

Homeless System Response: Client-Informed Data Collection Best Practices: Community Examples

Introduction

As Continuums of Care (CoCs) around the United States continue to build and implement systems to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, data collected and compiled within those systems have become integral to informing communities about how their systems are performing and serving people. These include data about outreach and engagement, shelter, housing, and support services, as well as the implementation of effective and equitable prevention strategies. This increase in data-informed approaches has led to the development of tools that effectively work as a triage process for coordinated entry, functioning both as a pre-screening and an in-depth assessment tool. With the continued use of many of these tools for data collection and analysis, communities around the United States have found clear disparities and shortcomings in the assessment and ultimate outcomes informed by these tools due to a lack of community and cultural context. Without lived experience and stakeholder input into the types of data and methods in which data is collected, it becomes very challenging to address the issues members of a specific community face.

Many communities have started to push for more client-informed data collection practices that elevate the input of those with lived experience and incorporate unique local community characteristics within the data collection process. Communities can use the data available to them to understand what disparities exist within their coordinated entry system and contextualize that data within the local context to create effective strategies to implement changes to address the disparities found. Changes to the assessment process may then lead to more equitable outcomes and address the needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness more effectively.

The following case study examples provide a brief look into some of the initiatives and strategies that communities around the United States are implementing to achieve the goals of equity and effectiveness. It is important to note that implementing and improving client-informed data collection practices is an ongoing process to ensure a more equitable system that listens to the people most impacted and utilizes effective means to assist people experiencing homelessness in getting the housing and services they need. COVID-19 has highlighted that unexpected challenges will continue to arise, and systems and processes must be designed in a way that's adaptive, equitable, and accessible, regardless of the changes to community conditions.

Greater New Orleans CoC

To bring meaningful change to the Greater New Orleans Region, a team representing a wide array of individuals across the CoC was organized to center racial equity through the creation of the Racial Equity Task Force. Underpinning the Task Force's objectives was a list of goals and action plans that covered the spectrum of the CoC's activities. "Our main priority was/is to develop equitable processes that are inclusive of client needs as well as resources to assist case managers in this work."ⁱ One of the key actions driving these priorities was an internal review of data collection practices, assessment methods, and staff and community feedback. More specifically, the Task Force "started to look more extensively at our data as well as implement new assessment questions to have a better understanding of people experiencing homelessness in our community, as well as coordinated entry and other processes."ⁱⁱ Examples of these new questions include reasons for homelessness, family structure, and locally relevant questions to further investigate what is driving homelessness that is specific to the community such as family dynamics.

One of the most significant findings from utilizing this redesigned approach was the prevalence of family conflict and its contribution to individuals experiencing homelessness. As CoC staff continued to receive feedback and insight into this issue, additional assessment questions related to family dynamics such as "have you experienced family conflict, and did it result in leaving home?" have been included to gain a better understanding of individuals' experiences. This locally specific change to the assessment questions informed actions to bolster family mediation support services and expand the capacity of family programs to help with conflict related to family issues. Outcomes such as these underscore the value of data collection and engagement practices that are informed by those with lived experience because it emphasizes how instrumental this additional data is to build a better understanding and to better serve people experiencing homelessness. It should be added that the Greater New Orleans CoC reported that "this new data

not only allowed us to review our data but compare it to public data in our area. It's been helpful to understand our community and how homelessness fits into the fabric of the Greater New Orleans Area."ⁱⁱⁱ

Diving a little deeper into the training and implementation of the Equity Task Force's work, new communication strategies across all levels were important to the equity-driven approach to data collection and subsequent action. At the outset, racial equity trainings were conducted across the CoC to educate members on the dynamics of power, racism, stereotypes, and implicit bias among other related topics. Underpinning this education and training was an emphasis on communication and cultural humility which has served as a key driver toward more equitable work: "Our trainings have been proved to not only assist in recognizing potential conscious and unconscious biases but also how to process them and center cultural understanding within communications with clients."^{iv} Some of the highlights to more effective communication strategies included:

- Ensuring that there are fair and equitable resources available to individuals at all levels (e.g., offering multiple languages in documentation and program/service details).
- Implementing an open and safe feedback loop to discuss incidents of unfair circumstance.
- Ensuring leadership roles are representative of the local population.
- Taking actions supported by equitable communication response plans.

