

# March 2013

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## HMIS Data Digest for DCA Grantees

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

This is the second monthly issue of DCA's HMIS Data Digest for DCA's grantees all over Georgia. 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.

*Where* do people first become homeless? In HMIS, this information is captured by asking for the **zip code** of the client's **most recent permanent residence**. Recently at DCA, we have been exploring the potential of using this data for mapping and planning. Being aware of hot spots of homelessness could become crucial to directing funds in an effective way throughout a large geographical area such as Georgia. Also, knowing how many of Georgia's homeless became homeless in another state can affect how we evaluate our own success. Of course, this all depends on accurate data entry by Georgia's homeless service providers – even the small ones. This newsletter provides a sense of why that is the case.

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. This month, a special feature showcases our ability to measure **homelessness recurrence** (when a formerly homeless person returns to homelessness). Using HMIS, we can calculate recurrence rates for specific periods of time, specific programs, or for the entire state. It is also possible to track *how long* it takes for people to return to homelessness. This is knowledge that could conceivably help us know when to follow up with former clients in order to increase their chances of housing stability.

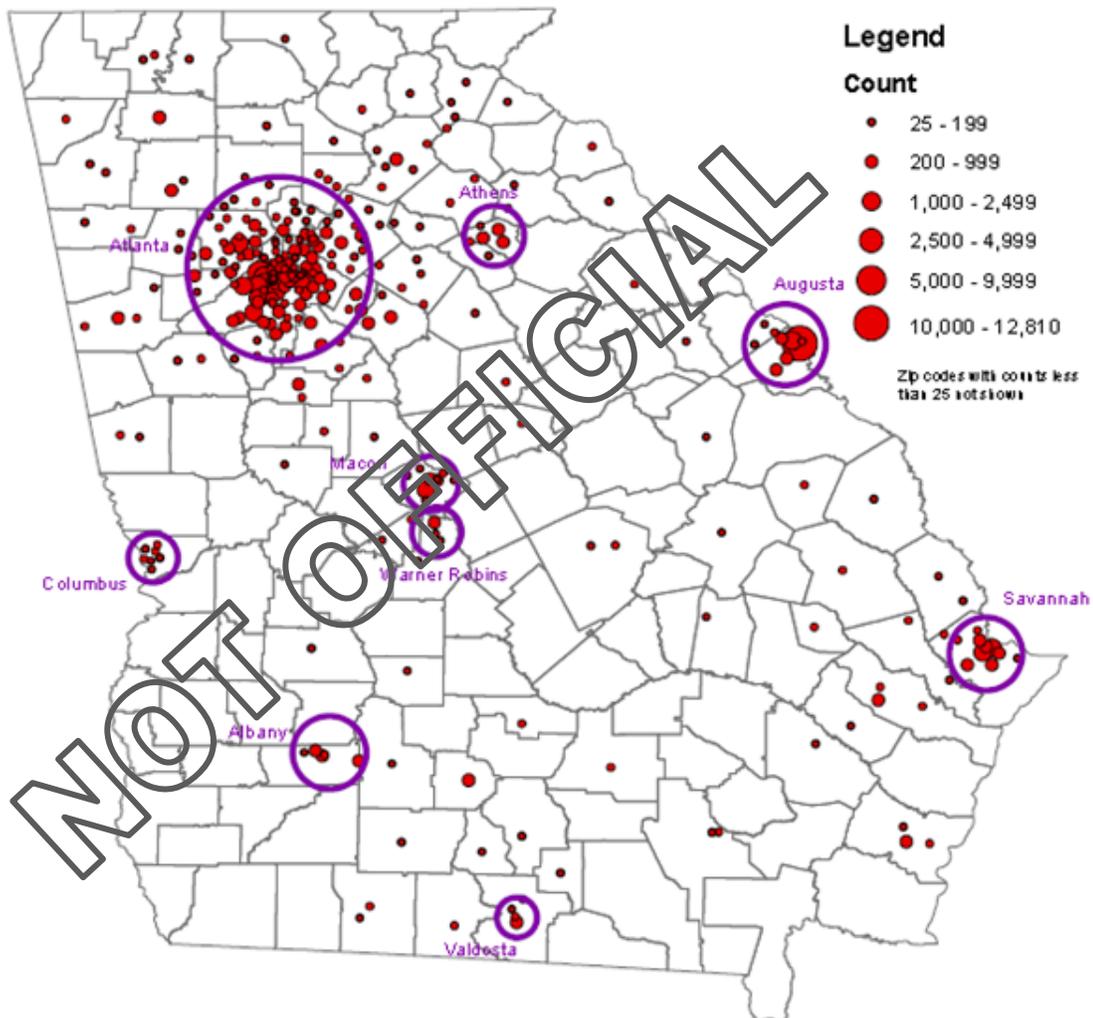
The featured agency this month is *CaringWorks, Inc.*, which has consistently had excellent data quality in the current grant year. Its president, Carol Collard, educates us about her agency and their HMIS best-practices. Thank you for partnering with us to help reduce homelessness in our state!

