

Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) Initiative

**HIFIS Data Analysis Framework**  
**“Elements of a Data Analysis Training Module”**

Homelessness Partnering Secretariat

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## **INTRODUCTION: The Benefits of Quality Data**

To understand the scope and nature of homelessness, it is critical to collect the most accurate and representative information on individuals and families who experience homelessness. Finding solutions to homelessness requires that this data be easily collected and analyzed. In addition, precise data and numbers are essential in identifying critical housing and homelessness issues in communities across Canada.

### **a) Improved community planning and decision making**

In support of the community planning process of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data, at a local and regional level, can be used to identify the number of individuals and families using the emergency and transitional shelters, and assess their needs. Clarifying the issues, priorities and objectives can help guide service providers or community planners in the design and implementation of projects. Establishing a data collection mechanism on site or at the community level is critical to the success of any measurement strategy. Indicators are used to measure progress in meeting objectives and targets, to monitor results and provide credible reports.

### **b) Improved homelessness services**

Data is the foundation of solid arguments to address priorities and gaps in homelessness services. The analysis of data collected over time can help guide the community in setting priorities and objectives based on the immediate needs of homeless people and those at risk of homelessness who are overrepresented, unattended or who require specialized services.

### **c) Better communication**

HIFIS is the best option to represent reality as it relates to homeless people. It is the only free software option that can record the most accurate, consistent and timely information about the scope and nature of homelessness. It is a user-friendly, robust software application that enables service providers to share information and develop partnerships within the private and public sectors and at the local, municipal, provincial/territorial and federal levels. The implementation of HIFIS within additional shelters and communities and improvement in local reporting will enhance the ability of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy HPS<sup>1</sup> to produce a more comprehensive national picture of homelessness. Future national reports will benefit from an increase in the number of higher quality local reports.

Use of HIFIS numbers leads to better public understanding and enables communities to promote change, to tackle the causes of homelessness and to ease the negative effects on individuals and families who experience homelessness. It can help build a rationale for continued strategic investments by all levels of government to ensure efficient and sustainable programs that will help prevent and reduce homelessness.

### **d) Partnership development support**

Since funding agencies and all levels of government struggle with competing budget priorities,

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<sup>1</sup> On April 1, 2007, the new HPS was launched to provide more effective and sustainable solutions to homelessness. Under the HPS, funding of \$269.6 million over the next two years will be used to help achieve meaningful and lasting results for homeless people in Canada. See additional information on the HPS Web site at [www.homelessness.gc.ca](http://www.homelessness.gc.ca)

demonstrated positive change in the communities is the impetus for policy development to combat poverty, social exclusion and homelessness. Solid data analysis is critical in building credibility because it holds the key to understanding the lives of people affected by homelessness. Evidence-based reporting is more consistent now that a growing number of HIFIS users share the same definitions (HIFIS data fields dictionary<sup>2</sup>). Provinces and territories as well as non-governmental agencies often use other data collection systems to accurately measure the effectiveness of their homelessness programs and to decide on future investments. When systems are compatible with HIFIS, data sharing at the community level enhances reporting on activities being implemented under the HPS.

#### **e) Avoiding duplication**

The HIFIS network contributes to the development of a national database that assists in the identification of national trends to inform policies and help design better programs. When a strong coordination is in place among HIFIS users and other housing and homelessness stakeholders, it becomes possible to identify patterns in the use of shelters and changes in housing status. The HIFIS database avoids the duplication that occurs when data is collected by private agencies and various levels of government. It provides an accurate overall picture of homelessness, of the size and needs of specific homeless populations, of their utilization of homeless services and of their ability to access mainstream resources.

## **Section A: Roles and Responsibilities of HIFIS Community Coordinators as Data Analysts**

#### **a) Provide an accurate picture of homelessness by identifying data quality issues**

A key responsibility of the data analyst is to improve data quality by identifying and correcting inconsistencies in the HIFIS community database. The HIFIS Community Coordinators (CC)<sup>3</sup> will provide consistent and continual training of staff involved in data collection and entry. The data analyst might rely on a data quality committee to develop a data quality plan, procedures or benchmarks for the community. The HIFIS CC and committee members can tap into HIFIS Initiative resources such as the data dictionary, training manual and HIFIS 3 data software.

#### **Improve data quality by switching to HIFIS 3**

The HIFIS CC, assisted by a data quality committee, will encourage HIFIS user compliance. The HIFIS CC will generate incentives to ensure timely data entry, help identify and correct data quality issues to facilitate the production of monthly or quarterly reports. The current focus of the HIFIS Initiative is on the processing of more HIFIS 3 data exports. By upgrading to HIFIS 3, most of the data quality issues (described in the following paragraph) will be resolved, thereby improving the quality of exports from sites and communities across Canada. HIFIS CCs need to train in the use of the HIFIS 3 Data Integrity Tools in order to introduce the system to the users in the community. Step-by-step instructions for HIFIS users to correct errors in their data banks will be included in the Data Analysis Training Toolbox.

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<sup>2</sup> HIFIS data fields dictionary was created to assist service providers in specifying definitions for the client. It is important to use standardized definitions to ensure that data is entered into the HIFIS software in a consistent and informed manner.

<sup>3</sup> HIFIS Community Coordinators (CCs) are responsible for negotiating partnership agreements with key cities, provincial associations and others; coordinating HIFIS software use at the local level; engaging shelter providers to explain the benefits of the HIFIS Initiative; for training on HIFIS software; and for the coordination of HIFIS data collection and analysis for local and Government of Canada uses

## Data quality issues inherent in HIFIS 1 and 2

Because of the critical importance of data quality, HIFIS 1 and 2 sites will have to be particularly vigilant with the following data quality issues inherent to these versions. Errors in data entry must be corrected at the starting point, as source data is the foundation of accurate and credible reporting. The data elements described constitute the essential elements of a client's unique identifier: name, date of birth and gender. Precise data entry of this information will ensure the availability of critical information on the characteristics of service users and will help planners improve homelessness services systems.

