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Executive Summary

Rural homeless service providers face a unique set of issues compared to their urban counterparts, and the needs of this community are growing. Homeless Management Information Systems (HMISs) have the potential to help providers and policymakers understand the differences between urban and rural homelessness and support the development of appropriate and successful rural-focused solutions. However, there are a number of challenges to successfully implementing HMISs in rural communities. Rural communities need critical resources in the areas of research and funding to develop best practices for implementing HMIS. Intermediary agencies and funders can collaborate with providers to develop and implement best practices in ending rural homelessness. Development of innovative collaborations and focused research and technical assistance can increase knowledge about rural homelessness and how best to address it. This knowledge is critical to success in addressing rural homelessness. The following points underlie the critical need for change:

• Rural homelessness exists, but it appears in a different form than urban homelessness and may not be addressed with the same methods that help alleviate problems in urban areas.

• Addressing rural homelessness can have a positive effect in a rural community’s economy and quality of life.

• Documenting the impact of rural homelessness through systemic and ongoing research is vital to addressing the issues of rural homelessness.

• Use of an HMIS in rural areas plays an important role in assisting service providers, community leaders, and policy makers to address rural homelessness.
Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities

The issue of rural homelessness sits in the shadow of urban homelessness and is often overlooked. Due in part to the sheer number of people experiencing homelessness in urban areas, urban communities draw a great deal of the country’s resources for preventing and ending homelessness. However, it is important to note that in a recent article, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2009) indicated that “in 22 percent of states, over 50 percent of people experiencing homelessness were counted in rural or mostly rural [Continua of Care]” (p. 3). This should not be surprising in light of the fact that a higher percentage of people in rural areas live in poverty. In 2005, 15.1% of people in rural areas lived in poverty versus 12.5% in urban areas (Ganong et al., n.d.).

Although homelessness is typically associated with large urban centers, sadly it is a problem that plagues small towns and rural communities as well. Rural homelessness, though also driven by the lack of affordable housing and inadequate service infrastructures, is less understood than its urban counterpart and presents a unique set of challenges.

- Nan Roman

While the causes of rural homelessness may be similar to those of urban homelessness, the solutions are not necessarily the same [U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2009A]. There are many challenges to addressing rural homelessness, and urban approaches do not always work in rural areas. Rural homeless service providers face a unique set of issues compared to their urban counterparts, and the needs of this community are growing. According to the 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), “in the twelve months ending on September 30, 2008, the share of the sheltered homeless populations in suburban and rural areas increased substantially, from 23 percent in 2007 to 32 percent in 2008” (HUD, 2009B, v). These percentages are particularly striking alongside the inherent difficulty in conducting point in time homeless counts and collecting shelter data in rural areas. Quantifying the need for homeless services is a major challenge for communities and policymakers [Homelessness Action Council (HAC), 2008]. In June 2009, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released guidance to rural Continua of Care (CoC) presenting various strategies to overcome the challenges of addressing homelessness in rural communities (HUD, 2009A). However, the guide did not discuss the challenges and potential solutions surrounding implementation of Homeless Management
Information Systems (HMISs). These electronic systems support the collection of information about the characteristics of individuals and families receiving homeless services across a community. In order to address the growing needs for rural CoCs, capacity must be built to utilize the functionality of existing rural programs and to implement HMISs.

HMISs have the potential to help us understand the differences between urban and rural homelessness and support the development of appropriate and successful rural-focused solutions. However, there are a number of challenges to successfully implementing HMISs in rural communities. It is the intention of this paper to lay out these challenges and some potential solutions. Rural communities need critical resources in the areas of research and funding to develop best practices for implementing HMIS. Intermediary agencies and funders can collaborate with these providers to develop and implement best practices in ending rural homelessness.

