



Homeless System Response: Unsheltered Data Collection Strategies: Case Studies

Introduction and Purpose

The number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the United States increased by more than 3% during the COVID-19 pandemic¹ and continues to grow in many communities due to a lack of affordable housing, increasing rents, stagnated wage growth, and limited availability of sheltered homelessness services. In response, several communities around the country have developed comprehensive approaches to addressing unsheltered homelessness through a combination of targeted street outreach services and collaboration among local partners, including housing providers, local political and business leaders, and healthcare services. These efforts have paired data from [Homeless Management Information Systems \(HMIS\)](#) and other sources with client-informed data collection practices to improve engagement with people experiencing homelessness and connect them to housing and other appropriate supports.

Successful programs are developed in collaboration with people who are currently unhoused or have experienced homelessness, who can identify and recommend effective solutions to barriers in the current systems. By respectfully and authentically engaging people with lived experience and expertise (PLEE) and listening to their stories, programs can develop individualized plans to assist them in accessing the supports they need. Many programs [hire people who have experienced homelessness](#) as navigators, outreach workers, and peer mentors.

This document includes examples of unsheltered data collection strategies from four communities—representing diverse populations, different engagement strategies, and a mix of HMIS and non-HMIS data collection practices—to help people experiencing unsheltered homelessness access housing and services in their community.

Community Examples

Seattle, WA

Seattle's [Housing Command Center](#) (HCC) is an initiative centralizing and streamlining efforts to provide housing and services to individuals experiencing homelessness based on practices and approaches gained from responding to natural disasters.

Seattle's HCC initiative uses unique methods of outreach and engagement to prioritize and permanently house residents who were experiencing homelessness in encampments located in downtown Seattle. Residents were assisted in finding units across the county area based on their assessed preferences.

Initially, Seattle's HCC structure consisted of intense collaboration between representatives of the local Lived Experience Coalition, the City of Seattle, King County, the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA), and other partners to assess and allocate resources as identified by the HCC. Individuals with lived experience co-led the HCC and were incorporated into other working groups to provide perspective. Many staff of KCRHA had lived experience as well. Under the HCC, specific working groups would move initiatives and particular bodies of work. The Data Management Team, largely staffed by KCRHA, also included members of different local groups with expertise in

¹ [Point in Time count data](#), 2020-2022.

homelessness data. These efforts enhanced the ability of the program to conduct targeted outreach and engagement with unsheltered individuals in the catchment area, identify barriers to housing, and match potential housing interventions to unhoused neighbors either within existing permanent housing projects or in new private market units identified by HCC.

To conduct this work, HCC has implemented a unique assessment for HCC outreach measuring individuals' service needs and housing preferences to address barriers and house individuals rapidly. This assessment used by outreach staff canvassing the catchment area was used to create a by-name list of individuals and was a critical tool for developing prioritization of encampment resolution. At a high level, management and coordination of outreach efforts were enabled by leveraging publicly available data (e.g., local transit maps and information on groceries, education, and medical services) and additional data provided by the City of Seattle. Geographic data and information regarding where encampments are located has streamlined efforts and was a critical factor in prioritizing encampments for services and resolution.

This work has been largely possible because of the utilization of third-party software products. Systems such as [SmartSheets](#), [Tableau](#), and [Property Inspect](#) have provided HCC with means to centralize data collection efforts and analyze progress at both large and small scales using maps, reporting, and data dashboards to identify solutions to emerging challenges and continue the initiative's progress. In particular, using SmartSheets allowed the community to coalesce data in a format that facilitated decision-making and ongoing data analytics, while [Tableau dashboards](#) allowed for sharing data broadly outside the HCC.

Fast Facts

Seattle's HCC assessment was first conducted in SmartSheets and later built into HMIS. It included the following focus areas:

- Community and identity
- Housing intervention and preferences
- Housing history - barriers
- Housing history - retention
- Health conditions & support needs
- Information on additional household members

Hennepin County, MN

The Streets to Housing program (S2H) in [Hennepin County, MN](#) is a street outreach/case management hybrid model that works with adults, youth, and families who are living outside, in their vehicles, or other places unsheltered and not meant for habitation. Since August 2022, the team has found permanent housing outcomes for 52 households and is currently engaged with over 300 households.

Development of the program was guided by a planning group, of which 50% were people with current or prior lived experience of homelessness and the remainder included community members, health care experts, veteran and youth leaders, and social workers. Of the resultant S2H Team, 30% were people who have lived experience of homelessness, and the team continues to partner with people with lived experience and expertise (PLEE) in the implementation and evaluation of the program.

S2Hs' work is based in the perspective that unsheltered homelessness is a result of [historical social and systems failures, resulting in inequitable opportunities and adverse impacts on Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ households](#). (Review [Homelessness and Racial Disparities](#) for more information.) In its goal to be a housing first community that is intentionally advancing equity, the community developed a

housing-focused, trauma-informed model to offer housing options that meet each household's unique situation. S2H ensures that unsheltered households can access safe and appropriate alternatives to living outside, based on their household composition and depth of need. The program provides support to help unsheltered households access emergency shelter and permanent housing as quickly as possible.