- **If one element is missing:** For example, if the message "Date of birth is missing" occurs, the system cannot calculate the age. If the database cannot link the information on "Date of birth" and "Book-in," it will treat a given client as two different individuals. Accurate client data entry avoids double counting. Double counting inflates the total count of homeless individuals.
- **If one element is inaccurate:** For example, if the message "Date of birth equals the book-in date" occurs, the system will produce an age of zero (0) and downwardly skew the average age. If the message "Date of birth occurs after book-in date" occurs, the system will produce a negative age calculation and downwardly skew the average age. If the message "Date of birth exceeds the limits of possibility" occurs, individuals living in shelters appear to be 150 to 350 years old, and the average age is upwardly skewed.

Because they are essential in calculating the length of stay, book-in and book-out dates have to be entered precisely.

- **If the "Book-in date" is missing,** it impedes the calculation of length of stay.
- **If "Book-out date" is missing,** it will appear that the client has never exited a shelter, and thus overstate length of stay and inflate the count of homeless individuals.
- **Inaccurate "Book-in/book-out dates"** skew the actual average or total number of days stayed in a shelter. For example, if the "Book-in date" is later than the exit day, the result is a negative length of stay, and if the length of stay exceeds 1000 days, it upwardly skews the average length of stay.

### b) Analyze data adequately within the community context in a coordinated way

The Government of Canada assists communities<sup>3</sup> in the implementation of HIFIS to improve the delivery of services to homeless clients and to increase understanding of their characteristics and needs at the local, regional and national levels. As full participants in the HIFIS Initiative, the HIFIS CCs will continue in their current efforts to coordinate shelters and service providers, to deliver HIFIS training, to report back to their communities on data collected and to foster sustainable partnerships. The HIFIS Community Coordinator's analysis of data and provision of precise and consistent reports on shelter users, shelter use and patterns in shelter use will provide accurate information on the nature of homelessness, the patterns of service utilization and the effectiveness of HPS community plans.

## Nature and scope of homelessness

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of the HIFIS Data Analysis Framework, whenever "community" is used, it refers to the homelessness strategy structure in place in your community and more specifically, to the group of individuals or stakeholders, committee or series of committees in your community with lead responsibility for community planning, implementation and decision making relative to your homelessness strategy. Community could be defined more broadly if HIFIS coordinators needed to define regional or sub-regional data coordination communities.

To know more about the nature of homelessness, the HIFIS CC must analyze data on the shelter users within the broader context of the population, housing and income dynamics of a community. The HIFIS CC data analyst also needs to become familiar with community trends in homelessness and populations at risk of homelessness. Namely, the analyst needs to be mindful of methods used in the community to calculate the size of HPS target population groups: the hidden homeless population, those living on the street, individuals and families who are short-term or crisis sheltered and those who are supportive housed. In most communities, homelessness coalitions also gather and analyze data on households in core housing need (living in substandard housing). In some communities, HIFIS data on the use of food banks can also shed light on populations who are sheltered and those at risk of homelessness. Individuals or households at high risk often enter into homelessness because of life situations such as insufficient social assistance to meet a rent increase, receiving an eviction notice or being discharged from institutions without a permanent address.

### **Homelessness service utilization**

To report on homelessness service utilization, the HIFIS CC has to analyze data on shelter use within the context of the sheltering and social housing capacity in the community. This analysis also must be done in conjunction with the community advisory boards involved in the HPS planning process and the local housing and homelessness coalitions. The HIFIS CC can use the wealth of data collected on owned/rented dwellings and shelter cost from various sources such as the 2006 Census. The community coalitions usually have access to data on social housing units, gathered from municipal planning, housing or social services department, provincial or territorial housing ministry or housing corporations and community housing corporations. Coalitions frequently consult coordinated waiting list data for social housing, supplemented with waiting-list data from housing providers in the private sector.

### **Homelessness service system effectiveness**

In the pursuit of an effective homelessness service system, community planners, funding agencies and all levels of government arrive at key decisions based on the analysis of data in patterns of shelter use. Here is an example of how an HIFIS CC could compare data from shelters and transitional housing among communities, by placing it in the broader sheltering and social housing context of each community. In one city, length of stay in shelters and transition housing can be short, because access to better affordable housing exists, whereas stays in another place have to be extended because no other adequate and acceptable housing options exist. In analyzing and seeking explanations to the different trends in length of stay of various communities, the analyst can point to promising approaches in the development of sheltering options that exist in some places. This type of analysis of shelter use patterns will help planners and decision makers identify creative solutions to homelessness service system issues, such as low-income and affordable housing.

### **c) Work with service providers and shelters to comply with Data Sharing Protocol principles**

Service providers and shelters may wish to develop their own reports; if they do, they will not receive additional support for them. They should however agree to follow the principles and procedures detailed in the Data Sharing Protocol (DSP) concerning: confidentiality of client-related information; informed consent of the client regarding personal information-sharing between organizations; and staff adherence to the procedures and structures set out in the DSP and regarding the accuracy and the security of the data collected. The tools available in HIFIS reporting and data analysis toolkits can

assist them in developing their reports; however, if they encounter difficulties, the national HIFIS team will be unable to provide support beyond what is in the toolkits.

