



**Los Angeles Homeless  
Data Assessment Report:  
Issues and  
Recommendations**

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*Prepared for:*

***The Los Angeles  
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## 1. Executive Summary

In the summer of 2011, Abt Associates Inc. was engaged by the Los Angeles Homeless Funders Group to conduct an assessment of the current homeless data collection and management processes in Los Angeles County and to provide recommendations for improving them. The Homeless Funders Group is an association of philanthropic partners throughout the Los Angeles area committed to coordinated planning and investments to address homelessness.

This Data Assessment builds on the findings of the self-assessment conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) as part of a Continuum of Care (CoC) Checkup process in the summer of 2011. This Assessment is based on a deeper and more detailed investigation of the current state of homeless data collection and management in Los Angeles and reflects information from interviews with key stakeholders, including LAHSA staff, LAHSA's HMIS solution provider, County departments, and other funders and stakeholders in the Los Angeles region. The Data Assessment also included interviews and focus groups with HMIS end users and makes recommendations based on best practices across the nation, in particular for tools and processes associated with client assessment and coordinated client intake. The findings and recommendations in this document are intended to inform the planning and implementation of coordinated HUD and locally-funded technical assistance work.

### **Ending Homelessness in Los Angeles: A Data Management Strategy**

In recent years Los Angeles has experienced increased national and local attention for the vexing problem of homelessness. The complexities involved in addressing the issue of homelessness anywhere are made more difficult in LA by the large geographic planning and coordination area and the multitude of independent, sometimes competing, political interests.

Los Angeles has experienced success recently with the development of thousands of new Permanent Supportive Housing units across the metro region, many of which use Mental Health Service Act (MHSA) funding to target the chronically homeless and persons with mental illness. Other small scale local initiatives such as Project 50 have provided permanent housing for fifty chronically homeless persons previously residing in tents along the sidewalks of skid row. Other groups are beginning to experience similar success on a neighborhood level by partnering with homeless assistance providers, elected officials, and public systems to create location-specific initiatives. And the United Way, in partnership with the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, has produced a strategic plan to end homelessness for particular subpopulations, people experiencing chronic homelessness and veterans, *Home for Good*. While a combination of specific subpopulation initiatives and geographically targeted strategies may ultimately provide the best region-wide approach for addressing homeless, successful implementation of these plans is hindered by the lack of a single, coordinated data collection and management strategy that can be used to measure progress and document success in ending homelessness.

While some stakeholders have expressed concerns about the adequacy of the LA HMIS as a platform for an improved data collection and management system in Los Angeles County, this Data Assessment finds that LAHSA's HMIS represents the foundation on which a homeless data management strategy for Los Angeles should be based. HMIS already provides a fully-functional infrastructure for client case coordination, program data management, and system-wide coordination and evaluation. Program performance outcomes, as well as system-wide measures, can be monitored using the standardized data

elements already defined as the building blocks of HMIS. System-wide outputs such as the supply of permanent supportive housing units, both in production and operational, can be tracked in HMIS.

Many homeless assistance providers in LA are already using HMIS or are familiar with administrative data management systems and can readily adopt HMIS as their primary data collection and management tool if provided the necessary resources and support. System improvements will be necessary to make HMIS viable as an ongoing tool. These improvements need to be targeted to end users of HMIS, so that their experience with entering and managing data and running data reports is positive and successful. Timely, complete and high quality data entered by end users then will be available to support the data and analysis needs of system planners and policy-makers as they analyze the performance of individual programs and the homeless services system. Homeless people themselves will benefit from more efficient and accurate service planning when service providers coordinate assessments, case plans, referrals, and outcome tracking using HMIS.

