HUD Exchange - Implementing Effective Contraction Negotiation and Relationship Management Strategies 101, 5/4/20

Mary Schwartz: (In progress) – to "Implementing Effective Contraction Negotiation and Relationship Management Strategies 101." I'm Mary Schwartz from Abt Associates and with me is Fran Ledger from the HUD SNAPS office. And we are excited to be presenting to you all today on this really important topic. So we're going to go ahead and get started.

There's been around 70 attendees, which is great. I am going to forward the slide, hopefully. Nope. Chantel, are you forwarding slides for me? Aha, now it can. Thank you. Hopefully. OK. Fran, can you forward the slides?

Fran Ledger: I cannot.

Mary Schwartz: Yeah, me neither. OK. Well, I kind of have the first couple of slides memorized. So once I know how to move these myself, in the meantime Chantel if you don't mind moving our slides forward for us. Thank you.

So we're going to be talking to you for about 60 minutes or so. You are all going to be in listen-only mode and here is how we're going to run this show. There is a chat feature; there's a Q&A feature. The chat feature is going to be for you guys to chat with each other, to chat with Chantel, who's our host for this event, if you're having any technical issues. The Q&A box is going to be for content-related questions that you want Fran and I to address while we're going through our content today.

So we will not be monitoring necessarily the chat box. It's more of you can send a message to Chantel for technical issues if you address it to the host in the chat box. You can send a message to all participants if you want to talk to each other, say hi.

Fran and I were talking right before we started the session today how it's fabulous that we get the opportunity to share this content with you and go through this information. But there's sadness, obviously, in not being able to be face-to-face with you like we normally would be at NHSDC. And so you know, if you want to make this more of an interactive session, if you too are missing that face-to-face time with us, we – the chat would be your way to kind of reach out to your fellow participants and say hi and try and get some interactivity here.

The Q&A box, again, is going to be just for content-related questions that Fran and I can address as we're going through. We'll pause in between some of the content and make sure that we are being as clear as possible about this topic.

We're going to record this session. It's being recorded. We'll post this for anyone in your community that wasn't able to attend this live today. So lots of opportunity to interact with this content if not the in-person and hanging out together.

All right. So I'm going to move – maybe move the slides myself now? Or no. Looks like it's all Chantel. OK. So I went over this already, but the Q&A box is for content questions. The chat box is for hanging out with each other and with us in more of a casual setting.

So let's get going. We're going to learn today – again, this is contract negotiation and relationship strategies 101. We're going to go through the contracting life cycle. We're going to identify some core components of HMIS's contracting, including writing requirements, procurement and selection, and monitoring for your requirements and monitoring for performance.

So we're also going to touch a little bit on the HMIS software checklist. That's going to help us really build a good foundation for what requirements should be.

Next slide.

OK. So requirements, procurement, selection, execution, monitoring. The contracting life cycle has a very kind of clear ongoing – kind of a continual process. And we're going to approach the content today with these kind of topics in mind and kind of walk you through each stage of the cycle. But I think the most important thing to remember here is that you can come at this process wherever you're at. You can jump into that circle and start working your way through the steps.

So we really want you to hear these words, think about the life cycle as we're going to talk about it today, and then take it to your local situation. Where are you at? Are in the middle of a procurement or selection? Are you in the middle of a contract that you've had forever and you really – you've never been monitoring and you need to get in and start monitoring? Are you just at the end of your rope and ready to start thinking about requirement?

Are you somewhere in that cycle? And how can you jump in and take what we're going to share with you today, kind of apply it locally, and now start kind of seeing yourself in the contracting life cycle and maintain it and keep it going? And the continual improvement of feeling like you're part of this kind of life cycle is really what we want to get across today.

Next slide.

OK. So we're going to start pretty simple. What is a contract? It refers to a written or spoken agreement enforceable by law. An MOU has many of the same features of the contract. We kind of draw a distinction between the two just because what we see a lot in CoCs is that MOUs are kind of defining our relationships with each other and the governing bodies. Contracts are then the more formal legal documents that we're entering into with the HMIS members.

But either/or, right? You could have contracts defining your relationships amongst government – governing entities. You could have MOUs, if that's how it ends up, with your vendors. So MOUs and contracts, the main point is that you have written down a set of things that everybody agrees to follow and now it's – we're going to monitor for those things we wrote down and work together to make it the best system it can be.

