

# COVID-19 Homeless System Response: EHV Program: PHA & CoC Collaboration Case Studies

This document highlights community examples in which Continuums of Care (CoCs) and Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) are working together to establish effective and transparent data sharing practices that improve the success of the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program. The examples provide CoCs and PHAs a starting point to consider their own community's data sharing and management needs.

A collaborative information sharing process between CoCs and PHAs is important in monitoring the referral and placement of EHV households. [Linking data between systems used by PHAs and CoCs](#) can help communities and providers understand the following:

- The effectiveness of the EHV program in decreasing homelessness or alleviating housing instability.
- The degree to which the EHV program addresses racial disparities.

Case studies of two communities—San Francisco, California and Hennepin County, Minnesota—illustrate how the CoC and PHA can leverage partnerships to align data and resources to track the outcomes and effectiveness of the EHV program.

## San Francisco, CA

In San Francisco, the Housing Authority was awarded 906 EHV's. To equitably distribute the vouchers, the Housing Authority partnered with the CoC through its Collaborative Applicant, the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH), to align resources and staff capacity to more effectively house individuals and families experiencing and facing homelessness. The Housing Authority and HSH developed a flexible data sharing agreement that allowed staff in both organizations to communicate the broader needs and challenges clients were facing. This partnership also provided an opportunity to make the process more efficient by minimizing time frames between assessments, referrals, and lease-ups.

At the outset of this collaboration process, HSH developed the following [community-informed local priorities](#):

- Address racial inequities in homelessness caused by structural racism by connecting households who have been historically marginalized to vouchers through community-based referral partners.
- Reduce homelessness by targeting vouchers for people who are currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness.
- Decrease inflow into homelessness by targeting vouchers for people at an imminent risk of experiencing homelessness.

The strategic partnership and local priorities guided the development of clear goals regarding data indicators shared across data management platforms and the data sharing agreement between the Housing Authority and HSH. This agreement provided the overarching framework for [data sharing practices](#) including types of shareable data and supplemental information that align with HSH's strategic framework and equity goals. The agreement contained appendices for the various programs and types of data involved, which allowed for a flexible and streamlined process with minimal need for changes and revisions to the overarching agreement.

The basic structure of this data sharing agreement between the Housing Authority and HSH is largely driven by information shared by HSH. [HSH uses Release of Information \(ROI\) forms](#) for their homelessness response system which inform clients of how their information may be used or shared by HSH and its partner agencies. This practice promotes informed consent on how client information will be collected and shared. Broadly, the process involves the following:

- All the data collected from HSH is recorded and tracked within Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and is sent with the applications associated with each person's profile that gets referred to the Housing Authority.
- The Housing Authority updates a client log sheet on a weekly basis.
- The Housing Authority shares updates each week on each referred client and where that client is in the process.

- HSH uses that information to update HMIS records to track the outcomes of clients they refer to the Housing Authority.

This back-and-forth data sharing and communication is conducted using spreadsheets and secured system sharing platforms like SharePoint. One important component of this type of data sharing agreement is that it bridges client data across entities to track the outcomes of clients by race, ethnicity, age, and veteran status. This practice facilitates data disaggregation, which can promote intentional data interrogation to disrupt disparities.

Once the voucher is in the client's hand, the Housing Authority and HSH use a unique number assigned by their system as a voucher entity ID instead of the personal information of the client to ensure the program meets the privacy requirements. Prior to this point in the process, both systems use the client's full name and birth date, as these are the only unique identifiers common to both systems.

Along with weekly meetings between the Housing Authority and HSH, the two organizations have frequent calls to discuss and solve any issues identified by staff related to the data sharing process. Another part of this collaboration involves HSH's management of internal dashboards using HMIS data. These dashboards are updated regularly, incorporating both HMIS data and feedback from the Housing Authority to maintain updated snapshots of the program's pipeline from enrollment in HMIS to voucher approval. Dashboard metrics include demographic and eligibility data, status updates such as when a client is successfully moved into housing, and zip codes that track initial referral locations and where clients move.

### ***Challenges and Points of Consideration***

A key consideration for advancing the data sharing agreement was to ensure the overall structure of the agreement was flexible and secure enough to cover a broad range of programs. This agreement was drafted broadly to accommodate a range of data sharing processes that entities might establish with each other and allow for program-based modifications. As such, it reduced the processing time for agreements and the need for revisions. The agreement also allowed the two organizations to collaborate more adaptively across data platforms such as HMIS (CoC) and [ELITE](#) (PHA software system) based on specific requirements for programs such as the EHV program.

Staff at HSH noted the importance of reducing redundancy in data collection and underscored the need to be flexible and engage more frequently when establishing the relationship with the Housing Authority. Initially, calls with larger groups of people were set up to establish organization-wide alignment regarding data management. Once internal processes and roles were established to maintain clear data communication, these calls were scaled back to data and project management staff so that meetings could be more focused. Staff responsible for logistics and program management met routinely for process updates and changes while staff involved with policy and stakeholder engagement met separately to cover broader program aims.