## **Section B: Using HIFIS Data to Inform the Community**

There are many creative ways to use HIFIS and to inform the community. This is a shared responsibility among key HIFIS users; the HIFIS CCs play a key role. This section illustrates creative tools specifically developed to inform stakeholders at the site, community, regional and national levels.

### **a) HIFIS reporting tools**

#### **Generic reports**

In selecting which generic reports to develop, the national HIFIS team gives highest priority to those that are national in scope, those related to funding or billing, and those that are similar to reports requested multiple times by the HIFIS communities. The following national generic reports have been developed and will be available in the next release of HIFIS: Shelter Report, Returning Clients Report, Admission Report, Age Report and Treaty Status Report. Other generic reports based on requests from the HIFIS communities are under development. All generic reports are documented by the national HIFIS team to provide project description and data elements.

#### **HIFIS Community Reports**

Communities that have reached threshold are invited to work with the national HIFIS team on a data analysis primer. While the National Database Export is generally not intended to be used by the community because of its limited number of data fields, it will be used as a data analysis primer to build aggregate reports at the community level in order to introduce HIFIS CCs to data analysis methods, models and tools. The goal is to provide the HIFIS CCs with a structure to work from for future data analysis. The **Yellowknife Community Report**<sup>4</sup> will serve as a step-by-step training tool to guide HIFIS CCs in producing their own HIFIS Community Report.

Reports limited to the 10 mandatory fields could also serve as a data analysis primer for communities new to collecting HIFIS data or in areas where a large number of shelters are using other systems and have agreed to share data with HIFIS. Because of the differences between systems, it is easier to ensure that all data is shared consistently by limiting the set of data to the 10 mandatory fields.

#### **Customized reports**

Because of the pressing need for reports on HIFIS data, the HIFIS Initiative assessed various reporting software tools available and chose Crystal Reports as the most commonly used software package for accessing data from a variety of data sources and for building ad-hoc reports. Crystal Reports is easy to use and existing expertise can provide a wide range of training and support options to build a community reporting capacity. This tool works well with Microsoft FoxPro and offers affordable

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<sup>4</sup> In Appendix 1, we explain the reasoning behind using the Yellowknife Community Report as a step-by-step guide to help HIFIS Community Coordinators produce their own HIFIS Community Report as a data analysis primer in using the 10 mandatory fields.

licensing for non-profit organizations. A recently produced Crystal Reports toolkit provides HIFIS CCs with quick and easy explanations on how to use the Crystal Reports software with HIFIS data. A budget was set aside for HIFIS CCs to attend Crystal Reports training because the national team members cannot provide training on the actual use of this software or assist in the development of customized reports. HIFIS CCs may wish to develop service provider or shelter-level reports for use in the community. Generally, the customized community reports are not limited to the 10 mandatory fields because they have access to a more exhaustive number of fields agreed to by shelters and service providers in the data sharing protocols.

Because HIFIS CCs share coordinator-level reports among themselves and because service providers and shelters share tools and tips with one another, it is important for HIFIS CCs to let the Help Desk know of materials being shared so the HIFIS Initiative can also keep track. If the Help Desk receives calls or e-mails, they will be able to forward requests to the original developer of the report.

## **b) Other HIFIS training tools**

### **Community report cards on homelessness**

Producing annual report cards has proven to be an excellent way of showing how well some Canadian communities are doing at ending homelessness. Report cards increase public awareness of homelessness issues through media and help communities to take on the issues themselves. HIFIS supported the production of the Community Report Cards Model and Startup ToolKit Homelessness.<sup>5</sup> It shows how leaders and decision makers with access to resources can act quickly and efficiently to have an impact on homelessness. The HIFIS CC can coordinate with local homelessness coalitions to provide them with precise data and data analysis expertise to prepare material for the media and for public awareness tools. The training tool deals with these key questions:

- **What is the goal of the annual report card and what is its impact?**  
The training tool describes the importance of HIFIS data as a key element in building the credibility of the report card with the media. It shows the importance of data collected and analyzed by service providers to inform on the lives of families with children, youth, single men and single women affected by homelessness. It talks about the role of the report cards in influencing the media constructively, the cumulative effect of their annual release on public awareness and their ongoing impact on homelessness.
- **Who creates annual report cards and who makes them succeed?**  
The training tool talks about the relationships behind the production of an annual community report card. It deals with the vital role of the coordinator of the coalition as the key to success. The tool demonstrates the complementary functions of two important working groups: a research and evaluation group, to deal with content and data; and a public affairs group, to work on the media campaign and message framing. Finally, the tool describes the tasks of the steering committee in overseeing indicators, in grading and in dealing with other strategically selected content.
- **Who owns the report card?**

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<sup>5</sup> The Community Report Card on Homelessness Model and Startup Tool Kit is based on the annual report cards produced by the Ottawa Alliance to End Homelessness, see [www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca](http://www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca).

The model demonstrates that it takes a coalition and broad agency participation to succeed. It shows that consultation with members and their evaluation of previous report cards can help flag the necessary changes in methodology. It talks about the role of media analysis in guiding subsequent content and framing. Finally, it illustrates how the revision of key messages can contribute to better public understanding and how an informed community has a greater impact on change.

### **Regional data coordination**

Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is implementing a project to assess the value of regional data coordination, based on an approach similar to the report card model used by the Ottawa Alliance to End Homelessness and on the data collection partnership with the Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency. The NL project will focus on completing the tasks required for developing a Regional Data Coordination (RDC) agreement, including: consensus around a core data set, data definitions, and reporting requirements, as well as a review of a sample regional community data sharing protocol. The training tool will engage participants in a discussion on the key challenges in reaching an RDC agreement in data gathering, sharing and analysis. It will offer a step-by-step guide in the development of support strategies that introduce, adapt and apply uniform and consistent data coordination practices at the regional level. The tool will describe the process of involving all service providers in a systematic regional collaboration, formalized in a regional data coordination protocol.

