

Looking Back at the VI-SPDAT Before Moving Forward

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Over the last decade, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has been urging communities to build coordinated entry systems that include assessment of which consumers are most in need of services. Various tools emerged to meet this need. The Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) became an industry leader, being implemented in numerous communities across the country. However, in December 2020, it was announced that the tool was being phased out by its creators. Around the same time, HUD began a demonstration project focused on racial equity in coordinated entry processes.

Change is in the air—homeless services are headed towards a new generation of assessment tools and approaches. Through the “Next Generation Assessment Tools” Series, the Alliance will provide a forum for sharing information and ideas for moving new assessment tools forward. The first brief will examine the history of the VI-SPDAT and policies that drove the field to the current moment – and what this means for future tools.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VI-SPDAT

Homeless services systems do not have enough resources to serve everyone in need. Tragically, this means that they must decide who will receive services and who will not. Through guidance, HUD requires communities to prioritize the most vulnerable people, or those who have the greatest need for services.ⁱ

According to OrgCode Consulting, a co-creator of the tool, the VI-SPDAT was created with that goal in mind.ⁱⁱ Although not the only assessment tool in use nationwide, the survey became an industry leader, and by 2015 was implemented in at least 39 states, the District of Columbia, and internationally.ⁱⁱⁱ Administered by service providers to people requesting homeless services, the questions focus on areas that include housing history, health, and safety on the streets.

Initially introduced in 2013, the VI-SPDAT was a joint effort—OrgCode’s SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) Prescreen tool was merged with Community Solutions’ VI (Vulnerability Index) tool.^{iv} Updated versions of the VI-SPDAT were released in 2015 and 2020.^v There are currently subpopulation-specific versions of the instrument for single adults, families with children, and youth.

2008

Congress funds Rapid Re-Housing for Homeless Families Demonstration (RRHD). For the first time, HUD requires some form of “centralized intake” and a standardized assessment tool for CoCs to receive funds for the program.

2010

USICH presents *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* to the Office of the President and Congress. Coordinated entry and processes for identifying consumer needs are critical components of outlined strategies.

2013

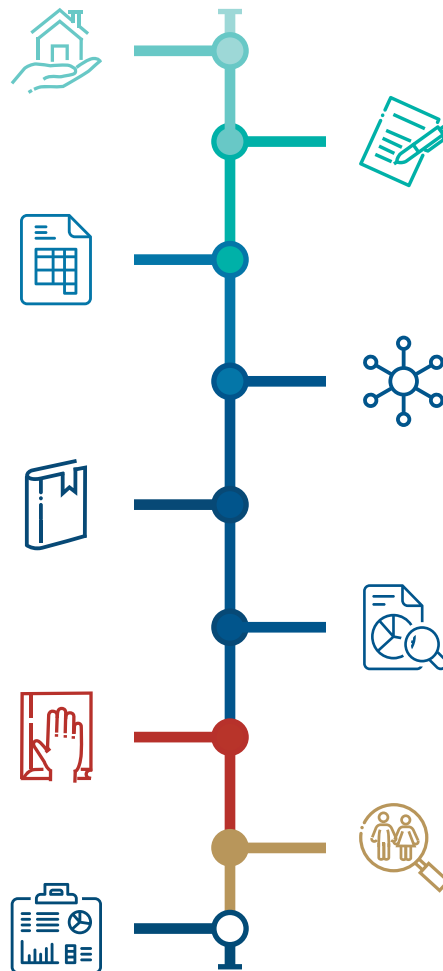
OrgCode and Community Solutions release the first version of the VI-SPDAT. Although the instrument will eventually become an industry leader, a number of surveys and vulnerability indices were put into use across the country (representing a broad array of approaches and questions).

2020

OrgCode announced that they were beginning the process of discontinuing the VI-SPDAT.

2021

CoCs from across the country generally begin a process of reconsidering their approaches to coordinated entry (including assessment tools).



2009

Congress passes the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and the HEARTH Act (which reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, first passed in 1987). Implementation allowed HUD to further define “centralized or coordinated assessment” and incentivize/require assessment tools.

2012

Through the CoC Program Interim Rule, centralized intake systems became a regulatory requirement. In a fashion similar to HGIS implementation, HUD did not prescribe a particular tool or practice but instead published guidance on what systems should look like. CoCs began searching for a process/tool that would meet the requirements.

