



Framing the Front Door: Coordinated Assessment

This brief, Framing the Front Door: Coordinated Assessment, describes the importance of every homeless crisis response system's having a centralized or coordinated method for reaching and assessing homeless and at-risk clients and directing them to the appropriate program or service. It describes the role philanthropic organizations can play in supporting this effort and provides examples of recent community leadership and investment strategies.

Under the national vision for a homelessness crisis response system, homeless programs should work in concert to help those people facing homelessness to quickly gain and retain housing, whether through temporary or ongoing assistance. To do this well, the system must have a way of identifying its clients and their needs and to direct them to the appropriate level of services quickly and efficiently.

A coordinated assessment system (also sometimes referred to as coordinated entry, coordinated intake, or centralized intake) is a method for directing those in need to the right services, and for allocating the crisis response system's limited supply of support among the larger group of people in need. It is typically operated by one or more agencies where homeless and near-homeless people can go or call to be quickly assessed and connected with a program that can meet their immediate need for shelter or support and help them get back on track to a permanent housing solution. Just as a school district assigns each child to a school, or a hospital ensures each patient has a managing doctor, a coordinated entry system seeks to match each person to a place or program to help address their housing need.

Where we have been

Homeless programs were developed over time in response to growing need. Each developed with a target population in mind, a set of goals and services, and rules about who would be served. Because of the magnitude of the homeless problem, programs generally had little trouble filling most of their beds. But for homeless people, the process of finding support could be very challenging. Most shelters, for example, offered empty beds to qualified callers but, if full, could do little more than invite the person or family to call back the next day—or perhaps provide them with other numbers to call. Some programs held periodic lotteries for help or kept long waiting lists. Even community referral systems, such as 211 phone lines, frequently simply offered a list of numbers that a person could call to seek help. The onus fell on the household experiencing the crisis to find help, and such help often finally came, if at all, as the result of dogged persistence or luck.

Coordinated Assessment

In the last decade, some communities have recognized both the burden on homeless people and the resource mismatch that sometimes results from a lack of a consistent method for helping people in need reach the right programs. Dozens of communities across the country have now established coordinated assessment systems for all or portions of their homeless system to reduce the burden on those in crisis and to allocate limited system resources more effectively. Because coordinated assessment systems typically serve as the front door to all homeless services, they also produce information about system-wide needs and gaps that is more reliable than when programs are not coordinated. Strong data systems and real-time information availability are critical to effective efforts. Under HEARTH, a system of coordinated assessment is a requirement for communities receiving federal homeless resources.

Coordinated assessment is important but is challenging to develop, as it requires every provider and funder to participate in a common method to determine how persons seeking assistance will receive help. Many providers worry that coordinated assessment will reduce their autonomy in selecting who they serve and negatively impact their ability to achieve positive outcomes. Coordinated assessment must honor the different strengths and focuses of each program while reducing the potential for clients in need to be refused help—or offered the wrong help.

Benefits of Coordinated Assessment

Where fully implemented, coordinated assessment has proven to have many benefits. These include:

- **Simplifying and speeding up the process of accessing help for most clients**
- **Targeting limited resources more effectively**
- **Reducing duplication of effort among providers, thereby allowing staff to focus on services rather than intake-related paperwork**
- **Improving a community's ability to deliver culturally-competent services through language capacity and other service links**
- **Increasing reliable data on gaps and performance, including developing a more accurate community-wide picture of unmet needs**
- **Ensuring crisis response services are available on weekends and after hours**

Coordinated assessment is more efficient for the system as a whole, but it also has costs. Usually, one or more agencies need to be identified and supported to perform this function. Other agencies must agree to participate and accept the clients referred to them. An assessment tool has to be agreed upon that serves to, at least, assign clients to initial programs such as shelter, prevention, rapid rehousing supports, and others. A strong, working data system that provides real time information about program vacancies is critical. A process for evaluation and improvement of the system has to be put in place to work out bottlenecks.

- **Coordinated assessment may free up some program resources (such as program time on assessment/intake) but alone it won't create new housing or services.**
- **Coordinated assessment should get people to programs faster, but programs still have to do the work of housing people quickly. A community will likely need to adapt or create new program models – such as expanding rapid rehousing from shelter and improving the targeting of its permanent supportive housing – to meet the need.**

- **Depending on how its structured, it may affect client or program behaviors and therefore influence demand for help**

The Role of Philanthropy

Creating and implementing coordinated assessment takes time, commitment, knowledge, and resources. Philanthropic organizations can support local efforts to develop coordinated assessment through both leadership roles in the planning process and strategic investments in its development and operation.

Example of leadership investment

Funder: The Champion Foundation

Goal: Reduce homelessness in the Spokane area through improving the coordination of services and housing

In the late 2000's, Spokane, Washington was facing rising homelessness and wanted to improve its coordination and outcomes. The Champion Foundation made a targeted investment in the community through a series of small but critical grants to the Spokane Low Income Housing Consortium (SLIHC) to help facilitate the local change process. In the first two years, SLIHC's work focused on getting providers and funders to increase use of the ClientTrak data system to collect common intake information and share client data across the system so that clients would not have to do multiple intakes. This process resulted in improvements in data quality, greater trust in the system's reports, and commitments to increase collaboration. With the introduction of rapid rehousing resources in 2009, local providers adapted a common assessment tool for helping assess and place homeless households.

SLIHC used Champion support to evaluate the tool, interviewing both case managers and clients about their experiences and testing the tool's functionality and accuracy. SLIHC made recommendations for modifying and expanding the tool to be used across the entire system of care as part of a new coordinated entry approach. Today, the City of Spokane has selected a partnership to develop a coordinated assessment process for the entire community, using the modified common assessment tool to connect clients to appropriate resources. With Champion support, SLIHC will support an advisory body to oversee the implementation and evaluate the impact of the coordinated assessment process as it rolls out over the next year. The Foundation's investment has been critical to the process and has leveraged key State and local funds to make the coordinated system approach a reality.

www.championfoundation.org

What You Can Do

- **Provide support for the development and operation of coordinated assessment:** Grantmakers can invest in the upfront work of designing and the ongoing work of operating coordinated entry assessment. This can include funding the planning process, the improvement of data systems, and staffing functions to operate phone lines or assessment centers.
- **Support the creation and testing of assessment tools:** A key feature of a coordinated assessment system is the initial tool for identifying needs and assigning programs or resources. A growing number of models exist, but in every community a model must be selected and then each tool customized and evaluated for the community being served. This initial effort takes time and resources.
- **Help develop buy-in among providers and programs:** To make coordinated assessment work, programs must actively work together. In many communities, residential programs such as shelter and transitional housing have been reluctant to fully participate. Philanthropic organizations can support the move to coordinated assessment by incentivizing or requiring participation by grantees.

To Learn More

For more information on coordinated assessment models and efforts:

National Alliance to End Homelessness
<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/4514>

and

HUD paper on Centralized Intake
http://www.hudhre.info/documents/HPRP_CentralizedIntake.pdf

and

US Interagency Council on Coordinated and Centralized Intake
http://www.usich.gov/usich_resources/videos_and_webinars/implementing_coordinated_centralized_intake

For more information about the role of philanthropy in ending homelessness: www.funderstogether.org