In broader terms, the ultimate aim of these communication strategies is to center people, which as it relates to data collection, means not only adding or changing assessment questions but encouraging exchange and participation that lends itself to the nuances specific to the community as well as uplifting the input and voices of those with lived experience. The work conducted by the Equity Task Force for the Greater New Orleans CoC demonstrates the evolving nature of relationships between people and data and the importance of continuing to incorporate community voice into systems that ultimately aim to support and serve those who need it most.

For more information, view the [work in Greater New Orleans](#).

Snohomish County, WA

Snohomish County in the state of Washington has begun work to incorporate the perspective of clients and those with lived experience into its data collection practices as a result of an internal review of their coordinated entry system. One of the initial findings driving the refinement process was the realization that wait times for assessment were very long and there were a number of disparities within the data collected, particularly in the scoring of those most in need. In an effort to streamline data collection and management in a way that would better inform decision-making, action, and the removal of barriers, the county identified a number of key priorities:

1. Support real-time resource connection, meaning less time "assessing" or being on a waitlist and more time creatively problem-solving.
2. Encourage transparent communication regarding the reality of resource gaps to support people in making informed decisions regarding engagement with navigators.
3. Commit to racial equity in every step of the process.

An important step to developing actionable tasks in this process was engaging with staff and those with lived experience to elicit feedback regarding the current system's performance and identification of starting points for improvement. Following this internal communication, a number of primary tasks were identified:

- Transition toward a phased assessment process.
- Focus on navigation, rapid resolution, and communications support.
- Implement priority pool & housing placement conferencing.
- Utilize transparent messaging and communication.
- Promote community training and education to bolster community relationships and input.
- Consolidate several tools and institute the vulnerability screening tool to streamline data processes.

One of the important dynamics of this process was the development of questions for the Vulnerability Screening Tool, which were organized into the various domains that encompass an individual's life. They were grouped as follows:

- Housing history.
- Household composition.
- Resource connection.
- Health, personal safety.
- Institutional involvement.

Building on this structure, Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) staff found that the types of vulnerabilities individuals and families were asked about could be further grouped by characteristics such as physical, medical, financial, behavioral health, and social environment. This proved to be a very helpful approach to understanding specific details and nuances of certain vulnerabilities and experiences individuals and families face, which speak to the unique dynamics of communities and their social networks. From a more technical perspective, this organizational structure also facilitated a more exhaustive analysis of the vulnerability assessment tool's performance and helped identify areas of improvement.

One of the most important aspects of any changes that aim for more client-informed data collection practices is that this process is regularly refined and improved. In Snohomish County, questions were tested in a number of rounds, which highlighted more specific refinement strategies such as making tweaks to the language of questions, including general narrative questions, and improving the approach to engagement to be more inclusive and open.

Another key aspect of the refinement process was building a better understanding of navigators' perspectives of the process. Part of this process review involved asking navigators if they had engaged with someone recently who was not placed but that they felt should have been. This process also involved trainings with navigators and increased incorporation of lived experience perspectives to strive toward a more comfortable and open environment for exchange that lends itself to more accurate and informed data collection as well as improving service to clients throughout the process.

For more information, view the [work in Snohomish County](#).

Montgomery County, PA

In the context of client-informed data collection, the Your Way Home Montgomery County CoC organized a team to conduct a preliminary assessment of the intersection of race and homelessness in Montgomery County. This work laid the foundation for the Equitable Access Prioritization Team (EAPT) Project which aims to design a more equitable and inclusive process for assessing and prioritizing families and individuals experiencing homelessness. Key to this initiative was building a team with a diverse set of backgrounds and including community partners and stakeholders such as people with lived experiences of homelessness.

Some of the summary findings from this research identified that the system lacked racially explicit language and outcome metrics which contributed to a "race-blind" approach that may explain "the dissonance between workers' intentions and the experiences of those receiving services."^{vi} It was also noted that one of the key barriers to accessing and receiving services was language barriers as well as the vast majority of assessments being administered over the telephone rather than in person. This method tends to inhibit the degree of personalization and trust-building. Similar to other communities, Montgomery County developed a coordinated entry system that administers an assessment tool to determine service prioritization; some staff had expressed concern about "how and when the assessment was being conducted and confusion among some clients about how it impacted their access to housing and services."^{vi}

In response to many of these findings, the EAPT has prioritized lived experience and stakeholder input within the redesign of its assessment and prioritization processes. Some of the strategies implemented to promote participation and stakeholder buy-in have included compensation by local partners as well as including people with lived experience in the Request for Proposal process and consultant projects. This has provided community members with greater decision-making power and a greater stake in the process, which shifts power dynamics by uplifting underrepresented voices within the community.

