Date: September 13th, 2005
Location: St. Louis, Missouri
Delivered by: Jeff Bullard, Director

2005 National Homeless Management Information Strategies Conference

The Canadian Experience:
Homeless Data Collection, Reporting and Performance Measurement

National Homelessness Initiative, Government of Canada

Introduction

Hello / Bonjour / Buenas Dias,

While I am truly excited to be here, it is regretful that our discussions are set against the backdrop of the tragic events that have taken place over recent weeks in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf Coast. While Canadians' hearts have gone out to the people whose lives have been devastated by Hurricane Katrina, I would like to take a moment to express our concern for the region's most vulnerable citizens: those who were already homeless before the disaster and those who were at-risk of homelessness, who have been deeply affected by the loss of their communities and the support systems that these provide. Although the topic of today's plenary is not directly related to ameliorating the current situation, we can only hope that the work that we do to alleviate homelessness will contribute to a better future for all.

I would like to begin by expressing my pleasure at having been asked to participate on this plenary. Since its inception, the National Secretariat on Homelessness (the NSH) has prided itself on strengthening the response to homelessness in Canadian communities. And, being your neighbours, we have followed your progress closely, "stolen" many of your best ideas, and learned from your many successes. Philip Mangano, Executive Director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness encourages what he has called "legitimate larceny" in recognition of the importance of "stealing" ideas that work. Let us take a moment to remember that we are working to better the lives of those who, for whatever reason, lack access to the fundamental human right of shelter – if we can continue to learn from each other, we will be better equipped to deal with homelessness in our communities.

Canada's National Homelessness Initiative

Before discussing data collection, reporting and performance measurement with a particular emphasis on Canada's data collection strategy, the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System Initiative, allow me to briefly outline the structure of Canada's National Homelessness Initiative.

Recognizing that homelessness affects the social and economic well-being of our communities, and that it undermines the human dignity and access to opportunities that

are the birthright of every Canadian, the government of Canada launched the National Homeless Initiative in 1999.

The National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) helps to ensure community access to services, supports and programs aimed at alleviating and preventing homelessness in all provinces and territories across Canada. The NHI operates within the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and is administered by the National Secretariat on Homelessness (NSH). The NSH provides ongoing program and policy leadership and advice in support of the NHI and to the Minister of Labour and Housing.

Promoting a model that encourages community planning and engagement by a variety of stakeholders, the NHI strives to provide communities with the tools and support needed to develop longer term, sustainable homelessness strategies. To further increase the knowledge base of communities, the NHI supports national and local research efforts that help to identify the current landscape, the underlying causes, and the trends of homelessness.

Knowledge and research are essential to understanding the multi-faceted aspects of homelessness. We recognized early that there was little credible information or reliable methodology to determine the size or scope of the homeless population on a provincial, territorial, or national basis. In fact, little was known about the total number of shelters throughout Canada and the services that they provide as well as the diversity of their clientele.

Thus, we were led to ask the following questions among many others: What sheltering services are currently provided in Canada? For whom? For how many? How many children do sheltering service providers house? What has driven individuals, families, youth and seniors to seek refuge?

Asking questions, as I am sure everyone in this room is well aware, is far easier than finding their answers.

The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System

Perhaps because Canada has a very small population, a mere 33 million people who are scattered over a vast territory (Canada is the second largest country in the world), innovative solutions, imaginative partnerships and creative ideas have played instrumental roles in the continuous effort to resolve homelessness.

In an attempt to address the knowledge gaps regarding homelessness in Canada, data collection in particular has been developed according to a unique and exciting model. While I speak to you with a certain degree of "HMIS-envy" – your ability to track an individual's progress as he or she moves through the continuum of support is truly an extraordinary accomplishment – Canada has, in its own right, been a pioneer in homelessness data collection. The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) Initiative, a key component of the NHI, aims to develop, deploy and maintain a community-driven national information system.

Launched in 2001, the goal of the HIFIS Initiative is to contribute to the alleviation of homelessness by increasing knowledge and understanding of homelessness issues. To achieve this vision, the HIFIS Initative pursues the following strategic objectives:

- to create and implement information services, tools and technology to support capacity development in shelters;
- to create a sustainable national network of data-sharing partnerships and manage a national database; and
- to negotiate and manage multi-stakeholder partnerships for long-term sustainability.

Community engagement in the development of the Initiative has been paramount to its successful implementation. From individuals experiencing homelessness to homeless service providers, the collective first-hand knowledge of these groups is tapped by the HIFIS Initiative through consultations, forums, and the establishment of reference groups. Created in consultation with community stakeholders, the HIFIS Initiative continues to work closely with them to establish a sustainable information system that serves the needs of the homelessness community, including those of homeless service clients, shelters, the communities that host them, and social policy makers.

