



CoC and ED Collaboration Case Studies: CoC and School System Share HMIS Data in Waco, TX

Summary

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education team of the Waco Independent School District (WISD) enters data about homeless children directly into the local Continuum of Care's (CoC) Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

Background Info

McLennan County, TX is a mixture of urban and rural communities. Waco (population about 124,000), the county seat, contains the most social services. Of the 19 school districts in the county, WISD is by far the largest. As evidence of a very high poverty rate, more than 90% of county students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Waco is also home to Baylor University and two other institutions of higher education.

Promising Practice Description

Recognizing the importance of data in describing the extent of homelessness in the community -- and realizing that both schools and the CoC serve the same population struggling with housing needs -- the Local Education Agency (LEA) committed itself to enter data on homeless students directly into the CoC's HMIS, as part of its required activities for homeless education liaisons. WISD finds HMIS useful in documenting unmet needs of students and recognizes the value of a partnership that exploits a robust data gathering system. HMIS entry helps to link students and their families to other community resources by integrating them into the CoC's ecosystem of resources and connects the schools more broadly to the housing and service community.

LEA role. The LEA used its Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program funds to pay for HMIS user licenses. No CoC funds are used for school-based data entry.

CoC/HMIS role. The CoC modified its HMIS data protocol to incorporate a unique assessment and workflow feature specifically for use by school district staff. The local HMIS systems administrator provides staff training on the usage of the data system, and collaborates with the WISD on addressing needs of specific users.

Homeless Education Liaison role. Schools' homeless liaisons enter data directly into the HMIS – using a unique assessment, aligned with HUD's published HMIS Data Standards – and include data on youth living in doubled-up arrangements as "unstably housed." The CoC's HMIS administrator uses these "unstably housed" data to create a special housing status sub-measure that helps identify youth that meet the U.S. Department of Education's definition of homelessness. This provides the schools and the CoC with a highly detailed local picture of youth homelessness.

Data privacy concerns. Every family accessing homeless services through the school signs a written Release of Information (ROI) waiver, which governs sharing of HMIS data. The ROI also addresses family privacy concerns under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Using a formal cross-systems agreement. WISD and the CoC established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which puts data protections in place and allows the HMIS administrator access to school system data. Only the system administrator can access both school district and CoC data located in the HMIS simultaneously. Other projects can view only enough general client profile information to avoid duplication of records.

Resources & Relationships

The Waco 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness was key in establishing a foundation for cross-systems commitments and school district support. Published in 2006, and adopted by the Waco City Council in 2010, this plan helped establish an alliance with the local education system, using a collective impact model.

Broadening partner involvement. Early on in the partnership, Baylor University conducted a community-based study on poverty and homelessness. Tapping the special skills and capacity of this local university helped inform and energize the planning dialogue throughout the community. Following its early collaboration on the 10 Year Plan, the Salvation Army committed to providing more housing for families. The cascading impact of increasing community collaborations helped strengthen WISD commitment to working with the CoC.

Leadership roles. Two key actors in the collaboration -- one in the CoC and the other in WISD -- brought extremely strong commitments to "doing the right thing, no matter what it takes," in moving the community to confront homelessness. The CoC Lead had previously been involved in early childhood education; and the LEA's Homeless Education Liaison had been a case manager in human services. As such, each had been "on the other side of the aisle", and each brought a special perspective to the table that strengthened the collaboration. In addition, both took it upon themselves to work aggressively in developing relationships with the community. These two lead actors served as the heart and soul that energized increasing cross-systems collaborations. They both saw the opportunity to tap housing assistance resources, such as the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP), as a means for addressing local families' needs.

In this same vein, the local HMIS administrator avoids a "cookie cutter" approach to managing the HMIS experience for local users. She provides unique assessments that are specific to the needs of each partnering project, building progressively over time. This commitment has nurtured the participation of many non-HUD-funded projects in the CoC's HMIS, and has helped inspire the trust of the school district's homeless education liaisons in the process.

Challenges & Barriers

School concerns about public data release. At first, fearing "bad press," some school personnel were reluctant to release the numbers of local students experiencing homelessness. The CoC, however, successfully persuaded schools personnel that this data could help build support by documenting the extra challenges that WISD faces in responding to the significant numbers of children and youth experiencing the multiple stressors associated with homelessness.

Tight staffing budgets. As data sharing has led to improved needs identification, it has also resulted in a growth in caseloads, for which there is insufficient liaison staff.

Key Lessons Learned

Adopt a flexible approach in HMIS administration. A willing and creative administrator can significantly broaden accommodation of school district needs in HMIS data collection.

Encourage active use of HMIS data. The more a community uses its HMIS data, the higher quality the data becomes, which, in turn, promotes further growth in use of data-gathering systems.

Build on the value of aggregate data. Cross-systems sharing of *aggregate* client demographics and services needed or accessed is at the heart of this system's success. Lack of cross-systems access to client-level data does not appear to impede robust collaboration.

Focus on using data to enhance systems response. This community-wide collaboration has fostered success by focusing staff and systems attention on using data to enhance response to the needs of children, youth, and their families, regardless of differences in homeless definitions across federal programs.

Use a tiered assessment process. The WISD liaisons seek and share only as much data as is needed to link children, youth, and families to each service they require. This approach minimizes redundancy in data collection, while allowing for data gathering on a more respectful "need to know" basis.

Bolster the flexibility of homeless education liaisons. WISD homeless education liaisons have the flexibility to work outside of school building settings with CoC homeless programs and other housing and service providers, increasing success in helping students and their families bridge the schools-community services gap.

Train liaisons in data collection and make them part of the cross-systems team. Homeless education liaisons are most effective when they know how to collect and convey the individual or case information that the CoC most needs. Active participation in regular cross-systems meetings is key to strengthening these collaborations.

Use data to increase public awareness. Sharing of data benefits schools and increases public awareness of the issues homeless students face. Using the comprehensive data set that WISD and the CoC capture, including “unstably housed”, also paints a more complete picture for the community than the data produced only with traditional CoC participation. Public schools, like other public systems, depend on community support. The data generated by cross-systems collaborations can provide a powerful set of tools for documenting and demonstrating the impact and value of increasing (or at least sustaining) public investment in cross-systems partnerships.

Tap university resources. In-kind contributions of faculty, students, and researchers at local universities can be a rich source of donated technical time and skills, generating both direct and indirect value for the community.