Step One: Planning

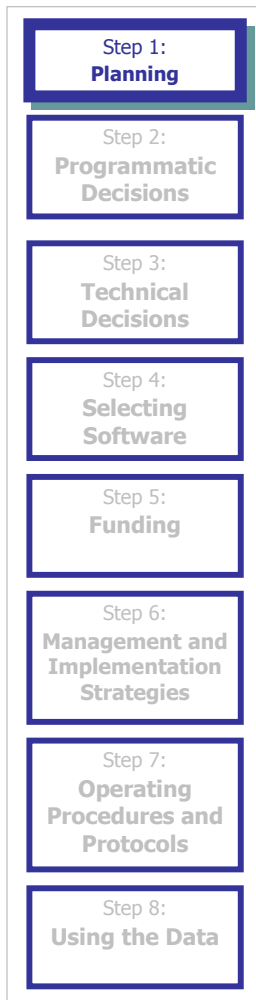| |
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| **Step 1:** **Planning** |
| Step 2: **Programmatic Decisions** |
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This step focuses on the HMIS planning process and the importance of planning to implementation. The process includes:

◆ Engaging key stakeholders and developing an organizational structure.
◆ Educating the stakeholders.
◆ Assessing community needs.
◆ Building consensus on a system vision.
◆ Designing the system to meet local needs.

Why Plan?

To implement a successful HMIS, a community must first determine what it wants to learn and how it can use technology to do so. HMIS provides many kinds of benefits, depending on how the system is designed. Therefore, it is critical that a community spend ample time to plan for the kind of system that will best meet local needs. The client-level information collected from each program can be analyzed with data from other programs to determine system-wide information, such as the overall level of homelessness, service effectiveness, and unmet community needs.

Step One output:

◆ Vision statement.

Developing a Planning Group

Broad-based representation from the community is essential to the planning process. The more far-reaching and open the planning group is, the greater the potential for achieving a successful HMIS. Although all of the specific stakeholders may not be clear at the beginning of the process, it is important to begin with a core group of representatives, expanding the group as other partners are identified. Being inclusive will increase overall buy-in from community partners. Outreach is an important part of planning. Stakeholder groups may include:

◆ Service providers.
◆ Consumers.
◆ Advocates.
◆ Government officials.
◆ Funders.
◆ Researchers.
◆ Information technology professionals.

Providers understand service delivery issues from the frontlines. They are keenly aware of their own reporting needs as well as the strengths and limitations of their internal tracking and reporting tools. Their input is critical to both visioning and designing the system. Frontline and technology staff, program and agency directors, and board members may be engaged in the planning process.

Consumer input during the planning phase can help create inclusive, comprehensive system goals, and can identify critical roadblocks to implementation. Consumers bring a unique perspective to discussions on client privacy and security. Consumer input throughout the implementation process increases ownership, use, and support of the system. Consumers representing a range of perspectives and service needs should be involved.

Policymakers bring broad perspectives to the process. In many communities, when data are not available, policy decisions are based on anecdotal or limited information. Many policymakers have specific questions they would like HMIS data to answer while ensuring that programs are designed to best meet clients' needs. Funders, government officials and staff members, researchers, and advocates should be encouraged to plan how an HMIS can shape policy strategies.

Involving partners who may espouse anxiety about the system in the planning process from the beginning is also helpful. Often consumers and agencies that provide services to victims of domestic violence, ex-offenders, undocumented immigrants, persons with behavioral health needs and/or HIV/AIDS have strong concerns about privacy and security. These are issues that all stakeholders should understand. Input from critical sources from the beginning can help a community design a stronger system.

<u>Organizational structure</u>

Due to the complexities of planning and the challenging decisions that need to be made, establishing an organizational structure to process information and manage decisionmaking is important. In most cases, this structure will continue as the community transitions from planning to implementation and operation. It is also helpful to identify a respected organization or individual to facilitate and chair the process and maintain stakeholder engagement. Some of the basic roles are outlined below. Although the actual structure may vary within each community, each function should be assigned to a specific group and attempts should be made to include in the steering committee and each workgroup members that represent each type of stakeholder.