The National HIFIS Initiative is comprised of 4 key components:

1. the HIFIS Software;
2. the National HIFIS Database;
3. the National Network of Shelter Service Providers; and
4. data analysis and dissemination.

The HIFIS Software is a user-friendly electronic records management system built for, and in consultation with, community stakeholders. It is provided free of charge as a means to collect information about the population using shelters while assisting in daily shelter operations such as booking-in and out clients, and reporting on shelter use.

Importantly, shelter service providers (SSPs) choose to participate in the HIFIS Initiative on a strictly voluntary basis. Furthermore, while a data export function is built into the HIFIS Software, SSPs maintain full ownership over the data that they collect and determine how and with whom their data will be shared.

By developing and signing a Data Sharing Protocol (or a DSP), shelters can share non-client identifying information with the National Homelessness Initiative, researchers, and other members of the shelter service provider community.

Since 2001, the HIFIS Initiative has taken a lead role in establishing a nation-wide network of data sharing partnerships amongst stakeholders, including service providers, researchers and all levels of government. As a result, a national database is being developed to help characterize homeless service providers and to collect key demographics of the homeless population accessing services. HIFIS data on homeless service providers and the people that they serve will help inform communities, support research, and aid various levels of governments with policy and program development.

HIFIS Export Data, housed in the HIFIS National Database, is characterized as the non-identifying client data fields that are shared between SSPs and the NSH. Shelter data shared with the National HIFIS Initiative describes shelter clientele and service use, but

does not store any personally identifying information. Client date of birth, gender and book-in and check-out dates are the only client-related information fields that are mandatory fields in the National HIFIS Database.

The Sheltering Service Provider List is a comprehensive list of known SSPs across Canada. This list represents the SSPs that the HIFIS Initiative knows to exist. The database includes such basic information as the SSP name, location, and its number of beds and, if known, the "type" of clients served by the SSP. Three years in the making, the effort has paid off as the Sheltering Service Provider List is paramount to macro-level analyses, ensuring a better understanding of the SSP landscape in Canada.

When coupled with existing sources of information and research methods, the potential of the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System as a platform for research is certain. As we continue to collect data in order to ascertain a comprehensive database that is representative of shelters across Canada as well as over time, the excitement generated by HIFIS continues to grow. Of the strategic directions identified by the National Homelessness Initiative, the HIFIS Initiative makes a significant contribution to two in particular:

1. to build and enhance partnerships of the community platform; and

2. to develop knowledge and understanding around homelessness to aid in the development of effective solutions.

A central focus of the Initiative is partnership building; the HIFIS Initiative is community-driven and it is founded on partnerships with stakeholders. Strengthening and expanding these partnerships is critical to the efforts undertaken by the Initiative. The HIFIS Initiative has developed cutting edge technology and tools, which, combined with community-level application on a national scale, vastly increase the available data on homelessness in Canada, leading to informed and appropriate efforts in the search for solutions to homelessness issues. This data is also a critical tool for evaluating the results and impacts of the NHI.

Progress Indicators

Assessing the degree of success achieved by the HIFIS Initiative is an ongoing exercise. Progress indicators are currently being defined to measure the rate of the Initiative's advancement by providing evidence that certain results have or have not been achieved. Indicators enable NSH decision makers to assess progress towards the achievement of intended outputs, outcomes, goals, and objectives. For the purpose of evaluation, progress indicators for the HIFIS Initiative are divided into two themes: operational and data indicators.

Operational progress indicators measure the community value of the HIFIS Initiative and the model by which it is delivered. For example, tracking the number and details of community partnerships established through the Initiative is important to cultivating a community driven approach. Direct communication with the SSP community through national workshops, the HIFIS help desk and via the Regional Coordinators of the HIFIS Initiative occurs on a continual basis. Further progress indicators include determining the

number of shelters covered by data sharing agreements relative to the known universe of shelters thus providing an indication of SSP involvement in the Initiative. The use of homeless service provider questionnaires helps to identify outstanding needs and to gauge community perceptions of the project.

Data progress indicators measure the extent to which stakeholders participating in the HIFIS Initiative are collecting and sharing data, the value of the data being collected, and the value of the NHI in acting as a national information source to stakeholders. The use of data progress indicators, such as the number of custom reports generated for the SSP community, the percentage of known sheltering service providers exporting data, and the percentage of known beds represented through data exports, assists in enhancing the operations, impact, and value of the HIFIS Initiative. The thoughtful definition of such indicators allows many facets of the project to be independently reviewed. Ongoing evaluation maintains and reassesses HIFIS Initiative direction – helping the NHI program to stay open, accountable and flexible.

