

## Rethinking the Homeless Response Framework

Founded in 1998, [Simtech Solutions Inc.](#) provides technical solutions and consulting services, to support organizations' and communities' response to homelessness. Our tools and staff help regions quantify the extent of the problem, isolate the contributing factors, and implement data-driven decision-making processes into daily operations.

Communities face many common challenges when attempting to effectively respond to the range of housing needs of individuals and families. At Simtech, we recognize the role that technology can play in improving the service delivery model. Examples of the current challenges to be overcome include:

- **Systems are too focused on reporting.** The goal should be to move the person from homeless to housed, not to create a report. Many case managers and other "end-users" struggle with apathy and fatigue of using the traditional homeless management information system (HMIS), as the focus is often more about meeting HUD reporting requirements than on serving the client. Accurate reporting can and should be a byproduct of effective interactions with clients, and should help tell the story of the work being done.
- **Data is fragmented between providers, systems, and regions.** Single, monolithic systems inadvertently create data silos within and between regions, inhibiting the ability for regions to have a truly comprehensive and coordinated response to a person or family's homeless situation.
- **Coordinated Entry Systems are excluding the most vulnerable**  
Coordinated entry systems often don't include those who are living on the streets and may be less likely to seek services from "brick and mortar" shelter providers. This is at odds with the intended goal of prioritizing those who are the most vulnerable.
- **First responders are being excluded.** First responders tend to have regular, and often ongoing, interactions with people who are homeless but are disconnected from the coordinated entry systems within their communities. Jails and emergency rooms end up being a costly stopgap solution, rather than applying those same financial resources towards housing.
- **The data entry burden on staff, and the assessment fatigue on clients, is excessive.** The intake process is too slow and data doesn't flow. Without data sharing, staff are forced to ask questions of clients that they have already answered to another provider. Repeatedly answering the same questions can also re-traumatize a client.
- **Different funders have different reporting requirements, and the geographic boundaries of these funding providers often do not align.** Providers with funders that have different reporting requirements are commonly instructed to enter data into multiple systems.

To overcome these challenges, multiple technical objects, or services, can be integrated into a singular framework. Each service within the framework fulfills a specific functional requirement and works seamlessly with the other services through the adoption of established data exchange protocols. The approach is similar in concept to how Lego™ blocks each contain the ability to connect to other blocks, while also having the ability to be connected to. In technical parlance, this software design methodology is referred to as "Service-Oriented Architecture" (SOA).



## The Building Blocks

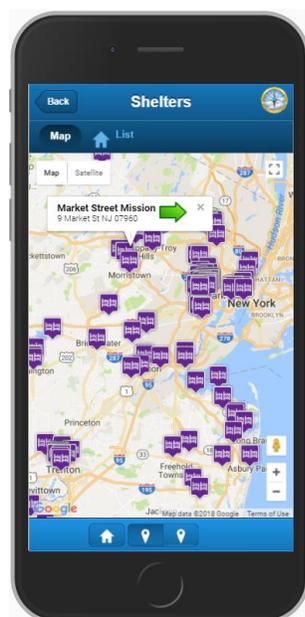
As each community is unique, the structure of the response will vary. Response frameworks designed using SOA can be tailored to meet local requirements and fill the gaps of existing systems. Some of the components a region might include in their own response framework, are described below.

**Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS)** are often the “doors” into the coordinated entry system for people who present at shelters and at service organizations focused on serving the homeless. HMIS tends to be the primary data management system for these providers and usually include some case management functionality aimed at better serving the clients.

**Mobile Apps** such as *Show the Way* can provide “light touch” intake, assessment, and referral for people in need wherever they might be. In compliance with the HUD HMIS data standards, the mobile app collects key demographic info, personal information related to disabling conditions and domestic violence, as well as information on benefits. Contacts and engagements are recorded as a byproduct of each interaction. GPS capabilities make it easier for outreach staff to locate and assist a person over time while also helping to identify hotspots and areas where there are resource gaps.

