

BECOMING AN OUTCOME-ORIENTED HOMELESS SYSTEM

This brief provides guidance to communities about how they can meet these responsibilities and improve their effectiveness in ending homelessness by becoming an outcome-oriented system.

The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act set the stage for a significant transformation in the approach to ending homelessness in the United States. The HEARTH Act sets forth measurable outcomes for communities as they work towards reducing homelessness (see Box 1) and charges Continuums of Care (CoCs) with responsibilities to meet them.

Becoming an effective outcome-oriented system means that communities constantly improve their performance in meeting these outcomes by paying attention to data, assessing performance, and planning for improvement. An effective outcome oriented system gives communities regular feedback on how they are performing as a whole and how they can take steps to further reduce homelessness.

WHAT DOES AN OUTCOME-ORIENTED HOMELESS SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Creating an outcome-oriented homeless assistance system entails institutionalizing a community process led by key stakeholders that regularly uses data to evaluate, monitor and improve the functioning of the system and programs to end homelessness. The community process should incorporate the following steps.

1. **Assess overall system performance.**
2. **Develop short-term local goals to improve performance.**
3. **Create and implement an action plan.**
4. **Monitor progress toward short-term goals and benchmarks.**
5. **Adjust action plan and implementation strategies to improve performance.**

This is a circular process, as short-term goals and benchmarks are achieved the overall functioning of the system can then be reassessed and new goals and benchmarks can be developed (step 6). Figure 1 captures this process.

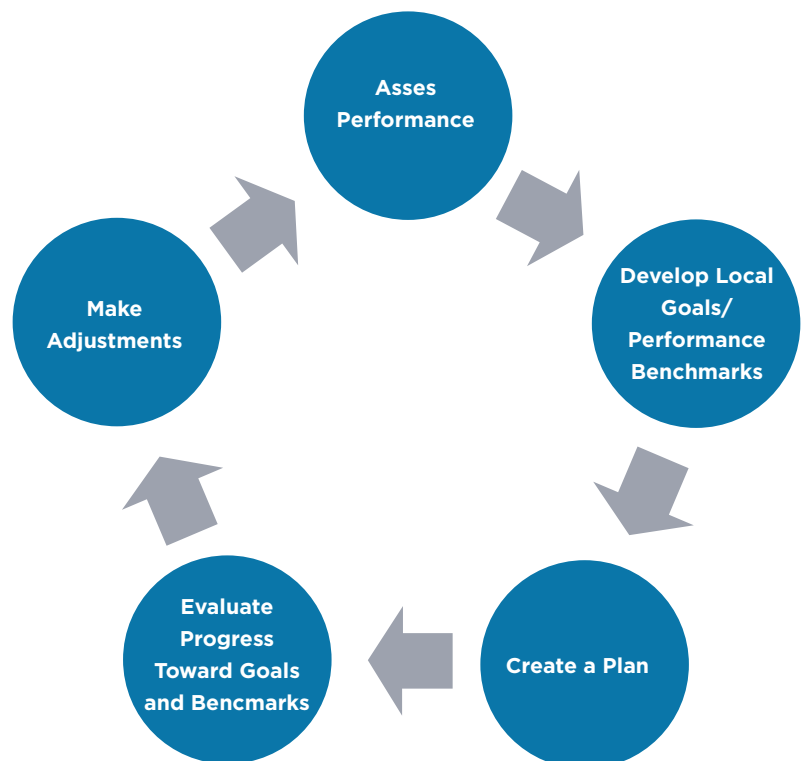


FIGURE 1. Steps to Achieve an Outcome-Oriented Homeless System.

PRELIMINARY STEP: ESTABLISH A CHANGE AGENT GROUP

Before beginning the process to evaluate and institute reforms to the homeless assistance system, it is necessary to identify the group of individuals who should oversee and be part of that effort. This change agent group may be the entire CoC membership or a subset of actors. It is usually important to have key outside stakeholders who can help build the political and public will that may be needed to support changes, particularly if change requires shifts in how funding has traditionally been allocated across programs or interventions.

Individuals or organizational representatives who are primary funders of the homeless system would be particularly valuable to include as would individuals with a lot of data expertise, such as the CoC HMIS administrator.

This group of individuals should be committed to meeting regularly to assess system performance and make recommendations for the development of goals and benchmarks to improve system performance. Subcommittees may be formed and new participants recruited to ensure expertise is available to the group to create and implement effective action plans. Whatever the composition, there should be an expectation that the change agent group is accountable to the larger

community and regularly keeps the public aware of progress being made.