*Jason Rodriguez*

*Georgia Department of Community Affairs*

# Data Quality: Zip Code of Last Permanent Residence

## The Most Recent Permanent Residences of Georgia's Homeless People Entering HMIS since January 1, 2011



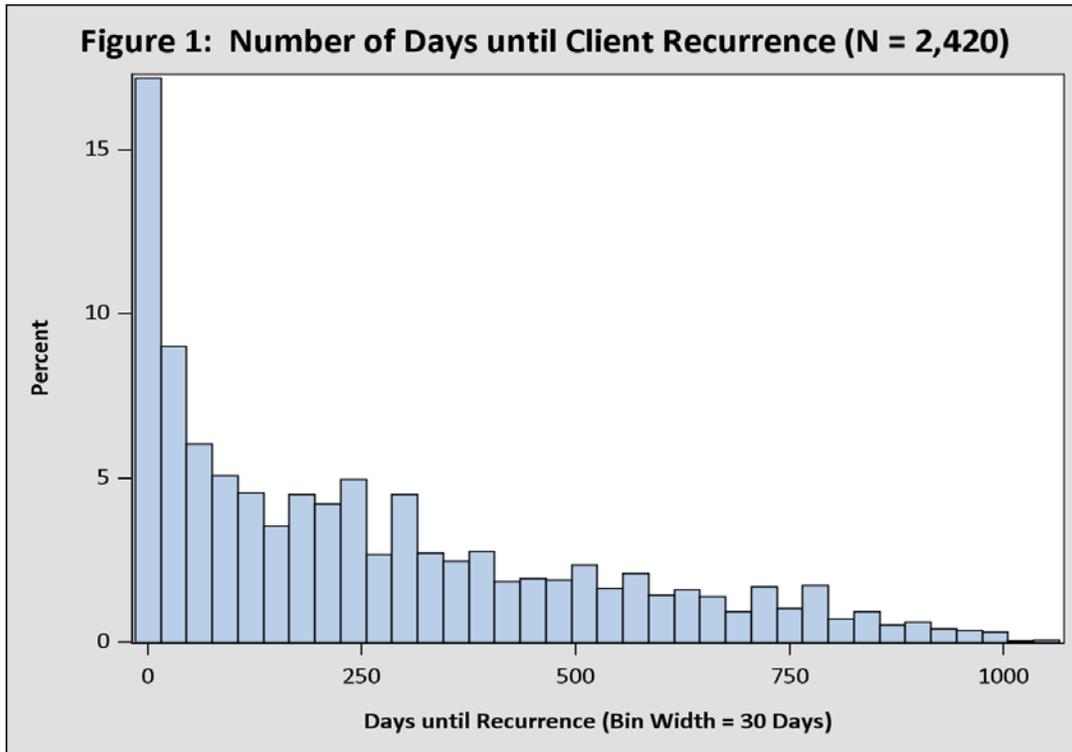
This map is intended to show the zip codes of the most recent permanent residences of HMIS clients entering the system during a two-year period (in order to get a sense of where people **initially become** homeless). It succinctly illustrates the possibilities of using HMIS data for critical statewide planning and strategizing. For example, we may discover that people are becoming homeless in a particular area of Georgia where there are no nearby shelter beds, prompting us to consider special funding for a shelter in that area. We can also observe if there are *other parts of the nation* that homeless people are coming from (not shown here).

