HMIS 101 for PATH Webcast: Questions and Answers

October 28 & November 9, 2010

Getting Started

How do I get started with HMIS?

A single agency in your area Continuum of Care (CoC) manages the local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). This agency, called the HMIS Lead Agency, manages the HMIS on behalf of the CoC. To find out which agency in your CoC manages the HMIS, go to www.hmis.info and click on "Communities" at the top of the page.

When should we start using HMIS?

You should begin using HMIS as soon as it is practicable. Many organizations and States already use HMIS for PATH. The HMIS Lead Agency will assist you to make sure you have the support, training, and infrastructure in place to effectively use the HMIS for PATH. They will help you identify your needs and how you can be a good partner in collecting and reporting data. It is advisable that you contact your State PATH Contact to obtain guidance. Your SPC will have information that you will find useful, such as whether or not there are other PATH programs in your State that use an HMIS.

Why is there no national standardization of HMIS?

Instead of developing a single software solution that would be cumbersome and costly for HUD to support, they created the HMIS Data and Technical Standards. These Standards are a national standard for data collection and reporting that local organizations can build upon to meet their needs. Although, every HMIS stores the same information, in the same way, one of the benefits of not having on HMIS software across the country is that each community can customize the local HMIS to make it more effective for the programs it serves. For instance, while every HMIS stores the same information in the same way, the interface of the system (what the user sees and can access) can vary by community.

HMIS and PATH

Will HMIS affect PATH reporting?

By providing consistent definitions and reducing the data collection and reporting burden, HMIS will help with PATH reporting. Some versions of HMIS software already come embedded with the ability to produce data specifically asked for in the PATH report.

Will HMIS be able to accommodate the different definitions of homelessness that exist within PATH and HUD?

Because HMIS is a software solution that can be customized, it can collect the data necessary to account for any differences between homeless definitions. Additionally, when the Homeless Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, it included an amendment that expanded the definitions of homelessness and chronic homelessness utilized by the HUD to include PATH oriented definitions, such as "at-risk" and counting families as chronic. As HEARTH regulations are published for comment, further changes are expected. Additionally, programs funded by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and education grants are recognizing and utilizing the benefits of HMIS. As these programs join their local HMIS, the software is being customized to meet their needs. (Visit the National Alliance to End Homelessness website for more information on the effect of the HEARTH Act.)

These changes will allow for common definitions, which will ensure consistency in reporting from PATH and other organizations using HMIS.

To read PATH's National Definitions of homelessness and view a recording of the PATH Definitions Webcast, select "Topics," "Webcasts," and then "National Definitions" on the PATH website.

Funding HMIS

Who will pay for agency implementation of HMIS?

The cost of participating in the HMIS varies depending on the resources the HMIS Lead Agency has been given to manage the system. In some cases, SPCs require HMIS participation and therefore provide either direct financial assistance to the HMIS Lead Agency to cover costs or allow PATH providers to utilize some of their PATH funds to cover the costs. In other cases, the HMIS Lead Agency has sufficient resources to cover the costs of HMIS participation by PATH providers. Therefore, the answer to this question will vary with every HMIS.

It is important to understand that the costs associated with HMIS are not for purchasing computer software. The HMIS Lead Agency, under the guidance of the CoC, has already purchased the HMIS software. Participation costs may include user licenses to the HMIS software, costs for computer equipment and online connectivity, helpdesk costs, and data analysis costs. However, the HMIS Lead Agency will assist you in understanding the costs associated with HMIS participation as well as with identifying financial resources to cover them.

What is the average implementation cost?

The cost varies by CoC. Although your HMIS Lead Agency will be able to supply this information, it is important to note that you will not be expected to pay the full cost of the implementation. Because the costs associated with managing the HMIS is shared across all providers (and sometimes multiple CoCs), your costs will be substantially smaller than the total cost. When approaching the HMIS Lead Agency, the most appropriate question to ask is "what will it cost for me to utilize the HMIS", not "what is the average implementation cost".

Will PATH pay for training?

Yes, SAMHSA will be providing training. The current plan for SAMSHA's HMIS training is centered on several regional trainings over the next couple of years. As decisions are made details will be announced. SAMSHA plans to leverage HUD's training capacity to ensure that information is consistent and up to date. PATH is also developing webcasts trainings to help inform HMIS administrators and HMIS software solutions providers. We welcome your suggestions regarding the content of these webcasts.

However, each community may use different software, so the PATH Technical Assistance Center will be unable to aid in technical assistance (TA) connected directly to HMIS software. This type of TA will come from your local HMIS System Administrator or the software solution provider. The PATH Technical Assistance Center, in collaboration with HUD, will provide TA for issues relating directly to PATH data.

Outreach, Privacy, and HMIS

There are situations (e.g., handing out hygiene kits in a tent city), where I am not necessarily going to sign up a person for PATH but am still providing outreach. Is there a way that we can still count outreach without having all of the data elements needed for HMIS?

Most HMIS implementations allow entry of a minimum number of data elements just to get the person's record started in HMIS, often just a name or an identifying description from the first contact.

Providers currently using HMIS find that through a series of outreach contacts, they can obtain the HMIS universal data elements, even if they do not ultimately enroll the person in the PATH program. This method allows outreach workers to obtain the information piece by piece, without burdening outreach worker or consumer. However, it is important to understand that the new PATH data collection processes will rely heavily on this information being collected for each person receiving an outreach contact, rather than accounting of how many outreach tools were provided to the consumer (such as pamphlets, hygiene kits, sandwiches, blankets, etc.)

How do we maintain privacy and HIPAA compliancy when using HMIS?

The HMIS is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) and allows you to determine the privacy of consumer-level data in your community and your program. You will need to work with your HMIS to establish privacy policies, including updating some forms, such as Client Consents. Some HMIS privacy standards outlined in the HMIS Technical Standards exceed those laid out by HIPAA.

It is also important to understand that neither HUD nor SAMHSA will receive client identifiable information. Reporting to HUD and PATH is only aggregate data; reports to HUD will not include PATH data.

Next Steps

When will HMIS become mandatory?

The 2011 PATH Application strongly encourages PATH programs to begin using HMIS as soon as is practical, yet, there is currently no date when SAMHSA will mandate HMIS for PATH. States have the jurisdiction to mandate HMIS within the State, so please contact your State PATH Contact to find out if your State has plans to mandate HMIS for PATH.

Are HMIS vendors aware that PATH is joining the HMIS network?

Yes. The PATH Annual Survey is already a standard report in the major HMIS software solutions; other software solution providers are working on implementing it. As the PATH program revises its Annual Survey, HMIS software solution providers will be made aware of expectations and provided with detailed information to properly program the PATH reporting into their systems.

For more information about PATH and HMIS, contact path@samhsa.hhs.gov.