

BACKGROUNDER: Homelessness-Specific Common Assessment Tools Currently Used Broadly Across Canada

Common assessment tools are critical to our work in ending homelessness. We recommend communities use whichever tool works best for them, based on local needs and priorities, as well as their approach to coordinated access. We can help you review the tools that are out there, and we can help connect you with the training and expertise you need to implement the tool you choose, but ultimately the choice is yours on which tool best fits your community needs.

In this backgrounder we provide further information on three homeless-specific common assessment tools (or suites of tools) currently in use in more than one community across Canada. Included in alphabetical order are the:

1. Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) and Vulnerability Index-Service Decision Assistant Tool (VI-SPDAT) suite of tools;
2. Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT); and
3. Youth Assessment and Prioritization (YAP) Tool.

This document has been reviewed for completeness and accuracy by the developers of each of the respective tools.

This is not an exhaustive list of all available tools. These are, however, the tools most in use. The intention of this document is to gather and share available information on each of the tools to assist communities in their decision-making around what tool is best for their needs. We'll periodically update this document as new information becomes available or as any other tools come into common use across Canada.

SPDAT and VI-SPDAT Suite of Tools

The Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) was first introduced in 2010. Since that time, the suite of SPDAT tools has grown and are now used in homeless and housing programs and services in over 1,000 communities around the world¹. The available tools and their evolution is summarized in the chart below, followed by additional information.

	SPDAT Suite of Tools and Release Dates
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beta Version SPDAT • Version 1 SPDAT
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Version 2 SPDAT • Version 1 SPDAT Prescreen
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Version 3 SPDAT • Version 2 SPDAT Prescreen
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Version 1 VI-SPDAT
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beta Version Family SPDAT • Version 1 Family SPDAT • Version 1 Family VI-SPDAT
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Version 4 SPDAT • Version 2 – VI-SPDAT • Version 2 Family SPDAT • Version 2 Family VI-SPDAT • Version 1 Youth VI-SPDAT (Next Steps Tools for Youth)
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice Discharge VI-SPDAT Version 1
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Version 1 Prevention & Diversion VI-SPDAT for Singles • Version 1 Prevention and Diversion VI-SPDAT for Families

¹ In the United States, of the more than 400 Continuums of Care, more than 300 use the SPDAT suite of tools. This ranges from Balances of State like West Virginia (covering 44 counties, 5 metropolitan areas, and over 250 communities) to all of Los Angeles County (one large county with 88 communities); from the entire State of Michigan (covering 83 counties and 553 incorporated municipalities) to individual cities like Fargo, North Dakota. In Canada, the SPDAT suite of tools are in common use in much of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, as well as parts of Atlantic Canada. The suite of tools has been used at various scales in European contexts like Ireland, France and the Czech Republic, and is in use in four metropolitan cities in Australia.

SPDAT and VI-SPDAT

The Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) developed over a decade by Iain DeJong, who later joined and became President and CEO of [OrgCode](#), was first released to the public in 2010. The SPDAT was originally developed as an assessment tool for frontline workers at agencies that work with people experiencing homelessness to prioritize who should receive assistance first. Its use has evolved as a tool in service planning and provision, to inform support conversations with clients in housing programs, and to measure changes and progress over time. It is an in-depth assessment across 15 components (20 in the case of the family tool) that relies on the assessor's ability to interpret responses and corroborate those with evidence. As a result, this tool may only be used by those who have received training by OrgCode or an OrgCode certified trainer.

The first Vulnerability Index-Services Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT), developed as a collaboration between OrgCode and [Community Solutions](#), creators of the Vulnerability Index, was first released in 2013. The VI-SPDAT was developed as a brief survey that can be conducted to quickly determine whether a client has high, moderate, or low acuity. The use of this pre-screen triage tool can help prioritize which clients should be given a full SPDAT assessment first. Because it is a self-reported survey, no special training is required to use the VI-SPDAT.

Youth Tools

In June 2015, the Next Step Tool for Homeless Youth, often called the Next Step Tool or the VI-Transition Age Youth (TAY)-SPDAT was released. This tool integrates the TAY Triage Tool, developed by the [Corporation for Supportive Housing](#) through research by [Eric Rice, PhD](#), Associate Professor at the University of Southern California, with the VI-SPDAT. The TAY Triage Tool predicts which youth are most likely to experience long-term homelessness and the VI-SPDAT helps understand current vulnerabilities and risks to future housing stability, to support youth in ending their homelessness. The creators joined forces to combine their expertise and to create one streamlined triage tool designed specifically for youth aged 24 or younger. This [article](#) includes further information on the TAY and the creation of the youth VI-SPDAT tools with OrgCode.

To complement the launch of the Next Step Tool, OrgCode also created a modified version of the SPDAT for use specifically with youth released in 2015. The Youth SPDAT was developed based on feedback from many communities using the SPDAT who identified the need for a complete assessment tool that emphasizes the unique issues faced by youth.