However, when DCA looked at the data more closely, we noticed some big issues that ultimately prevented us from using this map as an official reference: in some cases, the data clearly represent the *agency's* address when it is actually supposed to represent the *client's most recent permanent residence*. This seems to be contributing to a large overrepresentation of zip code counts in Augusta and possibly other areas. The point of this data element is to capture **where people are first becoming homeless**, not where they're currently residing; we are trying to get an idea of **where they are coming from**, not where they are coming to.

Update Program	
Program Name	TESTING
Program Type	Emergency Shelter
Site Name	DCA
County	Butts
Program Entry Information	
Click <a href="#">HERE</a> to add or edit FINANCE information      Click <a href="#">HERE</a> to add or edit SPECIAL NEEDS information	
Entry Date	04/21/2011
Housing Status	Literally homeless <span style="float: right;">Required for Residential and HPRP programs</span>
ZIP Code (last permanent address)	Don't know <span style="float: right;">Required for Residential and HPRP programs</span>
Prior Night's Residence	Emergency shelter, including hotel or motel paid for with E.S. voucher
Length Of Stay (in Prior Night's Residence)	One week or less
Disabling Condition	No
Chronically Homeless	No <span style="float: right;">?</span>
Program Exit Information	
Exit Date	<input type="text"/> ** Program Check-out must be done from the Client Search Page **
Destination	(None)
Reason for Leaving	(None)
Housing Status	--Select Housing Status-- <span style="float: right;">Required for Residential and HPRP programs</span>
<input type="button" value="Save"/> <input type="button" value="Cancel"/>	
<b>NOTE - This information is required for all household members that participate in a HUD-funded program.</b>	

What you see above is the page on Pathways COMPASS that supplies data for the zip codes map. The **highlighted fields** are especially important... For a person to be represented on the map, they **must** have a zip code recorded for their last permanent residence. Also, a homeless client will not appear on the map if they do not have a "literally homeless" housing status. Even if a single Pathways user is systematically entering in the wrong kind of zip code or housing status for their clients, it can significantly degrade our ability to look at statewide trends, because the mistakes add up over time. This is why it is extremely important for every user to be properly trained in COMPASS data entry and to see the value in what they do.

# Outcome of the Month



**Homelessness recurrence** (i.e., recidivism) occurs when a formerly homeless person returns to homelessness. This event gets to the crux of what we are ultimately trying to do: move people into **permanent** housing. Recurrence measures the lack of **long-term** success, and it is not something you directly enter into HMIS. Simply enrolling someone into a homeless program or flagging someone as “literally homeless” is all we need to establish that a past outcome resulted in recurrence. Recently, I studied 9,013 HMIS program enrollments that resulted in housing and found that 2,240 (**27%**) of them eventually returned to homelessness. That is a large number, but we can now begin to track it and hopefully see it reduced.

The histogram above shows the **swiftness** of recurrence among the 27% who returned. Each bar represents a 30-day period, beginning with the first 30 days after clients left their program. Unfortunately, it appears that persons in Georgia tend to return to homelessness rather quickly – the graph is heavily skewed to the right. More people returned within the first 30 days than in any other 30-day period. The average (median) length of time it took someone to return was 238 days. 3 out of 4 people who returned did so within a year.

