SBCC established their office as a community center. A staff member described the new opportunities that opened up with their move to Wilmington:

It's a community hub. We are able to do all kinds of things. ...we keep learning about strategies that you would never call therapy, which are inherently therapeutic and very valuable: yoga, Zumba, the garden, all that stuff that became possible because of where we were (with the move to Wilmington)

Since their time in Wilmington, SBCC has undergone program changes and responded to community issues. A signature community organizing initiative, I Heart Wilmington, started in response to high crime in Wilmington. The daughter of an active community member was murdered and media outlets were highlighting crime and negative characteristics of Wilmington. Community members active in SBCC talked about a different response that would highlight positive aspects of their community and build relationships. As a staff member told the story of the I Heart Wilmington program in an advocacy workshop for community members, "we responded (to the high crime and media portrayal) with love." Wilmington had a lower median income than the nearby neighborhoods and staff described how residents from nearby areas often described Wilmington in a negative light. In contrast, active community members with SBCC wanted to portray a more positive picture of Wilmington and they saw this reframing as a key part of their response. A staff member described the origin of I Heart Wilmington as a "complete mindset switch of how the media was painting Wilmington, you know. It became about civic pride and the love and kindness movement, you know...I feel like that was really the picture of who Wilmington is." Through their county-wide network, SBCC worked with residents in other

communities to start similar resident-led, civic pride initiatives. In 2019, SBCC supported I Heart chapters in multiple communities across Los Angeles County, from the neighborhood of Watts, the city of El Monte in the San Gabriel Valley area of Los Angeles County, to Lake LA, an unincorporated city in the Antelope Valley area that is 98 miles from SBCC's main office in Wilmington.

Throughout this time, staff described changing program structures when things did not work. SBCC has faced funding changes, with a budget of over 7 million in 2009 and recent funding decreases. Staff described a recent million dollar funding cut to the community organizing program that required them to change the format for community organizing groups, lay off employees, and reduce monthly funding for community groups. Due to the funding cut, SBCC no longer had funding for community connection groups (CCGs), which were groups that met for a common activity such as knitting or cooking, unless the CCG added a civic engagement component. While community member interviewees did not mention the funding cut directly, some community members discussed how they now had less money for food at meetings or that their knitting group was cut. The Community Organizing program currently contains Neighborhood Action Councils (NACs) that plan projects in their community, including some community connection groups that transitioned into NACs, and I Heart groups that do more advanced project planning.

SBCC also added different multiple programs to their office in Wilmington, such as an artisan collective where local artisans could sell their handmade goods at different events, and a chefs cooperative, where four active community members earn money through cooking at different SBCC events. These programs to create small economic opportunities were in line with



SBCC's asset-based focus and staff described this as a way to support their immigrant base and emphasize economic stability in their political context:

Obama was going to have the parents of DACA kids eligible for DACA-Trump became president and annihilated all of that. So in terms of this economic stability, we were looking at stuff we could control. We're not depending if some-if the administration changes and everything gets thrown out the window, we would still have control over it. And that's why the co-ops and the Artisan Collectives, things where there's really no policy that's going to affect that and the goal was to increase people's income

In addition to adding initiatives for economic stability, SBCC continued to serve as a community center in Wilmington. SBCC hosted many events and programs out of their center during my observation period, such as a Halloween resource fair and a Holiday event that featured a snow machine in their parking lot, along with their annual event held at a neighborhood park.

### ***SBCC Today***

SBCC has expanded beyond counseling, and during my observation period, they referred to themselves as SBCC Thrive LA instead of their original name of South Bay Center for Counseling. Programs continued to change, including a new process in 2018 for community organizing groups to gather feedback and an increased emphasis on advocacy in 2019 that included a push to involve community members in Census advocacy and outreach. While SBCC did not start in Wilmington, they are currently a community center within a fence-line community, highlighting the strengths of residents as well as connecting residents to resources. Their county-wide programs also draw from their asset-based community development

philosophy. Compared to LA CAN, SBCC had a more service focused origin, but with initial values on the importance of relationships and with core beliefs on the talents and resources of residents. While activities have changed, staff described their core values and mission as continuing from earlier. These values helped SBCC to evolve into a hybrid organization, but with a different organizing style than LA CAN, with both CBOs' organizing style influenced by their origin and mission.

### **Organizational Positioning Within Neighborhoods**

Both organizations identified closely with their community member base and played a role as a community center. With one CBO in a “fenceline community” and one CBO at the “epicenter,” they worked in two different neighborhood contexts. Their locations, combined with their mission, influenced how each CBO served as neighborhood organizations, including how they interacted with other institutions and how they represented the interests of community members.

### **LA CAN as a Community Organization in Skid Row**

Skid Row has a high concentration of service organizations, including mega-shelters, smaller shelters and missions, affordable housing providers, as well as health care and substance use organizations. Stuart (2016) describes a dominant logic among these service organizations of identifying problems as due to personal failings, but he also identifies smaller organizations such as LA CAN with alternative narratives. For LA CAN, countering this emphasis on personal failings and advancing this alternative narrative within Skid Row was a key part of their mission and strategies. In a dense service network, LA CAN had a community member base and played a key role as a watchdog against larger organizations. Members of LA CAN mentioned previously

staying at homeless shelters or temporary housing in this neighborhood, and many active community members lived in buildings owned by the two main nonprofit landlords in the Skid Row area, Skid Row Housing Trust and SRO Housing. Skid Row residents attended the weekly legal clinic due to problems with their nonprofit landlord as well as with the nonprofit-owned mega-shelters. At the same time, LA CAN formed partnerships with nonprofits that were identified as more connected to the community compared to the mega-shelters. These partnerships helped members to access services that LA CAN did not provide.

The *Carl Mitchell et al v. the City of Los Angeles* case provides an example of how nonprofits within Skid Row adopted different stances. While LA CAN had allies and partners, LA CAN explicitly took a different stance than other service providers and business interests in Skid Row. On March 6, 2019, the Los Angeles City Council debated whether to reach a settlement based on a 2016 court injunction or if the City Council should appeal this earlier court decision. LA CAN had worked with Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), an organization involved with both direct representation as well as impact court cases for people living in poverty in Greater Los Angeles, to represent Carl Mitchell and other Skid Row residents with legal standing. This lawsuit aimed to stop police from seizing and destroying property of houseless residents. As a result of this lawsuit, a judge had issued an injunction in 2016 that set requirements on how police could seize property in the downtown and Skid Row, including advance posting before sweeps and storing instead of disposing of property. While staff stated that this court injunction was not complete, LA CAN supported this injunction and saw these requirements as a step in the right direction to protect the property rights of houseless community members.

LA CAN staff and community members, along with lawyers from LAFLA, attended the March 6 City Council hearing to support the Mitchell settlement. During the public comment period, a LA CAN staff member commented that encampments did not cause homelessness and this staff member framed this settlement as supporting property rights of houseless community members. Business interests and other nonprofit organizations took a different stance and opposed the settlement and the restrictions placed on street sweeps due to this settlement. Instead, these organizations urged the city to fight the prior court decision. Downtown business organizations, such as the Central City Association, raised concerns around encampments, arguing that these restrictions on sweeps “encourage more dangerous street behavior” (quote of Carol Schwarz in Chiland, 2019). Other nonprofits aligned with business interests, indicating the range of opinions among nonprofits in one neighborhood. Two service providers, the Weingart Center and The People Concern, spoke at the March hearing and later filed an amicus brief in support of challenging a larger court case related to this issue, a position that was in opposition to LA CAN’s position. While LA CAN organizers openly disagreed with the Central City Association on this and other issues, LA CAN identified the nonprofits that were aligned with business and police interests as against the property rights of houseless residents.

While the Mitchell settlement provides an example of how LA CAN took an opposing stance from two larger service providers, LA CAN also had key neighborhoods partners. LA CAN had participated in an earlier campaign to form the Skid Row Neighborhood Council that would be separate from the larger Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council. Staff and organizers with United Coalition East Prevention Program (UCEPP), an community-based organizing and advocacy effort housed within a larger nonprofit focused on systems that support

drug and alcohol recovery; the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a nonprofit community-based performance group; and key active community members all organized to establish a Skid Row Neighborhood Council (see Appendix D for a description of organizations mentioned in this chapter). The 2017 vote for this initiative was unsuccessful, and a larger discussion of this vote and problems with voting is outside this of analysis, but community members and staff highlighted this as a community-led effort. These organizations and active community leaders have continued to work together. Organizational membership overlapped as some LA CAN members were also part of UCEPP or the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Below are a few different ways that LA CAN partnered with Skid Row organizations and represented the concerns of neighborhood residents.

### ***Key Partners and Allies***

There were several nonprofit or small community organizations in Skid Row that LA CAN was more likely to partner with. These organizations were more aligned with LA CAN's core values and narratives about poverty and identified as community-based compared to larger service providers within Skid Row. LA CAN's Freedom Now annual fundraiser dinner included staff and community members affiliated with United Coalition East Prevention Program (UCEPP), Inner City Law Center, Skid Row Coffee, Church without Walls, and active community members. At this annual fundraiser, LA CAN honored the executive director of a service provider focused on harm reduction, Homeless Health Care Los Angeles. As Pete White discussed LA CAN's relationship with Homeless Health Care, White mentioned that Homeless Health Care was LA CAN's fiduciary before LA CAN received their 501c3 status. During my time at LA CAN, I worked with staff at Homeless Health Care to administer a rental assistance

program that was funded through a prior lawsuit against developers in the downtown area. Conversations about key allies happened during LA CAN planning meetings, where United Coalition East Prevention Program's office; the Hippie Kitchen, a soup kitchen across the street from LA CAN's office that was run by the Los Angeles Catholic Worker; and the Homeless Health Care's location in Skid Row were all described as sites where volunteers could mention LA CAN's name and drop off fliers. A key organizer with UCEPP was often at LA CAN events while LA CAN community members performed with the Los Angeles Poverty Department. When an Los Angeles Poverty Department performance in April 2019 was the same night as LA CAN's bi-monthly resident organizing meeting, they ended the LA CAN meeting early so that LA CAN staff and members could watch other LA CAN members and friends who were performing.

While the organizations above were more likely to be at community events or mentioned as partners, LA CAN reached out to other organizations when advocating around land use or policy. During my observation period, the Los Angeles City Planning Department was developing a new community plan for the downtown and Skid Row area. LA CAN was involved with a coalition of community organizations who were concerned with how Skid Row residents were not included in City planning processes. Working with Inner City Law Center, Los Angeles Poverty Department, and the Catholic Worker, this coalition planned events such as press conferences and looked for different ways to engage residents in conversations on land use and development. An LA CAN staff member referred to proposed city changes to a housing preservation agreement for downtown and Skid Row and described this housing agreement as technical and "wonky" compared to their other efforts. For this effort, he would be reaching out

to nonprofit partners for this effort. While LA CAN was well positioned to advocate based on their history with organizing and previous lawsuits, LA CAN could also reach out to partner organizations with similar values.

### ***Strategic Alliances with other Nonprofits***

LA CAN actively partnered with the organizations mentioned above and had an opposing stance from some of the larger service providers. However, there were also organizations that did not always share the same stance as LA CAN, but these organizations could still provide needed resources for their community members. These organizations were not as frequent partners with LA CAN compared to the key allies, but their relationships were more cordial compared to LA CAN's relationships with non-partners. One LA CAN member compared LA CAN to other nonprofits in the neighborhood. He commented that LA CAN was more grassroots, but also acknowledged that other organizations played a role when he stated: "they're simply service organizations. At the same time, services are important because we don't provide them. You have to strike a balance." LA CAN helped community members to raise concerns against service providers. At the same time, LA CAN maintained relationships with some of these same service providers and could leverage relationships to provide resources for their members. Sometimes, relationships were not with the overall organization, but with specific staff members, and these staff members served as liaisons for accessing resources. Even if these organizations weren't core partners, LA CAN provided referrals and helped community members access needed services through these strategic relationships.

For one nonprofit housing provider, SRO Housing Corporation, LA CAN supported tenants with filing complaints. However, while LA CAN supported tenants with organizing

against this organization, they also saw SRO Housing as a partner at times and formed relationships with specific staff members. As an LA CAN staff member talked with a group of community members about tenant organizing, he compared the two nonprofit landlords, SRO Housing Corporation and Skid Row Housing Trust, to other housing developers. He described nonprofit housing developers as easier to work with than for-profit developers. While LA CAN worked to hold nonprofit landlords accountable, nonprofit partners were also “someone we can work with (compared to for-profit landlords), so in this way we need them.” LA CAN assisted tenants with complaints, but at the same time, they had a relationship in which they could ask the Executive Director to intervene for specific members. At one housing committee meeting, staff and community discussed writing a letter to SRO Housing to advocate for a specific tenant. One community member commented that their relationship with the SRO Housing Executive Director was an example of the success of LA CAN’s prior organizing efforts. The staff member responded that this was due to their committee’s efforts, “you did this.”

### ***LA CAN’s Role in this Landscape***

In a dense service landscape, LA CAN distinguished themselves as community advocates in several ways. At a Resident Organizing Committee meeting, one community member commented that LA CAN was not afraid to take on corruption. This community member referenced how LA CAN called out other organizations in the neighborhood, including nonprofit service providers. Community members mentioned being part of prior efforts that led to housing victories, such as preserving housing in the Alexandria residential hotel on Spring Street and eliminating guest fees in residential hotels. This history and involvement of community members in these efforts helped to establish LA CAN as a leader in organizing and as a source of



knowledge around land use. Due to the proximity of LA CAN's previous office to city hall, LA CAN also interacted with the Occupy movement when it was outside City Hall in 2011. As a community member pointed out, "We (members of LA CAN) showed them (protesters with Occupy) what real resistance looked like".

As a community hub, LA CAN served as a space for events and for community meetings, such as when a developer was making a presentation to community advocates about a proposed development for the old Salvation Army building. LA CAN's Thursday market included not only low-cost organic produce from their garden, but also music, free haircuts, and a DJ and open mic time. LA CAN was located in an area with multiple service providers, and LA CAN did not provide the formalized services that were offered through other organizations in Skid Row. In addition, LA CAN distinguished their role from other service providers through the types of events they held and by having a community space and arts approach (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). In this role, LA CAN partnered with other organizations that had similar orientations towards the community, such as LA Catholic Worker and UCEPP. While these three organizations shared core values, LA CAN had a larger organizing and city-wide presence compared to some of their closer Skid Row partner organizations. LA CAN had a history of leading efforts within Skid Row, such as campaigns against police brutality, lawsuits to protect property rights for houseless community members, and campaigns to preserve housing for low-income individuals, and LA CAN continued to play an active role on these issues. This history of organizing combined with their core values and an emphasis on challenging dominant narratives around houselessness provided LA CAN with the legitimacy to be a Skid Row voice in larger city-wide coalitions.

LA CAN's connection to Black radical thought also influenced their work in the community and their positions when taking action against service providers. African Americans are over-represented in the houseless population in Los Angeles County, comprising 40% of the population experiencing homelessness compared to 9% of the general population (LAHSA, 2018). Skid Row also has a higher proportion of African American residents compared to the Los Angeles county rates. One community member described his first impressions of Skid Row: "It was Mississippi 1954, it was a tent city, mostly Black people, patrolled by million goddamn police." Another community member referred to two Black belts within Los Angeles, with mansions in the Baldwin Hills neighborhood and tents and the houseless community in Skid Row. He described gentrification and resistance in another neighborhood that was a Black cultural center, Leimert Park, and connected Leimert Park's struggles to struggles in Skid Row:

Africa Town (in Leimert Park) over there is fighting all that. . They're (the city and developers) building fences around Leimert Park trying to move people out...And the same thing is going on right here on Skid Row. They're trying to move people out of Skid Row. That want the black man, if you're on Skid Row, they're saying, 'Get out of that tent and get the hell out of here.'

LA CAN saw both their origin and ongoing work as connected to the Black radical tradition. In a neighborhood where residents have dealt with the effects of structural racism, this connection was another way that they operated from the epicenter. As Pete White commented in an interview with the Los Angeles Sentinel,

We've been unapologetically Black from the get go, and because we sort of focus on the work on the ethos of the Black radical tradition, even when we have non-Black people,

allies, accomplices and other members, they also understand that we're moving and moved by the Black experience. (Quoted in Muhamed, 2017)

This connection to the Black radical tradition included both identifying how Black community members were disproportionately affected, as well as drawing from culture and music to highlight community and strength. This connection to the Black radical tradition influenced LA CAN's arts and culture program and how art was incorporated into activism, and this emphasis helped to position LA CAN as a key community space.

### **SBCC as a Community Hub in a Fenceline Community**

During an interview, an interviewee identified SBCC as one of the larger organizations in the neighborhood of Wilmington. The density and types of social service agencies in Wilmington differed from the concentrated service hub in Skid Row. In Wilmington, SBCC served as a community hub by operating as one of the larger organizations. SBCC described themselves as connected to and driven by residents, but their relationships with community members and with neighborhood institutions differed from LA CAN's relationships. Community members referred to organizations within Wilmington such as Providence Health & Services Wellness Center. Instead of nonprofits within the neighborhood, residents were more likely to mention the Police Department, local schools, or the refineries within Wilmington as partners. SBCC offered a range of services, including counseling, after school tutoring, and supports for relative caregivers. However the executive director framed their work more as a community space as she mentioned "I think people feel like we're a community center, not a social service agency. So, some people come in the cafe, just to have lunch". Here, SBCC served as a community center

and key resource, helping to showcase residents' strengths and to connect residents to neighborhood institutions and to each other.

SBCC hosted community events for Wilmington residents, and these events highlight the types of organizations that SBCC partnered with. In 2018, SBCC hosted their annual I Heart Community Fiesta in Banning Park, one of the larger parks in Wilmington. This festival had a stage for different musicians, food areas at both ends of the festival, a kids section that had multiple tables with educational activities, and rows of tables with different resources and activities for both kids and adults. While the different SBCC programs each had activity tables, many partner organizations participated in this event and hosted activities. Partner organizations included businesses such as State Farm Insurance; government agencies such as the Department of Health and the City Planning Department; First Five LA; the local public library; services such as health care clinics and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) services; as well as arts programs such as Limitless Dance. High school students with the Banning Recreational Center cheer squad performed. The City Council member who represented the Wilmington area, Joe Buscaino, had a table with staff members. Multiple canopies during the event had the name of the U.S. House representative for this area, Nanette Diaz Barragan, on the awning. SBCC's Instagram stories for this day highlighted many of their partners, including Children's Institute, First 5, State Farm Insurance, Los Angeles County SPA 8 collaborative efforts, and public libraries (See Appendix D). This was a large community event for the neighborhood where SBCC brought many different types of organizations together.

SBCC was a larger organization but with a focus on resident-driven efforts and on the gifts and talents and community members. With this combination, SBCC had both the

infrastructure and the mission alignment to support grassroots efforts that originated through community members not originally affiliated with SBCC. Several SBCC staff members identified the Clean Wilmington program as an exemplary grassroots effort and its founder, Salvador Lara, as someone who cared deeply about his community. A resident of the northeast part of Wilmington, an area called Ghost Town, Lara began to organize community cleanups for his street in 2007. After family and neighbors started to join him, they worked with city council member at that time, Janice Hahn, to turn the neighbor-led cleanups into the Clean Wilmington program. Clean Wilmington was initially housed under a different nonprofit organization but partnered with SBCC for cleanups. When Clean Wilmington needed a new host organization, SBCC was a community-based organization with the capacity to support this effort and Clean Wilmington became part of SBCC in 2016 (Daily Breeze, 2017). Other local efforts became part of SBCC such as an I Heart Harbor City youth organization in the Harbor City neighborhood directly adjacent to Wilmington. Harbor City youth had formed a group to organize and advocate for a skate park in Harbor City. This group then needed a sponsor organization with an orientation towards civic engagement and city pride, so in 2018, the youth-led effort transformed into the I Heart Harbor City group within SBCC's community organizing program. Here, SBCC used their existing capacity to provide infrastructure for neighborhood-led efforts.

### ***Connecting Residents to Key Wilmington Institutions***

While both LA CAN and SBCC hosted events and partnered with organizations to host events at their office space, events differed due to each CBO's types of partnerships. SBCC hosted a discussion with their city council member on a proposed Bridge housing shelter for houseless residents in Wilmington, the new redesigned voting booths for mock voting before the

2020 primary elections, and a Shop Latino event with different local vendors. Through the SBCC space and relationships with residents, departments and elected officials within local government had a place to connect with community members and SBCC was able to promote civic engagement and community voice. SBCC also participated in Wilmington community events sponsored by local government. I Heart Wilmington had a float for the Wilmington Christmas Parade and SBCC was a co-sponsor of the 2018 tree lighting in Wilmington. SBCC had different relationships with government agencies and officials compared to LA CAN, including a working relationship with police. While LA CAN worked with community members who had been targeted by police and took an explicit stance against over-policing in Skid Row, SBCC partnered with the police in several resident-led efforts. Through Clean Wilmington, the effort discussed in the previous paragraph, community members worked with police to address illegal dumping. Residents also planned Peace marches in Wilmington to address problems with violence and police were often a partner for these marches. These relationships with police could affect the poverty knowledge that CBOs communicated through their frontline work (as discussed in Chapter Four).

In the 2018 gala, both representatives from local labor unions and SBCC staff referred to fenceline communities and discussed how the oil refineries were a major institution and employer. Previously, SBCC had identified refineries as the biggest economic employer in this area but that community members who lived along the fenceline could not access employment there. To address this, SBCC partnered with the labor unions, major refineries, and Harbor Community College to develop the Energy Pathways program. The 2018 Gala showcased the relationships with both the refineries and labor unions. Two different labor unions as well as five

refineries sponsored the Gala at varying levels and SBCC recognized the president of the local United Steel Workers, the Marathon oil refinery, as well as a community member who participated in the Energy Pathways employment program. In her speech, the Executive Director, Colleen Mooney, discussed how each group took a risk to launch this training and employment program, such as the labor union changing practices that prioritized hiring family members in order to hire neighborhood residents. Mooney commented that although Marathon is a national company, they are a community partner in Wilmington. She referred specifically to two employees at Marathon and stated that these two employees would not hesitate to help if SBCC knew someone who was dealing with domestic violence or who needed a wheelchair: “they won’t put me on hold, they will take my call.” Here, SBCC could use their relationship to broker services from larger institutions. The refineries in Wilmington also sponsored events, such as community cleanups, as well as being the main sponsor for the Wilmington Tree lighting. SBCC partnered with larger Wilmington institutions such as the refineries and the police department, and served as a connection to residents in this role.

### ***Neighborhood Focus in Communities Outside of Wilmington***

While I primarily focused on SBCC’s relationships within Wilmington, SBCC oversaw community organizing groups throughout LA County. In each community, organizers and active residents attended Best Start meetings, a collaborative of local agencies working on early childhood education and child development in 14 targeted neighborhoods across Los Angeles County. The staff organizers in communities outside of Wilmington were too far away to use SBCC’s office as a meeting space, so organizers formed relationships with other organizations and local government, with many of SBCC’s Neighborhood Action Councils based out of

schools. Community organizers also held meetings in government-sponsored spaces, such as city-owned neighborhood houses in the cities of Palmdale or Lancaster or the Los Angeles County government services office for the San Gabriel area in the Eastern part of Los Angeles County. In addition to the Best Start meetings, staff organizers attended events with community members, such as Coffee with a Cop, or looked for local resources to share with residents.

SBCC organizers described how partnerships were a key part of their work. One staff member commented that “if you're able to work with any organization that's willing to collaborate with you, then you do it.” This philosophy of collaboration was similar to their organizing model that emphasized building relationships between residents. SBCC’s vision focused on networks of local relationships that drove social change (“About Us”, n.d.). Their core values of relationships and partnerships as the driver for local social change influenced their partnership philosophy, and their willingness to collaborate with “any organization that’s willing to collaborate with you.” These local partnerships helped SBCC community groups gain access to meeting spaces when they were far from the Wilmington office and to connect residents to different resources. In turn, SBCC could provide a connection to residents and recruit volunteers for other community organizations, such as providing donations for the City of Hope cancer center or recruiting volunteers for another organization’s Toy Drive. One organizer commented

We can bring people together and all that stuff, but we really can’t do it all. Sometimes we will have situations where maybe we don’t have the right answer, but I think having, you know, knowing somebody at city hall, knowing somebody at the police station, and just creating those relationships, those partnerships with other stakeholders, that’s huge. Because that helps you support the residents, and so, that’s in turn supports you.



SBCC staff used partnerships to connect residents to resources, but their relationships differed from LA CAN, such as some SBCC organizers forming relationships with police.

***SBCC's Position as an Asset-based, Latinx-serving Organization***

While SBCC was less likely to have the watchdog role and advocate against service providers compared to LA CAN, SBCC staff also described their approach as different than other service providers. Unlike service organizations that focused on deficits, staff identified SBCC as an asset-based organization that focused on residents' strengths and drew from narratives that community members were key to social change efforts. This asset-based identity, in combination with their neighborhood context, shaped SBCC's role as a community-based organization. Similar to how Marwell (2007) described CBOs bringing additional resources into neighborhoods, SBCC served as a connector to other institutions and built relationships within and between fence-line communities. SBCC worked with many immigrant families, many who were low-income or near-poor. Some members of their core community base have had negative experiences with previous institutions or service providers. However, SBCC's community base may still be treated differently compared to houseless community members with LA CAN who had experiences with some of the larger, more punitive service providers in Skid Row (as discussed in Stuart, 2016). These prior experiences affected how community members and a CBO interacted with institutions. In SBCC's work in Wilmington as well as in the Best Start communities, SBCC worked closely with Latinx residents and immigrant-serving organizations. This was not necessarily the connection with Chicana/o activism that was described by Pulido (2002, 2006), but SBCC connected with residents over Latinx culture, and this shaped their role in Wilmington. The two CBOs served as neighborhood organizations in different ways,

depending on their mission and core values and on the other institutions within their neighborhood. These relationships and their neighborhood identity then shaped each CBO's positions within city-wide fields. In the following section, I discuss how both CBOs drew upon their neighborhood identity.

### **Organizing from the Fenceline and the Epicenter: Positioning as a Neighborhood**

#### **Organization within Larger Fields**

Both CBOs were part of organizational fields through their neighborhood-level, city, and statewide partnerships. Some organizational fields had a higher amount of service providers, such as fields for homeless services or for children and family services. The two CBOs also worked within fields that focused more on advocacy, such as LA CAN serving as a key organization within tenant rights organizing. I also identified networks and relationships with more radical organizations, especially with LA CAN. These networks of radical organizations worked within some of the fields described above, such as homeless services, and sought to influence narratives in these fields. Each CBO drew from their history and connection with residents, but the two organizations represented their neighborhood and then advanced ideas through these partnerships in different ways.

The Los Angeles City Council budget hearing on May 15, 2019 highlighted different coalitions and how CBOs were involved with advocacy. The Los Angeles City Council was preparing their annual budget at this meeting, so organizations attended to advocate for specific issues to be included in the city's annual budget. LA CAN was part of two different coalitions advocating for funding. The Right to Counsel Coalition was a coalition of legal agencies and tenant rights organizations advocating for policies to guarantee legal representation for low-

income individuals facing evictions. At the council meeting, coalition members argued for funding for the first phase of this initiative. Services not Sweeps, was a coalition primarily of smaller organizations focused on community organizing, such as Democratic Socialists of America- Los Angeles Chapter, Black Lives Matter-Los Angeles, and Ktown for all. This coalition also included a few service providers, including Homeless Health Care and Venice Community Housing. The Services not Sweeps coalition were advocating to change policies for sanitation sweeps of houseless encampments, including removing the police presence at these sweeps and reallocating funding from police to fund public health infrastructure. In addition, the Black Worker Center, a partner organization of LA CAN, advocated for funding to implement a new anti-discrimination ordinance, while other organizations spoke in support of continuing funding for the LA Justice Fund that funded lawyers for families who were facing deportation.

During this hearing, LA CAN staff and volunteers spoke in support of Services not Sweeps' position and argued that the police received too much funding. Members of the Democratic Socialists of America members who often attended LA CAN events also spoke in favor of Services not Sweeps' position. Partner organizations through the Right to Council coalition, such as Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), also indicated their support for the Services not Sweeps position along with the LA Justice Fund and the Black Worker Center Anti-discrimination ordinance. One partner referred to their sister struggles during their testimony, indicating how efforts were connected. While efforts were connected, there were a range of organizations from mostly volunteer groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America to larger 501c3 organizations such as legal service providers. Within this larger advocacy network in Los Angeles, organizations were part of different organizational fields such

as homeless services or tenant advocacy. LA CAN positioned themselves within these fields through their history and connection to Skid Row.

While SBCC was not involved with the City Council hearing, their participation in the United Way's annual HomeWalk provides an example of their positioning. The annual HomeWalk event helped to raise money for United Way's Everyone In Campaign, which focused on ending homelessness and on providing supportive housing. The event took place three days after the City Council budget hearing, and the United Way reported that they had over 10,000 volunteers and raised over one million dollars at this event (United Way, 2019). SBCC had brought residents from across Los Angeles county to the HomeWalk fundraiser. Previously, a SBCC organizer described how residents involved with SBCC were able to connect with active community members from different parts of LA County at prior HomeWalks. United Way organizers with the Everyone In campaign had attended prior city council hearings. However, many organizations at HomeWalk, such as nonprofit housing service providers, were less likely to be at the Budget hearing earlier that week. In 2019, SBCC had an additional role at HomeWalk as United Way staff had asked if SBCC staff could help with event staffing. SBCC supervisors were helping with the overall event and many community members with SBCC were wearing yellow I Heart t-shirts and participating in the walk. Some community members had shirts for their neighborhood, such as I Heart Watts, I Heart El Monte, or I Heart East LA. Other community members wore shirts that represented all the I Hearts, saying "We are all I Heart". As the SBCC Executive Director walked through downtown during this event, a United Way staff member commented to her on all the yellow shirts representing SBCC at the event. SBCC identified key relationships, such as with the United Way, and SBCCs work with residents

helped to maintained these relationships. The two CBOs have different positions within city-wide organizational fields but for both organizations, these positions tied into their identity as a organization rooted in their communities or neighborhoods.

### **LA CAN: Connecting Skid Row Residents in Tenant Rights and Homeless Advocacy**

For LA CAN, I focus on a few specific coalitions and relationships to highlight how their role at the neighborhood level shaped their role in city-wide organizational fields: Services not Sweeps; the Right to Counsel Coalition; Downtown 2040; and LA CAN's connection to Black radical organizations. In their relationships with organizations outside of Skid Row, LA CAN brought their connection with Skid Row residents, a history of organizing, and a connection to Black radical thought. Through these partnerships, LA CAN also brought organizations and artists into Skid Row.

### ***Partnering with Non-professionals to Promote an Anti-criminalization Narrative***

Representatives from smaller, primarily volunteer organizations attended LA CAN weekly committees and LA CAN events and actions, so this participation in LA CAN committees was one way that LA CAN influenced the strategies and narratives of other organizations. Members of Democratic Socialists of America-Los Angeles (DSA-LA) and of White People for Black Lives attended LA CAN committee meetings and LA CAN sponsored events. Through these relationships, groups outside of Skid Row learned about LA CAN's work and could bring LA CAN's model to other parts of the city. DSA had a street watch program modeled after LA CAN's earlier community watch program to document police harassment against houseless individuals. LA CAN then recognized DSA members for their street watch program at LA CAN's 2019 annual fundraiser. As community organizations came together in

early 2019 to develop the Services Not Sweeps coalition, LA CAN was able to help guide an anti-criminalization narrative that called out the role of police in sweeps of homeless encampments. While the Services not Sweeps coalition included smaller, mostly volunteer run organizations that were not officially 501c3 or non-professional organizations, such as Democratic Socialists of America- Los Angeles and Koreatown for All, the coalition also included larger service providers such as Homeless Health Care and Venice Community Housing. LA CAN had a longer history and longstanding relationships with the directors of both organizations: Homeless Health Care was the initial fiduciary for LA CAN while the Executive Director for Venice Community Housing was previously a co-director for LA CAN and had an ongoing relationship with LA CAN.

Services not Sweeps was a smaller coalition within the larger homeless service fields, but this coalition was active in City Council hearings. They also hosted actions to call attention to problems with Los Angeles city policies. Many members of Services not Sweeps participated in Homeless Memorial Day actions which raised awareness about the number of houseless community members who had died in 2019. LA CAN played a key role in organizing actions on this day and hosted a march to City Hall. On the same day, partner organizations hosted events with similar messages in multiple neighborhoods of Los Angeles, including Echo Park and Venice. Details will be discussed in further chapters, but marches across the city promoted a narrative that emphasized houseless community members' humanity and identified a problem of government neglect. Due to their history with organizing in the epicenter of Skid Row, LA CAN was able to influence volunteer efforts in other areas of the city, such as supporting organizers in the Echo Park neighborhood who were speaking out against police harassment of houseless

individuals living near Echo Park Lake. In this role, LA CAN not only influenced organizing tactics, but also how efforts across the city were framed with an anti-criminalization narrative.

### ***Bringing a Skid Row Perspective to Tenants Rights and Land Use***

While Service not Sweeps focused primarily around policy for homeless services, LA CAN was also involved in tenant rights and housing justice. In these fields, LA CAN brought their history of tenant organizing in the residential hotels and a Skid Row tenant perspective. LA CAN had previous partnerships through an earlier Human Right to Housing Collective and other housing organizing coalitions, including efforts that were not successful in advancing policy changes. The time period for this study included the Yes on 10 campaign, a ballot initiative to overturn a California state law, the Costa Hawkins Rental Housing Act. While this ballot initiative was ultimately unsuccessful, LA CAN partnered with tenant organizations such as ACCE, SAJE, and Eviction Defense Network, with AIDS Healthcare Foundation as a large funder of this ballot initiative. Many of these organizations were also part of the Right to Council Coalition, a coalition focused on establishing a policy that low-income tenants have a right to a lawyer during eviction proceedings. In addition, LA CAN would refer community members to other tenant organizations when a tenant's issues could not be addressed in LA CAN's legal clinic. Coalitions did not always go smoothly and some relationships had more tensions. I focus less on relationship challenges between organizations (see Lichterman, 2020 for a discussion on relationships in Los Angeles coalitions and challenges for these relationships). Instead, I focus on LA CAN's overall role within coalitions and how LA CAN brought perspectives from Skid Row and from their previous struggles against gentrification.

LA CAN had a history of organizing to preserve housing for low-income individuals and to protect tenant rights. Downtown development was increasing when LA CAN was at their previous location on Main St, so LA CAN focused on preserving residential hotels for low-income tenants. These efforts included a city-wide Residential Hotel Ordinance passed by the Los Angeles City Council, a downtown-specific settlement to prevent conversions of residential hotels to luxury apartments, and building-specific campaigns, such as the campaign to prevent illegal evictions at the Alexandria hotel. LA CAN previously partnered with tenant rights organizations in other parts of the city to advocate for a freeze on rent increases instead of the yearly 3% increases allowed by Los Angeles's rent stabilization ordinance. This effort was not successful and both staff and community members referred to tense moments with police at City Hall during this campaign. While current LA CAN actions around tenant rights and housing justice experienced less police confrontation compared to confrontations during the rent freeze efforts, LA CAN was able to draw from this history of organizing. During a weekly LA CAN housing committee meeting, staff encouraged community members to attend an upcoming press conference and government hearing. Coalition messaging for this press conference included the connection between gentrification and evictions, and this staff member commented on how LA CAN had a history of dealing with these issues and of fighting against gentrification. Due to this history, this LA CAN staff member stressed the importance of a strong showing of LA CAN members and Skid Row at the hearing.

As an organization connected to both low-income tenants and houseless community members, LA CAN also helped to strengthen connections between affordable housing and houselessness for organizing efforts. As housing committee members discussed LA CAN's



position for an upcoming housing rights event in 2018, a staff member commented on how other housing organizations did not always make this connection. Because of this, she described the importance of LA CAN representatives speaking and highlighting the connection between housing policies and houselessness. While I present the Right to Counsel and Services not Sweeps as two separate coalitions, some activists, such as Los Angeles Tenant Union members, were active with both efforts. This overlap helped to broaden ideas of tenancy and to include unhoused community members and their stake in a neighborhood.

As part of organizing against gentrification, LA CAN worked with organizations in the larger downtown area and connected land use policy to preserving housing for extremely low-income individuals. LA CAN partnered with Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) and Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) as both partner organizations worked in neighborhoods close to downtown, Little Tokyo and Chinatown, that would be affected by a proposed community plan update for the greater downtown area. Downtown 2040, was a community plan with goals to “describe a collective vision for Downtown’s future and include policies, plans, and implementation programs that frame the City’s long-term priorities” (“Downtown Los Angeles Community Plan update”, n.d). LA CAN and their partner CBOs in Chinatown and Little Tokyo were concerned that their community base would not be represented in this new plan. LA CAN worked with other Skid Row organizations, such as the Los Angeles Poverty Department, Inner City Law Center, and LA Catholic Worker, to involve Skid Row residents and make sure that plan components benefited current Skid Row residents, as opposed to future residents with higher incomes. LA CAN then brought this Skid Row perspective to their partnerships with CBOs in the broader downtown area. At a community planning meeting in April 2019 that

brought residents from the three communities together, a staff member from a partner CBO described how the organizations and communities were “aligned as historic communities of color”. In addition to representatives from the three communities, a city-wide legal partner, Public Council, was also part of this effort.