The ongoing monitoring and assessment of the NL regional data coordination project, as well as the promising approaches and lessons learned from data coordination experiences in other communities across Canada, will enhance the training model. The national HIFIS team will develop an RDC model and training tools to address questions such as:

- What is the goal of RDC?
- What are the key elements in building an RDC approach to data collection?
- What is the recommended approach or model for RDC?
- Would the model respond to regional conditions? What would the issues be and which strategies could deal with them?
- How would RDC respond to new information (such as the 2006 Census) and what would it draw from this information?
- How could the approach be evaluated over time to test its effectiveness?
- Who would carry out RDC and how would that role be supported and resourced?
- Is there willingness on the part all HIFIS users to enter into a Regional Data Sharing Agreement?

### **c) HIFIS supports the Homelessness Partnering Strategy community planning process**

The goal of the HIFIS Initiative is to assist communities by releasing information that accurately represents the individuals and families who access homeless services at the site, community and national levels. HIFIS software can be used by shelters and service providers to feed outcomes into HPS community plans and results indicators. For example, HIFIS data (such as length-of-stay statistics) can be used to analyze the progress of communities in moving homeless people to longer-term housing solutions.

HIFIS data will help the 61 designated communities report on characteristics of the HPS target populations<sup>6</sup>. Efforts made by HIFIS CCs to broaden its coverage in communities and to increase the number of mandatory data fields will provide more accurate measures of the effectiveness of homelessness prevention and reduction interventions. In many communities, HIFIS is capable of providing standardized data in support of community monitoring procedures of HPS-identified generic outcomes<sup>7</sup> annual reporting. Examples in the HIFIS Data Analysis Toolbox will show how the community report card contributed to the HPS planning process. The training tool will illustrate how the Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency assisted in providing the statistical information required by the Community Plan Assessment Phase II, Data Tools document. Both the report card and the Newfoundland and Labrador RDC projects are case studies in data coordination. They are examples of how HIFIS can assist in community compliance to HPS reporting requirements based on identified generic outcomes.

These training tools will assist the HIFIS CCs in developing new capacity for evidence-based analysis. They will encourage planning, research and data coordination agreements with community coalitions that deal with homelessness or with statistics agencies that provide standardized data collection and monitoring procedures in communities and regions across Canada. These examples show how HIFIS assists communities in completing their plan assessment process and annual reports. They also show how HIFIS facilitate comparisons to understand homelessness at the community, regional and national levels, based on consistent and accurate information

## **Section C: Towards a Nationwide Analysis**

The increased demand from all levels of government and other funders for accurate, consistent and timely information on the homeless population and homeless service utilization is unprecedented. Community stakeholders express a need for accurate data to improve homelessness services, planning and decision making. As the only database that collects national data capable of providing an accurate picture of the nature and scope of homelessness across the country, the HIFIS Initiative must make every effort to enhance the robustness of the HIFIS software, the data analysis capacity of HIFIS stakeholders and HIFIS coverage in Canadian communities.

### **a) Increasing the number of Data Sharing Protocols**

Because HIFIS is the only national database, it is important to deal with the issues causing resistance to sharing data among homelessness stakeholders. If the issue is lack of trust, stakeholders need to know that the Data Sharing Protocol (DSP)<sup>10</sup> contains the absolute right to privacy and confidentiality of individuals and families concerning personal information, as stipulated in the federal, provincial and territorial freedom of information and protection of privacy acts. The DSP establishes parameters that define when data is transmitted, which data is shared, who receives and owns the data, and how the data is protected. The DSP serves as a guideline for data exchange with the federal government. At the federal level, no client-identifying information is shared; only aggregated data is exchanged to protect the client's privacy. This protocol can be used as a model for cities and communities that want to sign agreements with shelters and service providers. The signing of the DSP requires constant

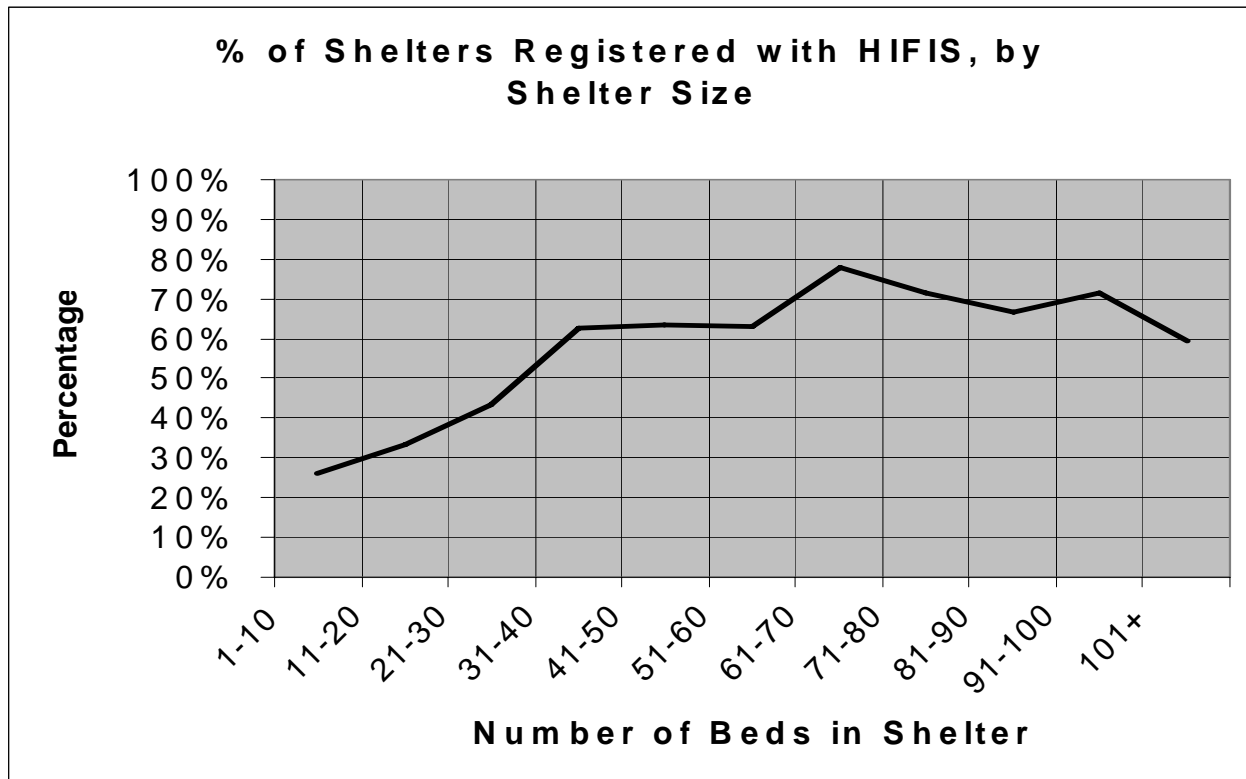
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<sup>6</sup> Appendix 2 gives definitions and statistics on the five HPS target populations.

