

Government Acquisition of Nonprofit Homelessness Services in Canada and the United Kingdom: Market and Non-market Values and Bases for Competition

Introduction

When governments acquire social welfare services, they make markets (Gingrich 2011). The rules that governments adopt in making social welfare service markets define who is able to participate, on what bases, and how prices will be determined. Research on the “contracting revolution” – in which governments contract nonprofits to provide social welfare services – has emphasized the transformative effect that such practices are having on nonprofits. A seminal text on the subject by Smith and Lipsky (1993), for instance, points to characteristics of service contracting to argue that the contracting revolution will exert downward pressure on social welfare provision. This basic logic has been echoed by further research on NPOs in the context of contracting out (e.g. Smith 2002; Boris and Maronick 2014; Pettijohn May 2013; Morgan and Campbell 2011; Curtis, n.d.). Government-funded, nonprofit-provided services are the norm in many social policy areas (Salamon 2015; Johansson and Johansson 2015; Archambault 2015; Marwell 2004). From hospitals to elder care facilities, schools, refugee resettlement, and disaster relief, government-funded nonprofits are key actors in implementing social rights (Marwell and Calabrese 2015; Marwell 2004). Given their pivotal role, political science should turn its attention to understanding the political consequences of nonprofit social welfare provision (Cammett and Maclean 2011, 2014).

This paper compares the regimes for government acquisition of nonprofit-provided social welfare services in Canada and the United Kingdom, focusing specifically on the provision of homelessness services. It argues that government social welfare service regimes can be marketized to a greater or lesser extent, and that this is potentially influential through its effect on nonprofit competition. The paper will draw on the concept of basis for competition as introduced by Tuckman (1998). *Basis for competition* refers to “the way that competitors choose to compete to meet their customer/constituent needs” (Tuckman 1998: 176). It begins with a review of the literature on nonprofit competition, before introducing the theoretical contribution on nonprofit service markets. Then, it applies the theory through the two case studies.

Literature Review

Competition is “the pursuit of the same objective by two or more firms” (Tuckman 1998: 176). Nonprofits are in competition with one another for revenue, personnel (board members, volunteers, and staff), beneficiaries, access, and authority (Tuckman 1998; Stroup and Wong 2017). There have been numerous studies on nonprofit competition. For the most part, this body of work focuses on attitudes toward competition (e.g. Sharp 2018), strategies of competition (e.g. Chetkovich and Frumkin 2003), and the confluence of competition and collaboration amongst nonprofits (Bunger 2013; Lammers 1990).

There has also been research on the effects of nonprofit competition, whether in nonprofit-only or mixed-mode contexts (e.g., Lammers 1990; Wolff and Schlesinger 1998). Eikenberry and Kluver (2004) argue that the marketization of nonprofits undermines the sector’s

role in fostering civil society, for example through building social capital or advocating on behalf of service beneficiaries. The finding of Grogan et al. (2009) is slightly different. They find that competition for government revenue can increase political activity to secure a favorable role under a new contracting regime; however, these efforts can undermine a nonprofit's ability to represent poor beneficiaries. The effect of competition on the adoption of market-based strategies is thought to be especially acute in mixed-form markets where nonprofits compete directly with for-profit organizations (Marwell and McInerney 2005). For instance, competition with for-profits changes the way in which nonprofits provide services – for instance, influencing the types of beneficiaries they serve (Wolff and Schleisinger 1998).

Competition is conceived as one of the drivers behind a broader trend toward the 'marketization' or 'commercialization' of the sector (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Ochs 2012; Weisbrod 1998; Tuckman 1998). However, Weisbrod (1998) notes that competition may in some circumstances strengthen the distinction between nonprofit and for-profit sectors, as well as strengthen nonprofit collaboration. The literature has identified competition for government contracts in particular as a source of nonprofit marketization (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Alexander et al. 1999; Adams and Perlmutter 1991; Ryan 1999; Smith and Lipsky 1993). The supposition is that government contracting leads to a loss of the public character of nonprofits, as these organizations adapt to the business-oriented approach necessary to meet government requirements (Alexander et al. 1999). Moreover, contracting prompts large nonprofits to become more business-like, while smaller, community-based organizations experience financial difficulties under devolution (Alexander 1999; Aiken and Harris 2017).

