

# January 2013

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## HMIS Data Digest for DCA Grantees

### *Enhancing the picture of homelessness in Georgia*

This is the first monthly issue of DCA's HMIS Data Digest for DCA's grantees all over Georgia (previously piloted for the Balance of State Continuum only). These newsletters will be very brief – but hopefully informative – summaries of how your HMIS data is being used to produce practical, concrete facts and figures. The wealth of information in our HMIS has the potential to raise new questions, challenge current assumptions, and legitimize otherwise counterintuitive practices. However, like a mirror, the quality of information we get out of the system reflects the quality of information we put into it.

The emphasis of this issue is a person's **exit destination**. One of HMIS' **most important data fields** is the destination that a person goes to when they leave a program. Are they going to another emergency shelter, or are they upgrading to an apartment? If an apartment, is it a temporary arrangement (with a friend, for example), or did they find a landlord who offers affordable rent that they can reliably pay? Since our primary goal is to see homeless people obtain stable housing, it is critical that we have this information for as many people who come through our Continuums of Care as we possibly can. This can alert us to changes in policy that we need to make, or it can validate existing policy. Overall destination trends can give us a great **birds-eye view** over Georgia that we can track **long-term**, but it relies entirely on the HMIS data entry that each agency performs every day.

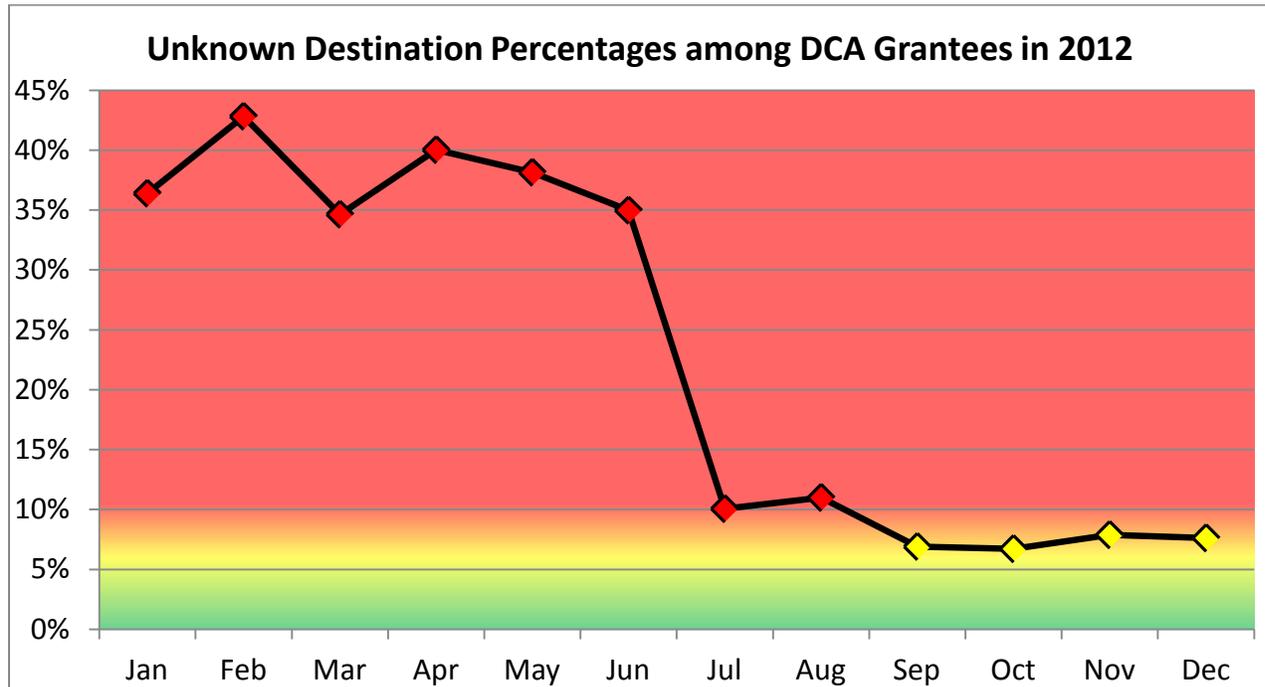
Every issue of the Digest will have an outcome statement that demonstrates how useful HMIS data will be once we are confident in its quality and reliability. While one reason for this is to provide you with interesting facts, the primary reason is to help you visualize the potential of HMIS for impacting planning and decision-making on the state and community level.

The featured agency this month is *The IMPACT! Group*, which has a record of excellent data quality in the current grant year. I asked Tom Merkel to educate us about his agency and HMIS best-practices – just in time for the Group's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of becoming a non-profit community partner in Gwinnett. Thanks – we appreciate all that you do!