Family Tools

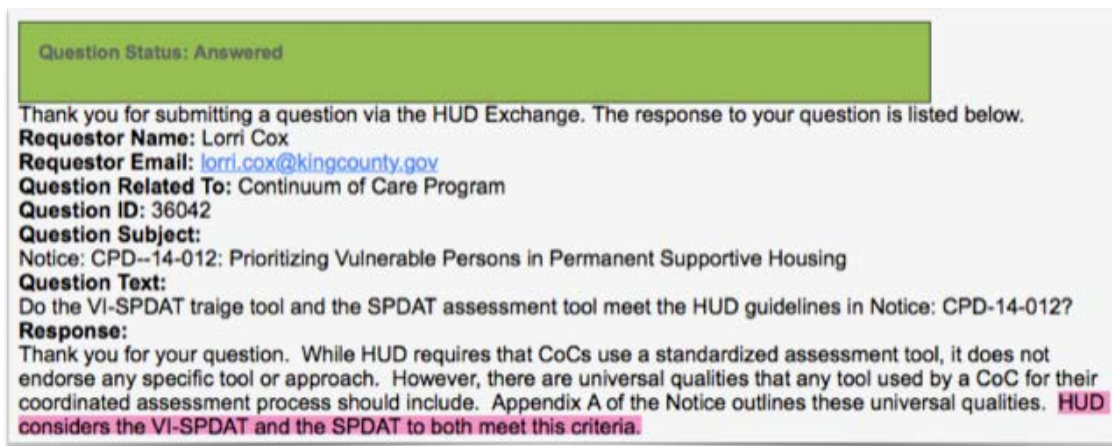
The Family SPDAT was released in 2014. There are 15 areas of inquiry that are the same as the SPDAT for single adults, plus five additional components that focus exclusively on the unique vulnerabilities and risks to housing stability that families face. Similarly, a family specific VI-SPDAT was also created and released.

Reviews and Further Evolution of the Tools

In 2015, OrgCode hired a private, independent, third party analytics evaluation consultancy to review the records available from 12 test communities that have been part of the SPDAT development since its inception. The resulting [review document](#) found that the SPDAT group performed better than the control group - that where SPDAT is in use that rates of housing stability were higher, and rates of rehousing were lower. The results paper also includes a link to the raw data which can be analyzed by anyone that wishes to further review the results. The full development process for the SPDAT and VI-SPDAT is included in this document entitled, [The SPDAT and VI-SPDAT: Tools Grounded in Evidence](#).

In 2018, new research and evaluation findings were made available by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and the University of Southern California on the effectiveness of the Youth VI-TAY-SPDAT (Next Steps Tool). Over 11,000 records were reviewed across more than a dozen communities where the Next Steps Tool was in use. The results of the review are included in this [policy recommendations brief](#) by Dr. Eric Rice.

In the United States, communities are required to have coordinated entry and are required to use a reliable tool in implementing coordinated entry. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has answered questions regarding the SPDAT suite of tools in regards to Notice CPD-14-012 through the HUD Exchange including this one from [March 2015](#) and the one pictured below. OrgCode elaborated on how the SPDAT tools connect to HUD's expectations in this February 23, 2015 [blog](#).



Question Status: Answered

Thank you for submitting a question via the HUD Exchange. The response to your question is listed below.

Requestor Name: Lorri Cox
Requestor Email: lorri.cox@kingcounty.gov
Question Related To: Continuum of Care Program
Question ID: 36042
Question Subject:
Notice: CPD--14-012: Prioritizing Vulnerable Persons in Permanent Supportive Housing
Question Text:
Do the VI-SPDAT traige tool and the SPDAT assessment tool meet the HUD guidelines in Notice: CPD-14-012?
Response:
Thank you for your question. While HUD requires that CoCs use a standardized assessment tool, it does not endorse any specific tool or approach. However, there are universal qualities that any tool used by a CoC for their coordinated assessment process should include. Appendix A of the Notice outlines these universal qualities. HUD considers the VI-SPDAT and the SPDAT to both meet this criteria.

The SPDAT and VI-SPDAT suite of tools continue to evolve through an update process every few years. Late in 2018, the tools will start to go through an updating process again. The review process includes:

- Opportunities for communities that use the tools to provide input on improvements;
- Adding new information gleaned through evaluation and up-to-date peer reviewed literature, government reports, and relevant Master and Doctoral theses'; and

- Vetting the additions through persons with lived experience as well as external experts in domestic and intimate partner violence, experts in trauma, and experts in applying an anti-oppression framework.

The 2018 updating process will also be paying particular attention to the impacts of discrimination on vulnerability and housing instability and the impacts of racial inequity on vulnerability and housing instability.