STEP 1: ASSESS BASELINE PERFORMANCE

The first step for the group is to critically examine the homeless service system's current performance in ending homelessness, taking into consideration the big picture goals outlined by HUD (see Box 1). The data that communities are regularly required to submit to HUD (i.e., an annual Point-in-Time count and other systems performance data) provide a useful

starting point for this discussion, but other data elements may be valuable. This could include information about local waitlists for shelter or other homeless service interventions, the costs per permanent housing exit for various program interventions, or qualitative data about why some programs have low utilization rates or high rates of involuntary exits (or exits to unknown locations) compared to others (see Box 2).

The quality, accuracy, and timeliness of local data are critical for both capturing system performance and to monitor improvements. As such, the first short-term goal that might be embraced may be to improve or augment data (see Box 3 for some tips to improve data quality).

Mapping how people commonly enter and exit the homeless service system provides one measure of performance. This might capture the average number of times a person needed to call, or weeks they had to wait before entering shelter; the processes required before

being identified or approved for a homeless service intervention (such as rapid re-housing); the number of different agencies the household needed to contact to meet basic needs to exit homelessness; or the

Box 1. 2009 HEARTH Act Outcomes

- Reduce the length of time individuals and families remain homeless;
- Reduce the rate at which individuals and families who are housed return to homelessness;
- Ensure all homeless individuals and families in a given region are served;
- Grow jobs and income for homeless individuals and families;
- Reduce the number of individuals and families who become homeless; and
- Reduce the overall number of homeless individuals and families.

Box 2. Pierce County, WA: Using Performance Data to Drive Decision-making

In [Pierce County, WA](#), the CoC conducted an analysis to understand the number of families in their system, where they come from, how long they stay in the system, and how much is being invested in ending homelessness. The analysis revealed that the length of stay in transitional housing (405 days) was significantly higher than in rapid re-housing (150 days); exits to permanent housing were similar between the interventions, while the cost of transitional housing per family was much higher (\$25,000 vs \$8,000 per family).

Based on this assessment, the county found that with no new funds, rapid re-housing could serve three times the number of households, with comparable or better outcomes and invested more heavily in this intervention.

amount of time the individual had to wait for services after receiving a referral. Systems mapping can indicate areas where streamlining processes can be implemented that could greatly reduce homelessness.

A strong understanding of how the local homeless service system is functioning, including relative to other communities or national benchmarks, will likely help committee members arrive at a consensus as to which issues should be tackled first. Crises, or political considerations, may also play a prominent role in determining priorities. Increases in people living without shelter or a program losing funding can result in demands that homeless leaders take swift action. The opportunity to address and overcome challenges can result in increased political support for the community's effort to end homelessness.

STEP 2: DEVELOP LOCAL GOALS AND PERFORMANCE BENCHMARKS

The second step is to develop local short-term goals and benchmarks to improve performance. Identifying goals should be a reasonably open process so as to facilitate buy in. When multiple actors have ownership over achieving the goal, they are more likely to remain engaged and leverage their own resources toward that goal. The support of the broader community may also be needed if the adopted goals require uncomfortable changes to how homeless service system or individual programs operate.

While some communities may elect to adopt sweeping goals that will require change on multiple fronts, it is also common to identify one or two priority action areas. Focusing on discrete goals can be useful to institute deep and swift change in one area. It is also helpful to identify goals that are both aspirational but attainable. The adoption of timelines is also necessary to monitor progress (see Box 4 for a discussion of 100 Day Challenges).

Other goals that may be adopted require ongoing work, for example, to achieve and maintain performance standards for interventions. This might entail having all rapid re-housing programs achieve certain performance standards (e.g. see Box 5 on reducing the length of time participants are homeless by expediting access to housing) or having all shelters reduce barriers to entry to limit the number of people being turned away within a certain time frame.

Box 3. Improve data quality for baseline assessments

To ensure CoCs have quality data to assess baseline and progress:

- Provide explicit instructions to programs entering data into HMIS as to what data will be used, when the data will be collected out of HMIS, and how the data will be used and reported. Information should be incorporated into HMIS governance charters. Include data quality standards and required data points for each household.
- Determine the frequency of reporting (e.g., monthly, quarterly), in an effort to balance the burden of reporting with the need for up to date information. [NOTE: Not all measures may need to be analyzed/reported in the same manner; i.e., some measures could be examined monthly, while others may require quarterly review. It is critical to determine who is monitoring the data and if it is publicly available.]
- Ensure all data reported at the community level can be drilled down to the program and client level in order to facilitate performance improvement.
- Provide a timeline for providers to enter and review their data as reported to community stakeholders.

Box 4. 100 Day Challenges: Communities Developing Aggressive Local Goals that Drive Change

100 Day Challenges provides an example of how a short-term goal can galvanize and inspire the broader community while helping to institute broader change. Many communities have adopted 100 day housing goals for a subset of their homeless population: chronically homeless people; unsheltered families; and youth. Embracing such a goal can have an immediate and profound impact on improving the lives of people being housed. It can also have an immediate and demonstrable impact on the homeless assistance system: including reducing point-in-time counts of people experiencing homelessness, increasing shelter vacancies, and improving exits to permanent housing. It can also serve to inspire and instruct the broader community on how homelessness can be ended.