*Jason Rodriguez*

*Georgia Department of Community Affairs*

## Data Quality: Destination at Exit



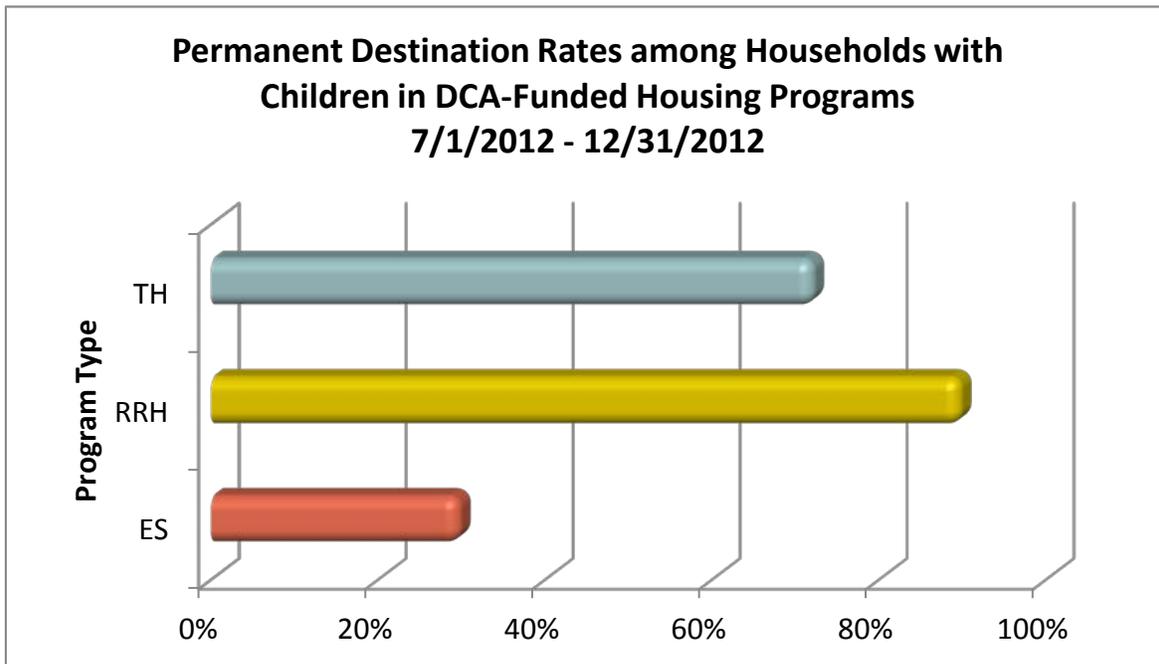
This chart shows the month-by-month data quality of clients' destinations when they left DCA-funded programs in 2012. Any time you record "Don't know," "Refused," or "Other" – or simply leave a field blank – we consider that to be an "unknown value." Unknown values do not provide any useful information about whether people are permanently housed when they are discharged from a program. Ideally, the share of unknown destinations should represent **less than 5%** of the total number of destinations recorded.

Clearly in the past year there has been some improvement – unknown data rates used to be horrendous, hovering consistently over 35%. While the trend has been much better lately, it's still not exactly where we would like to be. With a little more effort, we can get this graph into the green next month. This will give us more **confidence** that our calculations of permanent destination rates are truly representative of what is **actually happening** in a given month.

**17%**

This is the percentage of unknown destinations that exist among DCA grantees if you look at the year 2012 as a whole. Getting this below 5% should be our goal, because it will give us greater confidence when analyzing year-long periods.

## Outcome of the Month



Altogether, 616 households with children exited DCA-funded housing programs during the latter half of 2012, 42% of which were placed in permanent housing once their program enrollment ended. Most of the households (462) came from Emergency Shelter (ES) programs and were **less likely** to be placed in permanent housing when they exited. While there is not as much data for Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) programs (29 households), the **vast majority** had a successful outcome.

Seeing these trends would not be possible without data from HMIS. The following data entry practices are vital for ensuring that the above statistics are accurate:

- Enrolling people into the correct households
- Accurately identifying the head of household
- Recording the correct age for everyone in the household
- Recording the correct destinations when household members leave the program

Neglecting even one of these practices can significantly skew the conclusions we reach from the data. For example: these stats are looking at **the exit destination of a family's head of household** and making the assumption that, in a typical case, this destination represents **the entire household's destination**. The good news is that just about every household created in HMIS has someone designated as the head. The bad news is, in many households, **there is more than one person designated as the head**. This makes it slightly more confusing for us... It forces us to make the additional assumption that, out of the two "heads," the oldest is the *true* head of that household. The less of these assumptions we have to make, the better. Admittedly, in some cases, a family may actually consider itself to have two "heads" – but in other cases, careful and informed data entry can help reduce confusion.