The detailed recommendations in this Data Assessment Report are organized around four main questions that center on HMIS as the foundation for a comprehensive data management strategy:

***1. How can HMIS be improved to make it a more effective tool for planning and policy-making?***

All funders throughout Los Angeles County should adopt HMIS as the standard data collection and management platform for all homeless assistance programs. Until HMIS is universally acknowledged and supported as the primary tool for collecting data on homeless people, managing data about service use, and tracking outcomes, it will not have the necessary reach and breadth to become an effective tool for planning and policy-making. The following action items are recommended:

- ✓ Funders should require HMIS participation as a contractual obligation for all programs.
- ✓ LAHSA should incorporate standardized client triage and intake tools, assessment processes, prioritization protocols, referral procedures, and enrollment methodologies into HMIS functionality.
- ✓ LAHSA and the Funders Group should develop consistent definitions and methodologies for calculating program performance measures and support adoption of common definitions and approaches among all homeless assistance programs.
- ✓ LAHSA should complete the mapping of program-level performance benchmarks to desired system-wide outcomes associated with the HEARTH Act.

*Establish HMIS as the central management tool for HIC and PIT data collection and reconciliation processes.* Managing homeless bed and unit inventory data, as well as point-in-time counts, is a natural fit with HMIS operations. HUD already requires that HMIS be the central repository of information about homelessness in the CoC, including information about both programs and clients. The Los Angeles community should support the central role of HMIS in collecting and managing updates about all CoC programs in the community by completing the following tasks:

- ✓ LAHSA should develop a standardized process, integrated within the organization, to survey shelter and housing operators during the PIT count to ensure that regular updates to HIC bed and unit inventory are accurate and complete.
- ✓ LAHSA should use HMIS to generate sheltered PIT counts and verify HMIS-generated counts with providers via survey responses.
- ✓ LAHSA should collaborate with members of the Funders Group to integrate the multiple and disconnected service and unit inventory count processes into a single community-wide effort to establish one consolidated, accurate and reliable HIC data set.

*LAHSA should establish and monitor HMIS data quality standards. Ensuring high quality of data in HMIS is a labor intensive and continuing process. While some immediate management strategies can be employed to improve current quality and lay the foundation for future high quality, the following ongoing activities are recommended:*

- ✓ Establish and monitor HMIS data quality standards for each program type.
- ✓ Provide regular (monthly) performance reports with accompanying detail (client-level drill down) to enable homeless assistance providers to review program performance and address inaccuracies and discrepancies.

## ***2. How can HMIS be improved to make it a better tool for providing client services?***

*Enhance use of HMIS as a program and client management tool.* While some users of HMIS adhere to only the baseline requirements for participation, many homeless assistance programs have started to use the powerful tools HMIS affords that enable providers to capture case management notes, establish and monitor clients' housing goals, and document program eligibility and certification requirements. These management functions can be further supported and expanded by adopting the following recommendations:

- ✓ LAHSA should integrate coordinated assessment tools and processes (such as Vulnerability Index and 10<sup>th</sup> Cost Decile Triage Tool) into HMIS data collection functionality.
- ✓ Policy-makers, funders, and stakeholders should develop systems that use HMIS to track program vacancy availability, document program eligibility, refer clients, and link clients throughout the program enrollment process.

*Improve data sharing and analysis capacity.* Sharing of client-level data among homeless assistance providers, when done with the necessary privacy, security, and consent protocols in place, can enhance providers' ability to understand a client's previous homeless and service enrollment history and coordinate future program services in a more thoughtful and intentional way. Providers and clients both benefit when HMIS data sharing protocols enable providers to build a more complete picture of each client's homeless history and service needs. The following recommendations will promote a more robust sharing environment while maintaining necessary privacy protections:

- ✓ LAHSA should permit and support enhanced HMIS data sharing among different provider agencies and programs.
- ✓ LAHSA and other entities with client-level data on homeless people such as the County Executive Office and other County departments should review existing HMIS client consent protocols to identify opportunities to streamline data sharing permissions while maintaining appropriate protections.
- ✓ LAHSA should update training materials and approaches to encourage and support data sharing.