Although the shift from grants to contracts has been identified as a sort of bogeyman for the sector, the literature has devoted relatively little detailed attention to the characteristics of government service markets themselves. Tuckman (1998) acknowledges that public policy can influence whether for-profits and nonprofits compete directly, but this is a passing reference in an article about *how* nonprofits compete. This paper seeks to add to our understanding of the link between the contracting revolution and nonprofit commercialization through an analysis of government regimes for acquiring nonprofit social welfare services. It asks: do governments take different approaches to acquiring nonprofit social welfare services and, if so, how does this affect competition?

Characterizing Nonprofit Service Markets

When governments create social welfare service markets, they establish rules and practices which can emphasize different values, creating varying levels of competitiveness and different bases of competition. To the extent that these rules and practices reflect "free market" or capitalist values, nonprofits are likely to face pressures to become more businesslike. But governments make choices when they acquire nonprofit social welfare: they can protect nonprofits from direct competition with for-profits, create a presumption of service continuity except in extraordinary circumstances, encourage collaboration, and promote environmental, social, and governance (ESG) values.

Rules and practices such as these seek to place boundaries on competition or to shape the bases of competition away from a focus on price and service quality. In creating institutions such as these, governments shape the nature of the market, as well as the bases upon which nonprofits compete. This section discusses key institutions of nonprofit service markets and introduces their connection to different bases of competition.

A first potential distinction in government-created nonprofit service markets consists of grant- versus contract-based service acquisition. Indeed, there is some evidence that service contracting has displaced grant funding for nonprofits.¹ The distinction between granting and contracting is sometimes used as a signal for the extent to which a government-nonprofit funding relationship is marketized. For instance, in her analysis of political justice and private associations in light of “privatization” of public services Cordelli (2012) distinguishes between grants and contracts. For Cordelli, grants provide greater space for nonprofits to determine its own ends and programs. In contrast, contracting relations exert greater control over the fundee by allowing the funder to provide an organization with external ends, as well as to maintain direct involvement in supervising the work of the recipient. Cordelli’s analysis provides a reasonable ideal-type distinction between contracts and grants, and as such is a useful starting point for this research. However, it is worth noting that the boundaries between government granting and contracting has been blurred. Grant programs can be tied to service targets and in some cases do closely prescribe the nature of the service to be provided. Frequently, grants are delivered through a contract. As such, while the grant-contract distinction can be salient, it is necessary to delve into the details of either sort of arrangement rather than to simply rely on the label ‘grant’ or ‘contract’.

Beyond the grant versus contract divide, there are at least three dimensions of government regimes for nonprofit service acquisition that are potentially salient for the extent and nature of nonprofit competition: rules of entry, participation, and assessment. The first of these pertains to the *rules of entry*. Governments determine eligibility rules for potential service-providers. In doing so, they “ring-fence” the process such that only nonprofits are able to compete. Or, they can allow for direct competition with for-profits. Rules of entry also include whether government invites a small pool of applicants, versus an open process that any organization can join. Next, the *rules of participation* set out how a nonprofit applies for funding. Procedurally, participation can entail written submissions or in-person interviews. The length of written submissions, as well as substantive requirements, can make applications more or less onerous for prospective participants. Finally, governments can establish *assessment rules* that prioritize different values. For instance, assessment criteria may turn on the lowest available cost or they could privilege values such as service stability, provider experience, partnership and collaboration, or ties to the local community. This author posits that the inclusion of values outside of the cost-efficiency frame in assessment criteria suggest a less marketized acquisition regime. Assessment rules may also pertain to who is empowered to decide. In this case, the inclusion of certain actors, such as people with lived experience, may shape the way in which funding decisions are made. Additionally, *modes of evaluation* after a funding agreement is awarded, as well as the *length of the agreement*, *rules of payment*, and the *procedures of defining the service* potentially shape nonprofit competition in less direct ways.