<sup>7</sup> HPS generic outcomes and areas of data collection are found in the Appendix 3 tables.

<sup>10</sup> The DSP details the requirements for data collection, participation, privacy and security for all shelter and service providers entering data or having access to the HIFIS software. It also outlines the Government of Canada's responsibilities and obligation to protect data. HIFIS shelters and service providers are encouraged to sign a Data Sharing Protocol and submit data to the national HIFIS team.

communication with shelter users to ensure privacy and enable data sharing. Without the signing of the DSP, communities cannot send exports to increase the data available for analysis and research. Getting more DSPs signed makes the national HIFIS database more reliable because its data represents a broader range of shelters and a larger number of shelter beds and services.



The HIFIS software has been implemented in approximately 38 percent of shelters in Canada. It is important to note that this represents a more significant coverage in terms of beds available for homeless people in Canada. In fact, more than 60 percent of these shelters are large institutions with a number of beds ranging from 50 to more than 100 (as illustrated in the graphic above). While the HIFIS coverage is significant, there are regional gaps in representation, resulting in an incomplete national picture of shelter usage and the characteristics of the homeless population. Currently, out of 581 registered HIFIS users (438 are shelters), 292 organizations have signed a DSP with the Government of Canada.

**b) Increasing the number of data exports to the HIFIS Initiative**

**Exporting data is a Data Sharing Protocol requirement**

An increase in the number of data exports to the HIFIS Initiative would compensate for the gaps in

HIFIS coverage across Canada. The DSP<sup>11</sup> details the methodology and guidelines for data submission, aggregation and reporting. It defines the roles and responsibilities of the Government of Canada, the HIFIS CCs and service providers in dealing with the HIFIS exports. According to the DSP, service providers or HIFIS CCs are required to submit data export files from the 10 mandatory

fields to the national HIFIS team on a monthly or quarterly basis. The national HIFIS Initiative has received data exports from over 170 shelters and service providers out of the 284 that have signed a DSP. Without data exports, it is difficult for the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat to determine who is accessing homeless services or what the patterns of shelter use are. Having this information will inform planners, researchers and policy makers on the characteristics of individuals who experience homelessness in Canada and on homelessness services utilization and effectiveness.

HIFIS CCs will be required to set targets, create incentives and be proactive in setting up a data coordination committee. This committee, comprised of HIFIS users and service providers, will help facilitate the flow of exports from shelters to HIFIS CCs to the national HIFIS team. The tool Adventures in Data Coordination, presented by Jacques Daigle at the annual HIFIS Community Coordinators' conference and posted on the CC Web forum, is a good model for tracking HIFIS export files.

### **c) Adding more fields to the Data Sharing Protocol**

#### **The limits of the mandatory fields of the current Data Sharing Protocol**

Out of these ten fields, five identify the shelter facility being used: the “shelter name,” the “shelter ID” and the “shelter purpose.” These fields answer questions such as: Which shelter are we dealing with? How many beds and overflow beds does the shelter have? How are the beds being used? How often are the beds being used by the same individuals or families, and for how long?

1. “HIFIS ID” is the number given by the HIFIS Initiative to each shelter at registration time.
2. “Shelter name and ID code” is the name and identification code of the sheltering facilities providing temporary and short-term accommodation for homeless individuals and families.
3. “Shelter purpose” is the description of purpose of the shelter, which may be limited to just sheltering or may include supports such as food, clothing and counselling.
4. “Bed count” is the number of registered beds and overflow beds available in the shelter.
5. “Shelter type” identifies the type of shelter, such as emergency, Aboriginal, addictions (damp, dry or wet), drop-in, second-stage, single room occupancy, supportive, transitional, etc.

The five remaining fields collected under the DSP deal with the characteristics of the people using shelters. These five fields are the “unique client ID,” the “date of birth,” the “gender,” the “book-in date” and the “book-out date.”

6. “Unique client ID” is non-traceable client identification based on date of birth, name and family name.
11. Data exports have been received at the national level from over 170 shelters and service providers. The HIFIS Initiative has compiled a national shelter list of 1020 shelters representing over 26 000 regular shelter beds. HIFIS has up to 520 registered users, including shelters and other service providers such as food banks, drop-in centers and supportive housing organizations. See [www.hifis.ca](http://www.hifis.ca).
7. “Client date of birth” is based on birth certificates issued, using the information from the original registration of birth, completed at the time of birth.