Fran, feel free to jump in at any point if there's questions that come up or I can be more clear about already.

All right. Next slide. OK. Next slide.

We're going to jump into the requirements. We're going to jump into this life cycle at the requirements stage. That's where we're going to start, but again, that's not where you may be right now.

But ultimately, following the contract life cycle, you're going to land eventually on this idea of requirements. What do I need to run an effective HMIS? What do I need to have written down? And who needs to do what?

So we have Spot the Elephant. Spot was named by my daughter and the elephant is our analogy for a couple of different things. There's a parable of the blind men, or something along that line, right? Where this group of people lacking sight approach and elephant – or the system – and they each grab a different piece of the elephant, right? One grabs the ear and one grabs the trunk and one grabs the tail.

Without sight of the larger system, all one person holding a trunk knows is that it must be a snake. Holding a tail, it must be a rope. Holding an ear, it must be a piece of paper or something, right?

So without – it's kind of that analogy of in a system, everybody needs to know what it is they're working on and needs to understand what it is they have in their hands and how it fits with the whole.

There's also kind of a – HMIS is huge; it's a big project. It's got a lot of importance and a lot of parts to it and often times, in many of your CoCs, there's a lot of people that have an interest and a responsibility in the system. So HMIS is huge; elephants are huge. There's an analogy there of massive size. It takes a lot of care and feeding. Who owns the elephant?

So we think about this analogy of HMIS as a system and running it as a system and knowing who's supposed to do what is part of a sector management of that whole system. So there's kind of a couple different roles and where the requirements are written down for what should be happening in HMIS.

There's leadership – CoC leadership, bones part of the elephant. Yes, it's their elephant; they're in charge. The CoC is in charge of designating and operating in HMIS. Ultimately, decisions about HMIS lie at CoC leadership level. But often there's a contract or an MOU that transfers some responsibility to the HMIS lead.

So it's the HMIS lead's elephant? Yes, very much so. There's CFRs that define what the HMIS lead will do. Usually it should – you should all have in your governing documentation the CoC has basically designated the HMIS lead and kind of passed on these responsibilities to provide oversight management.

Well, but it's the vendor's elephant, right? They really own – it's their software. They're in charge of the coding and the programming and making it all work. Yes, but there's contractual agreements defining that. And so what does the vendor own versus what is in the HMIS leads column as part of this requirements writing exercise?

Well, a lot of contracts we've seen – and Fran will attest to this too – actually kind of just say we're all just going to follow HUD's data standards. And that's about the extent of the requirements.

So yes, it's kind of HUD's elephant. They do write down and define things like data standards and programming specifications and that kind of thing. But back to the CoC, right? Leadership is putting in place and providing oversight. HUD doesn't own this elephant just because they write down the data standards. There's this large number of folks and parties and interested people that are taking care of and feeding this elephant. Or should be if you're writing down requirements correctly.

Can we move to the next slide?

Oh, yeah. OK. It's our funny joke for the day, right? So you guys kind of know this already. You have gotten to these points in your HMIS life cycle where you've got stuck at the vendor. You've entered a ticket with your vendor and you said, this thing is broken. And they said nope, that's a feature. Is it a bug or a feature? This is a conversation that we have a lot in the HMIS world and so there's your joke that goes along with bug or feature.

Next slide.

Thank you, Ryan Burger (ph), wherever you are, for giving us that joke.

So requirements writing. In practicality, you will never have to have the bug or feature conversation with your vendor if everything is written down really clearly. That's maybe a little Pollyannaish of me. But generally what we've seen as a really effective strategy when thinking about your HMIS contracting is to just sit down and start writing.

Pick a category. So reporting is the example here. The requirements. So I know at least one specific, clear requirement for reporting is that my HMIS produce an ARP, right? To give to HUD for my CoC funding programs. So then you can start thinking about features in terms of what would be nice to have, versus baseline functionality. What do I have to have?

And as you start breaking things down in this way, it starts to become really clear that you could map out a whole real long list. I've seen communities with over 100 different requirements mapped out in exactly this way. And as they think about what they have to have to do their jobs with HMIS, versus what might be really nice to have, it starts to really delineate for you what you want to get into contract with your vendors and start negotiating for kind of that complete system where everybody knows what – who needs to do what and when.