The institutions of government acquisition of nonprofit social welfare, in turn, shape the manner by which nonprofits compete. In the first instance, *rules of entry* can constrain the extent to which there is competition – if, say, a government chooses to value stability by continuing to fund the same organization year-after-year. The *rules of procedure*, when they are onerous or

¹ In the UK, revenue to the charitable sector has been slowly increasing in recent years across all funding sources, including governments. However, there has been a shift in the way that governments fund charities. Specifically, since 2004 there has been a simultaneous decline of voluntary contributions by governments (i.e. government grants) and an increase in earned income from governments (i.e. fee-for-service contracts). Earned income from government is now the single largest source of funds for the charitable sector. See NCVO (2016).

complex, can limit competition by making it difficult for nonprofits to compete. But perhaps most significantly, different institutions of acquisition shape the bases for competition.

As defined by Tuckman, basis for competition refers to “the way that competitors choose to compete to meet their customer/constituent needs” (1998: 176). Rules of entry can create direct competition with for-profit organizations, which might lead nonprofits to compete differently than if the pool was restricted to nonprofit organizations alone (Marwell and McInerney 2005). Bureaucratically onerous procedures for participation can privilege larger, professionalized nonprofits. And, of course, assessment criteria will dictate the characteristics of nonprofits that are likely to be successful, as well as the manner by which nonprofits tailor the service that they are offering.

Research Design

This paper uses a case comparison approach to analyse variation in government regimes of acquiring nonprofit social welfare services. It compares Canada and the United Kingdom (UK), specifically regarding their methods of funding nonprofit homelessness services. To limit external variation, this dissertation focuses on two liberal welfare regimes, Canada and the UK. While we can roughly think about the welfare state in both countries as similar, the case study highlights the variations that exist in the institutions of acquiring nonprofit homelessness services. Homelessness was selected as a policy area with significant nonprofit service provision, while government simultaneously accepts a duty to support affected citizens, in both countries.

The cases were developed based on data from 107 semi-structured interviews with bureaucrats and nonprofit staff, undertaken as part of a broader study on the nonprofitization of the welfare state. Interview data provided information on the experiences, perceptions, and expectations of actors participating in the acquisition or provision of social welfare. This data was triangulated wherever possible through document analysis drawing on legislation, policy guidance, annual reports, and evaluations.

Case Studies

Procuring Homelessness Services in the UK: The UK Social Care Commissioning System

In the UK, homelessness services are, by and large, acquired through a social care commissioning process – which is rooted in public procurement procedures – implemented by local authorities. The contract commissioning process entails policy-specific “commissioners” working with more generalist procurement officials to define and procure a service. Public procurement for social care always entails commissioning, although not all social care services are acquired through procurement – some smaller contracts are awarded through other processes, such as restricted procedures or direct awards. This section begins by describing the service procurement process in the UK. Public procurement rules in the UK are geared toward providing open, fair, and transparent competition. It then describes four considerations which temper this general policy aim: promoting the local care market, small providers, social value, and incumbents and service disruption.

The Service Procurement Process

Public procurement is the process of purchasing goods or services by government. Procurement can encompass goods or services across an array of government functions – from paperclips to military aircraft, advisory services, and home care services for the elderly. Public procurement in the UK is subject to European Union (EU) rules covering, among other things, public contracts. These rules are designed to ensure the free movement of goods and services across the EU, including through establishing a level playing field for companies (Institute for Government 2017; Maciejewski 2017). It is also guided by domestic legislation which implements these rules and creates internal guidelines. The main current domestic legislation on procurement is the *Public Contracts Regulations 2015* (PCR). This legislation defines how contracting authorities are to carry out tendering processes.

As provided by EU and UK legislation, local authorities must undertake public procurement processes where the value of a contract exceeds set thresholds: in 2018, £181,302 for ordinary procurement and £615,278 for social care and other “light touch” contracts (CCS 2017). Below these thresholds, local authorities establish their own procedures. It is usual for local authorities to have a competitive tendering process for contracts of a larger size but below the threshold, while smaller contracts might be achieved by inviting one or a few providers to submit a quote (author’s interviews).

Procuring for social care entails a special process of “commissioning”. In public service commissioning, policy-specific commissioners work with more generalist procurement officers to define and procure a service (Geldards LLP 2013). The commissioning process generally begins with the development of the specification – a document defining the service to be provided – by the commissioner, sometimes with the assistance of a procurement team. Specifications are based on a needs analysis undertaken by the commissioner, as well as an identification of statutory obligations and “nice to have” services (author’s interview LO01SP).