These relationships with other CBOs extended beyond single campaigns. During a weekly housing committee meeting, an LA CAN staff member recognized Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) as an affordable housing developer and partner to LA CAN. Here, this staff member distinguished LTSC as a partner compared to other housing developers. LTSC took out a quarter sheet advertisement in LA CAN’s annual fundraiser program, indicating their larger support. These previous relationships and history helped LA CAN form coalitions that connected Skid Row residents to larger efforts.

### ***Connection between Skid Row and Black Radical Activism***

LA CAN staff described organizing that was rooted in Black radical thought, and LA CAN was part of a radical Black arts and activism field through this history and multiple relationships. While LA CAN partnered with both Black Lives Matter and White People for Black Lives for actions against police violence and surveillance, these partnerships extended beyond joint actions. For example, lead organizers of Black Lives Matter- Los Angeles were on LA CAN’s board of directors. Through these relationships, LA CAN was able to bring organizations into Skid Row and connect Skid Row residents to broader movements. Speakers from Black Alliance for a Just Immigration (BAJI) spoke at LA CAN’s bi-monthly resident organizing committee meeting while another meeting featured a journalist who studied the media’s coverage of police violence. Both of these speakers diagnosed problems as due to a

system of white supremacy and shared this analysis with Skid Row residents. At a retreat for women in Skid Row, LA CAN brought speakers and vendors that highlighted women’s strength and sisterhood through these partnerships.

LA CAN partnered with key organizations such as Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, BAJI, or Dignity and Power Now. LA CAN distinguished themselves and their partner organizations who identified with Black radical thought from more mainstream civil rights organizations. In an event introduction, the Executive Director, Pete White, discussed LA CAN’s history and the role of other organizations. In this speech, White commented on how the “NAACP sold out her community,” referring to the California NAACP’s opposition to the Proposition 10 ballot initiative on rent control legislation in the 2018 Election, and he repeated this statement for emphasis<sup>3</sup>. Through making this distinction, White helped to establish boundaries for organizations involved in Black radical activism. While White contrasted LA CAN’s position to the NAACP “selling out her community”, LA CAN formed alliances with the organizations that also diagnosed problems as due to white supremacy and institutional racism. These partner organizations brought an abolitionist frame (described in Chapter Four) and highlighted Black-led activism.

LA CAN’s work also helped to solidify relationships between arts and culture in Skid Row to arts and culture in Leimert Park, a Los Angeles neighborhood with a strong history and

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<sup>3</sup> References to the California NAACP were related to the president of the California NAACP, Alice Huffman, who also had a political consulting firm. During Huffman’s tenure as president, the California NAACP often endorsed positions from ballot initiatives that were in agreement with the Republican party and Huffman received criticisms of conflict of interest since her consulting firm received 1.7 million in 2020 for these same ballot initiatives. After the 2020 presidential election, she resigned as the State President due to health issues (Gutierrez, 2020).

presence of Black artists. I talked with community members who currently lived in Skid Row but mentioned previously drumming in Leimert Park. In October 2018, LA CAN hosted a celebration for Fela Kuti. The event invitation on Facebook stated that "our struggle has seen us create the most fierce and beautiful forms of resistance" and the Facebook invitation described this event as "night of culture, creation and community, held together with sounds from the motherland, in honor and celebration of the father of Afro-beat and pioneer of Pan-Africanism, Fela Anikulapo Kuti." The event began with a female drumming group from Leimert Park. One of drummers spoke about visiting downtown and seeing what was happening in Skid Row. She commented that "I am with you," referring to the LA CAN's location in Skid Row. She then added that "at some point, we (referring to Leimert Park) may need you." White started the event panel by highlighting relationships between Leimert Park and LA CAN and Skid Row. Wearing a Black Brilliance t-shirt, he commented that Fela Kuti's birthday celebration usually takes place in Leimert Park. For this year, LA CAN staff asked Leimert Park organizers if they could have this event at LA CAN's space. Through this panel, attendees learned about Fela's life, music and art as resistance, and Pan-Africanism. This event built upon the previous relationships and at the same time, this event reinforced LA CAN's connection to Black activism and arts. LA CAN then brought this identify and framework to their work on human and civil rights for houseless community members, both city-wide and in Skid Row, and to their work with tenant rights and land use.

### ***Positioning at the City-wide Level as an Organization from the Epicenter***

Whether LA CAN was situated within tenant rights, homeless services, or Black radical activism, LA CAN brought in their history and connection to Skid Row residents and the idea

that Skid Row had been a center of struggles. In this role, LA CAN not only represented Skid Row at city-wide fields but they brought out residents to be part of city-wide actions. For some fields, such as tenant rights, LA CAN operated in a more central position but with a Skid Row perspective. For homeless services fields, LA CAN was part of a specific niche, with other organizations in the Services Not Sweeps Coalition, that challenged existing policies and narratives around houselessness. While LA CAN was not the one of the larger organizations compared to other homeless service providers, LA CAN held a central position within a coalition that was challenging city policies around sweeps and the criminalization of un-housed community members.

Drawing from their history, LA CAN also formed relationships with key politicians and government staffers. Former City Council President Herb Wesson attended both the 2018 and 2019 annual awards fundraisers. In one city council hearing where LA CAN community members were planning to speak, one community member noticed Wesson's orange bow tie. He joked that this bow tie was an indication for Wesson's support for LA CAN's position, referring to orange as the color of the LA CAN logo and t-shirts. While LA CAN would disagree with and challenge city council members, staff had relationships with city council members, such as City Council member Gil Cedillo. Neither of these city council members represented downtown and I witnessed more challenges with the council member whose district included Skid Row, Jose Huizar. During my study period, Jose Huizar was being investigated by the FBI and as a result, much less of a presence and sometimes the object of jokes. Huizar was identified as supporting downtown business interests and less of an ally to LA CAN, which differed from SBCC's relationship with their city council member.

While LA CAN did not have a strong relationship with Skid Row’s city council member, LA CAN leveraged other government relationships at key levels. They had built a relationship with Peter Lynn, who was head of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) until November 2019. During a LA CAN committee meeting in June 2019, staff and community members prepared for an upcoming town hall with Peter Lynn. A staff member discussed the history of their relationship with Lynn, including when Lynn was previously at another government organization, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA). This staff member discussed previous advocacy and how Lynn was a helpful staff member and ally when LA CAN was advocating that guest fees should be considered an illegal rent increase. A community member who was a long-time active LA CAN member agreed with this statement and indicated his support for Peter Lynn. A few weeks later, at this town hall, White introduced Peter Lynn as “the only bureaucrat willing to face the community.” Through LA CAN’s position and their history in Skid Row, Lynn could work with LA CAN as a way to support an alternative narrative on houselessness.

Through their role as a community-based organization in the “epicenter of human rights violation”, LA CAN established a partnership with a United Nations Special rapporteur to document conditions for houseless community members in Los Angeles, and LA CAN members referred to their seat in the United Nations as a unique organizational feature. In December 2018, LA CAN staff, community members, and key partners spoke out during the Mayor of Los Angeles’ Human Rights Day speech in order to highlight contradictions between the Mayor’s discussion of human rights and his policies towards houseless individuals. LA CAN staff had met with the United Nations representative the day before the Mayor’s event. When community

members and staff debriefed after they disrupted the Mayor’s speech, White referred to the UN rapporteur’s speech to introduce the Mayor. White mentioned that the UN rapporteur made a comment about “welcoming the troublemakers because we need them too”, indicating that the UN rapporteur was acknowledging LA CAN in her introductory remarks. While staff discussed how the Mayor was unhappy with the speech being disrupted and Mayor Garcetti was a target of LA CAN’s actions, LA CAN formed relationships with other government officials and staff, such as United Nations Special Rapporteur and the former head of LAHSA.

Community members then described being part of a organization with a strong reputation. At a LA CAN member retreat, a community member mentioned that “People see me with my shirt and the bus and say thank you” and the community member sitting next to me nodded and agreed with his statement. This community member commented that “we are one of the preeminent groups in LA” and then added that LA CAN was one of the preeminent groups in California. LA CAN’s work at the both the neighborhood level and as part of larger fields helped them to achieve this recognition, leading to both local and state recognition. Through their relationships across multiple fields and their history as a community organization in Skid Row, LA CAN had a unique position to advance narratives that will be described in later chapters.

### **SBCC: The Role of Relationships and an Asset-based Model through County-wide**

#### **Resident Organizing**

In this study, I focus primarily on SBCC’s community organizing program, along with their main events, such as their annual Gala and annual community festivals. Other SBCC programs may differ slightly in their partnerships, but I focus on their community organizing program as one of SBCC’s larger programs and an example of hybrid work. I identified some

overlap with LA CAN, such as both organizations having relationships with United Way's Everyone In campaign and receiving funding from the California Community Foundation. Both CBOs were seen as having strong core values and a connection to residents and the two CBOs drew from this history and work with residents. However, SBCC was in different organizational fields compared to LA CAN. SBCC's relationships were not solely due to their connections and work in Wilmington, but also from their work mobilizing residents county-wide. One community member who was active with SBCC referred to many families involved with SBCC as "barely making it". In their work with low-income and near-poor families, SBCC was able to mobilize community members who might not otherwise be involved in political processes. SBCC's approach within larger fields was similar to their work at the neighborhood level, as they drew from their asset and relationship-based philosophy to highlight the role of residents and serve as a connector.

### ***Resident-based Approach in the Field of Child and Family Services***

Throughout their history, SBCC had been involved with child and family services and their previous work shaped their current positioning within the field of child and family services. SBCC began as a grassroots therapy organization, and one of their first grants from Los Angeles County was a child abuse prevention grant that mandated coalition work. As SBCC developed programs and gained funding, they formed relationships with various county agencies such as the State of California Office of Child Abuse Prevention and the Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection, as well as funders focused on early childhood programs, such as First 5 Los Angeles. SBCC's community organizing program grew through these relationships and through funding for family programs. While programs focused on child development and family services,



SBCC's mission looked more broadly at community change with a mission to "empower ourselves, individuals, families, and communities through innovating and co-creating a better future". This mission shaped SBCC's programs for children and youth and how SBCC interacted with other organizations within this field.

With First 5 LA as a key funder during my study period<sup>4</sup>, SBCC participated in First 5 LA's Best Start initiative which focused on 14 communities in Los Angeles County, described on the Best Start website as communities that "faced historic disenfranchisement and oppression", resulting in neighborhood-level factors that aggravated family stressors (Best Start, n.d.). Best Start has a goal of promoting relationships among community members and building community leadership so that "people develop strong and lasting relationships, support each other, and act together to give children the best start possible." (Best Start, n.d). While SBCC worked with South Bay communities that were not designated Best Start communities, such as Hawthorne, Lennox and Harbor City, many of the SBCC's Neighborhood Action Councils were in the 14 Best Start Communities. SBCC organizing staff discussed ways that they supported the Best Start initiative, including attending Best Start meetings within each community, participating in events and projects with other Best Start organizations, and introducing residents to Best Start meetings. However, there was some overlap between SBCC's and Best Start's activities for residents. Best Start was also able to offer more incentives to residents compared to SBCC, which could lead to residents participating with Best Start instead of SBCC. To

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<sup>4</sup> An interviewee mentioned that First 5 was funding Best Start until 2020, so I do not know how funding will change after this period.

distinguish their approach from Best Start, one SBCC staff members referred to SBCC's meetings and activities as a "little bit more residency". This staff member mentioned that SBCC NAC meetings were more focused on residents as opposed to Best Start meetings that included both residents and agencies. Through first getting involved through SBCC, some community members then became involved with Best Start, which helped to further connect residents to different resources and workshops.

SBCC worked with other nonprofit organizations as well as government offices focused on children and youth, and brought a "residency", grassroots approach to these partnerships. The Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection (OCP) attended an SBCC County-wide resident meeting in April 2019 to gather feedback on a new county-wide initiative on child abuse prevention. Residents from all over Los Angeles County who were involved with SBCC attended this meeting, and through activities at this meeting, OCP was able to gather feedback from community members. Their meeting structure was designed to facilitate involvement, which helped SBCC connect county agencies to a network of residents. Mooney referred to two peer organizations as key partner organizations: Friends of the Family, a services and advocacy organization focused on children and family services in the San Fernando Valley, and Children's Bureau, an organization focused on children and family services county-wide but with a community-based initiative in South LA. Mooney described these two organizations as partner organizations with similar values, but she positioned SBCC as more grassroots than these two organizations, as well as SBCC having a more flexible approach. Although SBCC had a smaller budget compared to some organizations, Mooney commented that SBCC was willing to try new things and think outside the box.

### ***Leveraging Long-term Relationships and a County-wide Turnout***

While many of SBCC's relationships were connected to work with children and youth, SBCC's work extended beyond child and family services fields. Relationships with residents were central to SBCC's model for social change and to their core values. This emphasis on relationships extended to partners, where they drew on their reputation and flexible approach. SBCC had a good relationship with the United Way Executive Director and United Way was a sponsor for both annual fundraisers during my observation period. Similar to previous years, SBCC brought community member from multiple parts of Los Angeles County to the 2019 United Way HomeWalk, including providing buses and other forms of transportation so that residents could get to downtown Los Angeles for this event. The presence of community members walking in their yellow t-shirts helped to show a county-wide turnout and in addition, SBCC was also able to respond to a request from United Way for volunteer staffing for the overall event.

By encouraging resident turnout and showing responsiveness to partner requests, SBCC's relationships extended beyond funding. As a result of their relationship, Mooney discussed how she was able to talk with United Way staff and propose ideas for the United Way's *Pathways out of Poverty* program that drew from their core narratives and asset-based philosophy. SBCC built on existing relationships with the County Department of Child and Family services (DCFS) and United Way of Greater Los Angeles to pilot a new child abuse prevention program that focused on providing families with financial assistance, guided by the belief that families knew best what they needed and how to spend the money. SBCC partnered with the two organizations mentioned earlier, Friends of the Family and Children's Bureau, as these two organizations shared core

values with SBCC. While the three organizations were aligned around values and ideas about poverty, SBCC staff felt that their previous reputation and willingness to try new programs enabled SBCC to be the organization to propose and launch this program.

SBCC leveraged their county-wide network of residents when they partnered with government and other organizations. SBCC used different ways to highlight resident impact on a county-wide level, such as when the 2019 Annual Gala honored five community heroes, one in each of the five Supervisory Districts in Los Angeles County ("About Us", n.d.). SBCC focused on increasing advocacy within their community organizing program in 2019, and they drew on their existing network of community members when they partnered with CBOs for advocacy initiatives. In the February SBCC County-wide resident meeting, an environmental justice organization Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) presented an upcoming initiative to improve park equity across the five supervisory districts in Los Angeles County and increase the number of parks in low-income communities that had fewer parks compared to the more affluent West side. CBE staff members presented this policy initiative and then gathered signatures from residents at the meeting and invited the community members to a press conference as part of Los Angeles County Board of Supervisor hearing. A SBCC staff member commented that they could help with transportation to attend this press conference and encouraged people to attend, stating that "even if you can't vote, you can advocate." Staff emphasized that this was a way to have an impact, regardless of citizenship status. A week and a half later, SBCC staff and community members active with SBCC attended this press conference with CBE, alongside other organizations such as Pacoima Beautiful, an environmental justice organization in the San Fernando Valley, Promesa Boyle Heights, a coalition of organizations in the neighborhood of

Boyle Heights, and COFEM, the Council of Mexican Federations in North America. These organizations differed from LA CAN's primary partners, but both SBCC and their partners for this press conference were organizations connected to an immigrant community. SBCC's leveraged their network of resident leaders, as well as the infrastructure to support resident involvement, when forming these partnerships.

Community organizers leveraged not only their network of residents, but they also leveraged their flexible approach when partnering with different institutions. However, a SBCC staff member described how this uniqueness could be a challenge for partnerships:

Our organization is so flexible. And we're always coming up with new things. We're always thinking outside the box. There's other organizations that are by the book, 'these are the guidelines, this is what you do and you can't do this cause you're going to get in trouble.' But we're different. We're so so different.

Serving as a connection between residents and other organizations was a crucial part for their work and mission. While staff saw their "residency" approach as a distinct feature, because this model differed from other service providers, SBCC could face difficulties in trying to explain their model. Because they were "so so different", this presented challenges when figuring how they related to other organizations or how they were positioned within organizational fields.

### ***SBCC Positioned as a "Resident" Organization within Social Welfare***

Whether SBCC was working within the field of child and welfare services or with broader community development and advocacy partnerships, SBCC drew from their history and core values as well as their county-wide organizing infrastructure. The Gala emcee in the

beginning of this chapter contrasted SBCC's work from other service providers due to SBCC's focus on "what is right". A staff organizer described this approach:

We do put our resident's first, you know. We do showcase them a lot, we do appreciate them a lot and I think that goes a long way for us. I think that's why we have NACs across the county ... I really do think that, that other organizations don't have that. They just don't.

Through their county-wide community organizing program based on resident's strengths, SBCC provided a way for other organizations and government agencies to connect with residents. In addition to their history with resident organizing, SBCC had an infrastructure to bring residents to events such as the United Way HomeWalk and show how they were developing resident leaders. However, SBCC still faced challenges with not fitting into the usual categories. One staff member described this tension: "are you doing case management, are you doing parenting, are you doing anger management? So, we have trouble. We're learning how to talk about ourselves better. But we have trouble." As an organization that had started as a grassroots therapy organization and evolved into a county-wide organization, staff still wrestled with ways to present themselves.

Despite these challenges, SBCC drew from this track record and their asset-based philosophy for their current relationships. SBCC was able to leverage their relationship with the United Way and provide feedback on United Ways *Pathways out of Poverty* program. Mooney described how she was able to ask the United Way "would you be willing to take this with us (a new approach to focusing on financial stability) and try this new way?" SBCC's relationships and track record enabled them to move forward with their core partners to develop an "LA model

of this notion of giving money directly to families.” While SBCC had a county-wide resident base, SBCC was not one of the larger organizations in their fields. SBCC occupied a specific niche based on their work with residents, highlighting the strengths of the predominantly immigrant families who they worked with and serving as a bridge or connection to resources. SBCC worked with different residents and SBCC’s role differed compared to LA CAN, both within the fenceline community of Wilmington and in city-wide fields. SBCC was less likely to challenge other organizations or institutions directly, but through relationships, they challenged a deficit-based approach and were able to insert new ideas into fields such as Child and Family Services.

### **Positioning as Neighborhood-based Organizations**

Both organizations were positioned as CBOs connected to residents; however, their role within a neighborhood and how they drew on this neighborhood identity differed based on their approach to organizing, their origin, and their neighborhood. LA CAN had a more activist origin as a fightback organization connected to the Black radical tradition. SBCC started as a grassroots therapy organization with a relationship-based model. SBCC’s initial approach was more focused on service than LA CAN’s approach, but SBCC had evolved into a hybrid organization that identified as a neighborhood-based organization in an immigrant community. Despite their differences, staff with both CBOs talked about their core values and how these values have influenced the organization’s development. Pete White referred to the initial founders of LA CAN as having a different system of analysis where the causes of problems were “political not personal.” LA CAN also started with a belief that people living in Skid Row should guide decision making. This orientation shaped LA CAN’s current position in Skid Row and within

city-wide fields, where they are a CBO focused on challenging narratives. While SBCC started with a greater focus on service provision, the Executive Director described values that focused on the value of relationships and on community knowledge. As SBCC expanded, they began to see that “you are not fixing poverty with therapy”. This perspective shaped the evolution of SBCC’s community organizing program, as well as their position and relationships within the neighborhood of Wilmington, including relationships with larger institutions.

Both organizations identify as community-based, but they have two different ways of representing community members that is influenced not only by their origin and mission, but also by the other organizations within a neighborhood. Within Skid Row, a neighborhood with a dense service infrastructure that LA CAN described as “the epicenter of human rights violations”, LA CAN stood out by their approach and their willingness to challenge institutions. Skid Row was an epicenter not just for policing and surveillance but also for the impact of post-welfare social policy on low-income community members. Community members sought services in a dense service hub that couldn’t meet basic needs and this context influenced LA CAN’s work in Skid Row. A community member highlighted how LA CAN stood up against corruption and LA CAN had a different stance regarding criminalization compared to larger institutions within Skid Row. Combining this orientation with a history of organizing, LA CAN was able to “bite the hand that feeds them” and speak out against practices of different institutions that affect residents in Skid Row.

SBCC is a larger organization compared to LA CAN and served as a community space for a working-poor immigrant community along the fenceline. SBCC served as a bridge through connecting residents to institutions and highlighted the strengths of community members who



might otherwise be ignored. I do not claim that one is more neighborhood-based, but the two CBOs served as community organizations in different ways based on their origin and mission, as well as the service infrastructure and neighborhood characteristics. For both CBOs, community members described how they were recognized by their shirts, with a LA CAN community member who mentioned that people see him on the bus with his shirt and an SBCC interviewee who described how she was recognized by her yellow I Heart shirt. This reputation then affected their frontline work as well as their relationships with other organizations.

These neighborhood relationships and history influenced how the two CBOs brought a neighborhood or resident perspective into city-wide fields and sought to introduce narratives into these fields. LA CAN brought a Skid Row perspective to their work in tenant rights coalitions and they drew from their organizing history for their involvement with the Services not Sweeps coalition. While they are a smaller organization compared to other homeless service organizations, LA CAN occupied a key position within coalitions and had a key reputation based on their neighborhood connection and history within the epicenter. LA CAN was positioned as more radical and neighborhood-based than many larger organizations and service providers, but with a longer organizing history and more staff compared to some of the “non-professional” organizations that they organized with. As a result, LA CAN was able to influence narratives among more progressive homeless service organizations. As detailed further in Chapter Four, LA CAN built on their reputation to advance a narrative on houselessness as due to a lack of housing as opposed to a personal responsibility narrative. SBCC had been less involved with advocacy, but were increasing their emphasis on advocacy during my observation period. As they formed partnerships and new relationships, SBCC distinguished themselves by their approach as well as

their ability to connect to a large group of residents. SBCC's work with resident-led efforts in fenceline communities influenced their relationships with county-wide funders, such as the United Way of Greater Los Angeles. However, SBCC staff also described challenges with how to describe their work so SBCC still navigated how they were positioned within fields due to this distinct approach.

At the annual galas for both CBOs, the two organizations were highlighted as having an approach that contrasted from other organizations. I discuss their approaches to frontline work in the following chapters, but here I show how they were positioned due to their history and work with community members. Their neighborhood location and mission shaped their relationships with organizations outside their neighborhood, whether it was LA CAN's representing the epicenter of Skid Row through their United Nations seat, SBCC's connecting residents to local government, or LA CAN's more confrontational relationship to Mayor Eric Garcetti. Through their positioning, both CBOs have identified opportunities, such as SBCC launching a new program with the United Way to focus on financial stability as a method for child abuse prevention or LA CAN advancing narratives against criminalization in homelessness policy. As both CBOs identified these opportunities, one community member commented that "Brother Pete (the Executive Director of LA CAN) has raised the bar." This positioning of the two CBOs provided the context for their frontline work and helped them to advance ideas through this frontline work. These were not one-way relationships and this frontline work then reinforced each CBO's role both within and outside the neighborhood. In the next two chapters, I examine components of the frontline work and how this frontline work helps them "raise the bar" and as a community member described, for city councilors and other actors "to take notice."

## **Chapter Three: Narratives of Community in “Organic Service Provision”: Hybrid Frontline Work as a Space for Reframing Ideas of Community**

### **“Because it’s the only place like it”**

Throughout the previous chapter, I introduced the two CBOs and described their role as community organizations. In this chapter, I focus on their frontline activities at the neighborhood level. For both CBOs, this combination of service provision and community organizing resulted in a distinct form of frontline work, and staff and community members shared why this approach was meaningful to them. One community member who first became involved with LA CAN in 2011 described how people kept returning to LA CAN. He referred to staff who leave LA CAN for another job but they still come back to help “because it’s the only place like it”. He described LA CAN’s approach and stated “that it (LA CAN) allows you to be you- to learn at your own speed, but also insistent that you are learning.” Another community member who had been involved with LA CAN for over 10 years stated that he didn’t initially expect his involvement to be long-term. In 2019, he was still an active member and he commented that “this is my family now”. Due to this welcoming and accepting environment that was “insistent that you are learning”, community members identified LA CAN’s frontline work as unique.

Community members involved with SBCC also discussed unique aspects of their frontline work. During an SBCC county-wide meeting for residents involved with Neighborhood Action Councils (NACs) in April 2019, staff and active community members discussed the planning process for an upcoming county-wide resident convening. Referring to SBCC’s resident-led efforts at the neighborhood level and then bringing active community members together at the county level, a staff member commented enthusiastically that there aren’t any

groups besides SBCC that do this type of work. A community member who had been an active volunteer with SBCC for multiple years agreed. She talked about changes that she had seen during her time with SBCC and how community members were increasing their impact. This staff member then asked meeting attendees how they felt about upcoming events and actions. One community member answered *poderosa*, meaning powerful in Spanish, and other community members smiled in response. A community member at another table then responded by describing the power of their neighborhood action. Through frontline work that highlighted residents' accomplishments and helped community members to see themselves as powerful, community members began to view themselves and their communities differently.

While the two CBOs varied in how they combined services with organizing, with SBCC having a greater emphasis on services and LA CAN having a greater emphasis on community organizing and being identified as a “fightback organization”, community members with both CBOs described how participating in each organization was meaningful. In this chapter, I identify aspects of their frontline work, including the role of long-term relationships and a welcoming environment, that resulted in each CBO being the “the only place like it.” Previous literature discusses how this hybrid combination can result in a distinct form of service and of organizing (Anasti, 2017, Chetkovich & Kunreither, 2006; Meyer, 2010). I examine how this combination was a distinct organizational repertoire, resulting in “organic service provision” that differed from traditional service provision. Having a unique organizational form helped organizations to leverage new opportunities. However, this distinct form also resulted in different uncertainties (Minkoff, 2002), so I discuss both the opportunities and challenges for hybrid frontline work. This type of frontline work provided a space for staff and community members to

reframe ideas that they had about community. This reframing highlighted the strengths of community members, resulting in the powerful feeling described above. I discuss how ideas about community were shared through this type of frontline work and as a result, how the two CBOs helped community members to identify their role in creating change and to see their communities differently.

## **Repertoires of Frontline Work in Hybrid Organizations**

### **The Context of Hybrid Organizations**

The two CBOs in this study are hybrid organizations that combine services and organizing. This type of service-advocacy or service-organizing hybrid nonprofit has been referred to as hybrid organizations (Minkoff 2002), social movement agencies (Hyde 1992), multi-purpose hybrid voluntary organizations (Hasenfeld & Gidron 2005) or social movement service organizations (Meyer, 2010). As opposed to service organizations that include a small amount of advocacy, hybrid community-based organizations have both organizing and service provision as fundamental to their mission (Meyer, 2010). This hybrid model is a way to provide services to vulnerable populations when the act of providing services could be considered political, such as providing reproductive health services (Hyde, 2000), services to undocumented immigrants (Gates, 2014), or services to current or former sex workers (Anasti, 2017). In addition, services can enhance organizing and political strategies (Heynen, 2009; Pulido, 2002), such as the Black Panther free breakfast program that highlighted contradictions of the state. In this case, services through the free breakfast program were a form of the Black Panther Party's material politics (Heynen, 2009). For a hybrid organization, both services and organizing are part of efforts for social change.

Counter to the idea that services would pacify an organization, both Brooks (2005) and Gates (2014) found that services meeting the immediate needs of a CBO's core membership have the potential to strengthen organizing efforts. This is not to imply that combining service and organizing is without challenges and a small organization still faces tensions when deciding whether to allocate limited resources to service or organizing (Gates, 2014). As referenced in the previous chapter, funding for services can result in additional requirements. This funding can affect how an organization works with community members (e.g. Kelley et al., 2005) and organizations may have to professionalize their approach to receive funding. Organizations still struggle with balancing organizing and services, but Gates argues that this can be a productive tension. In addition, this combination of services with organizing can create a distinct organizational form that results in distinct forms of both service provision (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006; Meyer, 2010) and organizing (Anasti, 2017; Gates, 2014).

In this study, I look at the organizational repertoires within hybrid frontline work and how these repertoires compare to frontline work in traditional service provision. Clemens (1993) describes organizational repertoires within social movements as the models that are culturally or experientially available for organizations. These repertoires provide a set of models that an organization can use and templates for how processes and relationships may be structured. Comparing two repertoires for community organizing, congregation-based organizing and individual member organizing, McCarthy and Walker (2004) find that an organization's choice of repertoire led to different tactics for advocacy and organizing and to different fundraising strategies. One repertoire had a clearly defined template for their work with residents, including an emphasis on leadership building with community members, while the other repertoire led to a

wider range of tactics, including direct action. Organizations draw from familiar models, but they can also create new combinations or repurpose existing repertoires for different uses. In her study of women's organizations, Clemens (1993) discuss how adapting familiar repertoires for unfamiliar uses helped to advance change. As hybrid organizations borrow from multiple organizational forms, I examine the repertoires that they use and whether they combine repertoires in their frontline work.

### **The Role of Frontline Work**

Previous ethnographies of street-level practices describe the importance of frontline work in shaping and implementing policy. Through setting boundaries for who has access to services, who is considered deserving, and where clients can contest rights, frontline staff can mediate poverty policy (Brodkin, 2011; Brodkin, 2013; Hasenfeld, 2010; Pittman, 2018; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Frontline staff can also connect residents to additional resources through both formal mechanisms as well as informal interactions (Small, 2006). Watkins-Hayes (2019) describes the role that AIDS service organizations provided both as institutional brokers and as framing institutions. Depending on whether staff served as a barrier or connected community members to resources, AIDS service organizations either helped to negatively or positively frame how community members viewed their life with an HIV diagnosis (Watkins-Hayes, 2019).

Frontline work is not solely a one-way relationship and Benjamin and Campbell (2015) describe how frontline staff work in partnership with clients to determine outcomes and achieve desired results. They argue that this co-determination between staff and community members is an overlooked aspect of performance for human service organizations (Benjamin & Campbell, 2015). Through co-determination and interactions with community members, frontline work with

community members extends beyond service provision. LeRoux (2007) discusses the role of social service nonprofits in encouraging community members to vote and contact government officials. In this setting, nonprofits serve as civic intermediaries. Through connecting community members to programs, CBOs provided an entry into advocacy for community members living with HIV (Watkins-Hayes, 2019), so frontline interactions can facilitate introductions to advocacy and political involvement.

While much of this frontline literature focuses on more formal organizations and traditional human service organizations, hybrid organizations will include community organizing and advocacy within their frontline work. This inclusion of organizing could change the relationships that CBOs have with community members. Han (2014) describes different strategies, distinguishing mobilizing activities that focuses on turnout for activities but does not include leadership development from organizing activities that include a long-term investment and an emphasis on building the capacity of members to become activists. The organizing activities that Han describes include a long-term relationship with members, differing from frontline work in traditional human service organizations.

While not explicitly referring to frontline work, Borkman (1999) describes interactions among community members within self-help and mutual aid societies. In these spaces, community members or non-professionals who share a common experience provide reciprocal assistance and help each other to process and make meaning of their situations. Unlike more professionalized settings, Borkman describes a voluntary commons with vulnerability and sharing among community members, resulting in spaces that include caring and emotional work. A focus on care ethics, which calls attention to how care is embedded in encounters and centers



the role of care activities and of mutual relationships (Lawson, 2007), can help to examine the interactions and social relations within hybrid organizations. Through focusing on care that is often marginalized or overlooked (Borkman, 1999; Lawson, 2007), Lawson (2007) argues that this emphasis can challenge market logics and create new relationships and institutions that enhance mutuality and well-being. This idea of care is not only in mutual aid or service interactions, but Till (2011) describes organizing activities that involve artistic expressions and draw on ideas of memory and belonging. As a result, these organizing activities create an ethic of care.

For the two CBOs in this study, their hybrid frontline work falls in between the informal settings of mutual aid societies and the more formal practices of human service organizations. Thus, their frontline practices could include hybrid practices that draw from both types. In a study of feminist hybrid organizations, Hyde (2000) argues that instead of sharp distinctions, hybrid organizations are on a continuum and draw from both grassroots and bureaucratic organizational types. Organizations can then be guided by professional norms as well as community member knowledge (Benjamin, 2018). Hybrid frontline work that combines informal and formal practices will then face different challenges. For example, Benjamin (2018) discusses how incorporating community member knowledge and increasing authority of community members resulted in new dilemmas for frontline staff, such as community members who were not quite peers with staff members or how much decision-making power to give to community members (Benjamin, 2018). These challenges could be intensified as CBOs provide informal care in a post-welfare period where governments have reduced services and are unable to

guarantee basic rights (Fennell, 2015). Hybrid practices that include care work occur within larger systems that reproduce inequality; this strain on resources could affect social relations.

### **Communicating Ideas through Frontline Work**

Hybrid frontline work can be a unique way working with community members, so I examine whether this type of frontline work then provides a space to reframe ideas around community. CBOs that incorporate organizing strategies will emphasize long-term relationships that strengthen a member's commitment and build leadership (Han, 2014). In this paper, I look at how long-term relationships through this hybrid form can not only strengthen commitments, but also introduce and shape ideas for community members. Research on popular education and worker centers show how interactions between staff and community members can be a space to introduce new narratives. In a study of day labor organizing, Theodore (2015) describes how organizing practices that included population education with community members resulted in social critique and helped to generate new knowledge about organizing. This was a not a one-way exchange of knowledge from staff to community members as immigrant workers who were part of the day labor center brought in their previous experiences from other countries. Theodore describes this organizing as adapted to local knowledge and the worker's daily experiences with economic hardships and marginalization, which then helped to produce knowledge grounded in local conditions.

Frontline interactions are not solely between staff and community members, but community members also share with each other. In a study of a worker center for predominantly female immigrant low-wage workers, Chun (2016) describes social learning and social connection through interactions between community members. These interactions helped to

counteract isolation and disempowerment and to build self-confidence among community members. In addition to building political agency, through community members sharing stories of previous organizing efforts, these interactions helped build organizational memory (Chun, 2016). This sharing and support also occurs within the voluntary commons spaces that were part of self help and mutual aid societies. As these groups focused on providing mutual support and highlighted expertise from personal experiences, Borkman (1999) describes how voluntary commons were spaces for experiential learning.

In addition to the explicit communication described above, frontline work can communicate implicit messages by the way community members are treated or described. In her ethnography of youth organizations, Eliasoph (2009, 2011) describes how youth understood themselves as being in an ‘at-risk’ category based on the language and communication from the organization to funders and other audiences. Experiencing multiple policies over a lifetime could reinforce experiences of marginalization, potentially leading to further disengagement from political processes (Bruch et al., 2010). While the prior examples show how implicit messages can increase marginalization, Ramirez (2015) describes Black-led food spaces where the presence of Black leadership and volunteers signaled that these gardens were safe spaces for Black residents. In the midst of gentrification and other spaces becoming unwelcome, the presence of Black leadership was a form of implicit communication to claim a community space. For this chapter, I extend this literature on how organizations can be spaces of learning to examine how CBOs communicate ideas of community through frontline work. Theodore (2015) and Chun (2016) discuss popular education formats and Borkman (1999) describes an experiential commons as a place for learning and reframing ideas. I examine how repertoires in

hybrid frontline work can lead to civic education and reshaping ideas. I discuss how frontline work is distinct from traditional service provision and organizing, including challenges for this hybrid form in a post-welfare service infrastructure; how hybrid frontline work provides a space for shaping ideas, both through explicit and implicit communication; and why reframing ideas is important for community members

### **Research Focus**

For this chapter, I describe frontline work in the two CBOs and how they advance narratives around community through this frontline work. I identify their organizational repertoires and I focus on how this combination of services and organizing results in a different type of service provision compared to traditional human service organizations as well as how services would shape community organizing. I then ask how this form of frontline work provided a space to challenge narratives. In both this chapter and the following chapter, I examine how ideas were shared and mechanisms for knowledge flows between staff and community members.

It was not feasible to observe every program in the two organizations, especially with SBCC as a larger organization. While each organization had programs that they classified as services, such as LA CAN's legal clinic or SBCC's tutoring or therapy programs, I focused primarily on their hybrid activities, such as the neighborhood action councils (NACs) within SBCC's Community Organizing program or the committee meetings and residential organizing committee meetings at LA CAN. Through these settings, I identified instances of "organic service provision" for both CBOs. I also used data from larger community events, such as the SBCC's kick off for their year-long Roots of Community Campaign that highlighted community values, such as respect, kindness, and courage, or LA CAN's annual Labor Day block party for

community members. While I focused on the activities described above, community members who were part of organizing efforts also used services, such as active LA CAN members who attended the legal clinic or SBCC NAC members who participated in SBCC’s Preschool Without Walls program. I examined how service and organizing activities complemented each other and shaped the CBO’s overall environment. Table 4 shows the type of frontline work that I observed and I detail these activities further in Appendix A.

