

Management Information Systems for Collaborative Approaches to Homelessness

Report produced on behalf of the Toledo Collaborative/Governing Body's MIS Subcommittee
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Management Information Systems for Collaborative Approaches to Homelessness

This report has been developed to provide an overview of management information system (MIS) options for a community-wide effort to address homelessness. We have researched systems being used in communities throughout the U.S. to learn what the systems are capable of doing, how particular communities are using these systems, what structures within each community have enabled implementation of the system, and approximate costs. We looked at over 20 different systems and communities, and we interviewed over a dozen system designers, community leaders, and case managers. After careful review, we chose five homelessness MISs to detail in this report. We also took what we learned from all our research and developed a concluding section on “What Your Community Will Need to Consider” if looking into implementing a homelessness MIS.

This introductory section provides a framework for understanding the descriptions that follow. While we have tried to write this report without a lot of technical jargon, it is important for the reader to begin with some general knowledge about MISs, homelessness case management options, and community-wide benefits and challenges.

What is an MIS?

Any “management information system” (MIS) today can be understood as a way of collecting and sharing information between people and across organizations through a computerized database. In order for multiple people to add data to and get data from the same MIS, the system is designed so that multiple computers can access it simultaneously. Therefore, most MISs are either accessible via the Internet or they are saved on a locally-owned computer network to which several computers are connected. An effective MIS provides a variety of benefits to its users:

- updates of data are automatically available to all users no matter where they work,
- reports can be generated which compile data from different sources, and
- security features prevent individuals from accessing data that is confidential.

MISs can also be designed with other functions besides just the database of information. For example, they often are accompanied by a communication forum for users to talk to one another (e-mail, bulletin boards, etc.) or a publicly accessible Web page that describes the organizations that are administering the MIS.

What Can an MIS for Homelessness Do?

An MIS that specifically deals with homelessness can be designed in many different ways. The options are defined by what kinds of data a community wants to collect and how it wants to use these data. Whereas some systems are relatively simple, the more complex systems present a variety of choices to the community for what it wants the system to accomplish.

Basic Information and Referral

The simplest homelessness MIS offers static “information and referral” data (I&R), such as the names and phone numbers of area shelters, transitional housing programs, and substance abuse

treatment facilities. These basic I&R systems are often connected to a telephone hotline to refer callers to services. The data are updated infrequently.

I&R with Tracking of Referrals

I&R systems that include some form of tracking allow users to collect a minimum amount of data about the referrals they make. For example, the system may track the number of referrals made for specific services, collect some demographics about the callers, or track whether or not the caller followed up on the referral.

Case Management Within a Single Agency

One of the key values of a more complex homelessness MIS is to allow case management data about an individual client to be entered into a computerized database. Such data might include the client's age, family status, income, history of services, current services, progress made, and so on. When these data are collected inside a single agency, they provide a structured process for following a client's progress step-by-step, and they make it easier for the director to generate reports, track outcomes for all clients, and track the use of funds for various services. (No longer does the program director have to sit down every quarter with a pile of folders and do manual counts.) This MIS can also facilitate a team approach to case management where multiple case workers in the same agency assist the same client. For instance, if one case worker in a women's shelter works with a mother, and another works with her child, the case workers can ensure more timely and regular sharing of progress through the MIS.

Collaborative Case Management

For community-wide approaches to addressing homelessness, the ideal MIS is designed to share case management data across multiple agencies. This allows information about a client's history and progress to be seen and updated by case workers in different organizations so that a comprehensive plan of services can address the complex needs of most clients.

Of course, any one agency could use an MIS that is designed for collaborative case management without then sharing the data with other agencies (an issue we came across in some communities). But collaborative case management systems ensure that all participating organizations can enter data into the same MIS and have options for sharing that data if the participants choose to do so.

These systems help communities address concerns about confidentiality of client data by requiring user-names and passwords, by limiting each user's access to only certain parts of the database, and by using data encryption methods to prevent Internet hackers from seeing the information. These are standard technological solutions to how to make data confidential, but the community will still have to work out its own plan for what data it is willing to share with whom.

