

The Role of Data in the Fight to End Homelessness



Calgary Homeless
FOUNDATION

The Case for Data
Sharing in Our City

Each one of us has a role to play in ending homelessness

WE KNOW THAT ENDING HOMELESSNESS TAKES MORE THAN JUST ONE PERSON, MORE THAN JUST ONE AGENCY, MORE THAN ONE APPROACH. IT TAKES A COLLECTIVE OF ORGANIZATIONS WHO HAVE COME TOGETHER WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS UP TO US TO WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE A CITY WHERE EVERYONE THRIVES.

Every one of us contributes to a strong network of agencies and dedicated professionals committed to helping people out of homelessness - working together to guide those in need to safe, secure housing and healthier, more sustainable lives.

It is up to US to help give a voice to the voiceless. It is up to US to take our hard earned knowledge and synthesise it into something that can create lasting change. Data underpins our sector's ability to not only support our city's most vulnerable, but to help them thrive.

Data can make all the difference between a lifetime on the street and the path to a permanent place to call home. Our city's most vulnerable rely on YOU to give them a voice.



Data in the fight to end homelessness

As system planner, Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) administers HMIS, Calgary's Homeless Management Information System.

Through HMIS, CHF has been collecting and analyzing data from homeless-serving agencies in Calgary, and across Canada, since 2008. This electronic data collection system is used to gather system-wide, standardized data that provides vital insights into homelessness. Rigorous data evaluation lets us know what is and isn't working, which has led to enhancements in programmatic decision-making, greater exchanges of best practices and the ability to focus resources where they will have the most impact.

This data also enables our community to stress-test for the future. The world is ever changing and as such, new and innovative approaches to programs and services need to be cultivated and tested to ensure we remain proactive in our work.

The impact?

A more accurate picture of homelessness in Calgary, and much better data to support clients - which drastically boosts the effectiveness of our care.

"Data shows us the needs of clients and demographics, and therefore puts the focus on where the greatest need is."



The impact of data sharing

DATA IS THE VOICE OF OUR CLIENTS AND TENANTS. THROUGH THE DATA THAT YOU SHARE, YOU MAKE AN IMPACT ON HOW WE MANAGE, MEASURE AND ADJUST THE SYSTEM OF CARE WHICH IMPACTS HOW QUICKLY PEOPLE GAIN ACCESS TO HOUSING AND SUPPORTS. YOU'RE HELPING US SHARE YOUR CLIENTS' VOICE, THROUGH DATA, ENABLING THE SYSTEM TO WORK FASTER AND MORE EFFICIENTLY THAN EVER BEFORE.



Mary Ann and Reg are two such clients.

Mary Ann, homeless after aging out of foster care, had been homeless for almost a decade by the time she met Reg in 1998. The two became inseparable, picking bottles and living in shelters for another 10 years before they were housed as a direct result of new data shared through HMIS. These two are just two of hundreds of people in Calgary who faced chronic homelessness.

Their journey home began in 2016. While examining newly available data from the Calgary Drop-In Centre, CHF's Senior Researcher, Dr. Ali Jadidzadeh, observed that although we were housing more and more people, we were simply not moving the bar on chronic homelessness. People were remaining homeless for years, never meeting the criteria to access their own permanent housing.

When Ali looked at the new composite data shared by the Calgary Drop-In Centre, he saw a whole new story. Because data IS people's stories. Each data point represents a part of someone's life today - their home or lack of a home, their family, their education, their health - and it can become a chapter in the story of their future.

Ali's new research included data on chronic and episodic shelter users dating back to 2007. Based on the total length of stay measured by days, it used more filtering options than earlier practices, including a filter by first date in shelter (a measure of chronicity), last date in shelter (how recently the person was in the shelter system), and the number of episodes of homelessness.

Ali's research shone the light on 109 people who had been chronically homeless for up to 20 years. People who had slept on mats in the Drop-In Centre and other shelters - some of them for their entire adult lives.