Recurrence is becoming a very important statistic to measure, and it relies heavily on **accurate client entry** into HMIS. Statistically speaking, if you do not enroll your client, it is as if they never came back to homelessness at all. If your client was literally homeless, and you did not assign them a “literally homeless” **housing status**, they may not have been seen as “homeless” to begin with. This is why active and thoughtful participation in HMIS by homeless services providers is so vital.

## Featured Agency: CaringWorks, Inc.

*One of our role models when it comes to data quality is CaringWorks, Inc. I talked with Dr. Carol Collard, President, to learn more about the agency.*

**JR: How and when did CaringWorks begin?**

CC: CaringWorks was founded in 2002 by Progressive Redevelopment, Inc. (PRI), which was the leading nonprofit housing developer in Atlanta at the time. PRI was a prolific developer of supportive housing and created CaringWorks to provide services that promoted the dignity and well-being of the client.

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

CC: CaringWorks is a nonprofit social service agency built on a single idea that every resident of affordable housing should have the chance to improve his or her quality of life. Our name conveys the sentiment that everyone deserves an opportunity to improve their lives, and that big change can occur from a little effort if we care enough to help.

**JR: What makes CaringWorks unique?**

CC: We really believe that caring works. The majority of CaringWorks staff is in recovery or has experienced homelessness. In most instances, that life experience and passion for the mission is coupled with academic and professional training which heightens the caliber of staff.

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

CC: There is a significant core population of chronically homeless in the Atlanta area. That subset consumes the majority of resources targeted to reduce homelessness. As a supportive housing provider, we specialize in combining relevant social services with permanent affordable housing. We work predominantly with clients who have experienced chronic homelessness and provide them with the tools and resources to optimize their capacity for independent living.

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

CC: This year the agency will focus on improving operations by better resourcing staff with technology and training. Our goal is to move to a cloud-based network for emails and data storage; we also plan to heighten our fidelity with relevant evidence-based practices.



**JR: What about your long-term goals?**

CC: CaringWorks will expand its capacity to reduce Atlanta's homeless population by providing more supportive housing opportunities and meaningful ancillary services.

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

CC: Routine staff training, manageable caseloads for each staff person so that proper time can be applied to data input.

**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.**

CC: It would help if regional data was shared and distributed more frequently so that individual agencies would have some sense of impact on local effort.

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

CC: More permanent supportive housing opportunities and more SUSTAINABLE funding streams for well qualified providers.

# Thanks, from the Housing Trust Fund Team



John Bassett  
*HTF Director*  
john.bassett@dca.ga.gov



Patrick Brown  
*Housing Development Coordinator*  
patrick.brown@dca.ga.gov



Jonathan Cox  
*Planning Manager*  
jonathan.cox@dca.ga.gov



Brian DiNapoli  
*Grants Consultant*  
brian.dinapoli@dca.ga.gov



Christy Hahn  
*ESG Coordinator*  
christy.hahn@dca.ga.gov



April Lockett  
*HMIS Consultant*  
april.lockett@pcni.org



Libby Mazur  
*SPC Program Coordinator*  
libby.mazur@dca.ga.gov



Elayne Miller  
*Grants Consultant*  
elayne.miller@dca.ga.gov



Whittney Mitchell  
*Program Representative*  
whittney.mitchell@dca.ga.gov



Tina Moore  
*CoC Coordinator*  
tina.moore@dca.ga.gov



Gary Moseley  
*Compliance Officer*  
gary.moseley@dca.ga.gov



Ronald Pounds  
*Disability Housing Coordinator*  
ronald.pounds@dca.ga.gov



Jason Rodriguez  
*Data Analyst*  
jason.rodriguez@dca.ga.gov



Phillis Thomas  
*Compliance Manager*  
phillis.thomas@dca.ga.gov



Dave Totten  
*HMIS Coordinator*  
dave.totten@dca.ga.gov



Bonnie Woods  
*Program Representative*  
bonnie.woods@dca.ga.gov



Patricia Wright  
*Compliance Manager*  
patricia.wright@dca.ga.gov