

May 2013

Data Digest for Georgia's HMIS Users

Enhancing the picture of homelessness in Georgia

This is the third issue of DCA's HMIS Data Digest for homeless service providers in Georgia that use HMIS. 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 huge amount 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.

Client income is a very important data element in HMIS. Out of HUD's three official performance measures, two are related to income ("Total income" and "Earned income"). The amount of regular income a homeless person is receiving (particularly as they leave a program) is a key predictor of how successful that person will be in maintaining their housing. Poverty is so often intertwined with a person's housing difficulties. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial that homeless service providers strive to increase the incomes of their clients. If providers are reliable in recording accurate incomes at program entry *and* at program exit for their clients, we can begin to see if our community is doing a good job in this area. This is one more step we can take toward shining a light on homelessness in Georgia, so that we can end it faster.

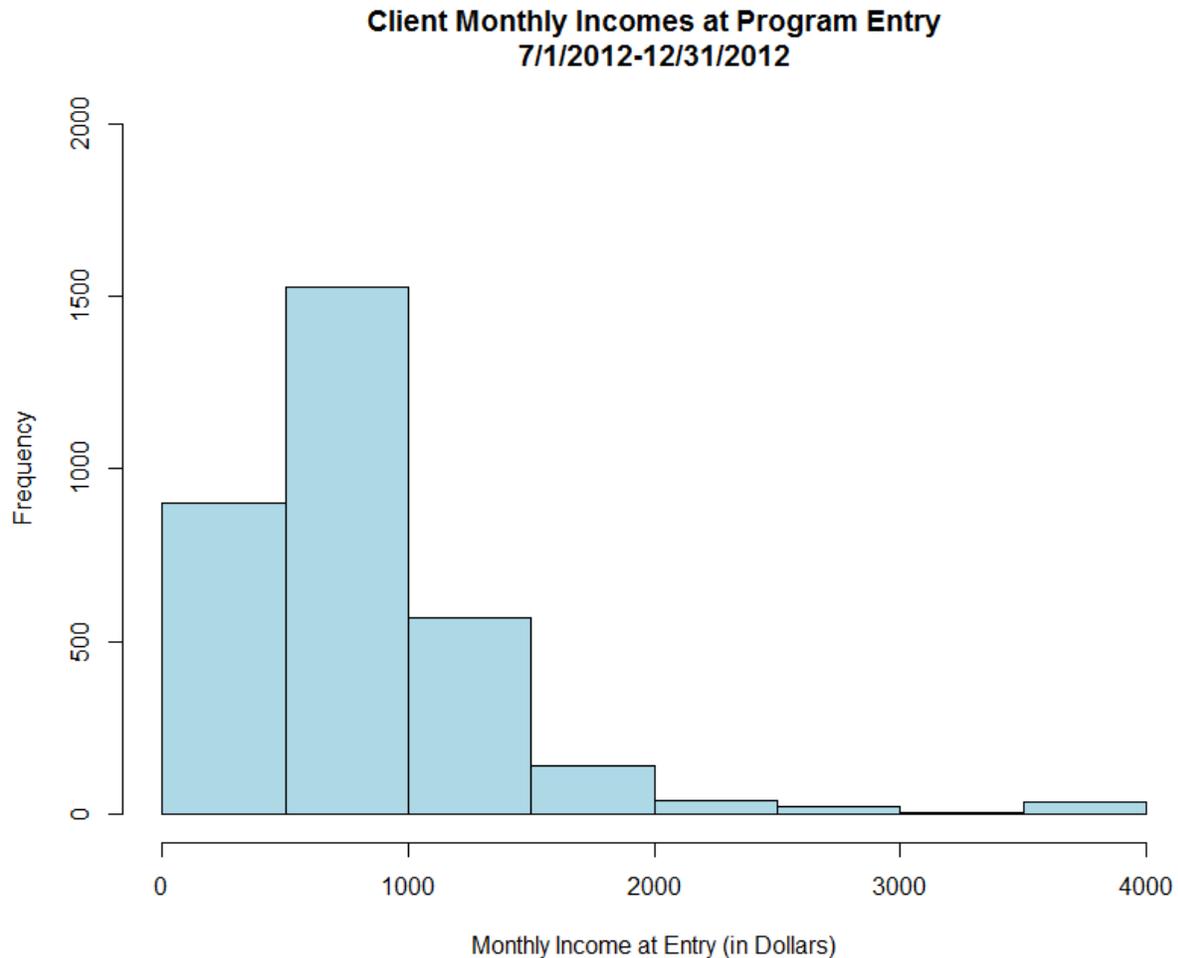
Every issue of the Digest will have an outcome statement that demonstrates how useful and informative HMIS data can be. This month, I highlight permanent destination rates among veterans in DCA-funded programs. Unknown data rates were very low this time, which gives us more confidence in the accuracy of the data. The outcomes for veterans tend to be significantly worse than the overall average – which should make us think about the ways in which we are serving veterans.