- ◆ <u>HMIS steering committee</u>: A governing or advisory committee should be established to provide overall HMIS project leadership. The committee, which should include representation from lead partners (including consumers), should reflect geographic and program diversity and encompass key people involved in the coordination of local homeless services and local information systems. In some cases, this oversight role can be assigned to an existing body, such as the local CoC planning group. The committee's tasks include oversight of the planning, implementation, and system operation process; the development and enforcement of HMIS policies and procedures in conjunction with the designated project administrator; and the approval of key HMIS decisions.

- ◆ <u>Consumer advisory group</u>: In addition to consumer participation in other groups, convening a group of consumers to provide a focused perspective on multiple issues throughout the planning and implementation process will be beneficial. Consumers should facilitate this group. Tasks may include design and/or feedback on consumer HMIS explanations, interview protocols, and training curricula; review of privacy protections and security measures; user-testing of system software during the selection phase; organization of focus group sessions on key HMIS topics; and outreach to other consumer and advocacy groups.

◆ Workgroups: Depending on the size of the community, setting up small workgroups to focus on specific issues during planning and implementation may be helpful. In smaller communities, the same group of people may be involved in a majority of the discussions, and all planning may occur within the auspices of the steering committee. The following are examples of potential workgroup structures:

- Data: Development of minimum data standards, data collection protocols, training, and data release policies.
- Privacy and Security: Detailed oversight of the development of privacy and security policies, procedures, and technical mechanisms developed to protect client privacy and security. Local legal experts might be recruited to join this workgroup to provide insight on State and Federal laws affecting the sharing of client-level data.
- Technical: Direct involvement in the assessment of existing technology infrastructure, development of technical requirements, and oversight of software selection process.

◆ Project manager/facilitator: The project will need a designated manager to guide the planning and implementation process, as directed by the HMIS steering committee. An individual or team can provide the project management, and lead roles may shift from facilitator to organizer and technical advisor as the process evolves. Neutrality, consensus-building style, organizational skills, and accessibility are important characteristics for the person in this role—as is the capacity to motivate and inspire stakeholders around the vision. Responsibilities will include design and management of various project phases; facilitation of committees, workgroups, and community meetings; stakeholder and community outreach and education; and transition to long-term system management (see Step Six for information on system management models).

◆ Consumer involvement specialists: Consumers can be paid stipends to help staff the planning, implementation, and operations phases. As peer trainers, consumers can play a vital role in obtaining buy-in from other consumers and advocates. These trainers can also serve as peer advocates helping consumers understand secure ways to provide information. Consumers can lead advisory groups and help facilitate or act in other supporting roles for ongoing workgroups or ad hoc committees that may form. Finally, consumers can analyze and interpret data, putting the numbers into a human context.

Community Example #2: Alternative Organizational Structure

Columbus, Ohio, organized its HMIS planning committee into workgroups based on common perspectives and interests.

◆ Case managers: Focused on data sharing issues, client interactions in relation to HMIS policies, use of software for case planning, and particular issues concerning front-end users of the HMIS.

◆ Program managers: Focused on the issues of program planning, management, evaluation, staff management, and interagency data sharing agreements.

◆ Policymakers: Focused exclusively on policy issues relating to confidentiality, data sharing, HMIS use, HMIS access, and data ownership.

◆ Technology: Focused on advanced technical design issues that are often beyond the experience of many human service providers.

Decisionmaking philosophy

An HMIS is most effective when all stakeholders fully cooperate and buy into the system goals. If an agency chooses not to participate, the clients served by that agency will not be included in the HMIS data. Therefore, consideration of the varying interests of each stakeholder group and how it may affect the design of the system is important in the planning process. Although a community may have to resort to a majority vote on decisions, reaching consensus is more likely to retain key stakeholders because those who support the process are more likely to continue to participate. Stakeholders should agree on a decisionmaking approach early in the process. For example, groups should consider the following questions:

◆ Will decisions be made by group consensus or majority vote?
◆ If members will vote, who actually gets a vote?
◆ How will the group handle ties or very close votes?

Timing

In many communities it has taken a year or longer to complete the visioning and design steps (Steps Two and Three). Although this may seem to be a long time, the work and buy-in achieved during this process will be important to HMIS implementation and operation. When undertaking an HMIS planning process, communities should be aware that completing this step may take a long time.