All of the systems described in this report are designed to enable collaborative case management. These systems also allow data tracking and reporting to serve other purposes in the community besides case management for individual clients. However, how these systems function and how they are currently used by communities varies widely:

- **Horizontal Sharing:** Many communities use a homelessness MIS only to share case management data across organizations that provide the same types of services, such as among all the shelters. This horizontal sharing reveals how an individual client has used shelters in the past and what other services the shelters have recommended for the client. It also allows accurate and quick tracking of the number of users of shelters in the community, and it can enable daily updates of shelter beds available. Horizontal sharing, however, limits case management data to what the shelter case managers know about the client's progress, and may not provide a complete picture of the other services a client is pursuing.
- **Vertical Sharing:** Using an MIS across multiple agencies that provide different services enables more comprehensive case management. For example, a shelter director, a mental health counselor, and a job trainer can all access the same record for "Joe Client," see what services Joe has been receiving, and enter information about Joe's progress and next steps. (Vertical sharing is also the best use of an MIS in a "one-stop shopping" service center that houses multiple agencies in the same location.)

Vertical sharing is especially useful in generating accurate, timely data about the community's full system of homelessness services and how residents are using these services. This use of a computerized system allows automatic counts of clients accessing homelessness services, reports of system-wide outputs and outcomes, and precise tracking of funds across agencies. More than a case management tool, then, an MIS becomes a key resource for community planning, fundraising, collaborative grants management, and system-wide governance.

- **Extensive Sharing:** The most extensive use of a homelessness MIS is to allow not only horizontal and vertical sharing of data within a community, but to connect the MIS with other communities and/or a state-level system. This extensive sharing is focused more on data tracking, reporting, and use of funds than on case management for individual clients.

How Can a Community Benefit from a Homelessness MIS?

From these different descriptions, one can quickly conclude that the best choice of an MIS for homelessness services depends greatly on what the community wants the MIS to do for them, who is willing to participate in using it, and what data will be collected. The benefits for the community increase with the complexity of the system and the degree of collaboration that supports its use.

Through our research on a variety of collaborative case management MISs, we have identified several community-wide benefits:

- Provides an accurate and easily updated community-wide picture of how many people are using what kinds of services with what results.
- Provides an accurate and easily updated community-wide picture of how much money is being spent on homelessness services and for what results (i.e., the return on the investment).

This can enable more appropriate resource allocation in the community and more efficient use of funds.

- Allows the community to be more responsive to demands of public and private funders for more accurate reporting of outcomes and use of funds.
- Builds the capacity of agencies and the community to know what they need to do and what resources it takes to do it, and to use data to make a convincing case to funders.
- Reveals and prevents duplication of services.
- Allows service providers to engage together more as a community by enhancing communication across agencies (and, thus, diminishing turf battles and distrust).

Most importantly, the MIS improves services to homeless people in the community, so that their needs are more likely to be met, their lives are more likely to improve, and the problem of homelessness across the community is reduced. A fully-functioning MIS increases clients' access to services, ensures faster and more appropriate services for individual needs, and allows case managers to hold a client more accountable for the effort s/he needs to make. In other words, cross-agency collaborative case management, combined with better tracking of outcomes and funds, responds directly to many of the frustrations that community members feel about the ineffective and inefficient elements of the current system of fragmented homelessness services.

While these benefits are significant, our research also reveals the hard work and commitment that goes into implementing a fully-functioning, collaborative case management MIS. The stories we tell in the following pages—and the lessons learned that we summarize at the end—make clear that this is not an effort to be taken lightly. To ensure the success of the system, a community must be willing to invest time, energy, resources, and a willingness to change.

Many communities across the U.S., however, have been able to traverse the hurdles associated with an effective MIS to put into place a high-quality system that is benefiting their homelessness clients, service providers, and community. The MISs profiled in the following case studies can all be purchased and implemented by other communities. We hope that the descriptions of these systems and their use in particular communities will inform the decision-making process in your community. In addition, the final section, “What Your Community Will Need to Consider,” discusses general lessons that all these case studies reveal about what is involved in implementing a homelessness MIS.

Compass

Atlanta, Georgia

Approximately twenty-five homelessness shelter and support service providers in Atlanta, Georgia, use an MIS called Compass to facilitate collaborative case management in their community. Compass was designed by Pathways Community Network, Inc., an Atlanta-based nonprofit that formed specifically to help local homelessness service providers develop an MIS that would meet their needs. Compass has been up and running in Atlanta since April 1999. Pathways is now working to install Compass in other communities.