8. “Client gender” is the self-identified gender of the client, such as female, male, transgender, etc.
9. “Registration book-in date” is the day a client registers for a stay in the shelter.
10. “Registration book-out date” is the day of departure of a client from the shelter.

During the production of the Yellowknife Community Report, the national HIFIS team realized that it would only provide a sample of what can be learned from HIFIS data being collected in the community. Although helpful as a snapshot of the lives of homeless individuals in Yellowknife and how they use shelters, drawing on more data fields could have revealed why the individuals are homeless and evaluated their progress towards housing stability. In the year ahead, the national HIFIS team will strategize with HIFIS CCs on how to conduct more in-depth analysis and meet the increasing challenges of the HPS focus on housing outcomes. The following fields were agreed to at the annual HIFIS Community Coordinators’ conference in September 2007:

1. “Reasons for service” is the primary factor that led an individual or a family to the shelter registration desk. Only one overriding reason to seek shelter should be entered and it can relate to a place (e.g. living on the street; discharged from another shelter, a mental health or criminal justice institution, etc.) or to a critical situation (e.g. women fleeing violence, discharge from a program or an institution, etc.).
2. “Contributing factors” provide additional information on the overriding reason that led an individual or family to the shelter. These factors are either ongoing or they preceded the actual request for shelter and will help determine the types of interventions or services needed (e.g. physical or mental abuse, a recent conflict with the law, a developmental disability, a recent breakdown in family relationship, a financial crisis, an eviction, etc.).
3. “Reasons for turnaway” can provide key information on client status (e.g. currently barred because of safety or security risks, intoxicated, etc.) or identify gaps in services (e.g. ineligibility for service because of gender, no beds are available, etc.).
4. “Reasons for discharge” can provide information such as book-out and stay details that explain the reasons why individuals were discharged from a shelter (e.g. admitted to a hospital, a detoxification centre, another shelter; a health, housing, legal aid or social services agency; or to settlement services, etc.); or inform on their destination after discharge (e.g. independent, private market or residential care facility; subsidized housing, etc.).

The national HIFIS team is considering the addition of extra mandatory fields to provide data on family. These fields would help meet the new focus of the HPS, and address the increase in family homelessness and housing instability that today’s statistics indicate.

5. “Family roles,” “marital status” and “relationship to parents” are three fields that may provide useful information on families. Some HIFIS users want to report partners in a couple; heads of family, with number of dependants and the nature of the relationship to parents (e.g. birth child, foster child or adopted child).
6. “Housing-related fields,” if they were made mandatory, would focus on the data collected on the places of origin before requesting service or being discharged, and the data on the destination after leaving the system. The HIFIS user could provide accurate data that would link clients to emergency sheltering (e.g. YMCA/YWCA, transition house, single room occupancy, etc.); or to more stable housing circumstances (e.g. co-operatives, subsidized or social housing, supported housing, residential care facilities, etc.).

#### **d) Making linkages to other databases at the federal and provincial levels**

The HIFIS Initiative also promotes the ongoing development of collaborative approaches with federal and provincial governments. HIFIS will continue to provide data on a per-request basis to federal departments and also explore opportunities to link the HIFIS national database with other federal databases. Provincial and territorial governments have expressed an interest in implementing the HIFIS software to collect shelter and service provider data. The HIFIS and Newfoundland and Labrador regional collaborative initiative is the most recent illustration of steps taken to share data between the federal and provincial governments. HIFIS CCs are in a good position to facilitate relationship building and establish linkages between the federal and provincial/territorial governments.

### **Data Analysis Toolbox**

Training tools are currently being developed to help HIFIS CCs enhance HIFIS data quality and make the most of HIFIS data.

#### **a) The HIFIS Data Analysis Framework**

The HIFIS Data Analysis Framework gives an overview of the CC roles and responsibilities in analysing data and using a series of data integrity and data analysis tools, including reporting tools and data coordination models.

#### **b) Data integrity tools**

The HIFIS 3 software is constantly being improved to meet the needs of HIFIS CCs. The HIFIS data integrity tools are now part of the latest version of the HIFIS 3 software. Here is a summary of the key functions further described in the training guide to assist HIFIS users in the identification and correction of data quality issues at the site level.

1. “Name duplicates”- This function will allow HIFIS users to search for duplicate clients. It can search for exact or similar first name, last name and/or date of birth, and run the search to show a match of 100 percent or less.
2. “Invalid birth dates”- This function allows users to see if a database contains inaccurate date of birth, such as less than 0 and/or more than 125 years old .
3. “Broken links/bad values” - This function will analyse a database to find any broken links or bad values between tables within HIFIS. If broken links or bad values are found, the table and client’s name will be displayed. The log file can be viewed in order to see the data integrity analysis results.
4. “Stay date chronology” - This function is a stay dates analyzer, which will display the illogical stay dates linked to a client’s record. This function allows the user to modify or delete illogical stay dates and also to select auto-swap when dates are reversed.
5. “Concurrent stays” - This function displays client records that have overlapping stays. Stay dates can be modified from here.
6. “VFP command window” - This function allows the user to open a table in the database to fix a value. To perform this function, the user must request an authorization code valid for one day only.

#### **c) Community reporting tools**

Various community tools are being developed to analyze the data from the 10 mandatory fields (“shelter users,” “shelter use” and “patterns in the use of shelters”) and some are proposing the addition of fields to broaden the range of reports and tools. Tools such as the HIFIS Community Report and the Crystal Reports Toolkit improve community-level reporting capacity.