There are lots of ways to categorize these requirements. We have a lot of examples that we can provide. Fran, I'm going to put you on the spot. There's a contract management toolkit that's coming out any day now. COVID-19 has definitely delayed some of the plans with our HMIS lead tools and products that we have been working on. But there are so, so soon going to be lots of great templates for you to use when thinking about how to really start writing down your requirements.

I think next slide, unless you want to say anything about this contract management tool, Fran.

Fran Ledger: No. I mean, we – there are some great tools that are going to help in this process and we're excited about getting them out the door – (inaudible) – so you guys can use them. So coming soon. Coming soon.

Mary Schwartz: OK. So here's another example of writing requirements and why we think this is a really important thing to start tackling. So here's the scenario, and we've seen this before.

You have a household ID in your system. And you have a global ID in your system. And your vendor used one and not the other. If you have a contract or an agreement with your vendor that says, we'll just follow all the HUD data standards, HUD data elements, that isn't detailed enough to really decipher these kinds of details where you can start getting tripped up on inaccurate counts in your report because one global ID is used instead of the correct household ID, or vice versa.

Or maybe you've defined some reports locally and you were anticipating using one and not the other. So writing things down, even down to the level of – and this table with the words about the data elements, project descriptor, universal data elements, program-specific data elements, that's how detailed it is in the software checklist.

So if you – and we have a link to the resource at the end of this presentation. So make sure to go there if you haven't checked it out already. If you get – want to take this software checklist and kind of copy and paste that and use it as a baseline to what your requirements are going to be, that's a great place to start. And this is how detailed sometimes you need to be in order to make these contract negotiations and responsibilities really clear between you and your partners, like the vendors and the participating agencies in your community.

OK. Next slide.

We're going to move on to the procurement, selection, execution part of the life cycle. I kind of always lump them together in my head for certain reasons. Fran, did we have any clarifications needed on the requirement section? Did any questions come in?

Fran Ledger: No. No, you can move forward.

Mary Schwartz: OK. Then moving right along. OK. I personally – I love the requirements writing because it really gives you a chance to sit down and be thoughtful and really – it can also – requirements writing – I'll just say one more thing – can be like a community-wide process, like an effort that everybody in your community has a chance to weigh in on, right? So giving everybody in your community an opportunity to say what they need or don't need – (inaudible) – is often a great way to get that process started.

But the real fun happens after you've written down your requirements. In the perfect world – maybe my opinion of a perfect world – you would take your requirements writing that you did, everything categorized out. You know what reports you need. You know what system administration tools you need. You know what user interface things you want to have happen for your HMIS. You know all the requirements are met. You've got all your data elements identified. You've written all of that our really clearly and that's just exactly what you put out as your RFP to start a procurement process.

Procurement means that you're – and there are certain monetary limits on – rules. If you're spending X amount of dollars, you have to do an open procurement. There are some (billing amounts ?) that you can do sole source. A lot of this has been defined recently or become I guess more solid from HUD's perspective, provided clarity, particularly in the contract management toolkit that we are going to put out soon around what those limits are. I'm not going to say them off the top of my head. I don't want to get it wrong and freak people out.

But basically, there's certainly communities – we know of them and we don't know of all them – where HMIS was just purchased 10 years and it's been going ever since and we renew the contract every year and we're just keeping the wheels on the bus, right?

If you find that because of the amount of money that you are spending on HMIS software or because it has been so long and you just logically need to procure because that's a good thing to do, because technology has changed and you never know what's out there. Or because you've gotten into a place where you are interested in writing a new contract, setting up a new process under which requirements are clearer for you and for the vendor, it may require you to do a procurement.

And so ideally, you would use your requirements to do your procurement process. And we also want to make the point that just doing a procurement process and opening up a procurement does not mean you have to change vendors. It could simply mean that you are opening up a process by which people get to review these requirements again, thoughtfully respond to their ability to meet your requirements or not. And you may end up with exactly the same software as you did before, just under a new contract.