Once the specification is developed it is put into a package, called the invite to tender (ITT), which encompasses: the rules of engaging with the tender, the specification, the selection questionnaire, and the proposed contract. The selection questionnaire includes questions about the organization itself – such as financial viability, experience with contracts, and whether the organization or its personnel have been convicted of certain offences like fraud – as well as how the provider will achieve the service. Once the ITT is developed, a contract notice goes out. Next, there is an opportunity for providers to raise questions; these questions are anonymously recorded, with providers and/or commissioners preparing responses. Once this clarification period is closed, there is a period of a few weeks before the deadline for tender submissions. At this deadline, the evaluation period commences.

Evaluation occurs at two stages. At the first stage, procurement officers undertake a pass/fail evaluation of the selection questionnaire. The second phase encompasses “quantitative and qualitative” submissions, referring to pricing and service quality, respectively (author’s interviews).² Quality scores are determined through a panel, which is comprised of between three and ten individuals. The lead commissioner on the tender is on the panel, usually with at least one other commissioner. Other panel participants can be representatives from other service divisions, frontline workers, or service recipients. Panelists do independent evaluations to arrive at independent scores, based on the stated evaluation criteria, and then come together to arrive at a single consensus quality score. The overall aim of including both elements is to find the “most economically advantageous tenderer” (MEAT) – which can mean “best Value for Money” or the

² This is the terminology that participants referred to in regard to the procurement process and for this reason it is being used.

lowest price (See CCS 2016a). In general, local authorities achieve this by weighting quantitative and qualitative elements of the bid. Weightings are sometimes set by the council, whereas in other cases commissioners have discretion. A common ratio is 70:30, where price is 70% of the weighting (author's interviews). "Commissioners want high quality and procurement wants a low price [...] We try to get them [commissioners] to construct the ITT so you get innovation – so there's something newer and better" (author's interview LO01SP).

After an evaluation is complete, the procurement lead drafts a debrief letter for all applicants, providing the results and anonymized feedback on their quality of submissions, ranking, and score. Then there is a standstill period during which applicants can seek clarification or raise a legal challenge. Interview participants had never heard of a situation in which a legal challenge had been raised by a voluntary sector organization, which they speculated was due to the small size of the contracts as well as the cost of legal action (author's interviews).

Data from a 9 October 2017 search of the Contracts Finder for "homelessness" contracts yielded information on 168 contracts published or awarded from 2015 onward. Contracts Finder is a government database covering public sector procurement in England (Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have separate datasets). Its purpose is to facilitate competition by increasing transparency in public sector procurement. The public sector is required to publish its contracts on Contracts Finder (Cabinet Office Efficiency and Reform Group and CCS 2015). The Contracts Finder data shows a high level of nonprofit participation in homelessness contracting, with some for-profit participation as well. NPOs were selected as suppliers for the majority (75%) of homelessness contracts, receiving the largest share of the total value of contracts (£242 million out of a total £500 million). For-profit organizations represented 17% of the total number of contracts and 6% of the total value (£28 million).

The Contracts Finder data also suggests that most homelessness contracts are awarded through a competitive tendering process. The majority of the contracts in this dataset, 72%, were awarded through an open or restricted procedure – the two procedures that allow for the widest range of competition.³ In an open procedure, "any interested economic operator may submit a tender in response to a contract notice" (PCR 2015: 27). Restricted procedures are similar, but entail pre-qualifying bidders, for instance by financial standing, technical capacity or professional capability (Mills & Reeve 2015).

Social Care Procurement Markets?

Generally, the framework for public procurement is meant to establish a market for social care contracting which adheres to three values: transparency, fairness, and equal access to opportunity. Where a contract is of sufficient size to go through procurement, commissioning operates through a competitive market process in which price is a prominent basis for determining the appropriate provider and where nonprofit organizations compete with for-profit agencies.⁴ According to Contract Finder data, most contracts are awarded through "open" or

³ Specifically, 57% of contracts were awarded through an open procedure while 16% were awarded through a restricted procedure. The remaining contracts were awarded through negotiated procedures (1%), direct awards (1%) or other (25%).