SYSTEM CAPABILITIES

The system is designed to enable the following activities:

For Case Management

- tracks client intake and assessment information, including client expenditures
- tracks services and referrals and their status
- allows shared and private case notes

For Direct Service Program Administration

- tracks the availability of resources such as funding, bus tokens, and shelter space
- allows staff to attach messages to a client's file so that the client can be reached at any agency s/he visits
- provides up-to-date accounting of the agency's assistance resources (e.g., transportation, rental, or utility assistance) by their source

For Agency Administration

- generates individual agency and community-wide reports on clients and services, and for specific local funders

SYSTEM SECURITY FEATURES

Agencies cannot share information about a client without the client's written permission. System users are required to attend trainings about the rights of clients, privileged communication and privacy, duty to warn and protect, ethical and legal ramifications of confidentiality, and ethical and legally required professional conduct. These trainings are provided by nationally certified trainers who are former social service clients. All staff have passwords that identify what information they can or cannot view, down to individual fields on a single screen. Fields are color-coded to reflect what is permissible to share.

HOW THE COMMUNITY USES COMPASS

The Atlanta community has succeeded in implementing this collaborative case management system. Case managers know how to use the system; many enter their own data as they work with clients or enter it promptly after meeting with the client. Data are shared across the participating agencies, which represent a comprehensive set of services for homeless clients.

The successful use of Compass in this community stems from the establishment of Pathways Community Network, Inc. in 1996. Pathways began as a collaborative of proactive, client-

oriented service providers who were dealing with technological issues at their agencies in the early 1990s. As they began to discuss developing a user-friendly, collaborative case management system, their agencies and colleagues were eager to pursue the idea and facilitate use of the system.

Pathways became a 501(c)(3) and hired a former case manager to be its Executive Director. The organization then spent several years planning for the system. Client surveys were conducted at each agency to learn how clients felt about a system that shared their information; the response was resoundingly positive. Forums were held to discuss and demonstrate the system to clients and staff, and to use their feedback for improvements.

After Pathways installed Compass, they used a train-the-trainer model to equip agencies to use it. One staff member in each agency was designated a “Pathways Point Person” who is responsible for training his/her colleagues, administering the system for his/her agency, and providing technical support to users. This person can turn to Pathways for additional technical support.

Pathways continues to improve the Compass system through formal reviews of the community’s technology needs. They regularly convene Board of Directors and Steering Committee meetings, involving many agency directors and Pathways Point People, to examine the system, discuss how it can better meet users’ needs, and explore the future of technology.

As a technology collaborative, Pathways Community Network, Inc. does not serve a coordinating or planning role for the community. The Compass system they support focuses on enabling collaborative case management, comprehensively meeting a client’s needs, and enhancing an individual agency’s capacity to do its work. Thus, the Compass participants are not currently using Compass data to generate aggregate reports to inform the community’s plans about homelessness services or funding. However, individual agencies can and do generate the reports they need by using forms designed by Pathways (in response to agency requests), but agencies cannot customize these reports.

COST

Pathways plans to introduce a new, lower pricing structure by the end of June. Presently, they charge for use of the system according to the size of an agency (measured by the portion of its annual budget related to case management after removing capital assets). Agencies pay 0.5% of this “case management budget,” a fee which can be no more than \$3000 per agency. Thus, in Atlanta, the most they could pay for 25 agency participants is \$75,000 per year. In return for payment, agencies get use of the system, technical assistance, and ongoing improvements to the design.

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Service Point

Shreveport, Louisiana

INTRODUCTION

In January 2000, approximately twenty social service agencies in Shreveport, Louisiana, began using an MIS called Service Point. Service Point was designed by Bowman Internet Services, Inc., also located in Shreveport. This system will also soon be used in the HUD Region IV of Louisiana by the Acadiana Regional Coalition on Homelessness and Housing and by the Baton Rouge Crisis Center. Also, in New Orleans, Unity for the Homeless, a re-granting agency that provides funds and technical assistance to individual non-profits and collaborative efforts to serve the homeless, recently began to use the system.

