

July 2013

Data Digest for Georgia's HMIS Users

Enhancing the picture of homelessness in Georgia

This is the fourth 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.

As anyone reading this probably knows, HMIS records information related to a homeless person's non-cash benefits. Unlike cash income, non-cash benefits are not directly related to an official HUD performance measure, but the information is still invaluable to have. Data quality is improving to the point where we can become more research-oriented – for example, by studying which public benefits are more effective in helping reduce homelessness. More practically for providers, however, better data quality simply makes it easier to identify who is not taking advantage of benefits, but should be. Having more financial resources makes it easier to obtain and keep housing.

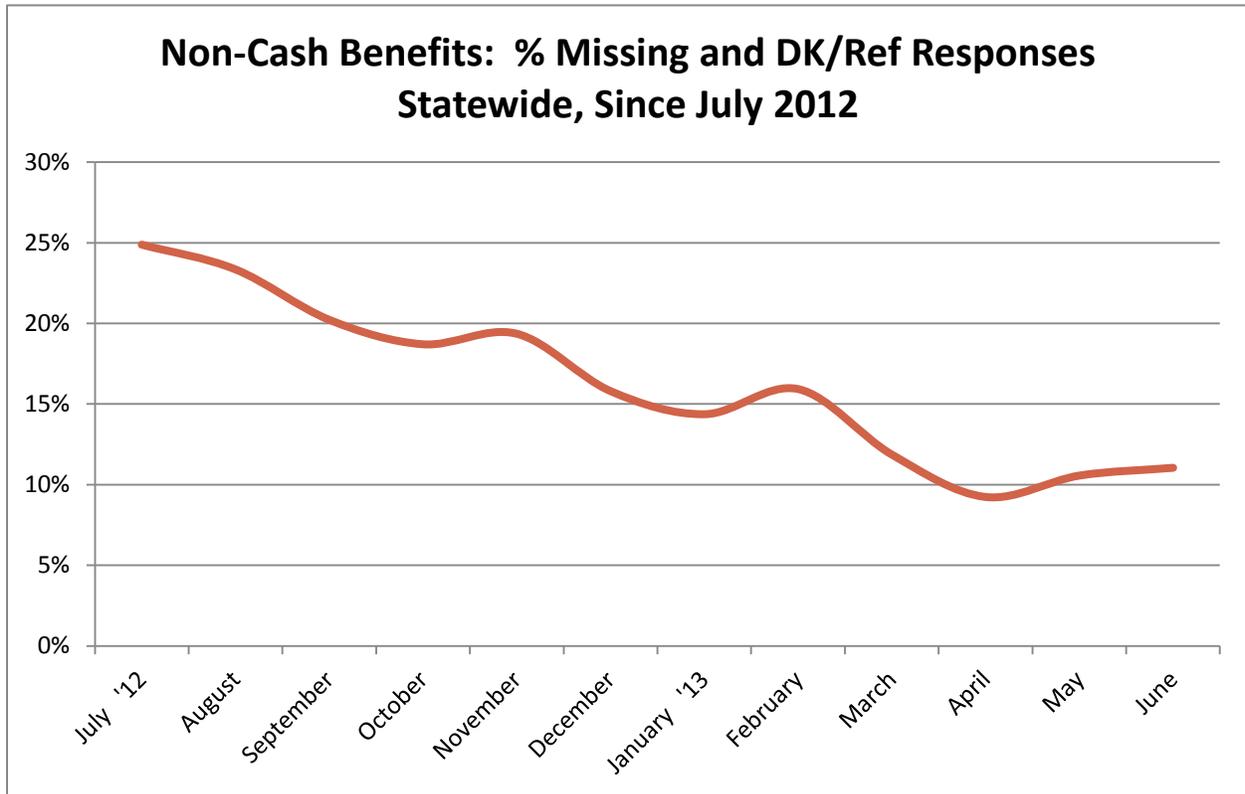
Every issue of the Digest will have an outcome statement that demonstrates how useful and informative HMIS data can be. This month, I introduce a new performance measure that judges programs based on their stability rates. Rather than being directly compared with other programs, each stability rate is compared with what was **expected** for that programs' clientele. This expected outcome is calculated by evaluating a range of characteristics for each client in the program – characteristics related to income, benefits, last permanent residence, age, program type, household characteristics, and several others. This means that performance measures can become fairer representations of organizational competency – and data quality will become all the more important as a result.