As mentioned earlier and in Appendix 1, the Yellowknife Community Report can be used as a step-by-step guide to assist CCs in using the 10 mandatory fields to produce their own HIFIS Community Report. The Yellowknife report provides a structure and a series of calculations to follow, using specific HIFIS data fields, to produce the various tables in the report. This HIFIS Community Report will serve as a data analysis primer to introduce HIFIS CCs to data analysis methods, models and tools.

#### **d) Data coordination models**

Data coordination at the community level is illustrated in the Model and Startup Tool Kit to produce an annual community report card on homelessness. The report card approach can also be used by stakeholders interested in the development of a Regional Data Coordination (RDC) model as mentioned on page 7.

#### **Community report cards on homelessness**

The HIFIS Initiative provides the Community Report Card on Homelessness Tool Kit and training to assist communities that have HIFIS CCs to get the most out of HIFIS data. The toolkit contains concrete examples of how to use HIFIS data at the local and regional levels, to help CCs support the process in producing community report cards on homelessness and other local reports. The HIFIS Initiative supported this systematization of the work done by the Ottawa Alliance to End Homelessness in producing an annual community report card on homelessness. It will serve as model in providing information and explanations to communities that want to reproduce promising approaches and best practices in generating their own report cards.

#### **Regional level training tools**

HIFIS trainers support communities and regions in the development of an RDC model, as well as training tools described earlier in this document. The RDC model will highlight the need for an agreement among the majority of shelter service providers who use HIFIS and are trained in HIFIS 3 to sign an HIFIS Data Sharing Protocol. It will explain the necessity of having a broad coverage of HIFIS users who engage in a coordinated effort to collect and share data in support of community analysis, planning and research priorities. It will illustrate other requirements to successfully implement the model, such as the need for HIFIS users to establish a consensus around a core data set, data definitions, reporting and strategies. It will explain how to deal with issues and challenges of regional data coordination and how the approach will be evaluated over time to test its effectiveness.

## **Appendix 1**

### **The Yellowknife Community Report: Creating Your Own Data Analysis Primer**

#### **Why follow the Yellowknife Community Report?**

The background information included in the Yellowknife Community Report reflects a commitment of the HIFIS CC to reach beyond the regular HIFIS network of homelessness shelters and service providers in order to broaden participation and get involved in coalition work. The tables on shelter users, shelter use and patterns in shelter use, analyzed within a community context, help make sense of the data collected and identify trends.

Many questions raised during the analysis of data can only be answered by the stakeholders who share the knowledge of demographic, housing and income dynamics of the community. To paint a broader picture of homelessness, community data reports must be enriched by contextual information. These reports help strengthen the local accountability mechanisms of homelessness systems and services, and propose solutions in how to assist homeless people and those at risk of homelessness in moving to more stable housing, maintaining housing and being self-sufficient. They raise community awareness concerning the homeless population and show the impact that community efforts are having on the prevention and reduction of homelessness.

#### **How can Community Coordinators get started on their own HIFIS data analysis primer?**

As was the case for Yellowknife, HIFIS CCs and others in their community will work in partnership with the national HIFIS team to develop a detailed community report using the 10 mandatory fields to provide local information on shelter users, shelter use and patterns in shelter use. When conditions are in place at the community level, the national HIFIS team will use the Yellowknife Community Report as a step-by-step guide in analyzing the data from the 10 mandatory fields to assist HIFIS CCs in the production of their own HIFIS Community Report as a data analysis primer.

## Appendix 2

### Homelessness Partnering Strategy Target Populations: Definitions and Statistics

The 61 designated communities under HPS are requested to provide profile data and factors on the life situation, age, gender, family status and ethnic origin for the following five categories of homeless populations (and those at risk of homelessness):

- People at risk of homelessness
- People living on the street and its sub-population of those chronically living on the street
- People who are short-term or crisis sheltered and its sub-population of those who are episodically sheltered
- The hidden homeless population
- People who are supportive housed

To evaluate the efforts of the HPS in preventing and reducing homelessness, the baseline population of each target group is needed in order to establish comparable data. Within each category, there is a methodology for determining the population size of each of these groups. Currently, accurate and reliable figures are only available for the population at risk of homelessness, in core housing need and spending at least half of income on shelter. HPS also did a national estimate for those living on the street and in shelters, based on calculations derived from point-in-time counts done in 14 Canadian communities.

#### At risk of homelessness

A reliable indicator of the number of Canadians at risk of homelessness is the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's core housing need and the "In Need and spending At Least Half of income on shelter" (INALH) statistics, which are derived from census information. A 2004 CMHC revision of the 2001 Census indicated that there were approximately 1.5 million households in core housing need<sup>8</sup>. These households were paying 30 percent or more of their income on housing, and living in unsuitable and/or inadequate accommodations. Of these, there were 570 700 INALH households spending 50 percent or more of their income on shelter, leaving them with limited income for other necessities. The number at risk of homelessness is even larger than these figures indicate, particularly when other groups at imminent risk of homelessness (such as those leaving health or criminal justice institutions without appropriate, stable housing; and youth exiting the child welfare system) are taken into account. Of particular note are the estimated 3.4 million Canadians in poverty, based on Statistics Canada's Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics<sup>9</sup>.

#### Living on the street

The only method currently used to count homeless individuals living on the street systematically is point-in-time counts. A point-in-time street count done at the same time as a shelter count usually includes individuals or families living on the street who lacked secured housing on the particular night of the count. These counts tend to focus on homeless individuals in target/known areas, which increases the likelihood that some will be overlooked.