## Featured Agency: The IMPACT! Group, Inc.

*One of our top role models when it comes to data quality is The IMPACT! Group. I talked with Tom Merkel, Executive Director, to learn more about the agency.*

### **JR: How and when did The IMPACT! Group begin?**

*TM:* We were organized the fall of 1992 as an informal working group to create and preserve quality affordable housing within Gwinnett County, and we obtained our 501c3 status in January 1993. So we are celebrating our 20th Birthday this year. Our agency received its first funding in 1993 to provide emergency shelter for homeless citizens of Gwinnett County. The program was expanded upon to become The IMPACT! Transitional Housing Program which today helps working families achieve sustainable, quality housing and remain permanently out of homelessness. The IMPACT! program is the largest in Gwinnett County and assists 22 homeless families with children at any one time. The program utilizes professional case managers to provide each family with subsidized housing, intensive case management, and a variety of supportive services such as child care assistance, financial education, and career building counseling. To date, over 90 percent of the families that graduate our program remain independent of assistance a year later.

In 1994, we added our HomeOwnership Center to meet the needs of first-time homebuyers and residents in danger of losing their homes to foreclosure, and it shortly thereafter became a HUD-Certified Housing Counseling Agency. The center today helps prevent foreclosures in Gwinnett County and greater Atlanta through group classes and free individual counseling sessions. The center also provides housing counseling, down payment assistance, and financial counseling services to first-time home buyers, current homeowners, and the general public in Gwinnett County and Northeast Georgia. All the clients in our Transitional Housing program are enrolled in the classes the center teaches.

### **JR: What does the name of your agency mean?**

*TM:* We hear that a lot, normally in the form of a question that goes something like: “What is an IMPACT!, and what do you guys do?” Actually, the answer is quite simple when you think about it: Our mission is to transform lives in a positive manner and strengthen our total community as we do that one person or family at a time. Therefore, we are truly making an “IMPACT!” on the lives of the people in our community. In addition, it is not one person in our agency, but a team effort – a “Group” that achieves the success stories. And we feel that we are on the cutting edge and a leader in a lot of things we do. (On a side note, I attend a lot of meetings and hear my contemporaries or speakers continually use the word “impact” and how important it is to “make an impact.” I often joke with them and tell them I need to copyright our name so I can start charging people every time they say our name.)

**JR: What are the unique challenges of homelessness in Gwinnett County, and how do you tackle them?**

*TM:* Gwinnett's largest homeless population is families with children. They are typically *under-*employed and lack specialized skills. They typically carry a heavy debt burden with past rental and utilities which greatly impacts their future housing potential. And one of the greatest challenges is helping them to identify affordable housing, which is lacking in this area. We tackle these challenges by addressing them directly from the first day the family enters our program. Their case management plan is designed with short- and long-term goals and time lines that should be complete by the end of their program period. We also work to develop and maintain an active network of private landlords who are willing to work with families with special challenges.

**JR: Do you have any short-term goals for your program? Long-term goals?**

*TM:* We have a number of goals for our agency. Short-term: (1) To identify volunteers to assist with some of the services that we currently pay for in order to better leverage our grant funds, and (2) to complete the design and implementation of new housing programs - in collaborative efforts both public and private partners that will benefit our Veterans and families. Long-term: (1) To complete the development of a private landlord network for families transitioning to permanent housing, and (2) to continue and expand our resource development base outside our existing network.

**JR: What are some good strategies for keeping HMIS data clean and accurate?**

*TM:* Our best strategies are: (1) Inputting *all* client data within 1 day after they are accepted into our programs. (2) Updating client data at least 2 times each month; sometimes data is updated more frequently. (3) Inputting all case notes in HMIS. (4) Updating all data upon discharge. (5) Running HMIS reports at least monthly so that we can address missing data in a timely manner.

**JR: From your perspective, what can be done to further reduce homelessness in Georgia?**

*TM:* To reduce homelessness in Georgia, the wrap-around issues that contribute to or cause homelessness must be solved: Employment, affordable and sustainable housing, child care costs, transportation, education and skills training, and financial literacy and budgeting education.



Here are some people making an *IMPACT!* From left to right: Phoebe Buckley-McNair (Sr. Case Manager), Avis Lucas (Case Manager), and Alice Ramsey (Director, Transitional Housing)

# Thanks, from the Housing Trust Fund Team



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