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Mission Driven? Applying Ethics and Capabilities to Organizational Level  
Responses to Homelessness

By

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## Abstract

The purpose of this interdisciplinary project is to apply a philosophical theory on ethics to the homelessness crisis in Seattle Washington. The Capabilities approach- a philosophical ethical theory- provides the conceptual foundation of this study. I adapt the theory using five capabilities from Martha Nussbaum's list of key Capabilities and apply them to the issue of homelessness. This is a qualitative study using case-based methods. I selected one key homeless organization, Mary's Place, to examine ethics and capabilities. I conducted in-depth interviews with five employees from Mary's Place to evaluate ethical issues in their organizational approach. The interviews revealed a strong focus on the particular use of language as well as the ethical tensions between the organization's mission and its translation into practice. Homelessness is a crisis that does not seem to be ceasing in Seattle or across other West coast cities. While there is not one solution to the issue, this research highlights the importance of understanding homelessness from the perspective of human flourishing. Findings from this project can inform ethical responses to homelessness more broadly.

## Introduction:

Homelessness in Seattle has reached crisis level. In 2015, Mayor Ed Murray declared it a state of emergency (Beekman and Broom, 2015). Unfortunately, the data suggests that the number of people who are homeless in Seattle continues to go up. The most recent data (2019) shows a modest reduction. It is impossible to walk in almost any neighborhood in the city, besides the most suburban or extremely wealthy parts, without seeing this issue first-hand. The underpasses of bridges and freeways are littered either with human beings and their temporary homes, or with the trash left behind. The increased numbers and visibility of homelessness has led the city to engage in sweeps of tent encampments forcing people to leave these zones.

Historically, single men were most likely to be homeless which has greatly influenced public perception of the issue. Recently, after the recession in 2007, the new face of homelessness has become families. In fact, family homelessness now accounts for more than a third of the total national homelessness population (HUD PIT, 2019). On a federal and state level, a lot of resources were put towards eradicating homelessness among single men,

particularly veterans. Now, we can see with organizations like the one studied here, that family homelessness is being targeted.

One thing that is unique for the experience of family homelessness, is that this is often an issue a family only faces one time in their lives. Unlike single male homelessness, family homelessness is not as chronic. Mary's Place recognizes barriers that have traditionally been set in place by shelter organizations that often keep people from receiving shelter. It tries to reduce these by allowing pets, opening it up for an inclusive family set-up, and having a day shelter where women can go during the day while other shelters are not open.

The best measure of the number of people experiencing homelessness each year comes from the Federal Government office of Housing and Urban Development's Point-in-Time count. This count comes out in the spring of each year. It is counted on one night in January by a large team attempting to count every tent, person, car, shelter guest and other variation of someone living without a home. Since 2015 when the crisis was declared in Seattle, people who are homeless – sheltered and unsheltered – was on the rise. Just a few weeks ago, the numbers for 2019 were released. For the first time in four years, the overall number of people counted as homeless decreased. Like the decrease in Veteran population, the demographic of family homelessness has been specifically targeted in the last few years. The city saw those numbers decrease as a result of their efforts to address the recent rise in family homelessness. In 2018 the total number of people counted as homeless was 12,112 but reduced to 11,199 in 2019. Those unsheltered in 2018 were 6320, whereas in 2019 it was 5,228. The sheltered population in 2018 was 5,792, and in 2019 it is 5,971. In many ways this is exciting news. The rates of unsheltered and sheltered people flip flopped. This could be attributed to an increase in shelter beds, getting more people off the streets and at least in temporary shelter. So many conversations around the issue revolve around growth, particularly seeing more folks on the street. One factor that may

contribute to this, is that the city continues to fence off areas where people have often put up tents. These remain more hidden, and now forces people to be visible on main streets or in neighborhoods where people experiencing homelessness were not staying before. Overall, it is mostly positive to see this decrease. However, there were increases in the minority homelessness population including the number of blacks/African Americans and Indigenous people who are experiencing homelessness.

This one-night count provides important but incomplete data. It is extremely difficult to cover all the city in just one night, particularly a cold night in January. At this time, many people may be living in their cars, sleeping on someone's couch or hiding away in abandoned houses or buildings, which are hard to count or account for. There is also a population of people who are technically experiencing homelessness but perhaps are staying with friends or sharing an apartment with a large group of people "e.g., "couch surfing"). Because the count is done every year on the same day, some people flee the count and try to avoid being included in the numbers. Thus, many argue this is an underestimation. The numbers matter. Government, social services and organizations, like Mary's Place, all use these numbers to guide policy decisions and the allocation of resources.

There are many pathways into homelessness but a key answer to exiting homelessness is stable housing. Sociologist Sheila Crowley (2016) focuses on housing. She details the reality of what is necessary to find and keep a home. Not surprisingly, a key factor in pathways to homelessness and barrier to exiting homelessness is the high cost of housing. The rental and housing markets in Seattle and other similarly situated cities make this harder. It is unrealistic to meet rent even for a dual earner household, let alone a single income household. For example, there is no US county where one can rent a 2-bedroom apartment (without being rent burdened) with a full-time minimum wage employment. Someone would have to make more

than double the Seattle minimum wage, the highest in the country, in order to try and afford a two-bedroom apartment for their family. This is a housing issue; it is also an economic issue. As with most issues in life, homelessness is something that occurs in conjunction with other factors and therefore must be dealt with looking at more than one solution and from more than one angle. However, for this paper, the shelter system will be the primary focus as it is often the main way that cities respond to the issue.

The motivation behind this project springs from the way in which Seattle (like many cities) generally has been responding to this issue. Shelters have previously been last-ditch efforts to simply provide a space for people to crash and be off the streets. As the numbers have risen in all the major coastal cities, shelters have become the number one response to the issue. The amount of low-income housing that would be necessary to house the volume of individual and families in need is not available. While we may not be able to “build” ourselves out of this crisis, the amount of recently built low-income housing has not kept pace with the current demand. However, as shelters were created largely as emergency responses, the infrastructure in them is not conducive to healthy and long-term transitions from homelessness.

The predominant type of shelter historically has been a basic, high barrier shelter. A high barrier shelter has a lot of rules, and never allows people to come in if they are on any sort of illicit substance, including alcohol. Typically, individuals must arrive after a certain time and leave early in the morning. They have a short window to eat, if meals are provided at all, then maybe (not always) there’s access to a shower or other resources such as clothing donations, computer time, and perhaps entertainment. Then, mats are brought out to be placed on the floor in an open space and the lights go out at a specific time. In the morning, guests are woken up and meant to leave very early. Often, the guests are not able to use the bathroom or even eat

before heading outside, no matter what time of year or weather. Rules are set in place to protect the broader community using this space and possibly deter overreliance on shelters.

Setting these barriers high often creates a hostile and unwelcoming environment. In Teresa Gowan's (2010) ethnographic work concerning people living on the streets of San Francisco, in the early 2000's, she describes this system as the "homeless archipelago". By this, she means that the shelter system essentially works to keep people in homelessness, rather than get them out. Because of how it has traditionally been set up and run, these shelters do not connect people to resources they need, or even create a healthy environment that would provide the support to take steps towards getting out. This is also showcased in Elliott Liebow's book, *Tell Them Who I Am* (1993), which is an account of women experiencing homelessness in Washington DC. Although researched in the 1980's, the findings are still relevant today. There is a revolving door in these shelters. People will get out, but often return at different points in time as they fluctuate between being housed and being homeless. It is difficult because you must make the decision to have a place to sleep other than the streets, yet also adhere to regulations and an environment that may not even be more pleasing than outside. In Snow and Anderson's study of homeless street people in Austin Texas, they covered almost every aspect of the issue. Snow and Anderson (1993) call these models of shelters "accommodative". They provide a space for the necessities but do little more. Snow and Anderson (1993) also create a typography for the different types of homelessness in terms of time. These are episodic, transitional and chronic. Episodic homelessness references people who may come in and out of homelessness, depending on where they are situated in their lives. They often go in and out of having jobs and keeping housing and returning to the shelter system. Transitional homelessness refers to people who are usually facing a major crisis that has set them back and are experiencing homelessness for the

first and perhaps the only time. Chronic homelessness refers to people who are consistently facing this issue.

Sociologist Mary Calterone-Williams in her book *A Roof Over My Head*, focuses on female homelessness, and how homelessness and the shelter experience is gendered. Williams discusses the intersection of homelessness and domestic violence for women, a common pathway into homelessness for women. She finds that women are separated into two groups – battered women and women who are homeless. Consequently, this leads to social and emotional responses for the former and economic resources for the latter. Yet this approach clearly misses that women need both assistance with their emotional well-being and economic independence. The consequences of this approach can be detrimental.

Moving beyond the minimal shelter model, a new approach gained traction. In addition to low barrier shelters, another model is the enhanced shelter model. An enhanced shelter is one which contains more than just a place to sleep and eat. From the King County government site, this is defined as, “An **enhanced shelter** operates with the dual goals of 1) sheltering and connecting people with services, and 2) providing **housing** navigation to find a long-term **housing** solution. ... At least two **shelter** staff will be present at all times, with more during the day and during times of high neighborhood activity.” (King County Gov, 2018) Enhanced shelters and permanent supportive housing became increasingly popular. Tsemberis and Henwood (2016) detail the Housing First model, which is now the leading model. The Housing First approach means exactly what the name states. Individuals experiencing homelessness are given housing first, before needing to meet any specific requirements. Prior to this, there was the Housing Ready approach, which sought for people to be clean, sober and have a job or showing steps towards a different life. The Housing First model has now replaced Housing Ready as a best practice for the industry. It recognizes that it can be easier to achieve these other goals once



someone has a stable place to stay. Housing first is largely based on a more general harm reduction approach to homelessness. Harm reduction is an approach aimed at reducing the negative consequences and negative mindsets around drug use. Housing first has mostly focused on the issue of chronic homelessness. Its goal is first just to get people into housing, and work on the rest from there. Typically, residents experience a weekly staff visit from the organization that has helped to find or provide the housing. Further, whoever receives such housing will be put on a standard lease and if you get evicted you can still have a relationship with the program.

The four key elements of the Housing First approach are first that it is consumer driven; so that people who are homeless make choices for their own pathways out of homelessness. In other words, the person receiving the services plays a large role in how the process is executed, where they live, and at what time they interact with the social service provider assigned to their case. Such practices amount towards providing agency for the individuals or families experiencing crisis, which historically, has not been present. Second, there is a separation between housing and chemical dependency or mental health treatment. People do not have to be clean or sober prior to getting housing. They are then presented with services after they get housing to help them toward positive behavioral change and stability. Third, there is recovery orientation. The focus is on treatment – if needed and when ready – taking a supportive and therapeutic approach. This is especially important in cases of chemical dependency; there is an understanding about relapses and the challenges with addiction. Finally, it is concerned with community integration. It is now understood that to keep people isolated from the rest of the surrounding communities in a city when they are trying to move out of homelessness, puts them at a real disadvantage. To integrate them into a broader community provides a better platform

for people to de-stigmatize and assimilate back into society rather than under the master status of homelessness (Goffman, 1963). Instead of telling people they must be fully clean and healthy before they can be in housing, this approach recognizes that sometimes what people need first is a place to be themselves, to achieve that first layer of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. From there, they can then find their way to higher order needs.

