

September 2013

Data Digest for Georgia's HMIS Users

Enhancing the picture of homelessness in Georgia

This is the fifth 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.

An often-overlooked HMIS data element is **chronic homelessness**; it is not a data element that HUD tracks, so we have not been tracking it in our data quality reports. However, it may play an increasingly important role in Georgia's data analytics. And it should! After all, the federal government has launched a major initiative to end chronic homelessness by 2015, so it makes sense for us to start tracking this data. The problem is that chronic homelessness has a complicated definition involving up to three years' worth of information, and relying solely on Pathways users to sift through it all does not seem like the most scientific way to classify people. On page 2, I describe another classification method we are experimenting with that takes into account other types of HMIS data. I also compare it with our current way of classifying people in Pathways.

Every issue of the Digest will have an outcome statement that demonstrates how useful and informative HMIS data can be. This month, I take a closer look at permanent destination rates and how they related to chronic homelessness status. I also give an update on our goal of having good data completion rates for client destinations.

The featured organization this month is *Ninth District Opportunity, Inc.*, which has consistently had excellent data quality. The Housing Program Manager, Shawn Howell, 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: Chronic Homelessness

Chronic Homelessness Classifications for Households that Entered Programs during SFY 2013

# of Enrollments % of Total Pathways User	DCA Algorithm	
	Chronic = No	Chronic = Yes
Chronic = No	 28,428 73.23%	 2,492 6.42%
Chronic = Yes	 4,087 10.53%	 3,816 9.83%

Misclassification rate: 16.95%

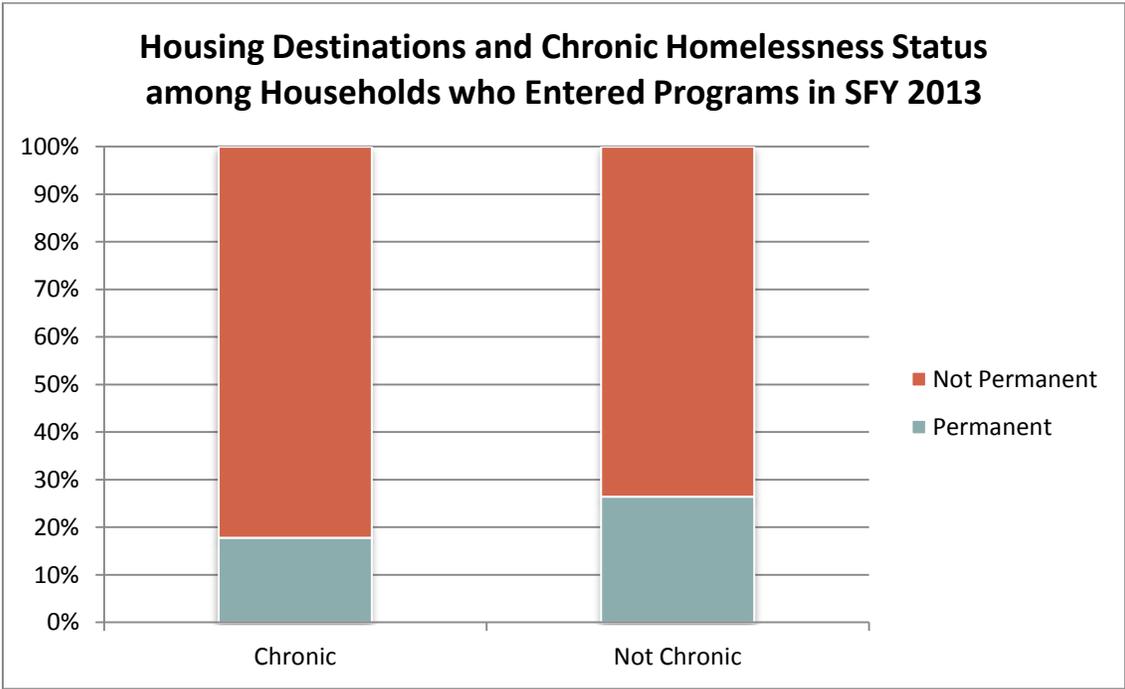
According to the interim HUD rule of chronic homelessness, a person should be labeled “chronically homeless” if the head of household...

- Has a disabling condition *AND*
- Meets at least one of the following conditions:
 - o Has had an episode of homelessness lasting at least 365 days *OR*
 - o Has had at least 4 episodes in the past 3 years.

In Pathways COMPASS, you can assign this classification to a client via a drop-down box on the general page. For the most part, this classification has been up to the discretion of Pathways users. The problem with this is that Pathways users are not guaranteed to be consistent with each other, or even with themselves, in applying the HUD rule to every client who walks in. People may still have varying ideas of what “chronically homeless” means exactly, and some people may take greater care in their data entry than others. It would help if this process was in some way automated.

