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HMIS PRELIMINARY REPORT



Results from the
Chicago Alliance's
HMIS Forum

HMIS PRELIMINARY REPORT: RESULTS FROM THE CHICAGO ALLIANCE’S HMIS FORUM

INTRODUCTION

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a software system that captures client information on individuals and families seeking homeless services; Chicago uses ServicePoint software for its HMIS. The information collected in HMIS is used by policymakers and planners at the federal, state, and local levels to help understand homelessness in a particular jurisdiction. HMIS has the potential to increase coordination among service providers and funders to help provide better services to people experiencing homelessness.

The Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness supports more than 80 homeless service providers throughout Chicago. Based on feedback received over the past year from agencies experiencing difficulties with HMIS, the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness convened service providers on March 15, 2010 for an HMIS Forum, held at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, in an effort to collaborate, share ideas, and discuss problems with the Homeless Management Information System, as well as recommend solutions.

Fifty agencies sent representatives to the Forum. After opening remarks by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness’ CEO, Nancy Radner, as well as a brief presentation from the City of Chicago, Department of Family and Support Services’ (DFSS) Deputy Commissioner David Wells, the participants were dismissed into breakout sessions by agency size: small, medium, large. In this first breakout session, groups brainstormed the main challenges they have experienced with HMIS. After this breakout session, the facilitators of each group identified the four main issues discussed by all agency sizes, and broke up the larger group again into four breakout sessions based on the four issues identified below.

This report is intended to summarize the issues and solutions identified by providers at the HMIS Forum, and will initiate a dialogue among HMIS system administrators and various stakeholders in order to help make significant improvements to the system. Chicago’s HMIS system is undergoing an evaluation by the Chicago Planning Council on Homelessness, to be completed in May 2010. Upon its completion, the Chicago Alliance will issue a final report that will combine concerns and solutions identified at the HMIS Forum, with others identified throughout the evaluation process.

FORUM FINDINGS

AGENCY SIZE

Although many of the agencies, regardless of size, experienced many of the same difficulties implementing HMIS at their agencies, some specific problems are dependent on agency size, and might require specialized attention. The majority of small agencies reported that staff turnover is one of the major problems they face. Infrequent trainings often make it difficult to get new hires utilizing HMIS in a timely manner; and, agency capacity usually only allows for a small number of people to be trained in HMIS. Additionally, because many small agencies do not have someone with the technical abilities to carry out the duties of an Agency Technical Administrator (ATA), the effect staff turnover has on an agency is exacerbated as HMIS data entry and agency processes are interrupted.

Medium and large-size agencies tend to experience more problems with consistent and accurate HMIS use because of the large amount of data they must manage. Many agency representatives felt that because trainings are purely technical in nature and lack ties to programmatic aspects of HMIS use, ensuring end-users at each agency are utilizing HMIS in a way that is consistent with other users in the program can be difficult. Agencies feel like they must re-train their employees when they return from the HMIS training to ensure they are using HMIS correctly for their program; this was not a communicated expectation when service provider agencies started using the system.

While all agencies reported data management problems, large agencies, in particular, struggle with data entry and reporting errors because their data input happens at a larger scale than smaller agencies. Agencies often reported that managing the data in HMIS is difficult because HMIS is not user friendly. For example, they cannot easily pull a list of clients for each case manager on staff (this is something reported by other size agencies as well). Agency representatives also indicated that the way HMIS is currently designed is not directly applicable to their program type. This results in incorrect data entry because agencies do not have the ability to prevent data from being entered into the wrong place for their program by, for example, graying-out or blocking a particular field. In addition, HMIS’ current set-up seems to contain multiple screens and fields where the same information can be captured, which leads to data entry errors.

Overall, among the three agency sizes, four common issues repeatedly surfaced during the first discussions at the HMIS Forum: communication problems regarding HMIS system, policies and procedures; problems entering data and getting useful data out of the system; inadequate training and technical assistance; and, HMIS not being tailored to Chicago’s programs.