S2H meets people where they are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, conducting outreach and engagement at encampments and other known locations where people experiencing homelessness meet or stay. S2H hosts engagement events to administer needs assessments, assist in obtaining benefits, and provide transportation to healthcare and other basic needs. At each event, S2H sets up a canopy, table, and chairs and uses its community engagement van to provide transportation to the event when needed. These events occur multiple times per week in coordination with community street outreach partners, youth and veteran leads, and healthcare organizations to reduce duplication, ensure holistic service coordination, and ensure full geographic coverage. Community partners provide storage, mail, showers, meals, healthcare, and other basic needs. The [schedule for Streets to Housing events](#) is public, proactive, and identifies what the program is offering, where and when the services are available, and how to access these services.

Fast Facts

Hennepin County measures its progress in HMIS according to the following metrics, measured in numbers:

- People engaged by S2H
- Locations identified
- S2H clients that used shelter in the last 7 days
- People active in the Hennepin County Coordinated Entry system (CES)
- People with CES referrals
- People on chronic index (by name list of people experiencing chronic homelessness)
- Veterans on chronic index
- People who moved into permanent housing
- People who are unsheltered

Tucson, AZ

The [Tucson/Pima County CoC](#) balances robust data collection strategies with a multi-level approach that provides people experiencing unsheltered homelessness with specialized supports at each phase of the process.

The CoC uses an approach in which outreach workers and navigators share the responsibilities for helping people resolve their homelessness. After an outreach worker builds initial rapport, individuals experiencing homelessness are provided with a warm transition to a navigator. The navigator's role is to provide ongoing support and assist clients in overcoming barriers to accessing services. This allows the outreach worker to remain focused on engaging unsheltered individuals, while the navigator assists individuals to the point of being move-in ready (having all necessary documents available and verifications completed) for housing programs to which they have been matched. If needed, navigators will connect individuals to resources outside of those available through the CoC. Additionally, navigators are expanding their role to include cultivating relationships with property management companies that may be more accommodating to those with less-than-ideal rental

histories and credit standing assessments.

As part of its efforts to streamline the path towards housing solutions, Tucson/Pima County CoC conducts much of its data collection early in the process. Street outreach contacts are collected in HMIS, and all HUD-funded programs in the CoC have 48 hours to update records as needed. Data quality review is conducted monthly.

Tucson/Pima County CoC was a participant in the [HUD Coordinated Entry Equity Initiative](#), through which the CoC worked to reduce disparities in access to homeless services. To improve frequency of contact with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, the CoC established a routine street outreach schedule. Whenever possible, street outreach workers communicate the scheduled times and locations that they visit, so that people experiencing homelessness become aware of when outreach teams will be available.

Collaboration with the University of Arizona helped to make 2023 the first year that the Tucson/Pima County CoC was able to carry out its Point in Time (PIT) unsheltered count electronically. A survey was designed to meet the CoC specifications, and the CoC gave the link to the app to all staff and volunteers conducting the count so they could use it on their mobile phones.

Dakota County, MN

[Ally Support Services](#) is the primary outreach program for people experiencing homelessness in suburban Dakota County, MN, serving approximately 1,000 people per year and assisting about 500 individuals with accessing shelter and housing. Dakota County does not have site-based shelters, instead utilizing a combination of motels, transitional housing, supportive housing, and affordable housing options.

Ally Support Services believes that resolving unsheltered homelessness cannot be done solely by one organization or effort. Its community-based approach includes employing people with lived experience of homelessness, as well as developing relationships with people who have current or prior lived experience of homelessness who help build connections between people experiencing homelessness and Ally Support Services. For people experiencing unsheltered homelessness without phones or easy access to the Internet, the organization uses non-electronic means, such as printed flyers and information cards that are distributed throughout the community, to distribute information about housing and resources.

Ally Support Services also receives calls for its services from the community at large. Calls from 211 crisis lines coming from people experiencing homelessness are routed directly to the team. Ally Support Services, in partnership with people who have lived experience of homelessness, provides training to local law enforcement agencies that respond to calls for service and have initial contact with individuals experiencing homelessness. This strategy has proven to be highly effective as a rapid response system in offering specific services to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the community.

The CoC's data collection strategies include structuring HMIS as a shared system, which allows street outreach workers to access information about previous contacts and eligibility for resources that may be available to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Organizations such as Ally Support Services can then confirm with their clients whether they are aware of these services, as communication gaps can occur due to mobility or a lack of phone, Internet, or a stable address.

Ally Support Services' individualized, personal approach to data collection includes the use of active listening, motivational interviewing, and prioritizing people's basic needs first. Its staff assist people to address their immediate needs, while also beginning to collect information through a qualitative storytelling approach where individuals are encouraged to describe their history and housing needs

and wants. Data are initially collected to identify key pieces of information that help guide staff in identifying the most appropriate options available in the community. The team conducts a weekly review to update the progress of each person in accessing shelter and housing.

Conclusion

As CoCs continue to address the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, thoughtful consideration of data collection strategies is critical to connect people with the resources they need to attain permanent housing. The case studies outlined in this document demonstrate that successfully addressing unsheltered homelessness relies on a collaborative approach that meaningfully incorporates the expertise of diverse people with lived experience of homelessness, is [client-centered and trauma-informed](#) in the use of HMIS and other formats, and pairs data collection with the provision of resources to address residents' current homeless crises. View additional information on [community approaches to unsheltered homelessness](#).