
Megan Pontes
University of San Diego
CANDIDATE’S NAME: Megan Burns Pontes

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: ADVOCATING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: HOW A HUMAN SERVICE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION MAKES SENSE OF ITS ADVOCACY SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

Hans Peter Schmitz, PhD

Leslie Boozer, EdD, JD

Jeff Unsicker, PhD

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ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are uniquely positioned to play a vital role in social change, and many integrate advocacy in their efforts. This dissertation examined how one human service nonprofit organization working to help the unhoused engaged in advocacy and advocacy evaluation using formal and informal methods. Through an in-depth case study of Think Dignity, a San Diego-based NPO engaged in the day-to-day work of social change, this research revealed how it developed its advocacy efforts, collaborated with partners, and assessed its successes and failures. Informed by the framework of social change leadership, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with Think Dignity. Analysis of documentation and social media from Think Dignity and its advocacy partners as well as extensive field notes provided additional context and data.

Think Dignity and its advocacy partners experienced successes and setbacks at individual and systemic levels. Within a short time, it established itself as a credible voice and advocate on the issues surrounding homelessness. Even when experiencing setbacks, Think Dignity considered how it shaped the overall narrative and kept its sight on its objective of systemic change for unhoused individuals. Relevant internal factors that contributed to Think Dignity’s advocacy include: (1) its ability to adapt successful campaigns from other locales to the setting of San Diego; (2) its strength as an advocacy partner based on its grassroots connections and experience providing services to the unhoused; (3) its multi-campaign approach; and (4) the wealth of experience from its staff, board, and advocacy partners.

Its advocacy success was also influenced by external factors such as public health and societal crises and lawmakers whose agendas aligned with their cause and with whom the organization could partner. However, those secondary factors only mattered because of Think Dignity’s agency, its collaboration with other grassroots organizations, and its consistent
messaging to galvanize the public and compel policymakers to act.

Many of the frameworks, strategies, and tools are created by foundations or external evaluators. By studying advocacy and advocacy evaluation in a small NPO, this study develops a more grounded understanding of ongoing advocacy efforts in complex political settings.

*Keywords: nonprofit organizations, advocacy, evaluation, social change*
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends who have supported me along this doctoral journey:

To my parents, who instilled in me from an early age a love of learning and the importance of giving of oneself in the service of others. You have always been a source of encouragement, especially during this program.

To my sister, for walking through the hills and valleys with me and making me laugh along the way.

To my in-laws, nieces, and nephews, for your continued love and support.

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To my best friend, partner, and husband, Matt, who provided a listening ear, an encouraging word, and steadfast support throughout these four years. Thank you for being super dad when mom needed to write. I am forever grateful to share this life with you. I love you.

And to my daughter, Sutton, my miracle. Words do not express the love I have for you and the joy you bring into the world simply by being. I do this for you.
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Finally, I am indebted to Think Dignity, particularly Mitchelle Woodson and Christine Lopez, for sacrificing their time and collaborating in this research. May the work that Think Dignity and its staff undertakes each day to bring dignity to each individual experiencing homelessness continue to challenge us all to make this world a better place.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>BDC</td>
<td>Basic Dignity Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIPOC</td>
<td>Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLM</td>
<td>Black Lives Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>COronaVIrus Disease of 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPAT</td>
<td>Coalition for Police Accountability &amp; Transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTT</td>
<td>Girls Think Tank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRS</td>
<td>Internal Revenue Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISDF</td>
<td>Invest in San Diego Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ+</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Questioning, Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPO</td>
<td>Nonprofit organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PrOTECT</td>
<td>Preventing Overpolicing Through Equitable Community Treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCO</td>
<td>Social change organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDSU</td>
<td>San Diego State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ToC</td>
<td>Theory of Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUST SD</td>
<td>Transparent &amp; Responsible Use of Surveillance Technology San Diego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>University of San Diego</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

We drown in this work every day… I get asked this question all the time - what’s your measure of success? And I can point to data and statistics and say, ‘If we get X amount of support from this’… ‘our added measure of success is that we pass this resolution’… those are easy things to point to say, ‘We’ve made it.” But the work is so much more than that… The work of building up our communities, the work of building up support. All of those smaller points are success. You’re getting one step closer to the kind of change you want to see in your community. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are uniquely positioned to play a vital role in social change and addressing issues of social justice. Described as vehicles for individuals to practice civic participation and engagement directly and indirectly (Suárez, 2020), nonprofits also engage broadly in the democratic process through activism and advocacy activities. While nonprofits can engender social change through their services and programs (Shier & Handy, 2015), the social justice issues they seek to address are “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p.160), requiring an adaptive approach to not only effect change in policy but also “people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p.19). In pursuit of this mission, advocacy can serve as a fundamental tool for NPOs (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013). As nonprofits increasingly embrace the idea of solving, rather than merely addressing social problems, these organizations are incorporating advocacy (to address root causes and systemic problems) with service provision (to address immediate needs). A key dilemma experienced by NPOs is how to justify their impact, particularly in terms of measuring the effectiveness of their advocacy. While many nonprofits may believe their mission includes achieving social transformation or sustainable
impact (Mitchell et al., 2020), much remains unknown about the ways NPOs informally and formally evaluate the impact of their advocacy efforts. How do those drowning in the day-to-day work of social change assess their progress and impact?

Nonprofit Advocacy Explained

Think Dignity engaged in advocacy as a nonprofit organization subject to state and federal regulations. In this section, I first define advocacy, including a taxonomy of the various activities that fall under advocacy. Next, I discuss the barriers nonprofit organizations face in deciding whether to incorporate advocacy into their strategies as well as in evaluating advocacy.

Defining Advocacy

Advocacy does not have a single, agreed upon definition. It is often defined by the types of advocacy activities. While advocacy is most associated with lobbying for new laws or policy change, nonprofits engage in a wide range of advocacy (see Table 1), including community organizing, raising public awareness, influencing attitudes, and building support for social change (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013; Pekkanen & Smith, 2014). Parish (2008) posited that though many nonprofits are involved in advocacy even if they do not consider themselves an advocacy organization. Rather than define advocacy by its activities, Jackson (2014) argued it is instead more meaningful to define advocacy by its purpose, whereas advocacy is “the act of influencing or supporting (something or someone)” (ILO, 2005, p. 5). While advocacy can occur on behalf of an individual, the focus of this study is advocacy that involves policy and/or societal change. Andrews and Edwards (2004) define advocacy as “promoting or resisting social change that, if implemented, would conflict with the social, cultural, political, or economic interests or values of other constituencies and groups” (p. 481). In the context of this research, I define advocacy as any activity or behavior aimed at influencing and promoting social change that
challenges systemic inequalities and injustices in the pursuit of equity and justice for all individuals and groups, particularly those historically marginalized. This definition aligns with my view that advocacy, particularly advocacy within the nonprofit sector, should address harmful systems and the root causes of societal problems.

**Table 1**

**List of Advocacy Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research and reporting for the purpose of influencing policy direction</td>
<td>Bring information forward to key decision makers; conducting research; writing papers (Shier &amp; Handy, 2015)</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult in policy discussions</td>
<td>Develop model policy &amp; administrative rules; develop regulations</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers and/or administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal advocacy</td>
<td>Using strategic litigation, provide legal support, write briefs, develop legislation (Stachowiak &amp; Gutierrez, 2019)</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers and/or administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct lobbying</td>
<td>Contact politicians directly on issues, legislation, etc.</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers and/or administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence policy implementation</td>
<td>Offer research, consulting, or opinions on implementation of policies and the resulting impact</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers and/or administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming and shaming</td>
<td>Publicly denounce actions, practices, or decisions by an individual, group, or organization</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers and/or administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build networks and coalitions</td>
<td>Organize with other nonprofit and/or private organizations for the purposes of applying pressure or attempting to influence policymakers</td>
<td>Government: key political decision makers and/or administrators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grassroots mobilizing

Encourage the public to contact politicians on issues, legislation, etc. Training and delegating on advocacy and activism activities (Han, 2014).

Public: private citizens

Awareness raising / Calls for public action

Education initiatives, promote community engagement, change public perceptions (Shier & Handy, 2015); specific calls to action (Christiano & Neimand, 2017).

Public: private citizens

Advocacy activities differ in terms of target audience as well as indirect versus direct action (see Table 2). Advocacy is typically targeted at one of two groups: the public (i.e., private citizens) or the government (i.e., key political decision makers and/or administrators). In addition, the advocacy activities employed may involve indirect or direct action. For example, nonprofits may conduct research and write white papers aimed at influencing policy direction, using indirect action with the government as the target audience. A nonprofit may engage in direct action with the same target audience by directly lobbying officials on a piece of legislation. Different activities may be deployed at varying times throughout the stages of the policy process.

1 Stages of the policy process include problem identification, agenda setting, weighing of policy options, decision-making, implementation of policy, and evaluation of policy impact.
Table 2

*Taxonomy of Advocacy Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience: Public</th>
<th>Indirect Action</th>
<th>Direct Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness raising / Call for public action</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grassroots mobilizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience: Government</td>
<td>Research &amp; reporting to influence policy</td>
<td>Legal advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult in policy discussions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct lobbying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence policy implementation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Naming and shaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Build networks &amp; coalitions</td>
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</table>

**Barriers to Nonprofit Advocacy**

Academic interest in nonprofit advocacy has grown substantially in recent years, as demonstrated by the rise in scholarly articles and books on the topic. Likewise, the public increasingly expects nonprofit organizations to engage in advocacy to combat the root causes of issues rather than simply provide services that address the symptoms. However, despite this increase in academic and public interest, nonprofits are often reluctant to engage in advocacy for a variety of reasons. They may lack the skills or resources within their structure to carry out such activities (Salamon & Geller, 2008) or fear being seen as ‘too political’ and may feel pressure, whether explicitly or implicitly, from their funding sources or certain stakeholders to not engage in advocacy and activism on certain issues - or at all (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013). Yet, it has been argued that “if any single sector is going to help respond to these critical debates and bring
people together, it will be the nonprofit sector” (Mason, 2018).

NPO hesitancy to engage in advocacy persists despite its potential to aid in pursuit of social transformation and sustainable impact (Mitchell et al., 2020). Nonprofit organizations often limit or avoid advocacy from fear of losing their tax-exempt status (Hull, 2016). Though advocacy can take many forms, lobbying is the activity most closely linked with advocacy. The activity of lobbying appears often in the literature on advocacy and entails any activity aimed at influencing public officials or legislation. While a common misconception is that nonprofits cannot lobby, 501(c)(3) organizations are indeed allowed to engage in lobbying to an extent; federal tax laws place limits on both the amount of time and the percentage of expenses spent on lobbying activities. The US tax code allows for lobbying if such activities are an insubstantial portion of their activities, yet the tax code fails to differentiate between what qualifies as insubstantial and what is considered substantial. Eligible nonprofits can choose to file for a 501(h) election, which measures the organization’s activities through an expenditure test while allowing the organization to retain its 501(c)(3) status (National Council on Nonprofits, 2020). While the 501(h) election is not appropriate for every organization, many nonprofits are unaware of this option. Fear of losing 501(c)(3) status combined with unclear restrictions often discourage organizations from engaging in advocacy (Hull, 2016), despite the potential of advocacy as a tool in pursuing social change.

At the same time, advocacy is often viewed as outside of the core competencies of the sector, not part of a nonprofit’s mission, or politically controversial (Libby, 2012). Likewise, foundations may discourage or prohibit nonprofits from receiving their grants when engaging in advocacy and policy work (Guerriero & Ditkoff, 2018).
The public increasingly wants nonprofits to engage in advocacy to address critical issues rather than simply provide a temporary reprieve through service provision (Guerriero & Ditkoff, 2018). While resistance to advocacy exists within the sector, advocacy can be used in conjunction with other activities in the pursuit of social change and social justice. Much of the advocacy work by nonprofit organizations is done by those that also provide services (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013). As understanding context is crucial in social change work (Boozer, 2013), these organizations are often well positioned to understand the problem, have existing relationships or partnerships with those impacted, and hold credibility in that area. NPOs engaged in both service provision and advocacy recognize the necessity to address an immediate need while also working to address or correct the root causes of societal issues. However, for those nonprofits engaging in both advocacy and service provision, evaluating progress or the impact of their efforts can prove difficult.

**Evaluating Nonprofit Advocacy**

Nonprofit organizations often struggle to establish evaluation procedures for their programs and as a measurement of overall effectiveness (Barkhorn et al., 2013). Evaluation of nonprofit effectiveness is generally associated with a “narrow focus on outcomes that are measurable, visible and tangible” (Arensman, 2020, p. 216). Nonprofits attempting to evaluate their advocacy efforts experience some of the same challenges as attempts to evaluate programs: limited time, limited resources, and lack of knowledge and capacity (Jones, 2011). Investing time and money into advocacy is more speculative than other efforts, as the impact of an organization’s efforts are rarely fully known (Schlangen & Coe, 2011vb). It is much more difficult to measure the effectiveness of advocacy efforts, as advocacy is complex in nature (Arensman, 2020). Advocacy activities can be difficult to quantify or measure due to a variety of
factors, such as strategies can change over time, the desired outcomes of advocacy efforts may shift, a range of variables can affect the policy process, and the difficulty in identifying outcomes including ‘interim’ ones (Coffman, 2007). Organizational limits, such as its size or capacity to establish and administer evaluation procedures, can also complicate evaluation of advocacy. Lastly, it can also be difficult to define time boundaries for advocacy efforts (Guthrie et al., 2005; Morariu & Brennan, 2009), which are generally ongoing due to the amount of social change needed within entrenched systems of power, privilege, and oppression. In short, advocacy evaluation can be difficult to tackle, but advocacy evaluation has the potential to assist nonprofits in changing the world for the better by aiding in reflecting and growing their capacity to adapt their advocacy efforts to changing contexts and situations.

While scholarly interest in nonprofit advocacy has grown over the years, the focus has largely been on the factors associated with advocacy engagement or the nature of the advocacy activities, with less known about how nonprofits evaluate the activities, outcomes, and impact of their advocacy efforts in pursuit of social change (Berry & Arons, 2003).

**Engaging In and Evaluating Nonprofit Advocacy: Theory and Practice**

This research examined how a nonprofit organization engaged in advocacy for social change evaluated the successes and failures of its advocacy activities. Utilizing an in-depth case study, this research provides insight into how one NPO engaged in the day-to-day work of social change both formally and informally evaluated its advocacy. The aim of this study is to expand the understanding of advocacy evaluation from the perspective of nonprofits engaged in social change work as well as how advocacy evaluation can be used to support and further the progress towards systemic social change. There continues to be a lack of research combining academic theories and what is in practice. What is in use that yields little benefit to nonprofit organizations
and their advocacy work? What informal ways of evaluation employed by nonprofits are not currently being captured by existing, formal tools of evaluation? In summary, how can the worlds of evaluation practice and research work more closely together, and what might result from that improved collaboration?

This approach to studying how NPOs assess their advocacy through the lens of the organization begins to address how nonprofit organizations can have more of a voice regarding the development of the nonprofit advocacy evaluation field. As many of the frameworks, strategies, and tools were created by foundations and external evaluators, this study contributes to our knowledge and understanding of how human service NPOs engaged in the work of social change gauge the success of their advocacy efforts and therefore how this resulting knowledge can inform the development, adaptation, or use of such tools from their experience in the field.

**Design of the Study**

The design of this study is centered on interpretivist, qualitative research methods, which were selected to develop a holistic and deep understanding of how nonprofit organizations engage in and evaluate advocacy work within their community. As social change work is complex and occurs in varying contexts, qualitative methods allow an in-depth inquiry by getting closer to those in the field than if from afar (Aspers & Corte, 2018) and to produce “context-dependent knowledge” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 221) that this study seeks.

As will be explored in more depth in the methodology chapter, an in-depth case study was conducted to explore advocacy evaluation in practice, specifically how one human service nonprofit organization in San Diego, California engaged in social change evaluated its advocacy successes and failures. Much as social change leadership involves co-construction with stakeholders who are best positioned with knowledge and understanding, the findings of this
study were assembled from the perspective of the participant organization as best positioned with the knowledge and understanding of its advocacy work.

This research does not propose to examine, nor can it examine, all nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy for social change. The scope of this study centers on a single nonprofit organization, specifically within the San Diego metropolitan area in the United States. While the generalizability of the findings to organizations in other areas of the United States or in other countries may be limited, the intent was to build a deeper understanding rather than to generalize from the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). As Thomas and Magilvy (2011) argued, the pursuit of generalizability “can inhibit or even extinguish the curiosity and interpretation that can come from phronesis” (p. 576).

**The Case of Think Dignity**

This dissertation considers the issue of social change and impact by focusing on the case study of Think Dignity, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in San Diego, California. Known for its beaches and year-round climate, San Diego also boasted the seventh largest homeless population in the country as of 2022 (Warth, 2022b). Homelessness is a wicked problem, as people can become unsheltered for a myriad of reasons, evidenced by the increase in San Diego’s homeless population despite the city’s past efforts (Warth, 2022a). While much needed to be done to address the root causes of homelessness, the needs of those currently facing homelessness also needed to be addressed. Think Dignity was one organization addressing both through advocacy and service provision.

Think Dignity was formed in October 2006 by a group of female professionals who met to discuss the problem of homelessness in San Diego (Think Dignity, 2021a). Initially called Girls Think Tank, the founders felt that many of the efforts provided only temporary relief and
often belittled the unsheltered. Think Dignity was founded with the mission to “advance basic dignity for people experiencing homelessness through advocacy and innovation,” centering its approach on understanding that those unhoused were also citizens deserving of basic dignity.

Think Dignity’s first service was distributing survival packs during the winter. Their services grew to include:

- a transitional storage center, which provided a place for the unhoused to store their belongings.
- mobile showers, which were offered at key locations around San Diego.
- a street café, where unhoused individuals had dignified access to fresh food that fit their dietary needs.
- and a street boutique, where women had access to menstrual, incontinence, and undergarment products (as lack of access to supplies cause unhoused women to makeshift their own which often led to other health problems).

What was perhaps unique about the services Think Dignity offered was that many were developed in collaboration with the population they serve. Rather than assume the organization had a full understanding or ‘the answer’, Think Dignity collaborated on problems and issues with those experiencing homelessness, purposefully seeking their insights and ideas. The street café and the street boutique are both services that were developed from these conversations.

In addition to the services the organization provided, individual and collective advocacy were key components of Think Dignity’s efforts and strategies. Individuals needed legal support for the citations they receive from being homeless. In one example provided by the executive director during an interview, a man in line for the mobile showers was being cited by police, who threatened to toss his belongings. Think Dignity was able to intervene to provide both legal
support and secure his belongings at the transitional storage center. In another instance, a woman received citations banning her from the area in the city where many homeless services were located, including the transitional housing center where she had just been granted a room. Think Dignity provided legal support in court, arguing that banning her from the area where she received housing was punishing her for being homeless while also ensuring she remained so.