### Language and Discourses

One of the important features highlighted through this project is the impact that language can have. Language is a central element of culture. Teresa Gowan reveals this in the discourses around homelessness she created.

Teresa Gowan wrote an ethnographic account of (mostly) homeless men in the city of San Francisco in the early 2000's. The book, *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders* was published in 2010. One of the key contributions Gowan made to the literature around homelessness and what specifically pertains to this project, is her articulation of competing discourses. These discourses have a major impact both on being a person experiencing homelessness and on the general public perception. Gowan spent a lot of time working alongside the men she was studying. She spent most of her time with a group of men she called the recyclers, as they collected recycling from the streets and turned it in for money. They saw this work as providing their livelihood. She noticed that these people took their job extremely seriously and wanted to have something they felt made their lives productive. The work gave them a pro-social identity and greater self-worth. In conversation with the people she worked alongside, collecting recycling herself, as well as attending and studying the shelter system, Gowan noticed how decrepit this system was. She described it as not only not contributing positively to getting people out of

homelessness, but in fact, keeping them entrenched in the state of homelessness. This was also addressed in Elliott Liebow's work (1993). Of course, low funding is a major issue. Many facilities are run by churches and other volunteer-based groups, meaning that their efficacy often depends on what people are willing to give, both time and money, simply out of the kindness of their hearts or Christian mission. More official shelters, such as Mary's Place or Roots Young Adult shelter in Seattle, must campaign for money from businesses, for both the shelter itself and to pay their employees.

A main theme of Gowan's book is to see how different people cope with their struggle through experiencing the crisis of homelessness. The main stereotypes around homelessness cast those experiencing it in a negative light. Even when doing honest work as she saw with her recycling companions, "I saw social workers treat them as chaotic addicts, doctors diagnose them as depressives, and police officers treat them as impediments to the quality of life of other San Franciscans" (Gowan, 2010: 9). Gowan attempts to understand how these stereotypes come about and aims to contribute to alleviating the stigmas. In addition, she aims to give voice to those experiencing a reality that society so often places under a moralistic lens as opposed to understanding the nuances of something that should be treated with more dignity.

Discourses play a large role in the stigmatization of homelessness and perpetuate negativity and illusions about what it means and how one can reach that point. Gowan developed a conceptual framework of the discourses around homelessness: sin talk, sick talk, and system talk. Sin talk focuses on the individual, placing the blame solely on them and their "sins" to have gotten themselves in the position where they are. From this perspective people are lazy, drug-addicted, alcoholics, unwilling to work, or otherwise participate in "normal" society. In short, they should find a way to get themselves out of it. Furthermore, under the sin talk

mode, Gowan noticed that many people experiencing homelessness had been indoctrinated to use this language against themselves as well which is reinforced by an individualized culture. By using the discourse of sin talk, people may remain “in the game of the streets”, a place they were drawn to, and although homelessness is still a low position, by using this language it can feel like they are still in the game (Gowan, 2010: 106-108). Both Gowan (2010) and Snow and Anderson (1993), showcase this type of language to be a coping mechanism for people experiencing homelessness.

The second discourse, sick talk, understands homelessness through a medical perspective. The focus is on mental illness and substance abuse as the root causes of homelessness. Treatment and other therapeutics interventions is the answer. Sick talk is typically used by social service agencies or shelter organizations. Many organizations seem to think that framing the situation from a sick perspective is helpful and compassionate. Yet, it can be just as dangerous as sin talk. It can make the people experiencing homelessness feel just as bad and allow the public to stigmatize them. It can disempower the agency of those who are homeless. Sick talk simply puts a label on them that calls for pity and treatment. As Gowan notes, “The same was true of therapeutic interpretations, which backed off from heavy moral judgment but still concentrated on the fallibilities of the homeless individual” (Gowan, 2010: 113). Although these may seem positive because they can recognize certain people’s issues, to overgeneralize can be very harmful to the large population of people who do not struggle with the aspects that sick talk focuses on. For example, not all people who are homeless suffer from mental illness and/or substance abuse.

System talk is focused on the failures of systems which have led people *to* homelessness. System talk describes the social systems set up in ways that seem to lead people to fail and

increase the likelihood they will fall into homelessness which include: government aid and social welfare, systemic poverty, housing/rental markets and eviction laws, labor market opportunities and wage structure, lack of universal healthcare, inequality in education, and racism in the penal system,. System talk is also the language many fell back on in times of trouble with the city or with the homeless archipelago. Gowan (2010) notes that system talk arises when people can understand that it is not one thing that lead to their experiencing homelessness, but that it is often a combination of some choices they made but really the institutions that cannot provide adequate support. This also takes away agency from the individual as they need to rely on systems for resources, yet these systems are failing them. Social systems and institutional assistance can also help people out of homelessness. This can also include the shelter industry.

Sick talk is not so much used by people living on the streets themselves, as using sin or system talk allows them to place blame on a system they cannot escape or to take power into their own hands by claiming their situation.

These discourses, as well as other features brought to fruition by Liebow, Snow and Anderson and Williams, have helped to create a better understanding of the problems occurring within the shelter system. Engaging with these, they highlight what changes should be made. This project adds to the broader conversation around the homelessness crisis. It specifically focuses on the ethical implications of work surrounding the issue and thereby draws attention to the issue of human rights for a vulnerable population.

Snow and Anderson (1993) discuss homelessness as a master status, meaning that once someone begins to experience living without a home, their social identity subsumes how they are perceived, and it can be hard to escape this descriptor. Homelessness is a negative status full

of stigma which Goffman (1963) described as “spoiled identity”. Language around this issue is hugely important. The way that we talk about homelessness and inform ourselves or others will have an impact on how the issue is then dealt with. The public perceptions can vary greatly depending upon the language used, as well as the perceptions of the individuals themselves who are experiencing it.

Important to the project by Snow and Anderson (1993), however, is the typology they made of organizational responses to homelessness. They describe the responses in five distinct ways: 1) accommodative; 2) restorative 3) exploitative 4) exclusionist/expulsionist 5) containment. The first is “accommodative”, which they operationally describe as being a “sustenance-oriented caretaker”. These are organizations like the Salvation Army which “...attends to the basic subsistence needs of the homeless, particularly the need for food and shelter. As a mode of response that helps the homeless manage street life, it facilitates their survival as homeless persons but does little to help them off the streets.” (Snow and Anderson, 1993). The accommodative response is the primary way shelters historically respond to the reality, seeing basic resources as the end, rather than a means to reach a more important end. The second response is “restorative”, described as “treatment-oriented caretakers” or a “medical perspective”. These responses are seen in hospitals, treatment facilities and psychiatric units. They are generally aiming to treat the “perceived physiological, psychological, or spiritual problems that are seen as impeding their clients’ functioning” (Snow and Anderson, 1993). Connected to what we will see below with Teresa Gowan’s discourse of “sick talk”, these organizations see homelessness as wholly connected to the individuals being flawed in some way. Under this category they operationalize a “salvationist perspective”. These are restorative programs that focus on trying to make people live more responsible lifestyles, hoping that this will in turn fix the issue of their homelessness experience.

Next, there is the “exploitative” response. These are operationalized as “market-oriented” and are places like plasma centers, the general labor pool, and specific jobs catering to people who need money quickly without specific skills. These responses are not worried about the well-being of people experiencing homelessness but are simply commodifying them for cheap labor. Then there are the “exclusionist/ expulsionist” responses. These are operationalized as the “NIMBY perspective”, which means not in my backyard. Such responses typically come from the residents of the city, who claim to be sympathetic to the issue but don’t want it to be seen or heard near their direct zones. Finally, there is the “containment” perspective. This is simply Police departments operationalized as “harassment”. It is important to note that none of these responses have a particularly positive lens to them. Perhaps, there should be another category for the “transformative model” (Snedker; 1/30/2019).

The hope is that authors like Gowan, Liebow, and Snow and Anderson in conjunction with philosopher Martha Nussbaum, can shine a light on the meaning of the shelter system. They all address the system in some way and will allow for a better understanding of what might be going right with a place like Mary’s Place, the changes it is making and what still needs work. Language is important and hopefully they will help shape the language to allow for a more ethical response.

### **Theoretical application:**

Given the stigma associated with the label “homeless” and the horrific conditions one endures while being homeless, its negative effect on future, well-being and overall “life chances” (Weber, 1978) is profound. This demands a discussion of ethics. There is a declared crisis in the city of Seattle regarding homelessness. This crisis calls for an ethical and moral response, not simply a pragmatic one because it involves the dignity and life of the human person. Specifically,

at stake is the right all should have to housing, a basic need that allows people a basis from which to flourish. The way this issue is talked about and theorized can make a large impact on all of those involved in it. Ethics are central as this involves a vulnerable population, where systems fail in a multitude of ways. Without housing people suffer very diminished capacity to live a life that contributes to their own well-being or societal well-being. The challenge of homelessness does not take place within a vacuum; this situation does not simply arise out of nowhere for those who end up experiencing it. People do not transition from a steady, easy life to suddenly becoming without a home. At its core, homelessness stems from poverty, and poverty is often a situation that people are born into, and which is very difficult to move out of. Experiencing homelessness often comes from failed systems, as we saw above with the discourses offered by Gowan.

To think through an ethical response, a philosophical ethical theory has been used here to consider ethics more generally and why this should even be addressed from an ethical perspective. This theory is called the Capabilities Approach. Homelessness is multifaceted, but inherently it is about poverty. The Capabilities Approach is embedded in the measuring of poverty, but more generally it's about how to think about what the measure of success for social welfare programs (or NGOs) in terms of outcomes for people. This relates nicely to measuring the success of an organization working on homelessness. Most people who are homeless are impoverished – in some cases literally. The majority are poor and in need of basic subsistence such as food and shelter. Theories about poverty, including global poverty, provided some insights into the study of homelessness, especially in the current state of crisis. The Capabilities Approach is one such theory.



Amartya Sen, one of the philosophers who coined the theory, the Capability approach, which will later be applied to the data, created this theory in response to the practice of using GDP-Gross Domestic Product as a measurement of poverty. He was unhappy with using GDP as a poverty measurement because it felt incomplete and did not always reflect the actual situation of poverty in a country. Not unlike the point-in-time counts, these are aggregate measures that don't fully reflect the impact on individual lives.

The Capabilities Approach, otherwise known as the Human Development Approach, (Martha Nussbaum, 2003), is an ethical theory that was originally created by Amartya Sen (1999). Sen was frustrated with uses of GDP as the central measurement of Global Poverty. The theory tries to answer a call of social justice. It aims to ensure that in situations of marginalization and discrimination people are not forgotten in the capabilities which allow them to function as individual humans, ends in themselves. Sen was disgruntled at the fact that a country, like India, could have a GDP that put them in satisfactory standing on the global poverty scale, yet have so much grinding poverty. When he travelled to India, he was appalled to see with his own eyes the numbers of people living in poverty and the ways in which people were living, in contrast to the wealth others enjoyed. This can inform our thinking about the issue of homelessness, specifically in thinking about an organization's response to the crisis, because it raises questions about success.