SYSTEM CAPABILITIES

The system is designed to enable the following activities:

For Case Management

- tracks client intake and assessment information, including family relationships
- tracks services and referrals provided to clients, their status, and flags these items for follow-up
- can attach Microsoft Word documents as attachments to client files for case notes

For Direct Service Program Administration

- checks clients in and out of shelter
- tracks the availability of shelter bedspace
- provides directory of agencies and programs in the area—can be searched by agency, program, location, or keyword, or distributed as a hard copy
- provides a communication forum called News Wire which facilitates e-mail notification of referrals, system-wide news reporting, an internal news wire for intra-agency communication, and Web site links to news articles

For Agency Administration

- tracks the amounts and sources of funds used to provide clients with services
- generates standard and custom individual agency and community-wide reports—specific examples include HUD and FEMA reports

SYSTEM SECURITY FEATURES

Users must be authenticated by the system before they gain access to client information. In addition, staff can input “restricted” records into the system, meaning that the complete record may only be viewed by the user or agency who entered the information. The system administrator can group users according to the levels of information they will be permitted to access.

HOW THE COMMUNITY USES SERVICE POINT

The Shreveport community has successfully implemented this collaborative case management system and serves as a good example of “extensive sharing” of data. Many different types of agencies track multiple populations through this MIS, including those who are homeless, have

mental health issues, have substance abuse problems, and/or have developmental disabilities. In addition to nonprofit organizations, the state Office of Mental Health uses it, and the state Office of Substance Abuse is likely to come on board soon. Current users hope to get to 50-75 organizational participants within the next year, including the Public Health department, so that this one MIS can meet all of the community's social service data management needs.

Overall administration of Service Point in Shreveport occurs at an information and referral agency called Centerpoint, whose goal is to "serve as a center for managed access to services, the dissemination of information, the compilation of data, and the facilitation of networking for the social service system in the Shreveport-Bossier area." Centerpoint shares responsibility for maintenance of the system with the company that developed it, Bowman Internet Services, Inc. The two organizations plan to share a new staff person, who will be housed at Bowman, and will be responsible for training, technical support, and report generation.

Individual agencies do not generate their own reports from Service Point. However, community-wide reports are generated and used by the Homeless Coalition of Northwest Louisiana and the Shreveport-Bossier Service Connection, a 90-member coalition of business, governmental and civic leaders, social service providers, and faith communities.

COST

Shreveport pays Bowman a fee of \$500 per month to host the system. The salary for the new administrator is unknown.

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Client Track Homeless

Richmond, VA

INTRODUCTION

Eleven homelessness service providers, including support service agencies, in Richmond, Virginia, are in the process of implementing an MIS called Client Track Homeless to facilitate collaborative case management and community-wide planning. Developed by Data Systems International, this system can be used in conjunction with other versions of Client Track designed for additional social service populations to enable extensive sharing in the community.

SYSTEM CAPABILITIES

The system is designed to enable the following activities:

For Case Management

- tracks client intake and assessment information, including family relationships, and client expenditures
- manually or automatically generates referrals with the system's directory of providers and services
- tracks services and referrals, and their status, including barriers encountered by the client
- allows both shared and private case notes
- allows notes for contacts with staff from other agencies

For Direct Service Program Administration

- tracks the availability of emergency shelter and transitional housing bed space
- schedules clients for appointments, meetings, or trainings
- facilitates interagency communication via an electronic bulletin board and e-mail—messages can be sent to outside staff or clients who visit another agency
- maintains case managers' personal notes and to-do lists within the system

The system's capabilities can be extended by using additional modules which:

- enable the use of electronic or digitized cameras, scan card systems, or computerized notebooks for services provided in the field
- allow the system to track an agency's financial transactions, including accounts payable, payroll, and purchasing
- can be used in conjunction with agencies using other versions of Client Track, such as Client Track Workforce, Human Services, and Welfare-to-Work. With this kind of extensive sharing, a community can enhance client services and better coordinate its efforts across a wide range of social and economic issues.

For Agency Administration

- tracks the sources of funds used to provide clients with services or financial assistance
- generates standard and custom individual agency and community-wide reports. There are over 100 standard reports including those needed for HUD's Emergency Shelter Grant, Supportive Housing, and Shelter Plus Care programs. In addition to meeting the reporting requirements of these specific funding sources, Client Track Homeless can provide reports on individual clients, case management activities, and funding sources.