As vital and important as individual advocacy was to Think Dignity’s work, advocacy at the systemic level was another tenet of the organization. This study focuses on its systemic advocacy addressing the issues of homelessness, particularly in understanding how Think Dignity engaged in advocacy and advocacy evaluation, both formally and informally.

**Key Findings**

From the interviews, document analysis, and social media analysis, it was observed that while strategy was involved in each campaign and Think Dignity’s overall approach, advocacy decisions and advocacy evaluation were largely informal, emergent, and concurrent. Think Dignity engaged in a wide variety of advocacy activities in each of its three campaigns, and it was able to evaluate and adjust quickly, largely without the use of formal evaluation tools.

Think Dignity’s advocacy and advocacy evaluation practices benefited from its multifaceted approach to advocacy, the experience of its staff, board, and advocacy partners, its tacit knowledge about the issues and how other cities have successfully reduced homelessness, and its ability to respond and adapt quickly to changes in the political and social environment. Think Dignity regarded advocacy success not as an endpoint but rather a continual focus on shaping the narrative and achieving small steps towards social change.
Looking Ahead

I begin the following chapter (Chapter 2) with a review of the relevant literature, including the history of evaluation in the nonprofit sector and advocacy evaluation. In Chapter 3, I present the research questions with a detailed review of the study’s design and the qualitative methods employed in the collection and analysis of the data, including a thorough description of the NPO selected for this study. Chapter 4 commences with brief vignettes of Think Dignity and its three advocacy campaigns, each from their origin to the time of the study, preceding a summary of the findings. The final chapter (Chapter 5) discusses the findings and the resulting implications for nonprofit advocacy evaluation for both practitioners and researchers.
CHAPTER TWO
ADVOCACY EVALUATION IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Nonprofit advocacy and its evaluation represent complex challenges to individual organizations. One reason is that overall nonprofit effectiveness represents a challenging area due to a prevalence of diverse views on how NPOs and their actions should be assessed. Principal approaches include an emphasis on mission accomplishment, a focus on fundraising growth as a proxy for success, and an emphasis on how various stakeholders (e.g., clients, the public, staff, donors, or peer groups) view the NPO (Herman & Renz, 1999; Lecy, Schmitz, & Swedlund, 2012). Faced with a persistent gap between limited funding and often complex and ambitious missions, nonprofits frequently find it challenging to incorporate evaluation to measure their overall effectiveness. This can lead to a “narrow focus on outcomes that are measurable, visible and tangible” (Arensman, 2020, p. 216).

These challenges to evaluation are particularly relevant for nonprofit advocacy, which tends to be more long-term and has unpredictable outcomes. While the importance of evaluation is growing within the sector, the perspectives of those engaging in advocacy are rarely incorporated into the development or critical review of evaluation tools, methods, and approaches. Following a brief history of evaluation within the nonprofit sector, this chapter explores the history of evaluation and evaluation of advocacy within the sector, the debates and challenges surrounding advocacy evaluation, and the dominant voices in the field of advocacy evaluation, including the leading methods, approaches, and tools in use.

**History of Evaluation in the Nonprofit Sector**

Incorporation of evaluation within the nonprofit sector is not a new phenomenon. Endeavors to evaluate nonprofit activities began in the 1950s (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011;
Roche, 2000) and have become increasingly sophisticated. In the United States, the enactment of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in 1993 greatly influenced the sector’s adoption of evaluation practices. The GPRA required federal agencies to establish goals, measure, and report on the outcomes of their programs, as well as provided statutory definitions for the terms output and outcome. In response, human service NPOs, reliant on government contracts for income, began to incorporate measurement tools and logic models (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011).

In recent years, funders, donors, and the public at large have called for greater accountability and increased pressure for nonprofits to ‘prove’ their impact through measuring performance (Minich et al., 2006; Polonsky & Grau, 2011), yet organizations are largely expected to develop such capacity on their own (Lampkin et al., 2006). Within this ‘performance era’ (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011), professed charity watchdogs, such as Charity Navigator and Guide Star, emerged, initially making IRS 990 information of NPOs available online. This data primarily focused on spending ratios and other financial metrics without much relevant information about mission accomplishment and overall effectiveness. A nonprofit may look good fiscally, with low overhead, and yet achieve little progress in achieving its mission or intended impact (Wing & Hager, 2004; Lecy & Searing, 2015). Benjamin (2008) noted that “performance accountability requirements may conflict with what it takes for nonprofits to do this work well” (p. 960). Thus, organizational impact (Polonsky & Grau, 2011) or “data on how organizations actually secure consent or deliver on their promises” (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 91) remained for decades largely unknown. While fiscal accountability is relevant, the more important question is that of an organization’s impact on the “lives of constituents or towards the issue being addressed” (Polonsky & Grau, 2011, p. 196).
Evaluation in the nonprofit sector first took hold at the program level, and therefore research on program evaluation dominates the academic literature on nonprofit evaluation. While not the focus of this study, evaluation of programs set the stage for the expanded use of evaluation throughout the sector, next appearing within international development. Unlike the linear and straightforward nature of many programmatic outcomes, international development, similar to advocacy, centers on complex, long-term problems (e.g., persistent poverty or discrimination). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) struggling to address complexity while demonstrating results from their development work increasingly use critical reflection and theory of change (Valters, 2014; Vogel, 2012).

**Nonprofit Advocacy and Advocacy Evaluation**

While the praxis of evaluation is expanding within the nonprofit sector, the practice of “evaluating the results of advocacy work” (Starling, 2010, p. 278) has been less studied. The evaluation of advocacy can legitimize its role for NPOs (Rahn-Tiemeyer, 2015), while also strengthening the abilities and capacity of nonprofits in their advocacy work. Nonprofit advocacy evaluation began to appear in the 1990s (Mansfield, 2010), though its use was limited for the first two decades (Starling, 2010). While academic research on nonprofit advocacy occurs in multiple disciplines such as political science, social psychology, and sociology, the literature on advocacy evaluation remains comparatively nascent as the practice of evaluating advocacy is also quite new. Additionally, the advocacy evaluation literature was initially limited to focusing on specialized advocacy organizations (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013). As service-focused nonprofits increasingly use advocacy to complement their other efforts, studies on their advocacy have emerged more recently to better understand how traditional service-focused nonprofits
combine advocacy and service provision to shape policies (Fyall, 2016). This section reviews key debates regarding evaluation and the challenges specific to evaluating advocacy.

**Debates in Advocacy Evaluation**

While the use of quantitative versus qualitative methods in evaluation has been long discussed, another question gaining traction within the sector is if evaluation is always needed.

**Collecting Data: Focus on Inputs/Outputs and Confirmation Bias**

Due to the demand for quantifiable results (Minich et al., 2006; Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011), preference is often given to quantitative measures over qualitative methods. This often leads to a concentration of measuring the activities of an organization (i.e., inputs and outputs) (Glass, 2017; Roche, 2000; Tsui, 2013) and then conflating those activities with impact or achieved outcomes (Fischer, 2001; Neesham et al., 2017). Research has documented the tendency of nonprofits to concentrate on quantifiable measures of their advocacy work over those that demonstrate relevancy and impact within the individual lives affected (Mayoux, 2003; Minich et al., 2006; Tsui, 2013; Jones & Hearn, 2009). It has been argued that it may not be appropriate for every NPO to measure impact (Ebrahim, 2019). Further, an organization has a vested interest to evaluate and account for only those activities over which it has some semblance of control rather than evaluate all resulting outcomes (Neesham et al., 2017; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014). Similarly, organizations may then focus only on positive outcomes rather than identifying what did not work or what may be unintended consequences (Tsui, 2013; Ranghelli, 2009; Roche, 2000; Davies & Dart, 2005). Such limited evaluation may impede the organization’s learning as well as its ability and willingness to take risks (Polonsky & Grau, 2011). While some evaluation tools warn against this tendency, strategies to capture unintended or negative outcomes remain scant.
To Evaluate or Not Evaluate

It is no secret that many NPOs are constrained by limited time, financial resources, and capacity (Devlin-Foltz et al., 2012; Coe & Schlangen, 2019; Unsicker, 2013; Coffman, n.d.). Such limitations, including lack of knowledge and training, affect nonprofits’ ability to develop and conduct evaluations as well as analyze and interpret the resulting data (Coates & David, 2002; Carman, 2010). While often centered on evaluation of programs, the debate on whether evaluation is always needed continues within the field. Gugerty and Karlan (2018) maintain that evaluation is not appropriate in every situation: poorly designed evaluation practices that divert resources of time and money that could be directed towards services and advocacy; nonprofits confusing management data (i.e., outputs such as 100 clients served) with impact data; or centering an evaluation around a theory of change before examining its underlying assumptions.

Challenges of Advocacy Evaluation

Notwithstanding nonprofits increasingly incorporating advocacy engagement as part of their mission (Casey, 2011; Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013), the limited scholarship may be ascribable to the inherent and well-documented challenges of advocacy evaluation. How does a nonprofit evaluate its effectiveness when it is but “only one piece of a complex social change puzzle” (Dart, 2010, p. 206) and results may not occur for some time? Despite the potential benefits of evaluation, organizations may devote little attention to such activities due to “the fast pace and scarce resources typical of advocacy” (Unsicker, 2013, pp. 225-226). Nonprofits face limitations of time, resources, knowledge, and capacity when attempting to engage in evaluation of programs or advocacy; however, advocacy evaluation diverges from program evaluation through its iterative and complex nature, long-term timeframe, context, and contribution and measurement determinations.
Iterative and Complex Nature

Whereas program evaluation is more linear in nature, advocacy evaluation is iterative and often complex (Guthrie et al., 2005). Advocacy is unpredictable and rarely a linear process (Faulkner, n.d.): strategies change over time, gauging advocacy activities can be tricky, outcomes are difficult to identify, and an array of variables can affect the environment (Coffman, 2007; Morariu & Brennan, 2009). Many aspects of the environment are beyond the control of advocates (Devlin-Foltz et al., 2012). Throughout this ongoing process, it is critical that advocates be adaptable, able to shift, move quickly, and learn from failure (Guthrie et al., 2005; Green, 2016; Teles & Schmitt, 2011).

Long-Term Timeframe

Advocacy efforts are usually open-ended, as nonprofits work for social change within spaces where power, privilege, and oppression are entrenched. This long-term focus complicates evaluation of progress or impact towards the desired change (Guthrie et al., 2005; Morariu & Brennan, 2009). This tension, between timeframe and advocacy outcomes, has been well documented in the literature (Davies, 2001; Gienapp & Cohen, 2011; Harvard Family Research Project, 2007; Gorvin, 2009; Montague & Lamers-Bellio, 2012). Despite policy change often requiring years of groundwork and multiple attempts before a victory, funders and other stakeholders regularly demand results within a shorter period (Ramírez & Quarry, 2019). Both Ranghelli (2009) and Gorvin (2009) observed the tendency for nonprofits to not account for the impact of outcomes unlikely to be realized for some time. Even once a change in policy is achieved, the advocacy work continues, as implementation or impact is not guaranteed (Casey, 2011). Establishing feasible advocacy outcomes within predetermined timeframes is difficult for both nonprofits and funders, who often aim for ambitious goals within short time periods.
**Context**

Advocacy efforts must be adaptive, and advocates have to regularly adapt strategies and tactics to changing external contexts (Coffman, 2007; Morariu & Brennan, 2009). External forces and characteristics vary among each advocacy campaign (Buffardi et al., 2017); for example, even if the same stakeholders are involved, the political climate will likely be different. Though successful advocacy is unique and challenging to replicate (Jones, 2011) and does not guarantee future success (Teles & Schmitt, 2011), both advocates and funders tend to approach advocacy efforts equally “rather than adapting their tactics and techniques to each unique situation” (Gill & Freedman, 2014, p. 49). The changing context often limits the transferability of lessons learned during an advocacy campaign (Buffardi et al., 2017; Bass et al., 2014), and research on the effects of the changing political climate on advocacy campaigns is scarce (Ward et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2018; Mosley & Gibson, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that advocates approach advocacy and advocacy evaluation with a comprehensive understanding of the current context (Guthrie et al., 2005).

**Contribution and Measurement Determinations**

In contrast to program evaluation, determining cause and effect is often difficult in advocacy evaluation. Nonprofits find it particularly challenging to directly link their actions to the results; multiple parties often work within the same space and issue, as it is unusual for a social issue to be addressed by only one organization (Ebrahim, 2019). The thoughts, decision-making processes, and relationships of the decision-makers involved are usually not fully transparent. For these reasons, nonprofit advocacy evaluation should be focused on identifying *contribution* rather than attribution (Morariu & Brennan, 2009; Patton, 2008, 2012).
Similarly, the complexity of advocacy can make it difficult for nonprofits to ascertain “what can be measured and what is really worth measuring” (Devlin-Foltz et al., 2012, p. 583). Though evaluation methods tend to logically connect outcomes to action, advocacy outcomes are less observable, often intangible, result from personal exchanges, and challenging to define (Arensman, 2020; Arensman & van Wessel, 2017; Buffardi et al., 2017). Advocacy campaigns regularly take years, or decades, to come to fruition, complicating attempts to measure the success of those efforts. Therefore, the literature increasingly stresses the importance of determining incremental or interim outcomes in addition to the ultimate objective (Parrish, 2008; Jackson, 2014; Faulkner, n.d.), as those outcomes “may be the only visible measures of success” (Parrish, 2008, p. 5).

**Who Is Driving the Conversation on Evaluation?**

The absence of advocate perspectives within the field has been noted (Morariu & Brennan, 2009). Coe and Schlangen (2011) observed how “evaluators and practitioners increasingly inhabit different spaces” (p. 8), dividing the advocacy evaluation literature between theory and practice. The preponderance of advocacy evaluation literature, tools, and guides were developed by U.S.-based foundations or professional evaluators rather than the nonprofit organizations themselves (Whelan, 2008). This section begins with a review of the influence of foundations in the field of advocacy evaluation before reviewing the predominant tools, methodologies, and approaches in use.

**The Influence of Foundations**

In addition to enhancing social impact, the purpose of performance measurements is to hold NPOs accountable to funders, such as foundations or government entities (Arshad et al., 2015), and the influence of funders has “the potential to help or hinder the organizations they
support” (Ebrahim, 2019, p. 208). Funders increasingly require evaluation as part of the terms of their advocacy grants, generally stipulating use of specific tools, strategies, and methods preferred by the foundation – most of which were developed by the foundation, other large foundations, or government entities and based on their respective assumptions of effectiveness (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Gready, 2009; Whelan, 2008; Morariu & Brennan, 2009; Post & Dodge, 2019). Advocacy grants typically have timeframes shorter than the nature of the advocacy effort, placing pressure for the nonprofit to demonstrate “linear cause-effect connections between project activities and impact” (Ramírez & Quarry, 2019, p. 3).

Funders may also be ineffective in using the data they require NPOs to collect and provide (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011). Foundations rarely engage in advocacy work in the field, and the lack of input from NPOs in the development of these tools highlights the power dynamics in play between grantor and grantee. Many models and frameworks for advocacy evaluation are centered on the role of the funder rather than that of the advocates (Innovation Network, 2009; Beer & Reed, 2009; Egbert & Hoeschstetter, 2006). For example, one model for funding advocacy stipulates that the nonprofit recipient determine their outcomes based on those predetermined by the foundation (Beer & Reed, 2009). Another, the Advocacy Assessment Framework (Barkhorn et al., 2013), uses a rating system of what is necessary for a successful campaign, based on the beliefs of the foundation – not incorporating those of the advocates. Further, foundations might be tempted to support campaigns they view as easy wins rather than those laying the groundwork for long-term change. Though some research on strong advocacy funders describes providing broad support and capacity building for grantees and long grant cycles, the emphasis broadly remains on the funders, not the advocates. Gready (2009) asked if
“it is possible to develop evaluative tools that are not solely driven or appropriated by funders and their perceptions of effectiveness” (p. 383).

As foundations have an outsized influence on evaluation, the dearth of equitable evaluation in the field is something of which NPOs advocating for social change should take heed. Dean-Coffey (2018) addressed this need, entreat[ing] funders to purposefully reflect on their history regarding social justice issues, particularly race, as “it sheds light on the implicit and explicit beliefs, values, and intentions that frame [their] current approaches and frameworks” (p. 528). Relatedly, Caldwell and Bledsoe (2019) argued that current evaluation practice can perpetuate structural and institutional racism and called for funders to align evaluation practices with their missions of social justice and equity.

Just as nonprofits are increasingly challenged to involve stakeholders in their work, greater incorporation of nonprofit and stakeholder perspectives in advocacy evaluation would bring foundations in line with the social equity these organizations often espouse. Evaluations that integrated the lessons and experiences of nonprofit advocates and stakeholders recognize “that understanding and integrating lived experience is fundamental to the activity of evaluation as social inquiry” (Schwandt & Burgon, 2006, p. 100).

**Methodologies, Approaches, and Tools Used in Advocacy Evaluation**

A substantial number of resources have been developed to assist foundations and nonprofit organizations in implementing and conducting advocacy evaluation. As mentioned, most of those toolkits and guides were created by foundations (Reisman et al., 2007), professional evaluation organizations (Gill & Freedman, 2014), or large transnational nonprofit organizations (de Toma & Gosling, 2005; Oxfam, 2020). While many resources are freely available online or through the originating entity, nonprofits seeking guidance on advocacy
evaluation should discern the applicability of each resource to its unique situation and context, as the toolkits and guides tend to be broadly focused with minimal direction on implementation. NPOs should also be cognizant of how the priorities of the developing organization influence the motivation behind the resource (e.g., funders often prize capacity building).

**Methodologies**

Constructing a roadmap or visual representation of an advocacy effort can be quite useful for advocacy evaluators. Three such methodologies in use are logic model, theory of change, and theory-based evaluation.

**Logic Model**

The use of logic models or a theory of change to frame an evaluation is much discussed in the literature. Developed in the 1970s for the organization USAID (Prinsen & Nijhof, 2015) and adopted more widely throughout the 1980s, a *logic model* (also referred to as a log frame) aims to depict all the elements of a project or program into a single table. Today, some funders still require a logic model, despite criticisms that logic models are linear, reductionist, and often lack usefulness to nonprofit staff (Prinsen & Nijhof, 2015). The applicability of logic models for advocacy evaluation is therefore limited.

**Theory of Change**

Discussed broadly by scholars and practitioners, *theory of change* (or ToC) was developed as a response to the criticisms of logic models. Incorporating aspects of other approaches, it appeared in the 1990s, and its adoption by practitioners and funders continues to grow (Arensman et al., 2018; van Wessel, 2018). Theory of change aims to unite logical thinking and critical reflection, map pathways to sought after outcomes, and unearth the explicit and implicit assumptions held about how change occurs (Van Es et al., 2015; van Wessel, 2018;
Vogel, 2012). The essence of theory of change is long-term impacts (van Wessel, 2018; Guthrie et al., 2005) and uncovering held assumptions (Stachowiak, 2013).