Additional Information

- The SPDAT suite of tools account for changes in household composition without requiring reassessment or only minimal reassessment and confirmation of information. The framework of the tools accounts for the fact that some youth will age into the adult system; some families will disintegrate into single adults; some single adults will form families; etc. This has the potential to decrease the traumatic impacts of a person or household having to repeat their story multiple times for different assessment tools. Furthermore, while youth can be compared to youth, adults to adults, and families to families, it is also possible to use the framework of the tools to look at the strengths, gaps, and composition of homelessness across population groups for the system as a whole. This is helpful for service planning, making funding decisions, and improving how gaps get addressed in the system of care.
- The tools are not predictive and make no claims to be, nor are they psycho-metric tools. They are indicative of risks to housing stability and vulnerability. The tools aim to isolate variables that can impact housing and level of supports that may be of benefit. They do not predict whether someone will be successful in housing, though more is being learned on a regular basis of whether certain variables within the VI-SPDAT and SPDAT may be predictive. In addition, the tools do not make decisions, they help inform decisions (as the name of the tool suggests it is a *decision assistance tool*, not a *decision-making tool*).
- The SPDAT is strength-based. In the training from OrgCode, participants learn how to use the information from the SPDAT assessment in a person-centered and strength-based manner. The tools are sensitive to the needs of various circumstances and sub-populations, as Version 2 of the SPDAT tools went through considerable review and evaluation for sensitivities to sub-populations, non-English speaking persons, victims of violence, persons diagnosed with serious mental illness, older persons, younger persons, etc. The only group found to be disadvantaged by the tools were youth, which helped spur the development of the Next Steps Tool for Youth and the Youth SPDAT.
- Starting in 2017, OrgCode partnered with Indigenous trainers in Winnipeg to provide a more in-depth cultural competency lens to the application and use of the tools. This training opportunity allows communities working with Indigenous people experiencing homelessness to apply an Indigenous lens to the application of the tool.

- Further information about the VI-SPDAT and SPDAT is included in blogs from OrgCode (February 17, 2015 [blog](#) and June 26, 2017 [blog](#)), this [Q&A](#) from OrgCode and this [PowerPoint](#) from the District of Columbia. The SPDAT suite of tools are currently included in the Homeless Individual and Family Information System (HIFIS).

Information about the current versions of the VI-SPDAT and SPDAT tools is summarized in the table below:

	VI-SPDAT	SPDAT
Available Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VI-SPDAT V 2.0 for Adult Individuals • VI-SPDAT V 2.0 for Families • VI-TAY-SPDAT V 1.0 – Next Steps Tool for Youth • Justice Discharge – JD-VI-SPDAT • Prevention/Rehousing – PR-VI-SPDAT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPDAT V 4.0 for Adult Individuals • SPDAT V 2.0 for Families • SPDAT V 1.0 for Youth
Purpose	Pre-screen triage tool	Screening, service planning and service provision tool
Cost	Free	Free – must first receive training to access the tools – which has a cost through OrgCode to train and then for communities to receive a Train the Trainer.
Where to Access	http://www.orgcode.com/spdat http://www.orgcode.com/products	Released following training. Can review here: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single Adult • Family • Youth
Available Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VI-SPDAT Single Adult Video Tutorial (21 minutes) • VI-SPDAT Family Video Tutorial (30 minutes) • VI-SPDAT Training – Singles/Families/Youth webinar (1 hour) 	http://www.orgcode.com/spdat <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial training is one day • Train the trainer is one day and available to anyone who has been actively using the SPDAT tools for three or more months.

Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT)

The Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT) is a full assessment tool for adult individuals. The VAT was originally developed in 2003 by the [Seattle Downtown Emergency Service Centre \(DESC\)](#) as described on their [website](#) and in this [document](#). Based on a structured interview, rating scales across 10 domains are completed to assess and compare vulnerability relative to others experiencing homelessness. The tool is designed for use by service workers and training is required to ensure reliable application of the tool. DESC commissioned testing of the VAT through the Washington Institute for Mental Health Research and Training at Washington State University which validated the tool as outlined in this 2010 [report](#).

[BC Housing](#) began using the VAT in Vancouver in 2014 as a common assessment tool to be used amongst multiple homelessness serving providers to:

- Assess eligibility for supportive housing
- Assess support needs of applicants
- Inform housing placements to create a healthy tenant mix
- Create a fair/transparent process

In 2016, BC Housing commissioned an evaluation of the VAT to support consideration of its continued use and expansion to communities across BC. The [Final Report of the Vulnerability Assessment Tool Evaluation](#), authored by Pathways to Housing First and The Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services - University of Ottawa was released in January 2017. Based on the results of this report, BC Housing is now requiring and supporting all communities across BC to use the VAT to inform prioritized access to BC Housing funded supportive housing programs.