⁴ Generally, commissioners cannot "ring-fence" a procurement process such that only nonprofits are considered. Authorities can reserve the award of certain services to mutuals and social enterprises (CCS 2016b). But none of the

“restricted” competitive procurement processes. In three-quarters of cases, homelessness contracts were awarded to NPOs. Thus, in the case of homelessness we can say that the government-nonprofit service regime is based on free market principles to a considerable degree. However, there are certain other considerations that enter into the decision-making process which affect the nature of competition for homelessness and other service contracts. This section discusses four such considerations: promoting the local care market, small providers, social value, and incumbents and service disruption.

First, the *Care Act 2014* requires local authorities to “promote the efficient and effective operation of a market in services for meeting care and support needs” (2014: s.5(1)). Specifically, this entails the following steps: designing strategies to meet local needs; engaging with providers and local communities; understanding the market; facilitating the development of the market; integrating their approach with local partners; and securing supply in the market and assuring its quality through contracting (Department of Health and Social Care 2018). Commissioners are expected to understand the local supplier base and to “facilitate markets that offer a diverse range of high-quality and appropriate services” (Department of Health and Social Care 2018).

The government staff that participated in this study all expressed an awareness of the market in the service areas in which they operated. For instance, one participant described using a conceptual tool called the “Kraljic Matrix”, which helps procurement officers to assess the risks associated with different provider markets from competitive to oligopolistic or monopolistic (author’s interview ES01RH). The Kraljic Matrix identifies different purchasing strategies depending on the importance of the purchase and the complexity of the supply market (Kraljic 1983). More broadly, procurement officers were aware of social care market structures and their obligation to facilitate market development (author’s interview BH01EB).

Facilitating markets can entail encouraging new entrants as well as preserving existing participants. For the former, procurement officers and commissioners seek to ensure that providers have heard about opportunities and listening to agencies about barriers to applying for contracts (author’s interview). As to preserving participants, the market shaping imperative also tempers the drive for low-cost bids, where this is unsustainable. Procurement officers expressed an awareness that bidders sometimes “loss-lead” and explained that they look for financially sustainable bids. “We don’t want to be squeezing businesses so much that they go out of business,” one interview participant said (author’s interview LO01SP).

Second, social care procurement can take certain limited actions to encourage the participation of small providers. While procurement officers and commissioners stressed that for-profit and nonprofit providers are “all treated equally”, statements of this nature were often followed by a discussion of rules to facilitate the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In 2010, only 6.5 percent of central government procurement spending was allocated to SMEs in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors (Young 2015). That year government set a target of supplying 25% of public procurement spending through SMEs by 2015.⁵ The *Public Contracts Regulations 2015* incorporated a number of recommendations put forward by

procurement officers or commissioners participating in this study mentioned having used the mutuals carve-out for homelessness contracting (author’s interviews).

⁵ Defined as “an entity engaged in economic activity that: employs fewer than 250 people; and had an annual turnover less than or equal to 50 million euros (£39 million); or has a balance sheet total of less than or equal to 43 million euros (£33 million).” (UKNAO March 2016: 6) The SME category includes most voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organizations.

Lord David Young. Known as the “Young Reforms”, changes included: a requirement that all undisputed invoices be paid within thirty days of receipt; the abolishment of pre-qualification questionnaires for procurement below a given monetary threshold; and a new online “Contracts Finder” tool on which all public authorities are required to add contracting opportunities (Fisher Scoggins Waters 17 March 2015).

Procurement officers are encouraged to break larger services into “lots” (smaller, parceled out services) for which organizations can bid (CCS 2016b). The new regulations also place a cap on the turnover requirement, so that procurement officers cannot require that bidding companies have a turnover of more than twice the estimated contract value (Government of the UK 2015: s.58.9). Service commissioners are also moving toward consortia-based service delivery (author’s interview LE01TP). For small charities, a consortium can sometimes be the only way to competitively vie for a service contract (author’s interview OX02EB).

Third, although local authorities cannot restrict procurement processes to nonprofit providers, the *Public Services Act (Social Value) 2012* (SVA) requires that social value must be considered in public service contracting (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2012). In some instances, SVA requires public sector agencies to consult on social value. Social value, defined as “enriched lives and social justice” (Cabinet Office August 2018: 19), refers to social, economic, and environmental criteria.