To date, the response to the HIFIS Initiative has been overwhelmingly positive:

- Over 800 sheltering service providers are included on the HIFIS Initiative National Shelter List for a total of 20,000 beds.

- Since 2001, 1, 091 individuals from across Canada were trained in the system, representing 237 organizations during 105 training sessions.

- Through the Digital Inclusion Partnership, Microsoft has agreed to donate 300 operating systems and office suites to the SSP community; the Systems Branch of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) / Social Development Canada (SDC) has contributed approximately 400 computers to over 250 shelters across Canada; the Computers for Schools program of Industry Canada has agreed to respond to requests from shelters for computer hardware, hardware upgrades and technical support; and TelecomPioneers of Canada have committed to provide computer technical support and training based on the needs identified by the individual communities and sheltering service providers.

- Of the 182 SSPs that have signed data sharing protocols at a national level, 8 of these communities have reached data threshold, where data exports represent 75% of the shelters and 80% of the beds in that community.

- Online supports were made available through the NHI national website. 50 community tools were produced and made available to the public for use by service providers. 72 regional implementations tools, including seven training manuals, were made available to the NHI regional coordinators to assist them in deploying HIFIS in their regions.

In the future, the HIFIS Initiative will continue to evolve from providing services and products directly to individual SSPs to managing large and sustainable partnerships with stakeholders. Knowledge partnerships, including large data sharing agreements with national shelter umbrella organizations and urban cities, will enable the HIFIS Initiative to

play a stronger role in data management and analysis for policy and research purposes. By handing over much of the direct implementation to large stakeholders, the following benefits are feasible:

- The development of a sustainable, community-based system with reduced federal involvement;

- Greater community ownership over processes and outcomes; and

- Increased federal research and policy formation through data analysis and dissemination.

Research and Analysis

Analysis of HIFIS Data is integral to improved understanding of the complexity of homelessness, including its magnitude, characteristics and causes. While complete and comprehensive data regarding shelter users is vital, we recognize that, in the meantime, we must go the next step and link homeless service providers in order to collect comprehensive information about the homeless population. Turning to the National Research Program (NRP) as a secondary source of information on homelessness is essential to understanding the homelessness landscape in Canada. The NRP helps to foster the development and assessment of appropriate and effective responses to homelessness at the local and national levels. Working closely with the HIFIS Initiative, the Research and Strategic Analysis teams endeavour to further realize the NHI research agenda to understand and to develop knowledge of homelessness issues.

Consultations with researchers and other partners resulted in the 2003-2006 research agenda that focuses on six areas: health; justice; immigration; cycles of homelessness; education, employment and income; and the North. Most NHI-funded research projects require that the researcher establish a partnership with a homelessness service provider so that those providing services to the homeless can increase their capacity and knowledge. For the researcher, the partnership gives first hand knowledge of the topic being researched. This collaboration between researchers and shelter and homelessness service providers has led to the development of partnerships between researchers and community-based agencies, helping to produce relevant and meaningful research. The research findings and resulting projects have been distributed through a variety of media to increase awareness and understanding.

The Strategic Analysis Team provides strategic syntheses of information from research projects, community planning documents, the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System and other relevant sources. Analysis works to asses impacts made and outstanding challenges faced by the NHI with respect to the root causes of homelessness; the circumstances faced by homeless and at-risk persons; the sub-populations of homeless people; the "continuum of supports" for homeless people; and the sustainability of the homelessness effort as affected by partnerships, community capacity building and project funding. This component of the NRP contributes to increased understanding, sharing and development of best practices at the local level, which is vital to making effective use of scarce resources and sustaining community efforts over the long term.

Strategic Analysis and Research and the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System Initiative come together under the National Homelessness Initiative to help foster the development and assessment of appropriate and effective responses at the local and national levels.

The National Homelessness Initiative recognizes that homelessness does not exist in a vacuum – its presence within society has far-reaching consequences for individuals, communities, and various sectors. The issue is complex, as both the people and the factors that lead to homelessness are varied and diverse. The NHI was designed with such concerns in mind, and strives to understand the issues in order to develop an effective strategy for alleviating homelessness.

Recognizing that knowledge is the foundation of strong social policy, the National Homelessness Initiative is committed to broadening the scope of research on homelessness in Canada.

Thank you.