This discovery led directly to a policy change here at CHF, which was to allocate 50 per cent of housing spaces specifically to chronic shelter users. Together with you, our community partners, we launched the Chronic Shelter Users Pilot, whose goal was to develop a systematic way to house people who had been staying in shelters for five years or more, but who were never "acute" enough on the existing scoring system to be triaged for supportive housing.

As a result of the newly shared data and Ali's research, over a six-month period in 2017, 109

people who had been chronically homeless at Calgary's three biggest shelters for single adults (the Calgary Drop-In Centre, Calgary Alpha House, and the Mustard Seed) were referred for permanent supportive housing.

More than 100 people now have a safe place to call their own.

This is a direct result of data sharing in action. Without agencies sharing data with CHF to synthesize into research and measurable results, we cannot be sure that we are addressing the sector's most pressing challenges. Thanks to agencies' commitment to sharing data through HMIS, CHF's senior researcher was able to identify a gaping hole in housing provision - one that previous processes simply had not picked up.

What other stories are buried in the data that we have collected and shared? What other good news outcomes are waiting to be brought to light? How many more Calgarians will walk out of homelessness and through the doors of their own home in 2018?

Sharing your data will shine the light on more new pathways out of homelessness and into the future.



"Data sharing helps our agency track successes and improvements over time...everyone is on the same system to (better) help our clients."

Data & Agencies: The Complete Picture

The Homeless-Serving Sector works with our community's most complex and vulnerable people. CHF, as the System Planner, supports the system of care by providing the tools, resources and data to help agencies continue to innovate and be more effective. This ensures that we all continue to deliver the best service to Calgarians experiencing homelessness. It isn't about the performance of any one agency; it's about what we can do as a team to support our city's most vulnerable.

Data underpins Calgary's Homeless-Serving System of Care and provides multi-level impact. Data collection not only supports our clients, but supports and identifies program performance; shows strengths and gaps in the system of care; and informs policy.

This multi-level impact is four-fold:

- We are all better able to understand people's homeless experiences by tracking the services they receive and the duration of their homeless episode(s)
- Help you better meet your client's needs by improving service and program

coordination; determining client outcomes; providing more informed program referrals; and informing program design

- Collect system-wide, standardized data for accurate, real-time reporting on the number of people who are homeless; the length and causes of their homelessness; and their demographic characteristics and needs, which creates a more complete system of care
- Improve research for evidence-based decision making, such as policy proposals for the necessary orders of government to create nation-wide social change

A complete picture of the homeless-serving system of care can only be provided if data is shared by all agencies within that system. That kind of data collection enhances how we are all operating, and as a result, how we are able to grow and become more effective in improving outcomes for the people we serve. In other words, the full collection of data supports and improves the lives of our clients and tenants because it impacts program development and helps to identify gaps in the system.



Additional Impacts of Data Sharing

» Performance Enhancement:

CHF's Janice Chan has led a research project that uses HMIS data to examine performance indicators for CHF-funded Housing First Programs. This project has involved extensive community consultation and is currently in the implementation phase.

» Improved Health Outcomes:

Dr. Katrina Milaney from the University of Calgary leads research on the health care needs of chronically homeless adults in Calgary. Dr. Milaney used sector-wide data, including HMIS, for two ongoing research projects, "Understanding Homeless Women's Experience of Having, Raising and Losing Children"; and "Understanding Intergenerational Dependency: Examining the Intersecting Issues of Homeless Families with Complex Needs." In addition to CHF, research partners on this project include Inn From the Cold, YWCA, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Alberta Human Services. The project's final report was finalized in November of 2016.

» Integration and Coordination:

In 2017, with the help of data collected from HMIS, the Calgary Housing Company (CHC), Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS) and the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) identified the need to integrate and coordinate the affordable housing and homelessness sectors. This led to the development of a project that will focus on identifying and stream-lining opportunities to successfully transition tenants from supportive housing to affordable housing when case management support is no longer required.

"For over 140 years, Calgary has been a city built by trailblazers in industry, innovation, social justice and philanthropy; as a community we continue to blaze new trails and bring transformational change."

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