SYSTEM SECURITY FEATURES

Client Track Homeless has a variety of security features which address client confidentiality. No information can be shared with an agency until the client has agreed to release information to that agency. The system maintains a log which shows which agencies have authorization to view a client's information, the effective date of this authorization, and whether a signed release of information is on file. In addition to this feature, the administrator of the system specifies the security clearance of each system user, who must have a log-in name and password. Staff can lock their computers stations if they need to leave their desks so no one can access the information in their absence. Furthermore, an agency can lock all of its client information so that it does not have to share with any other agency.

HOW THE COMMUNITY USES CLIENT TRACK

While Client Track is fully capable of supporting collaborative case management, the Richmond community has yet to use it for this purpose. Even though 11 agencies use Client Track to enter data, the community is still in the planning stages for sharing these data across agencies.

However, Richmond has put into place a community-wide infrastructure to support use of the MIS and to coordinate use of the data for community planning. They have placed responsibility for administration of the system with an agency called "Homeward, Richmond's Regional Response to Homelessness." This agency administers no funds, but it coordinates resources and services in the community, including the HUD Continuum of Care application.

Homeward is responsible for implementing and maintaining the system, including providing technical support. (They have contracted out much of this technical work.) They are also responsible for generating all individual agency and community-wide reports. Although Client Track Homeless is designed to enable participating agencies to generate their own reports, the Richmond community gave this responsibility to Homeward in order to address concerns around confidentiality. Homeward uses community-wide reports to plan for services in their community by identifying trends of service use and by bringing data to community-wide discussions about how to target resources to populations or areas in need.

COST

Client Track is sold on a fee-per-license basis. A license is required for each agency that wants to use it. The second, upgraded version of Client Track that Richmond purchased cost \$24,000 in license fees, but they also spent approximately \$20,000 on agency computers and \$9000 on new servers. In addition, Homeward pays for five phone lines (about \$1300 a year) and an Internet access fee of \$900/month. There are additional costs for the outsourced technical support and agency training.

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Regional Online Service Information Exchange (ROSIE)

St. Louis, Missouri

INTRODUCTION

ROSIE is an MIS system developed by Municipal Information Systems, Inc. (MISI), a 25-year-old nonprofit located in St. Louis, to enable data tracking across homelessness shelters. ROSIE is currently used by approximately 25 shelters in the City and County of St. Louis. In addition, agencies in St. Clair County, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, also plan to use the system.

SYSTEM CAPABILITIES

The system is designed to enable the following activities:

For Case Management

- tracks intake and assessment information, including basic family member information
- tracks services and referrals and their status
- allows shared and private case notes
- tracks follow-up information at 30-, 60-, 90-, 120-, 150-day, 6-month, 9-month, and 1-year intervals

For Direct Service Program Administration

- tracks the availability of housing units by the number of bedrooms and location

For Agency Administration

- generates individual and community-wide reports, including HUD's Annual Progress Report and Annual Performance Evaluation, shelter bed nights used, hotline caller characteristics, requests for shelter, and reasons for no referral

SYSTEM SECURITY FEATURES

All users must log-in and provide a valid password in order to access the system. A client's record may be viewed only by those shelters to which a client was referred or the shelter in which the client is presently residing. In addition, case management notes can be designated as private and not shared with other agencies. Also, a client's health status is kept confidential by only allowing the agency that entered the information to view it.

HOW THE COMMUNITY USES ROSIE

Until recently, ROSIE was used within St. Louis City and County only to track referrals, intake information, and shelter usage. Thus, instead of starting with case management and moving to cross-agency collaboration and community-wide planning, the first use for a homelessness MIS in St. Louis was as a tool for generating cross-agency reports to track shelter usage and monitor contracts. Now, however, the City of St. Louis is on its way to using ROSIE as a collaborative case management system. At present, case managers in St. Louis are being trained to take advantage of the system's case management capabilities.

ROSIE is administered by Municipal Information Systems, Inc. (MISI) (a nonprofit that maintains the MIS, provides technical support, and creates the report templates). However, the Housing Resource Center (HRC) (which is the I&R hotline that serves as the gateway to all

homeless shelters) generates and uses many of the cross-agency reports, as does the City's Department of Human Services, MISI itself, and the participating agencies. Reports are primarily used for reimbursement requests and contract obligations. Once the system is fully operational, the Department of Human Services and the collaborative body it coordinates—the Homeless Services Providers Network—will use information from the system to monitor existing programs and plan for new ones.