COMMUNICATION, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES

One of the primary issues stated by agency representatives was the lack of communication between the HMIS administrators and end-users. Agencies felt that new requirements and system upgrades are frequently implemented without agencies being notified properly or trained ahead of time. Additionally, agencies often need to communicate with system administrators regarding technical issues or make programmatic changes within HMIS, and the method to do so is cumbersome. Agencies stated they must call the City’s Department of Innovation and Technology (DoIT) helpline to explain the issue and receive a ticket number. They then have to email the ticket number to HMIS@cityofchicago.org and wait for a response, which could take several days. Agencies also stated that responses are not consistently accurate or do not answer the original question posed, and follow-up questions, after an initial response, require agencies to start the contact process from the beginning again (calling to receive a ticket number, etc).

Almost every breakout session discussed the lack of knowledge around policies and procedures for HMIS administrators, ATA’s, and end-users. Most users have not read, nor do they have access to a copy of, the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Additionally, breakout session facilitators reported that many users are unclear about the governance (administration and decision-

making) of HMIS in regards to the responsibilities of the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, the Planning Council and its HMIS Committee, and the City of Chicago.

Due to a lack of written policies and procedures that are easily accessible to all HMIS users, agencies expressed confusion over many policies related to security. One of the more prevalent issues discussed in breakout sessions was regarding client consent and entering clients anonymously. Some agencies were unsure if clients who refuse to be entered into HMIS should be entered anonymously, or not at all. Other agencies expressed concern about legal ramifications and/or ethical issues of reporting client data without proper consent. In addition, agencies are unclear about what forms of consent are permissible and sufficient (verbal vs. paper), how to capture this information in HMIS, and whether they are required to keep paper copies of consent on file.

Finally, many agency representatives also expressed confusion over the minimum requirements for entering clients for different program types, and how to enter information so it appears in reports generated at the program, agency, and city level.

DATA QUALITY AND REPORTING

Ensuring that the data being entered into HMIS and being extracted from HMIS is accurate, timely, and complete is difficult for agencies because of the problems discussed throughout this report. Often agencies are missing information when

they enter clients due to the lack of communication about new, required data fields, such as those announced by HUD in the 2010 HMIS Data Standards notice. Inadequate training, as discussed below, often leads to agencies incorrectly entering what is often large quantities of data. Additionally, the inability of agencies to customize HMIS screens to block fields that do not need to be completed, further leads to data being entered incorrectly.

Whenever data is entered into HMIS incorrectly, reports generated from the system will also be inaccurate. Agencies feel a high level of frustration when they are required to go back and correct large amounts of data because it is not showing up in a report. Another reporting issue agencies experience is the lack of standardized reports agencies can generate from the system on their own. Agencies felt that having more reports, and additional training on how to run and interpret reports, would allow agencies to examine their data on a regular basis, thus increasing their data quality.

TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

As agency representatives indicated throughout the HMIS Forum, many of the issues discussed in the preceding paragraphs stem from the lack of adequate training and technical assistance for end-users. First and foremost, most agencies felt that the communication process required to register someone for training is cumbersome, and that training offerings are not publicized well in advance to all agencies. For example, many

agencies were not aware of the Advanced Reporting Tool (ART) trainings held in August and September 2009. Likewise, many HMIS Forum participants thought that, once registered, subsequent communication was inadequate; some participants reported they did not receive proper confirmation that they have been signed up for a training session, or reminders about the training date, location, and time.

Additionally, agencies felt that initial trainings for new users are insufficient as they do not cover basic HMIS policies and procedures, and are not specific to their agency's program. For example, more often than not, trainees are shown many more capabilities of HMIS than their agency uses; therefore, the training is not directly transferrable to their agency's work. One attendee stated that it is clear that trainers know the technological capacity of HMIS, but not how it translates into agency programming, and especially not how it might differ for various program types. Trainers are often unable to answer non-technical questions, such as whether or how to enter a non-consenting client, or information about security policies.

