

## Prevention Targeting 101

### INTRODUCTION

Programs aimed at preventing homelessness have become increasingly popular in communities due to new funding sources, a desire to reduce costs to the homeless assistance and other systems, and the belief that providing short-term financial assistance upfront can prevent a homeless episode. Many communities used Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) funds to create their prevention programs. Under HPRP, communities were advised to serve the households that would become homeless without the receipt of this assistance and would also be completely stable in permanent housing afterwards. Communities faced a daunting task in accurately identifying households that fit this description. An additional hurdle to figuring out proper targeting techniques was that determining the success of prevention efforts was difficult due to the need to follow up with recipients.<sup>1</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that communities have struggled to find the most effective targeting threshold. While good targeting may seem difficult, it is possible. By using an approach driven by local data, communities can use their prevention funds more efficiently to resolve housing crises. This brief is a concise “how-to” guide on how communities can begin or improve efforts to identify and effectively assist the households who are most likely to become homeless and serve them appropriately.

### HOW TO TARGET

#### **Use Data on Households in Emergency Shelter to Target Prevention Assistance**

Communities can improve their ability to prevent homeless episodes by using the characteristics of their sheltered population as the criteria for determining if a household should receive prevention assistance. If the goal of prevention assistance is to prevent people from losing their housing and needing to enter shelter, it follows that homeless assistance systems should be targeting people that have the same profile as people who have entered shelter in the past. Usually, a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) or similar data collection system can provide all the data that a community needs. Some factors to look at include:

- Household income
- Disabilities in the household
- Criminal records

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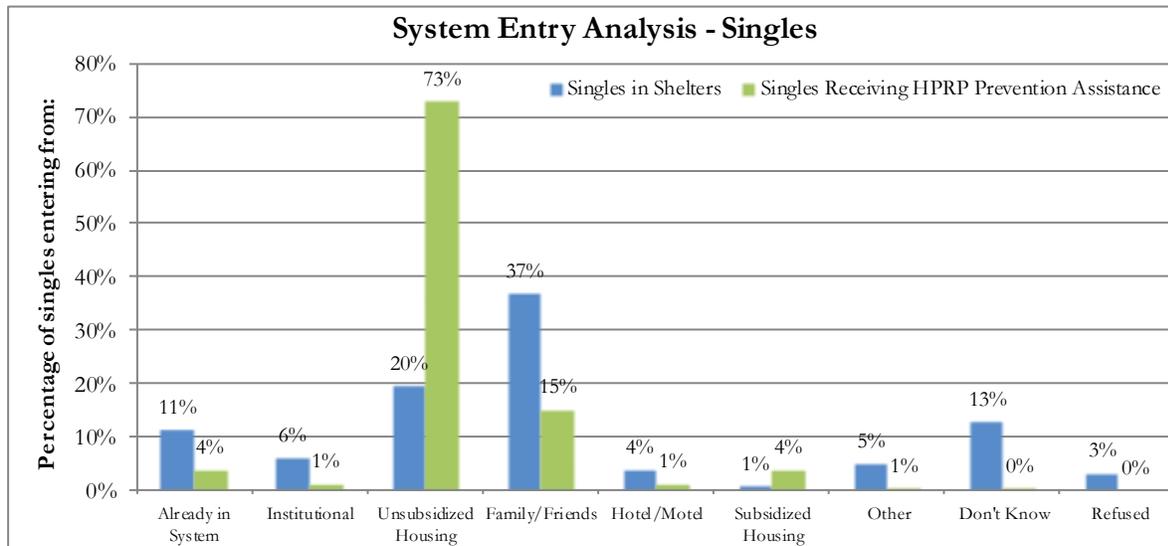
<sup>1</sup> Shinn, Marybeth Ph.D. and Jim Bauhmohl D.S.W. (1999, August). *Rethinking the Prevention of Homelessness*. National Symposium on Homelessness Research: What Works. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).  
<http://aspe.hhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/13-Preven.HTM>