So there's a lot of different ways to approach procurement and we don't want you to hear from this presentation that vendor change should happen. It's not actually – it's not what HUD prefers. HUD would prefer that you take all these different steps to try and negotiate and work within the parameters of your existing software as much as you can.

Do you want to add anything to that, Fran?

Fran Ledger: No.

Mary Schwartz: Next slide, please.

So procurement. So I said it already. Ideally, you are building – as you're writing requirements, you are building a scope of work for your contract. And you're putting that out there as the document that anyone who's interested in doing this job with you would respond to. So for each requirement that you detailed out – thinking back to the example of the APR, right, you've detailed what your requirement is – you then asked – it's kind of like, here's an idea.

Write down your requirement and ask for the response to the RFP – which stands for request for proposal. There's also RFQ, request for qualifications. There's a lot of different terms of this. So this is some of that kind of legal stuff that you'll have to check out and figure out locally what vehicle you use to kind of say, here's what we're looking for. So the procurement process is defined a little bit by what's going on locally and who the entities are involved.

But generally speaking, we can kind of generalize this to say, you can say, here's the requirement that I need. This is one of many. And the response to that requirement can be framed in terms of performance criteria; so you would ask them to respond with what a successful implementation of that requirement looks like and what it costs to get to that successful implementation. What does their product cost to ensure that a CoC is a standard function, accessible to all users, permission tied to reporting, tied to data by user name access, et cetera, et cetera.

So asking for the response – a lot of RFQs that we've seen over the years take the form of kind of narrative, I guess, or even checkboxes. Like, you would list out a bunch of requirements and just ask people to say yes or no to those things. And what we're proposing here is that there be more of a thoughtful kind of response request. We want you to respond to us in the form of what your performance looks like against each of these requirements. And even better, what it costs to do each of these requirements that we listed out in our RFP.

So it's one approach. And it's not the only approach. But it is kind of the bulk of the procurement content that we're delivering with this successful negotiation, relationship management presentation. Getting to this level of detail, particularly if you're about to embark upon a procurement, can lead to a very successful contract and monitoring process later on.

Next slide, please.

Basically what we're saying is, the scope of work that you build through your requirements writing can be the scope of work that you use for your contract. And having that upfront through the process of selection and vendor procurement, is just – has been found to be pretty beneficial.

So selection. So as you have released a procurement document and you've gotten responses, the selection process looks really different, depending on the community and how you approach it. But basically, you can phase out – you can start with a large number of responses and narrow down your choices through a series of scoring events, if you will. You kind of set up certain criteria for what would make a successful response and you have to write all of that upfront.

When you release your procurement documents, that's what you put, is how things are going to be scored, what you're going to be scored against. And you slowly whittle down based on what your requirements are and how you decide to stage out those scores. You narrow down to an apparent successful vendor.

And that's when you start entering into negotiations. Ideally, the scope of work for the contract has already been written because that was your RFP. So you're going into more of a, like, do we know what the performance criteria are? What would cause for nonpayment? What would cause for doing an amendment to this contract? How long a contract should last. How many chances to execute an extension there would be. So a lot of negotiation goes on after an apparent successful vendor selection is made. And you – it depends on how much time or what you have to negotiate.

But you will then also, if you are tackling a vendor transition at that time, you need to build enough months to do data migration and that kind of thing. And all that would be defined through this contract negotiation and RFP – sorry, procurement documentation.

So next slide.

So we talked about procurement. We talked about selection. We talked about execution. And again I'm going to point out the fact that if you kind of are doing a lot of pre-thought to – you see a procurement process needing to happen in your community and it's coming up and maybe you have a year or so to really plan and figure out what you want to do, you can be working on your scope of work as your RFP.

You can enter a procurement effort and a selection effort that clearly details how your successful respondent will work with you through the scope of work of your contract and sign a contract with a vendor that has a clear scope of work set against your requirements for HMIS.

It's a really – again I'll say Pollyannaish kind of – we know that not everybody's able to have that amount of time to plan their procurements in advance, that so often these things are kind of scrambled together – cobbled together at the last minute because something big happened and we just need to move now on this.

So what we're trying to set out here is that, with some planning and forethought, there can be ways to approach writing a contract with your HMIS vendors in a way that gets you to a place where you're managing against requirements that are real and ideal for your community and able to be managed and monitored. And this is the process that would help with that and help you get there.