2017

HUD releases the HUD Notice Establishing Additional Requirements for a CoC Centralized or Coordinated Entry System (01-2017). Additional tools and guidance for CoCs to establish and operate coordinated entry systems, including Coordinated Entry Core Elements (06-2017) and Coordinated Entry Data Elements (04-2020) follow.

2021

HUD SNAPS introduces the Coordinated Entry Equity Demonstration project. C4 begins working with cohorts of communities to design more racially equitable coordinated entry processes.

In recent years, researchers evaluated the tool with mixed results. A study focused on the youth version found that scores do predict who is most likely to return to homelessness^{vi}— meanwhile, a separate effort focused on individual adults found the opposite^{vii}. At least three studies identified unintended racial disparities in survey outcomes.^{viii} Other findings suggest that some questions may be unnecessary, while other responses may vary depending on the person doing the interviews.^{ix} OrgCode Consulting reports that the tool’s creators were not engaged by the evaluators to describe its intended purpose, origins, or applications.

The December 2020 announcement from OrgCode on phasing out the VI-SPDAT expressed concerns that a lack of fidelity to the intended use of the instrument, and debates about it within the field, may distract from efforts to end homelessness.^x Specifically, OrgCode’s concerns centered around communities relying solely on the tool to make resource allocation decisions, rather than using it as one component in a process to inform/guide decisions on program placement. Also, since it was open-source material, some communities did not have proper training on its use. In such communities, use of the VI-SPDAT may have been rooted in a lack of sufficient community resources for implementation and broader coordinated entry best practices.

Change isn't easy, especially for providers serving an estimated 1.4 million people in shelters each year. Without the VI-SPDAT, the path forward isn't fully clear. There is no shiny new assessment tool that is instantly available for use by everyone everywhere.

As the field moves towards replacement approaches, at least two things are clear: 1) beneficial aspects of the VI-SPDAT should be preserved and 2) growth should continue to be evident and ongoing. Achieving these goals requires an understanding of the previous tool.

MOVING FORWARD: LEARNING FROM A DECADE OF COORDINATED ENTRY PRACTICES AND TOOLS

The VI-SPDAT revolutionized the delivery of homeless services. As communities transition to new approaches, valuable aspects of the old one should not be lost. These include:

1. **Fairness through Process.** The VI-SPDAT helps Continuums of Care (CoCs) implement a HUD requirement^{xi} to establish a standardized process for prioritizing people for services. Although imperfect in reaching this goal, it represents a step forward in ensuring that all consumers are evaluated in the same way. Historically, an alternative has been the complete discretion of caseworkers and others in deciding who gets what housing resources. In such scenarios, a person could get access to housing or other resources based largely on the case worker they are assigned.

Complete discretion can be hazardous to equity efforts focused on race, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ, and other identities. Explicit and implicit biases go unchecked in environments in which providers are not properly trained and have no rules or processes to guide their decision making.^{xii}

NEXT GENERATION CHEAT SHEET

ANY NEW APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT SHOULD:

FURTHER FAIRNESS THROUGH PROCESS

PRIORITIZE PEOPLE MOST IN NEED OF SERVICES

BE DRIVEN BY A CLEAR DEFINITION OF "VULNERABILITY"

BE CAREFULLY CONSIDERED (INCLUDING FEEDBACK AND TESTING)