Another comment about the initial trainings is that they are too long. Many participants felt that requiring users to attend two full days of training is excessive, especially when they often have to do their own training on how to use HMIS for their agency specifically, once trainees complete the City training. Many participants felt that they did not know enough about the system during the initial two days of training, to ask meaningful questions; it

was only when they went back to their agencies and began using the system for the first few days did they feel they had many unanswered questions. A follow-up day of training, after an initial first day of training, might help to solve this particular problem. Agencies also expressed a desire to have a system in place for on-going or topic-driven trainings, such as trainings for report writing, or specifically for agency ATA’s.

Not only are initial trainings inadequate and on-going trainings necessary, but the lack of quick access to technical support seems to heighten agencies’ frustrations with using the system. Several people indicated that they are unsure of how to get technical questions answered, and they felt that getting an immediate answer to a question would cut down on data entry errors and help agencies stay on top of their data entry in a consistent manner. Many users felt that peer-sharing on a regular basis would also help address some of their concerns. This would help identify common problems that could then be addressed in future trainings, as currently it seems that the trainers are getting little feedback from end-users on how to improve them.

Along the same lines, agency representatives noted that having an easily accessible, basic user manual, and/or some source of knowledge base to refer to for HMIS troubleshooting, would help decrease data entry errors and frustration among end-users. The user manual would include step-by-step instructions for entering and updating clients into HMIS, and summarize policies and procedures listed in the SOP’s, while

an online collaboration could help with troubleshooting issues and sharing resolutions

CUSTOMIZATION

Breakout session facilitators noted that much of frustration agencies experience is due to what appears to be inefficiencies and inadequacies within HMIS. Agencies felt that in general, ServicePoint is not effective because it 1) has not been tailored for City of Chicago reporting purposes and 2) cannot be tailored to specific program use. This means that almost every agency that uses HMIS also maintains a separate agency database that they can use to run agency performance reports and client lists used for HUD and City reporting, and program evaluation.

HMIS end-users would like to generate useful reports from HMIS, but noted that the current HMIS set-up does not allow for this. For example, HMIS screens do not capture the goals and activities required for quarterly City DFSS reports, and capturing the Universal Data Elements (UDE’s) required for HUD is confusing as you can enter UDE’s in multiple locations. In general, agencies felt that either HMIS cannot capture the appropriate data, or they were not trained appropriately in capturing data necessary to generate reports that can be useful for City and federal funders. As previously mentioned, providing training on and the capability to create reports that are useful to their agencies would allow agencies to use the system for more activities than routine data entry. This, then, would also incentivize more frequent and correct use of

the system, increasing data quality and buy-in from users.

At the agency level, representatives reported that there are two problems stemming from the inability of agencies to tailor HMIS to their program. One is having too many fields and/or screens within HMIS that are not required, which then leads to data entry errors as people often enter information in the wrong location within HMIS. As previously stated, especially for larger agencies, this causes frustration as end-users frequently have to go back and correct large amounts of data once they learn of the problem. It also means that agencies can rarely pull out useful and accurate data from the system. Secondly, agencies would consider utilizing HMIS as their primary and sole database if they could capture the necessary information they need to operate their program, and if they felt comfortable about ServicePoint security. For example, agencies cannot change “picklists” for the types of service goals offered for clients. Another example is that many agencies will not use the case notes section in HMIS because they are unsure about security and privacy of these notes.

Users also felt that some of the screens in HMIS could be more user-friendly. For example, agencies thought that only being able to see clients assigned to the case manager’s specific login information, or putting all the HUD UDE’s on one page, would make data entry easier, and cut down on errors. As stated above, ATA’s or system administrators could also “gray-out” screens or fields that are not required to reduce data entry errors.