In the Statistics Canada feasibility assessment to determine how to get a comprehensive count of all homeless people for the 2001 Census, the street component was considered to be the more difficult

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<sup>8</sup> According to the CMHC, core housing need refers to households that are unable to afford adequate, suitable and affordable shelter. Affordability is recognized as a maximum of 30 percent of the household income spent on shelter.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada, "Income of Canadians," *The Daily*, 2007, retrieved September 2007 from <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/070503/d070503a.htm>.

population to reach and most expensive to survey. This was found to be true because homeless street people are difficult to locate, identify and count uniquely during any survey reference period.

### **Short-term or crisis sheltered**

The current method for collecting data on people who are short-term and crisis sheltered over the course of a year or more is through the implementation of data collection systems such as the HIFIS. Shelter management systems such as this one allow for the collection of annualized statistics. As discussed, point-in-time counts will only include individuals or families who were short-term or crisis sheltered in emergency or transitional housing on the night of the count. Most people who move from shelter to shelter are one- or two-time users who do not return once they acquire secure, stable housing<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, over the course of a given year, the number of homeless people would greatly exceed the total point-in-time counts, if all the different people who were constantly entering and exiting the shelter system were considered.

### **Hidden homeless population**

Currently, there is no systematic, reliable method for counting the hidden homeless population, nor is there agreement nationally on the definition.

Studies argue that street and shelter counts underestimate the homeless population because they are unable to identify the hidden homeless population. This population includes those who live in locations not intended for human habitation; individuals who move continuously among temporary arrangements provided by friends, family or strangers; and the homeless populations of rural and remote communities. Many women fleeing violence and victims of abuse generally seek alternatives before going to a shelter or transition home; these individuals are also part of the hidden homeless population.<sup>11</sup>

### **Supportive housed**

People who are supportive housed<sup>16</sup> form a particularly important segment of the population at risk. There is no method currently in place to count those in supportive housing, nor the number of units in which they reside<sup>12</sup>. However, the 2007 HPS community plans for the designated communities require that communities identify these numbers because of this population's high degree of vulnerability and their lack of skills to maintain housing without some type of financial or life management support; if supports were withdrawn, these individuals would likely join the homeless population.

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<sup>10</sup> Most families (75 percent) leave quickly and don't return [Denis P. Culhane, *Emerging Research on the Costs of Homelessness*, 2007, retrieved August 2007 from [http://www.ich.gov/library/2007-3-7\\_CulhanePpt.pdf](http://www.ich.gov/library/2007-3-7_CulhanePpt.pdf).] and 15 percent of the homeless population uses 50 percent of the resources [US Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Strategies for Reducing Chronic Street Homeless*, January 2004, retrieved August 2007 from <http://www.huduser.org/publications/pdf/ChronicStrtHomeless.pdf>].

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Canada, "Transition Homes in Canada: National, Provincial and Territorial Fact Sheets," *The Online Catalogue*, 2007, retrieved August 2007 from <http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=85-404-X>.

<sup>16</sup> Supportive housing is defined by the HPS community plans as housing facilities for individuals and families that include supports and services integrated into the housing, and no length-of-stay duration. Services depend on clients' needs and are provided to help residents maintain independence and stability to promote social inclusion.

<sup>12</sup> The national census does not fully capture or identify this population in its analysis of collective dwellings, especially since supportive housing may take the form of self-contained apartments.

## Appendix 3

### HPS Generic Outcomes and Areas of Data Collection

The HIFIS software can help shelters and service providers improve the management of client data and produce reports that give clear indications of progress being made towards housing stability. Specifically, the HIFIS software allows communities to collect data on referral information. Follow-up with the clients indicates if they have been placed in appropriate housing. As illustrated in the Yellowknife Community Report, the analysis of aggregate data under the 10 mandatory fields already enables the HIFIS CC to report effectively on the first outcome of reduction of homelessness in terms of shelter use, length of stay and occupancy rates of shelter beds.

HPS generic outcomes for shelters and projects	Areas of data collection and analysis
<b>Outcome #1: Reduction of homelessness</b>	<b>1.1 SHELTER USE</b>
	<b>1.1.1 Reduction in # of different people using an emergency shelter</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # of people using each emergency shelter in your community (list by shelter name)</li> <li>• Total # of people using an emergency shelter in your community (based on total # of shelters in community)</li> <li>• # of people using emergency shelter by age categories (0–14; 15–30; 31–64; 65+)</li> <li>• # of families (single or part of a couple without children; one- and two-parent/guardian + dependent child under 16)</li> </ul>
	<b>1.1.2 Reduction in the average length of stay in shelters (for consecutive nights and listed by shelter name)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average length of stay for individuals</li> <li>• Average length of stay by families (single or part of couple without children; one- and two-parent/guardian + dependent child under 16)</li> </ul>
	<b>1.1.3 Reduction in the occupancy rate of shelter beds</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total number of bed-nights used</li> <li>• Total number of possible bed-nights</li> </ul>

Broadening the analysis of data beyond the scope of the mandatory fields would make it possible to measure housing stability by monitoring changes in housing status and success in housing retention. This could be accomplished if CCs analyzed the HIFIS data along with information from providers of transitional, supportive and affordable housing services.

HPS generic outcomes in community plans	Areas of data collection and analysis
<b>Outcome #1: Reduction of homelessness and transitions to housing stability</b>	<b>1.1 Monitor shelter use (# of different people using shelters; average length of stay in shelters; occupancy rate of shelter beds)</b>
	<b>1.2 Monitor changes in housing status</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transitions in housing status: # of individuals moving towards greater housing stability</li> <li>• Housing retention: # of individuals who maintained their housing for a 3-month period after receiving housing placement services</li> </ul>