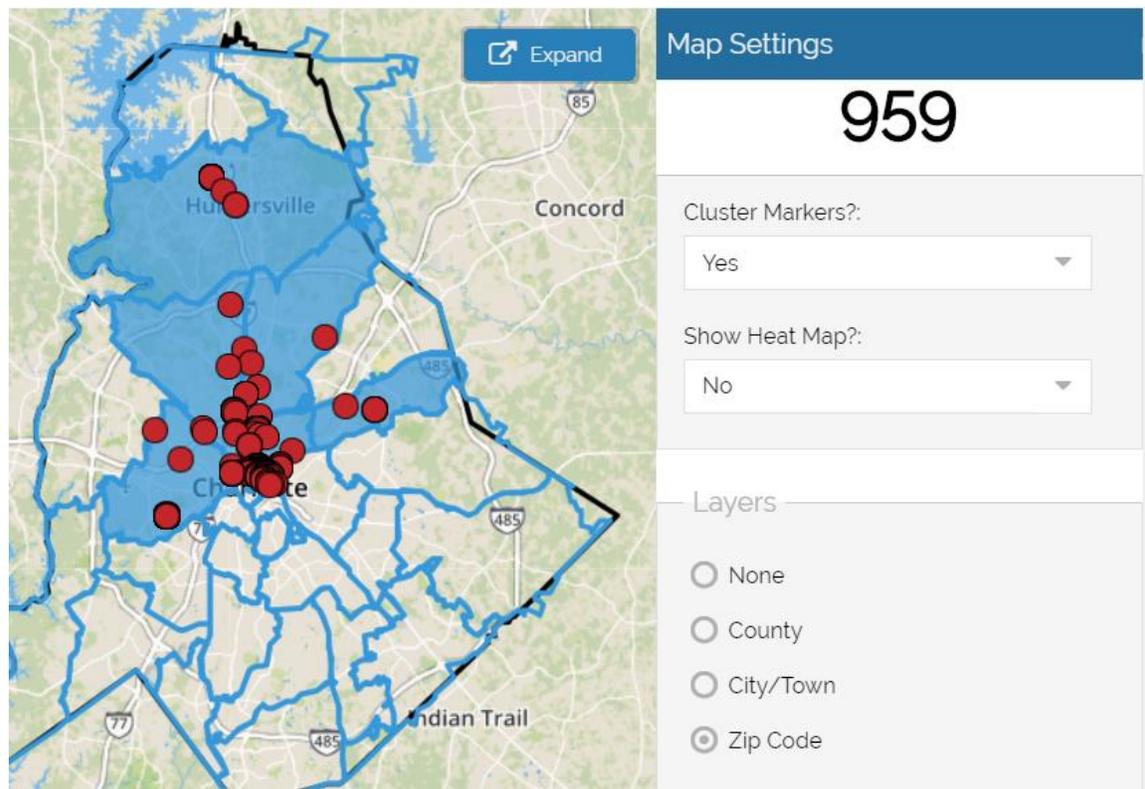


**Resource Directories** provide an overview of the organizations, projects, and services available as well as key information about eligibility requirements, operating hours, and service locations. These directories can supplement, or replace, traditional referral processes. Below are screenshots from the **Show the Way** mobile app that provide details on shelter beds that are currently available nearby. Note that the number of beds available is derived from the region’s HMIS.



**A Data Warehouse**, such as *HomelessData.com*, can combine data captured from HMIS and non-HMIS sources to build a repository of key information while also providing the tools necessary to learn from the data that is collected. Many HMIS systems can produce the required HUD reports but there are significant advantages of de-coupling the reporting from HMIS, and utilizing a data warehouse instead. These include...

- The ability to support multiple HMIS within the same region. This is ideal for organizations that need a specific software to support their operations and/or funders. This is also helpful for providers that operate in multiple jurisdictions.
- Personal and identifiable information can be integrated, based on established data sharing agreements, for the purposes of reporting and care coordination.
- Local, regional, statewide, and provider-specific, reports can be produced using either aggregate or de-identified data.
- Role-based security controls who has access to what data in the system.
- The regions for the VA, HUD, SAMHSA, DMH, and others often have different geographic footprints and reporting needs yet HMIS can only produce reports for a particular HUD CoC. A warehouse that has geospatial reporting capabilities can produce reports for regions of any shape or size. The image below illustrates how the boundaries of a region can be used to determine which records to be included in the reporting universe. Once the region is selected, then other selection criteria such as gender, veteran status, and age range can be applied. NOTE: For projects with multiple operating locations, a project needs to be set up per location until HUD accepts our recommendation to allow for clients to be enrolled into a project at a location. See page 6 in [The Role of Service-Oriented Architecture in Meeting the Goals of Opening Doors](#) for more information.

