Stepping Up Ohio: Addressing the Link Between Mental Health, Jail Stays, and Housing

Ohio Housing Finance Agency

Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

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OHIO **HOUSING** FINANCE AGENCY

IDENTIFYING A KEY POPULATION FOR HOUSING NEEDS:
Ohio's focus on re-entry, mental health, and homelessness

Across the nation people with mental health and/or substance use disorders are over-represented in the criminal justice and homelessness systems (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008). Studies show jail inmates who were homeless with co-occurring mental health and/or substance-related disorders were more likely to experience jail stays and be held in jail longer. Similarly, those who experience severe mental illness as well as homelessness are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system than similar individuals who are housed (Roy, Crocker, Nicholls, Latimer, & Ayllon, 2014). Jails have become a de facto holder for people who have high needs for housing with supportive services (McNiel, Binder, & Robinson, 2005), creating a set of costly short-term solutions that have sub-standard outcomes when compared to targeted housing and supportive services[1] (Rosenheck, Kasprow, Frisman, & Liu-Mares, 2003).

In Ohio more than 73,000 unique people access homelessness services a year. However, Ohio's policymakers and housing practitioners lack the data to identify areas of need for these Ohioans, and how to target housing and case management interventions to reduce both the cost and incidence of jail use and homelessness. Like most states, Ohio's housing solutions currently rely on the Point-In-Time count, which identifies the number of homeless individuals in the state on a single night in January. This count captures only a small portion of those experiencing homelessness and provides no details on mental health, substance use, or jail stay.

In recognition of the overlap, OHFA and the Ohio Human Services Data Warehouse (OHSDW) partnered with the Stepping Up Initiative in 2020. The partnership aims to reduce the number of people with mental illness caught in this revolving door, reduce the number of people needing psychiatric care who are in jail, increase local communities' systems of care, and increase housing options for people with mental illness. Stepping Up has used Sequential Intercept Maps (SIM) to determine where to focus resources to reduce the trajectory to jail of someone with mental illness. In Ohio, Stepping Up counties' SIMs strategic plans demonstrated the lack of shared data as a key barrier to achieving core goals:

1. Informing local and state leaders on the prevalence of people with mental illness who frequent public systems without getting better;

2. Informing local and state policy makers on how to use housing and healthcare to stop the cycle of people with mental illness from being in county jail and in homelessness systems;

3. Establishing a replicable model for other states and counties to aggregate data in similar data warehouses.

To address these issues and build evidence for statewide interventions, OHFA worked collaboratively with multiple state and county agencies, including Ohio's Continuums of Care (CoC), Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services, Ohio Department of Health, and Stepping Up to create the OHSDW, which combines data on homelessness, mental health and substance use, and jail stay. This partnership is developing evidence-based strategies to combat homelessness, reduce jail incidence, and create directed affordable housing for those most at need.

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1   A randomized control trial conducted in Ohio estimated that the state could save about $6,200 per person by allocating funds to PSH for those with mental health and substance use disorders, rather than leaving them in the revolving door of homelessness and critical justice services (Rosenheck et al., 2003)

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The Stepping Up Initiative with the OHSDW is a collaborative, innovative, replicable, and cost-effective way to address one of the key challenges at the state level: reducing homelessness through targeted housing interventions and supportive services. This collaboration provides Ohio's 88 counties and 78 local jails an unprecedented opportunity to address this barrier of data sharing to build housing solutions.

STEPPING UP WITH THE OHSDW: AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

OHSDW began collecting data in 2018 with the aim of developing a statewide, comprehensive strategy to alleviate homelessness through the analysis of multi-system data. By aggregating information about the homeless population in Ohio OHSDW can help practitioners, policy makers, and care coordinators throughout the state make more informed decisions about existing need, continued barriers to receiving appropriate care, and help build cross-sector solutions to homelessness.

The core of the OHSDW is local Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) data covering Ohio starting from 2012 and provided by CoCs . Data is collected on individuals who accessed one or more of the following services offered by the state's CoCs: Emergency Shelter, Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Re-Housing, Safe Haven and Transitional Housing. HMIS data includes self-reported demographic and health information, data on entries and exits, among other details.