Box 5. Rapid Re-Housing: Monitoring and Improving Performance in Your System

[Rapid Re-Housing Performance Benchmarks and Programs Standards](#) and the [Rapid Re-Housing Performance Evaluation and Improvement Toolkit](#) can guide communities as they develop specific training, performance benchmarks, and evaluation tools to assess performance of rapid re-housing programs in their system. These include:

- **Performance Benchmark #1:** Reduce the length of time program participants spend homeless. For a program to meet this performance benchmark, households served by the program should move into permanent housing in an average of 30 days or less.
- **Performance Benchmark #2:** Permanent housing success rates. For a program to meet this performance benchmark, at least 80 percent of households that exit a rapid re-housing program should exit to permanent housing.
- **Performance Benchmark #3:** Returns to homelessness. For a program to meet this performance benchmark, at least 85 percent of households that exit a rapid re-housing program to permanent housing should not become homeless again within a year.

The goals should ultimately be designed to help the community improve its performance in achieving the outcomes from the HEARTH Act. This in turn will help the community improve its competitiveness in annual competitions for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Program CoC funding. More importantly, it will help improve the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

It is also important to ensure that once goals have been identified, a system is in place to monitor progress toward achieving them. At the onset, communities should identify the data needed to evaluate progress and develop a plan for how it will be collected, monitored and shared. For example, some communities make data demonstrating progress toward goals easily accessible to the public, sharing successes through social media or press releases (see Box 6 and 7 for examples).

STEP 3: CREATE A PLAN.

Once the goals and benchmarks for improving the system have been identified, the group must develop and implement a plan. Elements of the plan should include strategies and action steps aligned with meeting those goals and benchmarks.

Achieving the goals and benchmarks may require the reallocation of resources or the adoption of new policies

at the programmatic or system level. Such changes can be tumultuous for providers as well as for people experiencing a housing crisis who are more familiar with the old way of service delivery. It is helpful if the broader community of stakeholders, including people experiencing homelessness, has a clear understanding of the goals the homeless assistance system is seeking to attain, why shifts in approaches or policies are being adopted, and how changes will be implemented.

If providers are being asked to change how they deliver services, it is important they are provided the support and training necessary to make the shifts and succeed in their new roles in the homeless assistance system. As an example, shelter providers who are expected to eliminate barriers to shelter entry may benefit from training in providing voluntary services or using harm reduction approaches.

Box 6. Sharing Rapid Re-Housing Data

Communities around the country have designed mechanisms for broader sharing of data on performance of their homeless systems. Two examples of such communities are included below, focusing on rapid re-housing outcomes:

Fairfax County, VA, Office to Prevent and End Homelessness has developed community-wide goals, which also served to build support for rapid re-housing. The Office shares data on performance through a variety of means including social media, printed reports, and community presentations.

EveryOne Home in **Alameda, CA** shares the results of its rapid re-housing performance outcomes with the community and its network of providers through the publication of a comprehensive Annual Outcomes Report that it posts on its website.

See Box 8 for a discussion of how Alameda County, CA designed a community process to develop standardized outcomes and performance benchmarks for each sector of its system.

STEP 4: EVALUATE PROGRESS TOWARDS GOALS AND BENCHMARKS

CoCs should regularly evaluate their progress toward meeting expected benchmarks and goals. CoCs can do this by meeting on a regular basis to review the data. Identifying what on a program level and systems level may or may not be moving the CoC toward its adopted goals is a key part of this process.

When communities assess their performance towards the local goals they have adopted and performance implementing action steps, they should focus particular attention on those programs that do not appear to be moving the system forward. For example, if it is determined that a CoC is not meeting a local goal, the community should determine whether:

- Programs did not adhere to the plan, and if so, why and what steps will need to be taken to address this.
- Programs adhered to the plan but the system still is not moving toward those goals, and therefore what additional steps need to be taken to understand why this is happening.

CoCs may find that some programs are achieving benchmarks while others are not. For programs that are meeting and exceeding performance expectations, CoCs may want to explore the practices they have adopted that can be shared with the rest of the community. CoCs may also explore what programs that are struggling to achieve benchmarks or timelines are having particularly difficulty with. CoCs can also learn from communities who have made similar adjustments and achieved greater success. (See Box 9 for an example of a community that regularly evaluates progress towards performance benchmarks.)

