

Minnesota's HMIS Frequently Asked Questions, July 2008

1. Why do we have to do HMIS?

HMIS is a mandate, linked to about \$20 million in federal funds received annually by service providers throughout Minnesota. The providers who participate in HMIS, the more likely providers are to continue to secure these funds. State programs that target homelessness require participation in HMIS to eliminate a need for duplicative databases and to help increase the system's coverage, which improves the data.

2. What can we learn from HMIS that we can't from a survey?

HMIS collects data continuously over time, as opposed to the "snapshot" provided by a survey. For example, whereas Wilder's most recent point-in-time survey show that 306 adults were in Ramsey County emergency shelter on October 26, 2006, HMIS data show that over 4,042 adults used Ramsey County emergency shelter over the course of that same year.

Since HMIS holds identifiable data in one place, it allows us to unduplicate counts. For example, if *shelter A* reports that they served 20 people in January, and *shelter B* reports that they served another 20 we can look to HMIS to see whether that is a total of 40 people, or if the same 20 people stayed at both shelters.

3. How can HMIS be used to help evaluate programs?

HMIS helps programs track information in a standardized way, including:

- A. **Outputs and descriptive information:** *How many people did you serve? How many of them were disabled?*
- B. **Provider-reported outcomes:** *When the client exits do they say they are going to permanent housing? or back to the street?*
- C. **Administratively-reported outcomes:** *How many clients who exit program A later show up in emergency shelter?*

Combined together this information can help the state make sure providers are accountable to program goals. It can also be used to help identify top-performing providers and their "best practices," which can then be used to improve service effectiveness throughout the state.

4. How else can HMIS benefit programs?

- By providing one database for several funders.
- By providing a relatively low-cost database that can be used for all of their programs, including those with no funder-requirements to participate in HMIS.
- By providing reports that providers can run and use in grant proposals and annual reports.

5. Is data in HMIS secure?

Yes. The primary software for the system, ServicePoint, has a powerful security model that includes the same SSL protections used to secure most on-line banking and shopping transactions. We operate the system as "closed" meaning that Wilder staff are the only people who have rights to view all the data in the system. Most end-users can only see data entered by themselves or others in their agency.

6. Does HMIS put victims of domestic violence at risk?

No. HMIS is governed by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which excludes certain programs from participating in HMIS. Domestic Violence agencies that participate in HMIS are strongly encouraged to only enter anonymous clients without any potentially-identifying information, like date of birth (see www.hmismn.org/postings/pdfs/DVLetter_3-06.pdf). Victims who are served in HMIS agencies that are not specifically DV providers are given the option of being entered as anonymous, but even those who chose to be entered with identifying information are subject to very little risk due to the security provisions mentioned above.

7. Can HMIS help inform us about causes of homelessness ?

Yes. HMIS can show how many people receiving homeless services are facing a variety of personal challenges, including disabilities and low incomes. HMIS data can also point to broader, systemic contributors to homelessness. For example, HMIS data can be used to show the disproportionate number of people of color seeking services or (new this year) how many people receiving services have recently exited facilities such as jails and hospitals.

8. How many data elements are required?

Requirements vary by funders. All participants are required to complete 16 “universal” data elements (14 required by HUD and 2 required by our implementation). Depending on how the data elements are counted the numbers range from 23 (Emergency Services Program) to 42 (HUD Supportive Housing Program) to nearly 80 (FHPAP and programs funded under the state’s initiative to end long-term homelessness). The state’s requirements are reviewed annually by state staff with input from Wilder, the HMIS Governing Group, and system end-users throughout the state.

9. Has HMIS data ever been used for anything besides provider reports back to the state?

Data from Minnesota’s HMIS has already been used for several public reports, including reports on emergency shelter use in Ramsey County (www.wilder.org/report.html?id=1934) and reports on Project Homeless Connect events (see www.wilder.org/homelessness.0.html). Additionally, data from Minnesota’s HMIS has been used in HUD’s Annual Homeless Assessment Reports to congress. Finally, HMIS data was used last year to update legislators on activities under various funding streams; for example, the number of people served under the initiative to end long-term homelessness. And we’ve only just begun!

10. Do we have to use ServicePoint to participate in Minnesota’s HMIS?

No. Hearth Connection is now participating by transferring data from their system into ours. This requires a high level of technical know-how, but it is a viable option being explored by several others.

11. Who runs Minnesota’s HMIS?

Wilder Research administers the project, which is overseen by a 25-member statewide “Governing Group.” Wilder also answers to its funders, including HUD and various state agencies.