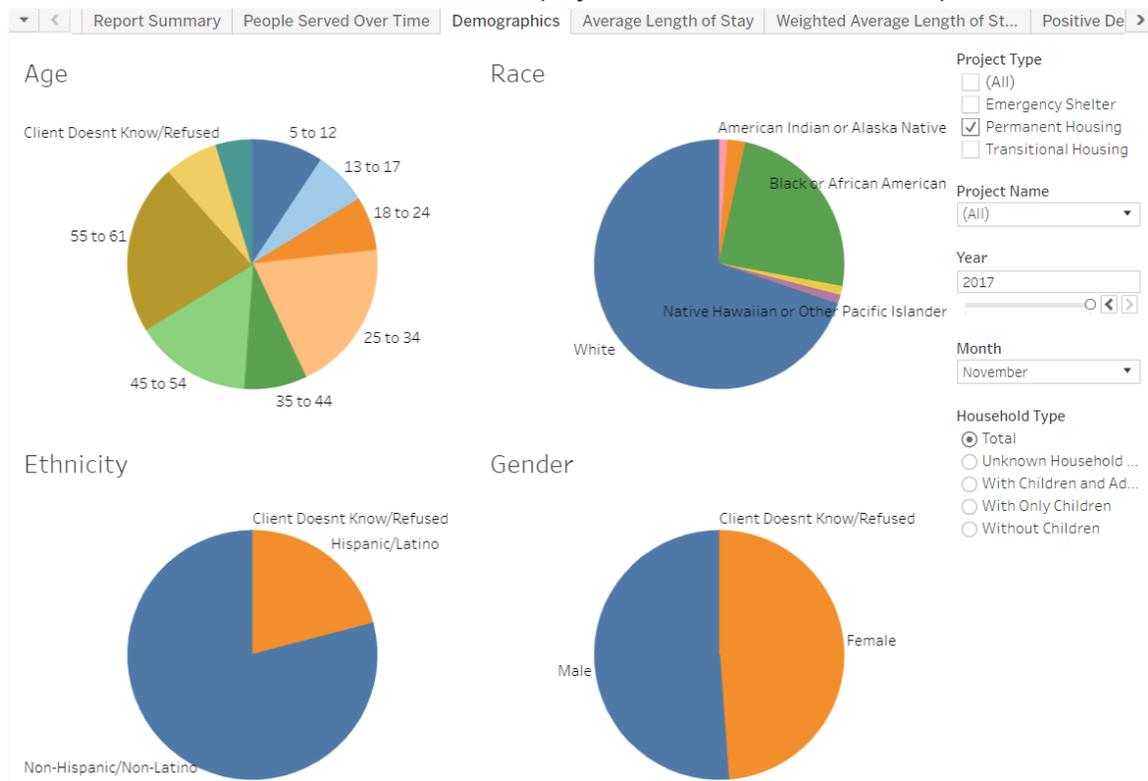


*Point in Time Counts by Selected Zip Code in Charlotte, NC*

For the purposes of coordinated entry, the information gathered can be used to help housing navigators make informed decisions about who should be prioritized for any housing opportunities that become available. Not only can a warehouse help to inform prioritization, it can also help to...

- Reduce the data collection burden by utilizing information that has already been collected from trusted data sources. See [Appendix A: Empirical Versus Self-Reported Information](#).
- Determine if someone is not receiving a benefit he/she is entitled to or if they have other funds available that he/she may not be aware of.
- Detect if someone is accessing the same resource from multiple sources, such as homelessness prevention.
- Improve the quality of HMIS data elements, such as prior living situation and destination, as the enrollment of a client into another project can be useful information for a staff member who is trying to fill the gaps in a person's HMIS record.
- Build a longitudinal picture of a person's housing and homeless experience. This can help meet documentation requirements for chronic homelessness, catch "Returns to Homelessness" that occur across regional boundaries, and show migration patterns over time.
- Serve as a repository of the project information to be used as the basis for the community resource directory.
- Provide proof of homelessness. See [Appendix B: Documenting Homelessness](#).

