

Measure 1: Length of Time Persons Remain Homeless

Ending homelessness in the U.S. by 2020 will require us to make significant improvements in the way our homelessness systems function. The department has developed a set of seven system-level measures to help communities understand their systems' performance. This video features Measure 1 of the seven, and explains why this measure is important, how it is calculated and how you might consider using this measure locally.

One of the most critical signs that your homeless service system is working efficiently is that people who experience homelessness are able to move quickly into a permanent housing situation. HUD measures this by looking at the average and median length of time people spend in homeless situations and then looks to see if that time period is getting shorter, staying the same, or getting longer.

The basic approach for this measure is to count up the number of days recorded in HMIS that a person has spent in emergency shelters and safe havens during a one year period and then find the average and median lengths of time for everyone in your system. Then separately, we look at the time a person has spent in emergency shelters, safe havens, AND transitional housing. We look at these two groupings of projects separately because we want to understand how long people are remaining homeless according to the HUD definition of homelessness – in other words, including transitional housing. But we also understand that people tend to stay longer in transitional housing, so we also look at time homeless excluding transitional housing. We rely on HMIS data to calculate the measure. Our goal here is to see a reduction in the average and median lengths of time people are experiencing homelessness from one year to the next.

You might note that neither of these approaches include time a person might spend on the streets, because that data isn't always recorded in HMIS. Eventually, HUD will update this measure to incorporate some information from the new data element 3.17, which tracks length of time on the street, in a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter, to help understand that part of the experience. For now,

communities with strong street outreach participation in HMIS are encouraged to add in data from those programs for your local analysis. This isn't required for reporting to HUD, but it can be helpful when you're looking for ways to make your system more efficient.

This performance measure has one of the more complex calculations, so let's take a close look at a few examples to help you understand how it will work.

We'll start by looking at the process you'll do to calculate each person's length of time homeless, just looking at HMIS entrances and exits. As we mentioned in the introductory video, the reporting period for each measure is October 1st through September 30th.

Let's look at Aaron. Aaron entered a safe haven project on August 1st and stayed there for four months, through the end of November. The following September 1st, he entered a transitional housing project and hasn't exited yet.

Remember, there are two separate calculations we'll look at – first, we'll consider just emergency shelter and safe haven enrollments, and separately we'll measure all enrollments in emergency shelter, safe haven, and transitional housing. When we look just at emergency shelter and safe havens for Aaron, his last enrollment in one of those project types ended during the reporting period. So, in that case, we'll start with his exit date from the safe haven, look back for 365 days, and count up all the days he was enrolled in emergency shelter and safe haven during that period of time. So he has a total of four months – or 122 days – of enrollment during that period of time.

Next, we'll consider emergency shelter, safe haven, AND transitional housing. Since his transitional housing enrollment is still going on at the end of the reporting period, we'll look back at the 365 days from the end of the reporting period. So we'll include the two months of safe haven enrollment that falls within that period. Now, here's an important point: you'll see that same safe haven enrollment continues back further than the start of Aaron's 365 day reporting period. Anytime enrollments are continuous beyond the last 365 days, those continuous days are also included in the calculations. So, since this enrollment

continues back, we'll include the whole, continuous 122 days of safe haven enrollment plus the 30 days of transitional housing enrollment for a total of 152 days.

Now we'll look at another example: Ahmad. He entered a transitional housing project on July 1st and stayed there for six months, through the end of December. The following June 1st, he entered an emergency shelter project and exited after three months – at the end of August. When we look at emergency shelter and safe havens, we start from his last exit date – August 31st – and look back 365 days. That's 92 emergency shelter days. When we add in transitional housing, we start from August 31st again and count up the 92 emergency shelter days and all of the transitional housing days that are part of the continuous enrollment – another 184 days – for a total of 276 days.

One last detailed example: let's look at Alexis. She was in an emergency shelter last May, June, and July, then she re-entered an emergency shelter for the June, July, and August during the reporting period. If we start with her exit date of August 31st and look back 365 days, her first shelter enrollment doesn't fall within that date range, so it's excluded. That means she has 92 days of emergency shelter enrollment and no additional transitional housing enrollment.

Now let's add 7 more clients, each with emergency shelter enrollments. Anthony has 182 days in emergency shelter, and everyone else has 90 days. We're adding more clients to show how you take these individual calculations and turn them into your systemwide average and median lengths of time. In this case, the emergency shelter and safe haven average is 103 days and the median is 90 days. When you add in the transitional housing time, the average is 124 days and the median is 90 days. Each year, you'll compare your averages and medians to the previous year.

Now that you understand the mechanics of how to capture each person's enrollments, let's talk about how housing people who are experiencing long-term homelessness can help you bring your averages down year over year. HUD hasn't set any thresholds for performance on this measure, but we do expect to see that

prioritization efforts will lead to declining average length of time homeless over time.

Let's look at one year in an example community – let's say there were 5 people experiencing homelessness in this community in this year. 4 of them were in and out of an emergency shelter within a few months over the course of the year. The fifth person – let's call him Alfred – had been in shelter for the last two years. You'll see that the average is very high – 197 days – and that the one person experiencing such an extreme length of homelessness really affects the average.

A few of these folks exit the system on their own. Some of them are assisted into permanent housing with subsidies. And, because of the community's focus on housing chronically homeless people, Alfred was placed into permanent supportive housing during the year.

So now, let's look at this community's average length of time homeless again the following year. Again, they have 5 people experiencing homelessness over the course of the year. This time, everyone is in and out of emergency shelters within a few months. That brings year two's average to 75 days – a reduction of more than half from the previous year. You can see that there's a significant impact from housing Alfred last year... so this measure reflects HUD's policy priority to prioritize housing chronically homeless individuals and families with the longest history of homelessness.

Eventually, when data from the the new data element 3.17 gets incorporated into the measure, the impact of housing the people with the longest times homeless will be even stronger. We should note, though, that when we incorporate that data element, we'll be calculating the measure twice – one without the new data element and once with it, so we'll never be comparing a year without the data element incorporated to a year with the data element incorporated.

This measure should be reviewed regularly at a local level to see how quickly people are moving through your system. This measure is particularly useful for informing system planning because we're not looking at individual projects, but

instead looking across all the emergency homeless interventions to understand how your system as a whole is functioning.

So that was Measure 1, Length of Time People Remain Homeless. Next is Measure 2, The Extent to Which People Return to Homelessness.