Introduction

Indigenous American/Alaskan Native, Black, Latina/o/e/x, Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander persons experiencing homelessness have often encountered systemic racism and discrimination and are under- or over-represented within our homeless response systems. Ensuring that we address the disparities caused or perpetuated by our systems requires approaching all of our initiatives, policies, practices, analysis and evaluation methods, and data collection with equity and cultural humility. Communities must engage in authentic partnerships and shared decision-making with people who have lived expertise of homelessness to design their data collection processes and their overall homeless response system in ways that better meet the needs of those most impacted.

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a local system used to collect client-level data and data on the housing and services provided to individuals and families at risk of and experiencing homelessness. Implementing a local HMIS is a requirement for Continuums of Care (CoCs) and an integral part of informing communities about how their systems are performing and serving people. To support HMIS implementations in containing accurate data about people at-risk of and experiencing homelessness, communities should understand the data collection processes that occur locally to ensure they are trauma-informed, culturally humble, centered in equity, and healing centered.

People experiencing homelessness may be reluctant to provide demographic or other personal information because of previous experiences with harmful data collection practices (e.g., loss of privacy from data breaches; loss of benefits due to data errors; lack of clarity about how data is used; intrusive, re-traumatizing, or irrelevant data collection). There are questions that people experiencing homelessness may have about the data collected by the homeless response system, including but not limited to:

- *Why is this information necessary?*
- *Who will have access to it?*
- *Is my information safe?*
- *Will this information lead to the services I need to obtain housing, or will I just end up on a waitlist?*
- *Will this information impact whether I am selected for housing or not?*

In addition to implementing client-informed data collection best practices that prioritize lived experience and input into the types of data and methods by which data is collected, staff within the homeless response system should center the individual in every data collection interaction.

Person-Centered Data Collection Principles

The human experience should be prioritized while collecting data within the homeless response system by creating a welcoming, respectful, and collaborative engagement. The following principles will help center people experiencing homelessness in data collection:

- Actively listen to people experiencing homelessness as you observe or interview them for insight into data that will help you understand their range of wants and needs to effectively connect them to resources both within and outside of the homeless response system.
- Approach interview questions with cultural humility and in a racially sensitive trauma-informed manner to help establish trust, rapport, respect, and partnership with people experiencing homelessness, understanding that they are in the midst of living through a crisis.
- Be honest and transparent when collecting data by informing people experiencing homelessness of their rights, their ability to refuse to answer questions, who will have access to the data, how the data will be used or shared, truthful information on access to services or resources, and level-setting expectations for next steps.
- Slow down during the data collection process, consider the pacing of questions during interviews, create space for people experiencing homelessness to ask questions, and be conscious of the environment within which data collection occurs to create a sense of privacy, safety, and a more person-centered atmosphere.
- Consider cultural and linguistic diversity, and varying literacy levels during interviews.

Data to Monitor to Reduce Disparities

Using the data you have to inform decisions and actions is effective for systems change to identify, monitor, reduce, and prevent disparities in your homeless response system. Systems data supports communities in identifying the greatest disparities in access, services, prioritization, referrals, and housing, but does not always reveal *why* communities see certain results or how people experience the system. Pairing qualitative data (non-numerical data or stories of human experience) with systems data will provide a critical understanding of barriers that people experiencing homelessness face while navigating our systems, along with possible solutions for reducing, removing, or preventing those barriers. Non-HMIS data should be included in data used to monitor and ultimately reduce disparities and inequities within the homeless response systems.

Data Sharing and Privacy Policies

Data sharing and privacy policies can reduce paperwork barriers, the burden on people experiencing homelessness, and re-traumatization by eliminating the need to collect the same data elements at different touch points throughout the homeless response system. Sharing data can also improve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness by enhancing service coordination and expediting housing placements as resources allow. Data sharing and privacy policies should follow three key elements: be clear, be honest, and be concise. People experiencing homelessness must understand how the information they are providing can be used and shared, and they must know that providing information is optional but may impact their eligibility. Sharing data is an intimate and personal journey for individuals experiencing homelessness that requires empathy, compassion, and cultural humility. Data transparency is of equal importance at the systems, provider, and client levels and should be used with integrity. In addition to informed consent during the data collection process, sharing *what happens to the data afterward* is equally important. Consider explaining the following elements:

- The assignment of a unique HMIS ID to represent the individual, family, and/or household; required reporting processes and the entities that receive such reports (the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, state governments, CoC partners, etc.) to improve the overall system.
- Intersystem referrals to housing programs.
- Collection of housing-related case notes that represent conversations with different staff across the homeless response system, etc.

Sharing this information in transparency shifts the data collection process from transactional to transformational and creates a person-centered interaction that prioritizes the human experience within the homeless response system.