COST

While the ROSIE software is free, MISI charges \$150/month per concurrent user, and \$25/month per the total number of users, to maintain the database, back it up, generate reports, and provide all other system administration tasks. This prevents agencies from having to purchase their own servers to host the system. Were a community to want to administer their own system, they could expect to pay between \$14,000-\$16,000 for a server, operating system, and modems. MISI also provides a day of training to a group for \$1000 and offers a technical support package for \$2000.

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Client Management System

Orlando, Florida

INTRODUCTION

Agencies in Orlando, Florida, have implemented a case management MIS called Client Management System. Developed by Orlando-based Community Services Network, Inc.(CSN), this system is designed to allow collaborative case management, but it is available as software that can be purchased and installed on individual computers. Between 25 and 45 agencies in Orlando enter their own data into this software for their own use, but very little cross-agency sharing is occurring. Social service agencies in Broward County, Florida, and Faulkner County, Arkansas, also use this system. Communities outside of the Orlando area can purchase the software from Human Services Technologies, a for-profit software development company that spun off from CSN.

SYSTEM CAPABILITIES

The system is designed to enable the following activities:

For Case Management

- tracks client intake and assessment information, including household information and client expenditures
- tracks services and referrals provided to clients, their status, as well as information released by a client
- provides private and shared case notes that can be grouped by category
- provides extensive follow-up capabilities, including records of outcomes, barriers encountered, a client's satisfaction with services, and unsuccessful and successful follow-up calls
- offers additional form sets (i.e., screens) such as those for the Supportive Housing Program, children's services, or veteran services
- offers the option of an additional module which provides more comprehensive case planning

For Direct Service Program Administration

- reminds case managers of important activities recorded within case notes
- enables e-mail between agencies
- tracks requested and actual resources provided to clients, whether in dollar amounts or other units
- offers connection to the Community Resource Guide, an extensive information and referral directory (this guide can also be printed and distributed)

For Agency Administration

- tracks the amounts and sources of funds used to provide clients with services, including purchase orders
- offers a soon-to-be-released fund accounting module
- generates standard and custom individual agency and community-wide reports, including HUD's Annual Progress Report and others for the Supportive Housing Program

SYSTEM SECURITY FEATURES

The system monitors whether client consent to release information is on file. All users need a valid password to access the system. Access to information can be limited by agency or by user. Any incorrect information entered at log-in will cause the system to shut down. The system administrator can specify up to six levels of security and user access.

HOW THE COMMUNITY IS USING CLIENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Only a few agencies in Orlando share their case management information. Many agencies have expressed no intention to share. The Community Services Network, Inc.(CSN)—a nonprofit that provides information-and-referral services (I&R) and administers some federal funds—sells the software and is not actively encouraging agencies to share. When approached, however, they provide education regarding the benefits of an MIS and what is needed to implement one successfully.

Agencies predominantly use the system to meet their own I&R, case management, and reporting needs. They administer their own systems, while CSN provides training and technical support. CSN hopes that in the future more agencies will share data so that community-wide reports can be generated to plan for services in the community.

COST

In Orlando, CSN charges the agencies an annual software licensing fee of \$1000 for the first year, and \$500 per year to renew. However, any other community would have to buy the license directly from Human Services Technologies; that fee is unknown at this time.

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WHAT YOUR COMMUNITY WILL NEED TO CONSIDER

If your community is thinking of purchasing, implementing, and operating an MIS for collaborative homelessness services, you will need to discuss and make decisions around a variety of issues. From our research and interviews with people in other communities, we have identified the following key considerations:

Identifying Why You Want an MIS

The system descriptions presented here make clear that a homelessness MIS can meet many agency and community needs. While basic system functions are often similar, the designs and uses of the systems vary considerably. Therefore, a community's first priority is to get clear on what it wants from the system. You can do this by looking at the needs of clients, agencies, funders, and community decision makers, and then discussing what the MIS should do to meet these needs, what information it will therefore have to collect, and how this information will be used. You will want to determine whether you want the MIS to:

- increase the performance of individual agencies,
- enhance the client's ability to get what s/he needs,
- improve the coordination of services,
- help the community meet contractual obligations, and/or
- enable community-wide service planning and governance.