We're about to transition over to the monitoring section of this presentation. But I did want to stop again and ask if there were any questions that came in or anything, Fran, that you wanted to have me go over again that wasn't clear.

Fran Ledger: Yeah, I don't think so. But I just wanted to remind folks that you can submit questions in the Q&A if you want us to respond to those. We're happy to do that. I think that we definitely will have time for a Q&A at the end. But if you go ahead and submit those while I'm presenting, Mary can be answering those. Or we can reserve them to the end and discuss them. You kind of have a rare opportunity right now.

You have somebody who's a subject-matter expert in this area; Mary's been doing this for a really long time and presenting on this subject for several years now. So I think that it's great to pick her brain if you have questions. And you had HUD on the line and I'm happy to answer questions that you have. So I would encourage you to do that.

I'm going to talk about monitoring. So that's so appropriate for HUD to be doing. So this is the next section that we're covering.

It's the last phase in the cycle before we start to loop the circle back into requirements. And it's really prior to contract renewal or termination, that thing that we try to resist having happen unless absolutely necessary. And the process is really monitoring – we're monitoring for compliance against those things that are in the contract, your terms and conditions.

So it's very important that all those things that Mary described, you want to be very diligent about those things to make sure that you have everything explicit, so that when you get to the monitoring stage there's a lot of transparency, clarity around those things that you're monitoring against.

And that as you're going through this monitoring process, when you find things that are not working, you're going to be able to do some negotiation around that potentially, do some contract revision through the renewal process. Or if you're finding that there's noncompliance or underperformance and it's not something that's able to be resolved, in that worst-case scenario then you're looking potentially at terminating and looking for a new vendor. So we'll talk a little bit about that as we go through this process.

Let's look at the next slide.

So monitoring. It's important for a lot of reasons. We're going to talk about the purpose for a few minutes. (Inaudible) – every organization now uses IT in some measure, right? So we use HMIS; it serves a lot of purposes for the CoC. HMIS is critical for policy decisions, for resource management, for understanding performance of the CoC and how we're doing in ending homelessness. It's really critical to the work that we do.

And so we have to make sure that we have a high-functioning HMIS in our communities if we want to be able to see if what we're doing is successful. So yes, we want to make sure it's compliant to the HUD standards; those are our baseline.

But communities, through this requirements process, have come up with other things that go beyond those things that are HUD required; the things the community needs to be able to determine whether you're able to assess the performance of your community, whether your HMIS is actually supporting you being able to do your day-to-day business and being able to report out what you're doing and how you're doing.

So monitoring the contracts with HMIS software center is meant to ensure that the technical and functional capabilities of the HMIS are working well and in sync with the contract. But you're also looking at software as a service component of it. So it's not just the technology piece or the hardware, but when you contract it with a vendor you also have that additional piece of services that are attached to it.

And you want to make sure that they're meeting the needs that are in the terms and conditions of the contract. So essentially, monitoring is a proactive approach to making sure that it's the appropriate software – that it's the right software. That the price is transparent and it's cost-effective. Does the cost that you're paying make sense for what you're getting? And you're mitigating against risk. So if you're continuing to find problems, what are you doing to help resolve those? So you're not in a situation where you have a piece of software that's not functioning for your community and is falling out of compliance.

And the last thing is that you're making sure that it's actually meeting the community needs. This is really – this is all very critical. In the (win ?) part of it, you want it to do this on an ongoing basis. And if you're doing that, then it becomes like a continuous quality improvement cycle, versus something that is more of a one-off kind of assessing past performance. And we'll talk a little bit about this.

It's helpful if this is ongoing monthly process where you're looking at your scope of work and you're sitting down with it and you're paying your vendor and you're looking at these things and you're seeing, OK, how are we – how is this working? Are the things that we contracted for, are they being met? And if not, how do we make adjustments and improve this situation, versus waiting until the end of the year to monitor against the contract.

And then you might find that, OK, we're looking at past performance over the course of an entire year and it's much more difficult to be actionable about those things and come up with strategies to address anything that may not be working for you. So monthly is a much more successful process to use, versus just a one-off.

So you want it to be doing monthly against scope of work, looking at what's happening as far as when you're invoicing and those things. And then when you get to the once a year, you can actually look at the whole contract itself and all of the conditions of the contract.