Employed as a process, product, or outlook (Van Es et al., 2015; Vogel, 2012), a theory of change is a “negotiated social construction” (Arensman et al., 2013, p. 22) that can be created at any point during an advocacy campaign. Just as advocacy is not static, neither is a theory of change, which should be continually revised over time (Van Es et al., 2015; Arensman et al., 2013). Similarly, a nonprofit may reflect the complexity of advocacy work by holding multiple theories of change (Arensman et al., 2013).

While designed to be more adaptable than a logic model, theory of change is still critiqued for attracting linear thinking, requiring unwieldy amounts of data, challenging to use, and failing to include unintended or unanticipated outcomes (Coffman & Beer, 2015; Van Es et al., 2015; Prinsen & Nijhof, 2015; Arensman et al., 2018).

**Theory-Based Evaluation**

*Theory-based evaluation* (or TBE) originated in nonprofit program evaluation in the 1970s (Weiss, 1997). In contrast to logic models and theory of change which were largely developed by evaluators, TBE centers on academic theory, which is said to strengthen validity; theories used include implementation theory (Weiss, 1997), program theory (Rogers, 2008), and complexity theory (Mowles, 2014). Theories such as Kingdon’s multiple stream theory (Cairney & Jones, 2006) and the punctuated equilibrium model (Gardner & Brindis, 2017) are useful in understanding the sudden critical windows that occur in advocacy. However, it has been observed that TBE is rarely used by practitioners due to “the lack of appropriate tools” (Faulkner, n.d., p. 2).
Approaches in Advocacy Evaluation

While care should be taken in selecting a methodology and tools, nonprofits should consider the overall approach of their advocacy and concurrently its evaluation – rights-based, utilization-focused, or systems thinking.

Rights-based Approach

A rights-based approach means the advocacy and evaluation are people-centered with objectives centered on human rights and structural causes (Gready, 2009; Chapman & Wameyo, 2001). Different versions of a rights-based approach have proliferated among NPOs intent on anchoring their activities in a universally accepted human rights framework. Relatedly, a values-based approach to advocacy and evaluation integrates social justice values (Klugman, 2010). With both, priority is given to looking beyond successful policy change to appraising the ultimate, direct impact on individual lives, especially the most vulnerable sections of society (Schmitz, 2012).

Utilization-focused Approach

Espoused by a number of authors (Patton, 2008, 2012; Coffman, 2009; Ramírez & Quarry, 2019; Montague & Lamers-Bellio, 2012, Coe & Schlangen, 2011), a utilization-focused approach directs attention to the “intended use by the intended users and evaluating the evaluation by that standard” (Patton, 2008, p. 1), underscoring that an evaluation should attempt to address every potential party. However, NPOs engaging in this approach should consider the effects if their primary users (e.g., funders) never change.

Systems Thinking Approach

A systems thinking or systems approach is fitting for those organizations addressing complex, societal issues, as it promotes examination of the broader context and collective
solutions (Rahn-Tiemeyer, 2015; Oxfam, 2020). NPOs who employ systems thinking in their advocacy and evaluation regularly seek out other perspectives and collaborate with those working on the same issue.

Tools for Advocacy Evaluation

In conjunction with a logic model, theory of change, or theory-based methodology, nonprofits can draw from the assortment of tools developed for evaluation (Tsui & Lucas, 2013). Tools developed for program evaluation tend to stress recording outputs over gauging outcomes and may lack the flexibility advocacy evaluation needs (Devlin-Foltz et al., 2012).

A number of authors connect successful advocacy evaluation with an organizational culture that prioritizes learning (Guthrie et al., 2005; Forti, 2012; Coffman & Beer, 2015; Gienapp & Cohen, 2011; Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011; Devlin-Foltz et al., 2012; Tsui et al., 2014). Several tools focus on the learning side of evaluation through forms of storytelling. Narrative assessment is a form of storytelling focusing on the multiple pathways to change, exploration of the context surrounding the advocacy campaign, and interpretation through qualitative methods (van Wessel, 2018). Storytelling is also utilized in the most significant change technique; stories of interim outcomes and impact are obtained, reviewed, and then reduced by staff and stakeholders to determine the most significant change that occurred (Davies & Dart, 2005). Similarly, the general elimination method determines the “most compelling explanation, supported by the evidence (Parrish, 2008, p.2) after eliminating rival explanations.

Other tools that appear regularly in the literature address identifying and measuring advocacy outcomes. As mentioned, nonprofits can tend to focus on recording outputs (or activity) and confusing this with outcomes (or impact). Outcome harvesting is used retrospectively to determine all outcomes (positive, negative, and unintended) that stemmed from
an advocacy effort (Wilson-Grau & Brit, 2012). With outcome mapping, advocates map the path to the desired changes they aim to affect (Tilley et al., 2018; Jones & Hearn, 2009), though causal, linear thinking and focusing solely on quantifiable activities can be a temptation throughout this process. Outcome explaining process tracing (or process tracing) recreates a theory of change, identifies outcomes, and tries to connect those outcomes to the advocacy, all while searching for alternate justifications and disconfirming evidence (Klaver et al., 2016; Punton & Welle, 2015; Befani & Mayne, 2014).

The proliferation of evaluation tools creates pressure that “advocates should know and be able to use multiple maps or frameworks for observing, thinking, and acting that include evaluating and learning” (Unsicker, 2012, p. 12). However, considering the reporting and other requirements imposed frequently by funders, it remains unclear how nonprofit organizations in the field obtain these skills amidst the demands of their daily work.

Conclusion

Nonprofit advocacy evaluation has gained growing attention in research and in practice. Research on these evaluation practices has revealed several important issues, including the problematic funder roles, the absence of NPO input on evaluation tool development, and the limited empirical studies of evaluation practices in use. Acknowledging the time and resource limitations most nonprofits face, how can the experiences of nonprofits – those doing the work in the field – inform the development, implementation, and adaptation of advocacy evaluation methods and tools?

Considering that few of the approaches and tools developed by funders and professional evaluators have been empirically tested, important questions arise regarding best practices. Are those methods and tools in use yielding practical benefits to nonprofits and their advocacy work?
How might growing nonprofits’ understanding of evaluation theory improve advocacy evaluation and outcomes? Most importantly, how can the voice of nonprofit organizations be better incorporated into the field of advocacy evaluation? How can the experience of NPOs advise and influence the design, adaptation, and deployment of tools and strategies in practice? This study responds to the need for taking a bottom-up perspective on advocacy evaluation. It is designed to reveal the voice and perspective of one human service nonprofit organization engaged in advocacy.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The design of this research is centered on interpretive, qualitative research methods, which were purposefully selected to develop a deep understanding of how Think Dignity, a human services nonprofit organization in San Diego, engages in and evaluates its advocacy for social change. Operating from the belief that meaning is socially constructed (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), this research explored the perspective and experience of Think Dignity as a practitioner in the field. A qualitative approach allows for a more in-depth inquiry by getting closer to those in the field than if from afar (Aspers & Corte, 2018) and produces “context-dependent knowledge” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 221). After a review of the research questions underpinning this study, this chapter presents the case study methodology used in this research, including sampling and recruitment, data collection, data management, data analysis, quality measures, and challenges and limitations, closing with the positionality of the researcher.

Research Questions

The central research question of the study was:

*How does a human service nonprofit organization pursuing social change engage in advocacy and formally and informally evaluate the progress of those efforts?*

To answer this overarching question, two areas of inquiry were developed:

- Choice and application of advocacy strategy and tactics

  - How does the NPO choose the advocacy strategy and tactics employed?
  - How does the NPO choose the evaluation tools to evaluate the advocacy strategy and tactics?
- Who developed those tools and resources (i.e., foundations, evaluators, or the nonprofit itself)?
  - Evaluation of advocacy strategy and tactics
    - How does the NPO evaluate the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy and tactics employed?
    - How useful are those evaluation tools/resources to the organization in aiding its pursuit of social change?

Answers to these questions expand our understanding of the formal and informal ways human service NPOs evaluate their advocacy and evaluation efforts. As NPOs choose and implement evaluation strategies and tools, these organizations are also appraising the usefulness of those tools in achieving both their mission and their goals of advocacy and social change.

**Case Study Methodology**

NPOs are facing pressures to demonstrate their effectiveness (Lecy et al., 2011). This study utilized a grounded case study to examine how one NPO formally and informally evaluated the resulting progress of its advocacy efforts. As discovery of the participant organization’s perspective and experience is primary in this research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a grounded case study approach was most appropriate. Among various case study approaches, this study aligns with more constructivist and interpretivist approaches (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) to knowledge production (Harrison et al., 2017).

Case studies are employed frequently in nonprofit advocacy research (Ward et al., 2022). The case study approach is appropriate in this instance as the research asks “how” questions and an organization’s evaluation of its advocacy campaigns cannot be divorced from the context within which those campaigns take place (Yin, 2003). Additionally, a case study promotes the
concentration and depth that this research pursued (Flyvbjerg, 2011) and requires an understanding of “complex issues in real world settings” (Harrison et al., 2017, p. 1). Within nonprofit advocacy research, the organization is the unit level most studied – more often than the individual and coalition levels (Ward et al., 2022). As this research asks how nonprofit organizations evaluate their advocacy, the level of analysis was naturally at the organization.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

This study centered on Think Dignity, a human service nonprofit organization within the San Diego metropolitan region in California with a mission involving social change and whose work combined service provision with advocacy activities. This organization was chosen for four reasons. First, its mission focused on an important contemporary and systemic social issue necessitating a combined approach of service and advocacy. Second, Think Dignity engaged in formal and informal advocacy evaluation as required by the study’s research interest. Third, an initial investigation revealed this case held sufficient information to develop an in-depth investigation (Patton, 2014). Fourth, the researcher was familiar with Think Dignity and its prolific advocacy work from a previous study.

The San Diego metropolitan area boasts an abundance of nonprofit organizations, with 11,898 registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations as of 2020 (Deitrick et al., 2020). A list of active nonprofits as of February 2022 was reviewed and narrowed down to human service organizations. This list was further refined to those organizations whose mission aligned with or alluded to social change and/or a social justice issue. An online search aided in identifying organizations involved in both social change and advocacy. Seven were identified for their potential as a revealing example of formal and informal evaluation of advocacy work (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The selection of human service nonprofits allowed for examination of
organizations attempting to address a need (through services) while also addressing the root causes contributing to that need (through advocacy). This focus on addressing current needs as well as root issues aligns with the researcher’s belief that the nonprofit sector has a role to play in social justice for all.

The decision to focus on a single case developed organically. Three organizations were initially contacted about participating in the study, one of which was Think Dignity. Mitchelle Woodson, the executive director of Think Dignity, immediately responded agreeing to participate in the study. The researcher was previously familiar with Think Dignity from another research project and therefore aware of its pursuit of its mission in addressing homelessness in San Diego through both service provision and engaging in advocacy. During the initial interview, it became apparent that Think Dignity presented a very information-rich case due to its three concurrent advocacy campaigns. As few studies have examined advocacy evaluation from the perspective of nonprofit organizations, the exploratory nature of this research aligned with this opportunity to go deep within a single organization, exploring the similarities and differences in evaluating its three campaigns, rather than attempt to compare the evaluation practices of different organizations engaged in unrelated campaigns.

**Think Dignity as a Social Change Organization (SCO)**

This study explores how Think Dignity, a human service nonprofit organization engaged in social change, evaluated the progress of its advocacy regarding the root causes of homelessness. Think Dignity’s advocacy approaches stemmed from a deep understanding of the issue by learning from and working with those impacted, collaborating with other organizations working in the same spaces, and learning from other cities and organizations that have
experienced success in addressing homelessness. At the time of this study, Think Dignity was engaged in three advocacy campaigns:

1. Housing as a human right.
2. Access to basic sanitation, specifically access to public restrooms.
3. Decriminalization of poverty and homelessness.

Think Dignity collaborated with individual and organizational partners in each campaign, including coalitions - the Invest in San Diego Families (ISDF) coalition on access to public restrooms and the Coalition for Police Accountability and Transparency (CPAT) coalition on decriminalization of poverty and homelessness.

Ospina et al.’s (2012) idea of social change leadership provides a lens for holistically researching how nonprofit organizations pursuing social change make sense of their advocacy efforts. Nonprofits pursuing social change are concerned with issues of social justice, which Ospina et al. define as “a call for fairness and equality of opportunity for all” and including the “values of inclusion, social solidarity, transparency and accountability, democracy, and equity” (2012, p. 272). Anchored in transformational, collective, and constructed leadership, this framework examines organizations ingrained in social change and was created “to illuminate participants’ meaning-making process in co-construction the leadership necessary to create social change” (p. 255). Social change organizations (SCOs) are nonprofits committed to addressing systemic problems and adaptive challenges through harnessing collective capacity that combine advocacy with other activities, such as delivering services and community building, all with the aim of addressing “social and economic injustice” (p. 261). SCOs work with stakeholders, valuing their lived experiences and as those best able to understand and address these problems.
Ospina et al. posit that the power within social change leadership lies in its collective capacity and using that capacity to influence, rather than generating internal organizational effectiveness.

Think Dignity aligns with the description of a social change organization, as this organization engaged in both delivering services and advocacy in its pursuit of social change. Just as social change organizations seek to engage and work collectively with stakeholders, this research sought to engage and work collectively with Think Dignity in exploring how it evaluated the progress of its advocacy efforts.

**Methods**

**Data Collection**

Think Dignity consistently engaged in social change leadership, co-constructing services and advocacy approaches with those stakeholders who were best positioned with knowledge and understanding (i.e., those experiencing homelessness). Therefore, the researcher developed the study in collaboration with the participant organization.

Case study research requires reliance on multiple independent sources (Tellis, 1997). For this research, data sources consisted of interviews, written organizational documentation, websites of Think Dignity and its advocacy partners, social media posts by Think Dignity and its partner coalitions, and field notes by the researcher (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Think Dignity to assess how the organization formally and informally evaluated its advocacy for social change through informal and/or formal evaluation. Interviews occurred during the period of May 2022 to February 2023. The large majority of Think Dignity’s advocacy work was coordinated by the executive director, Mitchelle Woodson, with support from the community engagement
coordinator, Christine Lopez. Seven interviews were conducted, six with Mitchelle and one with Christine.

**Table 3**

*Interviews with Think Dignity Leadership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Core Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director</td>
<td>May 12, 2022</td>
<td>50 min 40 sec</td>
<td>advocacy campaigns, working with lawmakers, coalitions, conducting research, advocacy tactics, shaping the narrative, success, capitalizing on momentum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director</td>
<td>June 9, 2022</td>
<td>38 min 34 sec</td>
<td>conducting research, coalitions, campaign strategy, theory of change, advocacy models, milestones, shifting strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director</td>
<td>August 22, 2022</td>
<td>Correspondence via email</td>
<td>theory of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director</td>
<td>March 1, 2023</td>
<td>Correspondence via email</td>
<td>advocacy campaigns, theory of change, evaluation tool selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director</td>
<td>March 6, 2023,</td>
<td>Correspondence via email</td>
<td>advocacy campaigns, evaluation tools, documenting milestones, power mapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March 10, 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td>community awareness, community action / engagement, systemic change, evaluation tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director</td>
<td>March 13, 2023</td>
<td>Correspondence via email</td>
<td>role in advocacy campaigns, milestones, success, strong voice, evaluation tools, research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine Lopez, Community Engagement Coordinator</td>
<td>March 15, 2023</td>
<td>32 min 51 sec</td>
<td>advocacy campaigns, working with lawmakers, coalitions, conducting research, advocacy tactics, shaping the narrative, success, capitalizing on momentum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The guide for the initial interview was developed by the researcher and can be found in Appendix B. Supplemental questions in subsequent interviews stemmed from a review of the previous interview(s) as well as other data collected (i.e., documents, social media posts). The audio for each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed through Otter.ai, with the transcription sent to the interviewee for member checking.

Additional data collection employed to supplement the interviews included gathering documentation from the organization, websites, and social media posts (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), follow-up interviews, and field notes. Documentation was collected from Think Dignity (directly and from its website) and analyzed to provide additional context and information regarding the organization’s advocacy and evaluation efforts. This documentation included annual impact reports, financial data, and theory of change documentation. The websites for the CPAT, the Project for Sanitation Justice, and ISDF were also reviewed and analyzed.

Table 4

Overview of Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Obtained From</th>
<th>Date Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual Reports</td>
<td><a href="http://www.thinkdignity.org">www.thinkdignity.org</a></td>
<td>2014 - 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>990 Tax Forms</td>
<td><a href="http://www.thinkdignity.org">www.thinkdignity.org</a></td>
<td>2013 - 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Change</td>
<td>Think Dignity</td>
<td>August 8, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Posts – Think Dignity</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram, Twitter</td>
<td>April 2010 - February 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Posts – Project for Sanitation Justice</td>
<td>Instagram, Twitter</td>
<td>June 2022 – February 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Posts – ISDF²</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram, Twitter</td>
<td>April 2022 – February 2023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² For public restroom campaign only.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Posts – CPAT</th>
<th>Facebook, Instagram, Twitter</th>
<th>July 2020 – February 2023</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think Dignity Website</td>
<td><a href="http://www.thinkdignity.org">www.thinkdignity.org</a></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPAT Resources (fact sheets, data cards, reports)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cpatsd.com">www.cpatsd.com</a></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invest in San Diego Families Website</td>
<td><a href="http://www.investinsdfamilies.org">www.investinsdfamilies.org</a></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project for Sanitation Justice (reports, news articles)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bathrooms.sdsu.edu">www.bathrooms.sdsu.edu</a></td>
<td>June 2021 – December 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News articles and clips</td>
<td>Various sources</td>
<td>December 21, 2017 – February 14, 2023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, social media posts were reviewed for Think Dignity, CPAT, Project for Sanitation Justice, and ISDF. Social media posts examined for Think Dignity were those at the inception of its social media accounts in March 2015 through February 2023; the posts for Think Dignity’s advocacy partners were similarly reviewed: June 2020 through February 2023 for CPAT and June 2022 through February 2023 for the Project for Sanitation Justice. As Think Dignity is only partnering with ISDF in one of its multiple active campaigns, only posts pertaining to the public toilet campaign were reviewed from the start of that campaign through February 2023. Surprisingly, data from social media sources are rarely analyzed in nonprofit advocacy research (Ward et al., 2022), despite nonprofits increasingly using social media as part of their advocacy strategy (Guo & Saxton, 2014). It was important to analyze social media for this case, as Think Dignity as well as its advocacy partners regularly employ social media to engage with the public for both information and action purposes. Think Dignity, for example, utilized their posts to inform and generate action for both its services and advocacy efforts.
Table 5

**Social Media Activity by Think Dignity and Advocacy Partners, April 2010 – February 2023**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think Dignity</td>
<td>1,375</td>
<td>2,181</td>
<td>569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPAT</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>1,084</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISDF</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project for Sanitation Justice</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,589</td>
<td>3,317</td>
<td>746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

**Social Media Activity by Campaign³, April 2010 – February 2023**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing as a human right</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to bathrooms / basic sanitation</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decriminalization of poverty</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>1,172</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>1,738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad homeless advocacy / other issues</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,061</td>
<td>1,665</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>3,127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ Total posts by Think Dignity and its advocacy partners.
Table 7

Social Media Activity by Focus for Public Audience, April 2010 – February 2023

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Information Focused</th>
<th>Action Focused</th>
<th>Both Information &amp; Action Focused</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing as a human right</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to bathrooms / basic sanitation</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decriminalization of poverty</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad homeless advocacy / other issues</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>1,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,066</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>1,664</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the process of reviewing the data from the initial interviews, social media posts, and document analysis, additional questions were generated to obtain clarification or to expand upon the information previously gathered. These questions were posed to Think Dignity either through additional interviews or question and answer via email correspondence, depending on staff availability. Digital recording, transcription, and member checking were also employed with the additional interviews. Member checking did not result in any changes or additions to the transcripts. Finally, field notes were taken throughout the process to record additional information regarding the organizational context and the context in which the interviews occurred, as well as to include reflections on my positionality regarding both the context and the interviews.
Data Analysis and Management

With the resources and design of this research in mind, the data analysis and management involved the following steps. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with the audio being recorded and transcribed simultaneously using Otter.ai. Transcriptions in Otter.ai retain the audio along with the written transcription, allowing the researcher to review for accuracy. The interview transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy, and filler words such as “um,” “like,” “right,” and “yeah” were removed. The reviewed transcriptions were sent to the interviewee in PDF format for review. Prior to coding, a pdf version of the interview transcript was uploaded to NVivo to assist in the data management process. Field notes were recorded using OneNote. Word and Excel were used to organize data from Think Dignity’s website, financial and impact reports, other organizational documents, and social media posts. In addition to being stored in a password protected folder on the researcher’s laptop, data was also backed up in Google Drive.