The featured organization this month is *The Extension, Inc.*, which has consistently had excellent data quality and client outcomes in the current grant year. The executive director, Tyler Driver, educates us about his 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 Non-Cash Benefits

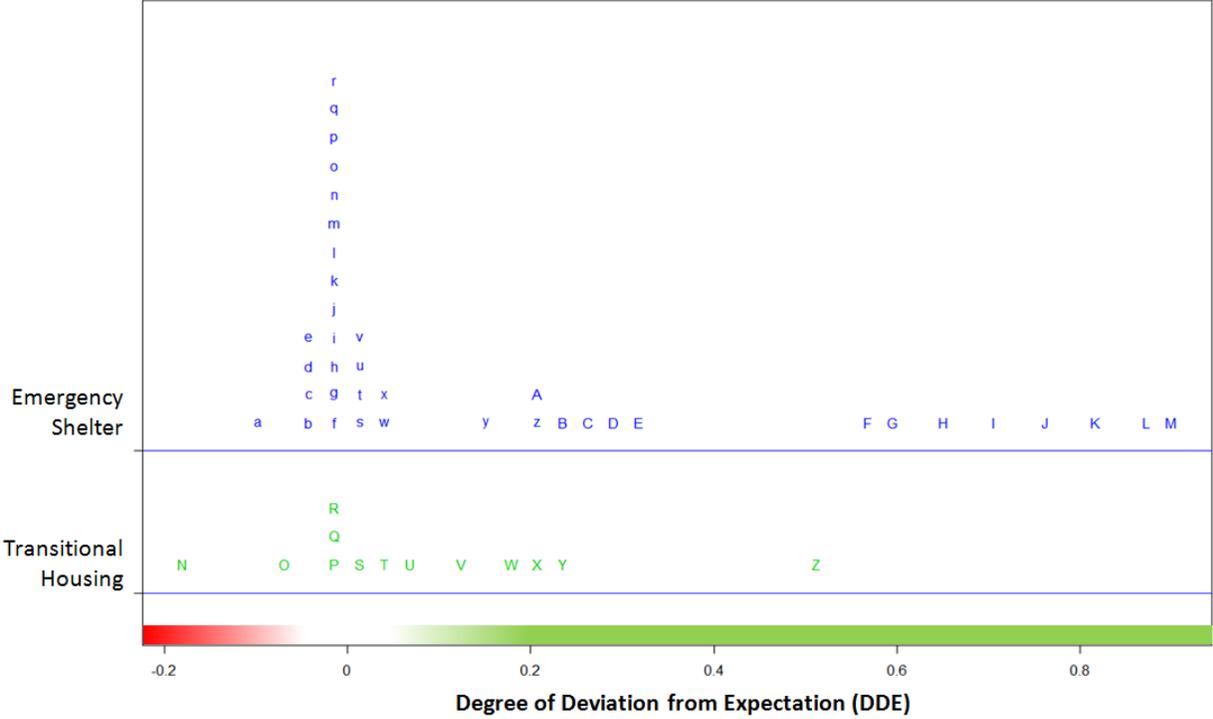


In Pathways COMPASS, users have the option of inputting income and benefits information of their clients. While there is a “Benefits” tab visible on the left side of the page, the most important data entries take place in the “Finance” section. Once in that section, COMPASS asks some cash income questions first, then proceeds to non-cash benefits. While it is acceptable to enter “don’t know” or “refused” if it truly describes the client’s response, it is important to keep these responses to an absolute minimum. And, of course, the non-cash benefits section should never be left blank.

Since July 2012, the percentage of blank, “don’t know,” and “refused” non-cash benefits data values has been steadily decreasing statewide. One year ago, at least 25% of Georgians in homeless shelters did not have their benefits data recorded in HMIS – which limited research and made it very difficult for anyone to analyze the impact that certain public benefits have on housing outcomes. However, looking back at the past three months, benefits information is unknown for **only around 10%** of clients in HMIS. This is *much* better, and it is a direct result of the extra work that agencies are undertaking to ensure that their clients’ data are recorded. We would love to see this permanently below 10%, or even 5%! We will revisit this in a few months and see if any improvements have been made.

Featured Outcome

Long-Term (90-Day) Stability Outcomes among 2013 ESG Applicants For Clients Who Exited Between 7/1/2012 and 2/28/2013



Do you ever feel like a statistic fails to take into account important context about your organization? A **problem** with simplistic performance measures, like permanent destination rates, is that they immediately place programs on the same scale – even though programs are oftentimes **not directly comparable** to one another. They can differ widely in their targeted homeless subpopulations, program paradigms, and regional characteristics. A 27% “success” rate might be a disappointing outcome for one subpopulation and an encouraging outcome for another; it depends on how the outcome compares with what was *expected* for each particular subpopulation. Failure to take this into account can result in distorted judgments of programs and discourage providers from serving homeless persons with special needs.

In preparation for this year’s ESG competition, we developed a new performance measure that judges programs differently, based on the types of clients they served. For example, serving disabled clients **lowered** a program’s expected housing outcome, whereas serving clients with income **raised** a program’s expected housing outcome. Altogether, 22 such client characteristics were taken into account. The graph above shows the actual performance of programs **relative to** their expectations, which can be called “degree of deviation from expectation” (DDE). Here, we see that 2013 ESG applicants tended to perform well compared to the typical Georgia program. This is definitely true of The Extension’s transitional housing program for men (represented in the chart by **Z**).