Evidence of social value is usually expressed in the questionnaire and can include stakeholder engagement, certifications (e.g. International Organization for Standardization accreditation), or other criteria. For instance, in a social needs contract social value might include providers administering a workshop for parents. Participants said that there is usually a bit of direction provided by commissioners on social value. For instance, a questionnaire might ask, “How would you decrease obesity?” (author’s interview LO01SP). There have been challenges in implementing SVA since its passage, which the central government is seeking to address (Acclaro Advisory 2019; Cabinet Office August 2018).⁶ A Cabinet Office report found that “too often the [Social Value] Act is treated as an afterthought, and a ‘tick box exercise’ to be performed for compliance only” (August 2018: 115)

A final consideration concerns incumbent providers. Formally, procurement processes cannot favour incumbents. However, interview participants expressed that commissioners do commonly consider the effects of de-funding incumbents on service provision in making their decisions. For instance, one local government official described a situation in which an incumbent provider has two contracts with the local authority (author’s interview BH01EB). In that case, commissioners would consider whether losing one contract might affect their ability to carry out the other. Although the procurement officers and commissioners that participated in this study expressed that this would not occur in a way that breached procurement regulations, the inherent tension between these two ideals was palpable as they described the issue of incumbents (author’s interviews).

Paying for Homelessness Services in Canada: A Fragmented System of Grants and Service Agreements

In contrast to the United Kingdom, the acquisition of homelessness services by Canadian governments is highly decentralized and variable. It is primarily undertaken through short-term

⁶ At the time of writing, the Cabinet Office is undertaking a consultation of how the central government should incorporate social value in its contracting (Cabinet Office 11 March 2019).

grants or annually-renewed usage-based funding. The federal government provides some funding for homelessness through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). However, this is a relatively small proportion of overall government funding for homelessness. In most cases, provinces or municipalities provide grants to homeless-serving nonprofits to provide specific services. Overall, government acquisition of homelessness services in Canada consists of a fragmented system of grants. This section explains core programs in two provinces – Ontario and Alberta – as an entry point for examining the extent to which the government acquisition of homelessness services in Canada reflects free market principles.

The main federal homelessness program, HPS, provides matched-funding for a variety of interventions. Although there have been fluctuations, HPS funding is typically around \$100 million in a given year.⁷ HPS-eligible activities include homelessness reduction activities, especially Housing First; homelessness prevention activities; data collection, analysis, and dissemination; “innovative solutions”; and activities to plan, coordinate, and integrate homelessness responses (ESDC 2018: s.4.0). Written into the HPS terms is a requirement that no less than half of funding for any given project emanate from another funder (ESDC 2018). This “community contribution” can be from other levels of government, philanthropic funders, nonprofits, or for-profit organizations. In both large and small communities, provincial/territorial and city/municipal government funding comprises the vast majority of the community contribution (ESDC 2017b, 2017c). The matched funding requirement is complemented by a programmatic focus on “catalytic” funding to support local homelessness systems, focusing on extreme forms of homelessness.

HPS is an annual matched grant-funding program. To receive HPS funding, projects must assure housing choice; undertake resource coordination; be sustainable beyond the life of HPS; and serve official language minority communities. Organizations apply for HPS funding through a designated Community Entity – which is usually a local government but can be a nonprofit. In both of Alberta’s major cities, for instance, the community entities are nonprofits. Funding decisions are based on requests for proposals. Although funding is annual, community entities value stability and prefer to work with them to improve performance. As such, it is “not common” to de-fund an agency and transfer clients (author’s interview CG07DK).

The federal government contributes a relatively small proportion of overall government spending on homelessness – other levels of government, especially provincial and territorial governments, comprise a much greater share of government homelessness supports. Provincial approaches to addressing homelessness differ. To provide a snapshot, this paper discusses government homelessness funding in two provinces: Ontario and Alberta. In Alberta, homelessness policy is set at the provincial level, with funding flowing from the province as well. Ontario has devolved homelessness policy implementation to municipal Service Managers – though the province sets the framework for municipalities and provides some funding for homelessness. For both provinces, the vast majority of homelessness services are provided by nonprofits and supported by government funding.

