November 2013

Data Digest for Georgia's HMIS Users

Enhancing the picture of homelessness in Georgia

This is the sixth of DCA's HMIS Data Digest for homeless service providers in Georgia that use HMIS. These newsletters are very brief but informative summaries of how your HMIS data is being used to produce practical 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 special needs are a very important data element in HMIS. These disabilities can make it difficult to find employment, stay employed, and obtain independent housing. Taking a look at the needs of clients and the housing problems associated will allow homeless service providers to address the issues people are facing and provide the services needed. The number missing and Don't Know/Refused responses regarding client special needs is not ideal. In order for us to make use of client special needs data, we need to be collecting clean, accurate data that gives us a clear picture of what's happening in clients' lives. By increasing the accuracy of client special needs data, we can provide more effective assistance to those experiencing housing difficulties as we continue to strive to reach our goal of eradicating homelessness.

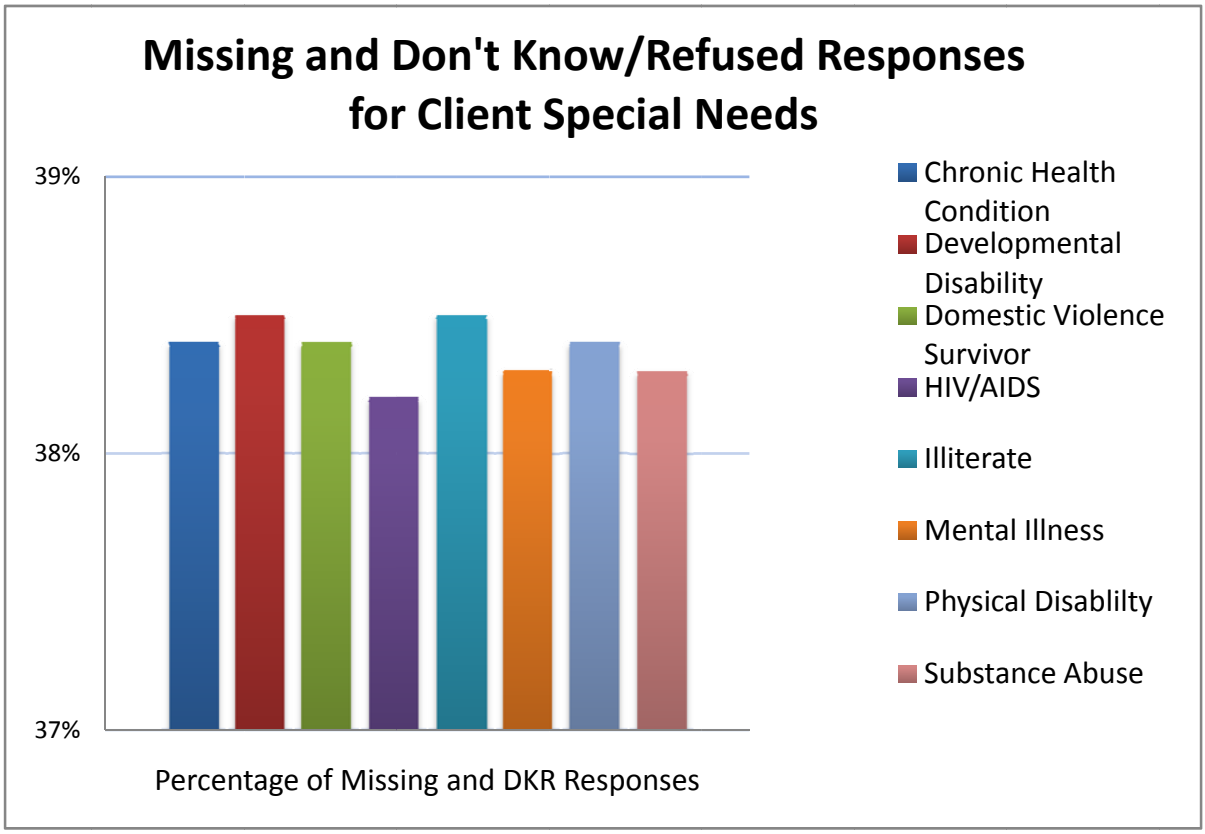
Every issue of the Digest will have an outcome statement that demonstrates how useful and informative HMIS data can be. This month, I looked at destination types according to level of special needs. Unknown, refused, and missing data rates were high, which adds an unwanted mystery of where people are going after they exit various programs. These client special needs data could use some attention.

The featured organization this month is *The Drake House*, which has consistently had excellent data quality in the current grant year. The executive director of the organization, Kathy Swahn, educates us about her agency and their HMIS best-practices. Thank you for partnering with us to help reduce homelessness in our state!