Featured Agency: The Extension, Inc.

One of our data quality and performance role models this grant year has been The Extension, Inc. I asked Tyler Driver, Executive Director, some questions about the organization.

JR: When did The Extension begin to get involved in homeless services? What's the back-story?

TD: We began in 1987 following the death of B. R. Hogan, who died from exposure underneath the bleachers of a local high school football stadium. We don't know a lot about Mr. Hogan, but we do know that he died in a way no one should, and with great sadness in our hearts, many in our community felt that perhaps he lived that way as well.

Several churches were joined by local elected officials and other concerned people throughout the community in a reflexive response to Mr. Hogan's death. With the simple mandate to save lives, it seemed like a simple and straightforward process: in 1987 the biggest threat to a homeless man's life in our area was extreme cold so we opened a shelter during the winter months and christened it the Marietta-Cobb Winter Shelter.

But something happened on our way to feeling satisfied. We were seeing the same people come back the following year and the year after, and if it wasn't the same face we were seeing, it was the same story about why these men were on the streets. We realized early on that homelessness was not a problem as much as it was the symptom of a problem, and for most homeless men in our community, that problem was addiction and its causes.

We now operate two State licensed long-term residential treatment centers for homeless, addicted men and women. Our 47 bed campus for men still includes that old warehouse, although few that saw the building then would recognize it today. Our 20 bed women's campus opened in 2009 and includes a former funeral home that was vacant for many years and was in such horrible condition that it reminded us of the old warehouse—we knew the day we first saw it that it was going to be the new home for our women's program.

JR: What makes your Transitional Housing program unique?

TD: We truly have something special. It has nothing to do with pixie dust or a secret sauce. Rather it began with an honest assessment of the dynamics of homelessness, followed by the implementation of a rigorous and comprehensive program that addresses the core problem of addiction and the ancillary issues. More than that, however, it's about the people involved in the process: highly trained and committed staff, those in the recovery and broader community who unselfishly give of their time, financial contributors whose love and support are tangible and who make it possible for others to

express the same in less tangible ways. Most importantly it's about those who come here for help, who, by realizing their potential, make the collective potential of us all so vividly evident.

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

TD: We serve homeless, addicted men and women. Our typical client comes in with nothing but the clothes on their back and just enough hope to make it through the front door. But ours is not the place where they end up; rather, it's where they start up. If they don't know before coming into the program, they will soon learn that we are not here because there is a problem—we're here because there is a solution. Probably what most distinguishes our residents is their tremendous gratitude.

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

TD: I suppose the challenges we face are common for service providers everywhere. Chief among those is helping the public and funders to understand that successfully addressing homelessness requires understanding that it is most accurately a symptom of a problem rather than a problem itself.

There may in fact be some challenges that are more pronounced due to our particular locale, such as an insufficient public transportation system and the relative high cost of housing. But those are issues beyond our control. We deal with those challenges by preparing our residents for the real world. Not dealing with life on life's terms was a fundamental characteristic of their active addiction, just as learning to enjoy life on life's terms is a key feature of their recovery.

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

TD: Beyond the day-to-day activities in support of the organization's mission and vision, our focus is on getting better and doing more. Guiding that effort is a five year Strategic Plan that is updated each year and includes an Annual Action Plan. We consider long-term goals to be those that will be accomplished six years or longer from now. Intermediate goals fall within a two to five year timeframe. The most pressing and urgent goals are included in our Annual Action Plan. Of course, our goals for the current year goals support the intermediate goals, which in turn prepare the organization to meet its long-term goals.

For example, a long-term goal is to expand into different geographic areas. Intermediate goals include developing and implementing an expansion plan. Of course, we'll need funding. This year the board and Executive Director are spending a considerable amount of time investigating the feasibility of income generation, essentially creating a business that will produce revenue to support expansion and existing operations.

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

TD: I'm all about organizations working together. While we're all doing that to a greater extent than ever before, we're probably not yet seeing the full potential of collaboration, particularly outside of our immediate areas. To that end I have three ideas that could greatly expand collaboration statewide.

1. Idea Bank – This could be an online repository of innovations and best practices, with an opportunity for organizations to post questions and get answers. It would expand our collective knowledge base and perhaps foster strong relationships across the State.
2. Agency Mentoring – DCA could pair up high functioning organizations with those that are struggling in an effort to improve overall efficiency and ensure that capacity is not lost.
3. DCA Listening Tour – Every couple of years, staff from DCA could hold a listening forum at three or four locations so that agencies' concerns could be heard to help build a greater sense of partnership between DCA and the organizations they support.



Staff photo: The Extension, Inc.

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