Go ahead, go to the next slide.

So we're actually producing an HMIS vendor monitoring tool, one of the many HMIS lead tools that have been in development that we're trying to get out to communities. And you're seeing examples here of something that you could monitor or measure against. And this one that we've picked out is around deduplication of client records.

So in the contracting process, you may have come up with a functional requirement around what it looks like to deduplicate a client record. And you may have set a standard for that and that was placed in the contract for what that looked like. And in the monitoring, there may have been a –

you may have found a finding around that, around – it's that it's not meeting the rate of confidence that you specified in the contract.

And so if you're doing this on an ongoing basis, you have an opportunity to develop some improvement strategies for making changes for this. And so the vendor has then an opportunity to go back, look at the system and see what they can do to address this.

This is – what we find often – what HUD finds often is that we'll have communities come to us after a long period of time where they have struggled with getting needs met. But those things have either not been articulated in the contract or they're looking over a long period of time of not getting a need met.

And so again, just to underscore, if you have these things laid out really clearly in sort of a working contract, then you are able to look at these things on a regular basis and catch these things early, giving everybody an opportunity to address them so you don't have these kind of outstanding larger issues.

And you can see where in this one specifically you would have something that, if you were doing some performance reporting, that this could really impact your report. It would be important for your CSD [ph] to have a good grade of confidence around deduplication of your client records.

Before I start talking about this one, Mary do you have anything that you want to add about the vendor monitoring tool or the monitoring in general up to this point?

Mary Schwartz: No. There was a question about whether HUD certifies HMIS vendors. So I did answer it no, there is no HUD certification. And I was typing away and the text box doesn't let me write as much as I would want to there. But really, that's the point. That's why we're having this presentation, right? Because HUD doesn't have any say over the HMIS vendors.

They hold a monthly meeting with the vendors to communicate the technical requirements around programming specifications and answer any questions there. But other than that, you guys are the ones that get to hold the vendors accountable. So if they say they're an HMIS vendor, it's up to you to write down your requirements of what HMIS means to you and hold your vendors accountable for those things.

So that is it. There is no official list of HMIS vendors. It is up to you to contract for the services you need locally.

Fran Ledger: Yeah. That's perfect. And it's interesting because the HMIS software that exists out there, they're very different. And so there's – HUD's baseline requirements, they are baseline. And they are not that – they're minimal standards. So the tools that we provide allow you to understand what are those baseline requirements.

But your community will probably have a lot of things that they'll want to add on when you're looking for a software. So you'll go above – much further – much above and beyond what HUD baseline requirements are for software. And that would be – that is what we anticipate.

So really, we leave it to the local communities to look for a software that meets their needs.

So let's talk a little bit about the who, the what, and the how. The who does the monitoring. So this depends in part on what type of organization you are. The HMIS leads can sometimes be a governing entity and sometimes it's a nonprofit. In rare cases it might be contracted to a for-profit, but generally you're seeing that it's a nonprofit or a government entity. And depending on that, you might have different folks involved in the monitoring process.

But generally what you're going to see is it's always going to go back to making sure that the CoC leadership understands what the results are of the monitoring. You want to always make sure that they are kept in the loop with how things are going with your HMIS.

So let's take it, for instance, if it was a government organization, it could involve things like a contract office if there was a contract office. It could involve the finance director. It might involve an operations director, finance department. So it depends on the government entity and how it's structured.

But often times in either counties, city/state government, there's a lot of controls around how procurement and contracting is done. And then that will tie into how you're monitoring and who is involved in your monitoring process. So you'll want to ask questions if you work for one of those entities to find out who are the appropriate people who should be involved in the monitoring.

And maybe they're not involved in all of the monitoring, but in parts of the monitoring. So if the finance director is involved, what part of the monitoring are they involved in? And so making sure you have the right people.

If you're a nonprofit, similar. I mean, do you – who are the right folks to be involved in that monitoring? If it's a small organization, it might be the HMIS lead is doing – the HMIS lead staff is doing the whole piece. You're looking at the entire contract and scope of work and you are the sole person doing the monitoring.