The featured organization this month is *The City of Hinesville*, which has consistently had excellent data quality in the current grant year. The director of the city's homelessness prevention program, Daisy Jones, educates us about her agency and their HMIS best-practices. Thank you for partnering with us to help reduce homelessness in our state!

Jason Rodriguez

Georgia Department of Community Affairs

Data Quality: Client's Monthly Income at Entry



This chart shows the income distribution of clients who were in programs funded by DCA. 11.1% of program enrollments were missing a monthly income, and 1.6% of income values were either “don’t know” or “refused,” bringing the total percentage of **unknown** monthly incomes to 12.7%. This is higher than our goal of 5%.

In addition to problems with unknown income, there were **unrealistic** incomes that clearly reflect some misunderstandings about what kind of data is supposed to be recorded. For example, there was one person making \$67,914 a month! Perhaps an investment banker is coming into one of our shelters for soup – but it seems much more likely that this was a data entry error.

As a data analyst, I have to think carefully about what to do in these situations. Part of the solution is to throw these extreme incomes away and treat them as “missing.” However... what is

“extreme”? The line isn’t clear-cut or obvious. The chart above indicates that several people are making more than \$2,000 a month. Should *that* be our line, or should our line be a lower amount? At DCA, we are currently trying to decide on a threshold that we can use to distinguish good income entries from bad income entries. Otherwise, statewide income averages might be misleadingly high.

Unfortunately, our ability to weed out bad income entries is very limited, because bad income entries aren’t always so obvious. For example, let’s say a client is making \$480 a month, according to HMIS – but in reality, she was making only \$40 a month. Perhaps her *annual* income was entered into HMIS by mistake. At DCA, there is no way for us to catch this kind of mistake. We will not realize that a misunderstanding has taken place, because \$480 looks like a realistic monthly income. It will get lumped in with all the others, and consequently our statistics will be skewed. So it falls on the shoulders of each homeless service provider to make sure that accurate **monthly** incomes are being entered.