*LAHSA and its HMIS solution provider should improve HMIS participation rates by enhancing the end user experience.* Homeless assistance providers, who are responsible for collecting client data and entering it into HMIS report that data collection and reporting are critically important to their jobs but that the current system and processes are cumbersome, and complicated. End users will improve their participation in HMIS and promote participation among other providers as the system becomes more user-friendly and provides more utility for day to day program management and operations. The following system and management improvements are recommended:

- ✓ Continue end user focus groups and provider discussion groups to document usability concerns and support system enhancements with Adsystem (the solution provider).
- ✓ Implement current plans to roll out *high-impact management reports* to agencies funded by LAHSA and other participants in the HMIS to encourage tracking of progress against HEARTH Act and community-defined performance measures.
- ✓ Develop targeted strategies to engage emergency shelter and permanent supportive housing providers in HMIS participation, with the goal of achieving 85 percent bed coverage rates across all program types by 2014.

### **3. How can HMIS be linked to other data to enable more comprehensive management and analysis?**

LAHSA and the County Chief Executive Office/Service Integration Branch should integrate HMIS client data with Los Angeles County's Enterprise Linkage Project (ELP). The ELP, LA County's data warehouse project, presents a significant opportunity to integrate homeless client data from HMIS with County departmental data to create a more robust and complete dataset of public system service utilization and associated costs of the most vulnerable homeless people. The following recommendations will support integration of data for ongoing case planning and analytical purposes:

- ✓ Define a set of community-wide research and analysis objectives to inform the development and use of homeless client data in the ELP.
- ✓ Update HMIS client consent protocols to account for uses and disclosures associated with ELP integration.
- ✓ Develop integration protocols that provide guidance for the frequency, process and handling, and security of HMIS data.

LAHSA should enable integration of homeless data from proprietary systems into HMIS, based on narrowly defined limitations and specifications that promote direct HMIS participation as the preferred and supported option. HMIS should be the preferred vehicle for homeless data collection and management, but some homeless assistance providers do not receive public financing for their programs and are not managed to participate in HMIS. In these limited instances, data integration should be allowed and supported.

- ✓ Enable non HUD funded providers to integrate basic client data (Universal Data Elements) with HMIS on a periodic basis (at least annually), as long as program occupancy information is otherwise made available to the HMIS for purposes of real time client referral and enrollment coordination.

### **4. How can LA create a coordinated assessment and intake environment?**

Los Angeles policy-makers, funders, and stakeholders should establish neighborhood-specific, locally-managed service coordination centers to use HMIS to support coordinated client assessment and program enrollment. New ESG and CoC program regulations issued by HUD will require use of coordinated assessment systems to document the needs of clients and make intentional service delivery decisions. While a single, centralized intake system for Los Angeles County is unrealistic, locally administered service coordination centers or 'access hubs' can be effective system management strategies if HMIS is an intentional component of the service delivery system. The system of coordinated assessment and intake would use HMIS in the following ways: Service coordination centers would evaluate homeless individuals' and families' eligibility for homeless assistance and document results in HMIS. Service coordination centers then would use HMIS to manage clients' prioritization for housing and homeless service resources.

- ✓ LAHSA should work with the solutions provider on future activation of the coordinated assessment functionality in the HMIS. This would include program wait list management, referral coordination, and coordinated assessment systems.
- ✓ The Broader group of stakeholders should define a set of system-wide expectations for coordinated assessment and intake but enable local service coordination centers to define and manage their own coordinated assessment and intake environments.

### Current Efforts and Next Steps

In the past year, significant improvements have been realized within the HMIS project in Los Angeles. LAHSA has redoubled efforts to encourage additional providers to participate in HMIS. Rates of participation, especially among Transitional Housing providers, have improved dramatically. LAHSA's HMIS outreach, training, and support materials have been revamped based on a series of recent provider feedback forums and end user focus groups. End users are reporting that HMIS is evolving as an increasingly more effective tool for client case management, program management, and funder reporting. While there continue to be opportunities for improved project management, coordination, and end-user support, HMIS is growing into an effective client, program, and system management tool.