Data analysis began during the data collection process (Neuman, 2011) and continued to develop over time (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), as the data from each interview informed the next. A document titled “Think Dignity Questions and Themes” was maintained throughout data collection and analysis, so that the researcher could document questions, notes, and themes that were emerging throughout the process. As the study centered on the experience and perspective of the participant organization, the data from the study was iteratively interpreted, utilizing in vivo coding.

Social media posts for Think Dignity were first categorized as general messages and information (e.g., a post about Memorial Day), organizational (e.g., a post about general organizational information or activities such as a post about its board), services (e.g., a post about its programs or the programs of a partner or local agency), or advocacy (e.g., a post regarding one of its three advocacy campaign, an advocacy action within the community, or
information to increase public awareness). Posts were then additionally cataloged as information-focused (i.e., intended to educate the public), action-focused (i.e., intended to spur the public to some sort of action), or both information and action-focused. Similarly, posts for CPAT, the Project for Sanitation Justice, and the ISDF coalition were first characterized as general messages or advocacy, then further categorized as information-focused, action-focused, or both information and action-focused (Guo & Saxton, 2014). For all of the social media posts, only the posts identified as advocacy were analyzed to (1) identify how Think Dignity used social media in its advocacy campaigns, (2) track the progress of each campaign, and (3) identify how advocacy strategy shifted in response to external factors.

In addition to relistening to the interviews to hear the words in the interviewees’ own voice, all text was re-read to obtain an overall sense of the entirety of the data. The transcribed interviews, annual impact reports, theory of change documentation, and text from websites were uploaded into NVivo prior to analysis. Field notes were also analyzed to identify any additional data and insights to complement.

The data from these sources were first coded inductively to identify recurring themes in the data. After this initial open coding, line-by-line coding was applied to capture more detail. This coding was recurrently studied to identify emergent themes and patterns, which eventually coalesced around the overarching findings.

The Research Process

Challenges occurring during the course of this study converged on the theme of time. Family and professional challenges required the researcher at times to pause data collection and analysis, which led to the study taking longer than originally planned. Coordinating schedules with participants also affected the timetable. However, the added time produced interesting
developments within Think Dignity’s advocacy campaigns and therefore further opportunities to observe how the organization evaluated its impact in light of those occurrences.

**Quality Measures**

Care was taken throughout the study to extensively document the data collection, coding, and analysis process, to remain centered in the perspective of the participant organization and its staff, and to engage in continual reflexivity as the researcher. This section discusses the trustworthiness of the data in terms of credibility, transferability of the findings, confirmability, and dependability.

**Credibility**

An inherent limitation of this research is it does not propose to examine, nor can it examine, all nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy for social change. This study focused on the specific experience of one nonprofit organization in the United States and specifically within the San Diego metropolitan area. Think Dignity was purposively selected for its potential as a revealing example of the subject (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Much of Think Dignity’s approach to advocacy strategy, tactics, and evaluation was informed by its mission of bringing basic dignity to individuals experiencing homelessness, which may make these results transferable to similar groups working on issues of homelessness. The findings may also be transferable to organizations advocating on different social issues because their clients likely face similar systemic issues, such as criminalization of poverty. Think Dignity was located in a major metropolitan area (San Diego) where coalitions were often comprised of the same grassroots organizations; the experience of NPOs located in a different context may differ from the findings in this research. The context of each advocacy campaign is unique, so elements that are specific to a campaign (such as tactics) may not easily transfer to
another.

**Dependability**

As advocacy work involves adapting to an ever-changing context, so did this research adapt, transitioning to center on a single case. Though the researcher was aware of the size of the organization, only two of the staff were involved in Think Dignity’s advocacy than had been surmised. Therefore, Think Dignity’s perspective on advocacy and advocacy evaluation was equivalent to the perspectives of these two individuals, namely the executive director who was the primary individual in its advocacy work. It is possible that the organization’s approaches to advocacy and advocacy evaluation might shift should it experience a change in leadership; if that occurred, a similar study might obtain different results.

As recorded above, research procedures were well documented, particularly in terms of data collection and analysis. Additionally, field notes were documented throughout to note additional insights and emerging themes, as well as an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on their positionality as well as any potential bias. As it has been mentioned, the researcher was previously aware of Think Dignity and its work from another project and held this organization in esteem. Throughout the study, I questioned how, as the researcher, I might be signaling validation or approval in wording of questions and used that opportunity to bring a critical eye to data collection and analysis.

**Confirmability**

After a review of Think Dignity’s website, an initial interview was conducted with the executive director. The subsequent interviews occurred concurrently with the remaining data collection, with the researcher also transcribing field notes throughout the process. All documents were publicly available online, apart from the Theory of Change which was provided
by the organization. Towards the end of the study, social media posts were recorded, coded, and analyzed as described above. As a new piece of data was collected or interview occurred, the previously collected data was reviewed for nascent themes which were recorded along with any surfacing questions into the working document titled “Think Dignity Questions and Themes,” which was added to, edited, and consulted throughout the study. Any additional questions were answered through an interview on Zoom or via email correspondence.

After an extensive review of the data and importing it into NVivo, the data was coded inductively. This process occurred iteratively, moving into line-by-line and simultaneous coding, resulting in 11 category codes and 31 subcategory codes (Appendix C). Throughout coding, the researcher noted what appeared to be emerging, including what was surprising or intriguing. As the resultant codes were reviewed, three themes materialized.

**Positionality**

Qualitative research cannot be separate from the researcher, as “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Therefore, throughout the study, I engaged in continual reflection on the identities I hold and how these have shaped and limited my perspectives and assumptions, as well as how I navigate the world and experience the nonprofit sector. I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender female from a middle-class family, who grew up in the ‘Bible belt’ of the Southeastern United States. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of my early experiences with the nonprofit sector and volunteering were connected to religious-affiliated organizations. Often those experiences were shaped by what we were doing for others, not with or alongside others, and lacked awareness of stakeholders’ perspectives and discussion of the systemic roots and forces at work, particularly in terms of privilege and oppression.
I continued this journey of growth and un-learning by reflecting on the ways that I have upheld the system more often than I have sought to tear it down, both individually and under the guise of ‘charity work.’ All of this prompted me to question how the nonprofit sector is engaging in and seeking social change. What good is the work that we do if it is not truly making an impact? How can this work be done without ensuring all voices are at the table, particularly the voices of those whom society seeks to marginalize?

Now as a scholar, my research interests intersect around the role of nonprofit organizations and groups as active participants in social change – both in those nonprofit activities to effect social change as well as how progress towards social change is measured.

My experience with the civil sector has been limited to nonprofit organizations that were smaller in scale and not directly engaged in advocacy efforts. In terms of advocacy and activism, I have limited experience with both, which may limit my perspectives on advocacy in the nonprofit sector from the practitioner standpoint. I also acknowledge the potential influence from my previous experience in the private sector, which can bring the temptation to view or evaluate nonprofit organizations, their programs, and activities through a for-profit lens – a focus on efficiency rather than impact.

I approached this study with the commitment to continually engage in reflexivity, questioning the assumptions and biases that come from these lenses and the identities I hold, particularly in terms of social change and social justice. Care was taken to use inclusive language in the interview questions. Throughout the study, I strove to maintain an open mind, acknowledge, and set aside any preconceived notions I might hold, and engaged in member checking to ensure the study captures the thoughts and opinions of the participants rather than my own assumptions.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter examines the advocacy strategies, activities, and evaluation practices of Think Dignity’s three main advocacy campaigns: housing as a human right, access to basic sanitation and restrooms, and decriminalization of poverty and homelessness.

Think Dignity and its partners achieved major successes at individual and systemic levels. Think Dignity was successful in provision of services that responded to the immediate needs of those it served. It had been successful in helping individuals with legal issues, including those incurred from being homeless. At the systems level, it was successful at: (1) becoming a prominent advocate in San Diego; (2) shaping the narrative through its consistent messaging on the issues unhoused individuals face; and (3) achieving small steps towards systemic change.

Think Dignity also experienced interim obstacles in its advocacy. An additional restroom downtown was removed shortly after its installation. Despite concerted efforts by Think Dignity and its partners, the City Council implemented a vehicle habitation ban. Yet Think Dignity played the long game of advocacy; even when it experienced a setback, it considered how it affected the narrative in that situation and kept its sight on its objective of systemic change for unhoused individuals.

What explains the advocacy successes and failures of Think Dignity since its founding in 2006? The evidence points to a number of relevant factors, including its efforts to adapt successful campaigns from other cities to the San Diego context. Think Dignity became a respected voice on the issue of homelessness because it developed grassroots connections and used its experiences with service delivery to inform its advocacy. Another important factor in its
success was its decision to campaign on multiple related issues, including access to affordable housing, decriminalization of homelessness and poverty, and access to basic sanitation. A distinct advantage was the advocacy experience of Think Dignity’s staff, board, and partners; this experience was instrumental in developing strategy and enabling Think Dignity to quickly evaluate and adapt its advocacy strategy and tactics.

Major external factors that shaped its advocacy success were moments of crisis (public health, BLM), finding policy champions, and having access to insider knowledge about legislative agendas. But these favorable conditions would not have sufficed without the independent efforts of Think Dignity, including its successful collaboration with other civil society groups and its use of social media to mobilize the public and put pressure on policy makers.

This chapter continues with a brief history and status of Think Dignity as an organization, from its beginning to the time of the study, including its staff and finances. A synopsis of each of the three advocacy campaigns is presented, followed by a synthesis of the findings.

**Girls Think Tank (October 2006 – November 2015)**

Moved by the pervasiveness of homelessness in their city and the impact on individuals experiencing homelessness, a group of female professionals founded Girls Think Tank (GTT) in October 2006. After concluding that the current system focused on temporary measures and demeaned those experiencing homelessness, they settled on a mission to “advance basic dignity for people experiencing homelessness through advocacy and innovation” (Think Dignity, 2021a). The new organization’s principal tenet was that all people deserve to be treated with basic dignity, centering its approach on the individual. From the early days, GTT incorporated
services and advocacy in its endeavors to meet the needs of those facing homelessness while also addressing the root causes of homelessness.

From that first conversation among friends and colleagues, GTT grasped homelessness as a systemic issue affecting individual lives, with many factors contributing to the societal problem of homelessness. In contrast to how the unhoused are often viewed, GTT emphasized that those experiencing homelessness are fellow citizens, recognizing that each person had their own unique story and deserved basic dignity. This position guided the organization’s actions from the beginning.

These initial conversations among friends and colleagues quickly expanded to involve the local community, as the organization recognized that real change required public support, educating, and addressing long-held assumptions about those facing homelessness. GTT began holding monthly Basic Dignity Coalition (BDC) meetings - open forums to discuss the issues connected to homelessness, how the community was impacted, and action steps to address those issues. Community-led solutions were seen as key to significant and sustainable change, and GTT’s first acts of service and advocacy generated from the BDC meetings.

Early activities included collecting blankets, jackets, socks, and other supplies and distributing survival packs to homeless individuals during the winter. The community was encouraged to both donate supplies and their time in helping distribute the packs to their neighbors living on the streets. From this first act, additional services were started to meet the immediate needs of the unhoused in San Diego. Summer survival backpacks were created and passed out. GTT took over administration of a transitional storage center, providing the homeless a place to securely store their belongings. In 2012, GTT began offering legal referral and advocacy clinics to help homeless individuals address legal matters (civil and criminal).
GTT continued to educate and involve the community in its efforts. Monthly BDC meetings provided the opportunity to engage in conversation and action on the issues impacting and contributing to homelessness. GTT also held events such as Picnic with a Cause, where a ticket purchased also provided a ticket to an unhoused individual, and a candlelight vigil raising awareness for those who died homeless.

Starting with Facebook in April 2010, GTT began using social media as a way to educate, engage with, and galvanize the public. Initial posts focused on information about the organization, its events, and advocacy. Instagram and Twitter accounts were added in March and December 2015, respectively. Social media communication was heavily information focused initially with many posts and reposts focused on addressing common assumptions and stigmas of those experiencing homelessness. Beginning in late 2016, the focus shifted toward posts that were action focused or both information and action focused.

**Think Dignity (December 2015 – February 2023)**

On December 16, 2015, the organization rebranded to Think Dignity, to reflect how all were invited to advance basic dignity for their neighbors experiencing homelessness. This section details the staff, finances, and services of the organization at the time of the study.

**Staff**

At the time of the study, Think Dignity had a staff of six and a board of nine. Mitchelle Woodson first joined Think Dignity in 2017 as the staff attorney; she became its managing attorney and added the role of Executive Director in 2019. Mitchelle was involved in both individual and broad advocacy work. As the Community Engagement Coordinator, Christine Lopez oversaw volunteers and served as Think Dignity’s liaison in the various coalitions and other advocacy spaces within which the organization was involved. The four other members of
staff were: Merlynn Watanabe, Programs & Operations Manager; Danny McCray, TSC Site Supervisor; Howard Diggs, Intake Specialist; and Lauren Turner, Staff. While primarily focused on operations and programs, staff would occasionally assist with advocacy campaigns as needed or based on their interests. Watanabe was a co-author of the research Think Dignity and the University of San Diego conducted on homeless experiences with law enforcement (Watanabe et al., 2021).

**Finances**

990 tax return forms were available for review for 2013 through 2020, and annual impact reports were available for 2014 through 2022. Initially (as Girls Think Tank), the organization relied on individual and corporate support and its annual fundraising event. Until 2017, GTT collected membership dues. Membership dues were then abolished, and individuals encouraged to become sustaining members through automatic recurring donations.

In 2015, the organization began receiving government grants to support its programs; the grants accounted for 47% of its income that year. In the years since, grants ranged from 24% to 46% of revenues, accounting for 41% in 2020. The San Diego County Bar Association provided some financial support for Think Dignity’s legal work, which was intrinsically connected to its advocacy work. While Think Dignity did not receive any grants explicitly for its advocacy, it was open to the possibility. Think Dignity has also turned down funds that its leadership felt would lead to mission drift. “If they’re not supportive of our efforts, [we] don’t want their money” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022).

At the time of the study, individual support, corporate donations, and government grants made up the bulk of Think Dignity’s income. After a hiatus in 2020 and a virtual event in 2021
due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Think Dignity’s annual fundraising event returned in-person in 2022, though financials from that year were not available.

Table 8

**Budget Development, 2013-2020**

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<td>Revenue</td>
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<td>$244,672</td>
<td>$351,555</td>
<td>$278,975</td>
<td>$415,894</td>
<td>$489,354</td>
<td>$309,990</td>
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<td>$93,259</td>
<td>$18,707</td>
<td>($205,287)</td>
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Table 9

**Breakdown of Funding Sources, 2013-2020**

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<td>Total</td>
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<td>$244,672</td>
<td>$351,555</td>
<td>$278,975</td>
<td>$415,894</td>
<td>$489,354</td>
<td>$309,990</td>
<td>$521,782</td>
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Theory of Change

While working with a development consultant on its fundraising plan and strategy in August 2021, Think Dignity went through the process of documenting its theory of change

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4 GTT filed the 990-EZ form for 2013, which provided less detail on the contributions. It is unclear if the amount listed for contributions included government grants or not. No annual impact report was available for 2013.

5 The 990 for 2014 lists this as ‘program revenue’ for SDHC, though no individual paid to use GTT’s services. From the annual impact report for 2014, it is clear that this amount was a grant from the San Diego Housing Commission.
(Appendix D) – a process in which the organization had not engaged previously. “The development consultant made it seem like why weren’t we doing this?” (M. Woodson, personal communication, June 9, 2022). The consultant walked the board and executive director through the organization’s theory of change step-by-step via PowerPoint, with the emphasis often on Think Dignity’s programs rather than consideration of both its advocacy and its programs.

The actions identified to bring about change included:

- Educating the public and rewriting the narrative about the causes of homelessness.
- Identify best practices and create a scorecard of service providers.
- Collaborate with community members to identify gaps in services and priorities/needs.
- Creating a campaign for change, i.e., human rights and advocating for solutions.
- Provide services with basic dignity as part of a community outreach plan.
- Establish pilot programs with best practices that can be replicated and operated by other service providers.
- Be an incubator of innovation for other service providers.

Evidence identified as indicative of Think Dignity contributing to long term change were:

- Educating the public and rewriting the narrative about the causes of homelessness.
- Hold a community forum/summit to educate the general population (focus group, pre/post survey).

The key outcomes or wider benefits were listed as “increased compassion, relaxation of criminalization and humanization of people experiencing homelessness, improvements in services and resources.”
No final visual was created, and at the time of the study, the theory of change was not something to which Think Dignity regularly referred. This was partially contributed to the organization’s size and the demands on the staff. While two of Think Dignity’s six staff members were regularly involved in its advocacy campaigns, it had limited capacity. Therefore, much of Think Dignity’s advocacy was also accomplished as a member of coalitions or in collaboration with other advocacy partners. A theory of change was not formally developed during those partnerships, rather the coalitions established guiding principles at the onset of those collaborations.

At the time of this study, Think Dignity had not referred to or updated this documented theory of change; however, the organization regularly engaged in internal conversations about its advocacy strategically as well as in response to what was emergent.