LONG TERM AND SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the exchange of ideas at the HMIS Forum and further examination by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, the following recommendations should be explored by the City of Chicago’s HMIS administrators and the Chicago Planning Council on Homelessness and its’ HMIS Committee for implementation. Some of the recommendations could be implemented in the short term, while others require a longer amount of time to implement.

| Recommendation | Short Term (To be accomplished in 3 months) | Long Term (To be accomplished in 12 months) |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Improve Communication about HMIS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate contact information and procedures to agencies for HMIS technical assistance and troubleshooting Email HMIS users about recent changes for HMIS and HUD requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create and implement procedures for notifying end-users of HMIS system changes for requirements, screens, policies, and procedures Create policies that outline the timeframe within which agencies can expect an answer to technical questions, and instructions for how to ask follow-up questions |
| Create a User Manual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin to review sample user manuals provided by HMIS software providers and other continua Solicit feedback from Chicago HMIS users about desired user manual content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create step-by-step instructions for entering and updating clients and grouping families together by program type Summarize policies and procedures listed in the SOP’s Include sample forms, such as the Release of Information, agency policies for data quality checks, etc. |
| Update Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create policy regarding entering non-consent clients and disseminate information to end-users | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and distribute minimum data collection and data entry standards for all program types Clarify privacy protection agreements, how data will be stored and protected, who is responsible for its protection, which data can/cannot be shared, and how it will be done Outline responsibilities of partner agencies, HMIS administrators, and other parties and establish formal grievance procedures regarding HMIS Ensure SOP document is easily accessible and frequently distributed to all HMIS end-users |
| Redesign HMIS Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue offering standard trainings for 3 months Training options, dates, and times should be widely communicated to all potential end-users via email blasts and posting on ServicePoint’s homepage Trainers should meet with HMIS administrators to discuss common issues end-users experience, and address these issues in training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer more types of trainings, such as refresher courses every six months or annually, Advanced Reporting Tool, security policies and procedures Outline data collection requirements for program types in trainings Require trainers to update training content on a regular basis to address on-going user issues Ensure trainers can respond to programmatic questions during training |

| Recommendation | Short Term (To be accomplished in 3 months) | Long Term (To be accomplished in 12 months) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Redesign Technical Assistance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify and communicate troubleshooting and technical assistance procedures for agencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase efficiency of technical assistance by replacing ticket-based system with help-desk format where users could call and receive prompt technical assistance Expand technical assistance to include on-site assistance and troubleshooting |
| Train and Utilize Agency Technical Administrators (ATAs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore possible expansion of ATA responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide ATA-specific training on their responsibilities Authorize ATA’s with additional HMIS responsibilities, including the changing of passwords and ability to customize screens in HMIS as much as possible |
| Develop User Groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch user-groups that meet monthly via an online collaboration, conference calls, in person, or webinars, to provide peer support and assist with troubleshooting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provider feedback from user-groups to trainers and system administrators about common issues that can be addressed in future trainings or via system-wide modifications Distribute answers to frequently asked questions regularly to all HMIS users |
| Increase HMIS Efficiency and Effectiveness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjust the time-out feature in HMIS, so that it is longer than it currently is and/ or create a feature where the HMIS system automatically saves work before timing a user out of the system Allow case managers to easily pull a client list from HMIS Create a way to enter clients into ServicePoint and ShelterPoint (ServicePoint’s bed management section) at the same time Have only one screen where required client information must be entered | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create the option for agencies to use HMIS for Department of Family and Support Services reporting requirements Solicit agency input to develop a series of reports that are useful for program evaluation |

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by the high level of turn-out to the HMIS Forum, it is clear that agencies are actively using HMIS and looking for ways to collaboratively make the system better. Together, with the help of HMIS administrators, the system can be improved to reduce duplicative efforts and frustration level among end-users and administrators alike. As stated by many participants on their HMIS Forum Evaluation Forms, users look forward to seeing the HMIS administrators implement many solutions identified at the Forum. Attendees also expressed an interest in maintaining an open dialogue between users and administrators through periodic gatherings.

Achieving the level of technical support, training, and communication agencies require may necessitate restructuring some of the current HMIS staff patterns. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all HMIS stakeholders will also help HMIS users understand the importance of dedicating the time necessary to maintain a quality system. Additionally, role clarity will also help establish accountability for recommended solutions outlined in this report. It should be noted that the commendable efforts of agencies and system administrators to focus on ensuring Chicago’s participation in the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR, a report annually submitted to Congress on the status of homelessness throughout the nation) have proven to be successful in the past year. Expanding Chicago’s system-wide efforts to focus on agency support can only help improve the system going forward.