Table 4

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*Types of Frontline Work at Each CBO*

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	SBCC	LA CAN
Community Population	Primarily Latinx, parents and families	Many houseless individuals or low-income tenants Events primarily in English
Types of meetings	Neighborhood Action Council (NAC) planning meetings Monthly County-wide meetings	Housing committee meetings Downtown Women’s Action Committee (DWAC) meetings Bi-monthly Resident Organizing Committee (ROC) meetings
Community-led events	NAC- planned family activities and school presentations	Tenant outreach activities Actions at City Hall
Sample community events	Roots of Community Kickoff Community Wellness Festival	Women’s Wellness Retreat Labor Day Block Party

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These frontline activities differed from traditional service provision and both CBOs were less likely to refer to community members as service-users or clients, but rather as members or participants. While frontline literature (e.g. Brodtkin, 2011) often refers to service users or clients, this terminology would be less common in a hybrid service-organizing nonprofit. Similarly, I primarily use the word participant or community member in this analysis to refer to residents who were active participants in CBO activities. With LA CAN working in a community of low-

income tenants and houseless community members and SBCC working in communities that had high renter populations, both CBOs were working in areas that were assumed to have more transient populations. Because of this, both CBOs also used term community members to indicate their stake in and commitment to the neighborhood.

While much of this data came from participant observation of frontline activities, I also drew from interview data from both community members and staff. The majority of staff had either grown up in the community in which they were working or they discussed growing up in similar communities or having similar experiences. As part of interviews, staff shared what they learned about their own communities.

## **Findings**

Both CBOs combined services and organizing through their frontline work. I first describe the repertoires within each organization's hybrid frontline work, including their use of planning meetings, community-led activities, and larger community events, and why these particular repertoires were meaningful. While the organizing styles and types of actions differed between the two CBOs, I identified common themes, including long-term relationships with the organization and a welcoming community space. As a result, both CBOs had a form of "organic service provision" that contrasted from traditional service provision. I then discuss how these aspects of frontline work- long-term relationships and the resulting organic service provision- helped to reframe ideas around community for both community members and staff.

### **Core Repertoires of Hybrid Frontline Work**

#### **SBCC- Relationship-Based and Resident Driven Methods of Frontline Work**

The conference room at SBCC had their mission statement and values on the wall, including how they are not a traditional service agency and do not focus on deficits. Instead, SBCC's prior website stated that "we are not like any other social service agency, but of a community of people acting together in partnership in order to create multiple systems of support". Descriptions of the community organizing program stated that a key feature of SBCC's program was their emphasis on "placing the long-term development and growth of relationships at the center of the process" ('Community Organizing and Building', n.d). A staff member commented on how this emphasis on relationships was a unique aspect of their organizing process:

You first fill those relationships. You get to know each other, you get to trust each other. And from there you decide, What do we care about and what do we want to do in the community? So I think that's what makes it really different here (compared to other organizations).

While Han (2014) describes relationships and long-term investment as a key part of organizing strategies, this interviewee saw SBCC as having an even greater focus on relationships compared to other organizations. This emphasis on relationships was a key aspect of their frontline work and their approach to social change. Within their relationship-based community organizing, I identified planning meetings, community-led events, and larger community events as key repertoires for frontline work and for building these relationships. The events that fell under these categories are also listed in Appendix A.

### *Planning Meetings as Spaces of Support*

SBCC had multiple Neighborhood Action Councils (NACs) as well as I Heart planning groups that were comprised of residents within a specific neighborhood or shared a common affinity, such as parents whose children attended the same elementary school. Frontline work within these groups often consisted of meetings to plan events, but this time for planning became a way to strengthen bonds and offer forms of support.

I observed a NAC meeting in September 2018 that highlighted these forms of support. This meeting took place at a community member's house, with everyone sitting around her dining room table. Members of this group were also friends and they talked with each other in Spanish before the meeting started. At this Friday morning meeting, they had eggs with chorizo, beans, cantaloupe, and different types of bread on the table, along with agua de melon and coffee. A community member passed out plates and made sure to hand me both a plate and a cup, as I was a guest at the meeting. As the staff organizer started the meeting, she referred to their year-long Roots of Community Campaign that highlighted a community value each month. September's theme was courage, so she began by asking each participant to share a time when they had showed courage. Speaking in Spanish, women shared stories such as coming to the United States or being the first in their family to get divorced. One woman referred to the two people to the right of her and how they had helped her. She did not have family in Los Angeles, but because of them, she had community. NAC members nodded, affirmed her story, and talked about the courage she had. This group then moved on to planning a project for the local elementary school where many of their children attended. The staff organizer then ended this meeting with announcements for upcoming meetings and events, and she encouraged them to



attend a community leaders meeting the following week. While the setting of a dining room table contributed to a feeling of home, the women also offered support to each other through affirmation and laughter while planning a project for their children's elementary school.

NACs met at different locations and I attended meetings at the SBCC Main office, a YWCA, a community member's house, elementary schools, community centers, parks, and county and city government centers. At each meeting, a community member was responsible for child watch, while parents participated in the NAC meeting. NACs had a fairly similar structure, with casual time as people arrived, an ice breaker, and then planning for upcoming activities. Food was often a key component of meetings and an SBCC organizer commented on the cultural aspect of sharing food and coffee. As community members met regularly to plan projects for their community, they were able to get to know each other over food and to offer companionship and support.

### ***Community-member Led Events for Leadership Development and Social Change***

NAC members organized community projects and these activities were also a type of frontline work, both for community members who were part of planning and for community members who attended events. In June 2018, a NAC primarily focused on their elementary school designed an event for other parents in the same elementary school. After deciding on workshop content in planning meetings, NAC members hosted a workshop on how to prepare students for college. With a parent volunteer serving as a translator, NAC members delivered portions of the presentation to other parents in the school. This NAC contained both monolingual Spanish and primarily English speakers, so NAC members delivered sections in either Spanish or English, with a group leader translating the sections in English to parents attending this

workshop. This workshop included breakfast and raffle prizes that related to activities for children. Later, community members mentioned that this event was the first public speaking experience for some NAC members.

Later during the summer, this NAC hosted activities at a local park. One community member commented that they wanted to reach families in a local apartment complex, so NAC members picked a park within walking distance of these apartments for their activities. Their bilingual event flier highlighted four different activity days, mentioning a different activity each day, as well as arts and crafts, food, and prizes for the winners. I attended an activity day with both a soccer game and a sock puppet activity. Kids and parents talked while they made sock puppets, so the activity was a space for informal conversation. Community members discussed summer activities and how they were staying cool during this hotter period without air conditioning. A community member had received extra free food, so they divided food up for people to take home. Through creating an activity for other families in the neighborhood, this NAC also created a space where NAC participants could bring their own children and socialize over food.

Each NAC would plan projects similar to the examples above, such as a summer fun day for a public housing development, a day of relaxation for other moms, and workshops at their children's schools. The logo for SBCC's community organizing Facebook page referred to building networks of residents who lead social change in their communities. These resident-led events were part of their model for social change. At the same time, through leading and organizing events, NAC members strengthened bonds with each other, gained new experiences and skills, and as discussed later, began to see themselves as community leaders.

### ***Larger Events to Build Community and Share Resources***

In addition to the events planned and organized by members, SBCC hosted community events for active participants as well as community members who were less involved with SBCC. The SBCC annual I Heart Family fiesta had resource tables, food tents where people could buy lunch for \$1, multiple types of children's activities, and a stage and performances all day. Right before the raffle at the end of the event, the performers played *Payaso de Rodeo*, a Mexican song for line dancing that gets faster and faster as the song progresses. The lead musician was wearing an I Heart t-shirt and people dancing were wearing I Heart Wilmington and I Heart Compton t-shirts. I recognized an interviewee from a few months prior to this event and she smiled at me as I walked past. This event offered a community event for active members as well as provided activities for community members who were newer to SBCC.

The themes for community events supported SBCC's goals of strengthening relationships and resident-driven social change. For 2019, SBCC changed the name of their annual event from the I Heart festival to the I Heart Community Wellness festival. The I Heart Wilmington organizing group held pop-up events the week before the festival to generate interest for this event, including a day with free burritos, backpacks, and succulent plants; an event with paletas or popsicles; and then a community peace march where they offered lemonade and coloring activities at the end of the march. Active community members often served as volunteers for these events. At the same time, community volunteers were able to participate in free activities and learn about different community resources through these events.

## **LA CAN: Frontline Work as a Fightback Organization**

At the entrance of the staff area at LA CAN's office, there is a framed poster of LA CAN's organizing model. The model lists three components: community organizing which is described as the core of their work, community services, and community improvements. Instead of isolated components, this poster showed services and improvements as connected and in support of their organizing, such as how their legal clinic was created to "remove the barriers to involvement that our members and constituents are facing on a daily basis" and how services are a way to both provide support and recruit members for their core activity of organizing. As a fightback organization, LA CAN staff and community members identified organizing as their core activity. While their actions and meeting content differed from SBCC, LA CAN also had regular ongoing meetings, community-led actions, and community events. These repertoires were a key part of their organizing strategy. Similar to SBCC, LA CAN developed long-term relationships with community members through these methods, which also resulted in creating communities of support.

### ***Community-building and Political Education through Planning Meetings***

LA CAN had fewer resident groups compared to SBCC's county-wide network of NACs, but LA CAN also held meetings where community members planned activities. Community members could get involved in a fightback organization through these meetings, but these meetings were also a way to build relationships, educate community members about their rights as tenants or houseless community members, and connect community members to different resources.

LA CAN had several committees that members could join: the housing committee focused on tenant rights and affordable housing; the civil and human rights committee; the food and wellness committee, the downtown women's action committee (DWAC), as well as an arts and culture program that was formed during my observation period. The majority of my observations were with the housing committee where we planned tenant outreach and organizing campaigns, including encouraging community member to attend government hearings or actions. As we discussed policy initiatives and upcoming campaigns, staff shared information on tenant rights and housing polices and active community members brought in their experiences and advice from previous campaigns. This meeting time also created a space to offer support. One housing committee meeting began with a discussion on how an active community member had recently faced challenges. As a group, we strategized about how we could support this community member. Some members suggested writing letters to help advocate and community members who had been through similar situations offered to share advice. Through this meeting time, members were able to bring up challenges and receive informal support.

LA CAN had bi-monthly residential organizing committee (ROC) meetings on Friday evenings where community members learned about different events and actions, heard a speaker or presentation on a particular topic connected to LA CAN's work, and enjoyed food and conversation. ROC meetings could include time to plan for upcoming events or actions, such as preparing for a town hall with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) held at LA CAN's office after the release of the 2019 Homeless Count results. Community members also learned about various topics from challenging police brutality to upcoming ballot initiatives. In addition, community members led parts of the agenda so these meetings were a way for

community members to be involved with organizing and planning. Many attendees of these Friday evening meetings were regular attendees who knew each other, so community members connected with each other while they welcomed new people to this meeting space.

### ***Community Involvement as Spaces for Action and Support***

Similar to how SBCC's frontline work included community member led events, LA CAN committees would involve community members with attending hearings and press conferences, as well as activities such as tenant outreach. LA CAN combined this mobilization for events with long-term relationships that were part of organizing strategies. One staff member described this involvement in both single events and long-term organizing as a key feature of a fightback organization: "you come here, I'm going to tell you to roll your sleeves up." In December 2019, many active LA CAN members were part of the Homeless Memorial Day procession to honor houseless community members who had passed away. Community members gathered at San Julian Park in Skid Row for a second line march, which was a traditional New Orleans funeral procession that includes music to commemorate and celebrate the person's life. A few community members had instruments and other community members passed out beads and noise makers before the march began. Referring to a houseless man who was living and then died right in front of City Hall, Pete White, the Executive Director of LA CAN, commented that "death came to their (City Council's) door step, but we will bring life to their doorstep." Staff helped with blocking traffic, and community members and staff marched to City Hall, stopping at various locations in Skid Row to place memorials where community members who had passed away had lived.

This march was a larger action that involved many active LA CAN members, but community members were involved in many other types of actions, such as attending city council hearings to show support for an LA CAN position, participating in press conferences outside the Los Angeles Police Commission, or attending marches. These events were a way that community members “rolled their sleeves up” and got involved. For many community members, these were not solely one-time events. Through participating in multiple events, these activities strengthened bonds and active community members offered support and encouragement to newer community members. Many of the housing committee’s actions focused on outreach to residential hotels to talk with tenants about their rights. At a weekly committee meeting, community members discussed the previous week’s outreach activities and a newer member recalled a challenge during this outreach activity and how he had responded. A long-term community member approved of this response and commented that “you are learning, you are doing good.” I also received this support and encouragement, such as when a long-term member complimented my outreach while walking back to LA CAN from an outreach day. These interactions through the different actions and sharing between older and newer members helped to form and strengthen friendships.

### ***Community Events to Communicate Key Messages***

LA CAN hosted events for both their active community member base as well as the larger Skid Row community. Through involving active community members as volunteers and highlighting key messages, these events were part of LA CAN’s organizing strategy. In 2019, LA CAN hosted events such as the Labor Day Block party and the Women’s Wellness retreat. The Women’s Wellness retreat was a healing retreat for women living in Skid Row that both

recognized the challenges that women faced and celebrated their strength. Active LA CAN members involved with the Downtown Women’s Action Committee arrived early to decorate and set up the event, creating space for activities such as reiki and massage and for wellness vendors. Decorations highlighted messages of resilience and strength, such as pink balloon letters that spelled out “love yourself” and a decoration stating “yas queen.” Speakers during the day reinforced messages of strength and solidarity. This event was featured in the talk show, Doctors tv, in a segment titled “How to Host a Spa Day for Homeless Women.” The host of the show attended the retreat and she described how during the event, “we talked, we laughed, we danced”. Reporters for this show interviewed a community member who had been giving pedicures to women attending the retreat. When the reporter asked what she was doing, she commented for the camera, “I am treating all my sisters the way I want to be treated.”

Alongside planning meetings and community-led actions, these larger events that included community building and resources were a key part of each CBO’s frontline work and of their strategy and vision for social change. Community members often participated in all three components and formed relationships with other community members and staff through these multiple interactions. Through this combination and across ongoing interactions, I identified two key features of frontline work for both CBOs: creating communities of care through long-term relationships and creating a welcoming environment and community space.

### **Creating Communities of Care through Long-Term Relationships**

Through the combination of planning meetings, community-led events or actions, and larger community events, community members formed long-term relationships through frontline work. These relationships differed from more bureaucratic relationships that staff and



community members described as having with more traditional service providers. Instead, hybrid frontline work led to relationships that created communities of care between community members as well as between community members and staff.

### ***Building Long-term Relationships with Community Members***

Many community members have been involved with each CBO for a long-time and as new community members came in, older community members welcomed them. A new community member was attending a SBCC meeting in Carson, a city in the South Bay just north of Wilmington. To welcome her, the staff member asked each community member to include where they were from and how long they had been part of this group in their introductions. Meeting attendees were predominantly Spanish speaking, but three people did not speak Spanish, so the staff organizer translated for this meeting. This was an all-female group and community members mentioned being from states within Mexico as well as the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and China. A few community members stated that they were involved with a prior NAC in Carson before this group was founded and one person described herself as a senior member. A few community members indicated that they were newer and one community member said that she was invited by a current member. One community member who did not speak Spanish practiced her introduction in Spanish and Spanish-speaking community members offered encouragement after hearing her introduction. The person next to her introduced herself with basic Spanish, then stated in English how this group is like a family. Many community members continued to stay involved with SBCC as I saw community members from this group attending later events at SBCC's main office.

I also saw this range of time for involvement with LA CAN. As the end of LA CAN's 2019 annual fundraiser, current and former staff announced that they were going to play a history game. They were creating a timeline and asked people to say when they were first part of LA CAN. The former director stated that she was class of 2000, referring to joining LA CAN in 2000. She saw someone in the audience and asked if she was 2006 and the person responded that she joined in 2003. Another person commented class of 2011 and then one person stated 2019. Staff asked partner organizations to join and they asked the head of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), Peter Lynn, when he realized that LA CAN was a great organization. Lynn stated 2007, referring to an earlier partnership with LA CAN when he worked for the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA). In the housing committee, four core members were long-time members. Since I was a newer member, long-time members frequently told me about previous events or processes, such as their previous process for making recruitment calls. Through these interactions, community members helped to build organizational memory (similar to Chun, 2016).

With these long-term relationships, community members could miss meetings or take time away and then come back. At an LA CAN housing committee in August 2019, I talked with a community member who I had not yet met in my year with LA CAN. As I began to introduce this community member to a long-term member and staff member, they commented that they knew her and referred to her by name. While this community member had taken a longer time away, other participants would leave for a few weeks or months and then come back. A community member walked in into a SBCC meeting in Carson and the staff member welcomed her and commented "un milagro", meaning a miracle, referring to this community member

returning after missing meetings. Community members not only formed long-term relationships, but they created bonds where they could return after time away.

### ***Relationships for Companionship and Social Action***

These relationships helped to create communities of care which community members described as companionship and feeling like family. I was welcomed in this way as a volunteer with LA CAN, especially through the housing committee,. I attended a general meeting in February 2019 that brought together LA CAN members from multiple committees. As I looked for a place to sit, I saw two members of the housing committee. When I told one community member that I would sit near them, he commented that “you should sit near family,” referring to himself and another member of the housing committee. While I was less involved with SBCC activities, I also experienced this feeling of being welcomed. Conscious of my role of an observer at planning meetings, I would wait for other people to get food to make sure that there was enough food. However, community members insisted that I eat and at some meetings, they delivered plates of food to me. Community members would bring their children to meetings and events, which helped to strengthen bonds between community members. SBCC had child watch at each meeting and meeting participants were often familiar with other participants’ children. At an I Heart meeting, a community member held another member’s baby so that the mom could get food and take some time to eat. Later, this mom commented on how her child “heard their voices in the womb”. referring to her time as part of this group when she was pregnant.

Through these meetings, community members formed relationships with other residents who cared about their community. These relationships aligned around a common commitment, whether it was being part of a fightback organization or creating impact in their community.

Because of this, community members discussed how their relationships differed compared to other groups that they participated in. A community member with SBCC described this common commitment among NAC members as a key aspect. At one point, she was deciding whether to stay involved after some inter-personal conflicts with this NAC, but she realized that “my other volunteer groups did not have the focus that this NAC had.” An LA CAN member discussed how he formed relationships with people who cared about their neighborhood through LA CAN: “I like to be around people that’s passion-driven, that’s fighting the good fight for the right reason, you know? We all may fight a little different but in the end, we are going for the same goal.” Through organizing with LA CAN, he not only formed friendships but he connected with other people actively involved in change.

This combination of relationships, support, and a focus on community change created a space where community members felt welcome. As a result, both CBOs recruited community members who previously may not have been as involved in their community. The executive director of SBCC, Colleen Mooney, commented that they were getting parents involved who had never attended a PTA (Parent Teacher Association) meeting; this type of frontline work provided a way for new community members to participate. Community members with LA CAN also commented on how they learned new things through getting involved. One community member who mentioned struggling in school commented that through LA CAN, “I could do something that I never thought I could do.” While these relationships led to a type of learning and involvement that community members had not experienced before, Pete White commented that community members weren’t just learning in this space. Rather, this was a space where community members were excelling. Community members found a place where they were

welcomed and able to thrive, and both CBOs emphasized the idea that community members were critical to change. At a LA CAN member retreat, White introduced the meeting by stating that community members were the “spirit and soul” of the organization. The long-term relationships within frontline work helped to highlight community members as the ‘spirit and soul’ and I discuss later how community members then began to see themselves and their community differently.

### ***Relationships of Friendship between Community Members and Staff***

Community members not only formed relationship with other community members, but they also formed bonds with staff. At an SBCC county-wide meeting, a community member who had been involved with SBCC for five years asked the SBCC staff members at her table about staff members who were not at this meeting. This community member was familiar with many SBCC staff members as she referred to multiple female staff who had the same first name. She asked about a former community organizing staff member and the two SBCC staff tried to recall what her new title at SBCC would be in Spanish. The organizers at this table were newer to SBCC compared to the community member volunteers at this table, so community members told staff about the previous locations for their county-wide meetings. These conversations highlighted the relationships that community members formed with staff as well as organizational memory among community members.

Through these relationships, family members of staff also became connected to the organization. A SBCC community organizer described how community members gave her daughter their hand-made items. Her daughter talked about visiting the *senoras*, referring to the women who were involved with the NACs.

So my daughter will tell me, ‘are you going to go see the senoras?’ and she’s like ‘because I wanna go with you.’ So that’s another great piece of this job, is that I do have the flexibility and opportunity to bring my daughter, so they do get to know my personal life. They get to know me as well because I think it’s part of the relationship building.

Both organizations created an environment where staff could bring family members to events and meetings, and staff and community members learned about each others’ lives through these relationships.

***When You Lose People, It Will Suffer: Challenges with a Relationship-based Model***

This frontline work resulted in a distinct type of relationship and I saw examples of loyalty to both CBOs because of these relationships. However, this relationship-based model also presented challenges. An LA CAN member commented on changes, specifically when a staff member left, stating that “this is a family and when you lose people, it will suffer.” Some community members with SBCC described how they appreciated the differing styles of staff organizers, but other community members talked about adjusting to a new style after their organizer left. I attended a meeting of resident leaders in a Best Start Community outside of Wilmington shortly after a staff transition for this area. After the agenda items were finished, multiple community members expressed frustration with communication after an organizer left. This was not part of the agenda and the SBCC supervisor responded to explain what had happened during the transition and then shift the focus to moving forward. The supervisor tried to move to a different topic after explaining this transition, but community members continued to express frustrations. Community members remained connected to their NAC groups after staff changes, but transitions were still challenging with a relationship-based model.

In addition to challenges due to staff members leaving, organizing groups also dealt with relationship problems among community members. One SBCC staff member described his first challenge as a new organizer was when a NAC group forgot a community member's birthday. Another SBCC staff organizer shared how another staff member had gone to some members' birthdays but not to others and this had led to problems. Not everyone will get along and some community members referred to problems with other group members during their interviews. Shortly before my observation period, SBCC asked some community members to leave the neighborhood action councils. As the director described:

We kicked six people out a year and a half ago. We struggled with that for months, we're not being understanding enough, we were not being passionate enough. And finally, somebody on my staff who said, 'These people are toxic!'

After asking people to leave, SBCC implemented their Roots of Community Campaign to counteract the toxic encounters and prevent future problems. This year-long campaign featured a different value for each month, such as kindness, respect, resilience, courage, and advocacy. SBCC activities fell under each month's theme, such as movie nights, an advocacy display, and meeting icebreakers that corresponded with the month's theme. SBCC also instituted a contract that community members signed as part of their partnership with the organization. This contract asked community members to agree to certain guidelines, such as not spreading gossip and rumors, "in order for us to create a true partnership and collectively create impact". SBCC implemented this contract and held events to counteract relationship problems, but staff and community members still had to navigate difficulties with relationships.

### *Costs with a Different, More Intensive Relationship Model*

Community members and staff from both CBOs discussed their passion and belief in the organization. For example, one community member with LA CAN was reluctant to discuss challenges during his interview because he did not want to say anything bad about the organization in a research setting. Another community member referred to how staff who left LA CAN still came back to help and I saw former staff at various events. SBCC staff also expressed their commitment to the organization, with two supervisors sharing how they were happy to be interviewed so they could share their passion for this work. While staff and community members expressed a strong commitment, staff also discussed the amount of work involved and the many different roles for staff members. Alongside powerful relationships, staff described costs of a relationship-based model. One staff member commented that “as an organizer I’m a lot of things. I’m an organizer, I’m a project coordinator, I’m a social worker, I’m somewhat of a mental health counselor- like all these things at once.” Another staff member commented on her different roles: “There’s a lot of times where I’ve stepped into [being] the taxi driver, you know, therapist, so many things. Like event planner, you know what I mean [laughs]? There’s so many things, and it’s hard not to because you become so invested.”

With this commitment, staff at both CBOs invested a large amount of time and energy and they had close relationships with active community members. When community members would experience challenges, staff would take time to assist and provide support for community members. A SBCC staff member described how this work can be draining when there are not enough resources:

I hate capitalism [laughs], you know. So allowing us to be able to admit that, yes, the



work we do is beautiful but it's complicated, and it's not all flowers and it's not all pretty. There is a reason why I've been here for so long, and you know, I love giving back to my community. But it is complicated and there are days that I'm really drained, and a coworker and I talked about this, how sometimes we don't want to see anyone after. She described her passion and commitment to working in the community where she had grown up, but she also described how this work can be tiring. Many community members were dealing with challenges due to poverty and trauma, and this could affect staff as well. Between November 2018 and January 2020, five community members who were active with LA CAN passed away. LA CAN offered spaces for community members and staff to process this trauma, which will be further discussed in Chapter Four. These relationships and feeling of family were sources of strength, but staff and community members then dealt with the loss of family members. With these challenges and losses, an LA CAN staff member asked who were the "caretakers for the caretakers."

### **Creating a Welcoming Environment and Community Space**

Through this frontline work, both CBOs became a community space for people to go and spend time. Mooney commented that some people would go to the SBCC office to hang out and have lunch and she felt that their office provided this space. At LA CAN, while community members formed relationships through committee meetings and actions, community members would then interact by hanging out in the lobby or in front of the building. At a Saturday volunteer day at SBCC's garden, community members prepared salad, adding mint, spinach, basil, cucumber, tomato and onion that were from the garden, while other community members grilled chicken. This garden was not only a space to volunteer but also to have lunch and spend

time together. Community members at both CBOs described celebrating birthdays with other people in the organization as a meaningful experience, so frontline work created a space to celebrate milestones. Organizations also provided a space to honor and remember community members who had passed away. The two CBOs created this environment both through their events and through the way they worked with residents on an ongoing basis.

A community member commented that she appreciated her time at LA CAN as a time “just to be seen and to be felt,” so this frontline work resulted in a place where community members felt welcome. In both CBOs, community members discussed how each CBO had a different environment compared to other organizations. One community member at LA CAN remarked that when first became involved, he didn’t know who the boss was. He stated: “that was kind of cool to me. You work somewhere and you don't know where the boss is, people come in, you don't see nobody acting like they are the big man or authority over nobody.” Another LA CAN community member described how he felt the organization was set up to welcome community members:

I think it is kind of an unspoken rule that when someone new comes in that you're going to be respectful and you're going to be nice to them. And if they have a problem, if you can help them with it, or just get them used to the idea that there's something good, [such as] the music and stuff on Thursday (at the Thursday market).

The food and camaraderie discussed above resulted in this space where people were welcomed. Overall, the different repertoires within frontline work built companionship and community. This next section discusses how this hybrid frontline work resulted in services that differed from traditional service provision.

## **Distinct Forms of Services and Organizing: The Importance of Organic Service Provision**

Through this frontline work, community members were able to get to know each other and offer support. When a community member involved with SBCC in the South Bay city of Hawthorne commented on what it meant to be part of a movement, she stated “to me, it is companionship.” Another community member who had been involved with SBCC for a year described the importance of the family feeling: “I love the girls here (the other community members who part of the neighborhood action council). Like I feel like we’re all like a little family here.” She mentioned “the girls” in her group, and many SBCC groups were all female, often mothers or grandmothers. NACs became a social outlet and a way to support each other. A SBCC staff organizer reflected on why community members keep attending meetings: “they’ve found some sort of community in their group and friendship, you know, and that’s what keeps them coming back. They get to get away from their daily routines and they get to share a space with other people and share ideas.” The relationships described above helped to create communities of care and what I identified as “organic service provision.”

Organic service provision did not happen through specific service settings, but rather through organizing and community-building spaces that were connected to both informal support as well as to additional resources. As a result, this organic service provision connected the long-term investment and relationship building, central to community organizing (as described by Han, 2014), to an emphasis on building communities of care. While organic service provision included spaces for mutual aid among community members, community members were also connected to additional resources and services, but in a more supportive environment compared to more bureaucratic service provision.

### *Spaces of Support and Organic Service Provision*

Planning and committee meetings brought community members together to work on projects or organizing campaigns, but this was also a space for companionship and for support that community members might not otherwise receive. In the ice breaker activities that were part of SBCC's meetings, community members sometimes shared challenges and then other community members and staff provided support and encouragement. We started a Downtown Women's Action Coalition meeting at LA CAN by checking in on how each member was feeling. When a community member shared recent challenges, other meeting attendees offered words of support and we talked about how we could support each other. Support also happened through informal interactions as part of meetings. At a SBCC NAC focused on healthy cooking, community members and the staff member talked with a community member attending this NAC for the first time while they waited for food to cook. This first time NAC attendee shared challenges with depression and her struggles to leave the house, and she talked about attending this meeting a way to deal with depression. As she talked, this staff member offered advice and support and encouraged her to return to future group meetings.

Community members at both CBOs mentioned starting their participation after a challenging time, such as after the death of a partner, addiction, or dealing with post-partum depression. One community member active with a SBCC NAC described a difficult pregnancy and how she received support from the group when she had to take time off. When she returned to the group, she described how she was welcomed back: "I was equally accepted, you know, there were new members, things had changed. But, you know, everything was still going ok and I was welcomed back." Community members often shared similar challenges. Many tenants in

LA CAN's housing committee had prior problems with landlords and community members had different experiences with houselessness. For SBCC, while many NAC members were mothers or grandmothers, NAC members also faced similar challenges. One SBCC staff member described how community members faced familial and economic stress and how this group was a source of support:

Those two together (familiar and economic stress) really stresses out a person and so I think that with, they feel alone, some of them feel really alone. So when they go to these groups, this is an opportunity for them to kind of bond with other people.

Through conversations and friendship, meetings became a space to share challenges.

SBCC staff described benefits from this support among group members and how benefits extended beyond a NAC's organizing projects. A SBCC staff member described visiting a NAC for the first time and talking with community members involved with this NAC. Unprompted, a community member told the staff member about the support that this NAC group had provided her after she dealt with an accident and then the death of her husband:

She (the community member) told me, 'that's what we do, now, we have each other, we have a network where I can literally call one of them up and say, let's just go out, I don't know where we're going'. She goes, 'especially for a community of ours, there's not much to do, so you build relationships and you hold on to them.' And that was so interesting because it just came from her. I didn't ask her, 'How have you built relationships, how is this going?' I did not. She came to me and she wanted me to know what this group has done for them.

Another staff member described how this support was an important outcome, just as much as her project planning goals:

My biggest goal isn't how many people attended your project or anything like that, although I know sometimes that that's what we have to focus on in terms of funding. But my goal is that if one day one of them is sick, they can call the other one and ask like, 'Hey, can you pick up my kid from school?' ... You know, or that they can support each other outside of the group

Similar to how Borkman (1999) described mutual aid groups, these organizing groups were a space for members to share and offer support to each other.

In addition to planning meetings, this support and encouragement happened as part of events. A community member with LA CAN described the impact of the Women's Wellness retreat after she heard one woman comment about her day. She described an outcome of this one-day retreat:

To put a smile on somebody's face that probably hasn't smiled in months, The Women's Wellness retreat was one of the days where I just was a part of it. And this one lady of the community, I don't know her name, but she just said under her breath; I just happened to hear her, 'Thank you God for a day of happiness, just this one day.' And I was just floored, because I was like oh my goodness, you never know what people are going through, what they've been through

Through this retreat, informal service provision extended beyond members of the planning groups, and the CBOs provided a space for the larger community away from the challenges that

they were facing, if even for just one day. At the same time, active community members were involved with creating the event and enjoying this retreat.

At an LA CAN event in early September 2019, I talked with a community member who had recently returned to LA CAN after a few years. This event was at the end of a very hot week in Los Angeles. Her apartment building did not allow air conditioners and she mentioned attending this event in order to get out of her hot apartment and into a cooler place. The CBO provided a place to be, whether it was attending an event in a climate controlled building, being supported by friends and family, or to have a day of happiness amidst trauma. In a dense service infrastructure, LA CAN didn't provide many of the services that other mega-shelters or larger organizations offered. Instead, through organic service provision, LA CAN provided a space for communities of care.

### ***Access to Resources***

Through relationships as part of frontline work, community members learned about different resources. At an I Heart meeting, the SBCC staff member presented information to meeting attendees on different SBCC programs. While community members at this meeting were actively involved with organizing, the SBCC staff member recognized that they might be less familiar with other resources within SBCC. The staff member distributed handouts and gave an overview of the different programs and classes offered at SBCC. She indicated programs that she thought could be useful for a community member attending this meeting and this staff member indicated that she could also use some of these classes. Community members discussed connecting to resources through SBCC, such as a program to pay utility bills, while another community member mentioned that she learned about WIC (Women, Infants, and Children)

resources through participating in SBCC programs. The Women's Wellness retreat at LA CAN had tables where community members could learn about different resources, such as St. John's Well Child and Family Center. Through committee meetings and ongoing interactions at LA CAN, community members learned how to file complaints and address issues, such as problems with their landlord. Staff also wrote letters on behalf of community members and referred community members to different resources. Both CBOs drew from their relationships with other organizations discussed in the previous chapter, whether it was a LA CAN staff member writing a letter to the Executive Director of an affordable housing nonprofit on behalf of an active community member or SBCC connecting residents to various community institutions within Wilmington. Through these resources, services extended beyond mutual aid. While both CBOs connected community members to resources, these resources differed based on their neighborhood institutions.

Through participating in different CBO activities, some community members also gained access to employment. Food was a key part of meetings and provided a space for conversation and organizing. Through cooking food for different events, a few community members and frequent volunteers with SBCC were also able to receive income while highlighting their "gifts and talents" for cooking. In spring 2018, SBCC started a chefs' cooperative. For this cooperative, four women chefs who had previously volunteered with SBCC programs planned meals and cooked for SBCC events and meetings. The chefs then described ways that they were able to use this extra income for their family. For SBCC's NAC meetings, a community member who was a volunteer with another community group would be responsible for child watch at that NAC meeting. This community member was then able to receive extra income. LA CAN was also able



to offer paid opportunities for active members. LA CAN had an internship program before my observation period and multiple community members described their experiences as interns. This was a paid opportunity and community members described learning new skills through this internship. During my time as a volunteer, LA CAN had temporary paid positions before elections, such as canvassing for the Proposition 10 ballot initiative or calling people to ask their opinion on various ballot initiatives before the 2018 election. LA CAN also had part-time census outreach opportunities that helped active community members to receive additional income.

### *Creating Space of Respite and Welcome*

In addition to tangible resources and support, frontline work provided a space for community members to feel welcome. Both CBOs had a garden that they used for events, with LA CAN's garden on their rooftop and SBCC's garden about a mile north of the main office. LA CAN used their garden for a yoga during their Women's Wellness retreat and a place for cocktails and food before their annual event. SBCC hosted multiple events at the garden, such as a harvest festival just before Halloween, a wine and paint night, and yoga classes. In addition to events, community members commented on how the garden felt like a place of respite. On a Saturday volunteer day at the SBCC garden, a couple walked in with their child around lunch time and the garden coordinator recognized them from previous visits. As the family sat down to have lunch at the picnic table, they stated that "this place is a sanctuary". A community member and volunteer at SBCC's garden compared the garden to spaces around him as he explained why he liked to spend time at the garden: "instead of being surrounded by trash, you are surrounded by life". The garden did not provide official services, but this was a place to have lunch with other community members and to feel at peace.

The CBOs provided space that helped community members to take breaks from stressful environments. For SBCC, community members referred to their activities as time to get away from daily routines and to have social interaction outside their immediate family. For LA CAN, community members discussed how being at LA CAN contrasted from the larger environment in Skid Row. Community members highlighted the strong arts community within Skid Row but they also commented on the daily challenges that people faced when living in poverty in Skid Row. One community member described how she felt at LA CAN compared to the other settings in Skid Row: “it felt so good here (at LA CAN), I just started coming back whenever I could. So I could hold on to my sanity and my hope.” Another community member described the significance of LA CAN’s Friday night Resident Organizing Committee (ROC) meetings within the epicenter of Skid Row:

Coming here for the Friday nights back then and feeling that it's just a little bit of a welcoming thing as opposed to ...You know, it's pretty harsh out there (in Skid Row).

Like I said, when you're on your own, I don't know if you can really overstate how nasty it gets. So to have a warm welcome right here in the heart of Skid Row really meant a lot to me.

While these Friday night meetings contained updates on political campaigns as well as guest speakers, this warm welcome and respite was also a key feature for organizing meetings.

Through these interactions and informal methods of support, the two CBOs played an important role that community members could not find in other places. One community member with LA CAN commented that “nobody has given me this space before” while another community member described the central role that LA CAN played in his life:

Interviewee: it's part of my life. Part of me. If you take LA CAN away from me [laughs]

Rachel: We don't want to do that-

Interviewee: It'd be a big, big, big part of me. A big chunk

This camaraderie as well as the warm welcome and place to hold onto “sanity and hope” resulted in a different very different relationship for community members compared to their relationship with other service providers.