This paper was prepared by the Rural subcommittee of the Southeastern Regional HMIS Collaborative (SERHC). SERHC is a collaborative group of HMIS lead agencies, HMIS administrators, and CoC representatives from a number of Southeastern states with the purpose of increasing communication and learning around the implementation of HMIS. In order to develop this paper, a subcommittee of SERHC gathered information from a number of different sources including discussions with rural CoC leaders and HMIS lead agencies, a survey of HMIS vendors, a review of available literature regarding rural homelessness and HMIS, and feedback from rural CoC leaders and HMIS lead agencies from outside the Southeast. It should be noted that this paper is not intended to be a thorough review of the literature but a statement of the current challenges and potential solutions to implementing HMIS in rural communities. The paper attempts to examine issues related to the implementation of HMIS in rural areas from multiple perspectives. First, it presents the challenges of HMIS implementation from the perspective of the service providers and HMIS lead agencies. Then it lays out the potential roles of intermediary organizations, vendors, and funders in addressing these challenges. The intent is that this paper will result in improved dialogue and increased resources focused on strengthening the implementation of HMISs in rural areas.
Challenges Faced by Rural Service Providers

Rural homeless service providers face several challenges in implementing, using, and deriving value from an HMIS. Some of these challenges specific to rural providers include:

• Understaffing. Many rural providers are understaffed, and existing staff must be able to serve in multiple roles. Staff may find it difficult to find the time necessary to input data into HMIS or to travel for trainings and meetings.

• Broad service offerings. Rural service providers often offer a multitude of services across a wide geographic area in the absence of other providers (Burt et al., 1999; HAC, 2008; HUD, 2009A). Data collection requirements are rarely congruent from one type of program to another (or one funder to another). This leads to more complex HMIS installations or duplicate data entry without accompanying incentives or funding.

• Heterogeneous clients. Homeless service providers in rural areas aren’t necessarily “homeless agencies,” or they may serve clients with a variety of needs. They may not be a part of the live and virtual networks of people and organizations that focus on homelessness, so they may not be aware of current practice/planning issues related to clients experiencing homelessness (HAC, 2008).

• Lack of documentation and training materials on rural best practices. Best practice and training literature rarely addresses the rural context and therefore may not be helpful for many rural agencies. There may be alternative best practice models of providing services that have not yet been documented or disseminated.

• Transportation. The cost of transportation in terms of time and money becomes a large burden on service providers when the geographical area is substantial.

• Lack of communication. Regular communication between rural providers and stakeholders is key, yet seems to be lacking (HUD, 2009A). While the root cause is unclear, this lack of communication could be due to geography, a history of being under-funded, technology issues, or lack of resources.

• Limited funding and/or capacity to apply for funding (HAC, 2008; HUD, 2009A). Lack of funding makes it difficult to purchase appropriate software, hire skilled staff, analyze data, and publish findings. Small rural agencies may also lack the skill and capacity to seek out and apply for new funding.

• Limited infrastructure for technology. Lack of consistent and reliable access to broadband Internet service often precludes the use of many HMIS software applications. Limited infrastructure reduces the capacity to implement and utilize HMIS.
Needs of Rural Homeless Service Providers

Rural homeless service providers seek information and examples, as well as technical assistance, in making the most of partnerships and ways to generate the resources possible to obtain the benefits of an HMIS. Specific areas for development include opportunities to gain:

- An understanding of what other rural homeless service providers are experiencing, as well as potential opportunities for collaboration.
- Knowledge of their community’s experience of homelessness. Are there specific subpopulations or geographical areas that have particularly high levels of homelessness?
- Expanded partnerships. Information is needed on how to successfully partner with local educational organizations (e.g., technical schools, community colleges, universities) and other service agencies.
- Benefits to faith-based organizations. In rural areas, a faith-based organization may be the primary or sole homeless services provider. The motivation for serving the homeless population is often different than the motivation of a non faith-based organization. As a result, the current HMIS benefits promoted to service providers may not resonate with faith-based organizations.
- Opportunities to highlight the plight of rural areas through HMIS (Burt et al. 1999; HAC, 2008; HUD, 2009A).
- Equitable access to HUD funds. With current funding structures and opportunities, entitlement areas have distinct advantages in terms of guaranteed money and opportunities to compete for funds (HAC, 2008).