Nussbaum (2003) asks: "What are *capabilities*? They are the answers to the question, "What is this person able to do and to be?" In other words, they are what Sen calls "substantial freedoms," a set of (usually interrelated) opportunities to choose and to act" (Nussbaum, 2003: 20). Capabilities are not simply the things we can do, but also those things that allow us to achieve goals that enable us to be truly ends in ourselves rather than simply means to others'

ends. In order to think about this, we must think about what we give people that they can use to achieve their goals. If someone is having a hard time keeping job because of their mode of transportation, you offer them a bicycle. Yet if they cannot ride a bicycle, this will not be the proper functioning to achieve their capability. So instead, maybe they need a bus pass, or to be set up with a carpool. An ethical society offers people choices, freedoms and supportive services to achieve their capabilities. So, a response must fit the needs and abilities of the individual who should be receiving those benefits.

Amartya Sen (1999) was the creator of this approach. He originally aimed to create an ethical theory of sorts that can help evaluate situations for individuals based upon their freedoms to achieve a valuable well-being. As he states, “The capability approach is concerned primarily with the identification of value-objects, and sees the evaluative space in terms of functioning’s and capabilities to function” (Sen, 3.2). So, this freedom, or the freedom to function, comes from the situational factors of their lives, so that people are not evaluated on levels where they are completely different. Everyone is born into circumstances out of their control and from there our lives diverge onto many different pathways, some parts under our control but others completely out of it. Even when we make choices in our daily lives, we may be making choices not out of an ideal freedom, but out of a freedom that is part of an “entrenched deprivation”, such as women making less money for the same work. These entrenched deprivations may also connect to the idea of the homeless archipelago Gowan discusses and how people get into a self-fulfilling prophecy in homelessness and in poverty more generally. Sen presents entrenched deprivation as something that often occurs within situations of inequality. Here people are so caught up in the situation they are in, that they cannot even understand what would be beneficial if things were different, or that they need to be.

To explain the view further, Nussbaum first asks, “what does a life worthy of human dignity require?” (Nussbaum, 2003: 32). The question clearly applies to homelessness. She uses the Capabilities Approach in its plural form to emphasize that the key elements that would allow for a certain quality of life for people are plural and should be qualitatively distinct. These elements will be detailed later as I apply the necessary capabilities to homelessness. This approach demands that we see people as an end in themselves and focuses on the choice or freedom that one should enjoy in order to reach this end. To elucidate, I will explore an example described by Nussbaum as borrowed from Amartya Sen.

Nussbaum does not want to see people reduced to sheer numbers: “finally, the approach is *concerned with entrenched social injustice and inequality*, especially capability failures that are the result of discrimination or marginalization” (Nussbaum, 2003: 19). She sees this as calling for government support to develop policy in order to improve the quality of life of individuals, as these qualities are defined by the capabilities. Nussbaum has created her list of ten capabilities that act as a set of the basic life capabilities individuals should have achieved in their lives. She recognizes that depending upon the situation, there will be certain aspects emphasized, or new capabilities needed. But overall, she finds her basic list of capabilities to establish the base level for every human person.

Nussbaum’s list outlines what she calls a threshold theory of justice. This means that the list may be changed and supplemented as it finds application in different situations. But it furnishes a basis to which we can turn when thinking about issues of social justice. This theory offers important insight in the application to issues concerning homelessness. It recognizes the debilitating features of experiencing homelessness and how the situation can keep people from reaching even a few of these capabilities through choice or functioning. From this list I chose

five capabilities which are most relevant to the issue of homelessness. These are: 1) life, 2) bodily health, 3) bodily integrity, 4) practical reason and 5) control over one’s environment. These have been chosen because of the threat to these capabilities’ homelessness directly poses.

The following tables make clear the relevance and application of this capability approach theory to the specifics of homelessness, and of the organizational response from a key social service organization in Seattle.

**Table 1: Five Applicable Capabilities and their Application to Homelessness**

Facets of Capabilities Approach	Quote from Nussbaum	Application to Homelessness
Life	“Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length...or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living” (33).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being homeless reduces the length of one’s life (or you can say early mortality) and the quality of a person’s life.</li> </ul>
Bodily Health	“Being able to have good health...to have adequate shelter” (33).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homelessness is literally living without shelter without access to standard health care.</li> </ul>
Bodily Integrity	Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault” (33).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being homeless puts you at a higher risk for assault and injury, especially sexual assault for women living on the streets.</li> </ul>
Practical Reason	“Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection and the planning of one’s life” (34).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing homelessness forces a short-term time horizon. One must focus on immediate needs such as where to get food and where to sleep, which makes planning for the future difficult if not impossible.</li> </ul>
Control over one’s Environment	“Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods) and having property rights on an equal basis with other” (34).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being homeless often means shedding one’s property, especially to avoid the stigma of being homeless (e.g., person pushing a shopping cart with all her belongings).</li> <li>• Most shelters do not provide storage space and often items are stolen.</li> </ul>

This table reveals the way in which the Capabilities approach interacts with the issue of homelessness more broadly. This table applies the Capabilities Approach to homelessness. These capabilities come off as common sense but are necessary to discuss in light of the trauma, stigma and dehumanization associated with being homeless – often exacerbated by the shelter system – that is well-documented in the research literature ( Gowan, 2010; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Williams, 2003). Being homeless stymies the realization of many of such capabilities. Moreover, the shelter system has not always included these characteristics that make individual capabilities flourish according to the theory. Nussbaum chose a list of ten capabilities that are necessary for a flourishing human life. Yet in the case of evaluating this organization, I chose five because these are the most important for the state of homelessness.

Overall, this theory offers resources to ground the sociological data in an ethical way, where both can expand on the work the other is doing. Theory is not the answer to solving an issue completely; you must have the data and then the groundwork to make a change. However, theory is very important because it focuses and guides our attention to the issues at hand and what may be missing. Nussbaum’s capability list draws attention to key features that make a human life good as an end, which is an important ethical issue for homelessness. It addresses needs that are often forgotten for this stigmatized, vulnerable population and demands that these features be sought after for the responses used.

#### **Data and Methods:**

Mary’s Place was chosen as the organization to study, in large part, because it is trying to establish something like a transformative model (Snow and Anderson, 1993). One of the key features that makes Mary’s Place stand out as innovative in the current shelter industry, is the way they are using some of the best practices illustrated above. The housing first model is one of

the features of a harm reduction model that Mary's Place is trying to enact in their system. Mary's Place is still in the triage phase of their work. Yet as they grow it seems they are both moving closer to implementing well certain ethical practices, but also moving away from some as they become more pragmatic in their methods. In thinking about homelessness generally, these five capabilities are important to achieve first. Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you cannot jump to achieving something before the levels prior have been reached. It is necessary to re-evaluate the shelter system and ensure that these basic capabilities are met. If such is done, the shelter system may better provide a base for people to go on and supply room for the others to flourish as well. By thinking about what issues have persisted in shelter systems historically, and how Mary's Place is making a conscious effort to change some of these factors, some form of ethics is in fact being used. Perhaps ethics does not appear explicitly in terms of ethical language, but in practice.

Mary's Place is unique in many ways. Not only did it pave a way in terms of women's homelessness, often forgotten in the conversations around homelessness, but now it accommodates full families in a way that has historically not been done. Mary's Place, started in 1999, was originally just a day center for women. Marty Hartman, the executive director, started Mary's Place after moving to Seattle and noticing how many women were experiencing homelessness, and the lack of services available to them. With a grant from Boeing Employee's community fund, they were able to open their first day center.

Traditionally, shelters separate the guests based upon sex/gender. Even when a single mother is experiencing homelessness with her son who is of a certain age, they would not be able to stay in a shelter together. Similarly, men who are the primary caretakers for their children, would have been separated from their children. Mary's Place recognized a need in the

social service response, and began to open family shelters, with a more diverse definition of family than has traditionally been adopted.

This study is based upon a case study research design (Gerring 2007; Ragin 1992). Using case study research of one or more significant cases can give insight into the broader spectrum of an issue. Using the case study approach for this project has allowed me to engage with the previous literature and then directly with one specific case to see how theory may be put into practice. This case study design is an “influential case” design (Gerring, 2007). This means that the study engages with a case in an exploratory manner. It does not try to make general claims and come to conclusions, but rather to push a discussion further, in this case of ethics. It is also influential as it is using an organization that is an outlier within its realm, Mary’s Place.

Mary’s Place was chosen as the organization to be studied for a variety of reasons. I had previously volunteered here and saw firsthand the work they were doing and how the shelter was run. I was impressed by the work they were doing in many ways and felt like everyone I worked with was doing their best and truly wanted to be there doing that work. The organization draws people to work there who care about this issue, as well as other social justice issues and the camaraderie between guests and employees was very moving. However, at the same time, I often felt sad going to or leaving my shifts because it was not a very nice physical space to be in. At the location I was working at, they were occupying an old motel building that Amazon had bought and was letting them temporarily use. There were many issues with the building itself and then plenty of other issues in terms of resources for the organization. Fights over diapers, food, play toys and clothing would ensue, all of which came in on a donation basis. Although there was a decent amount of organization, there were also a lot of details that got lost in the shuffle.

This is also a very interesting time to be studying Mary's Place, as they are rapidly growing and expanding, with plans to move into one of the new Amazon headquarters building in the fall of 2019. They have become a source for large companies such as this to put money into as their philanthropic account. This is wonderful in many ways, but also brings about some interesting ethical questions. When I was volunteering, there would be days when big groups of people from Amazon, Microsoft, or other large companies would show up and want to volunteer their time. This was always odd, because there wouldn't be that much for them to do, other than play with the kids in the afterschool program. I felt frustrated as a long-term volunteer because I felt like this was an invasion of the guest's privacy, as this was their home and they were unable to really have a say in when people were allowed in. Multiple times, there were also little parties put on for donors to come and the children would be brought out and allowed to eat special treats that were only offered at this time, sort of showing the children off to the visitors. It all felt unethical and stimulated the idea for this project.

It is important to think about how shelter organizations, like Mary's Place are responding to this issue, and whether they are responding in an ethical manner. This is because they are among those leading the response to the crisis in general. The current crisis has come about due to a range of causes, such as: the lack of affordable housing, the lack of good medical care, people struggling with addiction and mental illness, and unforeseen injuries that put people out for a while causing them to lose their home in response. All these things are important, but as it stands, the major player in response to the crisis currently is the shelter system. It's not necessarily a major cause but may play an outsized role in maintaining a dysfunctional systems-wide response. It is the city's major response to the issue, where most of the funding lies for homelessness in general (Lisa Gustavason, 10/10/2018). Also, as the number



of people experiencing homelessness in general rises, the more there is a call for places to house them temporarily, hence, the shelter system is increasing. And, as with any growth of something, this will naturally bring change and new ways to approach what has been working or not working in the past. As Mary's Place grows, there are questions that arise if the growth is accompanied by an ethical lens holding certain standards in place.

Mary's Place is doing a lot of work that sets them apart from the traditional approaches of shelters. Mary's Place has put into place many of the "best practices" as recognized by experts on the issue. They are a housing first, low-barrier, enhanced, and inclusive family shelter. This means that the main goal of their organization is to get people into housing, and this to be done before anything else. They are enhanced, because they provide resources like a housing advocate that the guests can meet with and be shown where and how to look for new, affordable places to live. They can meet with someone to help them look for employment and be informed about jobs they might be likely to get. There is a clothing closet on each site, where people can use the points they earn taking part in the chores and work of the organization as a community to buy things for themselves and their families. There is an afterschool program for the children, so their parents can have some time to go to meetings, come home later from work, complete their tasks for the community or simply have a break.