### ***Infrastructure for Organic Service Provision***

The term organic service provision does not imply services that happen naturally or unprompted as both CBOs had an infrastructure to create this space and type of service provision. This infrastructure was more pronounced in SBCC as a larger organization, but both organizations drew upon existing processes and their history of organizing. SBCC had monthly meetings where community organizing staff from across Los Angeles County met for updates, program changes, information sharing, and training. During their meeting, staff referred to specific aspects of SBCC’s organizing structure, such as project planning processes that organizers could use, as well as ways that supervisors could support organizing staff. SBCC had a core structure for NACs to follow, starting with an ice breaker to ending with a raffle for larger meetings or community-led events. SBCC was also able to provide gift cards to cover part of the cost for food at NAC meetings, grants for the NAC-planned projects, and stipends for community members responsible for child watch. While SBCC provided some templates and forms of support, community organizers still faced challenges juggling multiple groups. Staff commented that each NAC had different needs, so they tailored their approach with each

community group. As a result, a staff member described this as a job where “you needed to get used to change” and “no two days are the same.”

These processes for frontline work became part of organizational memory as community members became familiar with these processes through their long-term involvement. Active community members then introduced and welcomed newer community members to planning meetings and events. An SBCC staff member discussed how he preferred when active community members shared information with newer members: “I feel like it's more powerful when the group does it, as opposed to if I (as staff) do it, because then it's more of like a class setting.” This organizational memory helped establish a structure and welcome new people but this also led to expectations. At a LA CAN meeting, a community member asked a staff member about an upcoming annual event and if it would be “like we always do it.” When this staff member asked what he meant, this community member listed several expectations based on previous events. While this organizational memory provided a template for future events, this also presented challenges when staff had to change events.

### **Distinctions from Traditional Service Provision**

I have described this frontline work as organic service provision, and both organizations differentiated their approach from other service providers' frontline work, whether it was their emphasis on relationships or how they involved members in taking action. One SBCC staff member described their emphasis on relationships as different than other organizations because “for other organizations, it's very black and white, someone's talking to you over the phone, ‘Let me transfer you here’. but we definitely take a different approach and I think it does have a lot to

do with relationship building.” An LA CAN interviewee discussed how their approach differed from other service providers:

So a fightback organization (such as LA CAN) is different. So, you go into a service provider organization, you walk through the door, they ask you for ID, they give a application, they fill it out or you. They do the work for you, right? In other words, they don't teach you how to go out and fish. You know what I'm saying?...Whereas LA CAN, you come here with a problem like I did when I came here, I came to LA CAN as a complainant. I wanted to complain... LA CAN tells you, ‘Man, we don't talk about it. We be about it,’ right?...So in other words, you come here, I'm going to tell you to roll your sleeves up.

Within both of these quotes, interviewees expressed ideas of traditional service providers, such as “black and white”, “let me transfer you here” and “walk you through the door, they ask you for ID.” These descriptions implied a bureaucratic, less personal setting. In describing a relationship-based emphasis or helping community members to “roll their sleeves up,” these interviewees saw their interactions as different from traditional service providers.

Both CBOs talked about how community members were part of changes. Similar to how LA CAN interviewees commented that “we don’t talk about it, we be about it,” SBCC staff described how community members took an active role with their newer artisan collective. Initially, SBCC had an open group for their artisan collective. As they added more structure, Mooney described community members’ role in shaping this new structure:

We are a community of people moving towards this goal. Everybody's got to contribute. Everybody has to be willing to persevere. Sometimes it's going to be hard and sometimes we're just going to screw the whole thing up. But we'll do it together.

These descriptions share similarities with the concept of co-determination where clients influence processes and outcomes in human service organizations (Benjamin & Campbell, 2015) so some more traditional service providers also have elements of organic service provision. However, in this hybrid frontline work, community members took a more active role in relationships as well as determining the direction and outcomes of organic service provision.

With more personal, less bureaucratic relationships in hybrid organic service provision, community members described how they felt differently at both SBCC and LA CAN, such as the community member who referred to LA CAN as “a warm welcome in the heart of Skid Row”. Another community member contrasted how she felt at LA CAN compared to other service providers: “Just coming here feeling safe, coming here feeling loved; coming here feeling not like I'm a charity case... but I feel like part of the family.” I also heard similar comments from SBCC as one interviewee compared SBCC to other programs and how her son found a program at SBCC:

There's a difference with the programs here at SBCC than outside...at SBCC we don't make anybody feel bad about themselves. We work with their strengths and we help them flourish those strengths. So I struggled with getting my son into a program that he liked. And I struggled, I struggled.

She then described how he found a program through SBCC. While she was part of the community organizing program, her family became connected to other programs within SBCC.

As the example above indicated, SBCC's approach to their community organizing activities shaped other programs and their overall environment. Colleen Mooney described how this focus on relationships influenced programs throughout SBCC:

Folks that are therapists here don't call their people clients. So, I think we have really operationalized John's theory (John McKnight's theory on asset-based community development), which I don't think is a theory. Everybody has gifts and talents.. And mostly everybody wants to contribute. And what is missing is the opportunity, and the resources and the support to contribute what you have. And that's a fundamental, that's a very different thing than 'come out, we're going to case manage you' (at other organizations).

She later described how therapy fit into their overall approach, adding that "therapy's a useful strategy...But that's all it is." Organizing and relationships formed the core of SBCC's approach and then therapy was a strategy to support this work. Not only did hybrid work create a unique type of service provision, this work influenced other aspects of their organizational culture.

### ***Distinct Forms of Organizing***

Community members and interviewees were more likely to compare their frontline work to other types of service provision instead of comparing this frontline work to other organizing programs. Many community members had previous experiences with service providers, which could have led to this focus. However, the organizational repertoires that resulted in organic service provision also created a unique type of organizing. Mooney described how this focus on relationships was something that set SBCC apart from other organizing efforts:

I would define it as first of all, building a base, that is relationship based with people who live in the same neighborhood. So that...so like in the anti-war movement, I marched around with bunch of people. But once the war was over, we were all... Whereas if you build-you're building social capital in the neighborhood. So, I do believe that it starts with building and investing in those relationships. But then I think that we have to do the skills building in partnership with the residents that gets them to the point where they can tackle social issues and make impact.

SBCC explicitly distinguished their relationships-based organizing from more issue-based organizing. As a result, community members saw themselves as supported and as part of efforts for change. A community member who was involved in Watts through SBCC described her goal as letting other parents know that they can create change, "So, we have to give them that confidence, to talk to them and tell them: 'you also have the power, you have the right.' We all have the right because we are the ones living here." She described how she realized the power she had through organizing; then as an active community member, she helped other community members to see that they have this power as well. This sentiment was also common at LA CAN and community members shared how they were building power through their work at LA CAN. One community member told me that he was "building power through conversation," and another community member identified how she was building power by "just volunteering. I think that I'm building power, getting people to come, inviting people here."

Long-term investment and leadership development are often core parts of community organizing strategies (Han, 2014), but for both LA CAN and SBCC, these relationships and leadership development included support and communities of care. As a result, staff and



community members described different ways that community organizing had an impact on their membership, from building power to creating a welcoming space for people. As one organizer with SBCC commented:

I think an impact can be different for anybody and I think for the residents and the people that I work with, having that safe environment might be enough. I mean we were hearing this story about the lady this morning (who was dealing with depression) and she was like, I couldn't even get out of my house. So the fact that she got out of her house, into this building might be a huge impact to her. And for me that's community organizing. The fact that the groups have had that space and opportunity for somebody else to change their life. Even if it's as simple as showing up. That's community organizing.

They saw services and organizing as combined within their organizing model, resulting in a unique type of frontline work.

### ***Relationships between Hybrid Frontline Work and a Larger Social Service Infrastructure***

While both CBOs distinguished their hybrid work from more traditional service provision, community members also sought services from other service providers. LA CAN was in a dense service network with many providers that had services with “coercive benevolence” (as described by Stuart, 2016), so LA CAN's approach stood out in contrast to these organizations. LA CAN offered food and connected residents to resources, but they did not provide as intensive services compared to other service providers in this neighborhood. Instead, LA CAN provided a community-focused space within a more bureaucratic service hub. Within this service hub, LA CAN was able to connect residents to resources from other service providers. At the same time, LA CAN also challenged service providers within Skid Row,

supporting community members when they had concerns as well as advocating for new services and changes to practices (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four).

SBCC's main location was in an area with fewer services compared to LA CAN, so SBCC provided more services for the Wilmington neighborhood. In addition, SBCC connected residents to resources both in Wilmington and for NACs county-wide. While these partnerships helped community members to access resources, SBCC distinguished their approach from their partner organizations. Some community members had negative experiences with other service providers and one community member discussed how she saw outside organizations entering and then leaving her community:

Agencies would come and offer their services, for families, tell us all the things they have, all they will bring, and talk up a storm. But once they saw the true magnitude of need, they would no longer come back. When they saw the true issues in the community, I like to think that they took an X-ray of the community and then got scared.

In contrast, SBCC provided a more community-based approach with long-term relationships. SBCC was less likely to challenge or confront nearby institutions compared to LA CAN, but SBCC also distinguished their hybrid work as an alternative approach while connecting residents to resources from other organizations.

### **Tensions and Separations within Organic Service Provision**

Community members felt valued instead of feeling like a “charity case” through organic service provision, but organizations still wrestled with whether or how to provide more formal services. Formal services can be more resource intensive (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006) and adding these services can lead to additional requirements and expectations. LA CAN did not

receive government money for many of the ongoing organizing campaigns and this resulted in flexibility and a more family-like feel. During my observation period, LA CAN received money to provide rental assistance. While this was an important service to core members who may otherwise be evicted, staff expressed concern about bureaucratic elements that came with adding services. LA CAN partnered with Homeless Health Care Los Angeles, one of the core partners mentioned in Chapter Two, so that Homeless Health Care could manage parts of this grant. As part of this service, LA CAN instituted an intake process that differed from the informal connections described above. This intake process provided a way for community members to access this new service and during the intake process, a staff member highlighted how organizing efforts resulted in funding for these services. However, more official services could affect how LA CAN interacted with community members.

This question about whether or how to provide services led to some tensions around identity. While Skid Row had a high density of services, demand for services in this neighborhood was still higher than available services, especially for housing for extremely low-income individuals. LA CAN was involved with advocacy to preserve existing housing and create new low-income housing, but community members also asked LA CAN about help with finding housing. At these moments, some active community members commented that they wished that LA CAN could help more in these situations. While community members saw a need in Skid Row, not everyone was in agreement on LA CAN's role. In a housing committee meeting, community members discussed different services and programs at LA CAN and what LA CAN's role should be. The staff member pointed out the range of opinions among community members in this meeting, with one community member focused on adding services

and another community member focused on organizing people. Community members smiled and appreciated each other's perspectives, so this is an example of a productive tension as described by Gates (2014). However, this moment also points to challenges with this hybrid frontline work, especially when the existing service infrastructure did not meet the needs for community members, and how community members and staff wrestled with balancing organizing and services.

I saw fewer challenges around adding services for SBCC, but they also faced challenges with how to balance different components, suggesting that blending categories is not necessarily a seamless process. SBCC staff described their emphasis on relationships as a core value, but staff also questioned if they had put too much emphasis on relationships. One staff member referred to a time where they “overemphasized relationships, at the expense of making sure that we were building advocacy and skills.” They described being willing to “think outside the box” and change processes that were not working, but still faced questions on how to combine models. As discussed in the previous chapter, SBCC staff mentioned challenges with describing their work as their work did not fit into clear service boxes such as case management or anger management. Staff highlighted SBCC's unique methods during the county-wide meeting discussed at the beginning of this chapter and community members described how their involvement helped them to feel powerful. SBCC could explain their model through key relationships, but they still faced difficulties when explaining their model to larger audiences due to not fitting in traditional categories.

Both CBOs had an informal, family feel as part of their model and identity. However, similar to Benjamin's (2018) discussion of dilemmas with client authority, CBOs still struggled

with separations between staff members who have a connection to and live in the community and community members who are volunteers. At times, LA CAN staff had to close bathrooms to the public, but staff or frequent volunteers such as myself were able to use them. Frontline staff also faced different challenges compared to other staff. Front desk staff members were more likely to have to tell someone they couldn't use the restroom or talk with an angry person in the lobby compared to the executive director. SBCC was often able to hire community members, and I talked with community members who started as volunteers and then became paid staff. However, this could lead to tension when some people had income from the organization and others were volunteers. Both CBOs created a community space with more personal, less hierarchical relationships that resulted in communities of care, but CBOs still wrestled with these differences and how to set boundaries between community members.

### **Long-term Relationships and Organic Service Provision as a Vehicle for Reframing Ideas**

This hybrid service and organizing form offered a distinct way of working at the community level, which provided a way to reframe ideas around community. Relationships were a key vehicle for reframing ideas, and long-term relationships led to a different type of learning. One community member commented on LA CAN's approach: "They are teaching me the way I like to learn." He felt supported and this support and encouragement allowed him to make mistakes and learn. The community member at the beginning of this chapter referred to how LA CAN "allowed you to learn at your pace" and another community member described:

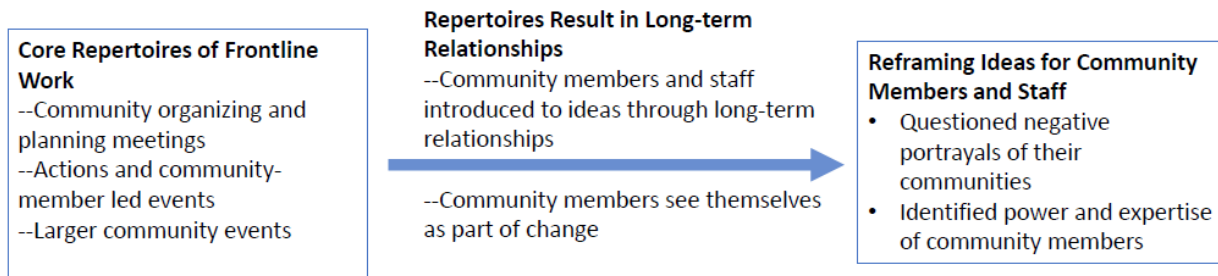
I've learned a lot. It's no secret I'm slow, but I have learned a lot in the year I'd been here. I'd like to learn more. I have been able to assist other tenants in ways that I was not able to assist them prior to coming here.

While community members talked about learning at different paces, they felt welcome and that their time with this organization had made a difference.

Community members described many different types of learning, including gaining skills such as public speaking and becoming less shy. I focus on one type of learning for this section: how interactions through frontline work provided a space to reframe ideas around community. Figure 2 demonstrates knowledge flows through frontline work and how long-term relationships and communities of care were a vehicle for reframing ideas. As a result, both CBOs created a space where staff and community members saw themselves and their community differently. In the next following chapter, I focus on ideas about poverty; how this frontline work challenged or reinforced ideas about poverty; and how these ideas were communicated to multiple audiences. Through reframing ideas on community and poverty, I examine whether this frontline work can create a new form of poverty politics.

**Figure 2**

*Shaping Ideas about Community through Long-term Relationships and Communities of Care*



## **Reframing Ideas of Community**

Community members with both CBOs discussed how their participation helped them to see positive aspects of their community and their fellow community members. At an I Heart Watts meeting with SBCC, community members discussed their reaction to a recent

documentary, *A Week in Watts*, which had received criticism due to its negative portrayal of Watts. One community member commented that she had previously seen the problems that were highlighted in this documentary but these problems were only half of her community. Through participating in I Heart Watts and SBCC, she met other people involved in their community, getting to know the other, more positive side. During an interview, another community member involved with I Heart Watts commented that her participation with SBCC “gives you more from the community, more than just problems,” indicating that she learned to see other aspects of this neighborhood. She referred to people who were part of SBCC’s organizing efforts as “one family, one tree with many branches” and then added, “It is such a leafy tree, especially here in Watts.” A community member in Wilmington discussed how volunteering at SBCC’s garden helped to change not only his idea of Wilmington, but also his role as a community member. He described how he previously felt that “Wilmington is never going to get any better. But now, I kind of changed that and I’m like, you know what, I want to help Wilmington get better. So yeah, I think that’s what changed about me.”

Community members at LA CAN also described changing their perspective of Skid Row after seeing how community members were involved. One interviewee discussed having a negative opinion after living in a shelter in Skid Row, feeling that “it was depressing. once I’ll leave the shelter, lets just get out of this place.” However, she saw a different side through volunteering with LA CAN:

But now, these people of Skid Row, the community, they're loving, they're talented, they're nice, they're giving. Even in their situations, like they're out here maybe in a tent and they're still coming to LA CAN and wanting to give something; whether its their

time or whatever, donations or whatever it is, and that's just major to me. So I see it (Skid Row) in a completely different light now.

Through working with community members who were part of LA CAN's efforts, these interactions helped change her perspective of Skid Row and of the community members living in Skid Row.

Messages around the positive aspects of a community and the power of community members were reinforced by staff from both CBOs across multiple interactions. I gave a brief introduction about myself and my research when I first attended a SBCC meeting in the neighborhood of Watts. The organizer then followed my introduction by saying that he was excited because I wanted to study something positive. He referred to the recent *Week in Watts* documentary that highlighted drugs and crime in Watts and stated that I was looking at a different aspect of the neighborhood through observing a community organizing group. To start the round of introductions, he encouraged community members to include other groups that they were involved with in order to highlight the work of residents. Community members mentioned volunteering with schools in the area, participating in the Best Start collaborative, serving in a leadership role at a school for teen parents, and serving on a public housing resident advisory committee. An older resident introduced herself and referred to this group as being her purpose, or *mi proposito*. This staff member was familiar with many of the community members through previous meetings, and through this introduction, he aimed to feature a different portrayal of Watts than was commonly discussed in media.

LA CAN staff also highlighted alternative portrayals of the community of Skid Row through their discussions. As we prepared for a training at LA CAN, two community members



cooked a New Orleans style breakfast for training attendees. Before serving the food, a staff member introduced the two women who were cooking. He mentioned the hardships that they faced in this past week and how they weren't able to sleep the night before. He referred to Skid Row as a community of resiliency and how despite their hardships, the two women came to LA CAN to prepare food for everyone in the meeting and "to take care of each other, like we do in the community." Countering the idea of Skid Row as a transient neighborhood, he emphasized Skid Row as a community where people supported each other.

In 2019, LA CAN launched the Skid Row singers, a group comprised of LA CAN members and staff that performed at several events such as the 2019 Freedom Now Annual awards banquet and the Jamaican Independence Day festival in a nearby park. In White's introduction of this group at the awards banquet, he highlighted the talent within the Skid Row community, contrasting this talent to how Skid Row is often described. A few days later, I talked with staff about the performances and how we were able to see people who are often at LA CAN as performers and artists. White commented that seeing the talent on stage differed from how people in the Skid Row community are pigeonholed, then added "how we pigeon hole ourselves."

### ***Community Members as Experts***

In these conversations, staff emphasized that community members were experts and community leaders. A meeting of SBCC community leaders in Summer 2018 included a debrief of a recent event that community members had planned. As meeting attendees recalled community members' accomplishments to plan this meeting, one staff member commented that "Ustedes hicieron todo," meaning you did everything. The staff member pointed out that

community members weren't alone and had staff support but community members did all the work for this event. Another staff member stated that they were able to do this as a community and talked about community members being part of a movement. SBCC county-wide meetings included NAC members from multiple communities throughout LA County, and the lead staff member for this meeting often emphasized that "you know what your community needs." At one county-wide meeting, staff and community members discussed whether a modified structure for county-wide meetings could better support community members' efforts. During discussions, SBCC staff stressed that community members knew their communities and how a county-wide structure could best support their specific community.

These messages were not just from staff, but community members also reinforced these messages. The SBCC county-wide meeting in April 2019 included a presentation from the Office of Child Abuse Protection (OCAP) on potential prevention initiatives. The OCAP staff member asked community members to comment on which of the proposed initiatives were most important by placing stickers next to their top choices. Many community members selected community engagement as a priority and one community member explained why this was important. She responded that community engagement is how they know what the community needs. Similar to messages from SBCC staff, she stressed the importance of learning from community members as they knew what would work best in their neighborhoods.

LA CAN staff also emphasized that ideas should come from community members. In an introduction to UCLA students who were learning about LA CAN, the staff member who was presenting stressed that the organization was founded to ensure that community members had a say in what was affecting them. He referenced the second half of the LA CAN mission, "serving

as a vehicle to ensure we have voice, power & opinion in the decisions that are directly affecting us” and referred to community members as experts. LA CAN also began each resident organizing committee (ROC) meetings by reading this mission, and one community member in particular emphasized this part of the mission when introducing the Friday night meeting. As community members attended multiple meetings, these messages were reinforced. When talking with community members during a training to be team leaders for an upcoming survey, White referred to this future survey data as “our stories, our truths.” He compared this upcoming survey where community members would be spearheading efforts to academic data, and commented that based on the community members experiences and strengths, “we could get better data” (compared to academics). White also highlighted the role of community-created data and commented that “In academia, they call them recommendations, but we call them action steps.” In addition to highlighting the expertise of community members, White highlighted how community members used their expertise for action.

### ***Reframing how Community Members see Themselves***

Through frontline work that presented a different view of their community and highlighted residents’ impact, community members saw themselves as more capable of organizing and creating change. Staff described how part of their job was helping community members to realize the power that they had. One SBCC staff member described how relationships as part of frontline work helped residents to feel confident in organizing:

It’s relationship building with our residents in a way that it covers them, like that helps them to advocate for their own needs and their own community ... and I think that’s really what we do. And I truly believe that with some of my residents, now they’re just

out there. They're like, 'I got this.' So I think that that's what community organizing enables them to do.

These messages did not just come from staff but also from other community members. After a Friday Night ROC meeting at LA CAN, a community member who was newer to LA CAN described his observations of LA CAN's work, commenting that "If people tell you that you are awesome, you will be awesome. That's what you do here (at LA CAN)." A long-term member then corrected him by saying "that's what *we* do," indicating that this newer member was now part of LA CAN. While this newer member indicated that one result of organizing was letting people "know that they are awesome," the long-term community member reminded him that as a new member, he was also part of this change.

In addition to helping community members identify their strengths, staff also stressed that residents were already involved and powerful. One staff member stated that part of his job was "making them (community members) realize that...they...have much more to offer than what they think they do." Another staff member described how community members were already doing similar work and part of his job was to help them identify this:

It's not like we have some magic formula where all of a sudden, this group is...they're better leaders, they're setting up their own agendas, they're setting up their own projects. They've already had it. So it's really just...opening that little light so they can see what they've already been doing in some capacity. And then just expanding that.

One community member with LA CAN shared similar comments that they were not adding anything new. While the previous quotes referred to recognizing capabilities and leadership, this

community member highlighted the power that tenants already had and how part of their work was to highlight this power:

We (tenants) already have the power and I think the idea of building it is convincing people that they have it. You already have the power, there's nothing to build. You just have to admit that you have the power, embrace that power and take it on. You know, use it...Maybe there are people who don't think they have the power. Believe me, convince them, they have the power.

However, he also acknowledged challenges with this process when he added that “it just seems like it should be so much more simple than it's turning out to be.”

Through their long-term participation, community members shared how they saw themselves as agents of change. A community member with SBCC shared what she had learned from her organizing efforts. Through her participation with SBCC and working with other community members, she began to see “that my voice has a lot of power, and like me, there are many others who have stayed in the community and seek to make it better. I think we've made a lot of impact.” Through seeing community members similar to them who were also involved, community members saw themselves as able to create change. One community member who was 50 when she first got involved with LA CAN described:

You learn from what you see and I didn't see many Black people participating in the political process. All we did was manual labor. I didn't think I had a voice. And being around people who say, ‘You do have a voice’, I needed that encouragement... That is something that, when I was a little kid, my family, a kid, they didn't teach us that, so I was not too old to learn (when getting involved with LA CAN)

Through participating, she was able to see other Black community members active in politics and in leadership roles and this showed her what she could do.

A community member involved with SBCC described how she was able to achieve more than she originally thought. She described expectations due to gender roles and how her participation helped her to realize that she could do more:

Sometimes, as a woman, you think you won't be able to get ahead, that you are just a housewife and that's the only thing you are good at. But then I saw a lot of things that motivated me to be in this group and to reopen it. Because I was like, you become more independent as a mother, as a wife, as a woman. And I have learned from this group that you can be satisfied in life as a woman

Messages emphasized by staff were communicated through explicit communication, but the community members above also described implicit messages where they saw other community members and themselves as actively involved and in leadership roles. This combination of explicit communication alongside implicit messages across multiple interactions reinforced ideas of community members' expertise and power.

### ***Reframing Ideas for Staff***

In addition to community members seeing their community differently, this frontline work also helped staff members to reframe their ideas about community. For both CBOs, many staff members grew up in the communities in which they worked and as a result of their work, were able to see their communities differently. Thus, it was not just staff sharing messages with community members, but staff were also introduced to ideas through their interactions with community members. Similar to the quote above, one SBCC staff member commented on

expectations due to gender roles and how working with community members had challenged her previous ideas:

I grew up with this sort of a similar idea of what, you know, what women are supposed to do, especially Hispanic women. And so, that's what you do, and some of them (community members) are like that. We try to invite them and they're like, Oh no I got to get home and make food for my husband'. And I'm not saying they shouldn't, we have these cultural ideas of what things should be like. And myself included, because of the way I was raised. So seeing that they (women who are part the neighborhood action groups) can be that (community leaders) and more is surprising to, at least to me it was. But it's a good kind of surprised

Another SBCC staff member described how through seeing community members involved with organizing, he saw how "residents can be impactful to certain issues, as opposed to before (working at SBCC), I maybe didn't know that they were as powerful." Through their interactions and work with residents, staff began to see community members as leaders and more powerful than they had previously thought.

As staff members were often from similar communities, staff discussed how they began to see their own community differently. One staff member included himself among residents who had a negative view of their community. Through working with residents and learning about other organizations, he saw a different side of his community that he had not seen before.

Another staff member described how interacting with people in Wilmington and efforts such as I Heart Wilmington helped her to look at her own community differently.

I think prior to being here, I wouldn't, I never shy away from saying I'm from NEIGHBORHOOD, but I also wouldn't say it with the pride that people say it with. People of Wilmington in particular are incredibly prideful of their community. Aside from the bad, they see the good, and they love their community. And so being able to talk about it the way that they do, and show it the way that they do, that's something that not everybody grows up to see things that way

These relationships with residents also encouraged staff to get involved in their current neighborhood. One staff member with SBCC compared how she felt within the NACs compared to where she lived:

Because I felt so welcomed (with the different NACs). I felt loved. I felt like I had more friends there. [laughs] When I went to my house, I didn't know anybody. So that's when I realized oh man I need to start talking to my neighbors.

Through working with NAC participants and being part of organizing efforts, staff were able to view their own community differently and were more motivated to get involved.

While I focus primarily on how frontline work shaped ideas for the community members and staff involved, staff also discussed these ideas with other audiences. One SBCC staff member who worked in South LA described how she would discuss her work with people who initially had a negative view of South LA:

Interviewee: I tell them that there's some really good people and good things happening in these communities. They have the bad stereotypes or whatever, but I'm really proud to say that I work here and there's good people working for the things they want to do for their communities. That's just my view now, I try to say that to people that don't know,



that don't live here or that have that negative image. I try to change that.

Rachel: How do they respond?

Interviewee: Surprised like “really?” and I'm like yeah! And then I talk about the things that they do and how they come together. You know, there's crime and violence but when there are people in need, they really come together to help out, but they do look surprised [laughs].

She described what she had learned through frontline work and she shared her views on communities with other audiences.

This frontline work provided a space to present an alternative picture of communities that highlighted strength and resiliency and that framed community members as experts, but staff and community members still brought in ideas of deservingness. Frontline work helped to reframe portrayals of communities and community members, but discussions could still focus on “good people”. These conversations could still highlight separations between poor and near-poor, and staff and community members worked through ideas of deservingness when they discussed the positive aspects of their community or neighborhood. I highlight these tensions in the next chapter as I discuss how staff and community members worked through ideas of poverty. In this chapter, I focus on how community members began to view their community differently.

Frontline work provided an opportunity for staff and community members to form relationships. Through these relationships, community members and staff were able to reframe ideas that they had about community and identify more positive aspects and power within community members.

## Conclusion

The two organizations differed in their approach, with LA CAN identifying as a fightback organization and SBCC drawing from principles of asset-based community development. In order to “fight back” or highlight “what is right in communities”, both CBOs drew from similar repertoires, combining planning meetings that involved community members, member-led events and actions, and larger community events. Planning meetings with community members were not solely a way to plan events, but these ongoing meetings built long-term relationships and created a welcoming community space for both CBOs. Chetkovich and Kunreuther (2006) and Meyer (2010) argue that hybrid organizations have a distinct form of service provision compared to traditional human service organizations. I find that this hybrid frontline work also led to distinct relationships compared to community members’ relationships with other human service organizations. These more personal, long-term relationships resulted in organic service provision that included mutual aid, informal forms of support, and access to other resources. Both community members and staff distinguished this hybrid frontline work from more traditional human service organizations as offering a more, welcoming space and a different system of care. However this type of organic service provision still existed in relation to a larger service infrastructure within their neighborhood. In addition, CBOs wrestled with ideas around adding more services and how that could change their organization, so CBOs still faced challenges with balancing this combination of services and organizing.

The combination of long-term relationships along with involving community members in projects or actions was not only a unique type of frontline work, but these methods provided a way to reframe ideas around community. Through highlighting how community members care

for each other, this frontline work provided a space to challenge ideas about low-income communities and helped community members to see themselves differently. This reframing did not happen through singular instances. Through long-term, ongoing interactions, community members and staff were introduced to ideas and able to see themselves as part of the change. These ideas were emphasized through repeated interactions. With this reframing as an ongoing process, groups and community members were at different stages in working through ideas. As a result, both CBOs challenged a deficit view of communities as well as highlighted the expertise of community members through frontline work, showing how CBOs can reframe ideas about community. This reframing strengthened relationships, led to new types of solutions that centered on community members, and resulted in members feeling more powerful and able to work for change. The two CBOs had similar themes for ideas around community, but as discussed in the following chapter, the two CBOs talked about poverty in different ways.

## **Chapter Four: An Issue Worth Fighting for:**

### **Alternative Forms of Poverty Politics through Frontline Work**

In this chapter, I examine how hybrid frontline work can be a space for reframing ideas about poverty and creating a new form of poverty politics. Through relationships developed during frontline work, staff and community members worked through ideas about causes of and solutions to poverty. The two CBOs used similar repertoires in their frontline work to present and emphasize core ideas through ongoing interactions, but they had key differences in their mission. SBCC focused on asset-based community development and countered portrayals that emphasized deficits of low-income communities by “scaling what is right,” while LA CAN positioned themselves as a fightback organization with an abolitionist frame, emphasizing structural problems and emphasizing the responsibility of state institutions. In addition, the two CBOs worked with different core populations. SBCC worked with undocumented immigrants and LA CAN worked with houseless and previously houseless community members. While community members from both CBOs have dealt with structural violence and trauma, they had different experiences with poverty and houselessness. These prior experiences influenced how community members thought about problems of poverty and solutions. Community members and staff brought in their personal experience and previous beliefs, which affected conversations within frontline work. Within these conversations, both CBOs found openings to introduce ideas and offer new forms of poverty politics. These differences in mission and history as well as in community members’ previous experiences resulted in differences in poverty knowledge between the two CBOs.

Frontline work offered a space to reframe or reinforce poverty knowledge among staff and community members, but CBOs also drew from their frontline work to introduce narratives of poverty to broader audiences. This status that “there is no other organization like it” as discussed in the previous chapter provided a source of legitimacy for each CBO. They drew on this legitimacy when introducing ideas to funders or when testifying at government hearings. In addition, frontline work could be a space to demonstrate alternative narratives to larger audiences.

Focusing on interactions across differences and how these interactions can increase awareness of structural issues, Lawson and Elwood (2014) argue that frontline encounters can lead to a more inclusive poverty politics. I also find that the frontline work of LA CAN and SBCC led to new forms of poverty politics for staff and community members. In addition, frontline work promoted ideas and offered new forms of poverty politics to larger audiences. This was especially pronounced for LA CAN due to their history of fightback frontline work and their idea that changing how people talk about poverty was “an issue worth fighting for”. LA CAN’s philosophy and mission was connected to their location in the epicenter of post-welfare policy, resulting in explicit discussions about poverty that contrasted from dominant narratives. SBCC had a different style of frontline work as they worked with community members at the fenceline. With their focus on resident- driven social change, SBCC had less emphasis on structural factors and fewer explicit conversations about poverty. SBCC was less likely to testify at City Council, but they promoted their core ideas through their relationships, including offering alternatives approaches to social welfare programs.

LA CAN's twitter bio in 2019 stated ended with "Human rights defenders and truth tellers, not asking for permission". In this chapter, I examine different spaces for this "truth telling" and how truth telling with multiple audiences is part of their work for social change; I argue that their frontline work and relationships with community members helped them to shape poverty knowledge with wider audiences and be truth-tellers in city-wide coalitions. In contrast, SBCC's social media emphasized community members leading social change in their communities and their frontline work enabled them to promote this narrative through relationships. For both CBOs, frontline spaces that resulted in communities of care and relationship building then became spaces to promote narratives at larger levels. Drawing from relational poverty, I look at how staff and community members worked through ideas of poverty during frontline work, and how these ideas were communicated to larger audiences. CBOs that promote alternative ideas face challenges at both the frontline level and with larger audiences, so I discuss how the CBOs worked through these tensions.

### **Poverty Knowledge in Frontline Work**

#### **The Importance of Poverty Knowledge and Relational Poverty**

How poverty is defined as a problem has implications for poverty policy and for the implementation of social welfare programs. Katz (2015) describes the history of poverty policy in the United States as a history of ideas about poverty. Katz describes this history as an "archeology" with six different layers of how the problem of poverty has been defined- poverty as a problem of persons, of places, of resources, of political economy, of power, and of markets, each layer building upon prior definitions. While Katz presents six different definitions, poverty as a problem of person and of places has been a much larger part of national discourses than

poverty as problem of power imbalances (Katz, 2015). O'Connor (2001) examines the production of poverty knowledge through a poverty research industry that included academic and research institutions. Through research agendas that emphasized studying the behavior of low-income individuals and their dependence on cash assistance as opposed to studying the role of institutions or economic factors, poverty researchers helped to portray dependency as a cause of poverty (O'Connor, 2001). Ideas have changed during historical moments, but both O'Connor and Katz identify key enduring themes within discussions. As poverty is defined as a problem of the individual and as due to the behaviors of the poor, the discussion of poverty is separated from the idea of inequality (O'Connor, 2001; O'Connor, 2016); poverty then becomes "an other or an exemption" (O'Connor, 2001, p. 15) as opposed to seeing poverty as created by structural factors. In this setting, racialized portrayals of poverty have influenced ideas of poverty (O'Connor, 2001), and the idea of poverty as a product of individual failure is compounded by stereotypes around race and ethnicity (Katz, 1993; O'Connor, 2001).

In discourses that frame poverty as due to the individual or personal failings, people living in poverty are often labeled and categorized (Katz, 2013; Watkins-Hayes & Kovalsky, 2016). Historically, social welfare agencies have categorized people based on ideas of deservingness, which shaped who received assistance and how services were provided (Mohr & Duquene, 1997; Katz, 2013; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Categories of deservingness are strengthened through formal policies, informal norms, and frontline practices (Watkins-Hayes & Kovalsky, 2016). Nuances within national-level discussions on poverty have changed over time, but discourses within policy and media still center on ideas of individual responsibility and deservingness (Watkins-Hayes & Kovalsky, 2016).

I use the framework of relational poverty to understand how poverty knowledge is produced, reproduced, or challenged through frontline work. To counter the mainstream view of poverty as a self-contained problem where an individual is primarily responsible, relational poverty considers how institutions and processes can produce and maintain poverty, inequality, and other forms of marginalization (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). This framework also considers the involvement of non-poor actors in the reproduction of poverty, as well as how creating distinct categories of ‘poor’ from ‘non-poor’ is used to justify political-economic inequality (Elwood & Lawson, 2013). Elwood and Lawson (2018) describe processes of “thinkable poverty politics” that reinforce dominant poverty knowledge, including who is considered poor, why they are poor, and what should be done about poverty. Through processes of differential incorporation that specify how and when people can receive services, low-income community members are either excluded or only included under specific conditions (Elwood & Lawson, 2018). Relational poverty helps to explain how processes and institutions maintain dominant ideologies, but this framework also examines ways of contesting or disrupting dominant poverty knowledge. Activism and community projects can reject conventional understandings of poverty and normative categories through their work. As a result, these projects can be “unthinkable poverty politics or refusal, hope and possibility” (Elwood & Lawson, 2018, p. 5).