Recently, I’ve been working on a way to do this using a client’s history in HMIS. I developed an algorithm that tries to follow the HUD rule exactly by **taking into account the following data elements: prior night’s residence, destination, and disabling condition.** I compared the results with the choices Pathways users made (see the table above). For the most part, they corresponded pretty well; they were only mismatched 16.95% of the time. For 10.53% of households, users saw chronic homelessness where the algorithm did not. In some of these cases, it could be that users were not paying enough attention to the technical HUD definition. Curiously, there are times when it was the other way around: users did *not* see chronic homelessness but the algorithm *did* (6.42% of households). This might result from some users skipping over the chronically homeless question in COMPASS. Of course, both types of mismatches could simply reflect the client’s difficulty remembering his residential history over the past 3 years, or there could be something that the algorithm is not taking into account. But it is important to reduce **user** error to a minimum.

Featured Outcome



Of all the households who entered housing programs between 7/1/2012 and 6/30/2013, 14,844 exited those programs as of August 12. Using the algorithm mentioned on the previous page, I separated these households into “chronic” and “not chronic.” Next, I looked at the **housing destinations** for these two groups. Chronic households fared worse: only **17.81%** went to a permanent destination, compared with **26.45%** of non-chronic households. This is not surprising, since “chronically homeless” by definition implies a greater tendency to remain in homelessness.

One thing to keep in mind is that the “Not Permanent” category includes clients with blank, “don’t know,” “refused,” or “other” destinations. In the chart above, these unknown destinations account for **21.86%** of all destinations. This is significantly worse than our ideal unknown rate of 10%, and it may be skewing our understanding of where people are going when they leave programs. This is why it is highly important to select these ambiguous responses **very rarely**.

Featured Agency: Ninth District Opportunity, Inc.

One of our data quality role models this grant year has been Ninth District Opportunity, Inc. I asked Shawn Howell, Housing Program Manager, some questions about the organization.

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

SH: Ninth District Opportunity, Inc. is a Community Action Agency, founded in 1964 to assist low-income families to increase their self-sufficiency. While we are not solely a housing organization, we have been involved with housing stability and the reduction of homelessness since our inception. Over the years, our involvement has included assisting with the creation of homeless shelters and domestic violence centers, operation of low-income housing units, provision of emergency rent and mortgage payments, mortgage refinance assistance, and home rehabilitation services. We started working with HUD's "Housing First" model in 2009 as a sub-recipient of the HPRP grant, which we found to be a perfect fit with our organization.

JR: What is your program's mission?

SH: All programs operated by our organization are part of an overall mission to advocate for families in need and to promote access to opportunities which facilitate movement toward self-development, self-reliance, and self-determination.

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

SH: It has been our experience that no two clients are the same, and the path to success for each applicant can be very unique. Our client base includes unsupervised youth, single persons, traditional families, single-parent households, elderly, and disabled. According to agency statistics, 56% of the households we serve in Re-Housing programs include children, 71% of which are single-parent households. Another statistic worth mentioning is the fact that 64% of the adults served through Re-Housing have the minimum of a high school diploma and more than 22% have some level of a college education.

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

SH: There is no doubt that homelessness looks much different in rural Georgia than in the larger cities. Most of our applicants do not have access to shelters, public transportation, or many of the resources

that assist with the normal progression towards stability. Our success can only be attributed to experienced case managers and relationships with partners that are as dedicated to assisting the homeless as we are.

JR: What are your best practices for keeping HMIS data clean and accurate?

SH: The agency has always been dedicated in collecting and keeping clean accurate data. A great deal of time is spent reviewing the HMIS data. Reports are run regularly while the agency strives to provide accurate reports to the public and our customers.

JR: Are there ways DCA or Pathways can help HMIS become more useful?

SH: DCA and Pathways have always been very quick to respond to HMIS issues as they arise. We appreciate and enjoy our partnership with both organizations and look forward to working together to continually increase the capabilities of the database in the future.

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

SH: Establishing partnerships with education and training agencies that will assist in increasing competencies and employment skills in the people we serve.



Staff photo: Ninth District Opportunity, Inc.

Thanks, from the Housing Trust Fund Team



Katie Arce
Programs Assistant
katherine.arce@dca.ga.gov



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



Whitney Mitchell
Program Representative
whitney.mitchell@dca.ga.gov



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



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



Ron Pounds
Disability Housing Coordinator
ronald.pounds@dca.ga.gov



Theresa Renfro
Programs Assistant
theresa.renfro@dca.ga.gov



Jason Rodriguez
Data Coordinator
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