This is a theoretically informed qualitative study. Building from the research on homelessness, I apply a philosophical theory on ethics to the issues of homelessness. I then use a specific case as the focus of the research study, in the influential case study model (Gerring, 2007). This project asked how ethics plays a role in an organizational response to homelessness. In order to assess this, I employ the case-based methods mentioned above. An ethical response

demands we explore they are achieving their goals and assess the implications for those receiving assistance.

The data was drawn from semi-structured open-ended interviews that encouraged respondents to give their own views and opinions on the work that they do and engage with the questions how they saw fit. The respondents were given a list of questions prior to the interviews as well as the consent forms in order to understand what they would be asked and what the process entailed. These interviews were set up through the communications officer from the organization. Official IRB approval was received prior to conducting interviews and all the participants were given consent forms to read over before and to sign at the interview itself, as well as copies to keep for themselves. The interviews were conducted at a location of the respondent's choice, and I conducted all the interviews. The questions for each interview were the same, with slight variations dependent on the conversation and responses to answers being received, but preliminarily there was a set of 10 questions given to each respondent (See Appendix A for the interview protocol). These questions were developed with the capabilities approach in mind. They were intended to try and glean a sense of the employees' purpose at the organization, how they felt the mission statement was being executed and if they had any sense of ethics or the use of ethical theory in the work they were doing. These questions were informed by Gowan's (2010) discourses and the way that language can impact the experience both of employees and of guests. In addition, I was trying to understand what kind of response from Snow and Anderson (1993) Mary's Place employees were attempting to give (accommodative, restorative, transformative) and if this matched with what they felt the organization achieved as a whole.

I wanted to specifically talk to employees directly, because there are often things that an organization represents as what they are doing, that may not be transferable to the actual work employees do. Having worked a lot of jobs myself, I understand that sometimes the mission of a place gets lost in the hustle and bustle of the actual work and I wanted to see how much of a connection or disconnection there was in this organization. This kind of work is very difficult for those who work in it. It is not a glamorous job to have, and the employees become frustrated by the system, and in turn frustrated with the guests they are trying to help. There is a high turnover rate and low retention for employees. Many are students who have either recently graduated or are studying something in the social sector and are excited to make a difference.

The employees were recruited through contact made with the Chief communications officer of Mary's Place. I sent out an email to the organization in general, informing them of my previous volunteer work and my interest in doing some research. I made contact in the fall of 2018, then was told to follow up in the beginning of the year 2019. I had been verbally promised at least five interviews, and somewhere closer to ten with this first contact. I got back in touch in January and set up the first three interviews right away. After I finished the last interview, with the Chief communications officer herself, she informed me that she could no longer help me. At this time, I began to email anyone I could think of to get in contact with. I had my professor try to reach out to their contacts, and I contacted the people I had already interviewed again. No one responded. It wasn't until the Spring that I finally got through to one more person, whom I interviewed, and they then set me up with my final interview. All the names have been changed to pseudonyms, despite some people's willingness to waive confidentiality.

Below is a table which details who was interviewed and how they were interviewed. This project included five interviews with employees from Mary's Place. The first three

interviews were conducted in person, two at the offices of the employees and the third at a coffee shop of the employee's choosing. Following this final interview, the communications officer of the organization stopped responding to emails, and contact was lost. Despite many follow up emails to this person, as well as the other two people who had been previously interviewed, there were no responses. Many weeks later, I finally got through to one more person from the organization, and she gave me an interview as well as connected me to my fifth and final interview for the project.

**Table 2: Interview Respondent Descriptive**

Pseudonym	Position	Sex	Race and Ethnicity	Date of Interview	Length of Interview	Length at Organization
Jake	Volunteer Coordinator (General)	M	White	1/24/2019	70 min.	2 years
Megan	Women's Day Center Coordinator (Women's day center)	F	Black	1/31/2019	32 min.	2 years
Sarah	Chief Communications Officer (General)	F	White	2/4/2019	31 min.	.75 year
Liz	Service-Learning Volunteer Coordinator (North Seattle locations)	F	White	4/17/2019	49 min.	2 years.
Olivia	Assistant Manager of Volunteer Engagement (North Seattle locations)	F	White	4/24/2019	28 min.	1 year

The interviews ranged from approximately thirty minutes, to seventy minutes. They were wholly dependent on how long the respondents chose to speak, as the same set of

questions was asked for each. Following the interviews, I transcribed the interviews and read through them looking for certain themes that were followed throughout. Topics such as language, agency and respect of the individuals story came up in most interviews.

### **Limitations:**

The data are limited despite my best efforts. It was very difficult to receive responses for interviews and the result is a small sample size. The generalizability of the study is limited which is true of all single case studies. Although I only spoke with five employees, each person represented a different sector of the organization and therefore gave breadth to the work including multiple perspectives and insight into the work being done at Mary's Place. This study is exploratory and serves more as a learning tool. Although I was in touch with people months in advance, and was verbally promised a certain number of respondents, after receiving three interviews, the contacts sort of disappeared. I was able to get in touch with two more respondents through continually reaching out towards the end of the research process, but the sample is still small. Perhaps being an undergraduate student and lacking status and positions or the promise of a publication to show the importance of this work lessened the eagerness of the organization to be a part of the project. Because of the sampling design and the low response rate, the information gathered is not a representative sample of the opinions of employees of the organization in general and therefore will not fully determine some of the questions the investigator was seeking to answer.

### **Discussion:**

This section details several subheadings that were used in thinking about how to evaluate Mary's Place as an ethical organization within the shelter system. These include some of the practices that stand out as ethical approaches, their mission statement and how well they are

living that out, and the language and discourses they use to situate the issue in the broader spectrum of responses and perceptions.

## Ethics

This project revolves around thinking in terms of ethics, and what the most ethical response, within the shelter system, to homelessness would be. Mary's Place has been chosen, as stated above, for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons is because it is currently enacting many of the "best practices" that can be used in the shelter system in general. These practices include; housing first, rapid re-housing, diversion and the enhanced shelter model.

Housing first is incredibly important to the idea of an ethical response. It is the latest movement in best practices for the shelter system, and for the response to homelessness in general. Prior, the focus was housing ready, which demanded that people be clean and sober, or have a job before they could receive housing. Housing first says that all you need to be housing ready is to not have a home already. When asked about ethics and an ethical response, one employee stated,

So ethically we just need to understand that everyone we work with is ready for housing today, if the units were available, they'd all be gone. And sure, we'd like to help you grow while you're here, but it's not a pre-requisite to your home. Us trying to mitigate the trauma of shelter and try to give you the tools to move forward. But if you come in and there's a house ready in three days, you can move in. Because that is your house, and your platform for growth, a shelter is not your platform. So that's really the ethical stance, just kind of meeting our families where they're at and looking into the future. (Jake)

This is important in thinking about how Mary's Place is moving away from a restorative shelter model (Snow and Anderson, 1993) to a more transformative model (Snedker, 1/30/2019). They are recognizing that the factor of concern for people experiencing homelessness is the fact that they do not have a home, and this should be the main priority. At this time, Mary's Place is trying to roll out a new 60 day to housing program, where they can get people into a new

housing set-up only 60 days after they have first become homeless. They are also trying to incorporate rapid-rehousing and diversion into their practices. Rapid re-housing tries to get people immediately into a new place, before they even enter the shelter system. The core components of this are to have a housing locator, rent and move in assistance and case-management services to help with retention. This is usually for individuals or families who are having a temporary issue but will be able to afford their own rent in six months. It recognizes that going into the shelter system can set you back, and if you get help with the payments up front, you can more easily get back on your feet. By having relationships with landlords and being in the know about housing units, Mary's Place can assist people in getting and keeping new housing and preventing more people from entering the system or the streets.

Diversion is a new program. It is based on the idea of diverting people from the shelter system all together. Mary's Place is working to develop this strategy. Sarah, one of the employees described it to me,

So, you meet them outside, and we don't have room to bring them in, but we can often use a little funding to do something to lift them up a little. First and last month's rent, you know just a small amount of funding that gets them into housing right away, within 30 days. We started piloting that program with the Schultz foundation, and then the city and county have picked it up and starting building changes. (Sarah)

These practices are very forward thinking and call out for more preventative measures than have been seen in this work in the past. They are looking for new ways to get people out of the shelter system, but also to keep them from ever even having to enter it at all. As Mary's Place continues to grow as an organization, and as they receive funding from large corporations like Amazon, a business that has contributed in particularly major ways to the housing crisis in Seattle, it is important to examine how ethics can be incorporated in achieving these goals.

### **Mission driven work**

As discussed previously, this situation calls for an ethical approach because it is dealing with a very vulnerable population and a situation of human flourishing. One way to evaluate the ethics of an organization is to evaluate them in their own terms. The mission statement of Mary's Place, as taken from their website is, "The mission of Mary's Place is to provide safe, inclusive shelter and services that support women, children and families on their journey out of homelessness"(Mary's Place). A few specific words stand out, especially with regards to what the traditional shelter system usually does. Describing the shelter as "safe" and "inclusive" is important, because it recognizes the history of shelters being unsafe places, where theft often occurs and even violence between residents. Inclusive is also very important, as many shelters have traditionally been high barrier shelters, creating many exclusionary features that prevent people from being able to receive services there. Exclusion could be based on anything from having a pet, to your sexual orientation. In one interview, Jake the volunteer coordinator, addresses exclusion: "So if your barrier is that you can't get rid of your dog, you should be able to stay with us. So, I think that in a way makes us unique, we are very creative in how we navigate and remove barriers." (Jake) This movement towards low barrier shelters, at least more of them, is one of the key reforms that needs to be seen in the shelter industry. Many people experiencing homelessness have pets, which seems silly to some people, but if you have nothing else to care for or to receive love from, this may be the difference between your living and dying. So, here we can see that Mary's Place seems to be making pointed efforts to adhere to this part of their mission. Next, we can look at what Megan, the day center coordinator says,

Mary's Place stands in the gap for when families lose their house, and then come off the street, and we found them temporary shelter and then provide temporary housing. You know, just the gap between that...Day to day we bring our mission forth and stand by our mission. If someone says we must be a safe and welcoming environment, that has to be every day, a safe and welcoming environment. (Megan)



She, as well as the other interviewees recognized the importance of consistency and of truly trying to live out their mission. It was made clear that the organization really highlights this in their training, and in their daily work. As a volunteer, I remember going through a specific training session where they described the mission and the way in which they tried to see that in practice.

All told, while I do think they are trying to live out their mission, my main concern is that the mission itself is very limited and does not include language specifically tied to ethics. It is very basic and pragmatic. Although I found the employees to all be aware of and cognizant of how they were trying to use this mission every day, I think perhaps the mission itself could use some re-evaluating.

### **Language/Discourses**

The work that Gowan did with discourses and to expose some of the harsh realities of the shelter system, is very important in thinking about the way that Mary's Place attempts to combat many of these historic issues within the shelter system. It is through explicit use of language, the induction of more agency to their guests, and other factors that we see Mary's place working against some of the issues exposed in previous literature. Gowan highlights not only how important these discourses are for the public and for organizations like Mary's Place to think about, but also for improving the complicated relationship that the people experiencing homelessness themselves have with their situation. This would incorporate thinking about some of the new best practices and the way they are trying to not only sustain people, but to uplift them and get them out of the situation in a healthy and agency inducing manner. This is perhaps

what Mary's Place is working towards, a more transformative discourse for their work within the shelter system.

