

BACKGROUND: Information on Common Assessment Tools

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 background, we describe what common assessment tools are, when they're used, and available guidance on what makes a good tool.

What are common assessment tools?

Common assessment tools are used in many different areas such as work places, schools and services to gather information from people and make an evaluation in a consistent and transparent way. Often through a series of questions, conversations and/or observations, each person's experience, situation, or understanding is measured, categorized and/or scored.

Common assessment tools are critical to the work of ending homelessness. They ensure communities are asking the right questions to understand people's strengths, vulnerabilities and risks in order to:

- provide housing services tailored to individual need;
- prioritize and focus resources effectively, efficiently and transparently; and
- measure changes and progress.

When are common assessment tools used?

Outlined in [Screening for Housing First](#) as the "assessment road map", common assessment tools may be used for a one or more of the following purposes:

1. Screening – initial engagement/priority setting/eligibility determination
2. Service/Support Planning – level of support and care planning with the client
3. Service/Support Provision – monitoring process and outcomes

Use of a tool is often one element of common assessment within a coordinated access process which includes 1) access, 2) common assessment, 3) prioritization, and 4) referral.

As part of the common assessment process, communities are strongly encouraged to use a common assessment tool. Communities may choose to use tools tailored to different population groups (e.g., adults, youth, families) and to collect additional information as needed (e.g., demographic, background, current situation, needs and preferences).

While prioritization and referral are not the focus of this background, in relation to common assessment tools it is important to remember that:

- Ideally, common assessment tools are used to assist with the prioritization process, not to make the decision. Prioritization for housing and services must continue to consider additional factors such as an individual's circumstances and choice (e.g., a person may be eligible for a more intensive intervention, but may prefer, and in fact respond just as successfully to a less intensive intervention).
- No tool can predict the success of an intervention for an individual or family. A good tool however, should increase the likelihood of matching people to the right level of service and the right housing, and will provide greater objectivity and transparency throughout the process.

Within coordinated access, common assessment helps to:

- Create a consistent, transparent and more objective way to match people to the appropriate housing and services based on needs; and
- Prioritize persons with the highest service needs for the most intensive interventions.

Common assessment tools can also support further service planning and provision once someone has been matched to housing support. Tools can be used to support conversations with program participants to help identify areas of strength, challenge, next steps and changes over time. Aggregate common assessment tool data can demonstrate concrete value for investment in terms of improvement in participant's lives as well as help inform staff training needs, program evaluation, service provision, and system planning.

What makes a good tool?

Most of the broadly available information about homeless-specific common assessment tools has focussed on their role in supporting coordinated access. Documents offering some advice from both the US and Canada are summarized below.

The United States department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) began using common assessment tools in one of their programs as early as 2008. HUD began requiring their funded Continuums of Care (CoCs) to use a standardized assessment tool as part of coordinated assessment beginning in 2012. Each CoC is permitted to choose any tool that meets HUD's identified qualities of a good standardized assessment tool. HUD has continued to update their guidance around coordinated access and assessment as both the process and tools evolve.

HUDs guidance has included the following evolving program requirements and information:

- In 2008, centralized intake was a key component of HUD's Rapid Re-Housing for Families Demonstration Project ([HUD Exchange, Centralized Intake](#)).

- In 2009, elements of coordinated entry were allowable for funding under the 2009 Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) such that many CoC's incorporated some form of coordinated entry into their program ([HUD Exchange, Centralized Intake](#)).
- In January 2012, the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) Interim Rule ([2011-24-CFR-576.400\(d\)](#)) came into effect requiring funded programs to follow the local CoC's coordinated assessment process.
- In the July 2014 Prioritization Notice ([CPD-014-12](#)), an initial list of recommended qualities of a good standardized assessment tool was included (see Appendix A).
- In November 2014, HUD, in partnership with the National Alliance to End Homelessness, convened a panel of experts to discuss assessment tools that communities are using to allocate homeless assistance and to consider the evidence base for the questions used in the tools resulting in [Assessment Tools: Expert Convenings Report](#) released in February 2015.
- In July 2016, the 2014 Prioritization Notice was updated with the 2016 Prioritization Notice ([CPD-016-11](#)) referencing the 2015 [Coordinated Entry Policy Brief](#) which provided recommended criteria for a quality coordinated entry process and standardized assessment tool.
- HUD's most recent information related to prioritization and assessment tools is outlined in the January 2017 Coordinated Entry Notice ([CPD-17-01](#)) and included in their June 2017 [Coordinated Entry Core Elements](#) Guidebook.

The Coordinated Entry Core Elements Guidebook identifies that any tool used for coordinated entry should have, the greatest extent possible, the following qualities (as outlined in the 2016 Prioritization Notice and reinforced in the 2017 Coordinated Entry Notice):

1. Tested, valid, and appropriate
2. Reliable (provide consistent results)
3. Comprehensive (provide access to all housing and supportive services within the CoC)
4. Person-centered (focused on resolving the person's needs, instead of filling project vacancies)
5. User-friendly for both the person being assessed and the assessor
6. Strengths-based (focused on the person's barriers to and strengths for obtaining sustainable housing)
7. Housing First-oriented (focused on rapidly housing participants without preconditions)
8. Sensitive to lived experiences (culturally and situationally sensitive, focused on reducing trauma and harm)
9. Transparent in the relationship between the questions being asked and the potential options for housing and supportive services

In Canada, a review of screening and assessment tools was conducted in 2015 by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Mental Health Commission of Canada based on the HUD criteria. The resulting documents available on the Homeless Hub include the [Screening for Housing First](#) (full report) and the [Table of Homeless Specific Tools](#).

To prepare these reports, a task force was formed (see Appendix A of the [Screening for Housing First](#) report) that selected a number of tools for review that focussed on:

- Housing First programs
- Phase one of the assessment roadmap (screening)
- Single adults¹
- Tools available at the time – which included a mix of those in broad use, those used largely in a single community, those that had been updated, and those generally no longer in use²

The resulting report had the stated purpose of offering alternatives to the Vulnerability Index-Service Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT),

“As the homeless service sector is generally unaware of the wide range of screening options available beyond the VI-SPDAT, a Housing First Assessment Taskforce was created by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness to provide recommendations of other suitable screening tools for communities to use.” (p.3).

It’s worth noting that this paper focused on tools the authors’ considered appropriate for screening and therefore did not include the SPDAT (full assessment tool). However, as described in [Tools Commonly Used in Canada](#), the SPDAT can be used both for screening as well as service support planning and provision. The authors’ also chose to recommend a specific tool, while the CAEH believes communities should choose the tool that best meets their needs.

¹ Available youth and family tools were not scoped into this review.

² A number of tools were included in the review that although available, were generally no longer in active use including: the Vulnerability Index which is no longer supported and has been updated as the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistant Tool (VI-SPDAT); version 1 of the VI-SPDAT for single adults (which had been updated with a Version 2); and Calgary’s Housing Triage and Assessment Survey, Calgary Acuity Scale, and the Homeless Asset and Risk Screening (these were developed and used by the Calgary Homeless Foundation between approximately 2008-2012 after which they began using the VI-SPDAT - from conversation between Marie Morrison and Kevin McNichol, Vice-President Strategy, Calgary Homeless Foundation on January 26, 2018).