So think about who are the individuals that need to be involved in the monitoring that can be thinking through strategies for doing improvement when you're finding that maybe there are some concerns with what – the findings that you might have in the monitoring. And make sure that those folks are involved in the process.

As far as the "what" is concerned, you have a few things that I've already mentioned. So one is the actual contract. So you need to be familiar with your terms and conditions going into the monitoring, and you want to be looking at your scope of work. And you want to remember, that's the stuff that doesn't necessarily get – so that's the "does not get paid if not done" stuff. So you want to make sure that everything's getting done, right?

And there's also a note in there that there's – we're hoping that in there you have some – have attached in there penalties and incentives for getting those things done. Or if they're not done, that there's penalties attached to them. So that is the "what."

And you want to make sure that everybody is clear on what those things are that you're going to be monitoring. This process should be very transparent. It should be clear going in who's going to be doing the monitoring, what's going to be monitoring, and how. This should not be a surprise to anyone. I mean, that is the best approach to the monitoring process is that it's clear and that it's transparent.

For the "how" of the monitoring, you want to make sure that you have a structure in place, that you have a monitoring tool, that there is a process that's outlined for what that looks like. You want to make sure that it's agreed upon and that it ties back to the HUD rules and regulations, and the terms and conditions of the contract.

You want to keep in mind that your – that when you're doing the monitoring, you're going to be monitoring on things that are the functionality stuff of the software; so the hardware, the IT, that piece of it.

But you're also going to be monitoring the services, so the kind of administrative piece of it, those things. When we talk about HMIS software vendors, we – this is a large term that we use. But we're encompassing in there both the services that the vendor's providing, but also the software and the technology that they're providing.

So you have to think of the whole piece. And all of that will have been captured in your contract. So how do you monitor all of that? So you'll want to think about that going into the process.

Next slide.

So let's talk a little bit about vendor changes. So if you've been on a presentation before with me talking about vendor changes – or Mary – you know that what – we've tried to share the experience that HUD and technical assistance providers have found when supporting communities through vendor changes.

And what we have found is that a lot of communities struggle through going through a vendor change. And often what happens at the beginning and what happens at the end very much is represented in this image here.

So what happens often is communities change HMIS vendors due to a lot of different things. So they might perceive that there's a lack of functionality in the HMIS. They get frustrated because the system's not capable of doing the things that they want it to do. And this may – there may be that things were poorly defined in the beginning and there are not good requirements in place. And there could be things that if they had been put in place in the beginning, it might have gone more smoothly. But they're just – they're not there.

And so out of frustration, what we see is a community makes a decision that they're going to change vendors. And when we provide technical assistance to communities through this process over the years – or they come to us kind of midway through the process – what we find is communities often face a loss of data during the transition. Because they think that data's going to transfer over, but in fact the data is not able to be transferred over and they lose parts of it.

There's a financial cost sometimes that is not considered in the transition. So the community may think that they have considered all of the costs involved in a transition and then there are things that are there that they didn't plan for. It takes a lot of staff resources to make a transition from one software to another. So there has to be – the agency has to have the capacity to be able to do that on top of doing your normal HMIS day-to-day business.

On top of that you have to be able to manage the actual transition part. There's the training of the end users on the new software. And when you go to a new software, you have to do all those things that you've done over a long period of time. Setting up work flow, setting up reporting requirements, all those things are compressed into the time that you're doing the transition.

So it is not an easy thing to go through a vendor transition. And often those vendor transitions happen because things have not been clear on the front end.

Let's go to the next slide.

So our preference is that communities try to exhaust all (things ?) before going through a vendor change. Often we see that when a community makes a change, they actually transfer the same capacity issues that they had with the original vendor on to the next vendor, because sometimes the issues haven't been just about the software; they had been about capacity issues around maybe insufficient resources at the CoC or at the HMIS lead agency.

It could be the providers in general don't value the HMIS like we would hope they would. There could be training issues in general. There might be not enough understanding about HMIS capacity and what it should do, what the limitations are. So those things that are human-related challenges often then transfer to the next HMIS vendor.

So what we would – what our preference is, is that two things happen. One is all the things that you heard Mary talking about and my piece that I've been talking about around monitoring. But all those happen with your current vendor. If you don't have that in place, you have an opportunity to put it in place now. If you're struggling with a vendor, get those things in place. If you're not struggling with a vendor, get those things in place now; they're good practices.