In 2015, following the release of the [Screening for Housing First](#) report, information on the VAT was shared through a [webinar](#) and a [presentation](#) at the 2015 National Conference on Ending Homelessness. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness updated the VAT Training Manual, adapting it to the Canadian context and including some new material which they released as the [Canadian Version of the VAT Training Manual](#) in January 2017. Further information is highlighted in Homeless Hub blog posts from [January 17, 2017](#), and [May 25, 2017](#). Over 2017, BC Housing offered three-day train the trainer to communities interested in using the VAT. The VAT is currently included in the Homeless Individual and Family Information System (HIFIS).

Information about the VAT is summarized in the table below:

	VAT
Available Tools	Canadian Version of the VAT (for single adults)
Purpose	A structured, person-centered approach to objectively measuring vulnerability to continued instability allowing service providers to prioritize limited resources based on vulnerability
Cost	Free with training costs
Where to Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access through training • Excerpt included in the VAT Training Manual - Canadian Version
Available Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BC communities access by contacting Will Valenciano at wvalenci@bchousing.org • All others can contact the CAEH TTA to be connected with VAT trainers on a fee-for-service basis (HPS Community Entities with designated Housing First targets, may access complimentary training)

Youth Assessment and Prioritization (YAP) Tool

The Youth Assessment and Prioritization Tool (YAP) originated in Lethbridge, AB in 2014. It came out of a perceived gap in assessing the needs of youth people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness coming through Lethbridge's youth centralized intake process. At that time, there was no other youth-specific assessment tool available so WalRhon Psychological and Assessment Services (Wally Czech) began a process (with the approval of the City of Lethbridge) of researching other possibilities, leading to the development of a new tool. The tool uses as a foundation, the [Transition Age Youth \(TAY\) research](#) from Dr. Eric Rice from the University of Southern California. The general premise is to identify existing factors for each youth that suggest that the more of these factors present, if no intervention occurs, they will be more likely to experience long term homelessness.

This tool was then implemented at the Youth Hub in Lethbridge as a shortened screening tool and as the primary method of initial intake and assessment of youth. Once the Alberta Government released its [plan to end youth homelessness](#), a partnership was developed between Walrhon Psychological and Assessment Services and the Government of Alberta to explore how this tool could fill the need for a youth specific assessment tool. A working group was established to assist WalRhon inform the adaptations and ongoing development of the tool which resulted in both a pre-screen portion and a more complete, strength-based interview designed to identify not only complexities and risk-factors but also strengths and resilience factors. A test phase for the YAP tool was completed across 7 community organizations in Alberta, Ontario and Newfoundland.

The tool consists of 22 mandatory pre-screen questions that provide initial scores related to long term risk of homelessness and prioritization for housing and supports. The interview portion consists of an additional 45 prompted sections to draw out various factors associated with a young person's life and current situation. Both portions help to inform six narrative domains with one last summary indicating the assessor's recommendations for referral and prioritization.

Scoring is a part of the tool but is not meant to determine eligibility cut-offs or acceptance into any particular program. Rather, the scoring helps assessors compare one youth to another in terms of prioritization and referral needs. At this point, the YAP tool is primarily for initial assessment purposes and not for use in ongoing case management but there is work being done to create a follow-up version that can be used for ongoing measurement of change and support needs throughout the case management process.

A Way Home Canada and Wal-Rhon have an memorandum of understanding that outlines the role of A Way Home Canada in stewarding the YAP tool moving forward. Through the [Making the Shift](#) project with A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, the YAP tool is undergoing a validation process. Making the Shift is using the YAP as the primary method for initial assessment for the programs participating in the Making the Shift pilot

projects. The University of Ottawa will be conducting the validation process and the results will be released once completed.

Further information about the Youth Assessment and Prioritization (YAP) tool is provided in this [June 2017 Tyee article](#), a Homeless Workspace Post from [September 20, 2017](#), this [September 2017 A Way Home Webinar](#) and this this Homeless Hub blog from [January 11, 2018](#).

Information about the YAP is summarized in the table below:

	YAP – Pre-screen	YAP – Full Assessment
Full Name	Youth Assessment and Prioritization – Pre-Screen	Youth Assessment and Prioritization- Regular Strength Interview
Available Tools	YAPPS v.1 (for single youth)	YAPRS v.2
Purpose	Pre-screen, initial rapid screening and assessment for initial priority	Full assessment for understanding of strengths, risk factors and service needs and appropriate referral
Cost	Free with training costs: Pre-Screen (PS) and Regular Strength (RS) training is combined	
Where to Access	Access through training through Walrhon Psychological and Assessment Services at walrhon@gmail.com .	
Available Training	Both the pre-screen and full interview assessment are trained together over two full days. Training includes a practical application component and serves as a train the trainer for individual programs after a certification process is completed post training which requires 3 completed assessments with a co-assessor.	