The use of language also provided a major factor in the way that employees thought they were employing ethical practices. For example, calling people who are experiencing homelessness and receiving the organization's services "guests" is a major part of the ethical practices in play. From the first interview, when asked about language usage, Jake responded, "You will notice we call our families guests. It is really being cognizant of the power dynamic in using the term clients. When you call people clients you hold the power in that relationship, they are there to access services from you. Whereas a guest is free to come and free to leave. Keeps us in the mindsight that we are in a collaborative process" (Jake). Each person interviewed was hyper-aware of the language they used to talk about this issue. This showcased to me that from the top down, the organization is making a valiant effort to ensure that this detail is not only thought about but put into practice. It can be difficult in a workplace to make sure every detail you find important is thread throughout all the employees work, so usually the things that do so are the ones that are constantly reinforced. To be reinforcing this specific detail means that the organization is very aware of the way that homelessness is stigmatized and the individuals and families struggling with this issue are typically valued and treated.

This work, by Gowan, has proved very helpful in framing an understanding of the kind of work Mary's Place is doing, how it shares the historic challenges within the shelter system, yet also how it is different and contributes to changing the system for the better. A key feature focused on from Gowan's work were the three discourses; sin talk, sick talk and system talk. These discourses are very important for thinking about the way that employees within an

organization are treating their clients or guests, as well as the way that guests are feeling about themselves and how they are treated.

Such discourse was a main topic discussed in interviews with the employees, how important their use of language is and what an impact this can make on the relationships they create with their guests. One employee stated, “Our language defines our reality. If you are not a conscious user, if you’re not photographing the words that come out of your mouth, it’s hard to do this work well...You have to be very conscious of the words you say, and understand you have been socialized by a biased system”(Jake). In the interview with Jake, who is the volunteer coordinator for all the locations, he focused a great deal on the importance of the language used. This applies what Gowan discusses concerning discourses and is a major aspect of how homelessness can be ethically engaged with or not. It seems that shelters often do the work that *appears* ethical or moral. Providing space for shelter and food to eat is a positive. However, if they are using the discourse of sin or sick talk and not looking for new ways to uplift or assist guests in making movements out of the shelter system, then perhaps they are not focusing on what is needed to transition out of homelessness. It is difficult to critique people for doing something when it looks to be a good thing, especially when so many others do nothing to offer support. However, complacency with suboptimal responses and acceptance of any kind of response will fail to achieve the change needed in order to alleviate homelessness in general. This is what is seen with the accommodative model (Snow and Anderson, 1993), a model that isn’t making the sort of change needed to push this issue further.

In thinking ethically about this issue as an organization, there is not an explicit conversation using this language. While Mary’s Place is doing a lot of work that suggests an ethically minded approach, the lack of the language suggests something about how they are

thinking about the issue. This was made apparent by the fact that all the employees were confused when asked the questions about ethics and wanted a further explanation. Then, most of them turned back to the mission statement as the place to think about ethics and continued to point to the deliberate use of language as the key ethical feature. In the second to last interview, with Liz, the service-learning volunteer coordinator for the North end locations, she reported feeling a lack of discussion around ethics and the use of ethics in the everyday work. She pointed to some of the questions of intersectionality, the problem of having so many people of color being served, while employees were mostly white and the movement towards more of a business model.

Finally, Mary's Place attempts to be individualistic and holistic. In discussions with the employees, it was stated that employees try their best to really distinguish each guest from the other. By using their names, or first asking what they would like to be called or addressed, they recognize that each person has come to them from a different background and story. Mary's Place tries to value what different people need and go from there. This I believe to channel the essence of the capability approach. The theory beckons us to recognize the varying needs of people. It reminds us that one thing that would greatly benefit one person in a crisis could do harm to another. This advice must be taken realistically of course, as there are not endless resources or time. Nonetheless, the recognition and movement towards such a practice is a good start.

### **Capabilities Approach applied to Mary's Place**

The interviews for this project have been evaluated in relation to some of the sociological literature as well as considering Nussbaum's capabilities list. After conducting the interviews, it was clear that the use of ethics is not made explicit in these terms by anyone at the organization.

This does not mean that ethics are not being used, but just that what appears to be ethical or moral does not operate under the guise of this lingo. It implies that much of people’s moral understanding occurs implicitly. When we discuss it explicitly it may help to reveal some of the moral blind spots that occur when we are only informed by our implicit understandings or actions. This can also help us align ourselves to the values we wish to promote, like aligning to the mission of an organization.

In order to evaluate Mary’s Place in terms of the Capabilities Approach, I return to the table applying the theory to homelessness (see table 1). First, I applied the five capabilities to homelessness in general, and here I have applied it to the specific organizational response from Mary’s Place. Each item will be addressed in turn in the following pages.

**Table 3: Capabilities and how Mary’s Place is Achieving these Goals or Not**

Facets of Capabilities	Quote from Nussbaum	Application to homelessness	Mary’s Place
Life	“Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length...or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living” (33).	Being homeless reduces length and quality of a person’s life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering shelter</li> <li>• Mary’s Place reduces the risk of illness and death from the streets or domestic violence</li> </ul>
Bodily Health	“Being able to have good health...to have adequate shelter” (33).	Homelessness is literally living without shelter.	Offers services to help people transitioning out of homelessness into permanent housing (housing representatives, childcare, job search, services to help families whose children are sick, etc.)
Bodily Integrity	Being able to move freely from place to	Being homeless puts you at a high risk for	As a predominantly women’s shelter, is

	place; to be secure against violent assault” (33).	assault, especially sexual assault for women living on the streets.	focused on the safety of women and their children, recognizing the difficulties and dangers that arise out of being a woman and experiencing homelessness.
Practical Reason	“Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection and the planning of one’s life” (34).	Experiencing homelessness forces a short-term time horizon. One must focus on immediate needs such as where to get food and where to sleep, which makes planning for the future difficult if not impossible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming a driver or partner in decision making for future</li> <li>• Historically, the restorative model does not allow for practical reason, transformative model would</li> <li>• Mary’s Place helps to destigmatize people experiencing homelessness</li> <li>• Also elevate their status through positive language and a relational approach</li> </ul>
Control Over one’s Environment	“Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with other” (34).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being homeless often means shedding one’s property, especially to avoid the stigma of being homeless</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restoring agency</li> <li>• Allowing for some privacy in shelters (rooms on doors, private bathroom use)</li> <li>• Guests input on the</li> </ul>

		(e.g., person pushing a shopping cart with all her belongings). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most shelters do not provide storage space and often items are stolen.</li> </ul>	organizational practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a low barrier shelter, Mary's Place allows people to bring in pets, have inclusive family types, etc.</li> <li>• Include the families in decision making processes.</li> </ul>
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From Martha Nussbaum's formulation of the Capabilities Approach, I have extracted five of her ten capabilities to apply to the situation of homelessness. These help to illuminate how an organization such as Mary's Place is responding well and ways in which they could improve in order to be aligned more to an ethical approach.

Mary's Place is doing a lot of innovative and exciting work engaging individual and family capabilities. They are attempting to get away from what Gowan describes as the "homeless archipelago", which the shelter system has been historically. Such a system essentially confines people to their situation, by providing shelter in such a way that dehumanizes and disempowers them further. Unenhanced shelters have been the predominant form of response to this crisis for many years. As we continue to see the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in general rise in coastal American cities, we can see the need for a different approach. Mary's Place is doing much of this work. By enacting many of the "best practices" currently discussed in the homelessness industry and the relevant literature, as well as through the sheer volume of people (in 2018, Mary's Place housed 179,900 people overnight) they are helping, Mary's Place aligns to much of what Nussbaum describes in her list of

capabilities. To evaluate Mary's Place against this theory, five capabilities from the general list most fitting to the situation of homelessness were used in conjunction with the qualitative data gleaned from interviews with employees. Although this theory was not originally intended for this exact purpose, Nussbaum expressed her desire to create it so that it may apply to other social justice and inequality issues. It is fitting that a theory originally created to discuss how poverty is measured would shed light on a situation like homelessness which is entangled with the general issue of poverty. Below, each of the five capabilities will be laid out and discussed in relation to the information received through interviews with staff members.

### *Life*

Nussbaum's first capability is *life*. She describes this as "Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living" (Nussbaum, 2003). This is appropriate to apply in a list for homelessness, specifically the shelter system, because the main reason to ensure people have shelter is to get them out of harm's way and keep them alive. People who are living on the street and in unsafe and unhealthy shelters are exposed to disease, stress, violence, and their health conditions (e.g. addiction and mental health) are deeply exacerbated (Jasinski et al., 2010, Gowan, 2010, Snow and Anderson, 1993, Liebow, 1993). Mary's Place helps to reduce vulnerability to these threats to their well-being. This capability is fundamental to human flourishing. Although historically the shelter system has gotten people inside, and out of sight, it has not provided a healthy life which would contribute positively to their health and well-being; rather it has continued to undermine health and well-being (Donley and Wright, 2008). People wonder why, when there are shelters with open beds in the city, there remain to be so many unsheltered people. But when



you think about the environment that a shelter has historically provided, you could understand why people would choose not to stay there.

When discussing why the women's day shelter exists with one of the employees interviewed, she describes, "Just to see women off the street, just to see women able to come into a facility where they can meet every day. To be dignified after taking a shower, dress up and then go for an interview. Just to uplift them a little bit, to give them a helping hand" (Megan). I think we all take our housing for granted, the fact that we can come home after a long day and know where we will sleep, where we will take a shower. It is important to recognize this need. To recognize that although there isn't funding to provide a nicer space for people to stay for free, that doesn't mean there shouldn't be any thought into the amenities and the design of a space where people can feel quasi-at home. Although people are resilient, living on the street or in poor conditions can greatly reduce a person's life.

### *Bodily Health*

The second capability is *bodily health*. According to Nussbaum this is, "Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter" (Nussbaum, 2003). Shelters are notorious for unhealthy, unsanitary conditions that can lead to sickness (Donley and Wright, 2008). The shelter system is clearly a place for individuals and families to receive a place to stay, but also often a place to receive meals. One of the biggest issues traditionally in shelters concerns food. There is the lack of food in general, the very limited times when people may receive the food given out, and the lack of nutritional value in this food. Shelters typically only provide food at very specific times. This can be difficult because if you are operating on a donation-based system, and you are waiting to receive that donation as a delivery, you cannot help when you will then be providing the food. There are also all sorts of

rules around what you can and cannot serve, how things must be packaged, and sometimes certain donations must be thrown out because of the food safety rules. It is a feast or famine situation in many shelters, and once the food runs out it is gone. This can be difficult if people are getting off work late and arriving at the shelter past a certain time. There will often not be food left for them to have. In general, it is a zero-sum game, high stress and non-collaborative, creating tensions for guests.