And then if you still find after you put these good things in place that you're having issues, and you've also looked at how you communicate with your vendor and you've documented that things are not working through your monitoring process. If you've exhausted those things then certainly if the software is not working for you, software is not meeting the needs and doing the monitoring and trying to mediate things through that has not worked, then of course we support doing a vendor change and making sure that your community has a compliant HMIS set of all that's important to us and that is meeting your needs.

But we hate to see communities investing in a change that is – it's a difficult process and we want to make sure you guys are doing the best that you can do around – as far as these good practices are concerned.

OK. Next slide. Mary?

Mary Schwartz: Yeah. So like Fran said, we want to see good requirements rating, processes, start thinking about what you can do in the context of your current situation. So we have this little kind of where are you going to jump into the cycle? And often we hear, but I can't. I can't procure anything new right now; that's not in the cards.

OK. Then work on monitoring your current contract. Look at the requirements that are in place. Look at the requirements written down already that somebody signed at some point in the past, and start monitoring against those requirements.

You could also try to amend your current contract. You can do a requirements writing exercise and then work through contract amending so that you could define more clearly within your existing contract those requirements and who's responsible for them.

But I can't amend my contract. OK. So you can't amend your contract. That means that at some point in the near future your contract is going to expire and you're going to need to write a new contract. So you're at the procurement process stage, right? That's where you need to be and give yourself enough time to do thorough requirements writing.

Also, you could just be in that kind of monitoring phase of the cycle. If you can't amend and you can't procure, then look at what you have written down right now.

Really, it's interesting – and Fran I think will attest to this too – that as TA providers, when we ask communities what their current contract says, many people can't answer that question. They don't know where it is. They've never seen it. They're managing HMIS for their community; they're the HMIS lead or they're the HMIS system administrator. But they've never seen the contract.

So sitting down with your existing contract is often your very first step to figure out what you can monitor against, what you can create findings for. Or it at least gives you a sense of what you would like a contract to say instead and start working on those requirements.

OK. But I can't monitor. Well then, if you really can't monitor your existing contract, you are at a place where you need a contract that you can monitor, because that is absolutely one of the fundamental responsibilities of signing these contracts with HMIS software vendors and being in a position of HMIS lead or CoC lead. You should be able to monitor. And if you can't, that's a part of the contract terms and conditions that should be in place.

So you are at the place where you need to either amend your existing contract so that you are able to go in and monitor against the requirements that are already written down, or you're in a place where you need to think about procurement and figuring out how to write a new contract entirely that you can monitor.

So that was just our quick slide on "but I can't do this, Mary and Fran." And we're saying yes, you can. We are here to help as well.

We're at the end of our time today so we're going to wrap it up. I haven't seen any new questions come in.

We had a few more questions, Fran, about how do we get a list of vendors – active vendors? Probably a Google search is your best way. There are some local efforts that we've seen Abt kind of trying to pull together a meaningful list of active vendors. But that's not – again, back to the idea that HUD isn't going to sanction a list of who's certified to be an HMIS vendor.

You each are going to have unique requirements in your communities that go above and beyond what the barely baseline government-mandated standards in reporting requirements are. So you're going to really want to engage in that process as what do I need and who's going to be best positioned to give those services to me?

And I think we're at time. So Fran, thank you.

Oh, yes. This is certificate of completion. I saw a lot of you putting your names in there. Thank you. If you put in your information correctly when you came into the room, right at that first screen before you joined the meeting, that's what we're going to use to get your certificates to you. So it's one of those sessions, so you need to attend this as well as three more to get that certificate.

Are there any other slides I'm missing? Oh, yeah. Contact info. Email us. We're happy to hear from you and help as much as we can. This is my favorite topic, so use it.

Fran Ledger: And this recording and slide deck will be made available. So if you want to share this with other folks in your community, you can. Or neighboring CoCs, you can share this. And those materials that we talked about will hopefully be released soon and they'll be made available on the HUD exchange so you'll have those.

Mary Schwartz: Thank you so much, Fran. Thanks, Chantel.

Fran Ledger: Thank you, everyone.

Mary Schwartz: Thank you, everyone. Bye.

(END)