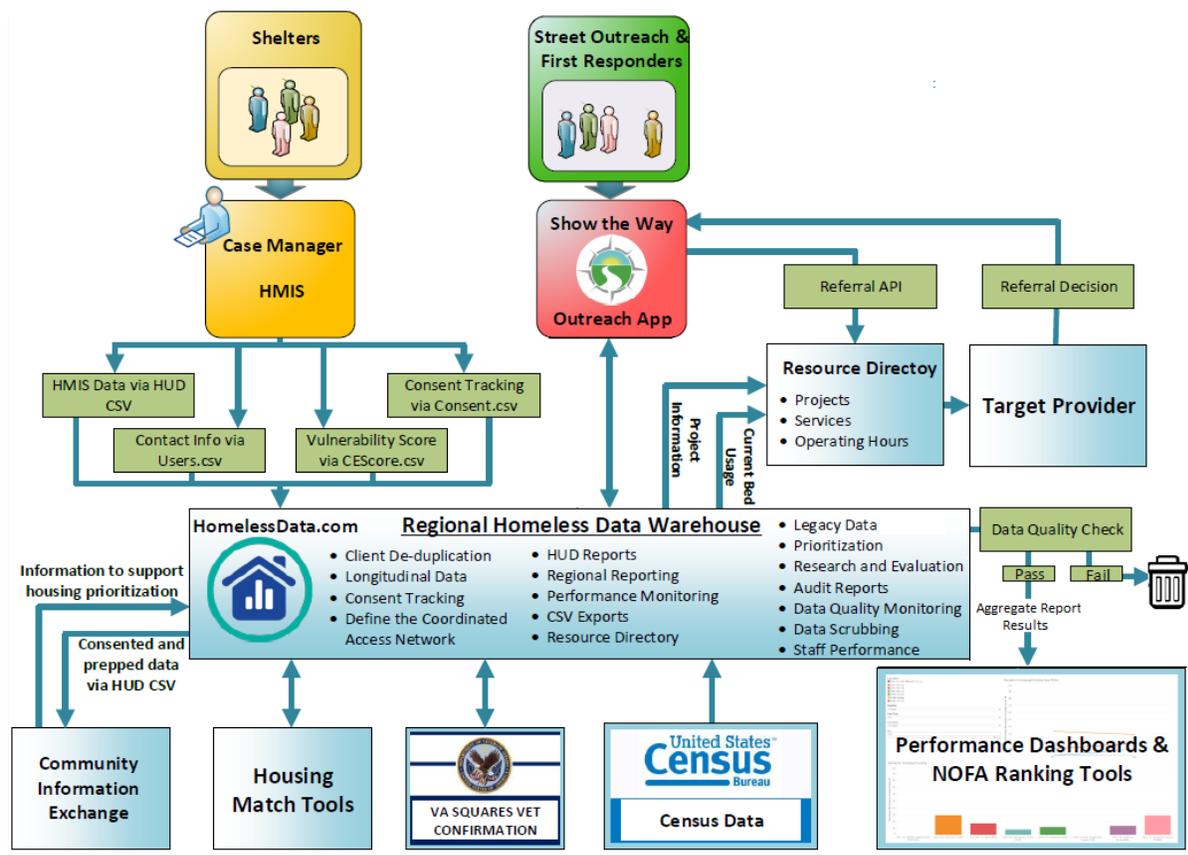
**Performance Dashboards** provide aggregate results to support the measurement of both growth and proficiency of a regional coordinated entry framework. Growth is measured by comparing the performance of the region to itself over time, whereas proficiency is measured by comparing the performance of the regional CES with its peers. Similar logic as to what is used to produce these dashboards can also be used to rate and rank projects for the annual NOFA competition.



Project Performance Measurement Dashboard for Somerville, MA

## Homeless Response Framework Diagram

Below is an illustration of how these key services can be tightly integrated into a singular homelessness response framework that is built using the SOA software design methodology. In addition to being able to support multiple HMIS and non-HMIS applications, this approach also overcomes the challenges faced by regions that are currently using a closed-HMIS system. With the addition of a mobile app, first responders and outreach staff are also included as part of the coordinated entry system.