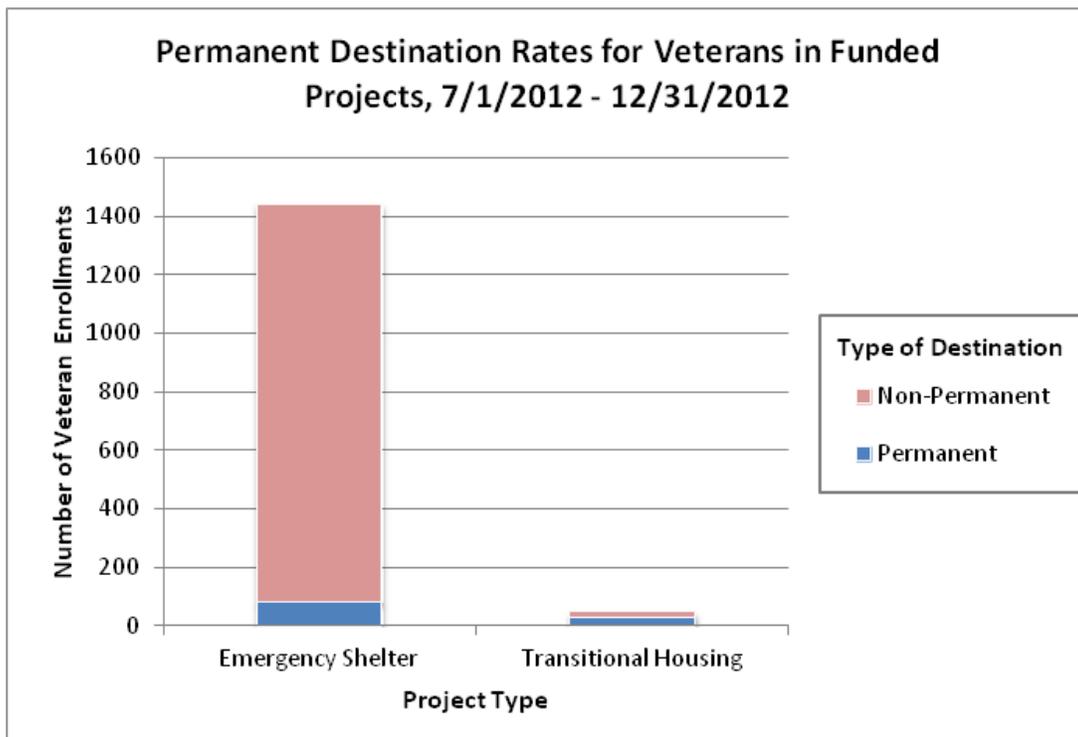
What is HUD’s definition of “monthly income,” exactly? It is simply the amount of money that the client received in the **30 days prior to entering the program**. There are different types of income:

Last Date Verified: 05/01/2013

Cash Income Sources and Amounts - Last 30 days	
Earned Income (i.e., employment income)	<input type="radio"/> No <input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes Start Date: 05/01/2013 Amount: 100.00
Unemployment Insurance	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Social Security Disability Income (SSDI)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Veteran's disability payment	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Private disability insurance	<input type="radio"/> No <input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes Start Date: 3/1/2012 Amount: 200.00
Worker's compensation	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
General Assistance (GA)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Retirement income from Social Security	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Veteran's pension	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Pension from a former job	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Child support	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Alimony or other spousal support	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Other source	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
Total	300.00

Not only is it important to record the correct monthly income amounts; it is important to make sure they are categorized correctly. These practices will ensure that we’re on track to recording accurate income levels for our clients. If we do this consistently over time, we will be able to gauge how successful our community is in helping our clients become self-sufficient.

Featured Outcome



As a result of housing interventions funded by DCA, **118 veterans** were placed in permanent housing out of 1,500 veterans who exited between 7/1/2012 and 12/31/2012. The rate of permanent housing placement differed significantly by project type. Only **5.6%** of veterans exiting from Emergency Shelter projects went to a permanent housing destination, compared with **56.5%** of veterans exiting from Transitional Housing projects. By this measure, Transitional Housing produced successful outcomes at a rate 10 times greater than that of Emergency Shelter, although Transitional Housing projects discharged far fewer veterans altogether (46). Rapid Re-Housing projects discharged only one veteran and therefore could not be compared here. The rate of unknown destinations was **under 5%** for both program types – which is great!¹ This means we can be confident that the reported percentages are accurate reflections of where veterans in DCA-funded programs are going.

To put this in perspective: out of **all clients** exiting DCA-funded projects during that same date range, 14.4% of those in Emergency Shelter projects went to permanent housing, and 67.1% of those in Transitional Housing projects went to permanent housing. This means that our veterans are having significantly worse-than-average outcomes, regardless of project type. Consequently, it is more important than ever that we connect our veterans to VA benefits and other resources they have earned, so that they can acquire the financial security needed to maintain housing.