Educating Stakeholders

Once the organizational structure is in place, the next step is to educate the stakeholders on HMIS issues and choices. Before stakeholders can begin making decisions about HMIS, all participants must understand the many options—their benefits and risks. At a minimum, groups must discuss the topics addressed in the Concepts and Components step, including the interrelationships among the issues. For example, stakeholders should understand the ways in which benefits relate to function and the related need for increased privacy protections with certain types of functions, such as interagency case management.

Visiting or talking with other HMIS communities to see how their system functions might be valuable. Also, consumer stakeholders should be offered education on issues that relate to their HMIS rights, potential benefits and risks, and the protections to their privacy, such as oral and signed consent. The language used should be clear and free of jargon.

With a full understanding of the issues, HMIS stakeholders are better equipped to debate the type of system that would be most beneficial for the community.

Assessing Community Needs

Assessing the community environment and existing challenges in homeless service delivery and data collection is important during the initial planning phases. This assessment provides an opportunity to revisit a community's specific needs. The community assessment should examine issues from the perspectives of all stakeholders. Focus groups can provide a great opportunity to collect information from consumers, providers, and policymakers who are not active in the HMIS process.

Examples of community issues include:

 ◆ Consumer issues: Are services accessible? Can consumers easily get appropriate referrals? Do they experience duplicative client intakes from program to program?

 ◆ Provider issues: Is information on available resources readily accessible? Are case managers able to easily access the services that clients need? Are services fragmented? Are shelter and supportive service resources being efficiently used? Is the process for producing program reports challenging and time consuming? What are the ways to evaluate program effectiveness?

 ◆ Policy issues: Is there accurate system-wide information on homelessness and the needs of those who experience homelessness? Is it possible to understand how consumers move between programs and the overall effectiveness of the system? Are there challenges to identifying service priorities when allocating limited resources?

These issues can be addressed in many ways. The HMIS is not the single solution to all homeless service delivery and data collection problems. However, communities can prioritize among these issues and needs to determine whether the HMIS can meet multiple objectives and if community support and funding opportunities can be increased. An assessment should also consider what community resources may benefit the project. For instance, does a central provider maintaining a centralized I&R database?

Building Consensus on the HMIS Vision

Based on the information learned in the education process and community assessment, the stakeholders must determine what the HMIS will strive to accomplish. Are there critical issues in existing systems that the community wishes to address in the design of the HMIS? For instance, if consumers currently must complete unnecessary and duplicative intakes at each agency, one objective of the new HMIS could be to decrease redundant intake processes.

Some common objectives include:

 ◆ Speeding homeless persons' access to the service system.
 ◆ Decreasing duplicative intake processes.

- Streamlining the referral process.
- Improving use of shelter resources.
- Coordinating case management.
- Collecting uniform data on those who access the service system.
- Generating unduplicated counts of clients served.
- Simplifying reporting processes.
- Identifying gaps in services.
- Improving information to guide resource allocation and policymaking.
- Enhancing access to client benefits, including entitlement programs and mainstream resources.

Guiding principles

A discussion of values or principles is important to key partners in the system. Do partners have any non-negotiable positions, such as consumer participation or privacy and security for domestic violence clients. Those partners may feel reassured if their views are incorporated as guiding principles for the design process.

Vision statement

After the group has reached consensus on the HMIS goals and guiding design principles, stakeholders document these ideas in a vision statement that captures the community's goals for the future. The vision should state anticipated outcomes of the implementation. Community Example #3, which describes a model in Seattle, Washington, provides samples of these kinds of statements and a discussion of how their development.

Once a vision statement has been clearly articulated, the steering committee should review and approve it. Once adopted, it can be used to guide implementation and assess whether the HMIS ultimately achieves its goals and predicted outcomes and to test major decisions, verifying whether the HMIS remains is consistent with the community direction.

The planning process continues through the next two steps in this guide. Stakeholders will use their vision statement to guide them through the planning process and to help them design a system that meets local needs.

Community Example #3: Seattle, Washington—A Model for HMIS Planning

In Seattle, funders, planners, service providers, and consumers have long worked together to find ways to effectively prevent, address, and reduce homelessness. In 1999 the city of Seattle, King County, and the United Way of King County collaborated to spearhead a regional HMIS initiative. The partners engaged national expertise and local facilitators to shepherd the planning and design phase of what became known as the Safe Harbors System. The result is an inclusive and comprehensive HMIS planning process that began with objectives and developed into a community vision, guiding principles, shared hopes, and initial system design decisions.

