

HMIS – A History

A Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a locally administered, electronic data collection system that stores person-level information about clients who access the homeless service system. HMIS began as a grassroots effort in the mid to late 90's to use technology at the community level to improve service delivery, the Continuum of Care (CoC) process, and community homeless planning efforts. As local implementation of HMIS grew and communities were able to generate data about persons relying on homeless services, it caught the attention of Congress.

In 2001, Congress issued a directive to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide data and analysis on the extent and nature of homelessness and the effectiveness of the McKinney-Vento Act programs, including:

- Developing unduplicated counts of clients served at the local level;
- Analyzing patterns of service use; and
- Evaluating the effectiveness of these systems.

HUD responded to the directive by convening grassroots communities, technology experts, and service providers in a process to inform the development of the HMIS Data and Technical Standards (HMIS Standards) and standard methods for conducting one night counts (Point in Time). HUD made an early decision to define standards for data collection, privacy, and security and not to develop one software application that all providers would use. Rather, HUD developed the HMIS standards and left the development of HMIS applications to the private sector.

HUD required all McKinney-Vento funded providers¹ to participate in HMIS and made HMIS an eligible use of Support Housing Program (SHP) funds through the CoC Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) process. To support this effort, HUD also implemented a National Technical Assistance component to assist communities with the details of implementation.

Between 2001 and 2005, communities began to implement HMIS and collect data to support program evaluation, community planning, funding requests, and grant writing. Each year, HUD increased the scoring in the NOFA process for HMIS implementation progress.

HUD developed and published the first Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) in 2007. The AHAR was a report based on the Universal Data Elements in the HMIS Standards and information from the Housing Inventory Chart communities submitted in the CoC NOFA application that defined the number of beds and units available across the country to house the homeless. This report, along with other data from CoC NOFA, provided data for HUD and Congress to make programmatic and funding decisions for homeless programs.

Congress continued to update the directive stating in 2007 that HUD must ensure full HMIS participation by all CoC and that future CoC funding will be tied to participation in HMIS and the AHAR. HUD announced that eventually CoC participation in the AHAR will become mandatory. In the 2008 CoC NOFA, HUD again increased the scoring component for HMIS implementation, signaling the importance of a fully functional HMIS and the shift towards evidence-based practices.

Communities have been voluntarily providing data for the AHAR report and have implemented advanced uses of technology (data warehousing, handheld devices, and GIS) and analytical processes (self-sufficiency, impacts of program models on client outcomes, effectiveness of 10-yr plans, and advocacy) to support their efforts. With such advances in the use of HMIS as a tool by communities and the technology infrastructure to collect and report data already in place, in 2009, the Homelessness Prevention Fund of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act also called for the use of HMIS to track homeless prevention and re-housing activities. HMIS will allow grantees to generate the required quarterly and annual reporting for this new \$1.5B Recovery Act program.

¹Except prohibited by law.