ADDRESS POPULATION-SPECIFIC NEEDS

BE EASY TO ACCESS AND USE

PREPARE FOR CONSTANT EVALUATION

2. **Prioritizing People Most in Need.** According to OrgCode, the VI-SPDAT was designed to “assist with identifying the ‘most vulnerable’ to be served first.”^{xiii} For systems with limited resources, client need levels should continue to be a central driver in deciding who is prioritized for help. Indeed, this continues to be required by HUD. Someone who could self-resolve within a week should not be prioritized over the person who is at risk of dying if they don’t receive housing assistance.
3. **Establishing and Centering a Definition of “Vulnerability.”** OrgCode and Community Solutions helped the homeless services world define “vulnerability” based on an understanding of relevant research.^{xiv} That definition guided the creation of survey questions on issues such as housing history and health status. Every question in the VI-SPDAT is connected to the survey makers’ definition of “vulnerability.” Thus, questions about issues that are irrelevant to the housing and service needs of the person are eliminated.
4. **Deliberative Processes.** The creators of VI-SPDAT outline a deliberative process for the creation of their tool which involved a) at least two forms of feedback (surveys and focus groups) from communities using it, b) the inclusion of diverse voices (e.g., frontline workers, people of color, and people with lived experience), and c) beta testing before it was released for general use.^{xv} There may be additional recommendations for future processes, and these efforts should continue to be deliberative.
5. **Accounting for Subpopulation Differences.** There are different versions of the VI-SPDAT for individuals, families, youth, and clients exiting jail or prison. These varying instruments seem to be rooted in an important understanding: subpopulations share many similarities, but in some ways relevant to ending homelessness, they are different.

These differences are important in at least two contexts. First, some subpopulations may have unique vulnerabilities (e.g., types of hardships tied to homelessness or barriers to exiting homelessness). Second, subpopulations may have differing needs tied to ensuring that interviewers get full and accurate answers from surveys.

Community approaches to assessment should account for these subpopulation differences. Future installments of this series will discuss considerations specifically related to racial and ethnic groups.
6. **Ease of Access and Use.** The different versions of the VI-SPDAT are available for free online. Guidance materials and technical assistance were also offered by OrgCode. Thus, the VI-SPDAT could be easily adopted by CoCs across the country.
7. **Planning for Evolution.** There are three different versions of the VI-SPDAT. At various stages, its creators revisited their work and made improvements. In the future, similar triage approaches should be in constant development. There is no such thing as being finished when creating a tool or approach—times change, circumstances change, and there are always ways to do better.

ALLIANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Any new approach to assessment should further fairness through process.
- » Any new approach to assessment should prioritize people most in need of services.
- » Approaches to assessment should be driven by a clear definition of “vulnerability” that is rooted in research and the work of ending homelessness.
- » Any new approach to assessment should be carefully considered, involving feedback and various types of testing.
- » Any new approach to assessment should involve population-specific considerations that help in accurately assessing everyone’s level of vulnerability.
- » Any new approach should also be easy to access and use.
- » Any new approach to assessment should plan for constant evolution.

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ⁱ See U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017), Coordinated Entry Core Elements; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017), CPD-17-01 Notice Establishing Additional Requirements for a Continuum of Care Centralized or Coordinated Assessment System.

ⁱⁱ OrgCode (2021), “A Message from OrgCode on the VI-SPDAT Moving Forward”, available at <https://www.orgcode.com/blog/a-message-from-orgcode-on-the-vi-spd-at-moving-forward>.

ⁱⁱⁱ OrgCode (2015), Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) Version 2 Workbook.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Rice, E., et al. (2018), “Linking the TATY-VI-SPDAT Tool to Housing Placements and Outcomes for Youth Experiencing Homelessness,” Cityscape, vol 20, 69-86.

^{vii} Brown, M., et al. (2018), “Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) in Real-World Implementation,” Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, vol 27, 110-117.

^{viii} Wilkey, C., et al. (2019), Coordinated Entry Systems : Racial Equity Analysis of Assessment Data, C4 Innovations ; King, B., “Assessment and Findings of the Vulnerability Index (VI-SPDAT) Survey of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness in Travis County, TX,” UT School of Public Health Dissertations (Open Access), 11 ; Cronley, C., (2020), “Invisible Intersectionality in Measuring Vulnerability Among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness - Critically Appraising the VI-SPDAT,” Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, vol 31, 23-33.

^{ix} See Brown, M., et al. (2018), “Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) in Real-World Implementation.”

^x OrgCode (2021), “A Message from OrgCode on the VI-SPDAT Moving Forward”.

^{xi} U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017), Coordinated Entry Core Elements.

^{xii} See Institute for Research on Poverty (2021), Inequities Memo Series: Understanding the Role of Caseworker Bias in Racial and Ethnic Inequities in Human Services, available at <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Memo-2-Caseworker-Bias-09272021.pdf>.

^{xiii} U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017), Coordinated Entry Core Elements.

^{xiv} See OrgCode (2015), Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) Prescreen Triage Tool for Single Adults American Version 2.01.

^{xv} OrgCode (2020), Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) Version 3 Workbook.