Homelessness policy in Alberta is the responsibility of the Ministry of Community and Social Services (AMCSS). AMCSS is the major social services ministry and is responsible for the province’s employment and income support, as well as disabilities supports transfers. Through the Ministry’s Community Services and Supports Division, the Government of Alberta’s homelessness services are primarily operated through “community-based

⁷ Approximately 0.03% of the total federal government budget, based on the projected 2017-2018 total expenses of \$329 billion (Government of Canada 2018: 319).

organizations” (CBO), which are generally nonprofits. Through its Homeless and Outreach Support Services program area, AMCSS funds CBO-provided Housing First programs, adult homeless shelters, and women’s shelters, and supportive housing.

First, AMCSS provides funding and oversight of *Housing First programs* and outreach in Alberta’s seven major cities (AMCSS 2018). Funding for Housing First comprises just under half of AMCSS’ homelessness spending, 46% (AMCSS 2018: 37). Housing First, formerly called “outreach and support”, refers to provincial government funding under the HPS framework (Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs 2011). The other major homelessness spending area, comprising 52% of total spending, consists of funding for adult homeless shelters and women’s shelters. AMCSS funds twenty-eight emergency homeless adult homeless shelter operations (AMCSS 2018: 37). AMCSS also “supports” women’s shelters in providing emergency and second-stage shelters, as well as some supportive services such as child trauma counselling, outreach, and case management (AMCSS 2018: 10). The vast majority of shelters, sixty-one out of sixty-six, are nonprofit-operated.⁸

In Ontario, homelessness services are devolved to local governments. The *2011 Housing Services Act* established a provincial framework for homeless and housing services through municipal Service Managers, which are local government actors (York Region 2017). While municipalities have primary responsibility for homelessness in Ontario, three funding programs are worth mentioning: Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI), Local Poverty Reduction Fund (LPRF), and Home for Good (HFG).

CHPI disburses funds to communities through Service Managers (Farthing-Nichol and Pries 2018). Service managers have flexibility to use funding toward any of the four service categories (MMAH 2015). CHPI funding is thus often put toward core municipal homelessness programs, such as shelter funding (Region of Waterloo 2017). Next, HFG made available \$200 million in operating funding over a three-year period, 2017-2020 (Government of Ontario 9 March 2017). Funding included operating funding for housing assistance and support services, as well as capital funding for new supportive housing units (MOH 2017). Although some HFG funding remained within government, most was distributed either to nonprofit support service providers or to affordable and social housing providers (government, for-profit, and nonprofit) via a request for proposals process (e.g., TSSHA 2018; OHS 5 July 2017).

Finally, LPRF was a grant fund administered by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, a government foundation (OTF 2018). The LPRF has five streams, one of which is ending homelessness. In 2016 \$6.7 million in funding went to the homelessness stream (Government of Ontario 2017). LPRF recipients must all be qualified donees, which in practice limits the pool of applicants to registered charities. LPRF funding applications consisted of a project overview, business case, and description of the evaluation approach to be applied (OTF April 2017). Funding allocations were assessed based on eligibility, the three elements of the application, partnership/collaboration, and organizational capacity (OTF April 2017).

Municipalities in Ontario fund homelessness services through a combination of property taxes, as well as provincial and federal transfers. Provincial funds can comprise approximately a quarter of a city’s homelessness budget, while federal funding through HPS is usually considerably less (City of Ottawa 2017a, TSSHA 2017). Municipal homelessness programs tend to be made up in large part by funding to nonprofit-operated homeless shelters, although support services and outreach are also typical.

⁸ The remaining six are government-run (four municipal shelters and one provincial AMCSS shelter), according to the National Service Providers List.

The typical model for homeless shelter operators consists of a service agreement in which the government actor pays the operator, usually a nonprofit, based on nightly occupancy (author's interviews). Funding can only be used for direct costs of service provision, as a result of which homeless shelters often use philanthropy to subsidize other activities. Most governments have shelter operating standards, which establish expectations as to the quality of the service. While shelter operators felt that funding levels were inadequate, and often eroding due to inflation, they felt that funding was very secure – operators perceived little risk that funding would be withdrawn.