Katherine Arce

Georgia Department of Community Affairs

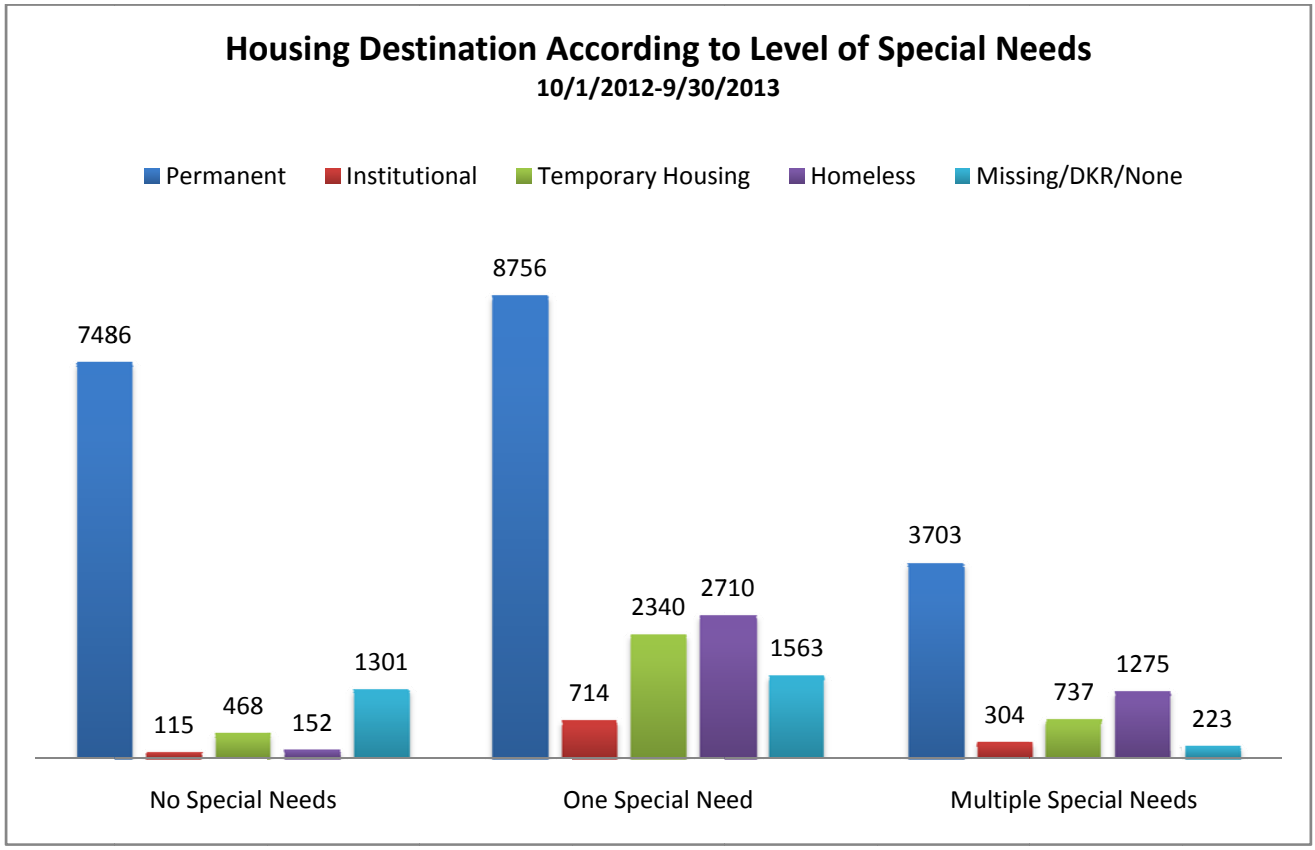
Data Quality: Client Special Needs



The graph above shows the percentage of missing data for each client special need included in Pathways. Close to **40%** of the data for these special needs is **not being captured at all**! This means that someone entering these clients into Pathways either left the entire question blank, or indicated that they do have at least one **special need**, but beyond that, the question was left blank. Because of this we don't know if these clients are in need of special assistance, medical care, counseling, or any other kind of help because we don't know which special needs they have. In Pathways, it is easy to select one special need but leave the rest missing because the default response is missing. If the client only has one special need, it is important that the other special need options in Pathways are filled in as "No." Here we can see a possible discrepancy between reality and what was recorded; in order to provide precise and accurate results during analysis, we need to make sure that these fields are being completed and completed **accurately**.

I should also mention that **28.1%** of client special needs data was **missing altogether**. For these individuals, the initial question of whether they have a disability wasn't recorded or was recorded as Don't Know/ Refused. This means that we aren't sure whether or not these clients have a special need or not. The completeness of this data is very important; if we don't know the problems that the clients are facing, we can't help them as well as we could if we had all the information. It's imperative that we indicate "don't know" or "refused" **very rarely** and only when the client truly doesn't know or is refusing to answer.

