Homeless Management Information Systems:
The Basics

What is HMIS?

HMIS stands for "homeless management information system." Programs that receive United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding to serve people experiencing homelessness are required to enter information into a community's HMIS.[1] Several HMIS software platforms are available, and local Continuums of Care (CoCs) choose a platform to use in their service area. CoC coverage does not correlate to counties, in some areas, multiple CoCs fall within one county, while others cover multiple counties. Each CoC uses an HMIS platform, a local, web-based information technology system that captures and reports client, project, and system-level information about homeless services use, performance, and outcomes. HMIS systems are powerful data tools that allow communities to understand the causes and trends of homelessness. They also promote informed system design and policy change at local, state, and federal levels.

Information derived through HMIS is reported to HUD, which aggregates the data to create a national picture of homelessness and homelessness services. Additionally, California's Homeless Data Information System (HDIS) aggregates HMIS data collected by California's 44 CoCs and is used to inform the statewide response to homelessness.

Although not specific to BHBH, Assembly Bill (AB) 977 (Gabriel, Chapter 397, Statutes of 2021) requires the participation of county behavioral health agencies to enter select data on the individuals and families served with Behavioral Health Bridge Housing (BHBH) funding into the local HMIS system.[2]

What Does HMIS Do?

HMIS collects and organizes information related to local populations of people experiencing homelessness and the ways that programs meet their needs. More specifically, HMIS allows communities and programs to:

- Assess individual needs and services to improve case management and care coordination[3]

- Connect people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness with housing and supportive services[3]

HMIS also helps communities, states, and the federal government to:

- Evaluate how programs can better serve people experiencing or at risk of homelessness[3]

- Inform applications for local, state, and federal funding for homeless services programs[3]

- Inform local, state, and federal policy changes[3]

What Information is Stored in HMIS?

HUD HMIS Data Standards outline specific data elements that each CoC must collect in HMIS.[4] Required data elements are listed in the Universal and Common Elements table below. Information stored in HMIS can be accessed by any local community HMIS partner agency, but only in the aggregate.

AB 977 requires county behavioral health programs to enter Universal Data Elements (Items 3.01-3.917), Program Specific Data Elements (Items 4.02-4.20), and Item W5 of the Individual Federal Partner Program Elements. These elements are listed in the table below. For more information, visit: HUD Exchange HMIS Data Standards.

Universal Data Elements	Program-Specific Data Elements
3.01: Name	4.02: Income and Sources
3.01: Social Security Number	4.03: Non-cash Benefits
3.03: Date of Birth	4.04: Health Insurance
3.04: Race	4.05: Physical Disability
3.05: Ethnicity	4.06: Developmental Disability
3.06: Gender	4.07: Chronic Health Condition
3.07: Veteran Status	4.08: HIV/AIDS
3.08: Disabling Condition	4.09: Mental Health Disorder
3.10: Project Start Date	4.10: Substance Use Disorder
3.11: Project Exit Date	4.11: Domestic Violence
3.12: Destination	4.12: Current Living Situation
3.15: Relation to Head of Household	4:13: Date of Engagement
3.16: Client Location	4:14: Bed-Night Date
3.20: Housing Move-in Date	4:19: Coordinated Entry Assessment
3.917: Prior Living Situation	4.20: Coordinated Entry Event
	W5: Assessment at Exit

Who is Responsible for Administering HMIS?

Every CoC must have a lead agency and an HMIS lead agency. The COC lead and the HMIS lead may be the same agency, but that is not a requirement. The HMIS lead is responsible for administering, implementing, and managing the HMIS database.[5] Administrative duties include choosing and administering the HMIS software program, ensuring programs are set up in the database, supplying licenses and education to participating agencies, running reports for HUD and other funding entities, and ensuring data quality.[6]

What HMIS Platforms Are Used in California?

Local CoCs select a program to collect the required data elements, comply with HUD's data standards, and support reporting requirements.[6] California's 44 CoCs use five different HMIS software packages: Bitfocus (52%); WellSky (25%); Bell Data Systems (11%), Social Solutions (7%); and Eccovia Solutions (5%).[7] A map of California's CoCs is available here.

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How Do I Identify my CoC Community Lead and HMIS Lead?

This list of CoC leads in California also includes the HMIS leads for most communities. Search for your county and select the option with "CoC" after the county name.

How Does My Agency Prepare to Implement the HMIS Requirement?

The California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH) will provide technical assistance and support to county agencies to implement the HMIS requirement. In the meantime, here are some initial steps county behavioral health agencies can take:

- Engage with the CoC and HMIS lead agencies

- Learn about the required data elements of HMIS

- Review the releases of information used in the community

- Review your community's HMIS policies and procedures

- Understand your community's process for becoming a participating agency in HMIS

Additional Resources

- Coordinated Entry Management and Data Guide

- HMIS Community Examples

- HMIS Data and Technical Standards, including Privacy and Security Standards

- HMIS Fact Sheet

- HMIS Guides and Tools

- HUD's HMIS website

- HMIS Staffing and Resourcing Toolkit

- HMIS Privacy Rule Introduction

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Endnotes

[1] Code of Federal Regulations; Title 24 - Housing and Urban Development; PART 578—Continuum of Care Program: Code of Federal Regulations (govinfo.gov). (https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2017-title24-vol3/xml/CFR-2017-title24-vol3-part578.xml)

[2] California Legislative Information; AB-977 Homelessness program data reporting: Homeless Management Information System.(2021-2022): Today's Law As Amended - AB-977 Homelessness program data reporting: Homeless Management Information System. (ca.gov). (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB977&showamends=false)

[3] Code of Federal Regulations; Title 24 - Housing and Urban Development; PART 578—Continuum of Care Program: Code of Federal Regulations (govinfo.gov). (https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2017-title24-vol3/xml/CFR-2017-title24-vol3-part578.xml)

[4] HUD Exchange: HMIS Data Standards (2021). HMIS Data Standards - HUD Exchange (https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3824/hmis-data-dictionary/)

[5] HUD Exchange: HMIS Data and Technical Standards. HMIS Data and Technical Standards - HUD Exchange. (https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hmis/hmis-data-and-technical-standards/)

[6] California Health Care Foundation: Homelessness Response 101 for Health Care Providers and Stakeholders. Homelessness Response 101: For Health Care Providers and Stakeholders (chcf.org) (https://www.chcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HomelessnessResponse101ProvidersStakeholders.pdf

[7] Colletti, Joe (2022). Half of California's Continuums of Care Changed Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Software between 2016 and 2022. Homeless and Housing Strategies for California. Half of California's Continuums of Care Changed Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Software Vendors Between 2016 and 2022 - Homeless and Housing Strategies for California (homelessstrategy.com)

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