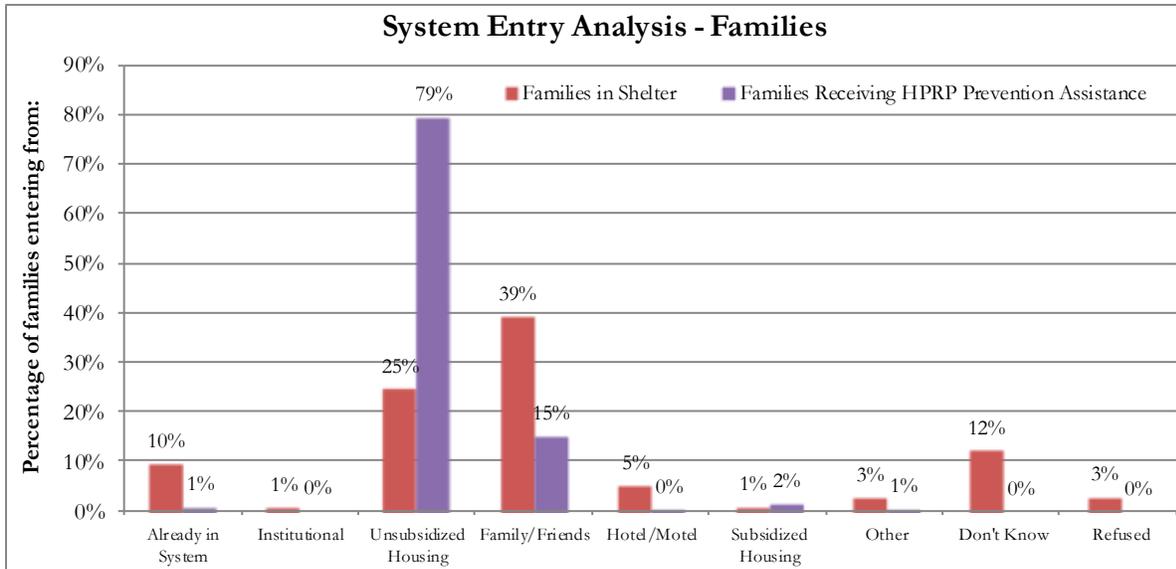
- Past evictions
- Pregnancy
- Benefits received (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, etc.)
- Number of and length of previous homeless episodes
- Living situation prior to coming to the homeless assistance system
- Employment status
- Household size and membership (presence of children, their ages, etc.)

Without using shelter data in selecting prevention assistance recipients, communities may run a much higher risk of inadvertently serving people who would never have become homeless in the first place, limiting the resources available to households that truly need them. The graphs in Figure 1 below illustrate this point by comparing data on prior living situations for households served by HPRP prevention assistance and households entering shelter in a community that participated in the Center for Capacity Building’s [HEARTH Academy](#). The differences between these groups in terms of prior residence are typical for many communities the Alliance has worked with that have not used shelter data in their targeting strategy; most prevention assistance ended up going to households coming from their own unsubsidized housing, even though most people entering shelter were coming from a doubled up situation with family or friends.

**Figure 1: Prior Living Situations for Singles and Families**

*Source: Center for Capacity Building HEARTH Academy data*





Discrepancies are also typical in factors other than prior living situation. For example, in another city the Alliance worked with, there was a \$1,000 difference in monthly income between households receiving prevention assistance funds and households in shelter. When analyzing [its prevention efforts](#) in this way, Hennepin County, MN, found that 63 percent of families in their shelter system had been homeless before, while only 36 percent of families receiving prevention assistance had been. They also found that while 33 percent of sheltered families had a head of household under the age of 22, only 1 percent of families receiving prevention assistance did. It is obvious in these cases that the households entering shelter – the ones who likely needed prevention assistance the most – and the people actually receiving prevention assistance were often quite different, and that the households needing prevention assistance the most had many more housing barriers than the households receiving it.

Although providers may have concerns about a high-barrier household’s ability to retain their housing after being assisted, as the Alliance describes in the brief, [What is 'sustainable' housing cost burden? Implications for HPRP](#), only about 10 percent of impoverished people end up becoming homeless over the course of a year. Providers must focus on identifying and serving the small subset of households who are truly on the immediate edge of homelessness in order to maximize the effectiveness of prevention funds. To further improve the chances of success for the households served, prevention programs should consider offering services to help households maximize whatever income they have, including linking them with additional benefits they qualify for and referring them to education and employment programs.

### **Prioritize Households with the Most Imminent and Intense Housing Crises**

Targeting closer to a household’s anticipated separation from housing increases the chances they will actually need financial assistance from the homeless assistance system in order to stay out of shelter. The more time a household has until their housing situation falls apart, the more likely it is they will find a workable solution for their current situation that does not require the

homeless assistance system to intervene. For this reason, households that have come seeking emergency shelter but may still be in their own housing situation are often good candidates for receiving prevention assistance. Other factors, including oral confirmation from current roommates/leaseholders that the person in question must leave their housing and has nowhere else to go, are also useful in determining how likely it is the household will need assistance. At the same time, an eviction notice on its own is not close enough to homelessness for targeting purposes, as many people may still be able to find other resources to help them resolve the situation before they are forced to leave their unit.

### **Communities Without Data**

For communities that do not have reliable shelter entry data or any data at all, the factors listed below can be used as an initial guide on who to target for receipt of prevention assistance until a proper data collection system has been developed. The [interim ESG regulations](#) also provide some guidance by defining people considered at risk of homelessness (and who are eligible to receive HUD-funded prevention services). Some criteria to consider from the regulations and other Alliance resources are listed below. Generally speaking, households with multiple risk factors should be prioritized for assistance.