Thus, there are in essence two distinct avenues through which the Government of Alberta acquires nonprofit homeless services: grant funding through the HPS system and funding to homeless shelter operators. Ontario's homelessness funding is more disaggregated, with two provincial funding streams that flow through service managers – CHPI and HFG – as well as a direct granting program administered by OTF. Municipalities also contribute their own funds. But the general the same model holds across both provinces: short-term grants are available for project or capital funding, while core services are provided through annually renewed, but predictable and long-term, funding arrangements.

Discussion: Competition and Bases for Competition in Homelessness

This paper has presented two examples of how government acquisition regimes for nonprofit social welfare can differ, even amongst liberal welfare states. In the UK, homelessness services are procured through a competitive tendering process that emphasizes transparency, fairness, and equal access. However, it is worth emphasizing that the most open procedures resulted in just a handful of bidders – with five or seven being the high end of participants' estimates (author's interview LE01TP, EX01CS). These bidders were "usually all" nonprofits (author's interview LE01TP) and usually all locally-based. The Canadian system is carried out through a combination of grants and service agreements at all three levels of government. In some cases, multiple departments fund nonprofit homeless service providers. Generally speaking, grant processes feature more competition than service agreements, since in the latter case existing service providers tend to receive renewals on a more or less automatic basis.

With regard to *rules of entry*, the Canadian system tends to constrain participation to nonprofit organizations and government – sometimes explicitly and sometimes tacitly, depending on the policy. In contrast, "ring-fencing" the nonprofit sector was viewed by commissioners and procurement officers as an illegitimate practice. While Canadian grant programs often invited open competition through requests for proposals – similar to the UK system of posting contract notices online – there tended not to be a new competition to determine providers of core services like homeless shelters, once the provider was established. As to *rules of participation*, both processes included procedures which were onerous, especially reporting requirements. However, in both cases government officials expressed an aim of reducing these kinds of barriers to participation.

Finally, *assessment criteria* in the UK favored cost-efficiency, although steps had been taken to incorporate other characteristics – such as social value. In Canada, grant programs tended to value project impact, local connection, and partnership. Participants described an expectation that grant applicants obtain letters of support from other local providers. In the UK, consortia bidding is a collaborative mode of including small providers, but it often created uneven power dynamics between small and large consortia members (author's interview

OX02EB). Service stability was clearly a core value in shelter service agreements. Without an ongoing competitive process, however, price was in most cases determined by government on the basis of a uniform price per head formula. This led to the erosion of payments through inertia. As such, in both systems one could identify driving factors that might create downward pressure on the funding provided by government.

These different regimes influenced the bases on which providers competed for funding. The competitive contracting process adopted in the UK was more likely to result in providers competing on the basis of price. In some cases, nonprofits took on loss-leading contracts in order to gain or retain market share (UK03IB). Canadian providers were more likely to differentiate themselves from other providers by emphasizing their own unique contributions.

The competitive tendering process associated with the acquisition of homelessness services in the UK does seem to decrease collaboration. Consortia are sometimes encouraged through this model because it is a necessity for small providers to be competitive, but in general the open tendering process discourages providers from sharing information and connecting with one another. The transition from grants to competitive tendering in UK homelessness services resulted in organizations taking an increasingly competitive attitude toward one another. “People started to ask one another, ‘Are you going to bid for my service?’ People that had been working in close partnership became competitors,” (author’s interview OX02EB). Participants also expressed a perception that the potential that a service would transition from one provider to another also resulted in lower staff loyalty and decreased the incentive for long-term investments (author’s interviews). In contrast, Canadian homeless-serving nonprofits were more likely to view themselves as competitors in the context of philanthropic funding sources. Certainly, government funding was sometimes seen as a source of competition amongst nonprofits, especially under scarcity. But in general, nonprofits in Canadian homelessness saw advantages in collaborating, and saw collaboration as something government funders wanted.

On the other hand, the competitive tendering process allows an ostensibly objective process by which to de-fund agencies. In this sense, it is potentially more accountable. In the Canadian context, failing homeless-serving nonprofits were likely to “limp along” (author’s interview ED14ML). Providers are constrained by standards regarding the substance and quality of service they provide. However, the underlying mechanism that a provider could lose its government funding was not a credible threat in the case of the “core” service of emergency shelter provision.

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