

Investigating Data-Sharing in Hudson County, New Jersey

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I. Abstract

Title: Improving Data-sharing in Hudson County, New Jersey

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In this capstone, I coordinated with the Corporation for Supportive Housing's (CSH) Senior Program Managers Gabriel Schuster and Cassondra Warney over an eight-month period to deliver a strategy that will address the lack of supportive housing in Hudson County, New Jersey. Through qualitative research including case studies and interviews with relevant stakeholders, I analyzed the barriers to data-sharing among government agencies, nonprofits, as it relates to HOME grants and Community Development Block Grants. Finally, I proposed solutions that promote more efficient data-sharing and ultimately generate improved housing outcomes in Hudson County. These solutions include advocating for buy-in at the state level, identifying what nonprofits, city, county and state officials' work relates to homelessness, and designating an official to advocate for improved data-sharing at the state-level.

II. Acknowledgements

This capstone represents almost a year's effort to integrate two years of planning school knowledge and a lifetime of curiosity around systems change. I would like to sincerely thank my advisor Bernadette Baird-Zars for her insight and compassion throughout this process. In addition, I would like to thank Cassondra Warney and Gabriel Schuster of the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), for their time, energy and patience. And thank you to my friends and family who have tolerated my unsolicited rants on the importance of data-sharing to address homelessness.

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Executive Summary

Across the countries, leaders are struggling to meet the housing needs of the most vulnerable populations. Throughout its history, the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) has committed itself to generating creative, data-backed solutions to advancing their goals of connecting vulnerable populations with both housing and services that promote long-term stability. As a former intern and current Urban Planning graduate student, I engaged with CSH to support their efforts as they fulfill their grant-mandated responsibilities to serve Hudson County, New Jersey, with a particular focus on how the county might expand previous efforts to harness data-sharing as a means of combating homelessness.

The research I collected elucidated several key takeaways for policymakers, planners and other stakeholders in the supportive housing realm, namely that reactive, ad hoc measures to improve data coordination cannot be the sole response. The needs of vulnerable, unhoused populations far outstrip this capacity. Hudson County must establish a proactive approach towards improving data-sharing across its many systems that comprise its homelessness response.

With the influx of federal funding post-COVID, Hudson County, like many other counties across the country, can harness the power of coordinated, strategic planning to leverage funds across

counties. This sort of decisive leadership, as my research indicates, is necessary to bolster long-term policy goals. To facilitate long-term planning, track outcomes that support informed policy decision, and leverage funds to optimize outcomes in supportive housing, government officials must name data-sharing as a priority, commit to cross-systems communication, and invest time and resources into the practical implication of improved data-sharing.

Introduction

In September 2021, CSH received \$500,000 from Wells Fargo to pursue research in five municipalities across the country. The funding represents an effort to address the effects of racial inequities that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. CSH will serve as a technical assistance provider in coordination with these county planning grants.

This capstone project is one of the several research projects that CSH will pursue Hudson County, New Jersey. Research generated by CSH staff remains in its nascent stage, however CSH's partnership with Hudson County predates this grant. Indeed, this grant purports to serve the most vulnerable populations. CSH is an existing leader in this space, developing and deploying tools that target supportive housing services to these populations in Hudson County. One such tool is the Frequent Users System Engagement (FUSE) initiative. This tool identifies the most frequent users of certain systems and uses this data to target supportive services. CSH boasts a vibrant history of connecting its innovative tools with stakeholders who can deploy these tools to serve a large population of users. In September 2018, CSH announced a public-private partnership with Hudson County, New Jersey to expand the county's use of this tool. Specifically, the partnership sought to tailor Medicaid Services to the most in-need populations ("NJ DCA, Hudson County Partner with Hospitals to Fight Homelessness with Innovative Supportive Housing Program").

The Initiative combines the expertise of several stakeholders, including cities, states, hospitals and nonprofits in the supportive housing space to realize the goal of a housing first model of healthcare. Hudson County's Housing First Pilot Initiative represents a collaborative effort between Lieutenant Governor Sheila Y. Oliver, the Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and Hudson County officials. Based on previous collaborations, it is CSH's perspective is that the successful collaboration among stakeholders is a prerequisite to achieving the sort of systems-wide change to generate genuine impact in the supportive housing field ("NJ DCA, Hudson County Partner with Hospitals to Fight Homelessness with Innovative Supportive Housing Program"). Supporting CSH in this research at this moment is particularly pertinent to current conversations surrounding the impact of data in the public sector. In 2021, the World Bank published its World Development Report, tethered by the theme of using data for the public good. The report underscores the importance of deploying data to support the public interest, touting the capacity of data to help governments prioritize scarce resources, improve service delivery and increase government accountability ("Data as a Force for Public Good" 52).