Featured Outcome



For this month's featured outcome, we're looking at the number of people who went to either temporary, institutional, permanent, or homeless destinations upon exit of a housing program. We can see that **significantly** more individuals with special needs (close to **4,000** altogether) remained homeless after exiting a program than those without special needs (only **152**), not to mention that homelessness was the second most common destination for those with special needs. The good thing is that most people are exiting to a permanent destination; however, the data shows that a little over **3,000** of the responses are either missing, "Don't Know", "Refused", or "None". This is excluding 5,058 clients from the agencies with the highest numbers of missing, "Don't Know," and "Refused" responses. If a destination is not recorded for a client exiting a program, how are we going to ensure that they are getting the **help** they need to improve their housing situation? It's important that we clean up this data in order for us to do a better job of tracking where people are exiting to, and possibly shed light on why they are returning to homelessness and what we can do to prevent it.

Featured Agency: The Drake House

One of our data quality role models this grant year has been The Drake House. I asked Kathy Swahn, Executive Director, some questions about the organization.

KA: When did The Drake House begin to get involved in homeless services?

KS: The Drake House (TDH) was formed in 2004 by a North Fulton Chamber of Commerce Leadership Class. Having been a member of that class and working for North Fulton Community Charities at the time, we were aware of the unmet need for emergency housing for single mothers and children in the North Fulton area. The class conducted a needs assessment, researched, and visited eight Atlanta area service providers in order to gather best practices. We knew that we needed to act in order to keep these very vulnerable families intact and in their own community. In late 2004, we filed for non-profit status, built a board of directors, and began searching for funding and building community partnerships.

KA: What is your program about?

KS: TDH is a crisis residential assessment center for homeless women and their children in the North Fulton area, offering immediate housing and programs such as life skills classes, mentoring, tutoring, and career coach services designed to provide stability for the children and assist the family in working toward housing self-sufficiency.

KA: What makes your programs unique?

KS: Our program is a hybrid model; it includes a private, fully-furnished one or two bedroom apartment, along with a faith partner to act as a mentor team for the family. The immediate goal is to get mom employed at a living wage and secure child care services as needed, so career services appointments are made as needed and arrangements are made for transportation to the original school for all school-aged children. Our Career Coach meets with clients one-on-one, holds workshops weekly, and offers a closet of interview clothing and accessories as needed, as well as follow up services.

KA: What client populations do you normally serve? Can you give an example of your typical client?

KS: TDH serves single, homeless mothers with children that originate from the North Fulton area. We serve families from Sandy Springs, Roswell, Alpharetta, Johns Creek and Milton. We require a third-party referral, usually a school social worker or agency providing emergency services. A typical mother in our program is in her mid 30s with 2 children. All of our mothers have lived independently at some point and through abandonment, loss of employment, illness, or other unexpected financial hit, find themselves being evicted, living with friends or relatives, in an extended-stay hotel, or in their vehicle.

KA: What is the experience of the typical client who enters into your program?

KS: Families who enter TDH are first shown their apartment, and service areas at The Drake Center for laundry, mail, etc. They complete an empowerment worksheet used in the weekly empowerment meeting with our staff social workers to develop a to-do list that will help effect change and move the family towards self-sufficiency. Teens and moms attend life skills classes; elementary and middle school children receive tutoring, and the infant-4 yr olds are cared for by loving volunteers. In order to ensure

long term stability, during the last 30-60 days of the family's stay a transition plan is developed to determine how the family will return to independent housing or get into a supportive or transitional housing program.

KA: What are the unique challenges of homelessness in Fulton County, and how do you tackle them?

KS: Creating an awareness of the challenges and the need for services for homeless is an integral part of our work. Fulltime employment is critical, yet employment with traditional work hours is very difficult to find, leaving a gap between the availability of daycare hours to match the employment hours. After hours daycare is a critical unmet need in our community. Sparse MARTA coverage makes using public transportation a challenge for those families without a vehicle. Employment and housing options that are MARTA inaccessible greatly decrease the opportunities available.

KA: Do you have any short-term goals for your organization? Long-term goals?

KS: Short-term goals for our organization include an extension of The Drake Center to increase programming space for the Monday Night life skills program, office space and storage. We are also developing an Alumni Program for graduate families to enable us to stay connected and offer resources, services and provisions. Long-term goals are to increase our fundraising efforts, pay off all property mortgages, and investigate affordable housing options as a second step for graduate families.

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

KS: TDH developed an interagency guide to assist staff with the data to be entered. The guide provides a timeline for updating client goals and indicators, and the updates are tied to specific points of review in the case management process. In addition, the agency administrator runs reports on a monthly basis to check for missing or inaccurate information.

KA: From your perspective, what must be done to further reduce homelessness in Georgia?

KS: Single mothers with children are among the fastest growing homeless population in Georgia. In order for these families to address their homelessness, there must be fulltime employment opportunities for the mothers, quality affordable care for their children while they are working, and safe and affordable housing. Education regarding the use of the earned income tax credit refund to supplement the family's monthly budget and ensure the family's housing stability would also be beneficial.

Thanks, from the Housing Trust Fund Team

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