

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Frequently Asked Questions

Note: This FAQ is for the Indiana “Balance of State.” The Indiana Balance of State covers all of Indiana except for Marion County. If your agency is located in Marion County, please contact CHIP at 317.630.0853 for more information.

1. What is the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)?

HMIS is a computerized, web-based data collection system that tracks the nature and scope of human service needs at an individual agency as well as across a Continuum of Care. HMIS is specifically designed to capture uniform client level data over time to understand the characteristics and service needs of men, women and children.

2. Who is in charge of the HMIS?

The Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA) is responsible for implementing the HMIS. IHCDA organizes trainings, user groups, and technical support. IHCDA is also the liaison between the user agencies and Foothold Technology, the HMIS software vendor.

3. Who should use HMIS?

Any agency that serves low-income persons, homeless persons, or persons at risk of becoming homeless should consider using HMIS. The more agencies that use HMIS, the better the data. The better the data, the greater the benefits to the agency and the community. Some agencies are required to use HMIS if they receive certain types of funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Although the name of the program is the “Homeless” Management Information System, the program is used by many different types of social service agencies.

4. What are the benefits of using an HMIS?

HMIS has many potential benefits, such as:

- Better coordination of supportive services
- Less duplication of intake and assessment
- Track client outcomes
- Print reports at the touch of a button
- Analyze data by population, subpopulation, gender, age, etc.
- Generate an unduplicated count of persons served
- Educate your community with good, hard, numbers
- Use data to communicate more effectively with funders and donors

5. Can you give me some specific examples of these benefits?

- A supportive housing program analyzed their HMIS data by subpopulation and discovered that clients who were also military veterans had a much shorter length of stay than any other subpopulation. The agency realized there was a need to develop better collaborations with local veteran’s service organizations. This issue would not have been discovered without the ability to analyze data using HMIS.

- A homeless program administrator routinely spent over 40 hours preparing their HUD Annual Progress Report (APR). With HMIS, the administrator simply clicks on a button that says “Print APR.” The entire process takes less than five minutes. By using the HMIS, administrative time is significantly reduced, allowing staff to spend more time working directly with the clients.

- The United Way calls and wants to know the average age of a homeless person in your community. They want to use the information as the centerpiece of their annual giving campaign. HMIS can be used to quickly generate information needed by funders.

6. What are the risks of HMIS?

The main risk of HMIS revolves around privacy and confidentiality. More often than not, consumers willingly give out their personal information -- because they are more concerned about getting food, shelter, and services. They are concerned about *survival*. Because of this, it is important to safeguard their dignity and their data.

The HMIS has several built-in security precautions. First, the HMIS software has a multi-level "permission" structure governed by passwords. A password allows the user to see only the data that is relevant to them. The systems also uses 128 bit encryption technology - the same technology used for online banking - to render the database unreadable to anyone who attempts an unauthorized use of the system. In addition, IHCD has developed client consent forms (to inform clients of their rights) and Agency Partner Agreements, and a user Code of Ethics to ensure the data is used and collected responsibly. Lastly, the government will not see any client level data.

7. How much does the HMIS cost?

Fortunately, HMIS is not an unfunded mandate. For homeless shelters and homeless programs, about 75% of the cost of HMIS is covered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The remaining 25% comes from a variety of sources, including annual user license fees.

8. How much are the annual user license fees?

Currently the first user license will cost \$300 per year. The second user license will cost \$240 per year, the third license will cost \$180 per year, and the fourth license will cost \$120. Additional user licenses are \$60 per user per year. HMIS can result in cost-neutral or cost savings by reducing the amount of administrative time spent on programs. However, IHCD is making every effort to ensure that HMIS is not a cost burden.

9. How many user licenses do I need?

To ensure privacy and security, every HMIS user must have their own user license. If there are five people at your agency who need to log on to HMIS, then you must have five user licenses. Sharing of HMIS user licenses is strictly prohibited. Not only does this compromise the security of the HMIS, but you could be in violation of federal privacy laws and subject to a substantial fine. As a general rule, most agencies will probably start with two user licenses per program. IHCD is more than happy to help you determine your needs.

10. Where can I get funding to pay for my licenses?

Some potential funding sources include:

- Emergency Shelter Grant (ESG). Annual fees are an eligible expense in your ESG budget.
- Local United Way "Venture" Grants. In the past, technology-related initiatives have received high consideration for funding.
- HMIS Technology Request. Occasionally IHCD has some funds available to cover some technology costs, including user licenses.
- Your local Continuum of Care or Homeless Coalition may know of other local resources that can help cover the User License fees.

11. What if my agency is a faith-based organization?

Faith-based organizations can have the same benefits of using HMIS as any organization. This includes the same access to training, onsite assistance, and technology funds. In addition HMIS is being customized to provide greater resources to faith-based organizations.

12. What if I don't have time to learn a new system?

IHCD understands that adopting a new technology can be a daunting task. HMIS staff is committed to helping your agency implement the HMIS in the way that best integrates with your normal workflow.

HMIS is expected to reduce the amount of administrative time spent on a program. Foothold Technology conducted a survey of their clients, and they indicated that administrative time spent on program reporting was reduced by as much as 80 percent. Imagine the amount of time you spend preparing summary data for your board meeting, combing through sign-in sheets, tallying up demographics. Using the HMIS, that same report could be printed in less than two minutes. Your agency may choose to use HMIS for a single program for a while, until you are comfortable with the technology. IHEDA will be with you each step of the way, whether it is on the phone or onsite at your agency, at a user group meeting, or through newsletters and conference calls.

13. Do I need to have AWARDS installed on my computer?

No. AWARDS is entirely web-based. All you need is an Internet connection.

14. What type of Internet connection do I need?

HMIS will work with a dial-up connection, suggested at 56K. According to HUD tests that compared all HMIS products, the Foothold Technology HMIS ran the fastest on the slowest computer.

Of course, as with the rest of the Internet, the faster the connection, the faster the HMIS will run. Therefore, IHEDA recommends using a "broadband" Internet connection, such as cable modem, DSL, or ISDN.

15. Can Domestic Violence programs use HMIS?

No, domestic violence programs are prohibited from using HMIS according to the Violence Against Women Act of 2005.

16. OK. I'm ready to go. When will my agency begin using the HMIS?

Users at your agency must receive a one-day New User Training before using the HMIS. Visit www.indianahousing.org for a list of upcoming trainings on the HMIS page.

17. What is HMIS training like?

A general HMIS training takes 3 to four hours. It covers basic HMIS functions like Passwords and Client Intake, Services, Discharge, and Reporting. More advanced training is also available.

18. Where are the trainings located?

HMIS training is offered periodically throughout the state as well as via online Webinars. Check out our website for a complete calendar.

19. Who should attend HMIS training?

Everyone at your agency who will be using the HMIS should attend HMIS training, as well as anyone who will be collecting information about your clients.

20. I'm not signed up for training yet. How will I know what is going on in the meantime?

Check out the HMIS page on our website at www.indianahousing.org