So many things come up that you have to shift theory of advocacy… So, while the theory of change, it’s good for long term vision and how we’re going to accomplish that, so many things happen where you have to shift focus. (M Woodson, personal communication, June 9, 2022).

**Programs and Services**

Think Dignity’s programs and services grew and evolved from the organization’s inception and in response to the needs of the homeless community and to external circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of the study, its services included:

- survival supply distribution events in summer and winter.
- a transitional storage center, which provided a place for the unhoused to store their belongings.
- mobile showers (since 2016), which were offered at key locations around San Diego.
• a street boutique (since 2017), where women had access to menstrual, incontinence, and undergarment products (as lack of access to supplies cause unhoused women to makeshift their own which often led to other health problems).

• a street café (since 2018), where unhoused individuals had dignified access to fresh food that fits their dietary needs.

A unique aspect of the services Think Dignity offered was that many were developed in collaboration with the population they serve. Rather than assuming it had a full understanding or ‘the answer’, Think Dignity purposefully sought the perspectives, insights, and ideas of those experiencing homelessness. The fresh market and the menstruation packs are both services developed from these conversations.

In response to the rise in criminalization of quality-of-life offenses and the other legal issues the unhoused face, advocacy for the individual had also been a key component of Think Dignity’s offerings:

• legal referral and advocacy clinics, assisting with approximately 1500 cases since 2012.

• Know Your Rights (KYR) card set in Spanish or English, explaining the areas of law most likely to affect the unhoused.

• Homeless Youth Legal and Advocacy Project (HYLAP, established in 2017), providing pro-bono legal representation, individual advocacy, and connection to services for youth experiencing homelessness.

Advocacy Campaigns

Advocacy campaigns played an essential part in Think Dignity’s approach to addressing homelessness. These campaigns were developed based on how Think Dignity defined the root causes of homelessness and chose to adopt a community-based perspective. For its advocacy
within the community, Think Dignity (2022) focused on developing campaigns that advocated for basic human rights and “to reshape our systems to be humanistic and just” (p.5). Think Dignity defined and centered its advocacy on including those for whom it was advocating at the table, uplifting and utilizing the voices of the unhoused. While Think Dignity advocated on other issues related to basic dignity for the unhoused or human rights at large, its advocacy was primarily focused in three areas at the time of this study:

1. Housing as a human right.
2. Access to basic sanitation, specifically access to public restrooms.
3. Decriminalization of poverty and homelessness.

These campaigns stemmed from Think Dignity’s research into and understanding of the issues contributing to homelessness. For example, research has identified poverty as the foremost reason families become homeless (Sparks, 2012).

As Woodson described, the decision for Think Dignity to focus in these areas was based on learning from successful campaigns and policy changes in other cities:

So, if we look at cities across the nation that have been successful in addressing their homelessness crisis, they’ve done two things: they’ve adopted the housing first model, and they’ve decriminalized poverty. San Diego’s doing the opposite. …we were already working [these issues] because data has proven the research. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

Additionally, the pandemic served as an impetus for Think Dignity to hone its advocacy efforts. In response to the criminalization and violence towards the homeless and Black individuals, Think Dignity amplified its advocacy around police transparency and accountability in 2020 (2021b).
Think Dignity identified these three campaigns as vital in dismantling the harmful stereotypes of the homeless and providing holistic and humane dignity for homeless individuals (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023). These campaigns connected back to Think Dignity’s mission of advancing basic dignity for people experiencing homelessness. For each of the three campaigns, Think Dignity researched and communicated directly with cities\(^6\) that had success in addressing their homelessness crisis and improving access to basic sanitation (M. Woodson, personal communication, June 9, 2022). In learning about the policies that were effective in addressing the issue, the factors particular to that situation, the strategies and tactics employed, and the challenges experienced, Think Dignity’s aim was to draw from those experiences to proactively address and generate systemic change in these areas. A narrative of each campaign follows.

**Campaign 1: Housing as a Human Right**

Access to housing remained central to Think Dignity’s human centered approach to homelessness advocacy. Access to affordable housing became increasingly difficult throughout the state of California, including San Diego where wage increases had not kept up with rent increases (Flanigan & Welsh, 2020; O’Flaherty, 2019). Additionally, plans for adding affordable housing fell short of the need. For example, Think Dignity posted in November 2014 on a joint three-year plan by the City of San Diego and the Housing Commission for additional affordable housing for up to 1500 San Diegans. At the time, the city’s population was 1.381 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). One mayoral candidate argued that San Diego’s housing system drove people towards homelessness (Saldaña, 2016).

\(^6\) Such as Portland, Oregon; Salt Lake City as well as the state of Utah; Indianapolis, Indiana; Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada; Houston, Texas; Seattle, Washington; and Columbus, Ohio.
Think Dignity regularly used social media to communicate about the issues unhoused individuals faced locally and nationally regarding access to both temporary and long-term housing. Posts included updates on shelter availability, the lack of affordable housing, innovative solutions such as tiny homes donated for the homeless, and ways to be an advocate for affordable housing. In this sense, Think Dignity sought to not just talk about homelessness but highlight the voices of the homeless in arenas where they were not represented.

**Housing First**

Long-term champions for the housing first model, Think Dignity began sharing informational posts about this topic through social media in 2014. Many shelters and transitional housing require compliance with stringent rules and acceptance of services; additionally, couples and families often must choose between shelter or staying together. Housing first, in contrast, maintains that housing is a human right – that housing should be provided first, leaving it up to the individual to decide which services they need or want (Tsemberis, 1999).

Think Dignity’s advocacy on housing involved several efforts focused on the city and county levels, often in concert or in support of others working on the issue of housing. In 2016, a measure to allow the city to increase the number of affordable housing units for low-income San Diegans was put on the ballot. Think Dignity posted on social media and informed the community about the measure, which passed.

Think Dignity championed petitions initiated by other parties – one in December 2016 by Women Occupy San Diego petitioning the mayor to adopt housing first, and another by a local citizen encouraging the city to use the termination fee from a professional sports team’s departure to provide housing for the homeless. Despite garnering 1,626 and 3,513 signatures respectively, no response was received to either.
In September 2017, San Diego experienced an outbreak of Hepatitis A, which hit the homeless community hard. Think Dignity’s advocacy during that period emphasized how the outbreak could have been mitigated if there was greater access to housing and basic services like restrooms. Think Dignity frequently adapted its messaging to a new crisis but continued to frame the issues based on its underlying commitment to human rights and individual dignity.

In January 2018, the US Department of Justice released a statement that enforcing bans on sleeping in cars criminalizes people for being homeless. A year later the city of San Diego proposed an ordinance reinstating a ban prohibiting people from sleeping in their vehicles. Think Dignity delivered public comments and was active on social media in opposition to this ban, asking where people were supposed to go when the shelters lacked available beds. Despite attempts to galvanize the public, the city’s Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods Committee voted to send the vehicle ordinance to the city council for a vote. Think Dignity intensified its advocacy through public statements, encouraging the community to contact their lawmakers, and hosting a rally and press conference immediately preceding the City Council meeting. Despite these efforts and three hours of public testimony from individuals with first-hand experience, the vehicle habitation ban was passed by the Council.

In response, Think Dignity continued its advocacy, using the hashtag #HousingNotHandcuffs (Instagram and Facebook posts, May 23, 2019). The organization continued its call for a repeal of the ban, and a few months later a rally was held in partnership with a coalition of local organizations and individuals recognizing housing as a human right. Think Dignity continued educating and mobilizing the public around the issue of housing.

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through conversation events, documentary screenings, and a mayoral candidate forum on homelessness and housing.

Advocacy extended to the county level as well, often directed at the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (BOS). Think Dignity informed the public and encouraged citizens to contact lawmakers to support two BOS proposals up for vote: one in 2021 creating a new department on homeless solutions and equitable communities, focused on streamlining services, decriminalizing homelessness, and a housing first approach and one in 2022 to declare homelessness a public health crisis. In both instances, the proposals were adopted.

**Housing as a Human Right Resolution**

Another aspect of Think Dignity’s advocacy on housing involved working closely with the City Council President’s office and other grassroots organizations in drafting a housing first resolution for proposal to the San Diego City Council. One of the tools Think Dignity regularly used was power mapping, identifying the priorities of elected officials where these individuals stand in terms of support or opposition to these issues. The City Council President at the time had prioritized housing as a human right. As an example of how policymakers often depend on nonprofit expertise (Mosley, 2012), he invited Think Dignity as well as other grassroots organizations to help draft a resolution around housing as a human right. The Council President, Sean Elo-Rivera, wanted the resolution to be community driven and informed by those doing the work, with his office providing feedback throughout the process of drafting the resolution.

Two subgroups were created: one to draft the resolution and the other to lobby officials in both the City of San Diego and other local municipalities to support the resolution. According to Woodson, the duality of the subgroups was to build and strengthen the amount of support so that it was more likely to be adopted once the resolution went through legal review. “It’s not binding
or anything, but we want elected officials to get on the dais to say this is what we believe in, and this is what we’re willing to work towards” (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

Think Dignity had a presence on both subgroups. Drawing on her interests in policy advocacy for housing and her experience in scheduling with elected officials, Lopez worked with the subgroup on lobbying local officials and other figures. Woodson was involved with the subgroup drafting the resolution, contributing language towards the type of policies the community ultimately would like the government to adopt. During the process of researching and drafting the wording for the resolution, Think Dignity and its partners on the drafting subgroup pulled from the experiences of other cities that adopted Housing First, while tailoring it to fit the local community. Both Woodson and Lopez spoke about how the subgroup began with templates from those cities and adding more specific language to include the unique issues faced in San Diego, including people experiencing homelessness.

We’ve seen where policies that focus on homelessness work. But we also understand that every city and area’s unique, so how can we shape what we’ve seen there to tailor to… how we plan to advocate and in San Diego… (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023)

Throughout the course of the study, the resolution achieved several important milestones. After some back and forth with the Council President’s office on edits to the draft, it was submitted to the city attorney for legal review, a requirement for the resolution to be presented to Council. The resolution passed legal review, to be introduced to the Council on October 31, 2022. In advance of the meeting, Think Dignity urged individuals in the community to contact their lawmakers, share posts on social media, and attend the City Council meeting. The
resolution was passed unanimously. Once the resolution passed, Think Dignity’s advocacy shifted towards identifying the types of policies that might stem from this resolution. At the time of the study, the organization and its partners did not have specific policies for which they were advocating.

The passing of the resolution was an example of how Think Dignity’s advocacy benefitted from a favorable political environment, including perceived urgency to address homelessness and the City Council President’s openness to grassroots input. Woodson spoke about how the process to get an ordinance, policy, or resolution passed was much easier if an elected official championed the issue. Political mapping helped Think Dignity and its advocacy partners to identify the “right” officials with whom to partner, based off the priorities the officials hoped to accomplish throughout their tenure. In this instance, the City Council President had prioritized the issue of housing for that term. Woodson spoke about how having an official champion their advocacy effort was critical in obtaining feedback from the inside, particularly from those who viewed it as a challenge. Think Dignity and its advocacy partners would use that feedback in refining their arguments to move “a little bit closer to the end goal” (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

**Campaign 2: Access to Basic Sanitation and Restrooms**

“…the conversations we have with folks, I think, always end up centered around access to restrooms” (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

Of the three campaigns, access to basic sanitation was Think Dignity’s longest, dating back to the organization’s founding as Girls Think Tank (GTT). Begun in 2006, this campaign exemplified the changing nature of advocacy and the political environment, experiencing successes and setbacks.
Portland Loos

In its exploration of how other cities have tackled access to basic sanitation, Think Dignity drew from the experience of the City of Portland, Oregon in addressing the same issue and the development of a 24/7 restroom (the Portland Loo) as a viable option to address the City of San Diego’s dearth of publicly available restrooms and the resulting public issues from lack of restroom access.

We want to include the lessons learned from those cities and implement in any advocacy work that we do, and typically cities are very willing to share their good and their bad… And it’s nice to hear from people that have already been through that give you really good feedback and honest assessments of how we can maybe not have to go through the same kind of challenges. Or even still, you’re prepared for it versus having to be reactive responses for it. (M. Woodson, personal communication, June 9, 2022)

Think Dignity’s foray into social media in 2010 were posts on this issue, kicking off a formal Basic Dignity campaign and petition calling for increased water and bathroom access in downtown San Diego. After collecting over 5000 signatures, GTT delivered the petition to the City Council in May 2010. A budget item request was made for six Portland Loos, and the Council approved $700,000 for that purpose in July of that year. Recognizing the importance of capitalizing on that momentum, GTT focused on this issue at its monthly BDC meetings and regularly posted updates and ways for people to get involved, such as helping to garner support from groups in the community. The organization presented an update to the City Council in October of 2010, and the Council unanimously approved placement of four Portland Loos in downtown.
GTT continued its calls for action from lawmakers, as 2011 came around and no restrooms were installed, holding a press and community conference on World Toilet Day (November 19, 2011) to demand the city follow through on increased restroom access. GTT and members of the Basic Dignity Coalition went in front of the council in January 2012 urging action. Despite the Council agreeing that the project was an “enforceable obligation,” there was no movement on the Loos until early 2013. During this time, GTT continued to advocate for action, regularly posting on social media, calling for lawmakers to follow through, and discussing at monthly BDC meetings. GTT and other advocates promoted for the restrooms by attending a meeting of the Budget and Finance Committee and the following City Council meeting, where funding was finally approved for porta potties and the purchase and maintenance of two Portland Loos, expected to arrive in 2014. GTT celebrated this success. However, it recognized that it had to continue its advocacy to ensure implementation and continued support for the Loos. GTT continued to be a voice for public restroom access through its social media and public statements in the news on the subject.

After years of advocacy efforts, two 24-hour Portland Loos were installed in downtown San Diego, the first on December 3, 2014. GTT celebrated with a first flush event. While the organization shared the positive impact of the additional facilities, it continued to advocate for more facilities, drawing on a grand jury report on the need for increased public restroom access in the city. However, eight months later, the city was considering moving or closing one of the Loos. Despite GTT rallying support, the Council approved removing the Loo, and it was put into storage. The other Loo was also removed due to construction, with a contractual agreement in place for the development firm to reinstall it once construction was complete.

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Amid these setbacks, GTT (renamed Think Dignity shortly thereafter) continued to advocate for improved access to basic sanitation and restrooms for the city’s unhoused population, continuing to highlight the issue with lawmakers and the public, posting informational links including one to a public toilet advocacy toolkit. The development firm tried to back out of the contractual agreement to reinstall a Portland Loo in April 2021. Its argument was the city would be opening a park with public restrooms, despite the fact that the park was not estimated to open for two years (in 2023). Think Dignity released statements and encouraged the community to submit public comments and attend the City Council meeting in support of holding the firm and city accountable. The Loo item was pulled from the agenda, postponing the decision and reinstatement of the Loo. While that Loo eventually reopened in December 2021, the other remained in storage.

During this campaign, a separate proposal surfaced in June 2022 to close access at night to public restrooms located in an area of the city’s largest park. That park was heavily frequented by tourists and residents, housed and unhoused; however, those restrooms were one of the few 24-hour options for those experiencing homelessness. Recognizing how the impact of a closure, even if partial, would affect the community, Think Dignity recalibrated its advocacy strategy and tactics to advocate against this closure, creating a petition and increasing calls for public support. At that time, the city did not move forward with closing those restrooms at night.

Public Health Crises

The campaign for access to public restrooms was able to more successfully push its advocacy during public health crises. In 2017, San Diego experienced an outbreak of Hepatitis A, where 600 people were infected and 20 died – most of whom were individuals experiencing homelessness. The lack of available public restrooms was cited as a major contributor to the
outbreak. In February 2023, an uptick in Hepatitis A cases resurfaced concerns of another outbreak. Think Dignity, a professor with the Project for Sanitation Justice at San Diego State University (SDSU), and other homeless advocates used this opportunity to highlight the cause for which Think Dignity had advocated for over a decade, participating in reports on local news stations where they emphasized the gravity of the situation (Rivas, 2023).

Advocacy Tools: Partnerships and In-House Research

At the time of the study, advocacy strategies for this campaign also included research partnerships in addition to collaboration with a coalition and other organizations in the community.

In-House Research

Think Dignity strategically fostered partnerships with institutions such as USD and SDSU with the purpose of developing in-house research. It gleaned this advocacy tactic from what it learned from researching other organizations advocating on the issues around homelessness.

When we looked at nonprofits that were successful in shaping policy and recommendations and in their organizing work, a lot of the times they had their own research housed under their organization. So that was an important step… as an organization… that we were housing this data that directly speaks to the issues that we want to address and solutions for it so that we can better support a lot of the work that we’re doing.” (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

Think Dignity began partnering with The Project for Sanitation Justice, an interdisciplinary academic team at SDSU in 2020 on access to public restroom facilities. This project included four components: (1) mapping public restrooms; (2) a toilet audit to assess the
actual operating hours, ADA compliance, and health and safety features; (3) a social survey of those dependent on public restrooms; and (4) survey of community opinions on public restrooms (The Project for Sanitation Justice, 2023).

The research began with documenting restroom accessibility throughout the county, identifying where public facilities are located as well as the advertised hours of each. Notable findings from this assessment included:

- The estimated ratio at night was one restroom for every 383 unsheltered people in downtown San Diego.
- Twenty-four zip codes in San Diego County (21%) had zero public restrooms. This area was home to 1.4 million San Diegans (Welsh Carroll, et al., 2022).

At the time of the study, Think Dignity and The Partnership for Sanitation Justice had submitted funding requests to grant programs at SDSU to begin the next phase of the project, investigating the maintenance, actual hours of operation, and security of those facilities, to shape their recommendations on what could be done (M. Woodson, personal communication, June 9, 2022). The project had also begun soliciting comments from the community on their positive and negative views about public restrooms.

Think Dignity used this in-house research strategically, describing it as strengthening its advocacy and helping shape its advocacy decisions by giving leverage and supplementing the other tactics it employed, particularly consulting in policy discussions, legal advocacy, direct lobbying, awareness raising, and calls for public action (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023). Research data also provided leverage in conversations with elected officials, who often cited the need for additional research before a decision could be made (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023) and helped address the question of fiscal impact that
was often brought up by those that are in the opposition (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

…a lot of people will say, “Well, we need more research to be able to make an informed decision.” And I feel like that’s always the scapegoat. So now we have this research, and we’re meeting with you. People experiencing homelessness – they are still your constituents. Now, what are you going to do about it? (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023)

**Partnership with Local Coalition**

As Think Dignity was well known for its restroom advocacy, other local nonprofits and grassroots organizations sought it out as a partner. Planned Parenthood and the Invest in San Diego Families (ISDF) coalition reached out to Think Dignity for its expertise, “out of respect and to not co-opt work that people are already doing” (M. Woodson, personal communication, June 9, 2022).