While all the systems profiled here can facilitate all of these outcomes, the specific system choice and how it will be implemented will depend greatly on whether you plan to use it primarily for case management within agencies, for collaborative case management, or for more extensive data sharing, reporting, and long-range planning.

Your choice will need to be a system that everyone agrees they will use, because broad participation in the use of the MIS is essential for its success. Implementation success will depend in part on clarifying everyone's expectations for the system. Some of the communities we studied found themselves revisiting issues they had already covered, or stopping and turning to new systems, because they did not clearly identify what they wanted up front. Also important in deciding what you want is to balance the desired benefits of the system with the costs the community is willing to bear (this is discussed further below).

Engaging in a Community Process

In order to ensure clear identification of what you want and successful implementation, clients, providers, and funders will need to be consulted. The communities we interviewed offered many suggestions on how to facilitate this process. First and foremost, bringing all interested parties to the table is necessary to get agreement on what information will be collected by the MIS, how client confidentiality will be protected, and the degree of sharing. In addition, opening up the process provides opportunities to:

- clarify how client rights will be respected
- explain how current funding will or will not be affected by agency decisions to participate in the MIS

- increase communication, foster cooperation, and avoid turf issues
- educate agencies about the benefits they can receive, the level of commitment that is required, and what agencies will need to put in place in order to have a successful MIS
- learn from providers what they want from the system while giving them room to change their minds as they learn more about the system
- allow people to vent about the change they will experience as a result of implementing an MIS

Community discussions will certainly be challenged by concerns regarding client confidentiality and data sharing. The need to protect client rights and fears that data will be used to negatively impact providers will influence people's responses to the idea. Thus, negotiating "ownership" of the MIS data will entail acknowledging the sense of power that comes with control over information. The amount of sharing that agencies do as well as the location of system administration tasks (that is, the ability to view information and to generate reports) will affect the amount of control that different parties feel they have and their willingness to participate. While most MIS systems are well-designed to enable various levels of confidentiality, your community will still need to decide what will be shared, with whom, for what purposes.

Creating a Community Structure To Support Your MIS

Before deciding upon the particular system you will use and the technology you will need to put in place, your community will need to decide how the system will be supported and how responsibility for operating the system will be shared. This is especially important if you want to use your system to enable community-wide planning through collection of cross-agency data and financial tracking. Most communities find it helpful to designate some organization as a "system administrator" who can oversee maintenance of the system, generate reports, and provide technical assistance. Various support structures are possible:

System Administration by Individual Agencies

The responsibility for maintaining and supporting the system can be placed with an individual in each participating agency. This enables each agency to take advantage of the MIS for agency performance, because they can troubleshoot the system quickly and access the equipment needed to make changes. In addition, the agency can rely less on a company or other agency to write the reports they need. Thus, an agency can administer its own programs, track its own dollars, and meet its individual contractual obligations with little dependence on the timeline and resources of others.

However, these advantages must be weighed against the disadvantages. First, the cost of maintaining in-house technical know-how for each agency is likely to be more than contracting out the technical services for multiple agencies. Second, a system administrator located within an agency may then be able to access information from other agencies that should be confidential. Third, leaving all system administration and report generation to individual agencies minimizes the community's capacity to manage collective funding sources or engage in community-wide service planning.

System Administration by a Collaborative Body

Some communities have chosen to locate system administration tasks and report generation responsibilities in a collaborative body, such as a nonprofit I&R agency or a coordinating council. Such a collaborative body can use its responsibility for the MIS to generate and share cross-agency reports that then facilitate coordination and planning of homelessness services (and possibly other social services) across the community. This collaborative body can have additional responsibility as well, such as writing collaborative grant requests, administering funds, and convening collaborative meetings. Giving system administrative functions to a collaborative body does not preclude, however, still allowing agencies to generate their own reports, so that agencies can use the MIS for their purposes, and the community can still access cross-agency data.

System Administration by Local Government

Local government can also be designated as the system administrator with community-wide planning responsibilities. If handled properly, this can work as well as a collaborative body. However, it can limit community-wide benefits if the government's focus is primarily on tracking government dollars, and not on improving services to clients and enhancing agency performance.

