

TRACKING WAIT TIMES FOR YOUTH HOUSING SERVICES

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

- Funded by Making the Shift, Inc. – a youth homelessness social innovation lab that houses a number of research and knowledge mobilization projects aimed at youth homelessness prevention and housing stabilization
- Concerned with how youth-oriented housing and housing service wait times are being tracked and can be improved, including through HIFIS, the by-name list, and other regional data management systems

PURPOSE OF STUDYING WAIT TIMES TRACKING SYSTEMS

- Wait times for housing are cited as a barrier in the transition away from homelessness for young people
- As policy tool, accurate and up to date wait times information can help inform decisions about resource allocation and where to direct policy efforts
- As advocacy tool, a better understanding of wait times can help service sectors and local areas appeal to governments for the supports they need to meet demand
- As research tool, wait time data can direct projects on the outcomes and experiences of wait times within and across sectors and subpopulations, including special attention to equity issues
- As service delivery tool, wait times can help identify local areas under strain and help service users and case managers navigate more quickly to needed services and supports.

CENTRAL GOAL OF STUDY

- Identify the barriers and opportunities that exist for standardizing public-facing and up-to-date tracking and reporting of wait times for housing, including transitional, supportive, and long-term social housing, as they pertain to youth with a history of homelessness

DATA COLLECTION

- Began in October 2021
- Consulted various service providers and systems administrators in housing and mental health sectors across Ontario
- Consulted gray and academic literature

HIFIS

- Homeless Individuals and Families Information System
- Federal web-based management system
- Can be used by multiple community organizations and service providers from a particular region to input real-time information about their clients, availability of resources, services, and plans
- Can offer integrated and centralized option for information collection and management to meet Coordinated Access mandate

BY-NAME LIST

- Coordinates people experiencing homelessness (for over two weeks) with housing or related services
- In some cases housed in HIFIS or another coordinating system; at times used in excel

HIFIS CHALLENGES

- Does not currently offer an automated data population option
- Does not provide public facing information
- System isn't always straight forward; it can be challenging to aggregate and analyze data, and at times a third party must be involved to produce reports
- Race-based data are not being collected uniformly

BY-NAME LIST CHALLENGES

- Used differently by different agencies – for example, some use it for only people who seek shelter services while others will use it for all people experiencing homelessness
- Not always integrated into a larger data collection system that stores information from across various service providers and
- Age-based data are collected uniformly, though not all agencies have a priority code for youth
- Race-based data are not collected uniformly
- Generally only accounts for people after two weeks of homelessness

DEFINITIONAL CHALLENGES

- There isn't a unified definition of wait times or a universal starting point; for example, sometimes measured from the point at which someone provides consent, goes through an intake process at a shelter, when someone becomes homeless, when someone enters the by-name list

STAFFING AND CAPACITY CHALLENGES

- The onus is on frontline staff to input information into by-name list/HIFIS; there aren't enough staff or time; staff turnover is high
- Staff have limited IT training or limited training on specific programs, like HIFIS
- Various challenges in identifying if someone was housed if they did it on their own, and in locating people, especially challenging with youth

STANDARDIZE DEFINITION OF 'WAIT TIME'

- Standardize starting point – some options: when consent is signed, when intake is completed, when added to by-name or unique identifier list, when request is put through for services
- Or, have various standardized wait points or “milestones”: how quickly are people being put in touch with resources, how long do they wait to be assessed or be provided an application form, how long does it take for them to be provided with housing, how long someone is experiencing homelessness/chronic homelessness; consider minimum, maximum, average, current, etc. = this can offer a more complex picture of the solutions needed
- Automated ‘priority’ code for youth

STANDARDIZE DATA REPORTING SYSTEM

- Standardize use of by-name list or other intake database through HIFIS or other coordinated system, with funding and IT support from federal/provincial government
- Institute robust and regular reporting and data extraction mechanism and schedule

ENHANCE HIFIS/BY-NAME LIST FUNCTIONALITIES AND USAGE

- Make wait list function in HIFIS more obvious and easier to use
- Fit new coding formula onto HIFIS or other coordinating system so that staff do not have to mine the data
- Coding would be established by municipal/regional service managers and standardized
- Include mandatory race and gender expansive data collection
 - consult with equity experts on evolving equity needs
- Clearly identify when a client has also accessed other opportunities
- Clearly identify when someone became homeless/chronically homeless

IMPROVE ACCESS TO STANDARDIZED DATA REPORTING SYSTEM

- Access to all agencies funded to support youth experiencing precarious housing or homelessness (with confidentiality considerations)
- Public-facing considerations
 - make data visible online
 - liberate data for use by researchers

INCREASE STAFF CAPACITY

- Provide staff with tools for faster data entry (e.g., tablets)
- Hire more housing resource workers who can gather information from community, online, etc., and input data
- Train staff on optimizing HIFIS/by-name list data input and population
- Referral system (e.g., to other agencies) requires clear and real time data

FUTURE QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

- What steps are required to liberate HIFIS data?
- What algorithms can be built to automate data analysis within HIFIS?
- How can we bring regional data coordinators together and standardize practice?

THANK YOU

- Questions and feedback are welcome!
- Contact: ann.deshalit@ontariotechu.ca