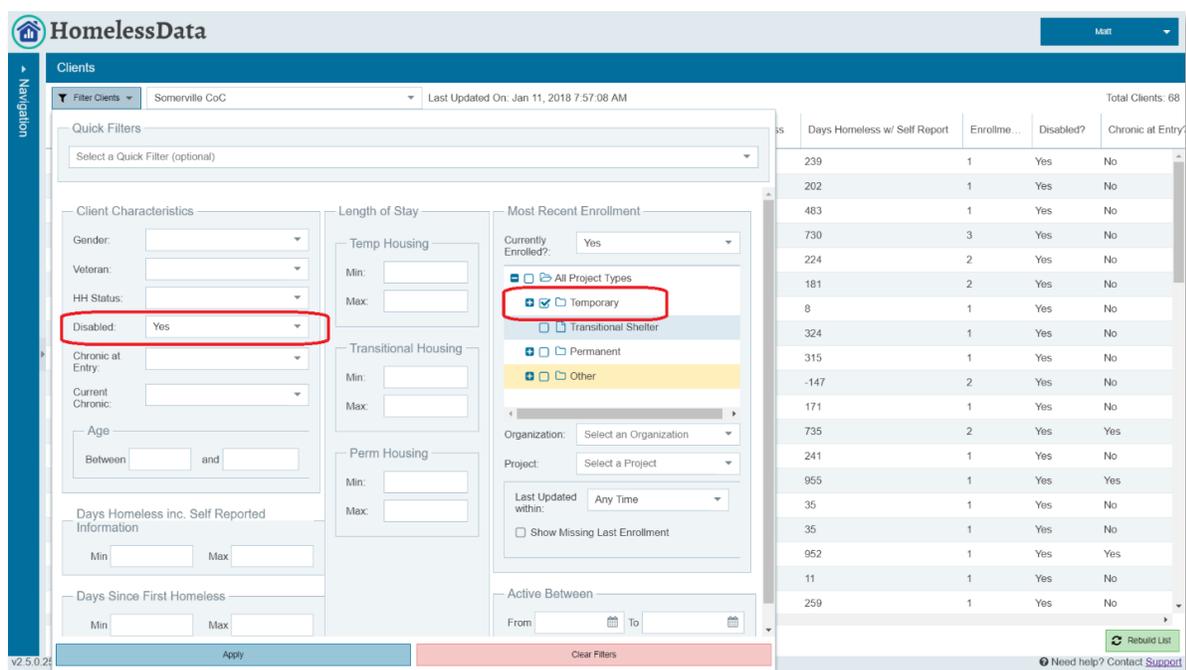
## Rethinking the Approach for Housing Prioritization

Prioritizing people for limited housing resources is a key aspect of coordinated entry. Some communities have chosen to incorporate an additional vulnerability assessment to assist with this while others would prefer to leverage the data that is already being collected in HMIS. Vulnerability indices appear to work well for situations when there is an urgency to house someone based on their current circumstances. However, according to the HUD commissioned [Assessment Tools for Allocating Homelessness Assistance: State of the Evidence report](#), "The invited experts generally agreed that existing assessment tools do not have a strong evidence base and are limited in their ability to select the best interventions for families and individuals or to predict which families would be the most successful in different interventions".

Simtech Solutions consulted with industry experts, analyzed data from a variety of sources, and had our findings peer reviewed, to develop our own [Review of the Tools and Techniques Used to Prioritize Clients for Limited Housing Resources](#). The research supports the findings in the HUD paper that vulnerability assessments, when conducted in isolation, lack a strong evidence base, are prone to error, can lead to

data entry fatigue, and allow for people to manipulate the system by providing inaccurate information to obtain a higher prioritization, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

Another option to consider is to integrate data from multiple HMIS systems and use the information gathered to develop “by name lists”. These lists can be sorted by total length of homelessness and filtered to show only clients that meet certain eligibility criteria for a housing unit. After ensuring the data is both complete and accurate, in accordance with the *HMIS Policies and Procedures* established for the region, the Coordinated Entry manager can use the list to prioritize the data according to the community’s prioritization model. For example, both Somerville and Lowell, MA have decided that active clients with the longest length of homelessness, with a disabling condition, will be prioritized first for new housing opportunities. The image below demonstrates how filters can be applied to display a prioritized list of clients that are eligible for a housing opportunity.