Factors to consider using include:

- Household has no income
- Household has moved frequently for economic reasons (at least two times within a 60 day period)
- Household lives in an unstable housing situation
- Household is currently experiencing a housing crisis (dangerous living conditions, eviction)
- Household is a secondary tenant (doubled up)
- Household is exiting an institution
- Household lives in overcrowded housing
- Household lives in a hotel or motel that is not paid for by the government or a charitable organization
- Household includes a young child under the age of two
- Head of household is under the age of 24 and was in foster care at some point
- Household has had a prior homelessness episode

### **Next Steps**

After identifying the characteristics of sheltered households and carefully examining the extent of the household's housing crisis, the next step is to create or modify an assessment tool. Assessment tools should include questions that determine how a household compares to sheltered households and include a scoring or rating system that makes it more likely households that are the most similar to sheltered households receive assistance. Hennepin County, in reaction to its community's findings, updated its prevention screening tool (available on the [Alliance's website](#)) and scoring system. Now households with the same characteristics as

their sheltered population, including ones with extremely low incomes, multiple barriers to housing, previous homeless episodes, and pregnant mothers under 30 are more likely to qualify to receive prevention assistance.

Assessment of eligibility for and provision of homeless prevention funds best happens through the homeless assistance system's "front door(s)," or system entry point(s). Homeless assistance systems with [coordinated entry](#) systems should use their intake center(s) to assess for prevention needs as well as any other housing and service needs. Systems without coordinated entry should train individual providers on what kinds of questions to ask to see if a household coming them for help is eligible for prevention assistance. Providers should be instructed to ask these questions and only admit a household to their program if prevention has been eliminated as a possibility in solving their housing crisis. They should also be trained on where to send households who need prevention funds if their organization does not have access to this resource.

Systems should also be aware of mainstream agency resources that could be tapped to provide prevention support. Mainstream agencies are organizations outside of the homeless assistance system that provide funds or other forms of support to certain populations. Mainstream resources that might be able to provide utility, rental, or other financial assistance include:

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs
- Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) funds
- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds
- Faith-based organizations
- Foundations
- Public Housing Authorities (PHAs)
- Community Action Programs (CAP)
- The United Way
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs

The homeless assistance system should be aware of the eligibility requirements households must meet to receive assistance from these other organizations and work questions about these requirements into their assessment tools. Households that may qualify for assistance under the criteria of these others funds should be referred to the correct agency for assistance.

## **EVALUATION**

There are two things that communities will want to evaluate to measure success with prevention targeting: one is their success in reaching people that would have become homeless without some kind of intervention or assistance, and the second is how well they have prevented homelessness for the households served. First though, communities will need to develop proper performance measurement standards.

### **Developing a Performance Standard**

Measuring the outcomes of prevention assistance requires a performance measurement system that sets reasonable expectations for success and adjusts for the risk of households being served. Having unrealistic expectations for prevention program outcomes may have consequences for consumers needing assistance. When prevention assistance programs are expected to achieve unrealistically high outcomes, they frequently assist people who have the lowest risk of becoming homeless, commonly referred to as “creaming.” A prevention program with a very high success rate that has never used shelter data in the past to aid in targeting efforts is probably targeting its resources to people who would never have become homeless in the first place. Programs experiencing these high success rates should be extra careful to ensure that they are serving households whose profiles match those of the households in the shelter system.

Risk adjustment, the process by which the definition of a positive outcome is adjusted based on who is being served, is one way that programs can figure out what level of success they should reasonably expect. Risk adjustment might include setting a lower benchmark for certain households: for example, a program might be expected to achieve success preventing homelessness for 60 percent of households served when those households have a high number of risk factors but may also be expected to achieve a success rate of 80 percent for households with fewer risk factors. More information about benchmarking and risk adjustment can be found in the Alliance guide [\*What Gets Measured Gets Done: A Toolkit for Performance Measurement for Ending Homelessness\*](#).

### **Successfully Reaching Would-Be Homeless Households**

As noted earlier, it can be difficult to know who would become homeless without a homeless assistance system intervention. Communities should continue to monitor the characteristics of households entering shelter and modify their requirements for prevention assistance accordingly. Another way to ensure the right households are being reached is to follow a comparison group of people who qualified for prevention assistance but did not receive it. The comparison group approach should only be used in cases where it does not raise serious ethical concerns. A natural way to do this is to look at people that have been turned away from prevention programs in the past due to a lack of available program funds.<sup>2</sup> If this control group of unserved households is becoming homeless at a higher rate than those who receive assistance, this is a good indicator that the community’s targeting criteria are on point. If the comparison group is **not** becoming homeless at a higher rate, the community will have to modify their targeting efforts.

### **Successfully Preventing Homeless Episodes for Households Served**

Outcomes for households receiving prevention assistance should be tracked over time at set intervals (e.g., one month after being assisted, three months after been assisted, etc.). Tracking the return rate of persons served with prevention assistance to the homeless assistance system

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<sup>2</sup> Gale, Katharine. “Do Conventional Prevention Programs Really Prevent Homelessness? Considerations for Using Local Data in Prevention Planning.”

will provide good information on how effective current prevention interventions are or have been.

## **CONCLUSION**

Prevention offers one way communities can reduce the number of households entering the homeless assistance system. Because funds are limited, communities must be strategic in committing funds to households that are the most likely to become homeless: these are usually higher barrier households with imminent housing crises who mirror those households already in shelter. By targeting those households most similar to the ones already in emergency shelter for assistance, communities maximize their chances that homeless assistance resources will return maximum results in terms of preventing future episodes of homelessness.