Mary's Place is doing a few things that stood out as positive changes to this system. One change that Mary's Place has made is the sourcing of the food. Liebow (1993) reveals this as a key complaint by women living in the shelter system. If they had to leave for work early or get home late, they would miss a meal and there would not be options for them to get another. In speaking with the volunteer coordinator, Jake, I asked where Mary's Place gets most of their food. This is a major positive with the partnerships they have with companies like Amazon and Starbucks. Both these companies have a huge amount of food that would otherwise be wasted. They bring daily deliveries to the different Mary's Place locations. Mary's Place is also collaborating with grocery stores and big companies, finding out what would be wasted and how they can forge partnerships to avoid waste and feed their guests. Jake even mentioned that at one point a company called them and offered to deliver a large stock of chicken breasts. But Mary's Place did not have the refrigerator space to hold it all. The company asked: if they brought them refrigerators would they be able to take all of it, and they agreed. Jake stated,

We work with Seattle Public Utilities in the space of food rescue, we purchase some of it wholesale, so we do a lot of central ordering and bringing that in. You can sit down to one of our hot dinners and say that 60 percent of it is probably rescued food. Because as much as we love composting in King County it is actually a last resort. A good last resort, but still needs to be processed. Breakfast and lunch are really all that pre-packaged stuff which is great in the shelter, especially for working parents so you can just grab something and head out. (Jake)

The aggression the organization uses to be on top of receiving and dealing with all this food ensures that Mary's Place always has a variety of food options for people. They have hot meals multiple times a day. Also, as Jake mentioned, there is pre-packaged food that would have been thrown away from Starbucks and Amazon but are great options for a parent who needs to leave early or miss a meal.

The creative approach and extensive business partnerships allows them to meet an ongoing need. Shelters also do not really have a place to store your own food, so even if you can afford to buy some groceries, you cannot keep them in the shelter. In another interview, the director of the day center said,

Then we set up the coffee, you know the first thing when the women get here, especially on a cold day, is to come in and get a cup of coffee. They want to come in and get a cup of coffee... and from there we have breakfast that is set out, like cold breakfast, cereal, toast. And at 8 o'clock we have a warm breakfast that comes out, eggs, biscuits, gravy. (Megan)

It is important that this happens at the day center, because many women will be coming from having slept outside all night, or at an uncomfortable shelter where they are kicked out first thing in the morning without food or the use of the bathroom. Many people claim that there are shortages of food for people who are experiencing homelessness. In some ways, this is true. There are many shelters, churches and food banks that hand out free food. However, this is helpful if someone can show up at the times when they are open. If you are working a job, or living your life, it can be difficult to reach these resources. Mary's Place is not only trying to change the way they shelter people, but also trying to change the way people receive food and simultaneously reducing food waste in general.

*Bodily Integrity*

The third capability is *bodily integrity*. Nussbaum describes this, “Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction” (Nussbaum, 2003: 33). This stood out as a capability particularly relevant for female homelessness. Women are extremely likely to be sexually assaulted while living on the streets or in shelters, which is often why you will see women wearing a lot of layers of clothing while outside, even if it is warm out. Jasinki and colleagues (2010) examine this using the book *Hard Lives, Mean Streets*. They state “...fears of sexual victimization are reinforced by daily experiences that expose homeless women to high levels of vulnerability and risk...Further, societal norms tacitly accepting violence against the homeless increase homeless women’s risk of violent victimization . . .” (Jasinki et al, 2010: 12). Suffering increased fear and vulnerability is another feature undermining capability to women’s experience of homelessness.

Mary’s Place started by catering to women and their children. As illustrated by Calterone-Williams (2010), many shelters choose between being domestic violence shelters, and homeless shelters. This is a vexing dilemma. While there needs to be a safe place for those fleeing domestic violence, a huge pathway for women to homelessness, they need to be able to go to these shelters and receive the kind of service that can aid the economic aspects of homelessness as well as the emotional. When speaking with the director of the women’s day center, it was recognized that a lot of the women coming to the shelter may be fleeing a domestic violence case and will need to remain anonymous and hidden. Megan stated, “And sometimes, a lady that walks in like that, most of the women are fleeing domestic violence, and they don’t want anybody to know they are here. So, we can bring them back to the conference room, and make some calls” (Megan). This means that the shelter must worry about providing

a safe space for people who are experiencing trauma and making them feel safe enough to be in that space.

Mary's Place has developed innovative ways to address both emotional and economic. At the women's day shelter in downtown Seattle, Mary's Place is open from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon, as a place to give women somewhere to be during the day and to receive services while other shelters are closed. It provides a small cold breakfast immediately at seven in the morning, then later provides hot breakfast and snacks throughout the day. There is access to computers, showers, a donation center for clothing and other goods, and activities to help occupy their time. They also have housing and career representatives that can meet with the women and give them guidance and resources for how to find a job or a home. The director of the day center, Megan, noted how important this can be especially because a lot of women who get picked up by the police at bus stations or on the street, who have fled from another city because of domestic violence or some other reason, are brought immediately to the day center. They have no idea what the city of Seattle even has to offer, let alone how to get from one place to another.

This day center stood out as a representation of the capability for *bodily integrity*. Not discussed much in the literature or conversations around the issue of homelessness is what people can do during the day and how they can spend their time if they do not have a home. If you have no money, no job and no place to live, there aren't many options for you to spend time after you are kicked out of the shelter for the day and before you can go back at night. Most shelters make you leave between six and seven in the morning, sometimes without even being able to use the bathroom or get anything to eat. Megan noted that many women are waiting at the door right when it opens because they need to go to the bathroom badly.

This capability also brings up other questions, like the need for sexual satisfaction and intimacy. Often in discussions around homelessness, these basic needs that housed people assume for themselves are forgotten when thinking about those experiencing homelessness. The discussion proceeds almost as if they should not get these opportunities; as if seeing they do not have the privilege of having a place to live, they should simply set aside all other needs. Yet, sexual satisfaction and intimacy are an actual health issue, especially if you are a couple. Most shelters do not have a private space for people to be alone and have time to enjoy this opportunity. Mary's Place allows families to stay together, so that mothers with older sons can stay with their sons, husbands and wives can all stay together with their families. At most of their locations, they give families whole rooms, which is still a very small amount of space for a whole family but allows them to have doors they can close and lock, in order to have a semblance of privacy. Also, in Liebow's work (1993), he details the pseudo-kin relationships that women created in the shelter system. Another way for people to experience intimacy, and something that is also fostered in the Mary's Place day center. Megan relayed that many women will return even after they no longer need the services, just to hang out with the other women they met at the center. This is a feature of life that is often forgotten in conversations around the issue of homelessness, despite its importance for all of us as social human beings.

### *Practical Reason*

The fourth capability is *practical reason*. Nussbaum describes this as, "Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life (this entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance)" (Nussbaum, 2003). This capability calls for people who are experiencing homelessness to be rational. The conditions of homelessness challenge rational decision-making with sleep deprivation, high

stress levels and hunger, so that *practical reasoning* can prove very difficult to achieve. The rational actor model assumes that people are able to engage in rational thinking including cost-benefit analysis (Elster, 1986) in order to maximize their utilities (Bentham, 1969) amidst preferences and incomplete information. Historically, once someone begins to experience homelessness, their credibility and rationality are often less accepted or considered. Although this can certainly make sense as a response with people who are struggling with addictions or mental illness, it is important to remember that this is a sizable but not conclusive portion of the population of people experiencing homelessness. As discussed with Jake, of Mary's Place, most of the families who receive help from the organization are a part of the transitional (Snow and Anderson, 1993) portion of the people experiencing homelessness. This has been changing a little bit as the numbers have grown and the lack of low-income housing in Seattle worsens. But the sentiment too often persists. A rational based perspective ignores the underlying structural issues—such as high housing costs and stagnating wages. These are not people who have no skills or rationality to make choices for themselves, thus they should not be treated as such. These are people who need a boost to help them get the chance to make the kind of choices or moves they are capable of. Jake adds,

But when you look at who is experiencing homelessness, 83 percent are originally from king county. That means they didn't have this problem historically. They had the tools to survive here. Maybe they never were put in a position to develop tech skills, but the skills they had developed were enough for a long period of time and now it is no longer enough. The communities being impacted are not being given the opportunity to change provisions, to change jobs. But the job market demands a set of skills that is not in the local population. (Jake)

It is difficult for someone to form or act on their own conception of the good if they do not even have the opportunity to do so. A lot of the recent movements into homelessness have come from shifts in the economy and the housing market. Yet, general assumptions around homelessness

remain within sin and sick talk, rather than system talk. Mary's Place combats this by ensuring that housing and job representatives are on staff to help people get on top of these facets of their lives. They hold people accountable by having community chores, giving points to people so they can then use these to "purchase" items in the donation based "store" and telling guests how to organize meeting with these representatives yet letting them organize these on their own.

The consumer driven approach is a key aspect for the realization of this capability. Allowing the guests to be the drivers of their own choices shows them that their own conception of the good should be valued and expands their practical reasoning. As opposed to the older models of shelters, Mary's Place focuses on housing first, rapid re-housing, diversion and an enhanced shelter model to give people more of the freedom to achieve this capability. Families can receive these services, dependent on their qualifications and which program would best suit their needs. They can also work with housing representatives and learn about the housing market and how to get themselves into it. These all have an inherent recognition of the practical reason people contain prior to becoming homeless, and it recognizes that with a little help they can achieve what they are able to achieve or have the capability to achieve again. I discussed with Jake the assumption placed upon those experiencing homelessness that they are helpless regarding their condition. He states,

Well, so I mean on that stance the assumption is that they couldn't find those resources themselves. Because that's part of it, when you're in a home it's a lot easier to do that, your brain is working the way it is supposed to. There's interesting research about the way stress and anxiety have the ability to impact our decisions. Because the way our brains are wired, we are not inherently rational beings, our rationality comes from our ability to pause and think when we react we don't react in a rational way. And when you're living below the poverty line in America, our affective IQ is below the average by about 13 points. (Jake)



This is a very important factor not often discussed. Rarely do we afford this benefit of the doubt to those experiencing homelessness. It is a great feature of what Mary's Place attempts to implement in their practices and approach.

#### *Control over One's Environment*

The fifth capability is *control over one's environment*. Nussbaum describes this as a multi-tiered set of supporting capabilities:

*A) Political.* Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. *B) Material.* Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers. (Nussbaum, 2003)

People who are homeless have very little control over their environment. If they are unsheltered there are places they cannot sleep and can be banished (Beckett and Herbert, 2009). For those who are in the shelter system there are set times for entry, exit, showering and meals. This leaves little individual control. A key aspect of one's control is the ability to have property and hold onto their past lives (Snow and Anderson, 1993). However, many lose their property (stolen, impounded by police) or choose to shed it as they become entrenched in homelessness-moving from recently dislocated to chronic (Snow and Anderson, 1993). This capability can inform thinking about what is offered to the guests in terms of their own capability to make choices and steps towards their own future. What stood out in asserting this capability is providing families their own rooms with doors. This allows the guests to hold property which addresses a major issue with shelters: keeping one's belongings safe and having a semblance of privacy. At most other shelters people needed to keep their belongings directly with them. This unique feature of Mary's Place may seem small, but it can make a big impact on someone's comfort level.

Even though Mary's Place still has people leave the shelter during the day, they can leave their belongings in their rooms while they are gone. This gives them a sense of protection and comfort, contributing to a greater well-being.