Filtering the prioritized “By Name List” in HomelessData.com for eligible housing candidates

Prioritization does not need to be an either/or decision between relying on vulnerability assessments or empirical data. Communities may wish to consider the implementation of prioritization practices in which scoring takes both factors into account. In this way, the clients that have demonstrated their consistent usage of system resources will be balanced out against the population of clients with highly acute needs that require immediate access to housing. This approach is in compliance with the [HUD Prioritization Notice](#) and provides a balanced approach that takes both vulnerability and past service utilization into account to help make an informed decision about who should be next in line for housing.

## In Conclusion

The Merriam-Webster definition of *coordination* is both “the process of organizing people or groups so that they work together properly and well” and “the harmonious functioning of parts for effective results”. SOA practices support coordination by providing the ability to customize a homeless response framework that enables providers within a community to harmoniously function together as one.

## Appendix A: Empirical Versus Self-Reported Data

The Social Security Administration conducted [a study of homeless people and their self-reported SSI/SSDI status](#) and found that "Fully 41 percent (934/2,257) of clients who reported receiving SSI/DI benefits did not receive them according to SSA."

Data integration enables regions to use trusted data sources for driving the prioritization process rather than adding in another administrative layer that relies on self-reported info that is often inaccurate. Examples of other trusted data sets that might be used to support prioritization, and the development of individualized service plans, include:

- The mental health diagnosis from SAMHSA-funded PATH to determine mental illness;
- The [VA's SQUARES system](#) can be used to verify a person's veteran status.
- Hospitals know who their high utilizers are;
- Police have details on who they are regularly interacting with;
- HMIS data from neighboring regions can help verify a person's homeless history (and subsequently their chronic homeless status)
- Data collected from mobile apps, such as Show the Way, can be integrated from street outreach providers to count contacts and engagements, and provide evidence of a person's homeless history

## Appendix B: Documenting Homelessness

Details on HUD's expectation around complying with this documentation requirement can be found within [this FAQ](#). According to page 56 of the [HMIS Data Standards Manual](#), "HMIS reports of actual enrollments in ES, SH, or SO projects may be used to meet third-party documentation requirements".

HMIS data gathered from emergency shelter (ES), safe haven (SH), and street outreach (SO) projects within the region can be used to demonstrate a person's homeless history. A person's time spent living on the streets is often harder to document however which is a primary reason for the development of the Show the Way app. Show the Way provides clinicians and first responders a simple tool to incorporate interactions with people living on the street. Once combined with data from HMIS, it can be used to verify a person's homeless status over time by running the [HUD Client System Use Report](#) over the combined data set.

S.	Temp. L.o.S.	Days Since First Homeless	Days Homeless w/ Self Report	Enrollme...	Disabled?	Chronic at Entry?	Current Chronic	Last Organization	Last Project	Last Entry
1032	2492	2901	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Catholic Charities Arch ...	105 - St Patricks Wome...	04/26/2016	
1849	1849	2093	1	Yes	No	No	CASPAR Inc.	First Step Street Outreach	12/19/2012	
985	985	2080	1	Yes	Yes	Yes	CASPAR Inc.	First Step Street Outreach	05/02/2015	
344	1045	1942	1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Catholic Charities Arch ...	105 - St Patricks Wome...	03/03/2015	
34	1809	1910	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Catholic Charities Arch ...	105 - St Patricks Wome...	03/17/2016	
691	728	1830	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	CASPAR Inc.	First Step Street Outreach	03/05/2016	

If a region is using self-reported information to support the prioritization, and there is a large disparity between the "Days Homeless w/ Self-Report" and the length of homelessness that can be documented using HMIS and street outreach data (as shown above), then this disparity should be accounted for with other third-party documentation. According to HUD guidance, at least nine months of homelessness within the past three years must be documented for a person to be considered chronically homeless.