Challenges Faced by Rural HMIS Lead Organizations

The role of the rural HMIS lead organization is a delicate balancing act between maintaining the integrity of the service provider data entered into the HMIS database and collaborating with the user agencies to ensure that proper data entry practices are presented, understood, and in place at each service provider on the network. As such, the lead organization must be prepared to encounter and provide solutions for unexpected issues and develop response plans for common problems.

Some of the specific challenges noted by HMIS lead organizations that serve rural areas include:

- Staff may lack basic computer skills which can result in a significant reduction in HMIS usage.
• Mission and vision of HMIS lead organization may not include being a technical assistance (TA) provider.
• Lack of existing rural best practices for training organizations and end users to effectively use HMIS.
• Limited technology infrastructure at the provider level.
• Lack of technology and project management expertise in implementing and maintaining HMIS in rural areas.
• Geographical barriers that prevent implementation of training, technical assistance, and service and support strategies in remote areas.
• Limited funding resources to address the many gaps experienced in rural areas which make it difficult to implement and support HMIS.

Needs of Rural HMIS Lead Organizations

Rural HMIS lead agencies would benefit from increased resources designed to help them support their rural clients. Some suggestions are to:

• Provide local assistance on current funding opportunities, training information, and engagement strategies for the diverse range of local agencies and coalitions.
• Revisit HMIS policies to ensure that any requirements which go above and beyond the federal mandate are manageable to smaller and more resource restricted agencies.
• Provide regular communication and on-site technical assistance to rural agencies to show them how to adapt HMIS to their programs.
• Ensure rural providers participate in CoC meetings to represent needs specific to rural areas and to offer all CoC representatives the opportunity to learn from each others’ experiences.

Suggestions for HMIS Vendors

HMIS software developers and vendors would be well-served to listen to the rural experience. Rather than attempting to address rural technological challenges from an urban perspective, it may be possible to develop technological solutions that work under adverse geographical conditions. Some suggestions include to:

• Design cost-efficient, scalable HMISs that require minimal technical competencies.
• Design HMISs to perform adequately when high-speed internet service is not available.
• Utilize emerging technologies that enable rural agencies to skip over a generation of antiquated technology.

• Rather than wasting valuable resources on trying to “level the playing field,” use rural communities as a testing ground for HMIS software functionality and data sharing.

• Offer scaled pricing to address limited funding resources in rural communities.

HMIS utilization is crucial in rural areas. In rural areas it is difficult for those who have no transportation to get from provider to provider. With the physical distance between service providers, it is important to utilize the system to aid clients in receiving services which are possible for them to access. Utilization of the HMIS may assist providers in forming a network to help better serve clients and reduce duplication of services.

HMIS vendors play a key role in increasing HMIS software utilization in rural areas. With the limitations of internet usage in rural areas due to aged computer systems or dial-up networks, it is imperative for vendors to consider this when making software upgrades. Without such consideration it may be difficult, perhaps impossible, for rural agencies to implement and manage a successful HMIS.

Improved cohesiveness in rural areas among providers, administrators, and vendors is necessary in order to increase HMIS software utilization. A few ways to increase rural collaboration would be:

• Offer additional training online through webcasts.

• Provide support to local system administrators.

• Create different versions of the software for smaller communities that still meet all HMIS requirements.

• Provide detailed training manuals for each user level (i.e., system administrator, end user).

The Role of Intermediary Agencies

Without fully understanding how to build the capacity of rural homeless service providers to deliver services and collect and analyze data through the use of HMIS, rural communities will continue to struggle with HMIS implementation. Many stakeholders will continue to apply an urban model to rural communities with limited success. There is a key role for intermediary agencies to play in the creation of effective rural capacity-building models and delivery of technical assistance that is targeted toward rural service providers. However, this requires an infusion of resources and funding.