In addition, each Mary's Place shelter has weekly or monthly meetings with all the guests staying at the shelter at that time, facilitated by a staff member. Liz, the service-learning coordinator for the North End group of shelters, discussed how these meetings went. They are held at a time when most of the guests will be home for the evening, before dinner, when the kids after school program is still open so the children can be watched by staff. At these meetings, guests can bring up whatever they feel to be necessary. It resembles a town hall meeting. The floor is opened to guests so that they can voice their opinions on the shelter operation and what they feel could be done better or differently. This invokes the agency of the individuals and a feeling of collaboration. Experiencing homelessness in general takes away people's agency. Things that seem so small, like having a place to store your things or a door where you sleep, can amount to huge factors in giving people dignity and restoring a sense of humanity.

In general, this capability stood out because of the "right to hold property" aspect, which is clearly nonexistent or severely compromised for most people experiencing homelessness. Now, the shelter system cannot simply give people property in order to meet this ethic. But what Mary's Place is beginning to enact, are things such as rapid rehousing, housing first and diversion programs, which are meant to get people into housing sooner. These policies all recognize the importance of people being in their own space and having their own property as a first step towards changing other aspects of their lives and sustaining their move out of homelessness.

### **Limits in Mary's Place Approach**

There are many positive aspects Mary's Place is achieving as an organization. It is achieving a lot of these ethical features. But there are gaps and places for improvement as highlighted by this theoretical application. One issue is representation. There is a mismatch between employees of Mary's Place and guests. The employees I interviewed, although not a representative sample, were mostly white, while the guest population are often people of color. However, in one interview an employee discussed how Mary's Place may be trying to over-represent the people of color that they serve. This felt uncomfortable when so many of the employees are white, which could lead to a "white savior complex,"

...how we do have fifty percent of the population of people who are homeless are people of color, and our branding is almost one hundred percent people of color. I think we can do better, especially when it comes to being equitable and representing people of all different backgrounds, especially thinking about the white savior complex. If you see some of our videos, you'll see how that kind of shapes itself in that framing as well.  
(Anonymous employee)

This was something I didn't expect to hear but was brought up when I specifically asked about ethics and how Mary's Place may be enacting an ethical framework. On the other hand, Jake brought up, "This also disproportionately impacts communities of color in King County, which I think is a good reminder for all of us to look at the history of who we are as a city.". So, there is more work that Mary's Place can do to enhance an ethical response to homelessness-one being address racial and ethnic representation in order to relate to guests.

Another feature that may challenge Mary's Place ethical foundation is the issue of growth and the partnerships with big corporate companies, like Amazon. When discussing ethics, Liz, another employee brought up their mixed feelings about the partnerships. They stated,

Like we do have very strong partnerships with a lot of corporate organizations, so to work with those organizations you have to kind of look at things sometimes from that perspective. So, I think that can sometimes lead to certain messes that would mimic that. So, it's almost just kind of two different worlds.

Although Mary's Place is doing a lot more, and much good work around this issue, the work is in many ways due to the money that comes from big corporations. With that comes certain issues, like having people from these organizations think they can stop by any location at any time "just to check it out". Or the corporate side may be focused on the numbers, while the shelter side wants and needs to be more focused on the individuals. Accepting money from a company may mean that Mary's Place must re-evaluate some of the work that they have done in the past. Perhaps this will veer them away from their mission statement. To include others in the process who might have different goals to achieve, when you are accepting their money you may therefore have to adhere to what they think rather than what your organization intended.

Finally, Liz also brought up the staffing issue, which seems to be a constant point of contention for any workplace doing social sector work. She told me, "You've volunteered, I'm sure you've seen days where we don't have enough staffing or people to hold down the fort. And having enough staff is really key to providing that safe and inclusive space to work off. So, there's a few things to unpack there." (Liz). In order to accommodate for the needs of the large quantity of people, and in the way that Mary's Place has represented their values (see Appendix C) they always need to have a certain amount of staff working. When this is not possible, things can get hectic. People can get overworked and both the guests and the employees will lose out. There are large turnover rates for these kinds of jobs, with high burn out and a lack of self-care. In one interview, with Olivia, we discussed how important it is for staff members to make sure they are taking care of themselves in this kind of work, "Definitely making sure you're practicing self-care and taking breaks when you need to and having a good community. Whether that be

coworkers or friends outside of work I think is huge.” She noted how it can be difficult to have the motivation always to continue showing up, and you must cognizant of where you are at personally before trying to engage with the work in the way you know would be best.

As Mary’s Place grows, attempts new approaches and becomes a bit more commodified with funding, they will face different ethical issues. I and multiple employees I interviewed worry that perhaps with the growth and partnerships, Mary’s Place may be becoming too pragmatic in their response, forgetting some of the ethics behind the work. It is all a part of the process, but this is where having something like this ethical foundation could be very helpful to remind themselves what their goals are and how best to align those and achieve them. Nonetheless, the recognition and movement towards such a practice is a good start.

#### **Conclusion:**

Finally, the resolution of the crisis of homelessness would not simply be to have all people experiencing this issue receiving shelter. Rather, it would be to alleviate the need for shelters in general and set people up on a path towards never having to use the shelter services again. As many of the employees interviewed for this data stated, the ideal goal of their work is to be worked out of a job.

This was an innovative project, connecting the ethical theory of the Capabilities Approach to the issue of homelessness for the first time. The connection makes sense because the theory was originally created to think about issues in world poverty. At its core, homelessness is really an issue stemming from poverty. Amartya Sen (1999) created this approach in trying to think about how global poverty is measured. He argued that by using the GDP as a measurement of success or failure, countries were able to appear as though they were doing well concerning poverty, while they were not. Specifically, in India, there were still

millions of people experiencing extreme poverty while their economy had been growing a lot. There is a similar issue going on with homelessness, seen with the latest data from the one-night count in Seattle Washington.

This project has illuminated how a philosophical ethical theory such as the Capabilities approach sheds light on some gaps in the work being done at an organizational level. In issues such as this, where human lives are the number one thing at stake, it is vital that they are not addressed simply through pragmatic terms. Such situations should evoke even more critical care of one's approach and response than something that does not carry the same weight on human lives. This project adds to the discipline of philosophical ethics by engaging with a theory meant to be applied to questions like this. It is a small leap from questions of poverty, feminist ethics and equality for women to the issue of homelessness. Unhoused people typically find themselves in poverty and marginalized in a very particular way that often deems them unfit to participate in society and voiceless. We see this addressed with the capability of *practical reason* illustrated by Nussbaum's list. Mary's Place addresses this reality through language and choices. These features help to reduce stigma and increase agency for those individuals involved.

There are a series of shelter reforms which would be necessary to affect a bigger shift away from the homeless archipelago Gowan discusses and accommodative responses from Snow and Anderson. This includes a shift away from sin or sick talk and a movement towards system talk which recognizes the structural roots of homelessness. System talk can have a great impact on how the issue is addressed and then treated. Engagement with the people experiencing the issue, and treatments that target their specific needs would be a big step. Other steps would be enhancements of the facilities themselves, and even movement of the locations away from just the downtown areas of cities, more integration into communities. Mary's Place is making

pointed efforts towards many of these reforms and to changing how the shelter industry reacts to the issue. They are implementing changes in the explicit use of language, the low barrier, enhanced model, the enactment of things such as housing first, diversion, rapid rehousing and the insistence on including guests in the choices made towards a different future. Mary's Place is making efforts towards reducing the language of sin, sick and system talk (Gowan, 2010) and in simply being an accommodative response (Snow and Anderson, 1993). They are trying to use new practices, and specific language in order to change perception and carry out their work in a manner that hopefully helps the issue in general.

This study brings up many further questions about ethics and their place in homelessness responses. People experiencing homelessness have not come to that situation from the same place always and they are usually not fighting against one barrier to thrive. However, homelessness is a multifaceted issue and so responses must be varied.

To conclude the evaluation of Mary's Place considering ethics, I have detailed both positives and weaknesses. There are clear ethical choices that impact the running of Mary's Place. They focus on the use of language, the "best practices" (housing first, diversion, enhanced shelter model, etc.) that are used by this organization and the focus on invoking agency and reducing stigma for guests and for people experiencing homelessness. Regarding the five capabilities chosen from Nussbaum, Mary's Place at least touches on one aspect of each and is working on fulfilling them to their fullest capacity. The issues they are mostly up against, are figuring out how to co-exist with their donors and to express their ethical perspective clearly and explicitly. Having a close relationship with their donors is necessary to their growth and to the work they are doing. But it will be difficult to achieve their mission and values at the same time. The mission of Mary's Place is also important to think about (see Appendix C),

because it does indeed state what they are doing with their work. Yet it really doesn't include language revolving around ethics or an ethical approach. This seems like an obvious gap that needs to be addressed if we are looking at this crisis through an ethical lens.

Finally, there was also a tension with this project using both disciplines of sociology and philosophy. This felt necessary from my perspective, as these are the disciplines I have been studying and I am constantly noticing the intersections between them throughout my course of study. It was difficult because most people to whom I proposed the project wanted me to narrow in and focus more on one than the other. Or they thought that it would be too much to try and do in one work. This may have been true. There is also a natural tension between these disciplines. Sociology is very data driven and looks at the whole picture of an issue. In contrast, philosophy is much more focused on abstract conceptual analysis. I think, therefore, I wanted so badly to combine them. I felt it was important to find that middle ground for this work. Also, perhaps I just wanted to incorporate two of my most respected professors and receive their knowledge through the work on this project.

Drawing from both the theoretical insight and the data analysis, there are three key insights and reforms that could be applied to the situation of homelessness more broadly. First, I think it is important to note the shelter reforms that are already being enacted by Mary's Place, and recognize that these should be making their way into the whole shelter system in our country. These consumer driven practices are key not only to making shelter life more palatable and better for those needing to stay and those working, but they also change the focus from accommodative to transformative – that is getting people to successfully transition out of homelessness into stable housing. Second, a feature that really stood out throughout this whole project was the use of language as an important part of culture. This was highlighted through



Gowan's discourses, as well as in conversation with the employees. A big focus in Mary's Place has been the way the issue of homelessness, and the people experiencing homelessness are referred to. Language plays a large role in perception and then in treatment. Finally, something that seemed both lacking in Mary's Place, and in the shelter system more broadly, are resources to help focus people's attention on how to live once they are out of this situation- that is more resources devoted to capabilities building. These need to be both holistic and individualized. While I do not think it is appropriate to necessarily instruct people on how to live their lives, there are important gaps in skills and opportunities and deficiencies that can be addressed. However, it would be important to recognize that many people who are homeless have not had opportunities to learn about proper nutrition, cleaning skills, childrearing or even banking and taxes. These are often skills that are not explicitly taught to people and left to the domain of the family. It would be a great asset to the shelter system to prepare people to move into their homes and feel adequate in how they can live on their own. This project took an in-depth view at one organization, but the findings can be applied more broadly. This research will aid in further developing the most ethical ways to continue to work towards addressing and alleviating homelessness.