### **Frontline Work as a Site for Communicating Ideas**

In this study, I examine frontline work as a key site for both upholding and contesting dominant ideas of poverty. Through determining who has access to services and information and under what conditions, encounters through frontline service provision can reinforce categories and classify community members as “others” (Elwood & Lawson, 2018). Low-income



community members may receive limited gains through services, but these frontline interactions within social welfare can maintain dominant ideologies around deservingness and personal responsibility within poverty knowledge (Elwood & Lawson, 2018). Focusing on offices where community members applied for welfare benefits, Soss (2000) describes frontline work as sites of political learning. Through interacting with frontline workers, community members who were receiving Aid to Dependent Families and Children (AFDC) learned whether government officials were willing to listen to them and what could be expected from government (Soss, 2000). Community members are not simply passive recipients within frontline work; as community members decide whether to accept stigma and requirements from frontline staff in order to receive services or to bypass regulations, they exercise agency and resistance (Pittman, 2018). The act of claiming benefits can be a political act, and through community members' encounters to seek welfare benefits, community members insert claims to benefits (e.g Soss, 2000). In addition to the formal settings described above, frontline work through informal organizations is also a key site for reinforcing ideas. Fairbanks (2011) describes informal recovery house operators that promoted discourse around recovery and personal responsibility as the way out of poverty. Recovery house operators used discourses to legitimize their role within a larger poverty governance system, and these discourses aligned with and reinforced dominant logics of a post-welfare period (Fairbanks, 2009, 2011).

Frontline work is also a space where staff and community members interact across differences and these encounters can help people to question poverty knowledge. Lawson and Elwood (2014) discuss how encounters between staff and community members shaped ideas not only for community members seeking services but also for staff members. Power relations and

identities affected the encounters, but through staff members' acknowledgements about structural issues as a result of these interactions, Lawson and Ellwood saw opportunities for a more inclusive poverty politics. Encounters between 'poor' and 'non-poor' community members have the potential to highlight structural issues, but these interactions can also reinforce difference. Fennell (2015) discusses interactions between public housing residents and middle class residents within a former public housing development that had converted to a Hope VI mixed income development. Government officials had hoped that interactions between residents with different income levels would increase sympathy and understanding, but Fennell finds that interactions led not only to compassion toward people's situations, but they also led to revulsion of different groups. Encounters between different groups can help to challenge dominant ideas, but these encounters can also reinforce stereotypes.

While frontline work has been used to uphold dominant ideas, frontline work through the activism and community projects as described by Elwood & Lawson (2018) can introduce alternative narratives and challenge categories. For organizations that see their values as counter to dominant values, such as the two CBOs in this study, their frontline work can communicate alternative ideas of poverty, including a different diagnosis of the problem compared to dominant ideologies, and alternative solutions. Both services and organizing can highlight problems and challenge existing ideologies. For example, activist organizations not only used services to meet a community need, but these organizations also used direct services to highlight shortcomings of existing state services (Pulido, 2002). Maskovsky (2018) discussed AIDs and housing justice activism in an ACT UP chapter in Philadelphia that organized for housing for community members living with HIV. Unlike ACT UP chapters in other cities that were predominantly

white, this Philadelphia chapter had a larger membership of Black community members and of currently or formerly houseless community members. Local government agencies did not identify current and formerly houseless community members with HIV as political participants. Through participating in activism, ACT UP members inserted claims to political citizenship and challenged ideas of who participates in political processes (Maskovsky, 2018). Similar to the idea of unthinkable poverty politics, Maskovsky describes their frontline work and activism as a demand for justice out of unthinkable places.

CBOs shape ideas not only between staff and community members through frontline interactions, but frontline work can also serve as a demonstration of a CBO's key ideas to other audiences. Camp (2012) describes how LA CAN used art activities to produce an alternative solution that countered ideas from local government institutions that portrayed Skid Row community members of causes of the problem. Instead of accepting as the status quo as inevitable, LA CAN involved community members with art activities that showed that increasing policing was not the inevitable outcome (Camp, 2012). Frontline activities not only challenged existing definitions of problems, but these activities also promoted alternative solutions, both at the community level and to larger audiences.

Even when CBOs are challenging status quo ideas through frontline work, CBOs can reinforce dominant ideas at the same time. These contradictory processes of upholding and challenging ideas coexist, so CBOs must wrestle with these contradictions. Fennell (2015) describes housing activists who documented housing conditions in public housing to highlight problems and show how the housing authority was responsible for these problems. Housing activists documented harms and building conditions through sensory experiences which Fennell

describes as “a critical but risky political currency” (p. 99). In calling attention to discrimination, activists also defined themselves by these categories (Fennell, 2015), which could further reinforce categories. In addition, organizational practices within activist organizations can reinforce inequities. As the Philadelphia ACT-UP chapter started to broaden their membership to include more low-income and Black community members, their non-hierarchical leadership styles reinforced existing inequalities between community members (Maskovsky, 2018). This group then modified their processes to be more welcoming to newer members, but this shows how frontline organizational practices can reinforce divisions and constrain a CBO’s ability to challenge narratives.

### **Frontline Work as a Key Setting within Poverty Governance**

Even when challenging ideologies, CBOs still exist in relationship to poverty governance and ideologies of power (Roy, 2015). I examine how CBOs challenge ideas, refuse normative categories, or offer new possibilities through ‘unthinkable poverty politics’ (as discussed in Elwood & Lawson, 2018), while also working within a social service infrastructure that constrains how CBOs can challenge ideas. I focus on hybrid frontline work as a key space where staff and community members can question dominant ideas, but where these ideas can also be reinforced. These contradictory process co-exist in frontline spaces (Lawson & Elwood, 2018). Community members also bring in their ideas and previous experiences, and their perspectives may differ from or be aligned with dominant ideas. Frontline work is shaped by larger frameworks as well as by the ideas that staff and community members bring to these interactions. At the same time, frontline work can be a setting to push back against overarching frameworks. Within these constraints, I examine how frontline work was a space to reframe poverty

knowledge, from the interactions with community members and staff to their communication to larger audiences, and why CBOs saw changing ideas as an important part of their work.

### **Research Focus**

In the chapter, I draw from the frontline activities discussed in Chapter 3, but I also focus on public-facing events that communicated narratives to wider audiences. Both CBOs involved community members in public-facing events and other advocacy activities, so I include these events as frontline activities. In addition, many community members involved in public-facing events participated in other frontline activities, so these events were one of multiple ways that community members participated with a CBO. For LA CAN, these events included community members attending or testifying at City Council, the Homeless Memorial march to honor houseless community members who had died in 2019, and events, such as panel discussions, for both community members and a wider audience. For SBCC, events included peace marches or other larger community events. For both CBOs, I included their annual fundraiser as an event that highlighted overall narratives. While annual events were geared towards funders, these annual events were also a way to recognize each CBO's core community base.

### ***Discussions of Problems of and Solutions to Poverty***

Discussions about poverty occurred in a range of ways through frontline work, from informal interactions to official presentations and facilitated discussions. In addition to explicit discussions, I also examined ways that frontline work could include implicit communication. In examining how staff and community members discuss poverty, I included related topics such as gentrification, economic opportunities and criminalization, and how solutions to poverty were discussed. Houselessness is a pressing issue in Los Angeles, so discussions on poverty often

focused on houselessness and affordable housing. During interviews, some staff and community members specifically discussed their ideas of causes to problems of poverty and of houselessness and some interviewees shared their personal experiences with poverty.

### ***Communication to Larger Audiences through Frontline Work***

In this chapter, I also look at how ideas from frontline work were shared with multiple audiences. Through ongoing memo-writing, I identified frontline work as a way to promote alternative narratives to larger audiences. I explored this process in greater detail and identified two ways of communicating narratives to larger audiences- frontline work as a source of legitimacy and frontline work as a source of communication. While interviewees didn't specifically use the term legitimacy, community members and staff discussed the role of trust and "walking the talk". To examine frontline work as a source of communication, I drew from participant observation as well as social media and news articles about frontline events. Examples for frontline work as a source of communication are primarily from LA CAN, but I identified examples from both CBOs and compared across CBOs. In this comparison, I analyzed how their style of frontline work, whether a fightback or asset-based approach, and their positioning at the epicenter or fenceline shaped how each CBO communicated poverty knowledge.

### **Working Through Ideas of Poverty at the Frontline**

The long-term relationships described in the previous chapter provided a way for staff and community members to work through ideas about poverty, whether through planning meetings, informal ongoing interactions, or participating in actions. Both CBOs emphasized the role and expertise of community members, but I identified key differences in how ideas about

poverty were communicated through frontline work. With LA CAN drawing from an abolitionist perspective and focusing more on structural causes and critiques of institutions, their fightback approach included more explicit discussions around causes of poverty. This does not mean that SBCC avoided conversations, but as a CBO with an asset-based approach, conversations centered more on community assets. Their approaches also differed based on each CBO's location and on the ideas that their community member base brought into interactions.

The two CBOs used similar methods to offer a new form of poverty politics, but the differences in organizational history as well as whether they had a primary emphasis on organizing or on services resulted in the CBOs having different forms of poverty knowledge. These differences in poverty knowledge shaped how community members were introduced to new ideas and the opportunities that community members and staff had to question existing ideas. However, both CBOs used frontline work as openings to introduce new ideas and help community members to reframe existing ideas. Through these openings, staff and community members identified connections and learned about the struggles of low-income community members while questioning categories and assumptions. For some community members, these interactions also helped to introduce and then emphasize structural causes of poverty.

### **Frontline Methods for Discussing Poverty**

Poverty knowledge in frontline work included discussions of systems such as affordable housing, policing, and economic systems that affect poverty, as well as discussions about people living in poverty. Discussions also brought in related concepts such as LA CAN staff identifying criminalization of low-income community members as a core problem or community members with SBCC who identified a lack of resources or concerns with violence in their community.

Alongside diagnoses of problems, discussions in frontline work included proposed solutions and who was considered responsible. I discuss key ways that each CBO introduced ideas about poverty, including official presentations and informal interactions for LA CAN and facilitated discussions and community projects for SBCC, and how discussions and core ideas were influenced by their overarching framework.

***LA CAN: Structural Analyses of Poverty through Presentations and Impromptu Discussions***

As a fightback organization, LA CAN's frontline work helped community members to learn about political processes, how community members were excluded from current processes, and how they could change these processes. One interviewee described how LA CAN talked with community members about poverty:

We talk about (poverty and houselessness) from a them versus us perspective. I mean we talk about it from a realistic perspective. The conversation comes up when we talk about resources. When a lot of people come through the door talking about, 'Why we ain't got this? Why we ain't got this?'

LA CAN highlighted systemic problems when they pointed out how the adjacent downtown area received more resources compared to the Skid Row neighborhood where members of LA CAN lived. This interviewee continued:

Why when you look on Spring Street and Hill and Broadway (in downtown), you see things over there that you don't see over here (in Skid Row), like trash cans? You understand me? And stuff like that, right? Street cleaning. Real street cleaning, right? Because I mean it's favoritism. We talk about privilege.. Who's in and who's out.



He described sharing this system-level view and discussing “the reality about it” when community members asked about challenges. Staff members and active community leaders varied in how they presented information and facilitated discussion. Despite this variation, I identified common themes for the poverty knowledge within LA CAN’s frontline work: drawing from an abolitionist framework to identify problems and solutions, defining problems as due to systemic failures and government inaction, and highlighting the importance of community-led solutions. As described in previous chapters, from their origin, LA CAN’s views differed from the dominant narrative of personal failings and instead LA CAN saw the causes of poverty and homelessness as political. LA CAN also started with a belief that community members should drive decision making and these core ideals were part of their poverty knowledge within frontline work. Through official presentations and facilitated discussions at meetings combined with informal interactions and actions, community members and staff were introduced to these ideas and connected topics to their personal experiences. Community members discussed ideas through multiple interactions, so long-term relationships were a key tool for political education and reinforcing poverty knowledge.

**Presentations and discussions on systemic issues and structural racism.** Throughout LA CAN’s history, the bi-monthly Residential Organizing Committee (ROC) meetings on Friday evenings were a key venue for sharing ideas and core principles and an important part of their organizing strategy. Community members described how they had participated in previous meetings, such as assisting with recruitment phone calls or cooking for meetings. During my data collection period, these meetings followed a fairly set format, with the reading of the LA CAN mission, ice breakers, ground rules, a speaker and discussion, announcements, and dinner after

the meeting had ended, These meetings were a space for members to learn about key topics and avenues for action, while helping to build and strengthen community.

ROC meeting topics often connected to historical events, either at a national level or within Skid Row, and their presentations about events emphasized key messages. I attended meetings that coincided with the 4-year anniversary of the death of Charley Africa, a Skid Row resident who was killed by the police; Black August, a month of honoring Black resistance and anti-prison activism that also commemorated the death of prison activist George Jackson at San Quentin prison; and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. LA CAN used these presentations to highlight structural violence and systemic causes of poverty that affected their community member base. For the meeting that fell on the date after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, staff showed excerpts from King's speech "The Other America". In this speech, King spoke about moving from struggles against segregation to struggles against poverty and economic inequality. Community members watched an excerpt where King connected racism to economic inequality and described how people who supported actions against extremism in the South grew uncomfortable when King identified problems within the North. After this video excerpt, a staff and an active community volunteer held a discussion where community members shared similarities between the speech and current conditions in Los Angeles. Community members highlighted current unemployment, referring to how people attending this meeting have struggled with finding a job. Meeting attendees also added that they felt that surveillance was worse than before. After the presentation, community members had conversation over pizza. One community member recounted the time he heard Martin Luther King Jr. speak while another

community member played his guitar, so this meeting space was also a time to strengthen relationships.

LA CAN brought in speakers to ROC meetings who had a similar abolitionist framework and could discuss systemic problems. One of LA CAN's first campaigns focused on changing the practices of L.A. Downtown Industrial Business Improvement District (BID) security officers in Skid Row and this emphasis on challenging criminalization and policing practices continued in their current frontline work. Both LA CAN and their partners identified criminalization as a problem in low-income communities of color. Presentations communicated how policing intensified problems of poverty through targeting low-income communities. They connected poverty to racism and anti-Blackness and discussed how policing served to uphold institutional racism. A Spring 2019 ROC meeting included a presentation by a journalist who critiqued how the media covered police shootings. In her talk, she described the police as representing the state and an anti-Black system. Not all of the community members present agreed with her and one community member disagreed with the comment that "there are no good cops." She responded with how instead of focusing on individual police, she viewed policing as an institution of white supremacy and police officers as representing and upholding this system. Announcements from LA CAN staff reinforced these messages, especially announcements from Stop LAPD Spying Coalition. This coalition of organizations and individuals had a goal of "dismantling of government-sanctioned spying and intelligence gathering, in all its multiple forms," and was housed within LA CAN ("About us", n.d.). Because of LA CAN's history and mission, they were able to house a coalition with an abolitionist framework. In turn, LA CAN members were able to learn about and get involved in Stop LAPD Spying Coalition activities

and the radical frontline work of Stop LAPD Spying further expanded the space for poverty knowledge. In a 2019 ROC meeting, staff discussed a Stop LAPD Spying Coalition action to end an Los Angeles Police Department program called predictive policing. A staff member discussed how predictive policing served to uphold white supremacy, with racism designed into the infrastructure of this program. LA CAN and Stop LAPD Spying Coalition's abolitionist framework informed the solutions that they promoted during frontline work. Because the system was "fundamentally flawed by design", he described how their solution was not reform, but dismantling this program.

In addition to speakers and presentations, ROC meetings included opportunities for community members to bring in their own experiences. Community members were then able to work through ideas of poverty by connecting their personal experiences to larger issues. Shortly after the release of the 2019 Los Angeles County Homeless Count results, staff and community members discussed the increase in houselessness in both Los Angeles City and County that was documented in the Homeless Count results. A staff member asked each ROC meeting participant to share their reaction to the Homeless Count results. After each person shared, the staff member commented that "our own eyes told us it didn't sit well" as community members thought that numbers were even higher than the report. Drawing on community members' personal experiences, staff asked community members what LA CAN should do as an organization. The increase in houselessness documented in this report had led to attention and concern from local government, so LA CAN staff identified this time as an opportunity to "uplift our narrative". Staff highlighted this as an opportunity: "If the council says bold, we can show them bold," referring to LA CAN's ideas to address houselessness. Staff had previously shared ideas with

community members as part of their long-term involvement, so they could refer to “our narrative”. Through these meetings, LA CAN shared “our narrative” and brought in solutions that corresponded with this narrative. Building companionship among members and drawing in community members’ experiences through frontline work, LA CAN included community members in actions and commented that “we (staff and community members together) can show them bold”

**Impromptu discussions and actions to highlight government failure and apathy.**

While the examples above were from official presentations and facilitated discussions, ideas were also shared through impromptu discussions. These discussions drew from the same core ideas and mission as the official presentations. Community members attended multiple events and thus learned about issues through multiple formats. During housing committee meetings, staff highlighted key concepts related to affordable housing and government processes. Discussions were not always planned ahead of time, but staff used this unplanned time to highlight government inaction or apathy towards housing for low-income community members. When discussing the history of downtown development, a staff member described how government officials used blight as a reason for development. These government officials used the word blight to indicate that poor people lived in that area. Here, he was showing how poor people were discussed and treated by government agencies. After community members expressed confusion about a city process during a housing committee meeting, a staff member drew an impromptu chart. He acknowledged that these processes were complicated and attributed complications as due to a “broken process for housing for poor people”. He used this example of a “broken process” to emphasize how because low-income housing was not

considered a priority, processes were more complicated and difficult to navigate. In this conversation, the staff member highlighted the responsibility of government in addressing this issue and the failure of government to do so.

LA CAN also used frontline actions to help community members to find flaws with the current system and to look for alternatives. Similar to the discussions described above, through involving community members in government hearings and various actions, frontline actions helped community members identify government apathy and a process that was “broken for poor people”. One active community member described how community members experienced this broken process through attending government hearings, which as result, helped to “build a culture of resistance”. This community member described how LA CAN staff helped community members began to see flaws in the system through participating in actions:

That's why we bring people there (to government meetings). That's what we show them because we teach people how to engage the system better than anyone else and they're going to see the system fails them and seek other alternatives. And then we need to be there to do that.

He then added “It's kind of cool, it's a real revolutionary undercurrent to a reformist organization.” Combined with informal discussions and presentations, participating in actions helped community members identify how “the system fails them” and the solution of seeking alternatives. This interviewee stated that “we need to be there to do that” referring to supporting community members who are seeking alternatives. This type of participation was not a one-time event, but an ongoing, supportive process leading to political belonging. The long-term

relationships and support highlighted in the previous chapter were critical in supporting community members as they worked through these ideas.

**Political education and reinforcing ideas through long-term relationships.**

Community members formed relationships with staff as well as with other community members through frontline work. These supportive relationships helped community members to question ideas and to learn across multiple meetings and interactions. Many policies discussed during Housing Committee meetings were fairly complicated, so staff explained concepts over multiple meetings. At one meeting, a staff member presented a diagram to explain the differences between HUD Section 8 housing programs and public housing. When one community member commented that he might not remember all this information, staff stressed that it took time to learn. Long-time community members also offered encouragement and assured him that it took time, so relationships between community members and leadership from long-term members helped to strengthen this learning. These relationships and ongoing interactions allowed people “to learn at your own speed but also insistent that you are learning.”

In addition to learning complicated policies over time, long-term relationships also provided a way to question previous assumptions and to be introduced to new ideas and frameworks. In a meeting in January 2019, one attendee who got involved with LA CAN the prior year discussed how he learned more about LA CAN through each event. He commented that “I thought I had seen it all when I had gone to Freedom Now”, referring to the 2018 annual fundraiser. Then, he talked about his experience going to the Fela Kuti concert later that year and how he felt even more connected to LA CAN after this event. This connection helped community members to learn about and identify with LA CAN’s core principles. At the annual

member retreat in December 2019, staff presented a document with principles for engagement. Guiding principles included “Power is within our communities”, “Our struggles are interconnected”, and “Commitment to Black liberation.” After presenting these principles, staff asked for feedback and one person reflected that “to abide by this, we need to know each other better.” Relationships were critical for following these principles and for questioning systemic racism. Staff and community members described their processes for learning these principles, and one staff added that this had also been a process of unlearning. This retreat then ended with a cake to celebrate December birthdays and a group picture with everyone at the retreat, so political education and “unlearning” happened alongside friendship. Through these frontline methods, LA CAN highlighted systemic problems and government apathy as well as community expertise. As discussed later, not all community members agreed with LA CAN’s analysis, but friendships cultivated through frontline work helped staff and community members to process these ideas.

***SBCC: Concepts of Community and Houselessness through NAC meetings and Community Projects***

While LA CAN had an abolitionist and fightback framework, SBCC had a different approach to their work with community members. SBCC’s Community Organizing Facebook profile photo included a logo that states “We build networks of residents who lead social change in their community.” This slogan highlighted SBCC’s core principles and belief in the power of residents. SBCC identified economic and social inequality in historically marginalized communities in their mission and they addressed this inequality through resident-driven civic engagement. This core commitment that impact must be “resident-led and community-driven”



influenced how staff and community members talked about poverty. SBCC contested deficit-based ideas of low-income communities and highlighted the role of community members in solutions, but SBCC was less likely to have a system-level diagnosis of problems. Discussions within frontline work were shaped not only by SBCC's mission but also by ideas from their core community base. Through frontline work that included facilitated discussions and ongoing community projects, SBCC also emphasized core ideas through relationships and ongoing interactions. However, the poverty knowledge within SBCC's frontline work differed from LA CAN, based on their mission, origin, and core community base.

**Frontline methods with community members who are “barely making it.”** Both CBOs had an emphasis on long-term relationships and saw community members as the “spirit and soul”. Thus, ideas are not just communicated from a CBO to community members, but community members bring in ideas and shape discussions within frontline work. Many community members involved with SBCC were low-income parents but they were less likely to be houseless compared to LA CAN community members. Community members involved with SBCC shared challenges such as loss of income, rent burdens, accessing places through public transportation, dealing with violence, or with substance abuse. Community members were able to share challenges and offer support, but many community members active with SBCC still saw a separation between themselves and houseless individuals. When I asked one community member about solutions to poverty during an interview, he equated poverty with homelessness and then identified two groups: those “barely making it” and homeless residents. This community member commented that he was less involved with addressing issues of homelessness. He described SBCC events for people “who are like barely making it that need a

little bit more help. But never for like the homeless people.” While other community members didn’t explicitly use these categories, community members who were interviewed mentioned the high rent and struggles to pay rent but still indicated a separation between themselves and houseless individuals they encountered at the park. Community members brought these pre-existing ideas into frontline work, and these ideas influenced conversations about poverty.

Community members also brought in ideas on the role of government institutions and the two CBOs differed in how they discussed the role of the police. LA CAN’s poverty knowledge identified criminalization as intensifying poverty, but SBCC did not have an explicit stance regarding policing. This was not solely a difference in organizational mission as community members who were part of SBCC also brought in ideas and experiences that affected frontline discussions. Some community members involved with SBCC identified ways that police could improve their practices, but they also saw police as potential partners. One community member commented that:

If people see us collaborating with the police, they (community members) will know they can come to us for help. The police need to be kind to us and we can be kind and respectful and cooperative with them. So that in the moment of crisis, people will know that there will be cooperation with the police and this will hopefully minimize crime.

They (police) need to stand with us as a community

She acknowledged that the “police need to be kind to us”, indicating expectations that police should improve their behavior, but she also saw cooperation with police as a way to address issues. One community member recommended that SBCC have police officers attend their meetings so that residents could ask “why it is that we always feel like we must keep quiet or

why they never respond when we call for an emergency.” She expressed concerns about safety as she stated “We would all like to walk around in the morning or afternoon for a few blocks without feeling like something bad will happen.” She felt that police needed to change and be more responsive, but she also saw police as part of the solution and improving safety.

While the community members above discussed working with police, not all community members and staff agreed with this idea. One SBCC staff member who worked in the community she grew up in recognized that her personal ideas were more radical compared the community members whom she worked with. She described how she adapted her approach based on her community member base:

My personal reaction, what I want to do is be like, ‘fuck the cops, let’s organize outside of that.’ But as an organizer learning to be, ‘Hey, have we thought about maybe there’s an alternative? (to police)’ .....now I’m in the ditches and understanding like...the whole process of like, this is the way these systems work, and sometimes it can be really scary if I bring that. Like I can’t just jump in and bring in my radical ideas, because that’s going to alienate my people from me.

While community members didn’t share her radical ideas, this staff member shared a connection with the community members she worked with. She looked for ways to facilitate conversations, recognizing that she couldn’t just “jump in and bring in my radical ideas.” She adapted her approach in order to introduce ideas, recognizing that community members’ experiences and beliefs affected her frontline methods and how discussions took place.

**Discussions of community assets and challenges.** While discussions in Neighborhood Action Council (NAC) meetings and county-wide meetings didn’t explicitly focus on poverty,

through talking about assets and community problems, community members questioned key concepts within poverty knowledge. SBCC's website referred to a "core commitment to place the gifts, talents and leadership capacities of neighborhoods first" ("About Us"; n.d.). In line with this commitment, frontline discussions with residents emphasized residents' gifts and talents as well as community efforts. At an SBCC workshop, a staff member shared the story of I Heart Wilmington's origin. He described how community members who formed I Heart Wilmington wanted to present an alternative, more positive picture of Wilmington compared to how media was highlighting crime in Wilmington. The staff member told community members at this workshop that "empezamos con amor" or "we began with love", emphasizing the values and leadership of community members. Through highlighting community assets, SBCC contested views of low-income communities, such as the media's portrayal that focused on Wilmington's deficits.

Through SBCC's relationship-based model, discussions provided a chance for community members to learn from each other and to reinforce the idea that community members were experts. Community members discussed both positive and negative aspects of their community, and they shared varying ideas about poverty through these conversations. At an I Heart Watts meeting, staff showed a recent documentary, *A Week in Watts*, in order to contrast how the video negatively portrayed the neighborhood of Watts compared to how community members viewed Watts. Staff showed this video in order to help community members plan an alternative, more positive video, but the discussion after the video showed a range of ideas among community members. In the discussion after the documentary, community members shared differing opinions about gangs in their neighborhood. One person referred to a specific

gang that had more respect for their neighborhood compared to other gangs. She commented that this gang would let a parent know if their kid was somewhere they were not supposed to be. After this comment, another community member referred to gangs as a “virus”, showing the range of opinions. Responding to the video, staff and community members also shared their perspectives on police. While the documentary described a hostile reaction towards police, the SBCC staff member commented that "I have seen you hug police or shake their hand". A community member responded with "I will shake their hands", indicating that he would work with police but he was not ready to hug them. While community members did not agree completely, many community members indicated that police could be part of solutions, showing a different view from LA CAN.

As community members discussed aspects of their community, the staff member emphasized how the documentary negatively portrayed Watts and ignored positive aspects. He referred to the efforts of community members within this room as positive examples that this video overlooked. He asked "should they (police) take the credit or should we (community members) get credit?" When community members commented both, the organizer responded that "You guys deserve as much credit. No matter what meeting I go to, I see you there." He did not argue with the idea that police were part of solutions but identified community members as equally responsible for change. Community members didn't agree on all aspects, such as how they felt about gangs, but this was a space to share ideas and then connect through community projects. Through these discussions, staff reinforced positive messages and questioned negative portrayals of their community.

SBCC also used facilitated exercises to help NAC participants learn more about their community and work through concepts within poverty knowledge. In 2018, SBCC instituted an modified version of human-centered design, which was a facilitated conversation using a three question survey to gather feedback from other community members. They used this survey to identify an issue that NACs from across Los Angeles county could all focus on. In either English or Spanish, this survey mentioned three different issues; faltas de viviendas (homelessness); education de salud (health education); and seguridad (security), and then had three questions about interest and importance for their community. At the November 2018 county-wide meeting, a staff member encouraged community members involved with SBCC to use these surveys to talk with other community members. With the upcoming holiday time, he joked that they could they have these conversations over tamales. Drawing from their relationship-based model, SBCC staff promoted the importance of learning from community member through these surveys.

Within this frontline method of community surveys combined with facilitated discussions, there was a range in how community members and staff discussed issues. At this county-wide meeting, staff and community members shared their experiences with hosting discussions around the three topics, specifically around how they talked about houselessness. A staff organizer commented on the challenge with the phrase Faltas de vivienda as this phrase didn't quite translate to homelessness and thus, presented difficulties for discussions in Spanish. In response, other staff shared how they discussed this topic. One staff member commented that she connected faltas de viviendas to housing rights. She described how at NAC meetings, community members discussed how many people were one paycheck away from homelessness, while another staff member clarified that she described this word as referring to people who

currently did not have a home. Another staff member shared that for some community members, this issue might be related to a proposed bridge home for their community, which was an initiative to have an emergency shelter in each city council district in Los Angeles. I was not able to follow up, so I do not know if this staff member was referring to community members' resistance to bridge shelters, as this resistance had been mentioned previously. Staff encouraged community members to share their experiences and emphasized community knowledge, but these discussions varied among communities and depending on the staff facilitating.

While the staff and community members at a meeting influenced how issues were discussed, across the different groups, staff emphasized the expertise of community members. Similar to LA CAN, community members with SBCC shared their personal experiences as they worked through ideas about poverty. SBCC had a different overarching framework that influenced the core ideas within discussions. Instead of focusing on structures or systems, SBCC challenged deficit ideas and emphasized community members as leaders. With a mission that emphasized the importance of relationships, as discussed in the next section, frontline methods helped to increase empathy and reduce separations.

**“Knowing that people struggle out here:” Community-led projects to build connections.** SBCC’s frontline work included resident-led actions as part of their goal of “building a network of residents who lead social change in their community.” The types of projects varied across NACs, but some resident-led actions involved services and interactions with houseless neighbors. Community members active with SBCC who were “barely making it” often identified a separation between themselves and houseless individuals. These resident-led

projects provided an opportunity to interact with houseless neighbors and learn about their experiences, which could challenge or reinforce separations between community members.

I did not observe interactions between NAC participants and houseless community members, but staff and community members discussed how projects helped to change perceptions. A staff organizer described a project where community members involved with SBCC surveyed houseless community members. Community members had previously organized blanket or food drives, and the SBCC staff organizer encouraged residents to further their involvement. This organizer described asking community participants:

‘We’re doing a great job (with blanket or food drives), how can we take it to the next level?’ And just asking those questions after every successful event ..So the point right now when we’re serving a lot of our homeless population, the ladies (involved with SBCC) feel comfortable going out and talking (to houseless residents). And we do get a lot of positive experiences, and so they’re kind of seeing like, ‘Wow, OK, now that we’re talking to them, like, what else can we do?’ How can we help them, you know, besides just giving them food and just giving them blankets like we’ve been doing for years.

Through talking with houseless community members, community members involved with SBCC learned that their houseless neighbors were not living outside because they wanted to. Rather, community members learned that “they’re (houseless community members) going through stuff, like can easily happen to the rest of us, so how can we share that, how can we share their story.” Interactions as part of this survey project combined with discussions at NAC meetings to challenge stereotypes of houseless community members. Community members questioned



separations and learned that houseless community members were going through things that could “easily happen to the rest of us.”

As community members in this group began to question stereotypes, they identified the problem of stigma against houseless populations. The organizer described why community members involved with surveying felt that projects addressing stigma were important: “Because if everyone looked at them (houseless residents) as people, we probably could get more help for them sooner. But so many people kind of view them as, you know. Just changing that stigma for sure.” In line with SBCC’s mission and focus, discussions reinforced messages on the role of community expertise as staff described how community members recognized the need to “ask them (houseless residents) what they need, they’re the experts”. Community members changed their perspectives through multiple interactions and facilitated discussions and the staff member commented that “It’s gradual. And it definitely does not happen overnight.” Through the ongoing interactions that included both community-led projects and then follow-up discussions in NAC meetings, community members identified challenging stigma as an important action.

This example above was a longer facilitated process to help community members expand from blanket and food drives to identifying stigma as a key issue, but other staff and community members described smaller projects that increased empathy among participants. SBCC hosted discussions after a Bridge Home emergency shelter was proposed for Wilmington. Staff described how some community members changed from opposing to supporting a Bridge Home in their neighborhood after facilitated discussions. Through NAC meetings, community members also learned about services for houseless community members and political outlets. One

community member active in the Antelope Valley area of Los Angeles County described learning about services and political processes:

I didn't even know we had different homeless shelters, I didn't know we had different places in the community. Like I didn't even know people would get together and like sit down and talk about the community. I learned about the meetings the city has, so it's really interesting, because you get to speak out.

She described speaking in support of a proposed shelter being located closer to the city center, so that it would be easier for people to get to. She described how people struggle and then referred to shelters as a solution:

Knowing some people that struggle out here, it's like how we were talking about rent, bills wise (referring to an earlier conversation during their NAC meeting). Like we're living off paycheck to paycheck and a lot of people are becoming homeless. So that's why it's good to have like some shelters, some donation centers and stuff.

Conversations through frontline work helped her to identify living paycheck to paycheck as a cause of houselessness. She had learned about shelters and donation centers and described these services as a way to help people who were struggling, but solutions were less likely to focus on more structural changes.

While this community member made the connection between living paycheck to paycheck and people becoming houseless, not all community members were in agreement. SBCC's main office was close to encampments for houseless residents and community members shared different perspectives on why people were houseless. One community member who was

active with SBCC described what she had learned after talking with houseless individuals and with police officers.

Of course, only they (houseless residents) know their needs, the reason behind them not having a home. We would even give them blankets, food and ask them ‘why don’t you look for a home?’ when they spoke Spanish. We would be like ‘why are you here?’ when they spoke the same language ‘Oh, I just don’t make enough, this or that.’ And a lot of the times, when the police would come with us, they (the police) would tell us that they (houseless residents) don’t want rules. The apartments have their own rules and a lot of them (police) would say that it was because they don’t have rules.

This community member discussed challenges that she faced paying bills. While she acknowledged that only they (houseless residents) knew the reason, she did not connect her financial struggles with struggles for houseless residents. Instead, her interactions with police officers reinforced ideas that focused on individual responsibility. Other interviewees discussed the high cost of housing, but they saw houseless residents in the park as facing different issues. Projects and facilitated discussions helped to increase empathy and form connections, but some community members maintained separations between themselves and houseless community members.

While staff and community members active with SBCC brought in differing ideas and facilitation styles, there were overarching themes. A SBCC staff member commented that this did not happen overnight; this was an iterative process with a combination of community projects where participants learned from other community members and facilitated discussions that drew on their expertise as community members. Community members brought in a range of

ideas, and SBCC frontline activities provided a space to work through these ideas. SBCC had fewer solutions at structural levels, but in line with their mission, discussions emphasized community expertise. With a relationship-based model, community members involved with SBCC learned about other community member's struggles, which helped them to question stereotypes and see "that could be me".

### ***Solutions within Frontline Poverty Knowledge: The Role of Institutions and of Community Members***

While they had similar frontline methods, the two CBOs had distinct forms of poverty knowledge due to differences in mission and overarching frameworks. SBCC identified access to resources and opportunities as a problem, but LA CAN was more likely to identify problems as due to government processes and systemic problems, including how institutions were "fundamentally flawed." How poverty was diagnosed as a problem then shaped how CBOs discussed solutions to poverty, including the roles and responsibilities of institutions and of community members.

The two CBOs differed in how they discussed the role of state institutions, including whether institutions were responsible for increasing poverty and how institutions should be part of solutions. As mentioned previously, there were clear differences in their discussions of policing and criminalization. In frontline events, LA CAN staff referred to the criminalization of poverty, and identified police as targeting and harming houseless community members. Staff described how targeting of Black and Brown communities was not a program flaw of police surveillance programs but rather due to programs working as intended. As an organization positioned in the "epicenter of human rights violations", many community members had

experienced harassment by police. LA CAN identified policing as part of the problem and discussed how criminalization exacerbated poverty and homelessness. Staff stressed during presentations to community members that they were not advocating for “a kindler, gentler racism” or reform, so police were not part of solutions.

In contrast, SBCC did not have an explicit stance around policing. SBCC had a philosophy on relationships and partnerships as a driver for local social change. As one staff member described in Chapter two, “if you're able to work with any organization that's willing to collaborate with you, then you do it”. In line with their philosophy, they saw police who could support resident-driven social change as potential partners for efforts. Community members involved with SBCC also ranged from giving police a hug and thanking them, willing to shake their hands, or identifying areas for improvement, while seeing the police as partners. These views affected discussions during frontline work as a SBCC staff member mentioned that bringing in her radical ideas could “alienate my people from me.” She recognized that relationships with community members were a central part of her work and modified her approach in response.

While LA CAN highlighted more systemic solutions and called out government institutions such as policing, both CBOs stressed the idea of community-centered solutions within frontline work. Both CBOs challenged ideas that focused on deficits of low-income communities when defining problems of poverty. Instead, the two CBOs highlighted the strength of community members in the midst of challenges. SBCC highlighted that community members “deserve just as much credit” (compared to police who were taking credit for solutions in this

case) and emphasized that community members knew what would work best in their communities. As one SBCC staff member commented:

You can't really solve the problem of poverty, if they're (community members) not in the answer. Like if they're not answering it themselves... Like if they're not coming up with some of the answers themselves. Like I can't impose solutions to their problems, because it wouldn't, work it's not organic. And that's still the idea of someone coming from the outside and imposing things on them, so it's important to work with people.