STEP 5: MAKE ADJUSTMENTS

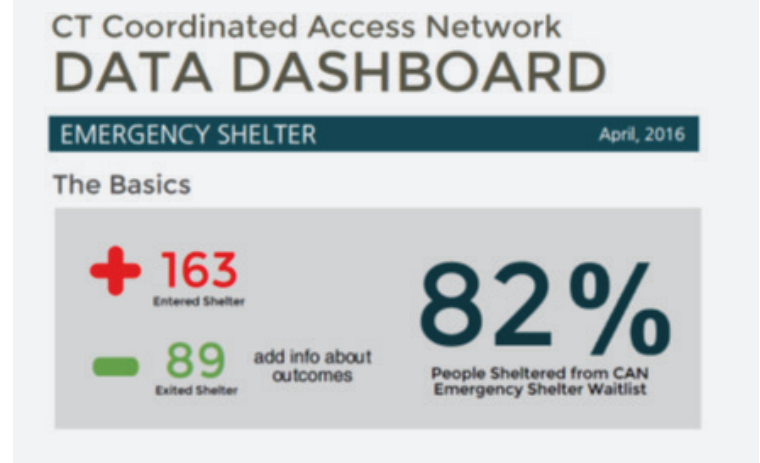
The primary value of regularly evaluating progress toward the desired goals is that it allows the CoC to make necessary adjustments midstream.

Box 8. Alameda County, CA; EveryOne Home – System-Wide Outcomes and Performance Benchmarks for Ending Homelessness

In 2010, [EveryOne Home](#) in Alameda County launched a community process to develop standardized outcomes and performance benchmarks for each sector of its system. The community adopted a set of standardized outcome measures, including measures such as “exiting with income” or “exiting to known destinations” which applies to all sectors. Others measures, such as “avoiding exits to streets or shelter” apply to Emergency Shelters, Employment Programs, and Services Only sectors. Benchmarks, the rate at which outcomes measures are to be achieved for each intervention type (i.e. 65%, 40%, etc.), were established based on the sector’s actual performance in 2009 and information from other communities about what might be achievable. In some cases, where there was no current data, aspirational goals were set. In most cases, the goal was set so that at least 25% of agencies were already performing at that benchmark rate. In addition, the community determined that programs demonstrating a difference of at least 10 percentage points in performance above the prior year would be viewed as meeting expectations even if they had not yet reached the benchmark.

Box 7. Example of a Data Dashboard

Connecticut’s Coordinated Access Network produces a Data Dashboard for regularly reporting to the broader community on performance of their system. An example of such a dashboard focused on emergency shelter outcomes is to the right.



Box 9. The Community Alliance for the Homeless (CAH) in Memphis/Shelby County, TN

The Community Alliance has developed a “performance culture” based on performance goals. The CAH shares data on a monthly basis with all partners, including agency statistics. Extraordinary performance by a particular agency or staff member is highlighted in Consortium meetings. Funding decisions are based on performance as determined by the annual Performance Scorecard. The Scorecard contains benchmarks including length of time homeless, returns to homelessness, and income growth. Programs are also evaluated on how they perform relative to other programs.

If particular programs are struggling with adopting new practices or meeting new guidelines, the CoCs may consider developing data-driven performance plans with specific actionable goals and dates for evaluating if changes have been made. CoCs may also choose to provide more training to struggling programs or provide high performing programs additional funding.

The evaluation may also indicate that programs are adopting new practices and policies but the desired impacts are not being realized. The CoC should explore what additional action steps are needed to achieve the adopted goals. As an example, a shelter may have reduced barriers to entry as required, but people living outdoors may not know about, or trust, that the shift

has occurred. This might require greater community investment in outreach to unsheltered people. CoCs may have expanded rapid re-housing capacity without achieving substantial reductions in the length of time people are homeless. What additional steps and activities can be adopted to expedite re-housing locally? Are additional housing search resources required? Are there steps that should be taken to expedite referrals to rapid re-housing programs? How can the action plan be modified to attain the goal?

STEP 6: START AGAIN!

Finally, CoCs should plan on stepping back to assess the overall functioning of their system. What new goals and benchmarks can be adopted to improve performance? Create a plan and a timeline to meet new benchmarks. Evaluate performance toward those benchmarks and make necessary adjustments based on the evaluation of progress toward goals.

Designing an outcome-oriented homeless system requires that CoCs take a holistic view of their community’s needs, determining what services are best suited to meet those needs. It requires that the system be flexible, nimble to changing circumstances, data-driven and transparent. If implemented effectively, communities who use these strategies can develop a better understanding their system’s performance, informing decisions that can move systems closer toward the goal of ending homelessness.

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The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a leading national voice on the issue of homelessness that accomplishes its mission through research and education, policy analysis and advocacy, and capacity building. The Melville Charitable Trust is the largest foundation in the U.S. that is exclusively devoted to supporting solutions to prevent and end homelessness.