

The Austin Homeless Management Information System, ServicePoint, Gains Momentum

By: Kerri Thompson

Everyday, many homeless individuals in the Austin community depend upon the availability and delivery of homeless services. In recent years, it has become a top priority to make these services more effective in order to improve the quality of life for homeless men, women, and children.

In 2001, the Austin community of social service providers began using ServicePoint, the web-based Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The Austin HMIS is funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and is sponsored by the Austin Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation Center (ATCMHMR).



According to the July 30, 2004 Federal Register, HUD HMIS Data and Technical Standards, "An HMIS is a computerized data collection application that facilitates the collection of information on homeless individuals and families using residential or other homeless assistance services and stores that data in electronic format." As of last year, all Continuum of Care funded programs are now required to use an HMIS to collect data on services and service recipients.

Although inputting data may be a daunting task at times, the HMIS data collected diligently by caseworkers has assisted the Austin community in providing important data to community planners and funding entities. The latest annual report to the Continuum of Care's Homeless Task force showed that in the past year, Austin homeless service providers had served 8,000 unduplicated homeless persons.

Currently, there are about 75 users entering data into ServicePoint. The hard work of these users must be commended, because data input takes away from time that could have been spent face-to-face with the client. In addition, HUD has not increased funding to support the extra time it takes to enter the data, leaving agencies under-compensated.

HUD has stated that an important goal of the HMIS will be to identify demand, needs, and gaps in services by tracking how clients are served. HUD hopes that future analysis of client data can help determine the effectiveness of current programs and services and help to find solutions to reduce homelessness.

One benefit of using ServicePoint is the ability for agencies to use customizable assessment tools to collect data both agency and community leaders have identified as crucial to planning and service provision missions. With client consent, ServicePoint has the ability to maintain a centralized, secure, detailed client record across service agencies, reducing duplication of client records. ServicePoint also has the capability to allow service providers to refer a client to other agencies within the community. In time, ServicePoint will also allow caseworkers to increase more timely communication with members of other social service organizations. This goal may be met as ServicePoint participation continues to expand within the Austin community.

Since its inception, the number of participating agencies in the local Austin HMIS has grown from 8 to 19. The current participants include: ATCMHMR homeless services, Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, Austin Women and Children's Shelter, Caritas of Austin, Casa Marianella, City of Austin Downtown Community Court, Community Advocates for Teens and Parents, Community Partnership for the Homeless, Crime Prevention Institute, Foundation for the Homeless, Front Steps, Health Care for the Homeless, LifeWorks, Marywood Stepping Stones Program, Passages, Push-Up Foundations, SafePlace, The Salvation Army, and Vincare Services' St. Louise House.

The United Way of the Capital Area generously lends the use of its 211 database to the ResourcePoint section of ServicePoint. ResourcePoint allows caseworkers to search through listings of local agencies that are able to meet a specified need, and refer clients to agencies currently able to meet that need.



ResourcePoint also provides the ability to print out and give to the client a detailed description of the services offered by the listed agency.

For more information on the local Austin HMIS, ServicePoint, please visit <http://www.hmis.info> or contact the HMIS Program Coordinator, Elizabeth Gfell, by phone 440-4026 or 825-5831, or via e-mail Elizabeth.Gfell@atcmhmr.com.