### **Personal Research Reflection:**

After finishing the project, I now have a better sense of what would have been better to ask. Another thing that took much longer and should have been completed sooner in the process was the IRB approval. This was a lot harder to write than I expected. Overall, I would have tried to start all the processes sooner, so that the kinks I discovered later could have been worked out and re-hatched rather than just needing to accept them. This research was presented both at the Pacific Sociological Association in Oakland California, and at the Erickson Conference on

Seattle Pacific University's campus. These were great opportunities to think about what this work means in the broader spectrum of these disciplines, and how the academic world functions and uses data that individuals collect. Thinking about myself, if I am in a stressful situation or place in life, I will face much more difficulty thinking about or achieving a goal than I would have otherwise. This was an important insight in thinking about how I perceive this issue, and how I would like to encourage others to do so. I hope that if nothing else, this project allows me to give more grace to those struggling with this issue, and in trying to be mindful of the best ways I can help change it.

**Faith Statement:**

My time at Seattle Pacific University has been interesting, to say the least. I presume most people's undergraduate experiences are. With each quarter, it feels simultaneously as if no time has passed and as if you have formed a whole new mind. This happens especially during finals week under the existential angst inducing experience of writing a paper at 4 in the morning. I came from a Catholic upbringing, one in which religion was never pushed upon me, yet was inherently a part of my everyday life. Whether this was a prayer over family dinner accompanied by an acknowledgment of something going on in our world that needed more attention, or attendance at church when I couldn't pretend to be asleep well enough on Sundays. The recital of Ave Maria in Latin instilled in me the belief that it is to a woman we should really all be praying. It was manifested in the many volunteer experiences I had through the service required at my high school and the trips to help migrant workers in middle school I opted to go on instead of a posh summer camp my other friends would be attending (not that I had the option or means to go on these instead). Yet, although I am a confirmed Catholic, I never felt rooted in a faith; I never felt the call to prayer on my own. The closest I come is when I think

deeply about the people I've lost in my life and perhaps worry that they will be looking down on me when I have made questionable choices in my "youth" (I am so mature now).

I remember being very struck by the prevalence of religion and faith talk in my first weeks at SPU. I knew I was entering into a system saturated with faith or at least religious discourse. But I wasn't quite prepared to be hearing people my age talk about something as complex as faith with such conviction. Unfortunately, like many before me and many after, I quickly became obsessed with the hypocrisy of religion. My irritation with girls on my floor who spoke of Jesus in such a way, yet wouldn't even say hello to me as we passed one another in the halls, became a source of real tension as I tried to navigate this school where I felt like a complete outsider. I became very comfortable being alone, as I look back, perhaps too comfortable as I am only now realizing what my anger may have left me to miss out on.

I was an angry atheist for a few years. I tromped through my first two years of college in black combat boots, thinking I was edgy as I played Kanye West in the showers and guffawed at the girls around me playing Taylor Swift (the horror!). I mocked (mentally) those attending church on Sundays. I instead went to work, a true capitalist's church I suppose, something my Marxist leaning self should want to avoid. Though you can't beat the system without playing it. I studied abroad in Rome, not once, but twice. I fell in love with history and art and culture (and food) and gained a newfound respect for the Catholic church, wondering how so many people could devote so much time and energy to something I was finding to be so marginal.

Although one of my favorite activities still remains arguing philosophically with my father about the existence of god, the ridiculousness of it and the distraction it provides to turn away from helping others, I can't help but find myself inching into thoughts about the potentiality of there being something higher than us (and not just Durkheim's concept of

collective effervescence). As I continue to engage with the issue of homelessness in our city, as I travel around the world and see so many different varieties of faith and people following religions, I keep coming back to the question of why faith is so powerful to many. Some of the smartest and most respected people in my life are people of faith, and to stomp on this with my combat boot self feels more and more like a personal attack on their piety. Now I took this fifth year, and finally pushed myself to engage with the community of SPU in ways I had been missing out on before; working for the *Lingua* journal, attending more campus events as a part of being on leadership, attending a conference with other SPU students and faculty, and having a role in a school theatre production. Although these things have maybe not explicitly gotten me closer to a faith perspective *per se*, but I think taking part in them has gotten me further from the anger and disconnection I was feeling in my first two years.

So, I suppose, my faith statement is still uncertain. I am also confused about what life means or what I will do next. I do not believe college is a time to answer questions, but simply a time to teach you how to ask them. I have taken classes from many disciplines. I have traveled to other countries and tried to engage my own city in a new and purposeful way. This Christmas, as I traveled in Europe with two friends of mine who had never met prior, I insisted we attend the small Catholic church in the small German town we were enjoying our holiday in. We ate minestrone soup and crusty German bread with red wine and then bounced down the street as the brisk winter air caught our breath, the bells of the church signaling to us what we couldn't find on the internet, that mass was in fact beginning. As I sat in an old wooden pew and listened to the harshest version of a Catholic mass I have ever attended, I thought about the beauty in this ritual. In another day across the world, my dad would attend a mass exactly like this one yet in English. He would sit down and stand up at the same time as I was and think reflectively

about a life he is living. In Chiang Mai Thailand, the same monks I had walked alongside as I silently explored their centuries old temple would still be there praying and living a simple life meant to help them access a higher order reasoning. In Rome, the Vatican was still there, waiting for the next time I would come sit and enjoy its architectural beauty late at night when all the tourists had gone home. There must be something to all this ritual, to all this history. Maybe I do not think I need it at this time in my life, but my respect for it is growing, and if nothing else I do enjoy a good conversation about it.

I walked along the canal the other day and overheard a young man telling another young man that he had “found Jesus at 19” and my immediate eye roll that ensued could not be helped. But then I scolded myself, and I tried to think about what having this experience meant to that person. My belief in the power of a good outfit for changing someone’s self-esteem, or the healing properties of whole healthy food may not be someone else’s and may be just as silly to them as their finding of Jesus is to me. As I have been attempting to gather a liberal arts education over the past five years, I have taken classes in all sorts of disciplines. I hope to have gained an understanding that there are many ways to engage and hopefully arrive at answers, even if provisional.

I am now taking theory in my last quarter and have realized that what I’ve been telling myself all along about my faith, that I can simply have a faith in society and humanity, is something Auguste Comte came up with so many years ago! This has been my answer to the questions of religiosity that permeate many conversations at SPU, whether at a house show or in the classroom; something my friends at secular schools have not encountered. I have simply been responding for years that my religion involves a belief in humanity and a faith in trying to help others. I like the idea of Jesus, a person who truly gave himself to others in a way that we don’t

often see in our daily lives. In many ways this project encompasses my faith. It represents the things I have learned to believe in over the past five years. I believe in the power of data and of using numbers and information to create new and better realities for people who are suffering in our world and simultaneously for the whole of society. I believe the use of philosophical inquiry can powerfully push our minds into thinking in a manner that gets us out of ourselves and out of the ivory tower. I want this project to ignite a sense of the need for ethical discussion, for a constant re-examination of who we are and how we are engaging with others. I deeply value discovery and knowledge and the world of an academic community, much of which has been a faith based one for me. This life is not a passive life, and if I have faith in anything now, I have faith in knowledge and in seeing life as dynamic, ever moving and impossible to truly grasp. But through the questioning itself, we can hopefully create a life for ourselves and those around us that is valuable as an end in itself.

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## Appendixes:

### Appendix A-

#### Interview Questions:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Interview Questions:

1. What is your position? How would you describe the work you do at Mary's Place?
  - a. How long have you been working here?
  - b. What originally brought you to this work? What drives you to do this work at this organization?
2. Can you articulate in your own words the mission of the organization?
  - a. Was this made explicit by the organization? If yes, can you explain? If not, how did you come to this understanding?
  - b. What are its core values?
3. How would you describe the current state of homelessness in Seattle?
  - a. How has it changed since you've been working in the field?
  - b. How similar or distinct is your organization compared to others doing similar work? Are your practices different from others you see out in the field?
4. How important is language usage in this work? Can you give me some examples of some of the language you use when talking about homelessness with fellow employees? With clients? How do they differ?
5. What does the work you do look like every day? Can you walk me through a "typical" day?
6. What does success look like from your perspective? Can you describe a case or client story (no real names will be used in published work) that illustrates success?
  - a. Does this differ from the organizations understanding of success?
  - b. When did you feel you weren't successful? Can you explain?
7. What is your organizations ethical approach to homelessness?
  - a. Is there a discussion of ethics or ethical principles in conversations around the organization? What is the ethical stance that Mary's Place is taking on the problem of homelessness?
  - b. Do you have a specific example?

- c. Has the organizations ethical position brought any tensions with other groups or the broader public? Is there any push back to the work that you do at Mary's Place?
  - d. Are there any internal tensions you see within the organization?
8. How does your organization fit into the broader service response industry? (The ecosystem of social service systems?)
  9. What is your perspective on some of the assistance Mary's Place is receiving?
  10. What else should I know about the work Mary's Place is doing in the area of homelessness?

## Appendix B-

The Capabilities that Nussbaum sees as crucial to her version of this theory are the following:

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault; including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, imagination, and thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.
5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).
6. *Practical reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance).
7. *Affiliation*. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) (B) Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.
8. *Other species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. *Control over one's environment*. (A) *Political*. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (B) *Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods) and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being,

exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers (Nussbaum, 35).

## Appendix C:

### Mary's Place Mission and Values-

#### MARY'S PLACE BELIEVES THAT NO ONE'S CHILD SHOULD SLEEP OUTSIDE.

We provide safe, inclusive shelter and services that support women, children and families on their journey out of homelessness. Across nine emergency family shelters in King County, we keep struggling families together, inside, and safe when they have no place else to go providing shelter, services, resources, community, and hope.

Basic needs are met each day: meals, showers, and laundry facilities—children are connected with schools. In the evening, families in shelter have dinner, do homework, socialize, and prepare for the week ahead. Resources are offered each day for housing, employment, wellness, and financial needs. Housing specialists work with families to address barriers and empower parents to build family stability, secure housing, and prepare for employment. Kids do homework, participate in fun and enriching activities, and go on outings and adventures in our on-site Kids Club.

Children with life threatening illnesses should not be living in cars and tents awaiting chemo or dialysis. Families, who have lost everything in the struggle to get their child well, have a place to receive care and support in shelter at Mary's Place Popsicle Place program.

We also operate a Women's Day Center in downtown Seattle that provides meals, showers, laundry, access to resources, and community to over a hundred women each day.

The support of the community keeps our doors open. The path out of homelessness can be long and challenging. We seek to build bridges of understanding about homelessness and its solutions. Since 1999, Mary's Place has helped hundreds of women and families move out of homelessness into more stable situations.

Each person that finds housing is ultimately responsible for his or her accomplishment, but often a community of support, education, and advocacy has helped along the way.

#### **our vision**

A community where all families have safety, stability, and housing.

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#### **our mission**

Mary's Place provides safe, inclusive shelter and services that support women, children and families on their journey out of homelessness.

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#### **our values**

**Love** — Love is at the heart of all we do. We are committed to creating a space where all are welcomed, respected, accepted, and loved for who they are.

**Collaboration** — We collaborate with others to ensure quality services, leverage and expand services across the region, and amplify the voices of women and families experiencing homelessness.

**Equity** — We are committed to creating an inclusive environment and assuring equitable treatment, access, and opportunity for all regardless of age, ability, race, ethnicity, religion,

national origin, indigenous heritage, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or life experience.

**Stewardship** — We carefully steward all that is entrusted to our care: material and financial resources, human resources, and the lives and stories of our guests.

**Accountability** — Our board, staff, guests, and volunteers are accountable to what we say we will do.

**Responsiveness** — We recognize and respond to urgent needs in our community by being creative, adaptable, and persistent.