Intermediary agencies can play a primary role in building the capacity of front-line service providers (HUD, 2009A). Some nonprofit organizations, like...
local United Way agencies, deliver technical assistance to support services offered by rural agencies. Other intermediaries may also distribute funding that has come from other sources. The objectives of these intermediaries are to help rural providers increase their scale and effectiveness. Examples of intermediaries include: National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), Housing Assistance Council, United Way, and technical assistance providers/consultants such as TAC, Abt Associates, Inc., Cloudburst Consulting Group, and Canavan Associates. In addition, universities, regional development centers, nonprofit or leadership development agencies, and state government can act as intermediaries to provide additional resources in communities that may not have a wealth of their own.

Some examples of how intermediary agencies can play a role in supporting front-line agencies include:

- Developing expertise in addressing rural homelessness issues and rural HMIS implementations. In order to do this, intermediary agencies would need to generate funding and either conduct or support research on methodologies of technical assistance and training that work most effectively with rural agencies. An overall increase in rural scholarship could provide best practices models and modes of operation for many rural HMIS implementations to follow.

- Understanding the unique issues that confront rural providers and being able to suggest solutions that work for CoCs with both rural and urban providers. Additionally, being able to build the capacity of nontraditional providers, working with extremely low resource agencies, and having a realistic understanding of the resource and capacity constraints of many rural providers are all valuable ways in which intermediaries could help rural agencies.

- Customizing services to the needs of rural providers. Even intermediary agencies that receive funding to provide capacity building services to rural homeless service providers often struggle to customize the services to the needs of rural providers. There is a tremendous need for more knowledge and expertise regarding the unique challenges facing rural service providers and the best way to address these challenges.

Partnerships with key intermediaries can be the key to the success for rural providers. Some examples of successful partnerships include:

- Foundations. Many foundations sponsor research or provide funding for capacity building and innovative programs. An example of a successful partnership with foundations include the partnership between the Center for Capacity Building and Osteopathic Heritage Foundation which provided 17 counties in southeast and central Ohio with a one year capacity building grant. It is important to sponsor similar capacity building projects that incorporate or focus on increasing the capacity of agencies to collect HMIS data.

- United Ways. In addition to providing program funding, many United Ways provide training and capacity building for partner agencies. An example of this is a project of the United Way of the Midlands which...
utilized funding from the Compassion Capital program to provide board development and capacity building services to a rural homeless service provider.

- Universities. Universities can provide capacity building, technical expertise, research resources and more. An example of a successful partnership is the University of Oregon and State of Oregon where an intern from the public policy graduate program assists with the Oregon Balance of State CoC planning, HMIS, and data collection including the point-in-time count.

- Regional Development Commissions and Planning Bodies. One example of a successful partnership is the partnership between the Southwest Georgia Regional Commission and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs in which the regional commission provided leadership and resources in order to conduct homeless counts in 10 counties that were primarily rural and had limited resources and few service providers.

Suggestions for Funders and Policymakers

It is widely reported but under documented that homeless service providers located in rural areas face significantly greater challenges when competing for ever-dwindling private sector and governmental funding. Like their urban peers, rural communities are asked to provide increased services with fewer resources. Unfortunately, many small, rural programs are already operating beyond their financial capacity. Most troubling is the lack of priority and focus directed towards rural homelessness by many funders. Based on discussions with staff at rural agencies, the following suggestions are intended to guide funders and policymakers in increasing the capacity and performance of rural agencies. This paper recognizes that the funding issues faced by rural service agencies are far broader than HMIS. In rural areas, increased resources should be directed towards:

- The development of new programs and the expansion of successful programs and services into underserved, rural areas.
- Research to quantify the scope and scale of homelessness in rural America.
- Support for the development and documentation of rural best practices.
- The upgrade or replacement of outdated technology.
- Personnel and staff development.