System Administration by a Company

Finally, the community can choose to locate system administration and report generation responsibilities with the company that designed the system. Under these circumstances, meeting community goals may be limited. For the most part, the company is not interested in the content of information it is managing. Furthermore, its role as middle-man can slow report turn-around time and limit applications of the information derived from the MIS. However, the company is best able to handle technical problems with the system, usually at a lower cost than on-site technical assistance.

Cost Considerations

Many expenses are involved in purchasing, implementing, and operating an MIS. A rough estimate of the total cost for one year, for 30 users in 10 agencies, could be anywhere from \$43,000 - \$85,000. The range is wide because the cost of all elements involved in using an MIS vary greatly from company to company, system to system, and community to community. This estimate includes the cost of software licenses, agency computers (which would not necessarily be an annual cost), use of phone lines and Internet access, minimal training, hosting/maintenance of the system, and technical support/troubleshooting. The assumption in this estimate is that a company hosts the system and the community does not buy its own servers and operating systems. This estimate does not include the cost of installation, additional equipment, any employees' salary or benefits, or the initial lost staff time/productivity in learning the new approach. Your community should compare prices carefully and be sure to ask about all relevant expenses.

While this investment may seem daunting, a community should think long-term about this decision and realize the ultimate cost savings that a fully-functioning MIS promises, including more efficient use of staff time, better data for garnering more resources into the community, and long-term reduction in the problem of homelessness. For example, the agencies that use

Compass in Atlanta have demonstrated that they can now serve more clients with the same number of staff.

Technological Considerations

As you plan for your MIS, you will need to consider a range of technological questions. You will have to decide what kind of network best meets your needs. Options include private Local or Wide Area Networks or private connections to the Internet. If you decide on the Internet, you will need to know whether users want to have dial-up or dedicated access. Other technological considerations include how scalable you want your system to be (whether the system can grow without lessening performance), how robust your system needs to be (how well the system can perform given high user traffic or information flows), and how many servers your system will need. Your goal will be to select the most appropriate technology given how you will use it, the prospects for technological advances, and your expectations about increasing the size and scope of the system. You can accomplish this by:

- obtaining good advice from technological experts who can explain things clearly
- assessing agencies' current technology capabilities and usage
- viewing demos of systems
- knowing what tasks the technological set-up of the MIS implies, who will accomplish them and how, and whether the associated costs (e.g., dollars, staff time) will rise or fall at different points during and after implementation

Implementing Your System

Successfully implementing an MIS entails integrating its use into the work of case managers, agency administrators, and the service network as a whole. Reaching this goal requires recognizing the amount and scope of change that these parties will experience and planning to accommodate this change.

The need to facilitate the transition to an MIS among case managers emerged as a common theme from our research, since their daily work is the primary source of the data to be entered. Ensuring a smooth transition involves knowing how case managers do their jobs and how they approach the idea of an MIS. For instance, case managers are very adept at tracking a large volume of information in their heads, often because crisis situations do not leave time for documentation. Thus, documentation can often feel like doing what one has to instead of what works best to get the job done. Social service staff may often feel that information collection requirements are imposed upon them and take them away from what they consider to be the work that really matters. In addition, they may distrust funders' or community leaders' ability to even know what information is the most important to collect.

Understanding the perspective of case managers can inform how to proceed in implementing your system. Case managers must be involved as early as possible in the decision making about why the community wants an MIS and how it will use it. But once a system is purchased, it is most important that the MIS work when it is first deployed, or that problems be addressed very soon after. There is only a small window in which to capture users' confidence in the system. Seeking out their feedback will help to identify problems as soon as possible.

The likelihood that the system will in fact work when deployed can be enhanced by planning for and managing the change process. You must expect the unexpected and take a deliberate approach to establishing new policies and procedures, such as those related to confidentiality of data, access to data, and how changes will be disseminated. In addition, training should be carefully planned and expertly provided. Case managers will likely need a social service person to help them relate the MIS to their work, in addition to technical training. Your community must also have realistic expectations about the pace of implementation and the point at which you will have reached your goal of system integration, which may be a full year or more after you purchase your system.

Despite the challenges, however, choosing and implementing management information systems are an everyday occurrence in today's Information Age. Communities looking at a homelessness MIS today are advantaged by the fact that many previous pitfalls and confusions have been worked out by designers and implementers, and the expertise is now available to allow for a relatively smooth transition. As long as you know where you want to go, you can find many helpful paths to get you there.