Funders and stakeholders in the homeless services system in Los Angeles County will need to continue to support the HMIS project as the foundation of a coordinated homeless data management strategy. Implementation of a coordinated data management strategy for Los Angeles will require the continued effort of LAHSA, City and County government departments, the Los Angeles Homeless Funders Group, and homeless assistance provider agencies and their staff. Abt Associates has been asked by the Funders Group, as well as HUD, to lead a team that will implement the technical assistance effort that supports this implementation. Technical assistance (TA) activities will need to be sequenced strategically. Based on this Data Assessment, we recommend the phasing of tasks presented in Exhibit 1.1 for review and consideration by the Funders Group and LAHSA. Resources have been committed for most of these tasks by either HUD or the LA Homeless Funders Group (HFG) and are shown on the exhibit.

The activities listed under Phase One are those needed immediately for the entire community working to end homelessness in LA, including providers, funders, and public officials, to adopt HMIS as the core technology for homeless data collection, management and reporting. The first step is to develop a comprehensive improvement plan that describes in more detail the resources needed for each task, time lines, and assignment of responsibility. Activities 7, 8, and 9 will improve basic HMIS data quality, data completeness, and system management functionality. Activity 10, integration of the HMIS with the ELP, is included in Phase One because of its important role in determining whether Permanent Supportive Housing Units are being targeted successfully to people with the greatest need. Activity 11 will expand the functionality of HMIS by designing screening and assessment tools and will lay the groundwork for this expanded use of the HMIS for managing a coordinated assessment and intake system in Phase Two. Phase Two is characterized by expanded and improved use of HMIS into more sophisticated management and analytical data uses as a result of the core HMIS functionality that will have been improved in Phase One. Phase Three then focuses on increasing system openness through HMIS data sharing across homeless assistance providers.

**Exhibit 1.1: Homeless Data Management Tasks and Resource Considerations**

Homeless Data Management Tasks	TA Resources Committed
<b>Current Efforts</b>	
1. Focus data quality improvement efforts on HIC and viable AHAR reporting categories	
2. Assess LAHSA HMIS project management and training effectiveness and implement improvements	
3. Define program and system-level performance outcome standards and draft corresponding specifications for HMIS <i>high-impact management reports</i>	
4. Conduct LA homeless data assessment	HFG <sup>1</sup> - \$35,000
<b>Phase One TA – Initiated in the next 6 months</b>	
5. Adopt HMIS as standard homeless data management system, implement strategy	HFG - \$34,630
6. Develop comprehensive HMIS improvement plan	HUD - \$21,500
7. Establish and support HMIS as the central tool for HIC and PIT data	HUD - \$10,000
8. Support HMIS participation through improved training and support materials	HUD - \$27,500
9. Target TA to providers to increase HMIS participation	HFG - \$47,530
10. Integrate HMIS client data with the Los Angeles ELP	HUD - \$25,500
11. Use HMIS to support coordinated client assessment and intake	HFG - \$29,000
<b>Phase Two – Initiated in the next 12 months</b>	
12. Establish and monitor HMIS data quality standards	HUD - \$7,000
13. Use HMIS to document client eligibility, program targeting, and unit availability	HFG - \$23,750
14. Support expanded program performance measurement and system evaluation	HUD - \$5,500
<b>Phase Three – Initiated in the next 18 months</b>	
15. Support data sharing in HMIS	HUD - \$6,000
16. Enable/support integration of provider-level data in HMIS	
<b>Total Resources Committed</b>	<b>\$272,910</b>

TA resources have already been prioritized for many of these tasks and components within tasks. The LA Homeless Funders Group has provided the resources necessary to draft this report (\$35,000) and has already committed \$134,560 in additional resources for direct TA and ongoing assessment. HUD has approved \$103,350 to address other critical TA needs.

Los Angeles is well on its way to creating a more comprehensive and effective data collection and management strategy for homeless programs and clients. With nearly \$273,000 in technical assistance resources committed to these improvement efforts, Los Angeles will be able to develop and implement a more coordinated and intentional strategy for homeless data management, one that enumerates all persons who experience a housing crisis, tracks the inventory and provision of services and housing, manages client services in a way that successfully links clients to the appropriate services and programs, and leverages the collective understanding of program and system performance to support ongoing improvement efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles Homeless Funders Group