Both CBOs saw community-led action and community knowledge as a critical part of solutions.

In their discussion of community-led solutions, the CBOs differed in how they framed solutions and connected community-led efforts to the role of government institutions. A SBCC staff member commented on the importance of community-led solutions, contrasting community actions to government actions: "I have much more realistic goals. I have much less faith in federal government, and even state and local government to do this well. I really think it's a job that needs to be done in community by communities." Interviews were conducted in 2018-2019, so the federal political environment towards immigrants likely influenced this view and the lack of faith in government. SBCC identified partners with a pragmatic approach of identifying partners in line with their mission, but they saw communities as leading these efforts. LA CAN also emphasized community-led solutions and agreed that "coming in from the outside and imposing things" would not work, but LA CAN also used community-led actions to hold government agencies accountable. By involving community members in frontline actions, LA CAN helped community members to see how the current system failed them and then imagine

alternatives. Through highlighting the failures of government institutions, frontline community-led efforts had a “revolutionary undercurrent”.

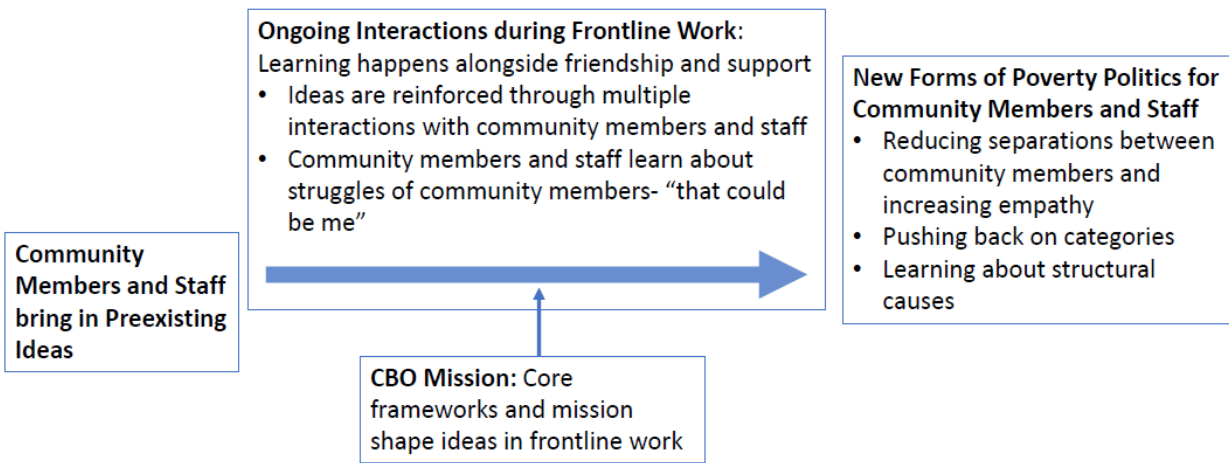
Their core population and philosophy also influenced how discussions and experiences of race occurred within the two CBOs. LA CAN was an organization centered in the epicenter, where Black community members were overrepresented among the houseless population, so community members faced marginalization due to both race and houselessness. Both LA CAN’s diagnoses of problems and solutions were rooted in community members’ experiences and their history as an organization connected to Black radical thought and with an abolitionist framework. This framework informed LA CAN’s diagnosis of problems due to structural racism. SBCC connected with residents over Latinx culture, and this also shaped their role in Wilmington, as well as how they worked with residents in other communities. Events were held in both English and Spanish and they incorporated aspects of Latinx culture and identities, whether it was conversations over tamales, music at their different events, or highlighting Latinx entrepreneurs. As mentioned in Chapter Two, this differed from the Chicano radical activism described by Pulido (2006), so SBCC was less likely to have an abolitionist framework. However, they provided a space for community members and staff to connect over shared experiences and for immigrant community members to share their concerns and to feel heard and valued.

Staff varied in how they would facilitate, but these overarching ideas provided templates and core ideas to emphasize during frontline work. Through frontline activities that included presentations and facilitated discussions, informal interactions, community projects, and conversations among community members, CBOs communicated narratives and provided a

space for community members to share ideas. Figure 3 shows the different influences on poverty knowledge and the mechanisms for shaping ideas about poverty. In this next section, I discuss how, as a result, frontline work led to new forms of poverty politics for staff and community members.

**Figure 3**

*Shaping Ideas about Poverty through Long-term Relationships and Communities of Care*



**Reframing Ideas for Staff and Community Members**

Interviewee: Poverty is because people are not making enough money, correct?

Rachel: Yeah.

Interviewee Am I right?

Rachel: Yeah, well how would you see it? It's however you want

Interviewee: People are not making enough money to take care of their needs that they need, necessarily. To solve the problem, they need to have a better income. To solve the problem, we need to have housing for the homeless. So, it's about financial, it's about us providing the help that's necessary (Community member, LA CAN)



Community members and staff did not have a uniform conception of poverty and they brought these differing ideas to frontline work. When asked about poverty, some community members equated poverty with homelessness while other community members focused on systems that caused poverty. For the community member quoted above, poverty was simply due to people not making enough money. Community members also varied in how they personally identified with poverty. One interviewee identified himself as barely making it but he saw that as different from poverty. When other interviewees talked about poverty, they included themselves as living in poverty. One interviewee commented that how after her part-time work with SBCC, she saw herself as less in poverty: “I don’t feel poor anymore, not anymore, I’m rich at heart because I’m here and I have my family.” Staff also had varying experiences with poverty. Some community members and staff had been involved with organizing prior to their time with LA CAN or SBCC, and they also brought in ideas from their previous organizing efforts.

These prior ideas and experiences influenced how community members questioned and reframed ideas about poverty and whether frontline experiences reinforced existing ideas. This process of reframing did not often lead to large shifts, but community members and staff increased their understanding of challenges for low-income community members and identified commonalities. These experiences helped community members to question ideas that defined low-income community members and individual failure as the source of their poverty. Hybrid frontline work resulted in new forms of poverty politics through two ways: 1) increasing empathy and identifying commonalities and 2) pushing back on categories.

### *Increasing Empathy and Identifying Commonalities*

Staff and community members described how through interactions, they learned more about how other community members struggled. I identified examples with both LA CAN and SBCC, but this was a common theme for SBCC. For community member-led projects, such as surveying houseless community members, community members who “were barely making it” learned that “they’re (houseless community members) going through stuff, like can easily happen to the rest of us”. In addition to this survey project, shorter projects where community members gave hygiene kits also provided an opportunity to have conversations with houseless community members. An SBCC staff member described the impact of these projects on community members:

It (NAC members’ perspectives) shifted, they said, ‘These are normal people. They (houseless community members) are people that struggle just like everyone of us. That could be me...It’s just their circumstances, they’re still people and there’s no reason why I should be scared of them.’

In this shift, community members began to see houseless community members not as an other or as someone to be afraid of and instead as “normal people.” NAC members began to identify similarities and shared struggles through these interactions. Seeing that “could be me” helped to reduce separations between near-poor community members involved with SBCC and unhoused community members; this, in turn, helped community members to recognize humanity and reduce their fear of other community members.

In addition to interactions through community projects, staff and community members learned about each other’s struggles through sharing during meetings. This was not only a way to

break down separations but also a way to strengthen connections as community members offered support to each other. Staff learned more about the challenges that community members faced, such as learning about community members' rent burden when discussing an upcoming rent control initiative. Many SBCC community members were immigrants and one SBCC staff member discussed how this frontline work "opened her eyes" to the daily challenges for people living in poverty, specifically for the struggles of immigrant families. Through interactions as part of NAC meetings and community projects, she also saw how low-income community members were involved with community efforts despite their challenges. She commented that these interactions "made me see and appreciate [their struggles] also because I do come from immigrant parents." Through forming friendships with community members as part of frontline work, she was able to personalize the struggles for low-income immigrants and connect their stories to her personal experiences.

### ***Pushing Back on Categories***

As community members formed connections and identified commonalities with low-income community members, staff and community members began to question dominant ideas about poverty and push back on categories. One SBCC staff member described changing how she viewed people living in poverty through her work with community members:

(Poverty) It's an issue but it's not something that defines people, I think, or that lets them become powerless. This has changed my perspective (working at SBCC), in how I look at things. I don't think, you know, it defines people, at least, I don't want it to. and I don't think it defines them.

Staff learned about the challenges that community members faced, but she also saw how these same community members had not become powerless; rather, low-income community members involved with SBCC were committed to their community. An LA CAN interviewee commented on how his idea of poverty had changed after spending time with LA CAN:

I think I thought poverty was destitute. And I don't think that anymore... I think it's also a reality that like you don't have as many means to get things. But you don't have as many ways to get things by money. But there are other solutions. There are ways to get food. There are ways to get care and guidance and housing and things we need. You just have to go about it in a slightly different way.

As opposed to a deficit view, he identified resources and ways that people would get care and food in the midst of poverty. He still identified challenges but in contrast to the idea that low-income community members were the source of problems, community members were creating their own solutions.

As staff and community members resisted categorizing and defining people by their poverty, they also questioned the idea that poverty was a choice. This reframing of ideas then influenced how they worked with community members. One LA CAN member described how frontline work that combined interactions and learning about different issues had helped him to recognize the magnitude of the problem and to question mainstream discussions about causes:

Interviewee: (Poverty) It's a bigger problem than I think I realized and that most people realize and that the causes of it are not what the mainstream population would have you think.

Rachel: What would you say the causes are?

Interviewee: I think the number one cause is income, a lack of income. You know, there are people that work two jobs and still can't afford to live in the city. I think there's a lack of rent control and there's a lack of keeping landlords on a leash of some sort, that it's so easy for a landlord to push people out now. So while there's few people down here that are down here because of their lifestyle choices, I now believe and have come to learn that most people are down here because of you know hitting bad times or not being able to afford to live here. ... And so, I don't look down on anybody.

Frontline work at LA CAN reinforced the idea that poverty was not a choice. This shift in ideas influenced his interpersonal interactions and as a result, he commented that “I don't look down on anybody.”

Frontline work with both CBOs led to questioning categories, but LA CAN had more examples where community members added a structural analysis. One community member commented on how his time at Skid Row and with LA CAN illustrated the structural nature of these problems: “Skid Row really helped me to actually realize that ... I mean when it comes down to it, it doesn't matter what you do sometimes. Poverty is designed, IS baked into this society that we live in currently.” He had previous experiences that shaped his awareness of structural problems but his participation with LA CAN and interactions with community members in Skid Row reinforced the structural nature and how poverty is “baked into this society.”

### ***Reframing or Reinforcing Existing Ideas***

As community members and staff described opening their eyes and realizing how poverty is baked into society, their prior experiences and perspectives shaped how they made sense of

frontline work. Depending on their previous ideas, staff or community members made shifts but still retained existing ideas. The following two examples from staff with differing perspectives prior to frontline work show how initial ideas influenced shifts in poverty knowledge. One SBCC staff described her previous beliefs and how she modified her previous ideas to identify fear as a barrier for immigrant families: “the biggest population that we work with is immigrant families. And there’s this fear when you came over here (to the United States), you came straight into Wilmington or straight into Compton, that’s all you know and you’re not going anywhere.” She contrasted this identification of fear as a barrier to her previous beliefs:

When I was younger I might say, ‘Oh, they are lazy’. That’s such a misconception that people have that people are naturally lazy which is not, it’s fear and it’s not knowing whether you’re going to leave the house and you’re going to come back later that day. So definitely seeing like what makes people act the way they do, but also knowing that they have options and they’re capable of doing more, once they let go of the fear.

She described shifting from the idea that some people might be lazy to identifying a problem of fear and a solution of helping people let go of their fear. Her encounters with community members challenged her beliefs and led to a more inclusive poverty politics (as discussed by Lawson & Elwood, 2014). Previous viewpoints affected these shifts, so as she changed her assumptions, she remained focused on an individual level.

Frontline work could also reinforce staff and community members’ previous ideas. A SBCC staff who described entering this work with a “systematic view” discussed how work with community members strengthened some of her ideas. Through forming relationships and learning about community members’ challenges, frontline work reinforced the gravity of the

challenges that community members faced. This staff member worked with artisans who were not able to sell their work in certain venues due to transportation challenges, and this made her angrier about inequity:

I come from a systematic view, right, looking at the inequity of resources that is there. And it pisses me off even more to see all of this talent and to see like our jewelry group. Our jewelry group makes beautiful pieces that they cannot sell in their own communities because people can't afford to buy from them.

Seeing the challenges for community members, her frontline interactions with community members “pissed her off even more,” reinforcing her beliefs.

While participation in frontline work did not often lead to large shifts in ideas, frontline work led to new forms of poverty politics in several ways. This process happened across multiple experiences as part of frontline work. In many cases, staff or community members did not have a radical shift in ideas, but changed part of their conceptions. Low-income or near-poor community members began to see “that could be me” when talking with houseless individuals, reducing separations between poor and near-poor, or between houseless community members and those barely making it. For both CBOs, many active community members were living in poverty. Through these interactions, staff and community members learned more about barriers as well as how people were resourceful and did not become “powerless” in this situation. Frontline work also helped to personalize challenges that community members faced. These interactions helped some community members to think more about causes of poverty and see a more structural perspective, especially with LA CAN.

## **Tensions and Contradictions within Discussions of Poverty**

Relationships through hybrid frontline work provided a space to introduce new ideas and question categories, but relationship-based models also included disagreements and negative interactions. Community members who were facing challenges received valuable support through each CBO, but some community members also brought in stereotypes and negative comments towards other community members. I heard complaints from community members towards Black or Latinx community members or comments about LGBT individuals through service activities within both CBOs. I did not get to fully explore this topic, especially for comments during service activities where I did not have consent to observe, but this is an area for future research. While hybrid frontline work was a space where community members' ideas were valued, community members could disagree or bring in stereotypes. One SBCC staff described the varying views within a NAC and how he facilitated discussions to not alienate group members.

It's so different how people view homelessness. I can talk to-I have a group of 15 and I can ask one person, 'What do you think about homelessness?' and they can be very, 'Don't help them. They made the decision blah blah blah' and the person sitting right next to them is like, 'You know what, I was once homeless because I lost the job and I couldn't afford rent. So, it wasn't a choice that I made, so I feel for them.' So, it's so different I try not to...I word it very carefully because I don't want them to assume that I'm picking a side. I just kind of...just very broad, 'What are your thoughts on it?' And then just let them talk and then, 'Okay. How can we work upon this?'



These meetings were an important source of support and community, but community members brought in ideas of deservingness. SBCC had core values that staff emphasized during frontline activities, such as leadership coming from community. SBCC also added a contract in 2018 to help establish respect and create a sense of community. Facilitators drew from these core values; however, in this case, this SBCC staff member felt that he could not openly disagree on this topic or pick a side regarding houselessness. Thus, this staff member facilitated with a broad approach to accommodate community members with differing viewpoints.

Some community members changed views through long-term conversations. After multiple community discussions at SBCC, community members changed from a prior stance opposing a Bridge homeless shelter to expressing support for a shelter in their neighborhood of Wilmington. Mooney commented that these difficult conversations were less likely to happen through a town hall, so SBCC held small group meetings that built upon relationships as venues for difficult conversations. While conversations led to support and many community members being able to see that houseless community members “were just like us”, resident-driven and relationship-based models still included separations and ideas of deservingness.

LA CAN had more houseless community members who were part of their community member base. With an orientation that explicitly stated that causes of houselessness were political not personal, changing this narrative was a key part of LA CAN’s mission and organizing strategy. Even with this orientation, community members at LA CAN could bring in separations and ideas of deservingness. At a bi-monthly ROC meeting in 2019, community members and staff discussed ideas of wellness. After hearing community members expressing judgement and separating themselves from their neighbors within Skid Row, Pete White

responded to these comments and stated “we have not been embodying social wellness”. White commented that we can’t do it alone and referred to participants using they and them to describe other people in Skid Row: “It’s not them, It’s we, it’s us”. He felt that this conversation where people were separating themselves from other community members in Skid Row contrasted from LA CAN’s values. He commented: “When we use words like those and them (as opposed to us or we), we disconnect socially”. While this was a tense moment where community members did not agree, this frontline work provided a space for political education and to work through ideas.

Community members did not always agree with each other, such as the example above, but community members often maintained relationships with each other and the CBO after disagreements. A community member openly disagreed with the speaker’s analysis at a LA CAN ROC meeting, leading to a tense moment, but this community member attended future meetings and events. When I asked about community members returning to LA CAN after disagreements, White described difficult conversations as part of wellness. Within communities of care, the long-term relationships and being together were more important than the disagreements. While some community members would leave after disagreements, these spaces for disagreement and learning were an important part of strengthening communities for the people who stayed.

Some active community members disagreed with aspects of LA CAN’s platform, but they held a strong connection to LA CAN alongside their disagreements on specific issues. One community member commented to me “the government ain’t the only ones fucking up this country,” referring to community members that he saw as part of the problem. He identified this position as being different than LA CAN’s diagnosis of poverty as a structural problem. He identified this difference, but also highlighted positive aspects of LA CAN’s work and referred

to LA CAN staff as his heroes. He talked with staff about these differences, and while he agreed to disagree on some aspects, he felt a strong connection overall to their organizing and community building efforts. This is not to ignore disagreements between community members or hurtful comments towards other community members, and more research could examine how staff members work through these comments and separations. A relationship-based model offered a distinct type of frontline work that was described as powerful and meaningful, but this model also included tensions and disagreements. With this model, staff and community member facilitated conversations to welcome community members and help them work through ideas of poverty alongside disagreements or tensions in relationships.

### **Spaces of Poverty Knowledge:**

#### **How Frontline Work Influences Narratives with Other Audiences**

In addition to providing a space where staff and community members worked through ideas about poverty, this frontline work helped advance narratives to other audiences. In this section, I show how frontline work positioned the two CBOs to communicate and shape poverty knowledge in multiple spaces. This hybrid frontline work and the relationships formed through frontline work provided a source of legitimacy. Through involving community members in public actions as well as through social media and news coverage, frontline work was also a form of communication. I discuss how the two CBOs used frontline work to offer alternative narratives of poverty, resulting in new forms of poverty politics with larger audiences.

#### **“Walking the Talk”: Frontline Work as Source of Legitimacy**

The two CBOs had a distinctive type of frontline work, combining organic service provision with involving community members in actions. Community members from both CBOs

used the term “walking the talk” to describe this type of frontline work. I first identify aspects of frontline work that resulted in the two CBOs being identified as walking the talk. Then, I describe how walking the talk provided a source of legitimacy among both community members and larger audiences and how CBOs leveraged this legitimacy to promote narratives.

### ***How Organizations “Walk the Talk”: The Role of Values, Trust, and Action***

Staff and community members shared examples of how each CBO’s frontline work reflected core values and demonstrated a commitment to action and change. One SBCC staff referred to a recent tough decision that she felt was in line with SBCC’s core values. She described community members noticing this action and how they had “community people saying, you really do walk your talk, you really do have the values that you said you had.” A community member involved with SBCC also identified the organization and a specific staff member as walking the talk. She recognized this staff member as “doing the work”: “she’s not just talking, she’s doing the work, you have to be a leader, like walk the talk.” A LA CAN interviewee described how their approach to frontline work built trust with community members:

Keeping it real with everybody. Letting people know what the issues is, right? Building that trust. People know that you're going to go to bat for them. People know that you got the good at heart. People know that when you are there that they got the best representation.

By showing they “had the good at heart” and “being willing to go to bat for people,” this approach built relationships and reinforced core values. As a result, the two CBOs gained trust and legitimacy with community members.

Both CBOs emphasized how community members were experts, so they walked the talk through hiring staff from the community. Mooney described how early on, SBCC emphasized hiring people from the community and that “the most important quality was for the person who's participating and helping to be able to walk in the shoes of the person that they're working with.” This emphasis continued as Mooney commented that when hiring, “what matters to me are what people's core values are. I don't really care where they went to school.” Both CBOs had staff and active volunteers who were from the community in which they worked. This was a form of implicit communication that showed that each CBO valued the experience of community members, which also provided a source of legitimacy. One community member described why it was important that LA CAN staff and committees included community members who had experiences with houselessness:

They're solid, they walk the talk. It's one thing to have professional people come and work in Skid Row, Cool. Drive in from Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, Palos Verdes, Hollywood, Ladera Heights, who wouldn't live here. But to watch people who have lived here, on the street, to hear their story, and to see them go way beyond their part and helping to change things. That's amazing.

She referred to wealthier cities on the West side of Los Angeles such as Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades as well as more affluent Black communities such as Ladera Heights where professional people lived who worked in Skid Row. In contrast, LA CAN employed people from the community, and their core messages and ideas came from community members. By drawing from community leadership, being willing to go to bat for people, and doing the work instead of just talking, CBOs demonstrated their values through actions.

### *Legitimacy from the Results of Frontline Actions*

The two CBOs were recognized for hard work and commitment to their neighborhood. As an LA CAN community member observed, “I don't think down here on Skid Row, there is another organization that works harder and to do more for Skid Row.” This hard work combined with walking the talk and successful outcomes resulted in legitimacy at both the community level and with wider audiences.

**“Being part of the winning team”:** **legitimacy for community.** Through long-term involvement with both CBOs, community members were active participants in both CBO's actions. As a result, community members saw themselves as part of a successful organization. One community member in the city of Carson described how other community members recognized not just the work of SBCC, but the work of community members involved with SBCC: “they have to ask ‘Who are you, what's going on here’. And when we tell them, ‘We're Carson people, we're the community’ and they're like WOW and so they just thank us.” A community member involved with LA CAN referred to previous victories that he had been part of and described LA CAN as “winners”:

LA CAN is winners. When they make up their mind, when they sit down and plan and strategize, they make a lot of changes. It's up to us how we want to do it. but if we decide, we make a lot of changes. There's nobody that can stop us, nobody.

He included himself as part of LA CAN, referring to us and we and commenting that “nobody can stop us.” Through this frontline work, community members saw themselves as part of change.

Being part of change also had an effect on community members. One interviewee with LA CAN described what it meant for community members to be part of history through frontline work:

So this is history we're making. I mean this is what people want to be involved in. So if you're poor, especially if you're a person of color ... you're denied so much, right? You've got a history, of denial, slavery, and everything. And so, it's a good feeling when you're a part of something. Everybody wants to be a part of a winning team, you know, everybody? It's about having something to cling onto, having something to live for, having something to keep you going from day to day, day to day, right? That makes you want to get up in morning. That makes you feel proud. That makes you smile, right? If you take away that, it's all death.

Through helping community members to feel proud and to “make them smile”, the two CBOs’ organizing efforts strengthened long-term relationships and communities of support, essential components of organic service provision. Community members were recognized and felt that they were part of history, and community members from both CBOs described this participation as a meaningful experience.

**Recognition by larger audiences due to frontline work.** Staff and community members described how community members outside their organizational membership noticed their work. Staff and community members from both CBOs shared examples of how they were recognized by their t-shirts. This recognition was not just because of current frontline work, but also due to their history in the community. LA CAN had involved community members in earlier tenant rights campaigns and one community member felt that LA CAN was now recognized as a strong

organization by landlords: “they respect us, they know we're strong- we have seen landlords back off of tenants (when seeing that a tenant was affiliated with LA CAN)”. LA CAN had a history of fighting and “going to bat” for community members. As a result, LA CAN had legitimacy to advocate for tenants in their current frontline work. This community member also described how LA CAN had recognition in the wider downtown community. On the night of the town hall to discuss the 2019 Homeless Count results, streets were blocked between downtown and the LA CAN office and many people arrived late to the LA CAN office. After the event, community members discussed the earlier traffic and having to walk around blocked streets. In response, one community member commented that “I told them I was with LA CAN and they let me through”. His identification with LA CAN helped him to gain access, or to walk across blocked streets in this instance.

Both CBOs’ frontline work was recognized not only within their neighborhood, but also by local government and city-wide funders. One community member active with LA CAN described how city councilors noticed LA CAN’s presence at city council. He indicated what city councilors might be thinking when they see LA CAN members at City Council meetings: “Okay, LA CAN there, there they are again, there’s LA CAN, LA CAN is there.” This community member then added ‘We're going to show up, we're watching you... That is what we want. These are our demands right here.’ Due to their earlier history, they were positioned to make demands and they promoted narratives when making demands. SBCC was less involved with advocacy, but the director described mobilizing NAC members to attend events. Community members in yellow I Heart t-shirts marched through downtown for the 2019 United Way HomeWalk, and this turnout communicated messages to multiple groups. Community



members who attended saw that they were part of a larger group of community members, while city-wide agencies were able to see a strong network of residents who cared about their communities.

### ***Drawing from Legitimacy to Access Spaces and Promote Narratives***

CBOs used this legitimacy from their current and previous frontline work to form relationships with funders and other partners and to access different spaces. The two CBOs then leveraged these relationships to introduce ideas and shape poverty knowledge. I identified key events for both CBOs that highlighted how each CBO used their legitimacy to shape ideas about poverty in different spaces.

#### **Challenging deficit-based ideas of community members through relationships.**

Through frontline work that highlighted community members as experts, SBCC promoted narratives that countered ideas of expertise in social welfare. In 2019, SBCC worked with the United Way of Greater Los Angeles and local government agencies to develop a pilot program that would provide financial resources to families as a method of child abuse prevention. Before launching this program, SBCC had discussions with partners on program components, including whether to add requirements for families participating in this program. SBCC advocated for the idea that families would know best how to use this money. Mooney used the example that if a family's goal was their first family vacation, that family knew best what their goal should be. As funders suggested increasing the emphasis on financial literacy for participating families, Mooney discussed this negotiation around program components.

I don't want to call it financial literacy, because honestly, I was on welfare. Having a checking account did me no good. Half the time, it was overdrawn and I didn't have any

money to put in a savings account. But strategies for looking at money differently, instead of financial literacy, which I think is kind of condescending. I mean, really, poor people manage their money better than almost anybody I know. But ways to think about how you use money to get what you want.

The proposed addition of financial literacy conflicted with the idea that families knew best how to spend money. SBCC brought in their core ideas as they negotiated with partners around program aspects such as financial literacy and monitoring or trust of families.

These conversations with funders and partners provided an opportunity for SBCC to introduce and further promote their core values. Counter to narratives that defined people as the problem, SBCC advocated for increasing opportunities to address social and economic inequality. A staff member described this view:

Unlike the image that's been created by the Trump administration, I think most people want to be self-sufficient. I think they don't get access to opportunity, and resources. But I do really believe that most people want to take care of themselves.

SBCC leveraged their legitimacy from previous frontline work to design a program that focused on increasing access to resources as the solution and that recognized that families knew best how to use these resources. SBCC was less likely to have a structural analysis compared to LA CAN's narratives, but SBCC inserted ideas that families were experts. This emphasis on the expertise of low-income families challenged core ideas within social welfare. These conversations did not happen at a frontline level, but during meetings between directors to develop this program. However, their demonstration of core values through frontline work

helped SBCC to gain access to meetings with key partners. Through this access, SBCC introduced ideas for solutions that countered narratives within poverty governance.

**Promoting narratives and influencing coalitions due to previous frontline work.** In 2018, Mayor Eric Garcetti announced a plan for an emergency homeless shelter, referred to as a bridge home, in each city council district in Los Angeles (Smith & Reyes, 2018). City Council member Herb Wesson announced a proposed bridge home in the Koreatown neighborhood that was at the edge of his council district. Shortly after this announcement, Koreatown business interests and community members began protesting the proposed bridge home, arguing that it was too close to schools and businesses. To counter the shelter opposition, other Koreatown community members organized to support this shelter. As this pro-shelter group began to mobilize, LA CAN drew from their previous organizing to shape narratives within the pro-shelter group. Through this coalition, LA CAN promoted narratives that identified criminalization of houseless residents as a problem and emphasized that shelters were not a permanent solution to houselessness compared to housing. Similar to SBCC's example above, much of this advocacy and coalition work happened outside of frontline work. However, LA CAN's previous frontline work provided legitimacy that helped them to shape a coalition's narratives, expanding their narrative to neighborhoods outside of Skid Row. LA CAN also continued to bring community members to city council meetings; this also helped LA CAN to build relationships with allies and to take a key role in coalitions.

After the initial protests and counter-protests, the Los Angeles City Council held a hearing on June 30, 2018 on whether to approve the bridge home in Koreatown. Many members of the Korean business community were opposed to the shelter, but LA CAN partnered with

members of the Korean progressive community who supported this shelter. Before entering city council chambers, White met with a few community members and partners to prepare for the day. White referred to LA CAN's history with organizing and described this hearing as an opportunity to add an anti-criminalization message to an emerging pro-shelter movement. LA CAN had built relationships with a few city councilors due to previous organizing work. These relationships helped LA CAN members, including myself, enter the city council chambers while other people were waiting in line. Staff suggested sitting up front so that cameras recording the city council hearing could see LA CAN's signs, so staff leveraged relationships to get an optimal spot for promoting their narrative.

Through this hearing, LA CAN was not simply supporting an existing message, but they influenced narratives among this pro-shelter movement. LA CAN was concerned about funding for police that accompanied funding for the new bridge homes. Here, LA CAN drew upon their experiences in the epicenter of policing to call attention to how criminalization accompanied services and to identify this as a key problem. Staff had prepared several key talking points, including identifying the main solution as housing instead of temporary shelters, framing the lack of housing as a human rights issue, and arguing that the city should not use the new shelter as an excuse to increase criminalization. Community members and staff held up signs that reinforced these messages, such as a sign that stated that "Criminalization and help should not be in same sentence". I held a sign with small letters that said "Just to be absolutely clear" (in small letters), "Shelters are not a replacement for housing" (in larger letters). Activists with the progressive Korean community sat in the same row as LA CAN members and provided signs in Korean for LA CAN members. Partners' signs also called out criminalization as a problem, with one sign

translating to “Shelter yes”, and the other sign translating to “Criminalization no”. While LA CAN partnered with members of the progressive Korean community, LA CAN’s framing influenced other pro-shelter community members at this hearing. A Koreatown resident who spoke in support of the shelter mentioned that he agreed with his “brothers and sisters in this side”, referring to the Council chambers side where LA CAN members were sitting, about not criminalizing houseless residents. He indicated support for LA CAN’s message, so testimonies from other community members echoed similar concerns about criminalization.

Through coalition work after the hearing, LA CAN was able to influence narratives within a new coalition. The counter-protests against the opposition to the proposed shelter led to a new organization of non-professionals that provided direct aid to houseless residents in Koreatown, Ktown for All. This all-volunteer group conducted outreach and provided basic needs services to houseless residents in the Koreatown neighborhood. Alongside direct service, Ktown for All called attention to problems with police involvement in sweeps of encampments and with confiscating property of houseless community members. Ktown for All became an active member of the Services Not Sweeps coalition, so LA CAN continued to work with Ktown for All. Through these partnerships, LA CAN promoted an anti-criminalization narrative that is currently a core part of Ktown for All’s platform.

In addition to city council meetings, staff and community members from LA CAN also spoke at public events with coalition partners. LA CAN had speaking positions due to their work in Skid Row, so these events were additional spaces to promote narratives. In April 2019, LA CAN partnered with community organizations from the neighborhoods of Little Tokyo, Chinatown, and Skid Row to host an event about the City Planning Department’s proposed

Community Plan for downtown Los Angeles, and how community members' interests were not represented in the City's proposed plan. In this discussion, LA CAN staff member stated that they needed to change the narrative about Skid Row. He mentioned not wanting the bad things in their community, "such as cops and gentrifiers," and then commented that "arts and culture is deep (within Skid Row) and so are activists." Compared to media portrayals that focused on people living in Skid Row as the problem, he reframed portrayals of Skid Row by identifying the cops and gentrifiers as the negative aspects of the community. Messages that identified criminalization as a problem, highlighted community strengths such as arts and culture, and explicitly stated the importance of narratives were also communicated through frontline work, so LA CAN promoted these narratives across multiple spaces. While this was more pronounced for LA CAN, both CBOs used their track record from previous frontline work to introduce alternative narratives.

### **Frontline Work as Communication to Larger Audiences**

In the examples above, frontline work provided legitimacy so that CBOs could advance narratives in different spaces. In addition, frontline work was also a way to advance values and ideas directly to wider audiences. Figure 4 shows these two different ways for using frontline work to communicate to larger audience- frontline work as a source of legitimacy and as described below, frontline work as a source of communication. Through highlighting frontline work in social media or to news outlets and involving community members in public events, the two CBOs communicated ideas about poverty to external audiences, with LA CAN especially positioned to advance narratives due to their role as a fightback organization at the epicenter.

Figure 4

*From the Frontline to Wider Audiences*

**Long-term Frontline Work and “Walking the Talk”**- Communication happens not through a single event but through a history of frontline work.

**Frontline Work as a Source of Legitimacy:**

- Results in a key role within coalitions and access to key relationships



**Introducing New Ideas through Relationships**

- Challenging ideas within social welfare
- Narratives of anti-criminalization

**Frontline Work as a Source of Communication:**

- Involving community members in public events with messages for larger audiences
- Publicity of frontline work highlights core ideas



**Ideas Highlighted by News Media and Adopted by Other Organizations**

- Introducing a structural narrative
- Challenging dominant portrayals of houseless community members

***“Praying with our Legs”: Messages through Frontline Work***

Both CBOs highlighted key narratives and organizational values in their documentation of frontline activities. In 2019, SBCC changed the name of the annual I Heart Wilmington festival to a Community Wellness festival. Their Facebook post advertising this event stated that “due to the political climate, divisiveness in our country and threats that have been made to our communities, we felt that we should emphasize healing, celebrate diversity, and community wellness.” This event was a key frontline space for building community. Both through the event and through social media, SBCC promoted their key values to wider audiences. LA CAN also used event publicity to highlight the expertise of community members to a larger audience. At the 2019 Homeless Count town hall, community members from LA CAN’s Downtown Women’s Action Committee (DWAC) shared both poetry and testimony. Through their planning meetings, DWAC members offered support and friendship while planning testimonies for this larger event. After this event, LA CAN used social media to highlight their testimonies. LA CAN’s twitter post about this event showed a photo of DWAC members speaking with the

caption, “DWAC Respondents panel, this presentation is flawless, it’s the real data set.” Social media posts highlighted the strength of community members as well as community knowledge as “the real data set.” These messages were emphasized through communities of care within frontline work, and then reinforced to wider audiences through social media.

Frontline events for community members and events for larger audiences were not necessarily separate categories of events, as both CBOs had events for multiple audiences. With community members as the “spirit and soul”, events such as their annual fundraiser included core community members as well as funders and partner organizations. This was a space to welcome community members and honor their commitment, while emphasizing key narratives with wider audiences. For SBCC, staff organizers helped community members attend the annual gala, including assisting with transportation. The LA CAN annual dinner also included many core community members along with performers from the community. In White’s introduction for the LA CAN 2019 annual fundraiser, he repeated a quote from Frederick Douglass, “I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs”. A community member at the table next to me smiled and quietly finished the quote. This annual event was a frontline event to celebrate and recognize their community member base and this quote resonated with this community member. At the same time, White shared information to wider audiences on the role of action and how they “prayed with their legs”.

Through discussing the CBO’s history and frontline work, both annual events were a way to communicate poverty knowledge to multiple audiences. When the emcee for SBCC’s Annual Gala stated that SBCC scales what is right as opposed to other organizations that focus on problems, he highlighted SBCC’s values and ideas for solutions. He commented on how SBCC



believes that every community has something that is right and how change does not come from the top but from community members. These messages echoed the ideas that were shared with community members during frontline work, and SBCC highlighted residents' work in different ways throughout their Gala. Through their annual awards fundraiser, LA CAN described their core ideas about poverty and the importance of these ideas. After referencing the Frederick Douglass quote of "praying with my legs", White discussed how the founders of LA CAN wanted to change how people talked about poverty. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, White presented LA CAN's view as different from mainstream ideas that blamed individuals and he stated that changing how people talk about poverty was "an issue worth fighting for." In this discussion, he emphasized the importance of changing narratives of poverty. In line with this mission, LA CAN drew from frontline work to communicate ideas to larger audiences and to change how people talk about poverty.

### ***"Our Names are Not Homeless"***

While both CBOs communicated key messages and values, for this next section, I focus primarily on LA CAN. Due to LA CAN's history at the epicenter, their fightback approach, and identifying that changing how people talk about poverty was "an issue worth fighting for", they were able to use their frontline work to communicate to larger audiences. I draw from two frontline events from 2019- a memorial for LA CAN community member Darrell Fields and the Homeless Memorial March- to show how the communities of care from their frontline work as well as their organizational positioning enabled them to challenge narratives. Through this communication, LA CAN offered a new form of poverty politics that emphasized the humanity

of houseless community members and identified government neglect and structural causes as responsible for houselessness.

