TURNING HMIS DATA INTO INSIGHT

A GUIDE TO MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR HMIS DATA

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BACKGROUND: A PRIMER ON HMIS AT THE FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL LEVEL

Ever struggled to explain why HMIS is important, or what it's used for? This should help!

HMIS NATIONALLY

HMIS helps national leaders make funding and policy decisions about housing and homelessness. By federal mandate, each Continuum of Care across the United States chooses and uses an HMIS. Nationwide, HMIS data is used to determine how programs are funded, what kind of interventions are most effective, where there might be gaps in services, and where we're making progress as a country to house our homeless neighbors.

For example, the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress helps the federal government understand trends in homelessness year to year. In 2018, it was reported that increases in unsheltered homelessness are driving an overall increase in homelessness nationwide, but family homelessness continues to decline. Another example is the HUD CoC Program competition, which uses HMIS data to prioritize communities and projects for funding. The CoC Program is the largest source of funding for homelessness assistance programs.

HMIS also helps researchers analyze trends. Their research contributes to our national understanding of homelessness and can be used by advocates to push for meaningful change. An example is research supported by Zillow, which used HUD data and other data to show that in communities where people spend more than 30% of their income on rent, homelessness rates rise faster. Another example is research by The Center for Social Innovation's SPARC initiative on racial disparities in homelessness, which used HMIS data and Census data to demonstrate that people of color are disproportionately affected by homelessness.

HMIS AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

In Minnesota, because the CoCs have agreed to use the same system and share data statewide, HMIS helps us coordinate as a state. This allows agencies in the state to better manage client data, coordinate services, guide resource allocation, and streamline service delivery. For example, Coordinated Entry efforts aim to help communities prioritize assistance to match persons experiencing homelessness with the most appropriate intervention. HMIS makes Coordinated Entry more efficient and more effective by storing assessment and referral data, charting a client's progress through the system and making it possible to analyze the system's effectiveness.

Locally, sharing HMIS data with community partners can help build understanding of who your program serves and how, and could help drive engagement between your agency and the public.

HMIS at the program level can be used to understand how a program is working and who it's working for, and to drive programmatic decisions. But for the insights and decisions to be good, the data must also be good. The following sections offer resources and suggestions for coaching staff toward improved HMIS data quality, and for engaging staff in activities to make meaning from the HMIS data they contribute.

PART I: FACILITATING DATA QUALITY REVIEW

Regular data quality monitoring can ease apprehensions about data, make corrections feel less punitive, and avoid panic right before a report's due.

GATHERING DATA

There are many resources for data quality reporting in HMIS, but it can be hard to know where to go to find the report that meets your needs. This guide provides helpful info about existing reports that can be used for data quality monitoring, and links to resources on how to run and interpret the reports. For information on other reports, including data quality checks specific to different funders, check the REPORTcollection. Each funding type's User Guide also has instructions on running reports for data checks.

FACILITATING THE CONVERSATION

Part of a regular practice of data quality monitoring involves making space to facilitate productive conversations. This article from MindTools provides general facilitation guidance – what does it mean to run a good meeting? What does an effective agenda look like? How can the facilitator encourage participation? The MindTools website has other helpful guides, some of which are free and some of which require membership. Explore the website to find all the free resources!

Beyond skilled facilitation of monitoring conversations, it's important to build a culture that empowers and motivates staff to feel like meaningful contributors, who want to put high-quality data into the system. This is hard work! Here are some tips:

Assuage fears about data. Consider doing an activity like this Paper Spreadsheet as a staff to ground data review in real-world examples. In doing review, simplify where possible by breaking down data into digestible tables or charts – no need to print entire reports! If the word 'data' makes your team cringe, use the term 'information' to remind staff that they're really capturing clients' information and stories, not just doing data entry.

Incentivize improvement. The Bridgespan Group compiled case studies from nonprofits that integrated measurement and monitoring into their management by making sure those who contribute data benefit through low-cost, high visibility incentives (start on page 7). Measure staff performance against their past performance, and consider incentives for when the group as a whole performs better compared to the past.

Provide opportunities for staff to talk to other HMIS users. Making staff feel like they are part of a community could increase their motivation. Give staff time to attend their HMIS User Group, if one is available in your CoC. If staff can't attend User Group, or your CoC doesn't have one, consider devoting some staff meeting time to HMIS questions, even if it's just time to work together on an email to the Helpdesk.

Normalize data quality review. Regular review helps staff develop good habits and stay accountable, while further reducing potential fears. You may already do regular reviews on other aspects of staff

performance, consider incorporating their HMIS data contributions into those conversations. Make sure any conversation about data quality related to job performance is framed not as punitive but as an opportunity for growth.

Think about data quality on a continuum. Where are you now, as a team, and where do you want to be? Where might be reasonable to reach in six months? In which aspects of data quality do you have the most room for growth? In which are you closest to where you want to be? Review ICA's Data Quality Matters series for additional insights into why data quality matters, what commonly causes poor data quality, and how to take practical steps toward improvement.
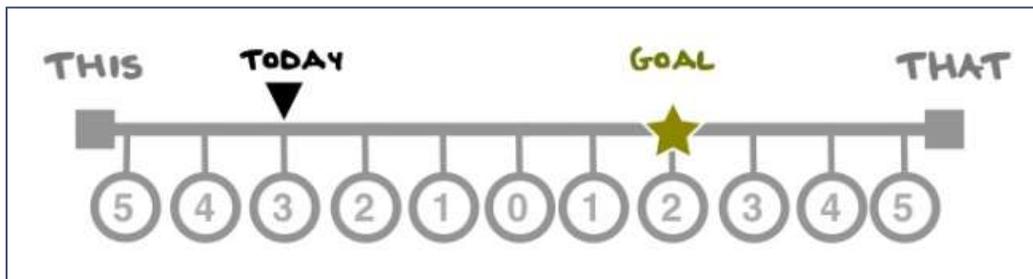

Image via Abby Covert.