Convener the local nonprofit Center on Policy Initiatives, the ISDF coalition advocated for a community budget “for the people and by the people” (ISDF, n.d.), submitting short-term and long-term asks on a variety of issues for the annual county budget. While not joining as a formal member of the coalition, Think Dignity worked closely with ISDF on the long-term and short-term asks for restroom facilities and maintenance in the San Diego County annual budget for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 fiscal years, drawing from its experience and its research on the current state of public facility access within the county.

While the county’s final approved budget for the 2022-2023 fiscal year did not include any of the short-term or long-term asks regarding restroom facilities, Think Dignity did not view this advocacy as a complete failure, instead turning its attention towards the next budget cycle.
I think even though something may have not happened that year, at least the seed has been planted…we continue to be that voice where we’re always going to advocate for something like this, and I feel like it’s a strong voice because our messaging doesn’t change… And I’ve noticed based on my interactions with folks that those types of conversations are at least like that – the memory sticks. (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023)

Understanding that advocacy work is not won overnight but rather a process, Think Dignity and the ISDF coalition began advocating short-term and long-term asks for the 2023-2024 budget cycle.

**Campaign 3: Decriminalization of Poverty**

The issue of homelessness is the end result of systemic failure. You see a lot of the intersections, so you’re also hyper policed. And so if we talk to folks about the issue of homelessness and why housing is important... policing poverty is an issue that only perpetuates poverty. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

Despite the Supreme Court decriminalizing vagrancy in 1972, quality-of-life laws, criminalizing life sustaining activities such as sleeping, eating, and access to urinate and defecate, continued to be enforced throughout the United States, perpetuating systems of inequality and entrenching individuals in poverty (Sparks 2012; Hopper, 2003). As of 2015, the state of California accounted for 12% of the national population but 22% of the homeless population, and the lack of state response to its growing homeless population led to municipalities such as San Diego enacting and enforcing such laws, often aimed at quality-of life offenses (Fisher et al., 2015). The increasing use of “‘quality-of-life’ laws [aimed] to keep homeless people out of public spaces, but [did] nothing to reduce homelessness or help homeless
people” (Fisher et al., 2015, p.6). As of 2015, San Diego enforced eleven municipal codes that criminalized the daily activities of individuals experiencing homelessness (Fisher et al., 2015), practices documented as deepening poverty (Herring, 2019).

Think Dignity’s decriminalization of poverty campaign focused on addressing policies that disproportionately harm individuals such as the homeless and other marginalized communities living in poverty. In its advocacy strategy for this campaign, Think Dignity employed all of the advocacy activities in Table 1 (pp. 3-4) in its advocacy work as an organization and as part of coalitions.

While Think Dignity consistently advocated against the criminalization of poverty and the homeless, particularly in its legal support of individuals, its broader advocacy on this issue amplified beginning in 2015 as evidenced by its increased use of social media to provide information and calls of action to the public on this issue.

**Grassroots Mobilizing, Awareness Raising, and Calls for Public Action**

Think Dignity facilitated discussions in-person and online on the U.S. Department of Justice’s statement that criminalization of homelessness was unconstitutional. It regularly highlighted the positive and negative ways that other major cities were addressing this issue, such as how both Denver⁹ and Los Angeles¹⁰ spent millions of funds criminalizing the homeless rather than on housing and services, and it celebrated when the San Diego City Attorney introduced a misdemeanor diversion program aimed at reducing recidivism (Think Dignity, August 19, 2015, Facebook post).

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¹⁰ Zhao, J. (2015, April 19). Los Angeles spends more money policing the homeless than helping them: report. RawStory. [https://www.rawstory.com/2015/04/los-angeles-spends-more-money-policing-the-homeless-than-helping-them-report-shows/?fbclid=IwAR2GC2z2nGI4PLhxB8g0k4-3I4EuPdc8fs9Bj68FJEmDLjNoRMpT-Jp6I](https://www.rawstory.com/2015/04/los-angeles-spends-more-money-policing-the-homeless-than-helping-them-report-shows/?fbclid=IwAR2GC2z2nGI4PLhxB8g0k4-3I4EuPdc8fs9Bj68FJEmDLjNoRMpT-Jp6I)
In March 2016 before a massive storm system moved into the area, San Diego conducted sweeps of the homeless, evicting them from areas and discarding their belongings. Think Dignity published an op-ed and called for the community to act, noting the focus for policy change needs to be aimed at those who ordered the sweeps. Sweeps of the homeless continued to be an issue on which Think Dignity advocated year after year, including during the course of the study.

2016 ended with two calls for community engagement. Think Dignity urged the community to attend the Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods meeting for a presentation on traffic stops; the independent report analyzed demographics of traffic stops and found disparities indicating biased policing. It also solicited signatures for a petition initiated by Women Occupy – San Diego calling for the mayor to suspend ticketing, arrest, and stay-away orders for unhoused individuals. The mayor responded that this issue would be a priority in 2017.

In response to the independent report on traffic stops, the San Diego Police Department presented its plan to address the disparities as well as implement a 2015 state law aimed at reducing discriminatory police procedures at the February 2017 City Council meeting. Think Dignity called for the community to attend. The issue of policing would become a more prominent aspect of Think Dignity’s advocacy in later years.

Social media posts highlighted personal stories and the impacts of sweeps. It hosted documentary screening and conversation events about an individual’s experience of being criminalized for being homeless. #HousingNotHandcuffs became a rallying cry for Think Dignity and its advocacy partners from 2017 onward, displayed around San Diego, advocated for at City Council meetings, and demonstrated in a Caravan for Housing movement.

Increasing public awareness and addressing stereotypes remained a consistent theme of Think Dignity’s advocacy strategies on decriminalizing poverty and homelessness throughout
2018 and 2019, pushing information out through its social media, newsletter, and BDC meetings and in-person through press conferences and dinner discussions.

The COVID-19 pandemic shifted many events online, but Think Dignity remained active in its advocacy and communication to the community. As discussed later in the chapter, the organization, along with its advocacy partners, were able to capitalize on the political events of 2020 to highlight issues involving broad criminal justice reform. In the summer of 2020, it coordinated a week of action to end police violence and called for public action in contacting lawmakers to pass legislation holding police accountable. In the spring of 2021, it held an educational event online to discuss a recent report on the 500+ quality of life laws in force in the state.

**Legal Advocacy**

In addition to the individual legal assistance Think Dignity provided to homeless youth and adults, the organization also engaged in broad forms of legal advocacy. In 2016, Think Dignity collaborated with United Against Police Terror – San Diego to create Know Your Rights card sets. Available in both Spanish and English, these laminated pocket cards helped individuals invoke their rights if confronted by officers. Know Your Rights Beyond the Stop Workshop was also offered. The card sets were still available at the time of the study.

The homeless filed a class action lawsuit against the City of San Diego in 2017, disputing its use of encroachment, and Think Dignity was very vocal in its support of this lawsuit. The executive director at the time remarked, “Once someone is touched by the criminal justice system, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to do exactly what we expect from them: find a job, clean up, get off the streets” (A. Rios, July 19, 2017).
**Right to Rest and Vehicle Habitation Ban**

Think Dignity’s legal advocacy on the decriminalization of homelessness focused on quality-of-life activities such as where a person is allowed or prohibited from sleeping. A right to rest bill was put forth in the state Senate in early 2015, which would have decriminalized quality of life offenses such as eating, sleeping, and living on the street. Think Dignity encouraged the public to contact their lawmakers to support the bill. While Right to Rest SB 608 was successfully introduced then amended the bill was dropped after the author of the bill cancelled the second hearing, stating the bill needed fine tuning. The heart of the bill was reintroduced as SB 876 the following year, but this too was dropped after that sponsor canceled the second hearing. Three years later, Think Dignity co-sponsored a right to rest bill and called for the public to petition a local state assemblymember to introduce this bill. However, the assembly member, who had sponsored and co-sponsored other bills on homelessness, did not respond to these requests.

Meanwhile, a case on this issue was working its way through San Diego courts. SDPD cited the defendant for living in his vehicle. Think Dignity filed an amicus curiae brief on criminalizing those living in their vehicles, spoke on this issue at City Council, and requested the community show up in court in support of the defendant and the greater issue at hand.

The vehicle habitation ban proposed by the City of San Diego in 2019 highlights the intersection of housing and criminalization of poverty and homelessness. As discussed in the housing campaign, Think Dignity publicly denounced the proposal, repeatedly shared information on the proposal and its impacts, and called for the public to urge lawmakers to oppose this ban and show up en masse at City Council calling for #HousingNotHandcuffs. As
mentioned, the Council passed the ban, and Think Dignity continued employing multiple advocacy tactics towards the repeat of the ban.

**Coalition Work and Influencing Policy**

An instrumental part of Think Dignity’s advocacy for the decriminalization of poverty and homelessness occurred through its membership in coalitions. While coalition building is described as an act of advocacy, coalition work expands the resources available for advocacy work, particularly the well of advocacy experience and knowledge from which the coalition can draw. Coalition work also benefits from the varying perspectives and groups that are represented. As a coalition member, Think Dignity brought the perspective of those experiencing homelessness to the conversation and the impacts on that population (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

**CPAT and the PrOTECT Ordinance**

Think Dignity previously worked with the University of San Diego on the first phase of a research project documenting the local homeless experience with law enforcement and citations (Watanabe et al., 2021). The issue of biased policing of the homeless, BIPOC, and other marginalized communities was a prominent aspect of Think Dignity’s advocacy in later years through its work as a member of the Coalition for Police Accountability and Transparency (CPAT). An independent report by SDSU on biased policing by the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) provided the impetus for its involvement in the CPAT coalition, where the data from this report informed the coalition’s policy work.

CPAT formed when the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) invited organizations advocating on criminal justice reform to work together in response to the biased policing report. Initially the advocacy of CPAT and its members was largely reactive,
responding to any reports of a negative police interaction, through press conferences, public statements, social media, and presence at City Council meetings. For example, when the SDPD presented its plan for reducing discriminatory police procedures at the City Council meeting in February 2017, Think Dignity and CPAT called for the community to attend.

The coalition decided to draft an ordinance that would change the procedures for pretext stops, the area where the most biased policing was occurring according to the report by SDSU. This decision came about through coalition discussions in the pursuit of more systemic change in this area. “We decided, ‘Well, we should do something about it, not just hold a press conference. So how do we implement change?’ And that’s when we decided, ‘Okay, let’s draft an ordinance that can change these interactions’” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, June 9, 2022).

At the time of the study, CPAT was advocating for the adoption of its ordinance, PrOTECT (Preventing Overpolicing Through Equitable Community Treatment). As a targeted response to the report on how BIPOC, LGTBQ+, people with disabilities, and people from other marginalized communities are disproportionately stopped, interrogated, and experienced use of force within the San Diego community, this policy sought to address biased policing for equitable treatment of all within the local community:

…it essentially would really change the way policing is done in San Diego. So highering the bar for searches from reasonable suspicion, which is relatively low, to probable cause, where they would have to have facts to show that this person has committed or is about to commit a particular crime. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

**Capitalizing on Momentum**

Advocacy decisions and actions were also emergent as Think Dignity and its coalition partners responded to changes in the current political climate and context and in response to local
and national events. During the process of drafting and advocating for its proposed ordinance, Think Dignity and CPAT swiftly responded to any instance (local or national) related to criminalization of poverty, biased policing, police accountability or transparency, using the public’s attention to grow awareness and momentum for PrOTECT. This included holding events, such as hosting a community forum to have conversations about the issues or holding a run event in remembrance of Breonna Taylor to engage with the community about PrOTECT and distribute yard signs.

…the summer of 2020, everybody was super interested in the issue of police reform. It became kind of trendy. And how do we use that moment to amplify this is the work we’ve been doing, and this is why it’s so important… (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

**Collaboration with an Elected Official**

“The challenge with the ordinance, and specifically with trying to get support for it, is that issues of policing are very political, and it’s difficult to get support” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022). For PrOTECT, CPAT identified a councilmember, Monica Montgomery Steppe, with whom to partner and introduce this ordinance to the City Council. The process stretched over five years, during which this relationship was instrumental, as the city councilmember was able to relay to the coalition the climate and priorities of the Council and when bringing the policy to Council was more likely to result in the policy moving forward. For example, Think Dignity and CPAT organized a press conference and community presence at City Council for when PrOTECT was to be introduced, when the councilmember pushed this back due to other issues that were taking priority.
So we do have to recalibrate. And that’s a challenge, especially if you’re amping up for those big milestones… And it’s a huge hit to say, dang, we tried to get all this support for this particular day, and now we’ve got to take a step back. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

In this instance, CPAT quickly deployed other tactics such as a community forum and newsletter to maintain momentum and engagement with the community.

Councilmember Steppe introduced PrOTEKCT to council in June 2021, requesting legal review of the ordinance – a huge milestone for this campaign. Think Dignity and CPAT continued to update the community on PrOTEKCT and biased policing, galvanize support, and provide ways to get involved to build momentum and maintain pressure on the City Council. Video and written testimonies of those affected by biased pretext stops were shared to personalize the issue. At the time of the study, PrOTEKCT was still in legal review.

**TRUST Coalition and Surveillance Technology**

Think Dignity joined the Transparent and Responsible Use of Surveillance Technology San Diego (TRUST SD) Coalition, along with twenty-nine other organizations from the community. TRUST SD formed “to address the widespread and secretive use, installation, and acquisition” of cameras and microphones in streetlights throughout San Diego County, operated by the policy without any oversight in place (2020). As a member, Think Dignity contributed to the coalition’s advocacy efforts, educating the public about police surveillance through community workshops, forums, social media, and other events, galvanizing support and presence at committee and council meetings. Advocacy also occurred at the state level, with lobbying and urging citizens to sign a petition and contact state lawmakers against passing a bill expanding the use of face recognition technology; the bill was not passed.
To address the impacts of this technology on privacy and civil liberty, the TRUST SD coalition developed and advocated for an ordinance requiring transparency and oversight through a community-led board on when the surveillance technology could be deployed. Its proposal made its way in 2020 through the necessary committees to the City Council that November with a wealth of public support via e-comments and emails sent to councilmembers. The City Council unanimously approved the surveillance ordinance and the privacy advisory board ordinance at the first reading of each.

The coalition had to adjust their advocacy strategy to incorporate other issues that arose during this process. In the fall of 2020, the city proposed granting sole use of the technology to the SDPD but retracted the proposal due to outcry from the community including TRUST SD. In response to community pressure and council members, the mayor directed that access to video footage from the streetlights be turned off. TRUST SD celebrated this small win at the time, though it was later uncovered that though cellular data was turned off, the cameras and microphones in the streetlights were still recording and the data could be downloaded. Additionally, despite the ordinances passing, the city endorsed millions in grants for surveillance equipment in December 2020. In July 2021, SDPD requested a renewal of its contract with ShotSpotter, which was only deployed in black and brown neighborhoods. TRUST SD used these setbacks to support its advocacy and their argument on why these ordinances and community oversight was needed.

Think Dignity and TRUST SD continued to lobby officials and advocate for the ordinances to be implemented. “After something is passed and getting it implemented, that’s really more about holding folks accountable” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, June 9, 2022). Workshops and webinars on surveillance were held for the community, and the public
was urged to continue contacting lawmakers and attending Council meetings demanding action. Despite being listed as a priority by the new major and the Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods Committee, over 600 days passed before each was put up for a second hearing. While each ordinance was passed unanimously by Council, as of March 2023, Think Dignity and TRUST SD were still advocating on their implementation, calling for public support and demands for the TRUST ordinance to be upheld and for the privacy advisory board to be funded/resourced.

The work doesn’t stop once these ordinances are protected. This often happens with legislation. We support legislation for criminal justice reform, and then it gets passed. And we’re like, ‘Yay, change!’ But the next step is implementation. They’re not just going to implement this because of the kindness of their heart. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022)

**Intersections Between Campaigns**

Even as the three campaigns were discussed separately, the intersections between the campaigns were evident, much as the underlying issues contributing to homelessness are intertwined. #HousingNotHandcuffs highlighted the connections between issues of housing and the criminalization of homeless individuals. The City of San Diego’s removal of the Portland Loos from downtown also exemplified this interconnectedness – how the issues of access to public restrooms, criminalization of poverty, and lack of housing intersected and impacted individuals experiencing homelessness:

Because, as you may guess, there were a lot of complaints about the restrooms were embracing criminal activity in the areas that they were installed in. But I would argue against that because what do we consider criminal activity? Right here in San Diego, we
consider sleeping on the sidewalk criminal activity, so if we look at what the calls were for here, a lot of the issues were quality of life offenses. (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

Think Dignity engaged in various distinct advocacy strategies and tactics, and many of its efforts crossed multiple campaigns.

**Synthesis of Findings**

This section discusses the findings from the study of Think Dignity’s advocacy and evaluation practices. Strategy was crafted for each campaign as well as its broad advocacy, yet advocacy decisions and evaluation were largely emergent, informal, and concurrent based on its tacit knowledge about the issues. Advocacy success was not regarded as an endpoint but rather a continual focus on shaping the narrative and achieving small steps towards social change.

**Advocacy Strategies and Tactics**

Think Dignity engaged in a wide array of advocacy tactics throughout its advocacy campaigns and as referenced in the taxonomy presented in chapter 1 (Table 2, p. 5), employing tactics from all four quadrants and engaging with both the public and the government in direct and indirect ways. Its decisions regarding the strategy and tactics employed were specific to each campaign and informed by its knowledge of the issue and the experiences of other cities and organizations, the current political environment, its working relationship with advocacy partners, and what emerged throughout the course of a campaign.

**Advocacy Takes a Village**

“…being able to foster and create relationships with people that align with your mission, I realized, is so important. Because you really do need that. It takes a village…” (C. Lopez, personal correspondence, March 15, 2023).
Coalitions and other strategic partnerships were a central component to Think Dignity’s advocacy work. Woodson reflected that “most of the advocacy work is coalition work” (personal correspondence, June 9, 2022). Prior to and throughout the study, the organization worked closely with a variety of coalitions, other grassroots organizations, universities, and elected officials. Of Think Dignity’s staff of six, only two worked regularly on its advocacy campaigns. While building networks and coalitions is an advocacy activity within itself, these partnerships expanded Think Dignity’s advocacy reach and were instrumental in determining advocacy strategy and tactic decisions. Think Dignity contributed part of San Diego’s lack of progress in reducing its homeless population to the lack of “a concerted effort… We’ve worked in these weird silos in our different municipalities…” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022).

Additionally, Think Dignity’s research partnerships with San Diego State University (SDSU) and the University of San Diego (USD) granted Think Dignity access to funding sources and grant opportunities that it might not be able to access as easily in addition to providing data to support its legal advocacy and policy work.

Think Dignity used power mapping to identify those lawmakers with whom it could work closely in policy discussions and policy implementation. While extremely useful, these partnerships could be “more challenging because then you’re kind of at the whim of whoever’s campaigning” (M. Woodson, June 9, 2022). Relationships with elected officials could fluctuate based on the issue. The Council President with whom Think Dignity partnered on the housing as a human right resolution floated a proposal that ran counter to the organization’s work to increase public restroom facilities, proposing the city charge for public restroom access, which
Think Dignity vehemently opposed due to the impact this would particularly have on unhoused citizens.