¹ ☺

Featured Agency: The City of Hinesville

One of our data role models this grant year has been the City of Hinesville's Homelessness Prevention Program. I talked with Daisy Jones, Program Coordinator, to learn more about it.

JR: When did the City of Hinesville begin to get involved in homeless services?

DJ: The City of Hinesville implemented a homeless prevention program in October 1998 and named it the Next Step Program, which was derived from a grant which funded some of the services. Under this grant, the City of Hinesville operated five homes for transitional housing to qualified persons. In 2006, the city was awarded a Supportive Housing Grant, which enabled it to provide an additional ten properties for transitional housing. The Homeless Prevention Program has fifteen single-family properties for transitional housing. In addition, when funding is available, eligible persons are provided hotel vouchers, rental assistance and utility assistance.

JR: Does your program have a mission statement?

DJ: The defining mission of the City of Hinesville's Homeless Prevention Program is to advocate for, equip, and empower qualified persons on the path to self-sufficiency. Our vision is to initiate the process of lifetime self-sufficiency by preventing and reducing the number of homeless men, women, and children – dramatically changing their lives through strong collaborations, effective assessment and intake, case management, and program accountability.

JR: What makes your program unique?

DJ: Our program is unique in that the homeless are mostly identified through collaborations and referrals from agencies, organizations, and other local service providers. This is critical to reducing the numbers of people living on the streets or in other places not meant for human habitation.

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

DJ: (1) Ensure staff members are trained beyond the level of accessing the system. (2) Ensure they know the step-by-step procedures for various key actions. (3) Utilize webinars (archived and active) to improve proficiency and provide refresher training. (4) Incorporate local HMIS goals in training and orientations for all staff members; i.e. entering 'don't know' is unacceptable. (5) Ensure that data collection and screening documents include the needed information and universal data. (6) Explain and help staff members understand the value of data quality at the macro and micro levels beyond their

workstations. (7) Review the Program Enrollment and Discharge Report and HUD APR I&II at least biweekly.

JR: Are there ways DCA or Pathways can make HMIS more useful? We want it to be less of a chore and more of a tool.

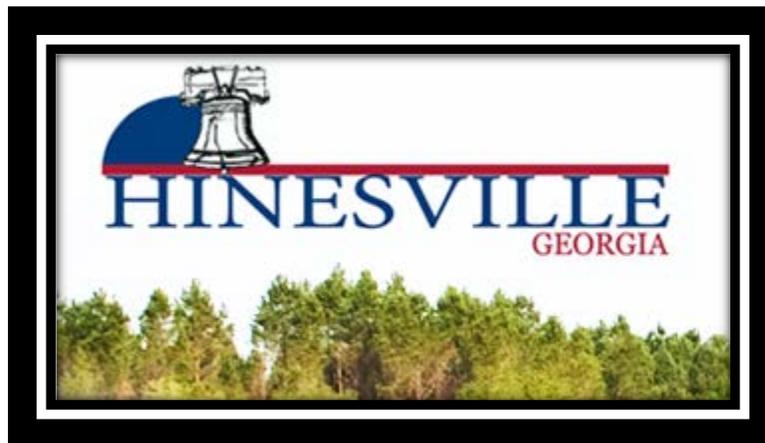
DJ: We appreciate the technical assistance and web access to tools, tutorials, information and webinars.

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

DJ: Education is a critical tool in preventing and breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness – especially when it comes to financial literacy, renter’s rights and procedures, predatory lending practices, and public awareness of personal economy pitfalls and missteps.

JR: What should visitors do first when they come to Hinesville?

DJ: Visitors to Hinesville should definitely visit Warrior’s Walk at Fort Stewart, just a few minutes from Downtown. Warrior’s Walk is a life-changing memorial to the men and women who have given their lives to our country. Link: <http://www.stewart.army.mil/warrwalk/>



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