At the beginning of the process, the city's elected officials passed a city ordinance that outlined community objectives. This action signified the importance and legitimacy of the Safe Harbors project. The objectives included:

- ◆ To improve the quality of client services and provide faster links to housing, benefits, and services.
- ◆ To identify gaps in the service system.
- ◆ To provide an unduplicated count of homeless men, women, and children.
- ◆ To increase the availability of data to help the city and its funding partners make planning and funding decisions about the services provided to homeless people.

The planning process identified key policy questions, legal parameters that might influence community decisions, existing technology literacy and infrastructure, and primary data required for homeless funders' reports. These inputs were used in a broad range of forums to spark stakeholder discussion and position formulation on the key policy decisions. One early lesson learned was the lack of universal agreement on many of the issues. The constructive opposition was healthy to the process. In fact, even after months of debate, Safe Harbors stakeholders still had not arrived at agreement on several critical policy questions, including the conditions of client and program participation, processes to select the central server organization, or the standardized set of minimum data requirements for the system. However, more importantly, those initial months of planning were used to establish consensus on a community vision, guiding principles, shared hopes, system benefits, and a community process of decisionmaking that could be used to guide stakeholders in all future Safe Harbors planning, implementation, and operation decisions.

The Safe Harbors guiding principles were developed from two perspectives. The city of Seattle, King County, and the United Way of King County's bottom line requirements for the Safe Harbors System were: "An outcome-based, computerized system to facilitate timely, efficient and effective access to needed services and supports for persons who are homeless in Seattle and King County."[5] Two components related to timely service linkage and data needs were further defined in the statement.

A majority of planning process community participants defined the second set of principles, which included statements on privacy protections, funding, and appropriate use of data. Both of these perspectives were then used to inform and test future design decisions.

Two shared hopes for preventing, addressing, and reducing homelessness reinforced the guiding principles.

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[5] *Safe Harbors Design Project*. Prepared for the city of Seattle, King County, and the United Way of King County (February, 2001). Available at http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/hmis/index.cfm.

- ◆ Easy access to resources for individuals and families who are homeless or near homeless:
    - No barriers to needed resources, including elimination of red tape and duplicated assessment processes.
    - Culturally competent resource delivery.
    - A match between what individuals and families ask for and what they receive.
    - Individuals' and families' timely and direct connections with needed resources, including public assistance benefits.
    - Attention to individuals' and families' strengths, desires, and needs.
    - Recognition and acceptance of the diverse paths and choices individuals and families make when they are dealing with their homeless situation.

- ◆ Effective use of data generated through a Safe Harbors system:
    - De-identified aggregate data available to all stakeholders.
    - Data used to identify system gaps and barriers.
    - Data used to increase public awareness and mobilize public action that results in increased resources for improving the Seattle/King County response to homeless.
    - Maximum protection of the privacy rights of individuals and families who use services in the Safe Harbors System.
    - Streamlining of the administrative reporting requirements for agencies serving individuals and families who are homeless.

The Safe Harbors planning process was successful due to many factors, including:
- ◆ Taking sufficient time with adequate resources to engage in comprehensive planning.
- ◆ Having HMIS champions and political will to publicly move project goals forward.
- ◆ Committing to consumer involvement with resources, support, and meeting location.
- ◆ Building media awareness and support.
- ◆ Providing regular community updates, education, and training.
- ◆ Learning from others, including peer education, site visits, and training seminars.
- ◆ Building on community strengths by incorporating the local I&R system, information technology (IT) professionals, local facilitation, and expertise and beliefs of community partners.
- ◆ Creating a name for the project that promoted the goals of the system, rather than its technical nature.
- ◆ Documenting consensus, commitments, and expectations throughout the process.

Visioning Exercise #1: HMIS Goals and Objectives

Task

Craft a project statement for an HMIS that would meet the needs of your community. The project statement should respond to the following questions.

1. Why are we doing this?

2. What are the anticipated outcomes of the system?

3. What are the objectives for the system?

4. What are the anticipated benefits of having a system for:

    a. homeless men, women, and children?

    b. service providers?

    c. public policy stakeholders?

5. What do we want to be able to do at the local level?

6. What do we want to be able to do at other levels (regional or state)?