In August 2019, Darrell Fields, an active LA CAN community member and musician, was murdered while sitting outside of the tent where he lived with his partner. Darrell Fields specialized in covering Jimmy Hendrix songs and was an active part of LA CAN arts and culture activities. Staff planned a memorial where community members could grieve and celebrate Fields' life. As they planned and promoted this memorial, LA CAN called attention to the way that Fields' life and death was described by media. The initial *Los Angeles Times* headline read "A homeless man burned to death. An LA man is accused of intentionally setting him on fire." A press release on LA CAN's Facebook page invited people to honor Fields' life later that day and commented on the *Los Angeles Times* headline.

The "homeless man" killed in Skid Row (referring to the *Los Angeles Times* headline) has a name, is loved, and has been a long-term resident of Skid Row. Say his name, "Darrell Fields!"

The Los Angeles Community Action Network and the entire Skid Row community are heartbroken by the brazen attack and subsequent death of Darrell Fields. News reports have consistently referred to him as "homeless" and "transient," however, he should be considered houseless and a long-term resident of Skid Row. Additionally, at the time of his death he was working on numerous projects to elevate the healing power of arts and culture in Skid Row.

The community will gather tonight, August 28, 2019, at 838 E. 6th Street at 6:00 pm to celebrate the life, mastery and artistic vision of Darrell.

LA CAN's frontline work offered comfort and support to community members dealing with the sudden loss of a friend. At the same time, LA CAN responded to media headlines and challenged narratives around houseless community members through this frontline work.

LA CAN planned a memorial to celebrate Fields' life, as well as to support his partner. Community members involved with LA CAN, people who lived near him, and members from other organizations such as Democratic Socialists of America attended this memorial. Community members were encouraged to wear purple in honor of the Jimi Hendrix song "Purple Haze." The event started in front of the LA CAN office and attendees held purple balloons as they walked over to the corner in Skid Row where Fields had lived and was murdered. News coverage described different aspects of the event, including purple balloons and roses, speakers, an electric keyboard, and friends singing "A Change Is Gonna Come," and "Bridge Over Troubled Waters."

This memorial was a space for healing for community members and staff, but this was also a space to reframe narratives. LA CAN's social media documented the event and their posts were highlighted on local media. *LA Taco*, an alternative newspaper, included LA CAN's twitter post stating "the elegance of purple as the Skid Row community celebrates the life of Darrell 'Jimi Hendrix' Fields." (See Figure 5.) In contrast to assumptions that people living in Skid Row were transient individuals, this post portrayed Skid Row as a community with art that supported each other. This event and social media promotion influenced how the *Los Angeles Times* wrote about Fields' death. By the end of the day, their headline changed from the original headline on how a homeless man had burned to death to a headline that featured a community of friends and Fields' identity as a guitarist: "Friends gather to recall the Skid Row guitarist who died when his

tent was set ablaze”. LA CAN staff also used press coverage to call attention to systemic problems. In the *Los Angeles Times* article on Fields’ memorial, White identified a shortage of affordable housing for couples in Los Angeles and commented “They (Darrell Fields and his partner) could never find accommodations for a couple, which is one of the big problems with our ... system of providing services...There are very limited opportunities for single individuals and even less so for partners (qtd in Queally & Ormseth, 2019).” Another staff member discussed the scarcity of housing for a *Guardian* article:

“There are not enough empty beds, even if everyone wanted to go into these horrific shelters,” said Angela James, LA CAN’s deputy director of finance and operations, who said she greeted Fields nearly every day. “People don’t have a choice.” (from Levin, 2019)

LA CAN called attention to these challenges during frontline work and then amplified messages through media. Here, James identified structural problems and the “horrific” conditions in shelters while she referred to Fields as a friend whom she greeted nearly every day.

Figure 5

*LA CAN twitter post of Darrell Fields Memorial highlighted in LA Taco*



**LA CAN**  
@LACANetwork

The elegance of purple as the Skid Row community celebrates the life of Darrell “Jimi Hendrix” Fields.



44 10:23 PM - Aug 28, 2019

*Note:* Post included in the LA Taco article “Darrell Fields, Beloved Guitarist living in Skid Row, Burned to Death While Inside his Tent” on August 29, 2019 by L. Kwon.

After the memorial, LA CAN continued with organic service provision to support Darrell’s partner, and they advanced narratives through this support. Staff set up a GoFundme page to support Fields’ partner Valerie. Through this GoFundme page, staff emphasized structural problems as well as how communities supported each other:

Valerie was Darrell’s everything. There was never a conversation without her being mentioned or him rushing off to tend to her needs. Their relationship sustained the ability to live with dignity in the face of poverty and structural violence. It took both of them to achieve and now that Darrell has joined the ancestors, Valerie needs our assistance to fill this void and retain her dignity. Please support Valerie in any way(s) you can - community is needed more than ever.

Counter to narratives that identified personal or community failings, LA CAN emphasized the systemic nature of problems and how community took care of each other in the face these larger problems.

The National Homeless Memorial Day provided another example of how LA CAN's frontline work promoted narratives. Towards the end of 2019, almost 1000 unhoused individuals had died in Los Angeles that year and a Los Angeles County Health Department report from October 2019 documented an increasing mortality rate for houseless individuals. LA CAN partnered with members of the Services not Sweeps Coalition to host actions for National Homeless Memorial Day on Friday, December 20. Their publicity before the event stated:

Join us as we celebrate the National Homeless Memorial Day. Our names aren't homeless." We're more than a statistic. And we say, NO to #3aDayinLA. (referring to a statistic of an average of 3 houseless community members dying each day in Los Angeles). Citywide vigils are planned throughout the day starting with a second-line parade in Skid Row at 12:00 pm.

Community members took action through marching and playing music, chanting near City Hall, and stopping at places where community members had lived and passed away. This was a frontline space where community members honored people who had died and expressed their sadness and anger. Through recognizing people's lives, this march showed how community members within Skid Row supported each other. At one stop, a staff member asked how to fix houselessness and participants shouted housing. Through these chants, community member expressed ideas about solutions. As community members marched to City Hall and back to LA CAN, they also offered narratives to larger audiences. These frontline actions emphasized the

humanity of houseless community members that was glossed over in headlines and identified responsible parties, such as how deaths were due to government neglect.

Similar to Fields' memorial, this frontline activity communicated narratives through social media and press coverage. Coverage from multiple sources including the *Los Angeles Times* described anger and sadness at this march (see Figure 6), and quotes from this event emphasized community action in the absence of government action. In the *Los Angeles Times* article about the march, White was quoted as, "When death comes to the doorstep of City Hall (referring to a houseless community member who had died in front of City Hall the week before), you know we must respond... We are going to set up shrines to show our people didn't die in vain" (Holland, 2019, December 21). These shrines served as a way for community members to not only honor people had died, but also as reminders that people's names "weren't homeless" and that city government was not doing enough.

Figure 6

*Los Angeles Times coverage of 2019 Homeless Memorial March*

Anger, sadness dominate day of mourning for homeless people who died in L.A. this year



Pancake, a community organizer, leads supporters as they march in downtown Los Angeles in tribute to homeless who died this year. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

*Note:* Headline and photo from Los Angeles Times' article by G. Holland on December 21, 2019.

In addition to identifying government neglect as a problem, LA CAN used social media to demonstrate the power of community members. LA CAN's Twitter and Facebook posts about the march included pictures with a comment that:

Our movement is fueled with so much love, culture, determination and tenacity that we will surely win. [#3aDayinLA](#) serves as our clarion call to turn up the heat in 2020. We need to keep expanding our reach

[#ServicesNotSweeps](#) [#HousekeysNotHandcuffs](#) [#LetsGetFree](#) .



LA CAN also highlighted the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of this march on Facebook and Twitter with a link to the article and the comment “Please never forget, this parade was fueled by love.” In highlighting their efforts, LA CAN reframed definitions of problems and solutions, emphasizing “housekeys not handcuffs.” These posts challenged portrayals of low-income communities within more mainstream poverty knowledge; instead, LA CAN’s portrayals featured the love, culture, and determination within the Skid Row community.

### ***Shaping Poverty Knowledge with Larger Audiences***

These two events both occurred in the later half of 2019, but these events were part of LA CAN’s history as a fightback organization. Through partnering and involving other organizations in frontline work, partner organizations adopted similar narratives. In addition to Services not Sweeps Coalition partners, core ideas were also adopted by more mainstream organizations, such as the United Way of Greater Los Angeles. In their Facebook post, United Way’s Everyone In Campaign recognized the Homeless Memorial march and identified key organizations that were part of this march.

Today, we joined a vigil to mourn, remember, and celebrate the lives of the over 1,000 neighbors who died while experiencing homelessness this year. This is beyond unacceptable—this is an injustice. Homes and services don’t just end homelessness, they save lives. Want to particularly recognize Koreatown for All, LA CAN (Los Angeles Community Action Network), White People 4 Black Lives / SURJ Affiliate Los Angeles, Venice Community Housing, Venice Justice Committee, and all of our partners and allies who are fighting every day for the rights of our most vulnerable.

#BedsNotSidewalks #EveryoneIn

The organizations highlighted in this post were all Services not Sweeps coalition members and key partners with LA CAN. Through this post, a larger organization, the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, recognized the frontline work of LA CAN and their key partners. By documenting this frontline work, the United Way shared LA CAN's narrative that recognized deaths as an injustice and identified housing as the solution.

At the 2019 year-end retreat, White commented that LA CAN was shifting the narrative and more people were now talking about houselessness as a byproduct of structural racism. LA CAN had been promoting this narrative throughout their history, and White referred to 2019 as a "breakout year" for promoting their narrative. Government agencies and wider audiences now agreed that houselessness was due to housing insecurity and poverty, including a recent Los Angeles County Public Health report that, according to White, "double downed on the structural narrative". Local government had shifted their language, and White commented that the structural analysis that government agencies were now using "was born here (at LA CAN)." Larger organizations also expressed the idea that houselessness was primarily caused by a lack of housing, as opposed to causes at the individual level. For example, United Way of Greater Los Angeles' Everyone In campaign had billboards throughout Los Angeles that stated "homes end homelessness". I did not ask United Way about influences on this slogan and multiple efforts likely influenced this shift to focus on housing, but LA CAN staff mentioned having this narrative prior to other organizations. White told community members during the retreat: "When you look at our knowledge, when you look at what we been putting out, we been ahead of this homeless issue (identifying structural causes and homelessness as due to housing). We've been ahead of this housing crisis." In 2019, this message could be seen on United Way of Greater Los

Angeles's billboards or Facebook posts, but as White stated, the "structural analysis was born here (at LA CAN)." This history of frontline work combined with their positioning helped LA CAN to promote structural causes as primary causes of homelessness and poverty.

### **Tensions and Contestations when Mainstreaming Ideas with Fewer Resources**

After Pete White highlighted 2019 as a breakout year for LA CAN's narrative, he cautioned on the risks when bringing ideas to more mainstream audiences. Larger organizations were beginning to adapt LA CAN's positions, which helped to promote narratives and increase visibility. However, this could present challenges for smaller CBOs such as LA CAN when larger organizations adapted parts of their narrative but did not align completely. Larger organizations could modify narratives, and these larger organizations had more resources and relationships to promote their modified, potentially watered-down version. White presented this as a challenge to discuss later in the retreat, but we were not able to discuss further due to time constraints. In addition, some parts of narratives were adopted while other aspects remained controversial. The idea of "homes end homelessness" or that a lack of housing was the cause of homelessness as opposed to personal failings had gained traction in Los Angeles during my observation period. Key coalition partners adopted LA CAN's stance against criminalization, but narratives against criminalization were not as widespread among other organizations within the homeless services field. Organizing against criminalization has since gained support and wider recognition in 2020, so support for narratives are currently changing. However, for most of my study period, this critique of criminalization was not as widespread as the ideas that "homes ends homelessness".

While SBCC was less involved in shaping city-wide narratives, they were able to influence ideas about community and poverty through their relationships. As they introduced ideas, SBCC faced dilemmas when negotiating aspects of these ideas with funders and partners. In SBCC's pilot program that focused on increasing financial resources as a method for child abuse prevention, one of SBCC's core tenets was that families knew best what they needed, including how to spend additional financial resources. Funders asked for more requirements around goal setting and financial literacy, but Mooney described her hesitation around ideas that were part of financial literacy. In order to promote a new approach, SBCC faced decisions on whether and how much to compromise around core ideas. Both CBOs advanced narratives to larger audiences, and audiences could modify aspects of these narratives as they were adopting them. In this situation, CBOs had to decide how to negotiate around or emphasize key aspects of narratives that were more controversial or less likely to be adopted.

### **Conclusion**

For both CBOs, staff and community members learned through long-term interactions and through the support and communities of care described in Chapter Three. However, the two CBOs advanced different ideas based on their mission and core population. Both CBOs challenged ideas of personal failings or deficit-based views of communities but they differed in how they challenged these ideas and diagnosed problems of poverty. In contrast to ideas that emphasized personal failings, LA CAN referred to structural problems, whether it was an emphasis on housing in order to solve homelessness or references to policing systems that were "fundamentally flawed by design." SBCC had fewer discussions on structural causes but in line with their mission and history, SBCC emphasized that community members had gifts, talents,

and leadership capacities. As they rejected ideas of personal failings, SBCC diagnosed problems as due to lack of access to opportunities or to resources.

As diagnoses of problems will influence ideas for solutions (Katz, 2013, 2015), the two CBOs differed in how they presented solutions to poverty within their frontline work. Both CBOs emphasized change and ideas coming from communities, but they varied in how they incorporated government institutions into solutions. SBCC was less likely to challenge systems in their frontline discussions; instead, they focused on increasing opportunities and on changing systems by including community members and their expertise. LA CAN used community-led change to highlight systemic failures, including describing how communities took care each other in the face of structural violence or identifying how communities have stepped up due to government inaction. As opposed to focusing on partnerships, LA CAN used community actions to highlight problems and hold government accountable.

Due to their styles of frontline work and core missions, the two CBOs had different openings to discuss ideas of poverty, both with their community base and with larger audiences. These openings within frontline work also varied within a CBO due to a range of facilitation styles and community groups, especially within SBCC. While their core ideas differed, for both CBOs, frontline work across multiple interactions provided a space to work through ideas of poverty. Through the combination of community actions, presentations, and discussions, community members and staff began to question some of their previous ideas. Not everyone agreed on solutions that were communicated through a CBO's frontline work and Pete White described working through disagreements as part of building community. Community members within each organization did not hold a uniform position, but both CBOs emphasized their core

values. SBCC emphasized the gifts and talents of residents and helped community members to build relationships and increase empathy between near-poor and poor while LA CAN emphasized that causes of poverty were structural, not personal. With an abolitionist framework, LACAN also identified policing as a problem and as a factor that intensified poverty.

In addition to community members and staff working through ideas about poverty, this frontline work was also a space for introducing narratives, or ‘truth telling’ as described by LA CAN’s twitter bio, to larger audiences. Both CBOs drew from their frontline work for legitimacy and highlighted how their approach and values provided a different way of viewing communities. SBCC introduced solutions in line with their core values through their relationships with funders and other partners. LA CAN also advanced ideas through relationships and in addition, they used frontline work to demonstrate alternative narratives. CBOs still faced tensions on how to negotiate aspects of their narratives when larger organizations adopted and modified these ideas, and I was not able to explore this challenge fully. Despite these tensions, both CBOs found ways to offer alternative narratives, whether it was SBCC questioning how social welfare programs are designed or LA CAN offering an alternative diagnosis of homelessness. Similar to how community members and staff worked through ideas over multiple interactions, each CBO’s history of frontline work and relationships helped to communicate and offer new forms of poverty politics with larger audiences over time.

Both CBOs discussed concepts related to poverty knowledge in their frontline work, but LA CAN had an explicit focus on poverty in their mission. Pete White commented on how early on, community members who were part of LA CAN had a different way of talking about poverty and that the “structural narrative was born here.” This emphasis on challenging poverty

knowledge has been part of their mission, and they described themselves as “truth tellers, not asking for permission.” As a result, LA CAN was well positioned to advance key ideas and these discussions were a central part of their organizing strategy. This does not imply that SBCC was not advancing ideas, but SBCC’s ideas centered more on concepts of community. Their positioning was different as SBCC worked in low-income communities at the fenceline. Drawing from an asset-based approach, SBCC focused on reframing ideas of low-income communities. The two CBOs worked with community members who had different experiences with structural violence and trauma and each CBO created a community space for their core population. Their positioning affected the ideas that were advanced through their frontline work and with larger audiences, but both CBOs communicated ideas in line with their mission and their core values.

## **Chapter Five: Narratives of Poverty in a Post-welfare Los Angeles:**

### **Openings for “Truth Telling” through Hybrid Frontline Work**

We are not being looked after, we have to look after ourselves

*-Community member quoted in an LA CAN Facebook video on the lack of handwashing stations in Skid Row, March 25, 2020*

This is a front-lines reality for so many Los Angeles communities. As a result, mutual aid is flourishing with so many people and organizations stepping in where government has failed or flailing. We shall not be moved. We will not be silenced. Nothing about us, without us

*-Facebook post referencing this video on the lack of handwashing stations, March 25, 2020*

SBCC realizes that many of you have already lost your jobs and as you know, one of the core values of SBCC is a commitment for economic security, particularly for low-income folks. We want to assure you that we are here to stand with you and to help you take care of your family and yourself and provide for your children. We are committed to healthy communities...For over 40 years, SBCC has partnered with residents respecting their assets and their values and coming together with them to make their lives better and to make our communities stronger and healthier. In this time of crisis, we intend to stand on those values and stand with you. And we will be here...

*-Video statement from SBCC Executive Director, March 30, 2020*

While writing my dissertation findings, I frequently returned to field notes to review event descriptions. Re-reading field brought back the images and memories of different events and meetings, but I was reviewing notes during a pandemic and a time of social distancing. SBCC meetings with bread and coffee around a dining room table and LA CAN bi-weekly meetings followed by pizza had been postponed and the spaces where community members held on to hope and sanity looked different. While their format for frontline work changed during the pandemic, both CBOs continued on with their mission. Their frontline work, now virtual gatherings or in-person mutual aid, remained connected to their community member base and to their fightback and asset-based approaches.



From the epicenter of post-welfare policy, LA CAN called attention to how Skid Row was especially affected by the pandemic and highlighted how mutual aid was filling in the gaps that were created by government inaction. Early on in the pandemic, LA CAN identified that the city was not providing enough handwashing stations and then not refilling the limited handwashing stations frequently enough to meet demand. To meet this need and to highlight government failure, LA CAN installed handwashing stations decorated with community art. Food sources that houseless residents relied on had suddenly disappeared due to a decline in charitable food donations in Skid Row, so LA CAN called out the problem of food scarcity. Working with existing partners, LA CAN developed two food distribution days where they handed out survival bags: Wellness Wednesday and Strong Sunday. LA CAN not only handed out food but they also showcased the efforts of community members and how “mutual aid is at the heart of what LACAN is doing.” Similar to their previous work and to the Black Panther Free Breakfast program (Heynen, 2009), LA CAN drew from their mutual aid to identify systemic racism and government neglect and to build power. An LA CAN organizer spoke during a zoom town hall in March 2020 that was organized by the newly formed Healthy LA coalition, a coalition of organizations promoting solutions for public health problems and economic hardships caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. During this forum, the LA CAN organizer described a history of organizing by community members and commented that “if government had been paying attention (to community members’ earlier demands), we wouldn’t be in this situation (with limited access to hygiene stations and housing options).”

As a CBO connected to Black radical thought, LA CAN emphasized how Black communities were heavily affected. They continued to communicate narratives based on their

frontline work, such as when LA CAN was a beneficiary for a BET live concert to support their “robust mutual aid in a predominantly Black community.” LA CAN commented in their Facebook post about this concert: “Our MUTUAL AID work is making national headlines and bringing MUCH needed attention to the neglect of our houseless and socio-economically vulnerable neighbors in Skid Row.” While the format of activities and meetings changed, their fightback style and core messages continued. In Summer 2020, with protests for racial justice after the death of George Floyd, discussions on racial justice were at the forefront. LA CAN drew from their abolitionist framework to play a prominent role in challenging police violence while emphasizing their solutions to houselessness. In addition to highlighting community-centered efforts, LA CAN had begun an eco-hood pilot project to build 400 square foot homes at a low cost. Through this project, LA CAN called attention to the inadequacy of the City of Los Angeles’ response to houselessness. This project was under construction in 2020, and in their publicity for this project, LA CAN portrayed it as a way to provide dignified, quality housing that contrasted to the City’s approach.

SBCC continued with their asset-based, resident-driven work during this time. Many of SBCC’s activities were now being offered through Facebook Live, including support groups, activities for children, and cooking demonstrations. SBCC also hosted “Know Your Rights” sessions with lawyers in both English and Spanish on topics such as rental rights, special education, immigration, and employment. Through social media, SBCC continued to connect community members to resources and job opportunities. As a CBO in a fenceline community, SBCC recognized that their community member base did not often have jobs that allowed them to work from home. SBCC provided families with resources as well as economic opportunities

through a face mask cooperative and virtual pop-up events where members of their artisan cooperative could sell products. An artisan cooperative member commented on Facebook that participating in SBCC's Artisan cooperative allowed her to contribute more to her family since her husband was now working fewer hours. Recognizing the financial shortages due to changes in employment, SBCC community organizers and volunteers partnered with other organizations to provide food donations and other forms of assistance.

As LA CAN portrayed their food distribution as an example of mutual aid and community strength, SBCC also connected their food distribution to their mission and core values. Alongside food distribution, the video message from the SBCC Executive Director stressed that in the face of job losses, "we are here to stand with you and to help you take care of your family and yourself." Similar to before the COVID pandemic, SBCC used their volunteer food distribution to emphasize the role of partnerships and to showcase how community members were creating solutions. A SBCC Facebook post shared photos from a community-led food distribution in the Antelope Valley area of Los Angeles County. This post recognized the role of community members and of SBCC's support, with a SBCC staff member commenting that "In this challenging times I have learned that my community is stronger together...I am forever thankful to SBCC Thrive LA for teaching residents to become advocates and leaders and the work it does in communities." During this time, SBCC also used social media to advocate for filling out the 2020 census forms and why it was important for communities to be represented.

Both organizations highlighted how community members took action in times of crisis and called attention to how low-income communities faced increased hardships. While SBCC emphasized partnerships similar to their previous work, LA CAN used their services such as

food distribution to call out government inaction and how government policy increased inequality. I could not have predicted what frontline work would look like during a pandemic when I began this study, but both CBOs' ideas about community and poverty continued through their new forms of frontline work. This dissertation study drew from frameworks of relational poverty and poverty knowledge to examine ideas of poverty and of community within frontline work and if or how a CBO can challenge existing narratives and offer alternative narratives of poverty. Through focusing on frontline work by hybrid CBOs that combine services and community organizing, this dissertation also adds to our understanding of the role that hybrid CBOs can play within social welfare.

Poverty knowledge shapes how social welfare solutions are constructed and how community members are treated within services (Katz, 2013, 2015; O'Connor, 2001). Due to the importance of poverty knowledge for social welfare policy and services, I examined whether and how this frontline work can be a moment where ideas about poverty change and the roles and limitations for hybrid CBOs in reconstructing poverty knowledge. Hybrid CBOs see their frontline work as a response to political conditions (Gates, 2014) and in this way, these CBOs seek to challenge post-welfare policies and ideas about poverty. Despite having values that counter dominant values, CBOs exist in relation to bureaucracies of power and poverty governance (Roy, 2015) or to informal poverty governance (Fairbanks, 2009). While challenging and offering new narratives, CBOs still work with other social service organizations and their community members base must navigate systems of poverty governance. As CBOs seek to change practices within larger systems, these larger institutions respond to counteract changes, in what Dozier (2019) describes as a push and pull response. Within this context, I sought to

understand how CBOs can reframe ideas of poverty and community, including the aspects of frontline work that support this reframing. I examined how CBOs can offer new forms of poverty politics (as described by Elwood & Lawson, 2018) while situated within social welfare and post-welfare policy.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Both CBOs combined community organizing with social services, but they differed in their overall approach and history. LA CAN had a greater emphasis on organizing with a fightback orientation, while SBCC started with a greater emphasis on service and drew from an asset-based philosophy. The two CBOs worked in different neighborhoods in Los Angeles, with SBCC at the fenceline and LA CAN at the epicenter. As a result, they reached populations who had different experiences with social welfare systems, which affected each CBO's position within poverty governance and post-welfare policy. The two CBOs also had different ways for discussing poverty, based on their mission and their location. Despite these differences, I identified common repertoires within their frontline work. Through long-term relationships developed through frontline work and their organizational history, both CBOs found openings to offer new forms of poverty politics at the frontline level and to communicate alternative ideas or "truth telling" to larger audiences.

### **Hybrid Service Organizations as a Unique type of Service Provision within a Larger Service Infrastructure**

While hybrid organizations may appear to straddle two different categories, service provision and community organizing, Chetkovich and Kunrether (2006) find that hybrid organizations offered a distinct type of services compared to traditional human service providers

(also in Meyer, 2010). This study also finds that the repertoires within hybrid frontline work changed the character and approach of service delivery, specifically through long-term relationships that resulted in communities of care. Staff and community members in both CBOs described how their approach differed from other service providers. They contrasted their more personal relationships from the bureaucratic approach of other human service organizations, and these relationships resulted in communities of support. Gates (2014) and Hyde (1992, 2000) discuss services as part of a hybrid CBO's vision of social change. This was the case for both LA CAN and SBCC. In addition, I find that this distinct form of organic service provision addressed gaps in service provision within a post-welfare state. As places to "hold on to my sanity and my hope" within a service bureaucracy, the two CBOs provided support, such as mutual aid and friendship, and a type of relationship that community members could not find with other service providers. This friendship and support laid the groundwork for a CBO's organizing efforts and provided a space where community members and staff could work through ideas of poverty and community.

This hybrid frontline work and long-term relationships with an organization resulted in spaces of care similar to the mutual aid groups described by Borkman (1999) or Lawson's (2007) care ethics. However, community members also received services from other service providers and the two CBOs assisted with referrals and served as advocates to help community members access services. As one LA CAN community member recognized, "services are important because we don't provide them. You have to strike a balance." This unique, more caring form of organic service provision for hybrid CBOs was still situated within a social service infrastructure.

Each CBO's relationships to other service providers differed based on their mission and the service infrastructure in their neighborhood. In a dense service environment where many community members had negative experiences with service providers, LA CAN helped community members to question practices of service providers and to advocate for additional services. As a United Nations Rapporteur remarked in an event for Human Rights Day that "we need the trouble makers," referring to LA CAN, their role as a trouble maker enabled them to challenge practices within the epicenter. At the same time, LA CAN maintained strategic alliances and was able to connect community members to resources from service providers. SBCC was less likely to challenge the practices of other service providers, but they worked in an area with fewer service providers. Instead, SBCC sought to increase resources at the fenceline. This was not due solely to geography as both CBOs' mission and history shaped how they worked with community members, but the two CBOs offered a distinct form of services in their neighborhood. I find that this role and how they would "strike a balance" varied based on the social service infrastructure within their neighborhood and their mission.

While I discuss hybrid CBOs filling in a unique gap, CBOs still faced tensions as they navigated this role. CBOs wrestled with whether to add more services and how that would affect the way they worked with community members, especially with limited capacity. Hybrid frontline work resulted in a more personal relationship that community members valued, but CBOs still had to maintain some separations between staff and community members. Fennell (2015) discussed the challenges of sympathy in a post-welfare period due to limited services and high need. While CBOs helped meet needs with food assistance and connecting community members to resources, the two CBOs were not able to provide other services that community

members needed, such as housing. CBOs provided social support for community members who were dealing with challenges, but staff and community members then dealt with secondary trauma as they supported community members. The two CBOs faced challenges when offering mutual aid, from expectations of community members to the stress for community members and staff; thus, staff commented on the need for a “caretaker for the caretakers.”

Despite these challenges, I found a key role for hybrid frontline work within a post-welfare service infrastructure and both CBOs continued this role during the pandemic. SBCC served as a bridge to resources; LA CAN called out government shortages through their mutual aid while partnering with both grassroots organizations and larger organizations; and both CBOs provided a key space, now primarily virtual, for community and support. This distinct form of frontline work resulted in community members forming long-term relationships and loyalty to both CBOs. Reflecting on her work and SBCC’s unique model, one staff member commented on how she thought SBCC’s work should be recognized:

I would definitely love for people to know more about SBCC and who we are and the work that we do, it would be awesome. I’m sure, somebody’s written in a book somewhere about us, but it would be good to know that your work can be published and people can read about it. If I ever decide to go back to school, or my kids who go to college and they are taking some sort of sociology class and SBCC is referred by their, you know, by their professor, that would be really cool [laughs]

As she described wanting people to read about SBCC’s work, including that this study could be published so that people could read about SBCC, her comments demonstrated a belief in this frontline work. Staff and community members from both CBOs saw their frontline work as



different from traditional human service providers, and they saw this hybrid work as filling a key role for community members. The ongoing interactions that were part of this distinct form of frontline work then became a vehicle to work through ideas of poverty.

### **Working through Ideas through Frontline Relationships**

This study examined whether frontline interactions with community members were key moments where ideas about poverty and people living in poverty were contested, both for community members and staff. Through implementing policy and determining access to services, frontline work can help to shape policy outcomes (e.g. Brodtkin, 2011). Through frontline work, community members can also be connected to resources and other opportunities (e.g. Small, 2006; Watkins-Hayes, 2019). Frontline work can communicate implicit messages, such as community members learning through frontline interactions at welfare offices that their opinions were not valued (Soss, 2000), and as a result, can increase feelings of marginalization (Soss, 2000; Bruch et al, 2010). However, interactions across difference are also a way to create a more inclusive poverty politics (Lawson & Elwood, 2014). Building off this research, I examined how ideas about poverty were reframed or reinforced and identified aspects of frontline work that facilitated this reframing. I found that the aspects discussed above, such as ongoing interactions and supportive relationships, created a space to introduce new ideas about poverty and community. The key messages for the two CBOs differed based on their mission, but both CBOs emphasized key messages across multiple encounters. Community members learned new ideas, whether it was questioning deficit ideas of their communities, learning how causes of poverty were different than they initially thought, or challenging previous assumptions about people living in poverty. In addition to community members changing ideas through these

interactions, Lawson and Elwood (2014) identify ways that staff modified their previous ideas due to frontline work. I also find that this was not a one-way knowledge flow from staff to community members, as community members also brought in ideas and previous experiences, which shaped poverty knowledge within frontline work. Through working with community members and learning more about challenges for community members, staff challenged prior assumptions and saw communities that they grew up in a different light.

This process of working through ideas occurred across multiple interactions. Community members participated in community projects and actions as well as attended meetings and presentations. Through this combination, learning happened along friendship and support. At meetings and presentations, community members were introduced to ideas and also had a space to share ideas with each other. Through ongoing communication, staff reinforced ideas such as how community members deserve the credit for positive change and the impact and power of community members. Staff and community members also described implicit communication such as feeling that they were valued in this space or observing how staff came from similar communities or had similar experiences. This implicit communication reinforced messages and helped to create an environment where community members could share and discuss ideas with each other.

Community members brought their previous experiences and ideas into their interactions within frontline work. Some community members had experienced differential incorporation (as discussed by Lawson & Elwood, 2018) and described how previous encounters with other institutions made them feel like “a charity case” or that they had no value. Other community members described prior experiences with larger nonprofits that appeared to be overwhelmed by

the problems in their community. In addition to these prior experiences, community members brought in assumptions about problems of and solutions to poverty, such as why people were houseless. The two CBOs were in different neighborhoods, and as a result, community members with each CBO had different experiences with houselessness. With an explicit abolitionist framework, LA CAN also attracted different community members compared to SBCC. Each CBO offered a space that community members did not get elsewhere, but they each provided this space for a different community member base. As both CBOs saw community members as the heart of the organization or the “spirit and soul,” community members’ prior ideas affected frontline interactions and discussions.

Through the relationships described above, community members and staff worked through their existing ideas in order to reframe ideas around poverty and community. While community members did not always agree, community members who disagreed still returned and formed friendships. As Pete White described, disagreements were part of this process. Community members did not always experience radical shifts, but this frontline work provided an opening where community members identified connections with other low-income community members and questioned ideas and existing categories. Both CBOs used relationships and similar repertoires to advance ideas around community and poverty, but the CBO’s mission and philosophy shaped core messages within their frontline work.

### ***Differences in Poverty Knowledge based on a CBO’s Mission***

Based on their organizational histories and mission and whether they were at the epicenter or fenceline, the two CBOs advanced different ideas about poverty. I identified key differences as well as common themes across the two CBOs. Both organizations reframed ideas

around community through their frontline work. With LA CAN staff highlighting how community members in Skid Row take care of each other and SBCC staff emphasizing how NAC members were creating change within their community, the CBOs' frontline work emphasized how community members were committed to their community. Through frontline work, both CBOs questioned negative portrayals of their neighborhood and presented community members as central to driving solutions. This helped community members see “more than just problems” and gain a different perspective of their community. An LA CAN twitter post about their new handwashing stations in March 2020 emphasized this idea that community members were central to solutions:

We are making the drop! The 1st LA CAN 'Big Can' is housed on the corner of 5th and San Pedro. Neighborhood resident, organizer, innovator, and all-around superwoman Stephanie is holding it down. The only way these solutions work is if the community owns them. [#LetsGetFree](#).

Both CBOs emphasized these ideas within their frontline work as well to external audiences, such as through this twitter post that highlighted their work.

While both CBOs helped community members to see their power and to question deficit-based portrayals of their community, the two CBOs differed in how they discussed other aspects of poverty. Through ongoing meetings, LA CAN highlighted examples of government inaction or how the system was ‘fundamentally flawed by design.’ LA CAN diagnosed the problem of houselessness as due to evictions and a lack of affordable housing as opposed to personal responsibility. This diagnosis extended beyond housing, as LA CAN acknowledged how structural conditions contributed to houselessness and poverty. For example, LA CAN staff

emphasized the role of structural racism when they referenced how a government report identified “a straight line from redlining to homelessness” or when their social media posts highlighted disparities in who was affected by COVID-19. Through their discussion on racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and deaths, LA CAN also highlighted how their work was at the epicenter. As LA CAN rejected personal failings as a cause of homelessness, they added an emphasis on human rights and identified problems of criminalization and violations of human rights; this view contrasted sharply from downtown business interests that identified encampments as the problem. How LA CAN diagnosed problems then affected the solutions that they promoted. Through community-led solutions, LA CAN demonstrated how community members were stepping up when government had failed and drew from these efforts to advocate for more and improved services.

From a fenceline community and with an approach that focused on community assets, SBCC differed in their orientation and their critique of systems. SBCC diagnosed causes of poverty as due to access to opportunities and to resources and their solutions to inequality focused on community-led solutions. While SBCC was less likely to refer to institutions as “fundamentally flawed by design” or explicitly call out government, SBCC still offered a critique of approaches within social welfare and an alternative way for working with community members. For example, in her critique of financial literacy, Colleen Mooney described how this emphasis on financial literacy overlooked the skills and resourcefulness of community members. SBCC did not share the abolitionist framework of LA CAN, so SBCC was less likely to include critiques of criminalization through their frontline work. However, through frontline work, SBCC also challenged assumptions around poverty, such as that people were lazy or that people

were houseless because they wanted to be, as well as highlighted the resourcefulness of communities.

### **Using Frontline Work to Advance Alternative Ideas of Poverty at Larger Levels**

Frontline work not only communicated ideas about poverty to staff and community members directly involved, but I also find that CBOs used their frontline work to shape ideas with multiple audiences. These audiences included other organizations through partnerships and coalitions, funders, and media. Services within hybrid organizations can be used to highlight contradictions and shortcomings of the state (Pulido, 2002) and to contest the idea that status quo policies were inevitable and instead promote alternative solutions (Camp, 2012). Building off this research, this study examined how CBOs drew on their frontline work to shape narratives around poverty to the audiences mentioned above. CBOs did not communicate narratives as a one-time event, but instead their previous frontline work positioned them to advance narratives. Their history and the idea that they “walked the talk” provided legitimacy. Both CBOs leveraged this legitimacy to promote core ideas, as SBCC introduced programs that questioned ideas of expertise within social welfare and LA CAN reframed problems to focus on housing and structural racism instead of personal responsibility. In this reframing, LA CAN also called attention to how criminalization intensified poverty, countering ideas from business interests that promoted criminalization as a solution.

In addition to frontline work as legitimacy, this frontline work was also a form of communication to larger audiences. This was especially pronounced in LA CA due to their history and style of frontline work. As a fightback organization, their frontline work included involving community members in actions. These actions happened alongside friendship and

communities of support, and through these relationships, community members helped to shape narratives of poverty. LA CAN also drew on their history and reputation to gain access to media. In addition to offering alternative diagnoses of problems and calling attention to government and criminalization as a problem, LA CAN challenged the way low-income community members were discussed. As Maskovsky (2018) described how organizing helped to insert new claims around political citizenship, LA CAN's frontline work was a reminder to government officials that "people's names were not homeless" and centered community members' action and political citizenship in the face of neglect. This is not to say that SBCC did not communicate narratives as SBCC also showcased community-led solutions through promoting their frontline work. From their fenceline position, SBCC emphasized the gifts and talents of community members in their communication to audiences such as funders and key partners. While not at the same scale as LA CAN's media coverage and communication, SBCC also inserted claims around political citizenship through countering deficit portrayals of community members and showing how community members used their gifts and talents to create change. Both CBOs not only shaped narratives, but they did this through centering community members' ideas and experiences.