In addition to directing resources to where they are most needed to address rural homelessness, funders and policymakers might also:

- Develop an awareness of the difficulties and opportunities related to addressing rural homelessness.
Identifying challenges and barriers is just the first step in addressing rural homelessness. Systemic change requires broad-based commitment from service providers, funders, government agencies, and community stakeholders.

• Promote increased collaboration and resource sharing with faith-based organizations. The SERHC subcommittee, Faith-Based Initiatives, is working to develop and promote strategies to support this effort.

• Consider rural providers and rural program models when developing data standards and reporting guidelines, including the Annual Homeless Assessment Report.

• Increase collaboration between funding agencies regarding data and reporting requirements to reduce duplication.

• Examine the definition of “rural” as it applies to McKinney-Vento and other programs and funding.

• Provide increased and improved technical assistance focused on HMIS and general capacity building for rural service providers.

• Provide technical assistance to enable rural agencies to compete with urban agencies for funds. State and federal funding requirements may dictate levels of agency accountability or community collaboration not sustainable in rural areas.

• Explore the development of a centralized, web-based, searchable database of HMIS and technology funding resources for rural homelessness that is capable of matching funders with agencies.

Impact of the HEARTH Act

The recent amendments to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act take some important steps towards recognizing the unique and important nuances involved in addressing rural homelessness. However, the HEARTH Act takes an extremely narrow view of what constitutes a “rural” community. In addition, the designation of “rural” or “not rural” by continuum ignores the very fact that many rural areas were incorporated into larger Balance of State continuums due to a lack of capacity and resources and efficiency. This creates a conundrum for Balances of State and other CoCs that have both rural and urban areas in their geography. These Continuums may lack the technical assistance and capacity building resources to sufficiently address the issue of homelessness in the rural areas. To truly address rural homelessness, it is important to recognize that the boundaries of a CoC are somewhat arbitrary and may contain a mix of rural and urban areas. Without the resources to address the issues that are unique to rural communities within a CoC, funders will continue to funnel resources into urban areas and fail to address the very real phenomenon of rural homelessness.
Creating System Change

Identifying challenges and barriers is just the first step in addressing rural homelessness. Systemic change requires broad-based commitment from service providers, funders, government agencies, and community stakeholders. In summary, these key strategies should be further investigated in an effort to help rural service providers select, implement, and evaluate the use of HMIS including:

- Formation of a non-commercial consortium of vendors, designers, policy makers, and service providers dedicated to improving technological capacity in rural communities through emerging technologies and applications.
- Development of data and reporting standards that encourage and foster the development of infrastructure and systems that function adequately in rural, underserved areas.
- Revision or elimination of funding and program guidelines that penalize rural applicants and increased priority on funding solutions that can address rural homelessness.
- Increased investment in research about rural homelessness, including the identification of best practices in addressing the unique issues of rural providers.
- Technical assistance and capacity-building resources and strategies designed specifically for rural implementations.
- Further development of technological solutions to assist with HMIS implementations in rural areas.

Conclusion

Rural homelessness is a very real and prevalent issue which plays a significant role in rural communities’ economy and quality of life. Being able to successfully address rural homelessness has the potential to have a positive effect on all areas of the community. The methods of addressing rural homelessness and evaluating success may be different than those used in urban areas. However, there is a large gap in the research and knowledge available to effectively address rural homelessness. HMIS in rural areas can play a vital role in assisting service providers, community leaders, and policymakers in understanding and addressing the issue of rural homelessness. A focus on improving the implementation of HMIS in rural communities through funding, technical assistance, research, and innovative strategies and collaborations is an essential piece of ensuring that the issue of rural homelessness is appropriately and effectively addressed.
References


Additional Resources


Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities

Talking Points for HMIS Lead Agencies

Introduction

The role of the rural HMIS lead agency is a delicate balancing act between maintaining the integrity of the data entered into the HMIS database and collaborating with the user agencies to ensure that proper data entry practices are in place and understood by each service provider on the network. As such, the lead organization must be prepared to encounter and provide solutions for unexpected issues and develop response plans for common problems.