HSH staff raised another major point of consideration, that of tracking zip codes to determine the movement of households through the EHV program process. By tracking zip codes to identify the locations clients were coming from and eventually being housed in, HSH gathered data that reflected the performance of the EHV program, informed where the highest needs were geographically, and guided community engagement activities for areas experiencing the highest degree of need. HSH highlighted that understanding the distribution of need and program allocations from demographic and geographic contexts helped shape implementation of both federal and local programs. For example, zip code tracking of referrals led to targeted programming and outreach in areas of historic disinvestment or high levels of homelessness.

## **Hennepin County, MN**

The Office to End Homelessness, a partnership between Hennepin County and Minneapolis, Minnesota, coordinates the countywide effort to prevent and end homelessness and, in doing so, coordinates with multiple PHAs. The Hennepin County CoC has targeted 100% of the vouchers available to its community to those who are experiencing literal (Category 1) homelessness. To track client data in real time, the CoC established a [SmartSheet](#) system where data are aggregated and used to inform bi-weekly calls with the Housing Authorities.

Instead of a data sharing agreement, the CoC and PHAs established Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to outline the data sharing and collaboration process. The key distinction between an MOU and a data sharing agreement is that an MOU is a written agreement that outlines the relationship between two or more parties, whereas a data sharing agreement includes a detailed description of how data are being shared between two or more parties. In short, an MOU can (but does not necessarily) include a data sharing agreement.

User groups including both the Coordinated Entry (CE) team and staff handling PHA data were established to identify efficiencies in cross-entity communication of data and program status. As in the San Francisco case study, consistent communication between the CoC and PHAs was essential to successful collaboration and data sharing. The CoC and

PHAs conducted bi-weekly calls to go through SmartSheet to identify issues, differences in, and alignment of data. An EHV program-specific user group composed of CoC and PHA staff was also established to meet with the PHAs so that coordination of programs between entities is seamless. The Office to End Homelessness also has planning staff who were responsible for collecting and organizing CE data as well as including EHV data for provider level and system level data dashboards. These dashboards are used to monitor and evaluate outcomes for clients through a racial equity lens across entities, which includes but is not limited to the disaggregation of outcomes by race, ethnicity, age, and gender.

In terms of internal tracking infrastructure, CoC staff maintains [Power Business Intelligence \(BI\)](#) dashboards that can create subsets of data by program and track time from the start of the assessment process to when an EHV household moves into housing. These types of data dashboards use aggregated data to protect the privacy of clients and track the trends and outcomes of various programs such as the EHV program.

Throughout this data aggregation and sharing process, the CoC has aimed to align all of its data practices, equity goals, and outcomes for the EHV program. Alongside a collection of demographic and eligibility metrics, the CoC is also tracking placement locations so the case management team can better understand where EHV households are being housed. These efforts have helped staff identify neighborhoods that may be experiencing greater need or greater capacity to provide housing and resources for individuals and families. This type of data tracking informs community engagement and resource allocation activities conducted by the CoC. It also provides insight into client outcomes aggregated across entities by race, ethnicity, age, and veteran status, which can be used to track the success of established racial equity goals.

### **Challenges and Points of Consideration**

CoC and PHA data collection and management practices do not necessarily align, making coordination calls and upfront communication very important. Taking time to share details about tracking methods and data elements can help mitigate some of these concerns. For instance, user groups are an excellent way to align specific staff, such as the CE team and PHA case managers, to ensure all parties are informed throughout the process and track program success and equity goals.

Data sharing agreements are typically easier to execute when geared towards serving one client population, which in this case is those experiencing homelessness. Serving and tracking multiple client populations can require multiple data sharing agreements or an agreement with some degree of flexibility by program and client type. In the event of limited staff or system capacity, specific data sharing agreements that target only those experiencing homelessness can help CoCs and PHAs implement agreements faster to meet community needs.

Hennepin County experienced a very high EHV utilization rate, highlighting not only the impact of this program but also the need by people who are experiencing homelessness and the importance of a collaborative infrastructure between the CoC and PHA to tackle this need. The CoC also improved the speed and effectiveness of implementation by encouraging providers to use similar data systems and metrics to improve systemwide tracking.

## **Conclusion**

The EHV program provides a resource that may help address racial and social inequities and connect vulnerable populations with more permanent housing options. CoCs and PHAs that work collaboratively have also been able to track client information to determine what effect the use of EHV has on housing outcomes.

The case studies outlined in this document provide two examples of the many partnerships forming across the U.S. Although specific agreements, partnerships, and data sharing practices may vary, the goal of the EHV program remains the same: to assist families experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including those who were recently homeless and those fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking. The data sharing and tracking process between participating organizations does not need to be complicated to be effective, but it is important that the process is secure and considerate to the clients it is intended to serve. Regardless of methods, clear communication and transparency are critical to success. The best way to approach the establishment of a partnership between CoCs and PHAs is for each to assess staff capacity, time allocation, available technology, and existing partnerships among community stakeholders; respect the consent, input, and perspectives of the households being served by the EHV program; and be clear about what they can offer to support a successful partnership.