The team has also implemented a series of physical and digital surveys to further develop its assessment questions and receive feedback regarding its assessment process. The example of Montgomery County further underscores the importance of building a foundation and process rather than an answer or a tool solely focused on outcomes. Tools need to be community-specific and building trust and transparency among staff and community members is integral to developing a process that is community-specific. Part of redeveloping tools to best serve specific community needs is system infrastructure that supports ongoing feedback from both staff and community members. There are many barriers to people providing feedback based upon their experiences and the process must be structured in a way that can pivot to the evolving needs of its community members.

Some of the ways in which EAPT seeks to address these challenges include:

- Diving deeper into the current coordinated entry system and its ability to break down the data by race and ethnicity as well as additional variables that speak to local experience.

- Sharing ideas and cultivating open dialogue with community members, specifically in communities most impacted by homelessness such as communities of color, to strive towards a more equitable and accessible system.
- Supporting consultants’ research and projects with the input of individuals with lived experience.
- Contributing a set of recommendations that inform a process design that is more flexible and adaptive to the needs of community members.

For more information, view the [Your Way Home site](#).

Minnesota: Trusted Messenger Vaccine Program

The Trusted Messenger program’s purpose is to equip and pay people living and working in homeless or congregate living settings to share information with their peers about COVID-19 vaccinations. Participating organizations will select Trusted Messengers from their programs who will share their own experiences and provide a non-medical, non-threatening perspective to aid their peers in making decisions about the COVID-19 vaccine. The [Minnesota Department of Health](#) (MDH) has contracted with [African Career, Education, and Resources, Inc.](#) (ACER), in partnership with the [Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing](#) (MICAH) to operate the program.

The program was designed around the input of people with lived experience. Specifically, the survey tool, data collection methods, and the application to become a trusted messenger were all created with input from a diverse stakeholder group that was primarily comprised of people experiencing homelessness. Including people with lived experience in the application design process removed historic barriers to participation such as contracting with the state and provided people who were experiencing homelessness with easy entry to become a trusted messenger.

All messengers were given [extensive training](#) on the subject matter of vaccines, as well as training on motivational interviewing to assist in better engaging people. Initial trainings are supplemented with monthly Collaborative Trusted Messenger meetings with all contracted organizations and led by the MICAH Executive Director, who also previously experienced homelessness. Additionally, there is a [weekly provider webinar](#), which provides an opportunity for providers to ask questions of peers, hear what their peers are doing, and informally support one another. The people selected to participate in the program are equitably financially compensated (salary and/or contracted services) by the initiative through the programs by which they are employed.

Centering the voices of those who have experienced homelessness and providing the training necessary has allowed the Trusted Messenger program to refine the vaccine outreach messaging and reach more people than it would have had it not included both their voices and their work as paid Trusted Messengers in their own community.

More information on the program and the partners involved can be found at the links above.

Conclusion

As CoCs continue to build and implement systems to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, data collected and compiled within the coordinated entry system has become integral to informing communities about how their homeless response system is performing and serving people. The community examples in this resource demonstrate some of the many unique and creative ways CoCs are approaching a more client-informed data collection process and underscore the iterative nature of the process. This process involves co-designing tools and strategies with staff and people with lived experience to create a data collection and service delivery system that is informed by both lived experience and locally specific cultural dynamics from stakeholder engagement.

Building trust and a more transparent process was a primary driver for this work and one of the key takeaways was that improving client-informed data collection practices is an ongoing process. The goal should be improving the process and its foundational aims more so than a single goal or outcome. As needs and challenges evolve within a community, the data collection process also needs to be adaptive. Client-informed data collection offers a method for building a more adaptive process, which will ultimately improve a CoC’s ability to identify and address the specific needs of individuals and families within the community. View additional information on [elevating lived experience in coordinated entry](#).

ⁱ [Centering Racial Equity in the Greater New Orleans CoC - National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v [*Your+Way+Home+Racial+Equity+Evaluation+Phase+1+Report.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

^{vi} Ibid.