What are the needs?

Some of the specific challenges noted by HMIS lead agencies that serve rural areas include:

- Lack of basic computer skills among agency staff in many rural areas.
- Lack of technological aptitude, project management expertise, and “best practices” in implementing and maintaining HMIS in rural areas.
- Limited funding resources to address the many technological gaps present in rural areas.
- Limited technology infrastructure in rural areas.
- Geographical barriers that prevent implementation of training, technical assistance, and service and support strategies in remote areas.

How can HMIS Lead Agencies help?

Rural HMIS lead agencies would benefit from increased resources designed to help them support their rural clients. It is suggested that the rural HMIS lead agency explore opportunities to obtain such resources. Specific suggestions include:

- Provide local assistance on current funding opportunities, training information, and engagement strategies for the diverse range of local agencies and coalitions.
- Revisit HMIS policies to ensure that any requirements which go above and beyond the federal mandate are manageable to smaller and more resource restricted agencies.
- Provide regular communication and a representative to visit rural agencies providing consultation on how to best capture program data for HMIS entry.
- Ensure rural providers participate in CoC meetings to represent needs specific to rural areas and to offer all CoC representatives the opportunity to learn from each others’ experiences.

For more information or to view the full Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities document, please visit: http://www.hmis.info/collaborative/SERHC.aspx
Introduction

Rural agencies that provide services to people experiencing homelessness often suffer from a lack of resources, serve a wide client base, and offer a variety of services. These challenges make it difficult for many rural communities to manage successful Homeless Management Information Systems (HMISs). An additional challenge for rural agencies is that few vendors’ priorities match their needs, making it difficult to use HMIS effectively.

What are the needs?

HMIS software developers and vendors would be well-served to listen to the rural experience. Rather than attempting to address rural technological challenges from an urban perspective, it may be possible to develop technological solutions that work under adverse geographical conditions. Some suggestions include to:

- Design cost-efficient, scalable HMISs that require minimal technical competencies.
- Design HMISs to perform adequately when high-speed Internet service is not available.
- Utilize emerging technologies that enable rural agencies to skip over a generation of antiquated technology.
- Rather than wasting valuable resources on trying to “level the playing field,” use rural communities as a testing ground for HMIS software functionality and data sharing.
- Offer scaled pricing to address limited funding resources in rural communities.

How can vendors help?

In order to make HMIS software utilization a success, we must work to create cohesiveness in these rural areas amongst the providers, administrators, and vendors. A few ways to increase rural collaboration would be:

- Offer additional training on-line/webcast training.
- Improve communications with each agency.
- Provide support to local system administrators.
- Create different versions of the software for smaller communities that still meet all requirements.
- Provide detailed training manuals for each user level (e.g., system administrator, system user).

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Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities

Talking Points for Researchers

Introduction

Rural agencies that provide services to people experiencing homelessness often suffer from a lack of resources, serve a wide client base, and offer a variety of services. These challenges make it difficult for many rural communities to manage successful Homeless Management Information Systems (HMISs). Universities and Research Institutions often study a wide variety of geographical areas. These efforts often overlook the scholarship efforts needed in regards to the rural sub-population of homelessness. Colleges, Universities and other researchers could benefit from quality data about rural homelessness that HMIS could provide. Key to many of these efforts is the funding and dissemination of rural research.

What are the needs?

Scholars and researchers can help drive the mindset and methodology of what it means to be homeless in rural America. This can provide factual differences between rural and urban homeless data collection. Researchers can contribute to scholarship on rural homelessness in many ways.

• Provide methodology for better data collection.
• Provide better understanding of migration patterns of rural homeless.
• Provide a base for better funding mechanisms designed for rural data collection.
• Create better outlets for information and data usage.
• Increase academic scholarship.
• Create enhanced understanding of rural homeless data.