In a webinar hosted by LA CAN about community responses to COVID-19 that focused on "grassroots responses to organized abandonment", one speaker stated they were using the platform that they had to promote ideas. Both CBOs used the platforms that they had to communicate narratives based on their previous history, frontline work as a demonstration of their values, and key relationships. This platform was still within a post-welfare system. CBOs must also maintain relationships with funders and other organizations and these funders brought ideas around poverty (e.g. Kohl-Arenas, 2016). In this setting, CBOs had to negotiate meanings

such as SBCC negotiating around ideas of financial literacy that contrasted with SBCC's principle that community members knew best how to spend their money. LA CAN also cautioned on the risks of mainstream organizations adopting and then modifying narratives so these processes continue to be a negotiation. Support for narratives and the platforms that CBOs have also changed over time. White referred to 2019 to a "breakout year" for advancing their narrative, but this was after a history of LA CAN's frontline work as a "troublemaker". During this "breakout year", government agencies highlighted structural narratives, such as the language within the *Report and Recommendations on the Committee for Black People Experiencing Homelessness* (LAHSA, 2018). At the city-level or within organizations fields, CBOs introduced and promoted new ideas about poverty over time and through relationships, which then pointed to different solutions.

### **Study Limitations**

In this study, I discuss how a CBO's neighborhood location, core population, and approach to frontline work shaped their narratives, but many other factors also affected the two CBO's ability to work with residents and communicate narratives. For example, both CBOs had dynamic executive directors who influenced the organization, with Pete White being involved with LA CAN since the very beginning. Colleen Mooney was not the founder of SBCC, but SBCC was a much smaller organization when she joined and SBCC has seen significant growth and a move to Wilmington during her tenure as director. Their personalities shaped the organization, such as White speaking and writing about poverty and structural racism. While I documented speeches and my conversations with the two directors, I did not examine how each ED affected cross-organization comparisons. I also did not get the chance to talk with them about



leadership or how they thought the organization would continue after their tenure. Since both Executive Directors actively shaped narratives for their CBO, this conversation merits future discussion.

SBCC's home office was in a fenceline community of Wilmington and LA CAN's office was located within the epicenter of Skid Row. However, the two CBOs also extended their work into other communities within Los Angeles County. I included SBCC's work with Neighborhood Action Councils outside of Wilmington, but I have less data about LA CAN's work in neighborhoods outside of Skid Row. LA CAN framed their work as being in the epicenter of human rights violations and they saw their work as rooted in Black radical thought. This emphasis influenced their work in South LA neighborhoods such as the Historic South Central neighborhood, which were historically Black communities that had dealt with structural racism. LA CAN conducted outreach to neighborhoods in South LA, including their Census outreach in 2020; however, I was not able to fully include this frontline work in my analysis. I could not examine all of SBCC's programs due to the size of the organization. I focused on their community organizing program, as this was one of SBCC's larger programs and a strong example of SBCC's core values. While many of the core principles and the emphasis on relationships applied to other SBCC programs, focusing on different programs could have emphasized different partnerships and variations within neighborhoods.

Through a study of two CBOs, I was able to examine organizations that reached different populations within social welfare, with SBCC focusing on children and family services and LA CAN focusing on homelessness, and that were part of different organizational fields. As a result, I was also able to identify common themes across different approaches to frontline work.

Studying two CBOs helped to increase an understanding of the role of hybrid CBOs during a post-welfare period and how key differences shaped narratives. However, by comparing two different CBOs, I could not go into as much depth for a single organization and fully compare and contrast across programs within one CBO. In addition, as I focused on frontline work in two organizations, I did not have the perspective from other organizations or from funders. As I finished analysis and writing during a pandemic, the role of the time period on data collection was very clear. Much of my field observations occurred during a Trump presidency where homelessness was a pressing issue in Los Angeles, but before the COVID pandemic hit. This affected the interactions and narratives that I observed, as well as the interview content.

Lastly, I must acknowledge my relationship and presence within the sites. I do not see my presence as a limitation, but I was a participant, especially with LA CAN. From the start of my data collection, a LA CAN staff member commented that in order to do research at LA CAN, you first needed to be part of the organization. I formed relationships and friendships as part of this work. This helped me to gain access and to learn more about the organization, but I also recognize that community members shared information due to this friendship. I have used this information thoughtfully and carefully, and did not include some information in my field notes depending on how it was shared. I was also personally affected whether it was dealing with the death of a community member who had welcomed me into the housing committee or becoming invested in a campaign outcome, and I hope to continue relationships with both CBOs after this dissertation. While I accounted for my relationships during analysis, personal relationships still shaped how I write about the organizations and the people who were involved.

## **Implications for Social Welfare**

By examining the role of hybrid CBOs in shaping poverty knowledge, this study has several implications for social welfare and community practice. In this section, I discuss how this hybrid model can be part of social welfare practice. In discussing the strengths of this model, I describe how communities of care and political education are important outcomes of frontline work within social welfare and specific components of frontline work that resulted in these outcomes. Then, I look at the importance of narratives of poverty within social welfare and how frontline work in hybrid CBOs can be a space to critique and shape these narratives. I discuss how CBOs can shape narratives with their community member base, and the outcomes that this has for community members, as well as how CBOs can use frontline work to shape conversations at larger levels.

### **The Role of Hybrid Frontline Work and Communities of Care in Social Welfare**

This focus on hybrid frontline work that combines service and organizing can increase our understanding of how this combination is a form of social welfare practice. Community members identified hybrid CBOs as different from other service providers. Through the two CBOs and the relationships developed as part of frontline work, community members found a place where they felt that they had value and could hold onto hope. This resulted in communities of care where community members felt supported and connected to resources. Both CBOs referred community members to other service providers. While community members still accessed services from traditional service providers, this study demonstrates how organic service provision filled an unmet need within post-welfare social policy. Through repertoires that placed a greater emphasis on more personal, ongoing relationships with community members and

created a welcoming community space, both CBOs provided care, support, and mutual aid that community members could not receive through other service providers.

Instead of being seen as clients, both CBOs emphasized that community members were the “spirit and soul”. As a result, community members had a different type of involvement compared to other service providers, where they were treated more as clients. Community members felt they were part of change, and as a result, community members developed a sense of political belonging through this frontline work. With Skid Row as primarily houseless residents and low-income tenants and SBCC working with many immigrant community members who are renters, both CBOs are working with residents who may not be considered by other audiences to be invested in their community. In contrast, both CBOs made a long-term investment in building relationships among community members and in creating a community space that members returned to. I documented effects on community members due to their participation, from “no one has given me this space before” to the support that community members gave each other when they were facing challenges. The two CBOs used specific practices and language to create this more personal space for community members. While organic service provision and forms of political belonging can appear to be spontaneous and unplanned, this organic service required organizational capacity. CBOs invested time and resources to build relationships and create a space where supportive relationships could be developed. This study identified communities of care as an key outcome of hybrid work, and the importance of the time and investments needed to develop these spaces.

This study also showed different ways that hybrid CBOs engage with more traditional human service providers and institutions as they seek to represent their community member base.

In a service-dense neighborhood where community members had negative experiences with service providers, LA CAN represented their community member base by speaking out against other nonprofits and institutions in their neighborhood. In contrast, SBCC served as a bridge and connected residents to resources in a fenceline community with fewer resources. I present two different ways that CBOs responded to the social service infrastructure and neighborhood characteristics, depending on whether they were located at the fenceline or at the epicenter of post-welfare policy. These roles were also connected to each CBO's mission and overall philosophy- as LA CAN's role was in line with their fightback style of frontline work and SBCC's approach aligned with their asset-based philosophy. This study demonstrates different forms of community practice. CBOs can represent community members and address unmet needs in multiple ways, including whether they work with or challenge other neighborhood institutions, and these forms of community practice are influenced by their neighborhood context and mission.

### **Organizing and Political Education through 'Organic Service Provision'**

In addition to distinct relationships and forms of support through hybrid work, this study identified how organic service provision supported each CBO's organizing efforts. For LA CAN, services such as mutual aid during the pandemic, similar to the Black Panther free breakfast program (Heynen, 2009), were a way to call out the state and signify that community members were stepping up when government had failed. This was not only an organizing tactic, but organic services shaped narratives on who was responsible and countered dominant views that community members were responsible for their problems. Similar to Han's (2014) discussion of organizing strategies, the two CBOs formed long-term relationships with community members,

but with an emphasis on building communities of care. For both CBOs, relationships from organic service provision strengthened bonds for community organizing efforts and increased community members' attachment to the CBO. Through these relationships, community members were introduced to advocacy strategies over time. This study shows how this combination of organizing and care work, which resulted in organic services and support, was also central for organizing efforts in these two communities.

### **Frontline Work as a Platform for Reconceptualizing Poverty**

Assumptions of poverty underlie social welfare policy and on-the-ground practices with community members. In the conclusion of his ethnography, Stuart (2016) states that without a meaningful reconceptualization of poverty, current challenges within poverty governance and coercive policies will remain. In this dissertation, I examined whether hybrid frontline work could be a space where CBOs reframe ideas about poverty and if this could offer new forms of poverty politics. While the goals of offering new forms of poverty politics were not always official or grant-funded outcomes, for both CBOs, changing narratives about poverty was part of their organizing strategies. The two CBOs found openings through frontline work to introduce ideas to community members, but this was a longer-term process as community members and staff learned through multiple interactions and through forming relationships with each other. At an individual level, community members did not necessarily undergo a radical shift in how they thought about poverty. However, through personalizing struggles and forming connections, community members increased empathy or questioned causes of poverty and existing categories. Through reframing ideas of community, this frontline work countered a deficit view of communities, helping community members and staff to see their community in a different light.

This type of hybrid frontline work provided a way of working with low-income community members where community members were part of change and driving solutions. This approach to social welfare communicated key messages to community members. Soss (2000) discussed frontline work within a more bureaucratic service agency, welfare offices, and described how community members received messages on how they weren't valued during this frontline work. In contrast, the hybrid CBOs in this study conveyed a very different type of message. Through implicit and explicit messages, community members described feeling that they had value and learning about their power, showing the value of this hybrid approach within social welfare. In addition, this frontline work was a site of political learning. Community members were introduced to ideas through this process, so relationships and mutual support provided a vehicle for political education in community organizations. While SBCC was less likely to call out the government, relationships through organic service provision helped community members to realize that they had power and that ideas for solutions to social problems could come from community. This political learning and identification of community power were important outcomes from hybrid frontline work that community members did not find with other service providers.

This frontline work also helped to introduce narratives at larger levels, such as introducing approaches to funders and promoting a more structural narrative among coalitions and government agencies. Both services and organizing are part of a hybrid CBO's vision of social change CBOs (e.g. Gates, 2014), and transforming narratives was also part of this vision of social change. Due to previous frontline work that reflected their values and trust built over time, both CBOs had legitimacy to shape narratives with wider audiences. Similar to how

community members reframed ideas across multiple interactions, developing this legitimacy and shaping narratives with larger audiences also happened over time and across multiple interactions. LA CAN staff warned about potential cooptation when more mainstream organizations then adopt messages, and this is an area for future research. This long-term process, both for forming relationships with community members and for introducing narratives at larger levels, may not fit into funding cycle timelines. However, as Pete White described at LA CAN's annual fundraiser, changing how we talk about poverty was "an issue worth fighting for."

### **Directions for Future Research**

In examining the role of hybrid frontline work and how it could be a space for reframing ideas about poverty, this dissertation also identified tensions and areas for future research. This type of frontline work helped community members to question existing ideas, which led to a more inclusive form of poverty politics (as described by Lawson & Elwood, 2014). However, community members still brought in ideas of deservingness and identified separations between themselves and other community members. For CBOs that counter dominant values and see community members as the driving force of their organization, working through these tensions is a critical part of community building. However, staff and community members still faced challenges when navigating these tensions. I documented these tensions, but more research could explore this topic in further detail and increase our understanding of how CBOs address these tensions.

In this study, I described reports of long-term narrative shifts after a history of community work, but I have less data on how narrative shifts have translated into policy.



Community members testified to the importance of having a place where they have value, and this was achieved through communication within frontline work. At larger levels, staff described language shifts among government agencies and being able to introduce new programs. Future research can explore additional outcomes, such as whether language shifts lead to policy changes or changes in administrative practices.

Fennell (2015) describes the challenge of providing care in a post-welfare period when basic needs are not being met. Mutual aid filled a key void not just through providing services, but also through providing care in a manner that was supportive and more personal than other service providers. In this study, I also identified challenges with providing this critical form of care in a post-welfare state. Staff and community members grieved the loss of community members after forming friendships and they supported each other in dealing with multiple challenges. At times, this work could be emotional and draining and as one staff member commented, “it’s not all flowers and it’s not all pretty.” Communities of care offered critical support, but staff could be stretched thin due to these circumstances. In some cases, the need for services was greater than mutual aid could handle, and staff and community members struggled with the demand for services such as housing, which they could not provide. Additional research can further explore how CBOs work within these challenges and provide these more personal, less bureaucratic communities of care in places of structural violence and trauma.

### **Epilogue and Conclusion**

The Facebook post chronicling LA CAN’s 2019 annual retreat in December featured a photo of meeting attendees as well as a caption that commented on “fierce abolitionist determination; deep appreciation for the individual investments made by folks in the room; and,

a bonafide desire to turn-up and turn-out in 2020.” At the time of that retreat, neither CBO could have predicted what “turning-up and turning-out in 2020” would look like. Their repertoires changed as official in-person meeting spaces closed, but their relationships with community members and their mission continued. As an SBCC staff member reminded community members, “we are here and stand with you.” Both CBOs filled gaps through providing food and resources, but also through maintaining community spaces during a mostly virtual time. As an LA CAN staff member described their Sunday food distribution during an event on Facebook live, “people come for the food, but they also come for the love.” This hybrid frontline work continued to provide organic services that were not being provided through more bureaucratic services, including a space for community support, albeit in a different form than before the pandemic. Both CBOs also communicated their core values through frontline work, such as providing love and standing with their community members. Building on the relationships that they had formed previously, frontline work in this modified form continued to be a way to promote narratives.

If 2019 was a breakout year for LA CAN’s narrative, in 2020, narratives were increasingly at the forefront. At the epicenter and with a connection to Black radical thought, LA CAN worked in an area where effects were most acutely felt. LA CAN had been talking about structural racism and had an abolitionist framework throughout their history, but protests and uprisings after the murder of George Floyd brought these issues more into the mainstream. Organizational fields could be reconfigured as larger organizations increased their focus on racial justice. However, LA CAN maintained this connection to the epicenter and drew from their history as an abolitionist organization. By August 2020, when protests had become less frequent,

the ending of LA CAN's twitter bio changed from their previous description of "Human rights defenders and truth tellers, not asking for permission" to their current description of "Human rights defenders and truth tellers. Black Lives Matter forever."

SBCC was less involved in conversations about structural racism compared to LA CAN, but they used this year to strengthen their commitment to changing narratives. In Spring 2020, SBCC redesigned their website with a new link- [sbcc.community](https://sbcc.community). One of the first graphics on this site included the text "Changing the Narrative, Empowering our Communities". Instead of referring to the name of their founding, South Bay Center for Counseling, their July and August 2020 e-newsletters started with "SBCC: Strength Based Community Change," reflecting that their ways for implementing their core values had changed since their original name. While SBCC didn't have the same platform as LA CAN, SBCC used their relationships and social media to promote their key messages and demonstrated their core values through their programs. SBCC had launched their pilot program for giving money directly to families as a method of child abuse prevention before the pandemic and Mooney described how families participating in this program had established a social network and supported each other during the pandemic. She stated that giving money directly had a made a difference, demonstrating how investing directly in families was an important social welfare strategy for addressing poverty. Through their programs, Mooney also described how SBCC helped to restore hope during the pandemic. She clarified that this was not a "Pollyannaish" idea of hope, or an overly optimistic and unrealistic idea that everything is going to be okay. "Not everything is going to be okay," she remarked, "but we will make it."

Both CBOs continued their role in providing a unique type of services and advancing narratives during the pandemic. They “stood with community members” and served as the “trouble makers,” demonstrating the role for hybrid frontline work. In this post-welfare infrastructure, both CBOs played a key role in providing love and care, along with food and resources, while calling attention to problems and identifying solutions. Community members were able to see themselves and their roles differently and this frontline work was recognized by larger audiences. Referring not only to LA CAN but also to other mutual aid organizations that partnered with LA CAN, Los Angeles City Council member Mike Bonin published a tweet in August 2020 that highlighted their efforts and how their frontline work was meeting needs when government had failed:

With America going hungry and houseless, Congress has gone home. I wish Washington had a fraction of heart that the mutual aid groups in LA have. Since the start of the pandemic, they have been some of our best first responders.

#NeighborsHelpingNeighbors

Bonin also indicated how these organizations demonstrated solutions through their frontline work:

Mutual aid groups aren't about charity. They are about solidarity. Neighbors helping neighbors. Building strong and vital communities through human connection during a time of physical distancing. They are showing us the future of Los Angeles, and it is bright.

This frontline work demonstrated an alternative way of working, “building strong and vital communities”, both through creating communities of care as well as challenging narratives.

CBOs faced tensions as they tried to advance narratives and frontline work did not always lead to radical shifts in community members' ideas. Despite these challenges, this dissertation showed how hybrid frontline work provided openings for truth telling, from helping community members to see their community differently, challenging how poverty was defined, reminding media and the larger public that “their names weren’t homeless,” and “showing us the future of Los Angeles.”

## Appendix A

### Events for Participant Observation

#### **Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN)**

##### **Planning Meetings for Community Members**

Housing Committee meetings- weekly

Downtown Women's Action Coalition meeting- *I did not present my role as a researcher here, so I do not include the majority of meetings in my field notes.*

Human and Civil Rights Committee meetings- 2 meetings

Food and Wellness Collaborative meetings- 2 meetings

Bi-monthly Residential Organizing Committee meetings - 11 meetings

Housing committee planning meetings with a smaller group of core committee members- 3 meetings

Skid Row Tenant meetings to develop a Skid Row Tenants Bill of Rights- 5 meetings

Annual planning meeting for active community members- January 2019

Strategy meeting led by Human and Civil Rights committee- Presidents Day 2019

Tenant Rights training for active LA CAN members- March 2019

Orientation for Downtowns Women's Action Coalition (DWAC) need assessment survey and survey leader training- October 2019

End of Year Retreat for active LA CAN members – Dec 2019

##### **Actions for Community Members**

Meetings to organize residents of specific buildings- 2 meetings

Human Rights Day Demonstration- December 2018

City Council hearing on Mitchell v. City of Los Angeles settlement- March 2019

Stop LAPD Spying Press Conference- March 2019

Public comment for Poverty and Homelessness subcommittee meeting- March 2019

City Council hearing on upcoming city budget- two hearings in May 2019

Outreach with LA CAN housing committee members- 12 outreach days

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) Town Hall for community members to share comments- June 2019

City Council hearing for Right to Council- October 2019

DWAC needs assessment survey day- November 2019

Homeless Memorial March- Dec 2019

##### **Actions for Community Members (as Part of Coalitions)**

Rallies and press conference as part of tenant rights coalition- 4 events

Skid Row Now 2020 Discussion- January 2019

Discussion on the upcoming city plan (for community members from Chinatown, Little Tokyo and Skid Row)- April 2019

##### **Events for the Skid Row Community**

Prop 10 Community education event- October 2018  
2018 and 2019 Labor Day Block Party  
Skid Row Women's Wellness event- April 2019  
Weekly marketplace- 1 visit  
Memorial Procession

**Public Events (for LA CAN members and larger public)**

2018 and 2019 annual award fundraisers  
Fela Kuti: A night of cultural resistance and Celebration- October 2018  
Poor Peoples Campaign kickoff- December 2018  
UCLA Housing Justice event at LA CAN's freedom room- February 2019  
Tasters and Conversations Panel- September 2019

**SBCC**

**Planning Meetings and Trainings for Community Members**

Roots of Community Collective- 2 meetings  
NAC meetings- meetings with 6 groups; multiple visits with one group  
I Heart meetings- meetings with 3 groups; multiple visits with 2 out of the 3 groups  
Advocacy workshop- Jan 2018  
SBCC County-wide meetings- 4 meetings  
Regional NAC Leaders meetings-1 meeting each for 2 different regions

**Actions and Community-led Events**

Tree Planting- Jan 2018  
Cleanup for Carson community garden- March 2018  
Wilmington Garden workdays- 3 visits  
Tree planting and cleanup- April 2018  
NAC-led workshop for parents- May 2018  
NAC-led family activity days- 3 events  
I Heart East LA Community event- August 2018  
I Heart Carson garden opening- October 2018  
Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors press conference- April 2019  
Participation in United Way HomeWalk with SBCC community members- May 2019

**Events for the Wilmington Community**

Roots of Community Campaign Launch- Jan 2018  
Community Input Session for Robert Wood Johnson Raising Places Initiative- Feb 2018  
Pop-up Green spaces visioning- March 2018  
I Heart Wilmington Anniversary event- April 2018  
Activities at the I Heart Wilmington Garden- 4 events (including two fundraisers)  
I Heart Family Fiesta- September 2018  
SBCC Holiday event December 2018  
SBCC Community Wellness Festival- August 2019

**Public Events (for SBCC members and larger public)**

SBCC Gala- October 2018

SBCC booth for Wilmington CicLAvia- April 2019

**Other Meetings**

Community Organizing staff meeting- February 2018



## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

*Interviews did not ask all questions depending on time (with starred questions as priorities). Interviews also asked about specific events and interactions or follow-up on specific questions.*

#### **SBCC Community Member Interviews**

Primarily focused on participants in either NACs or I Heart initiatives.

#### **Background Information**

1. How long have you lived in Wilmington (or Carson or other neighborhood)?
2. In what ways do you work with SBCC?
3. How long have you worked/volunteered with them? How often do you volunteer?
4. Are there other organizations or programs in the community that you work with? This could be another community agency, church school programs, or other programs.

#### **Experiences with SBCC**

Questions can ask about work with SBCC in general or a specific program (e.g. I Heart Wilmington; community garden)

5. \*\*Can you tell me about how you first heard about SBCC?
  - a. Why did you use their programs/ attend their meeting for your first meeting?
  - b. How was your experience of their programs compared to what you were expecting?
  - c. What were the reasons that you kept coming back? (or what was the reason that you decided not come back?)
  - d. How has your involvement changed?
  - e. Do you have a memorable experience?
6. Can you talk about your interactions with SBCC staff members?
  - a. How do you interact with community members as part of SBCC programs?
7. \*\*What are some of the problems or concerns that SBCC is addressing?
8. What changes have you seen in Wilmington (Or Carson or Watts) since you have been working with SBCC?
9. \*\*What changes have you seen in yourself or your family? How have these programs affected your life?
  - a. \*\*Has organizing changed your views on community?
  - b. \*\*Has organizing changed your views on poverty?
10. Have you seen an impact on other people? Can you describe this impact?
11. \*\*What are some of the challenges you see with these programs?
  - a. Do you have an example of a challenging moment?
12. Is SBCC different than other community programs? Can you tell me how?

#### **Closing Questions**

13. If you could change anything about this work, what would it be?
14. What else should SBCC be doing to address community problems?
15. \*\*What does community organizing mean to you?
  
16. \*\*Do you plan to stay involved? In what way?
17. What else needs to happen to address poverty in this community? Who else should be involved?
18. \*\*Is there anything else that you would like to add or that we should have asked?

### **SBCC Staff Interviews**

#### **Background Information:**

1. Can you describe your role with SBCC?
2. How long have you worked/ with them? How have your roles changed?
3. Can you tell me what you were doing before working with SBCC?
4. Do you live in the neighborhood that you are working in? For How long?

#### **Experiences with SBCC**

5. \*\*Can you tell me why you applied/ what led you to SBCC?
  - a. How was your experience of their programs compared to what you were expecting?
  - b. What was the transition like from volunteer to staff? (if applicable)
  - c. How did this compare to previous organizing (or services) that you had been part of? (if applicable)
6. \*\*How do you interact with community members as part of SBCC programs?
  - a. What communities do you primarily work in?
  - b. Differences between your different groups?
  - c. For supervisors: how do you work with different groups as a supervisor? What are the ways you work with organizers?
7. What are some of the problems or concerns that SBCC are addressing?
  - a. What are some of the challenges for community members that attend your group?
8. \*\*What are key ideas that you try to share with community members as part of organizing?
  - a. How do you build community in your groups as part of this work?
  - b. What keeps community members coming back?
9. How do you work with other organizations as part of your role?
10. How do you interact with other staff members and other SBCC programs as part of this work?
  - a. How are you connected to the larger organization (if working with groups outside of Wilmington)?
11. What are key supports that organizers need? For supervisors: What are supports that supervisors need?
12. (If live in community) Does your family participate in SBCC programs? Can you tell me about those interactions?

13. What changes have you seen in Wilmington (Or Carson or Watts) since you have been working with SBCC?
14. \*\*Have you seen an impact on community members? Can you describe this impact or give an example?
  - a. How has participating in these programs changed the way community members think about their community?
15. \*\*Has organizing affected the way you think about community? \*\*Has organizing changed your views on poverty?
16. \*\*What are some of the challenges you see with these programs?
  - a. Challenges as a new organizer? (If applicable)
  - b. Do you have an example of a challenging moment? Or a tough decision as an organizer? *How have you handled these decisions?*
17. How does funding influence your work?

### **Closing Questions**

18. \*\*What else does SBCC need for this work to be successful?
  - a. What else is needed from funders? From other organizations or government?
19. What else needs to happen to address poverty in this community?
20. \*\*What does community organizing mean to you?
  - a. Has that changed? How do you talk about this with your family?
21. \*\*Where do you see this work in the next 2-5 years?
22. \*\*Is there anything else that you would like to add?

### **SBCC Senior Staff**

#### **(Organizational) Life History Interviews:**

*These interviews will have fewer questions but this will focus on*

- The origin of the organization
- Key changes in the organization
- Key areas of growth
- Reasons for changes and key decisions
- Reasons for expansions or new program
- Challenges for organizations
- Key successes
- Values/ mission of organization

### **LA CAN Community Member Interviews**

#### **Background Information**

1. How long have you lived in Skid Row/ Downtown?
2. How long have you worked/volunteered with LA CAN? How often do you volunteer?
3. Are there other organizations or programs in the community that you work with?

#### **Experiences with LA CAN**

4. \*\*Can you tell me about how you first heard about LA CAN?
  - a. What did you hear of them initially?
  - b. Why did you attend your first meeting or use their first programs?
  - c. What was that first meeting/ event like?
  - d. What were the reasons that you kept coming back? (or what was the reason that you decided not come back?)
  - e. How has your involvement changed?
  - f. Do you have a highlight or favorite experience?
5. \*\*What are some of the problems or concerns in the community that LA CAN addressing?
6. Is their work/ approach different than other community organizations? Can you tell me how?
  - a. What do you like about this approach? What are challenges with this approach?
7. \*\*What does poverty mean to you? How do you define it?
  - a. What do you think are causes of poverty?
8. What changes have you seen in the community as a result of LA CAN?
  - a. Have you seen an impact on other people? Can you describe this impact?
9. \*\*How have these programs affected your life? Has it affected health?
  - a. \*\*Has being involved changed your views on community?
  - b. \*\*Has being involved changed your views on poverty?
10. How do people at LA CAN (staff or community members) talk about community?
  - a. How they talk about causes of poverty (and solutions)? How is that different from other people/ organizations?
11. \*\*What are some of the challenges you see with these programs?
  - a. Do you have an example of a challenging moment?

### **Closing Questions**

12. What else needs to happen to address poverty in this community? Who else should be involved?
13. What else should LA CAN be doing to address community problems?
14. If you could change anything about this work, what would it be?
15. \*\*Do you plan to stay involved? In what way?
16. \*\*What does community organizing mean to you? What does building power mean to you? (or other terms that came up in the interview)
17. \*\*Is there anything else that you would like to add or that we should have asked?

### **LA CAN Staff Interviews**

## Background Information

1. Were you living in Skid Row before being part of LA CAN? What were some of your experiences in this area?
2. When did you get involved with LA CAN?

## Experiences with LA CAN

3. \*\*How did you first hear about LA CAN?
  - a. Why did you attend your first meeting or use their first programs?
  - b. What was that first meeting/ event like?
  - c. What were some of the first campaigns that you worked with?
  - d. When did you become staff?
  - e. \*\*What were key campaigns or wins?
  - f. \*\*What were some of the challenging moments?
  - g. \*\*What were some of the big changes?
  - h. Do you have a highlight or favorite experience?
4. \*\*How does your organizing look different compared to earlier?
5. \*\*How did your location change affect your work?
  - a. Interactions with businesses in old locations
6. What are some of the problems or concerns in the community that LA CAN addressing?
7. \*\*Is your work/ approach different than other community organizations? Can you tell me how?
  - a. How do services fit into your work?
  - b. Are there challenges with your approach?
8. \*\*How does LA CAN talk about poverty and the causes of poverty?
  - a. Have you seen changes in how other people outside of LA CAN talk about houselessness?
9. \*\*What are key ideas that you try to share with community members as part of organizing?
  - a. Have you seen an impact on community members?
  - b. Why do community members come back?
10. Have you seen an impact on the community?
11. How has being part of LA CAN affected your life?
  - a. \*\*Has organizing affected the way you think about community? \*\*Has organizing changed your views on poverty?
12. \*\*What are current challenges for LA CAN?
  - a. How does funding affect your work?

## Closing Questions

13. How is downtown or Skid Row different than before?
  - a. What else should LA CAN be doing to address issues in downtown?
14. What else needs to happen to address houselessness? Who else should be involved?
15. If you could change anything about this work, what would it be?
  
16. \*\*What keep you involved with this work?
  
17. \*\*What does community organizing mean to you? What does building power mean to you? (or other terms that came up in the interview)
18. \*\*Where do you see this work in the next 2-5 years? What will downtown look like?
19. \*\*Is there anything else that you would like to add or that we should have asked?

## Appendix C

### Programs and Services within Each CBO

#### **LA CAN**

##### **Organizing Committees**

- Housing Committee
- Human & Civil Rights Committee
- Food & Wellness Collaborative
- Downtown Women's Action Coalition
- Bi-monthly Residential Organizing Committees (ROCs)

##### **Services and Ongoing Activities**

- Weekly legal clinic with Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles
- Weekly Thursday marketplace

#### **SBCC**

This is not a list of all SBCC programs, but a list of programs that were discussed during the dissertation.

##### **Community Organizing Programs**

- I Heart Initiatives- located in Wilmington, Carson, Watts, Compton, Harbor City, East LA, El Monte, Antelope Valley)
- Neighborhood Action Councils
- Community Connection Groups- previous groups within SBCC's community organizing activities that focused on an activity in common such as knitting or cooking. (By the time of data collection, they had transitioned to NACs or were disbanded.)
- County-wide meetings- Monthly county-wide meetings for NAC members across Los Angeles County
- I Heart Wilmington Community Garden
- Clean Wilmington

##### **Other SBCC Programs mentioned in dissertation**

- Artisan Collective
- Chefs Cooperative
- Creative Incite (previously Streetcraft)
- Energy Pathways Program
- Preschool without Walls
- Relative Support Services
- Thriving Together Tutoring program

## Appendix D

### Key Organizations for each CBO

This includes other organizations that each CBO interacted with, both in their neighborhood and broader organizations fields, that were discussed in this dissertation.

## LA CAN

### Skid Row Neighborhood

#### *Key Partners*

Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA)- City-wide organization but also key partner for Skid Row efforts; provided legal counsel for court cases such as Mitchell v the City of Los Angeles; hosted weekly legal clinic at LA CAN's office

United Communities East Prevention Program (UCEPP)- Community members were members of both organizations; UCEPP staff at many LA CAN and partner events

Los Angeles Poverty Department- Community members were members of both organizations; partner for Skid Row planning efforts

Homeless Health Care Los Angeles- Homeless Health Care was the original fiduciary for LA CAN; served as the administrator for LA CAN's rental assistance program; Executive Director of Homeless Health Care was recognized at LA CAN's 2019 Freedom Now Awards

Los Angeles Catholic Worker and the Hippie Kitchen (soup kitchen)- Catholic Worker members at many LA CAN events and partners for Skid Row planning efforts; Hippie Kitchen was often a spot for outreach and fliers

Skid Row Coffee- Social enterprise café that included LA CAN members and also served drinks and food at LA CAN events

Church without Walls- Church pastor at many LA CAN events and often a speaker

#### *Nonprofits in Skid Row*

Inner City Law Center- Partner for Skid Row planning efforts; staff at LA CAN events

Skid Row Housing Trust- Nonprofit landlord; LA CAN would support tenants in complaints, but SRHT was also a partner for events

SRO Housing Corporation- Nonprofit landlord; LA CAN would support tenants in complaints, but LA CAN also reached out to Executive Director on behalf of certain tenants



Downtown Women's Center- relationships with some staff members; had previously been partners before my data collection period

Weingart Center- on the opposing side of LA CAN for *Mitchell v the City of Los Angeles*

The People Concern- on the opposing side of LA CAN for *Mitchell v the City of Los Angeles*

***Business interest and Police Interests- Targets of LA CAN actions***

Los Angeles Downtown Industrial Business Improvement District- target of LA CAN's earlier campaigns

Central City Association- on the opposing side for *Mitchell v the City of Los Angeles*

Los Angeles Police Department- target of multiple LA CAN campaigns

***Broader Downtown efforts***

Little Tokyo Service Center and Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA)- partners for broader Downtown planning efforts

***City-Wide Fields***

This focuses on organizations that LA CAN directly interacted with, either as partners or as targets of actions.

***Homeless Services***

Services not Sweep Coalition that included Democratic Socialists of America- Los Angeles (DSA-LA); Ktown for All; Venice Community Housing, Homeless Health Care- Los Angeles- challenged narratives within the larger field

United Way of Greater Los Angeles- Everyone In Campaign-adopted narratives about Housekeys not Handcuffs

Previous head of Los Angeles Housing Services Authority (LAHSA), Peter Lynn- Hosted Town Hall about Homeless Count at LA CAN; attended LA CAN's annual fundraiser

Agencies such as the Los Angeles Police Department and Los Angeles Sanitation Bureau- target of LA CAN actions

United Nations Special Rapporteurs- LA CAN members mentioned their relationship with the UN and LA CAN met with rapporteurs during their visits to Los Angeles

***Tenant Rights/ Housing Justice***

Legal Service Providers, including Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and InnerCity Law Center- Members of the Right to Counsel campaign during data collection period

Community organizations, including Strategic Actions for a Justice Economy (SAJE), Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)- Members of coalitions together.

Los Angeles Tenants Union- members of both housing justice campaigns and Services not Sweeps

***Partners that Shared Abolitionist Framework***

Black Lives Matter- Los Angeles- Core partner, head of BLM-LA was board member and partner for actions against Los Angeles Police Department

White People 4 Black Lives- Members also participated in LA CAN activities; partner for actions against Los Angeles Police Department

Dignity and Power Now- At joint actions and shared similar frameworks

Black Alliance for a Just Immigration (BAJI)- Director was a speaker at LA CAN events and shared similar frameworks

**SBCC**

**Neighborhood Partnerships- Wilmington**

Oil refineries (multiple refineries)- partner for Energy Pathways program and funder; Marathon oil was recognized at the 2018 annual Gala

Labor unions (multiple labor unions from this area)- partner for Energy Pathways program and funder; President of United Steelworkers (USW) 675 was recognized at the 2018 annual Gala

Los Angeles Harbor College- partner for Energy Pathways programs

Providence Health & Services Wellness Center

Other partners for events included area business; city government agencies; local schools; local public libraries; WIC; health clinics

***Government Offices and Agencies who Partnered with SBCC***

Council Member Joe Buscaino

Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn

Los Angeles Police Department- partner for some cleanups and peace marches

Representative Nanette Diaz Barragan

County offices that work with Service Planning Area (SPA) 8

### **Within Best Start Communities**

Local government offices- Government offices were used as meeting sites, such as a Los Angeles County services office in South El Monte or city-owned meeting houses in the cities of Palmdale and Lancaster

Elementary schools- NAC meetings often held at elementary schools

Police departments- Some NACs and organizers worked with police, such as NAC members who attended Coffee with a Cop events

Organizations and agencies in the Best Start Collaborative meetings for each Best Start community

### **City-wide Fields**

This focuses on organizations discussed in this dissertation.

### ***Key Relationships***

United Way of Greater Los Angeles- Funder and partner for Pathways out of Poverty program; SBCC helped with staffing for the United Way of Greater Los Angeles' 2019 HomeWalk

### ***Child and Family Services***

Government agencies- California Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP); Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection; Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services- provided some funding and staff from OCAP presented at county-wide resident meeting

First 5 LA Best Start Initiative- funding for community organizing efforts

Key Partner Organizations- Friends of the Family; Children's Bureau- described as key partner organizations with similar values

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