**Advocacy Decisions and Evaluation Are Both Strategic and Emergent**

“‘It really depends on the campaign and the coalition partners’” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, June 9, 2022).

Whether planning and responding on its own or as part of a coalition, Think Dignity’s advocacy tactic decisions were both strategic (proactive) and emergent (reactive). Strategic milestones were identified to move each campaign forward, but much of its advocacy work was also emergent in response to changes in the political climate or assessment on what was working or not in terms of advocacy tactics and strategy.

While Think Dignity and its advocacy partners strategized at the commencement and throughout each campaign, much of how the organization responded and reacted was due to the nature of advocacy, complex, iterative, and at times unpredictable. A deep understanding of the issues combined with adaptability assisted Think Dignity in being able to balance strategy and emergence, proactivity and reactivity. Many times, Think Dignity and its advocacy partners recalibrated its advocacy strategy and tactics due to other external changes or pressures in the political environment. These adjustments occurred quickly to maintain momentum around the issues.

**Evaluation Tools and Methods**

While Think Dignity did engage in assessing and gauging the progress and impact of its advocacy work, individually and with its advocacy partners, its evaluation largely developed organically, attuned to both the local context as well as how impact had been achieved elsewhere in the areas of homelessness and its root causes.
In addition to its singular exercise through its theory of change, tools employed by Think Dignity include power mapping (to track the support and opposition of lawmakers and government officials) and social media analytics (to gauge growth in awareness and support). Think Dignity also measured community awareness and support through signatures on petitions, signs distributed (for PrOTEECT), turnout at city council and board of supervisor meetings, and increase in supporters through analytics on its volunteer newsletter and monthly newsletter, documenting this information in its organizational and coalition meetings.

Due to how its legal work and advocacy work are intrinsically tied, Think Dignity had some financial support for its advocacy from the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and the San Diego County Bar Foundation. However, the grants it received were largely for its programs and services. While Think Dignity utilized formal tools (such as intake and post surveys) to provide statistics and narratives that assess programmatic impact for its grant reporting, it had no such requirements for its advocacy; any pressures from funders to use certain formal evaluation tools and other requirements were restricted to its services.

At the time of the study, Think Dignity did not currently use any other formal methods or tools to track or evaluate its advocacy, and the organization did not have any methods or tools that they planned or desired to use or incorporate. It also had not developed its own tool or method for evaluating its advocacy work, though this seemed unlikely at the time due to the time constraints and demands on the staff. However, Woodson noted that the tools the organization used were dependent on each individual advocacy campaign, leaving open the use of other tools and methods in the future if found to be needed or useful in evaluating its advocacy.
Concurrent and Informal Advocacy Evaluation

As discussed, much of the advocacy work done by Think Dignity, individually and collectively with its partners, was informed and influenced by the ebb and flow of its campaigns, with the organization responding to changes in the various factors and influences affecting each campaign. Similarly, evaluation of the impact of each strategy and tactic emerged and was concurrent to the changes in advocacy strategy and tactics; as new milestones and small steps were determined, these were simultaneously and often informally measured and evaluated as events unfolded. This enabled Think Dignity and its partners to adjust, pivot, and recalibrate their strategies and tactics as needed, such as the messaging used in their conversations with community members and lawmakers.

As stated, collaborating with coalitions and other grassroots organizations was central to Think Dignity’s advocacy, and much of the evaluation and decisions on advocacy strategy occurred in response to the nature of the campaign:

We’ll work very closely with the coalition to map out key things that we want to do. Obviously, there’s some ebb and flow in that based on… how elected officials are responding to things that happen that we couldn’t have otherwise guessed. (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, June 9, 2022)

These strategy discussions occurred in coalition meetings, without the use of formal evaluation tools.

Many of the nonprofit and grassroots organizations that worked closely with or were members of the CPAT coalition were also involved with the ISDF coalition. Woodson noted that San Diego had a “very small community of organizers and activists” that were involved in a variety of issues and coalitions (personal communication, June 9, 2022). Considering the
resource and time constraints these organizations experienced within their own work, one can understand why formal evaluation was not widely in use by the coalitions.

**Tacit Evaluation of Advocacy**

The issues surrounding homelessness and the factors contributing to it have been heavily studied, including the approaches and policies to reducing homelessness. Similarly, advocacy strategies and tactics by organizations in areas that have seen success in addressing the factors contributing to homelessness are also well documented, from which Think Dignity was able to draw when it made its advocacy decisions. While Think Dignity’s advocacy was centered on the needs and situation of the local community, much of its evaluation was informed by what was already ‘understood’ about these issues as well as its experience working with the unhoused.

Ultimately, Think Dignity evaluated its advocacy against how it contributed to shaping the narrative, as this underpinned its understood theory of change – that shaping the narrative was the key to achieving other milestones and getting closer to the systemic change it sought. When the county passed its 2022 budget without including any of the short-term or long-term asks, Think Dignity did not view its advocacy work as an abject failure. Even as the organization assessed the timing and its strategic plan in meeting with officials and community members, it felt its continued messaging kept that issue present in people’s minds, shaping the narrative. Evaluating its impact in shaping the narrative often focused on what could be measured (i.e., number of supporters at a city council meeting, signatures on a petition, social media activity), and yet Think Dignity recognized that this could not be fully captured.

**Evaluation of Advocacy Success**

NPOs engage in evaluation of their advocacy to gauge its effectiveness, so that adjustments can be made, and strategies honed to achieve social change. In short, advocacy
evaluation is aimed at both defining and achieving success. Think Dignity viewed success as unbounded and concentrated on the incremental outcomes achieved and its ability to shape the narrative about the homeless and the issues they face.

**Success Is Found in Small Steps**

“So, I get asked this question all the time – what’s your measure of success? … All of these smaller points are success. You’re getting one step closer to the change you want to see in your community” (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

In line with the advocacy evaluation literature, Think Dignity stated the importance of establishing milestones, or incremental outcomes, for each of its advocacy campaigns and celebrating when those were achieved. Success was not seen as something finite but rather a constant, consistently pursued and achieved through small steps or incremental milestones towards bigger milestones (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022; C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

Milestones were determined by Think Dignity for its overall strategy and in collaboration with its advocacy partners (such as CPAT and the Project for Sanitation Justice) for the separate campaigns. Discussions of these “small steps” occurred formally within meetings and written communications as well as through informal and emergent communications. Determination of milestones was informed by what was known about each issue. Small steps or milestones that Think Dignity cited as evidence of success included:

- Highlighting, uplifting, and utilizing the voices of individuals experiencing homelessness, police brutality, and/or overpolicing.
- Shaping the narrative around homelessness and each of the campaign issues.
- Hearing how individuals experiencing homelessness used knowledge to advocate for themselves.
- Partnering with educational institutions and developing in-house research through those partnerships.
- Collecting a high number of signatures on a petition or letter of support within a short time period, as evidence that its messaging was being heard.
- Obtaining support from elected officials.
- Seeing PrOTEKT lawn signs throughout the community.
- PrOTEKT moving into legal review.
- Volunteers becoming staunch advocates.
- Receiving national attention for its work.
- Passing of housing as a human right by the City Council.

Due to the systemic roots that contribute to the issues on which it advocates, Think Dignity viewed its pursuit of social change as “taking small impactful steps” when it could (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

Other than the social media analytics and power mapping, neither Think Dignity nor its advocacy partners used any other formal method of documenting and tracking milestones. Think Dignity felt that it was able to adequately capture the progress of it and its advocacy partners in reaching these milestones, all while retaining a long-term view of its advocacy.

**Success Is Shaping the Narrative**

When asked what advocacy success looks like, shaping the narrative was a common theme in the interviews, the messaging in the organization’s documents, and Think Dignity’s theory of change.
A lot of what we found to be successful though and to get more support is really informing people about these issues. And so I talk a lot about shaping the narrative because that’s really important to organizing work, not just advocacy, but actual organization. And so if you look throughout history in how we’ve oppressed different populations, or how it’s easy to continue to victimize certain populations, you do that by shaping a particular narrative. We’ve seen that with black folks. We’ve seen that with folks experiencing homelessness. You villainize them, and it’s easier to justify your actions. And so much of this work is in really honing on what that narrative looks like.

(M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022)

Think Dignity engaged in a variety of actions to shape the narrative regarding homelessness and its three campaigns through raising awareness through its consistent messaging and communication (social media, newsletters, op-eds, commercials, and news appearances), petitions, coalition work, grassroots mobilizing, and direct lobbying.

If I had to choose one thing in particular, in all of our advocacy efforts, what’s been successful is helping to shape that narrative, informing the public about these issues because a lot of the times people are just not informed on the topics… And through that, we’ve seen that we’ve gained more support in all these areas of advocacy… (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022)

Woodson and Lopez both spoke about the importance of expanding the reach in shaping the narrative, tailoring the messaging to different perspectives and interests (such as local businesses or those concerned about fiscal impact).

How do we tap into people that wouldn’t otherwise be a supporter of this work? And how do we shake that narrative to capture their interests? …You can’t just have the same
people showing up at the City Council meetings, and we are screaming the same shit every time. We need more people to say it. (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022)

Even in shaping the narrative, Think Dignity adapted its strategy over the years, strategically and in response to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier social media posts focused on the broad narrative regarding homelessness and sought to challenge preconceived notions and stereotypes through highlighting the experiences of those experiencing homelessness and stories from other areas and individuals working on this issue, as seen through the posts from 2016 and 2017. Posts from 2021 and 2022 were more targeted around campaigns and issues, as Think Dignity shifted to encourage action and advocacy towards systemic change (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, March 13, 2023).

From its initial founding as Girls Think Tank, the organization utilized two monthly actions to build community awareness and support: a monthly newsletter and a Basic Dignity Coalition (BDC) meeting. While the newsletter continued, the BDC meetings were suspended during the pandemic, and Think Dignity did not yet have the capacity to restart these at the time of the study. Think Dignity, often in collaboration with the coalitions in which it was involved, found other means to regularly communicate with the public through social media, news outlets, and online and in-person community events and forums.

Shaping the narrative and growing public awareness and support was the cornerstone of Think Dignity’s success, namely because “…politicians move because of the ground underneath them” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022).

As documented, failure to address negative assumptions and stereotypes about individuals experiencing homelessness constrains effectively addressing the issue (Sparks, 2012;
Hopper, 2003). Even when a campaign experienced a setback or did not progress as hoped, as with the county budget not including any of the public restroom asks in the 2022-2023 budget, Think Dignity still found success in how it shaped the narrative and public awareness.

Lopez reflected on how the impact of messaging and interacting with volunteers affected its advocacy. Conversations with staff and individuals experiencing homelessness not only led to those volunteers returning but often becoming the organization’s strongest advocates on social media or with a call to action (C. Lopez, personal communication, March 15, 2023).

**Success Is Not an Endpoint**

“Success is that our seemingly small voice is making such a huge impact, not just in our communities but nationally because this is a national conversation…” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022).

As shared in the interviews and evidenced throughout Think Dignity’s literature and posts, advocacy work does not have an end date. Even as an outcome was achieved and a victory celebrated, Think Dignity continued advocating, seeking to build and maintain that momentum, recognizing that the political tide could turn and that those in opposition would not rest either. Legislation passed does not guarantee implementation – or implementation done well. Policies can be overturned.

“Success isn’t an end goal. It’s a constant – that we want to meet these smaller milestones to get to the bigger milestone to get some smaller milestones to reach bigger milestones” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, May 12, 2022). The advocacy continued because Think Dignity was advocating change in a system designed to work against those for whom it was advocating (M. Woodson, personal communication, May 12, 2022 & June 9, 2022).
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Many individuals and nonprofit organizations are engaged in advocacy to achieve social justice and social change. This inquiry utilized a case study grounded in the experience and perspective of one human service nonprofit organization engaged in advocacy and advocacy evaluation. After examining the advocacy campaigns of Think Dignity and the formal and informal ways it evaluates its advocacy through interviews, document analysis, and social media analysis, this final chapter discusses the findings and resulting implications for the practice and study of nonprofit advocacy evaluation.

Discussion of Findings

After a thorough examination of the data, it was observed that Think Dignity approached advocacy strategically, evaluating and adjusting quickly, largely without formal evaluation tools. The organization, its advocacy, and its evaluation practices benefited from its multifaceted approach to advocacy, the experience of its staff, board, and advocacy partners, and its ability to respond and adapt quickly to changes in the political and social environment.

Multifaceted Approach to Advocacy

In addressing homelessness, Think Dignity recognized that many societal factors intersect, contributing to this issue, and therefore crafted its advocacy strategy to be multidimensional both in terms of campaigns and tactics. Its three campaigns targeted areas that most impacted quality of life for unhoused individuals and were areas in which other cities and NPOs had seen reductions in their homeless population by addressing. Throughout each campaign, Think Dignity exercised a variety of advocacy tactics, strategically and reactively, in its pursuit of social change.
Experience Matters

The advocacy experience of Think Dignity’s staff and that of its advocacy partners contributed in several ways to its ability to contact advocacy evaluation in a way that was largely informal and emergent. Think Dignity’s experience and knowledge from working with the homeless community lent credibility to its advocacy work. It also researched and drew from the experience of other NPOs and advocates working in this area. Additionally, the legal and advocacy experience of its two staff members that worked on its campaigns was clearly a benefit and was instrumental to its ability to informally evaluate its advocacy. Many of its former and current board members had legal, nonprofit, and advocacy backgrounds as well. Lastly, the coalitions and other partners with whom Think Dignity worked brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to its advocacy. Having an abundance of advocacy experience and legal knowledge may eclipse or circumvent the need for formal evaluation as well as aid in advocacy decisions regarding strategy, tactics, and how to shift when things change unexpectedly.

Flexibility in Advocacy and Evaluation

While Think Dignity did not incorporate many formal tools within its advocacy evaluation, its process satisfied the needs of its organization and advocacy work. In the advocacy evaluation literature, organizations that improve their evaluation practices are those able to pivot and adapt quickly in response to the continual learning that occurs throughout a campaign (Starling, 2010). Think Dignity and its advocacy partners maintained a comprehensive awareness of the progress and different facets of each campaign, including staying attune to the ways that strategy needed to shift and what tactics needed to be deployed in response to changes in the political and social environment. This ability to be nimble and responsive aided Think Dignity in its advocacy campaigns.
Implications for Practice

While this research concentrated on the advocacy and evaluation practices of Think Dignity, its experiences can inform how other organizations approach advocacy evaluation, including determining when formal evaluation is beneficial and appropriate, harnessing the value of collaboration, and being adaptable and responsive to the political and social climate.

Question What Evaluation Is Appropriate

As some have reasoned an organization should only evaluate what is under its control (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Neesham et al., 2017), one could argue that attempting to evaluate advocacy assumes control that an organization does not have (Devlin-Foltz et al., 2012). Limited resources combined with the fast nature of the work both can contribute to an organization engaging little in formal evaluation of its advocacy (Unsicker, 2013); however, the question should be considered if formal evaluation will truly benefit the organization? Teles & Schmitt (2011) likened advocacy evaluation to “a form of trained judgment, rather than a method” (p.3). This lends itself to the informal evaluation in which Think Dignity principally engaged. While some may interpret informal as lacking in critical thought or deliberation, informal evaluation refers to that evaluation that happens concurrently with advocacy, through conversation and critical thought outside the use of formalized evaluation tools and methods. As previously argued, formal evaluation of nonprofit advocacy may not be appropriate or needed in every situation or for every organization (Ebrahim, 2019; Gugerty & Karlan, 2018) and focusing only on formal advocacy evaluation ignores the ways that organizations and individuals make informal decisions and judgments and shift strategy along the way.
**The Benefit of Experience**

Organizations should begin with an assessment of their experience and knowledge of the social justice issue on which they are advocating as well as in advocacy broadly. The issue drives advocacy and evaluation decisions, and for issues like homelessness that have been well studied, this may mean that there is less “work” in deciding what strategy/policies to pursue and how to get there. Is knowledge on the issue centered on the experiences of those affected? What has been learned from individuals, NPOs, and cities who have made progress on this issue? What is the experience of the staff and board members? What is the experience of those with whom they partner in advocacy work?

**Weigh the Costs and Anticipated Benefits**

NPOs need to analyze the costs of any advocacy evaluation tool or method against the expected benefits. Formal evaluation methods and tools involve time, money, and resources, of which many nonprofits are constrained. The costs and benefits of incorporating additional evaluation tools should be assessed by the organization. How is/will the data gathered providing knowledge to inform future advocacy? What is the cost in time and resources for implementing this evaluation practice? Would implementing this tool provide benefits and knowledge that would otherwise not be gained, or is this an exercise of activity masquerading as productivity, an example of conflating activity with impact (Fischer, 2001)? Which formal evaluation tools will further advocacy work, and how can the organization capture or recognize the informal ways it evaluates its advocacy?

For those funding advocacy, these organizations should consider the evaluation tools they require and question if these are applicable to each organization and advocacy campaign. Grants often have cumbersome reporting requirements from the perspectives of the NPOs, so for an
activity that is as difficult to evaluate as advocacy, funders should truly partner with the nonprofits it funds, viewing its advocacy and impact from the viewpoint of its community, and weighing the costs and benefits of any evaluation tool or method. Think Dignity was recognized for its advocacy work and sought after as a partner, which indicates that it was “good” at what it did. In such situations, how might that speak for itself?

**The Importance of Collaboration**

Collaboration is fundamental to advocacy reach and success. Think Dignity observed how the practice of San Diego municipalities working in silos had failed in their attempts to address homelessness in the area and spoke to the need for a coordinated approach based on what has been found to be successful.

Societal problems such as homelessness are “wicked” problems, and these issues share many of the same root causes. Therefore, organizations pursuing social change should be creative in thinking through these intersections and with whom they could collaborate. Working with others who are in the same space or where things intersect broadens the reach of what one organization can accomplish.

In addition to the ability to pool resources, coalitions and other collaborations benefit from the incorporation of other knowledge and viewpoints, mitigating the temptation to focus only on positive outcomes or those for which the organization believes it has control. Collaboration in advocacy provides multiple perspectives for analyzing and evaluating progress, formally or informally. Through its coalition memberships and other partnerships, conversations and evaluations of the advocacy campaigns were not limited to Think Dignity’s perception, and therefore, decisions could be made in a more holistic fashion. NPOs evaluating their advocacy efforts should take care to do so in partnership with those organizations and individuals with
whom they collaborate. What collaborative tools could be utilized or developed to aid collective advocacy evaluation for coalitions and other advocacy partnerships?

**Adaptability of Theory of Change and Advocacy Strategy**

Each individual and organization has a theory of change, even if it is unspoken. However, being able to articulate one’s theory of change, the assumptions held, and how these inform advocacy strategy is important to advocacy and advocacy evaluation. Organizations should document their theory of change and revisit it periodically, especially in response to changes in staff, board of directors, and the broader context.