PART II: FACILITATING MEANING-MAKING CONVERSATIONS

We support what we help create! Seeing how data can tell the story of a team's hard work and a program's impact can be a motivator for contributing high quality information and working toward improved outcomes.

GATHERING DATA

Use the APR and the Core Report to find the information you need to facilitate such a conversation. If you work in a program with one or more funder-required reports that demonstrate demographics and outcomes at the aggregate level, such as LTH, you could use those reports too. But the Core Report, and the APR, contain universally applicable data. Below is a table you can use to identify which report might give you information on key participant demographics and outcomes.

If you use the APR, ICA's APR Explorer is a tool to visualize elements of the APR. Simply upload your APR and explore the handy charts and tables. If you use the Core Report, look out for an upcoming Core Report guide to be released by ICA.

	Measure	APR	Core Report	Other
PROGRAM INFO AND DEMOGRAPHICS	Number of persons served	✓	✓	
	Number of leavers and stayers	✓	✓	
	Demographics (gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability status, DV history, CH status)	✓	✓	
	VI-SPDAT score (Coordinated Entry assessor agencies)			CE Assessor Agency Check: Referrals or Entry/Exits workflow
CLIENT OUTCOMES	Residence prior to project entry	✓	✓	
	Income at entry and follow-up/exit	✓	✓	
	Non-cash benefits at entry and follow-up/exit	✓		
	Health insurance at entry and follow-up/exit	✓		
	Length of time in the program (aka stability for PH programs) including average length of time in program	✓		
	Exit destination	✓	✓	
	Returns to homelessness			Returns to Homelessness report – contact Helpdesk to run
	Outcomes for key subpopulations	✓	✓	

FACILITATING THE CONVERSATION

Once you've identified your questions and gathered your data, plan a meeting to explore and make sense of what you've collected. The following are sample activities, or sets of activities, ranging from the most straightforward (**1**) to the most interactive/hands-on (**6**).

1. This guide, though focused on data in the context of schools, offers step-by-step instructions for facilitating data conversations. Start on page 6 (Step 2). This section walks through identifying patterns, and strengths and challenges. Try any of the data elements outlined in the above table to explore patterns, using outcomes data like the summary outcomes by subpopulation in the Core Report to talk through strengths and challenges. The next section of the guide walks through identifying driving factors for those strengths and challenges, and it includes templates for each of those steps.

2. ICA created a **handout** for the Minnesota Coalition on Homelessness conference that can be used to explore the data in the Core Report. The handout asks you to imagine a meeting with Fake Agency's Executive Director, but can be repurposed for exploring your agency's data with other stakeholders too.

3. The **Data Party** described in this guide is more like a meeting. In this example the facilitators made participation voluntary but encouraged attendance with food. The guide offers suggestions for the kinds of questions you could ask in a Data Party, as well as some lessons learned about logistics.

4. One way to spice up your data presentation at a Data Party is with **Data Placemats**, handouts that tell a data story with charts and tables. These tips and resources on creating handouts for your analysis party presume that you're using the data to produce a final report, but it doesn't have to be that way. More on data placemats here (focus on the tips for Phase 1 and Phase 2) and here. You could use the charts from the APR Explorer on your placemats or make your own! If you want to make your own, but aren't experienced in visualization, check out this guide to choosing charts to get started.

5. Dabbling in the Data is a guide to activities that help staff understand program data. It's broken up into sections.

- *Distribution* - the first two activities in this category can be considered icebreakers. The next few would work well with data where you want to understand the differences between groups (individuals vs families, or chronically homeless vs non-chronically homeless, for example). You can use any of the crosstabs from the Core Report for these activities.
- *Change over time* – in these activities, you could use data from sub-assessments that changes or is updated over time. You could also use the point-in-time counts from the APR to examine changes over the year in the number of persons served.
- *Contribution* – these work well for understanding outcomes data in a larger context. You could use the Summary Outcomes tab of the Core Report, or other summary outcomes reports for your funder, for these activities.
- *Categories* – these activities mostly require qualitative data (i.e. not numbers) so aren't a good fit for data from the Core Report or the APR.
- *Communicating Findings* – these are great for translating the data into bite-size messages, and could work with demographics, outcomes, or even data quality data.

6. The Data Culture Project offers engaging, out-of-the-box activities designed to make data interpretation fun and approachable. Try these activities that pair well with HMIS data or explore the others!

- Deconstruct a Dataviz focuses on interpreting data visualization. For this activity, consider using the statewide 2018 PIT infographic created by ICA, or with the APR visualization tool.
- Data Storybook has participants craft a story out of a dataset. Try this one with participant detail records from the Core Report, to understand how clients come to your program and how their circumstances might affect their outcomes.

If you want to take the exploration to the next level, consider doing any of the above activities and comparing your program's data to other sources. **ICA's Minnesota Data Portal** contains visualizations of demographic and outcome information from sources like the PIT and the System Performance Measures process, that would translate well in a comparison to your program's Core Report or APR.

Finally, remember that these seeds will grow best when planted in fertile soil. Building and supporting a culture where data is valued for insight and improvement, and not seen as a hoop to jump through or an impediment to the real work, takes time – and it can't be done alone. Other agencies in your CoC and throughout the state can be important partners for driving progress forward. As the state system administrator, ICA is here to support your data quality improvement and program evaluation efforts. Ask the Helpdesk for data quality resources, submit a Custom Report Request to get any additional data you need, or talk to your Regional System Administrator about your ideas for HMIS projects.