This data is matched and paired with data from other agencies. For this partnership in particular, OHFA worked with Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services and Ohio Department of Health to collect data on mental health and substance use diagnoses, claims, and treatments, as well as mortality data. The OHSDW also began a pilot project with data from the Cuyahoga County jail, which is Ohio's largest county jail and annually houses about 26,000 inmates.

This matching process is one of the only state systems that provides the ability to understand how individuals move through multiple institutions. Key insights from this match have already shown that data matches between systems are critical for getting a better picture of mental health, substance use, jail use, and homelessness.

In Ohio, for example, the number of people accessing homelessness services has increased over time, from about 58,000 people in 2012 to 76,000 in 2018. Self-reported data on mental health and substance use shows that each year about 30% of those unique people who experienced homelessness also reported a mental health diagnosis, 11% reported alcohol abuse, and about 13% reported drug abuse issues.

However, pairing data with OhioMHAS, almost 95% of people who entered the homelessness system in 2018 had at least one OhioMHAS diagnosis, procedure, or claim over the prior decade, far higher than the percentages reported in HMIS self-reported data. In 2018, almost 67% of unique entrants had a mental health primary diagnosis over the past decade; 19.5% had a substance use diagnosis, and 4.4% had an alcohol-related diagnosis.

We are also able to determine a set of high-users in all three systems, which provides details on which areas, diagnoses, and jail patterns that require the clearest need for housing intervention to reduce future costs and improve housing outcomes for the most vulnerable populations.

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A REPLICABLE, COST-EFFECTIVE, AND EXPORTABLE MODEL

While this partnership is innovative and highly impactful, it also presents a cost-effective and replicable model for other states to use. As a trusted partner throughout the state, OHFA spearheads this program administratively but is directed and managed by a steering committee with representatives from each participating agency. This structure encourages buy-in and collaboration from multiple state systems. This has not only allowed the innovative data match to happen, but has encouraged a multi-state-agency focus on the importance of housing as a social determinant for health outcomes.

While the cost impact of this data warehouse is posed to be large, potentially up to $6,000 per year for all individuals who received more targeted care, OHFA requires only a small set of state resources and staff time to hold the data within a secure server system. A data-warehousing expert expends about 350 hours of time bringing in new data, matching datasets, and working through data issues. Two research analysts on staff help with reporting and OHSDW management. Given the collaborative nature between state agencies, it is also possible and plausible that health dollars could be used to fund and project expenses.

The structure of the OHSDW also presents a methodology to maintain data privacy. OHSDW uses a hashing algorithm to strip datasets of personally identifying information before data is brought into the warehouse. This maintains confidentiality and privacy, while also allowing us to conduct deep analysis at the individual level. This style of data matching would provide all state agencies with the ability to maintain data integrity and privacy, while moving forward with a data warehouse.

MOVING FORWARD

The Stepping Up project with the OHSDW provides an unprecedented look at the intersection of mental health and substance use, jail stay, and homelessness across Ohio. In a series of forthcoming reports and by working collaboratively with other agencies, OHFA will use data from OHSDW to help develop policies intended to reduce recurring stays within all three systems. For example, data will be utilized to better direct resources towards housing and supportive services. Rather than using outdated and incomplete PIT counts, this data can help guide resources towards those most at need for housing.

OHFA is also working to expand partnerships throughout the state, working to bring in data from state systems such as Jobs and Family Services and Medicaid. These additional data items can provide even deeper understanding of how to identify those most at risk for high-cost care, persistent homelessness, and substandard outcomes.

OHFA is honored to support ongoing efforts to identify and address those most at risk for high utilization of the mental health, jail, and homelessness systems. We hope that these efforts will allow practitioners, policymakers, and housing experts to make progress on reducing chronic homelessness among those with mental health and substance abuse issues, who also encounter the criminal justice system. While Ohio has made significant progress in reducing the number of individuals experiencing homelessness, the state still has a large unhoused population. This collaboration is a critical step in understanding the issues facing Ohioans and the solutions that can have the most impact on reducing homelessness.