While NPOs should approach advocacy and advocacy evaluation strategically, organizations must be able to adapt their strategy and even theory of change in response to the unexpected and often unpredictable nature of advocacy work, an skill described as strategic capacity (Teles & Schmitt, 2011). Organizations that can adjust and pivot quickly are likely to be more effective advocates (Green, 2016; Guthrie et al., 2005; Teles & Schmitt, 2011). This was true with Think Dignity, who was able to identify rapid changes in the political and social climate and shift, adapting its theory of change, strategy, and tactics in response. While the organization and its advocacy partners drew from the experience of others, it also recognized each situation as unique and tailored their advocacy strategy and tactics to the local context (Gill & Freedman, 2014; Jones, 2011; Guthrie et al., 2005).

**Implications for Nonprofit Studies**

For research on nonprofit advocacy, social change leadership provides a holistic framework (Ospina et al., 2012). As a social change organization (SCO), Think Dignity was committed to addressing the systemic problem of homelessness by harnessing the collective capacity of unhoused individuals, other grassroots organizations, and the community. One of the
strengths informing Think Dignity’s advocacy was its relationship with the unhoused community in San Diego. Think Dignity did not just provide services to these individuals; rather, it listened to their lived experiences to truly understand the issues they experienced and structured its services, individual advocacy, and systemic advocacy from this knowledge. Additionally, Think Dignity’s collective mindset extended to its practice of advocacy, namely that “most of advocacy work [was] coalition work” (M. Woodson, personal correspondence, June 9, 2022). Its connections and partnerships with other grassroots organizations and individuals in the community not only expanded its advocacy reach but also added to the collective advocacy experience which shaped advocacy decisions, both strategic and emergent. Indeed, nonprofits often place themselves at a disadvantage when advocating on their own (Fyall & McGuire, 2015) and cannot truly engage in analysis of the problem without engaging with the community (Unsicker, 2013). Think Dignity exhibited social change leadership, and the power in that leadership was keeping its time, resources, and focus on its individual and collective efforts for social change, rather than direct those towards building internal efficiencies (Ospina et al., 2012).

Advocacy has become an important activity for many nonprofits that provide services. Research has begun to recognize these dual roles (Fyall & McGuire, 2014; Suárez, 2020; Schmid et al., 2008), though the tendency is to view a nonprofit as representing a single role (Kimberlin, 2010). The act of providing services accords nonprofits with specialized knowledge and therefore influence within the public arena, particularly in terms of discussions on policy (Fyall, 2016).

As an organization engaged in both service provision and advocacy, formal advocacy evaluation was not and could not be Think Dignity’s main focus. Formal evaluation in itself does not guarantee more effective advocacy and can detract resources from advocacy and service
provision (Gugerty & Karlan, 2018). Moreover, focusing only on formal evaluation ignores the informal ways NPOs quickly evaluate and adjust their advocacy.

This study confirms that organizations such as Think Dignity largely refrain from formal evaluation and do not need to do so to be credible advocates. On the contrary, this study indicates that advocacy is most effective for organizations that have deep and collaborative relationships with the population for whom it is advocating. Think Dignity built these relationships through its service provision that was, along with its advocacy, rooted in the perspectives and lived experiences of San Diego’s homeless community.

**Opportunities for Future Research**

The research on advocacy evaluation from the perspectives of NPO advocates is limited (Morariu & Brennan, 2009), with much left to be explored. Future research is needed on the informal and formal advocacy evaluation from the perspective of other nonprofits, coalitions, and stakeholders, and other research methods, such as a longitudinal study, will expand our understanding and aid development of advocacy evaluation practices.

**Research of Other NPOs and Other Contexts**

This case study centered on the experience of one nonprofit organization in San Diego, California. Further research exploring advocacy evaluation from the perspectives of nonprofit advocates is needed. Studies of other nonprofits addressing the issue of homelessness through both services and advocacy would provide the opportunity for a comparative case study.

Research into the advocacy evaluation of US nonprofits advocating on other social issues is also needed and would be revealing. What similarities or differences may be found between their evaluation practices? What might be learned that will aid funders, practitioners, and researchers in supporting nonprofits in their advocacy and evaluation strategies?
Several of the large, well-known international non-governmental organizations developed advocacy and evaluation toolkits. Future research can explore the applicability of these toolkits for nonprofits in a variety of contexts.

**Research of Coalitions and Other Stakeholders**

Much of Think Dignity’s advocacy was done in collaboration with coalitions and other partners; in fact, it found coalitions to be a foundational part of its advocacy. Additional research examining advocacy evaluation from the coalition level is needed (Ward et al., 2022; Fyall & McGuire, 2014), obtaining the perspectives of the coalition as well as the perspectives of the individual member organizations. How do evaluation practices occur individually and collectively within the coalition? How do these coalesce as well as diverge? How are other coalitions or collectives engaging in formal evaluation? What formal or informal tools are most useful or needed for coalitions engaged in advocacy?

Another expansion of this research would be to gather the perspectives of other stakeholders in the advocacy process, namely the unhoused individuals with whom Think Dignity collaborates and serve—those directly impacted by Think Dignity’s advocacy work.

Relatedly, many of the individuals and organizations involved in the advocacy campaigns detailed in this study possessed a wealth of experience in advocacy from which they could draw which may have lessened the benefits from increased use of formal evaluation. Research further exploring the relationship between advocacy experience and benefits from formal evaluation could be enlightening for practitioners and researchers alike.

**Longitudinal Studies**

While the case study has been used often in advocacy research (Ward et al., 2022), few case studies have examined advocacy evaluation. The case study is useful in attempting to
capture the informal as well as formal ways organizations evaluate their advocacy. However, other research methods can build our knowledge on how nonprofits evaluate their advocacy.

Campaigns last for years, as evidenced by Think Dignity’s campaign for access to basic sanitation. Campaigns may also have no end, as the work of advocacy continues even once legislation is passed or struck down. While difficult and potentially prohibitive in terms of time and resources, a longitudinal study of how advocacy evaluation evolves from the beginning and throughout an advocacy campaign could provide interesting insights into the growth and development of organizational evaluation practices.

**Closing**

As NPOs increasingly engage in both advocacy and services to address systemic social issues, opportunities abound to learn more about how these organizations can evaluate their progress towards greater social change. Drawing on their own experience as well as the experiences of others in the field, nonprofits should determine what advocacy strategy, tactics, and evaluation best fits the issue and the contact in which they are advocating, acknowledging that replication of past efforts does not equal future success (Teles & Schmitt, 2011). Most importantly, an organization should remember that advocacy and evaluation tools are only one part of its overall strategy (Parrish, 2008) – a strategy that should transform over time (Green, 2016).

Additionally, researchers have much to uncover in terms of how individual organizations and collectives engage in formal and informal advocacy evaluation. It has been argued that NPOs generally lack a “systematic, rational evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of advocacy” (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014, p. 15). The word effective must be used conscientiously, as it can be difficult to know if a different advocacy tactic or strategy would
have been more successful. As discussed, it is not always possible to capture or document what has been achieved (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011), particularly with advocacy.

Researchers and practitioners should ask themselves if effectiveness means success in this context. If so, this begs the question if advocacy, particularly advocacy for social justice and social change, is only to be undertaken when success or effectiveness is anticipated? What about when advocacy is the “right thing to do” even if the chances of “success” are low?

Think Dignity’s view of effectiveness and success was centered in its long-term view of advocacy and its focus on shaping the narrative – consistently bringing the public’s awareness to the issues and growing support from within the community. Shaping the narrative demonstrated Think Dignity’s holistic view of advocacy due to the long-term impacts a changed narrative would have for homeless citizens, the community at large, elected officials, and policy implications. For example, can one know or capture the seeds that are being planted in terms of changing public opinion? Even if the outcome did not go the way the organization had hoped, its advocacy for individuals and societal change centered on doing what it felt was right and needed in the moment. Such advocacy may not lend itself well to formal evaluation.

All of this coalesced into Think Dignity’s belief that all individuals deserve to be treated with basic dignity. This was the foundation for its advocacy and services, built from listening, collaborating with, and learning from the lived experiences of unhoused individuals. Think Dignity continually used informal and formal evaluation of its advocacy strategy and tactics, adapting to the political and social environment, refining its message, and brainstorming how else it could advocate for social change for individuals experiencing homelessness. It researched the root causes of homelessness, using this and the experience of other cities and organizations to inform its theory of change and advocacy strategy. This, combined with the experience of its
staff, board, and advocacy partners, contributed to Think Dignity being a credible and powerful advocate.
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This section reviews some of the key terms used in this dissertation, which concentrated on evaluation of the advocacy activities and efforts by nonprofit organizations. Organizations that identify as advocacy organizations were not be considered for this study; an *advocacy organization* is one whose mission and core activity is advocacy (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013).

*Advocacy* does not have a single, agreed upon definition. It is often defined by the types of advocacy activities; while often associated most lobbying, advocacy can also encompass other activities, such as community organizing, public awareness, and network formation to name a few. Parrish (2008) posited that though many nonprofits are involved in advocacy even if they do not consider themselves an advocacy organization. Rather than define advocacy by its activities, Jackson (2014) argued it is instead more meaningful to define advocacy by its purpose. A brief definition of advocacy is “the act of influencing or supporting (something or someone)” (CIPE, 2003, p. 6). Andrews and Edwards (2004) define advocacy as “promoting or resisting social change that, if implemented, would conflict with the social, cultural, political, or economic interests or values of other constituencies and groups” (p. 481). I defined advocacy any activity or behavior aimed at influencing and promoting social change that challenges systemic inequalities and injustices in the pursuit of equity and justice for all individuals and groups, particularly those historically marginalized.

*Public policy advocacy* is advocacy specifically focused on influencing public policy, policy implementation, or the processes around policymaking (Unsicker, 2013).

In the literature on assessing nonprofit organizations and their impact, the terms monitoring and evaluation (or M&E) are often discussed and practiced in tandem.
Monitoring “measures progress in achieving specific results in relation to a strategy’s implementation plan” (Coffman, n.d., p. 1).

Evaluation “attempts to determine as systematically and objectively as possible a strategy’s worth or significance” (Coffman, n.d., p. 1). Evaluation can be prospective (beginning at the start or planning stage of a strategy or effort, developmental (during a strategy or effort), or retrospective (after a strategy or effort is completed) (Morariu & Brennan, 2009). The focus of the evaluation can be on process, outcomes, or impact (Unsicker, 2013) as well as capacity building (Whelan, 2008).

The acronym MEL increasingly appears in more recent literature, adding emphasis on the learning aspect of the monitoring and evaluation process. MEL is likewise relevant throughout an advocacy effort (Unsicker, 2013).

This study follows the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) in distinguishing between output and outcome:

An output is a measure of an activity or effort (GPRA, 1993).

An outcome is “a change in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution” (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012, p. 1) or the desired results (GPRA, 1993).

This research studied the advocacy efforts of a nonprofit organization whose mission centered on social justice and social change. Ospina et al. define social justice as “a call for fairness and equality of opportunity for all” and including the “values of inclusion, social solidarity, transparency and accountability, democracy, and equity” (2012, p. 272). Social justice addresses the inequitable distribution of assets, opportunity, and privilege. The goal of social
justice work is to effect social change, which describes change to social systems and changes in the established ways in which people think and act (Freedman, 1952).

A human service nonprofit organization within the United States is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides some type of service to individuals and groups and may also engage in advocacy regarding the issue or need their organization is trying to address (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013).

Advocacy evaluation seeks to determine the effectiveness of advocacy activities, efforts, or a campaign, despite the complexity and non-linearity of advocacy. Advocacy evaluation is often discussed as a formal process, where an organization might employ various techniques and methods, such as developing a theory of change, determining outcomes, and measuring policy changes which tend to be results-based (Arensman, 2020). Evaluation can also occur informally within an organization, whether that organization has a formal process for evaluation. Informal evaluation is more spontaneous and occurs in individual and group thoughts, reflections, and conversations on the efficacy of advocacy efforts.
APPENDIX B

Initial Interview Guide

1. (Think Dignity’s mission is to advance basic dignity for people experiencing homelessness through advocacy and innovation.) How does Think Dignity live out (or pursue) its mission?

2. As executive director, describe how your role contributes to Think Dignity’s pursuing its mission through advocacy.

3. Understanding that some of your programs and services may have adjusted due to the pandemic, what are Think Dignity’s current programs and services?

4. What ways does Think Dignity bring about social change through advocacy?
   a. **Follow-up:** When is this tactic most likely to be used?
   b. **Follow-up:** Why is it used in that instance / those instances?
   c. **Follow-up:** How did Think Dignity gauge the overall effectiveness of this tactic?

5. How does the organization make decisions / plan about future advocacy?

6. How does the organization measure those advocacy efforts?
   a. What about advocacy efforts done as part of a coalition?

7. What are ways that Think Dignity engages with the community to move your mission forward through advocacy?

8. What are ways that Think Dignity engages with policy makers and/or the government to move your mission forward?
   a. **Follow-up:** What is the history of Think Dignity using this tactic in engaging with policymakers / the government? (i.e., documented history)
   b. **Follow-up:** When is this tactic most likely to be used?
   c. **Follow-up:** Why is it used in that instance / those instances?
   d. **Follow-up:** How did Think Dignity gauge the overall effectiveness of this tactic?
   e. **Follow-up:** How has COVID 19 affected this engagement (positively and negatively)?

9. Are there any other tactics used through advocacy?
a. **Follow-up:** What is the history of the organization using this tactic in engaging with the community? (i.e., documented history)

b. **Follow-up:** When is this tactic most likely to be used?

c. **Follow-up:** Why is it used in that instance / those instances?

d. **Follow-up:** How did Think Dignity gauge the overall effectiveness of this tactic?

e. **Follow-up:** How has COVID 19 affected engagement in advocacy (positively and negatively)?

10. Who in the organization is involved in advocacy?

11. Who in the organization is involved in evaluation of advocacy efforts?

12. Describe past advocacy efforts (or campaigns) of Think Dignity.

13. What are the ways that Think Dignity gauged progress of this effort (or campaign)?

   a. **Follow-up:** Ask for expansion of each item mentioned (i.e., is it formal or informal? Prompted internally by the organization or required by a funder? How long has this evaluation measure been used? Is this measurement determined prior to the effort/campaign? How often is it measured, evaluated, etc. throughout the effort/campaign?).

14. Describe the current advocacy efforts (or campaigns) of Think Dignity.

15. What are the ways that Think Dignity gauges progress of this effort (or campaign)?

   a. **Follow-up:** Ask for expansion of each item mentioned (i.e., is it formal or informal? Prompted internally by the organization or required by a funder? How long has this evaluation measure been used? Is this measurement determined prior to the effort/campaign? How often is it measured, evaluated, etc. throughout the effort/campaign? What is your role in the evaluation process? Who is involved in the evaluation? At what stages?)

16. How do you gauge the progress of this effort (or campaign)?

17. How does [name of the organization] gauge progress towards accomplishing its mission / social change?

   a. **Follow-up:** Ask for expansion of each item mentioned (i.e., is it formal or informal? Prompted internally by the organization or required by a funder? How long has this evaluation measure been used? Is this measurement determined prior to the effort/campaign? How often is it measured, evaluated, etc. throughout the effort/campaign? What is your role in the evaluation process? Who is involved in the evaluation? At what stages?).
18. Are there ways that you individually gauge the organization’s progress towards accomplishing its mission / social change?

19. How is evaluation incorporated as a practice throughout the organization?
   
   a. **Follow-up.**

20. How do the relationships with donors (individual, foundations, etc.) influence your evaluation practices?

21. How do other nonprofit organizations influence your evaluation practices?

22. Is there anything else I have not asked about that you think is important to add in regard to [name of the organization]’s evaluation of its advocacy efforts?
APPENDIX C
List of Codes

- Advocacy evaluation
  - Mapping out milestones
  - Power mapping
  - Statistics and narratives
  - Theory of change
  - Tools dependent on advocacy campaign
- Advocacy sets us apart
- Advocacy tactics
  - Capitalize on momentum
  - Community action
  - Community events
  - Duality approach
  - Emergent
  - Lobby
  - Petition
  - Research and reporting
  - Shaping the narrative
  - Strategically thinking
  - Using privilege, authority, and power
  - Working towards policy
- Awareness
  - Community awareness
  - Expand the reach
  - Holistic view
  - Informing of the issues
  - Not aware of their rights
- Basic human dignity
- Creating systemic change
- Empowering our community
- Hone advocacy efforts
  - Templates from model cities
- Short-term and long-term advocacy
  - Implementation
  - We have to recalibrate
- Success
  - Getting feedback
  - Highlighting those impacted
  - Shaping the narrative
  - Work doesn’t stop – success is not an end goal
• Working closely with partners
  o Coalitions
  o Elected officials
  o Universities
APPENDIX D

Think Dignity Theory of Change

Step 1 Long Term Goal

- What is the long term change you see as Think Dignity’s goal?

- Think Dignity’s mission is to advance basic dignity for people experiencing homelessness through advocacy and innovation.

- Think Dignity’s mission is to inspire, empower and organize our San Diego community to advance basic dignity for those living on the streets.
Step 2 Identify the Problem

- What is the problem Think Dignity is trying to solve?

Step 3 Stakeholders

- Who are the people Think Dignity helps? Who is affected by the issue TD wants to solve?
- Who can help Think Dignity achieve its goals? Who are the people TD needs to influence to bring about long term change?
**Step 4 Action**

- What steps are needed to bring about change?
  - Educating the public and rewriting the narrative about the causes of homelessness
  - Identify best practices and creating scorecard of service providers
  - Collaborate with community members to identify gaps in services and priorities/needs
  - Creating a campaign for change, i.e., human rights and advocating for solutions
  - Provide services with basic dignity as part of our community outreach plan
  - Establish pilot programs with best practices that can be replicated and operated by other service providers.
  - Be an incubator of innovation for other service providers.

**Step 5 Outcomes**

- What evidence would show that the action Think Dignity is taking is starting to make a difference towards long term change?
  - Educating the public and rewriting the narrative about the causes of homelessness
  - Hold a community forum/summit to educate general population. (Focus group, pre/post survey)
Step 6 Wider Benefits

- What are the key outcomes of the Think Dignity’s activities and programs towards long term change?
- Increased compassion, relaxation of criminalization and humanization of people experiencing homeless, improvements in services and resources.

Dear Megan Pontes:


Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Findings:

Research Notes:

Internal Notes:

The USD IRB requires annual renewal of all active studies reviewed and approved by the IRB. Please submit an application for renewal prior to the annual anniversary date of initial study approval.

If an application for renewal is not received, the study will be administratively closed.

Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.

The next deadline for submitting project proposals to the Provost's Office for full review is 4/8. You may submit a project proposal for expedited or exempt review at any time.

Sincerely,

Eileen K. Fry-Bowers, PhD, JD
Administrator, Institutional Review Board

Office of the Vice President and Provost
Hughes Administration Center, Room 214
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110-2492
Phone (619) 260-4553 • Fax (619) 260-2210 • www.sandiego.edu