How can researchers help?

Researchers could help address homelessness in rural communities through increased efforts to study the issue of homelessness in these communities. By becoming familiar with data collection methods, researchers may be able to offer insight on improved methodology and help agencies to use their data to shape policy. Additionally, researchers could:

• Implement GIS type systems to better track rural homeless populations.
• Improve transparency of rural HMIS implementations.
• Increase effectiveness of HMIS.
• Increase the usage of a more unified best practices model.
• Provide better economic models of rural homeless impact.
• Increase overall understanding of rural HMIS implementations.

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Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities

Talking Points for Intermediary Agencies

Introduction

Rural agencies that provide services to people experiencing homelessness often suffer from a lack of resources, serve a wide client base, and offer a variety of services. These challenges make it difficult for many rural communities to manage successful Homeless Management Information Systems (HMISs). Intermediary agencies such as advocacy organizations, foundations, United Ways, and planning commissions can play an important role in supporting rural agencies in fully implementing HMIS, in addition to effectively addressing rural homelessness.

What are the needs?

Additional resources are needed in order to:

• Better understand the problem of homelessness in rural America
• Provide targeted and customized capacity building in rural areas around HMIS implementation, continuum planning, program implementation, and general organizational capacity.
• Support the development of best practice programs tailored to rural areas.
• Explore technological solutions to assist with HMIS implementations in rural areas.
• Provide development and training to ensure that staff have the skills to work effectively with clients and use technology appropriately.

How can intermediaries help?

There are a number of key roles that Intermediaries can play in supporting rural providers. These include:

• Developing expertise in addressing rural homelessness issues and rural HMIS implementations.
• Conducting research to better understand the problem of homelessness in rural America, as well as how homelessness is best addressed in a rural community.
• Providing capacity building and technical assistance that are targeted toward and specialized for rural providers.
• Supporting the documentation and implementation of rural best practices.
• Providing support and technical assistance for homeless planning efforts in rural communities, including facilitation, assistance with homeless counts and other homelessness research, and assistance with incorporating best practices into planning.

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Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities

Talking Points for Funders and Policy Makers

Introduction

Rural agencies that provide services to people experiencing homelessness often suffer from a lack of resources, serve a wide client base, and offer a variety of services. These challenges make it difficult for many rural communities to manage successful Homeless Management Information Systems (HMISs). An additional challenge for rural agencies is that few funders’ priorities match their needs, making it difficult to use HMIS effectively.

What are the needs?

Additional resources are needed in order to:

- Conduct research to better understand the problem of homelessness in rural America, as well as how homelessness is best addressed in a rural community.
- Provide targeted and customized capacity building in rural areas around HMIS implementation, continuum planning, program implementation, and general organizational capacity.
- Support the development of best practice programs tailored to rural areas.
- Upgrade and replace outdated technology.
- Explore technological solutions to assist with HMIS implementations in rural areas.
- Provide needed staff development to ensure that they have the skills to work effectively with clients and use technology appropriately.

How can funders and policy makers help?

Mainly, funders and policy makers can help by educating themselves about the needs of rural agencies and offering funding and support that make sense for these providers. Additionally, funders and providers can provide and support resources to:

- Increase and improve technical assistance focused on HMIS and general capacity building for rural service providers.
- Implement a centralized resource directory that provides information about funding resources for rural agencies.
- Promote collaboration through the formation of a non-commercial consortium of vendors, policy makers, researchers, and service providers dedicated to improving HMIS capacity in rural communities.
- Develop reporting and data standards that fit both urban and rural program models and systems.
- Increase collaboration between funding agencies regarding data collection and reporting requirements in order to decrease duplication of effort.
- Consider the potential impact of funding and program guidelines on rural applicants, including the way in which “rural” is defined.

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Challenges to Implementing HMIS in Rural Communities

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