Data-driven approaches towards addressing the homelessness crisis are proliferating across the country. Initiatives like Built for Zero and Openreferral.org both name data coordination and interoperable data as an indispensable tool in solving homelessness ("The Approach"). They identified the limitations of current efforts as failures of government officials to create avenues

for data-sharing, suggesting that the approach towards data-collection should privilege top-down approaches.

CSH itself has been involved in pay for success efforts to fund supportive housing, such as with the Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond (SIB), where they provided technical support (Starting with Stability: How Denver Is Breaking the Homelessness-Jail Cycle) .These programs rely on data to measure the success of social interventions, like supportive housing, to secure private funding. As Hudson County considers how to leverage data to support policy targeting homelessness, it is clear that developing interoperable, secure and user-friendly systems is a critical step. The question that I will address in this capstone centers on the specific weaknesses of the currents systems, and the proposed avenues for intervention.

Harnessing Data to Facilitate Policy Goals: Emerging Trends

Optimizing the use of open data provides an opportunity for governments to unlock over \$3 trillion in economic value according to a McKinsey report. Importantly, this Mckinsey report clearly identifies governments as the primary actors who can unlock this power, suggesting that an approach resembling top-down is the most appropriate mechanism to enact meaningful reform.

Further, the report identifies three vital roles of governments in the advancement and implementation of open data. Specifically, governments wield the capacity to enable value creation, manage risks and engage stakeholders (5). Many of the initiatives relevant to Hudson County rely on the coordination of multiple stakeholders. Further the benefits of open data extend beyond purely monetary benefits, into public benefits that honor the public good, offering enhanced accountability for public officials, insights into decision making, and insights into appropriate next steps (9).

When open data is scaled up, there is greater opportunity to unlock value. The potential for the government to unlock value is not limited to one silo. Indeed, opportunities for involvement exist across for a role as a provider of data, a catalyst, a user and a policymaker. Questions that practitioners might ask themselves include:

- What data can be made available?
- What value are we trying to add?
- How often will data be updated (Chui et. al)?

Updating data systems is no small task, particularly in already cash-strapped municipalities. Per a conversation with a prestigious homelessness researcher affiliated with the University of San Francisco, they note that an effort to coordinate data-sharing between her office and the area's hospitals required 15 years of coordination and struggle. As the interviews with Hudson County

stakeholders contained in this report will indicate, coordinating data-sharing at the local level without significant top down support is fraught and inefficient.

Government can and should be decisive in its actions to incorporate open data. In the case of Hudson County, CSH and county stakeholders have demonstrated the importance of data in identifying at-risk populations and targeting interventions. With this new grant, CSH has the opportunity to learn from past obstacles and generate long-term strategies for coordination, growth and impact that considers not only immediate challenges but politics and advocacy as well.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Homelessness Data

Deploying the appropriate method to establish accurate counts has always been a fraught task. However, the extraordinary strain that the pandemic has imposed upon the homeless services/housing space has only exacerbated the issue at hand. Indeed, in a February 2-22 article published by CityLab, Kriston Capps explores the shortfalls of current data collection protocols, and how it has weakened our understanding of the impact that the pandemic imparted on the homelessness crisis in the United States. Between 2020 and 2021, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Point in Time, a nationwide yearly count mandated by the agency, registered a drastic decline in homelessness rates across many

categories. According to the report, from February 2020 to February 2021, the sheltered homeless population in the United States declined by 8 percent. This number should raise alarm for stakeholders, given that it deviates from the trends established over the last several years, where sheltered homelessness declined at a far more gradual pace.

Understanding the meaning behind these changes is critical for stakeholders in the housing/homelessness community. Indeed, if we are to begin to unpack the implications of the numbers, it is useful to understand how the federal government records homelessness. HUD's Point in Time Counts require homeless service agencies, like shelters, to record the number of homeless individuals using the services on a night. As those who have lived through the pandemic understand, each month of the pandemic engendered drastically different public health data, social norms, and daily challenges.

The federal government supported communities serving the homeless with broad, multi-faceted support. State, local and federal spending dollars often supported efforts to provide immediate housing to homeless populations in less crowded settings. Later, I will discuss how Houston seized the opportunity offered by federal funds to optimize outcomes for homeless populations. Often, federal funds often encounter barriers to optimized dispersion. These shortfalls are significant because failures to record accurate homeless counts impedes providers ability to both predict need and advocate effectively for resources from lawmakers. While COVID-19 has amplified these weaknesses, the PIT is highly variable, and thus our

reliance on the count to inform policy in itself compels stakeholders to reconsider the data tools on which we have historically relied. In other words, stakeholders and advocates are limited by the tools available to them in many ways.

Gleaning Insights from Hudson County's 2021 Point-in-Time (PIT) Report

The CityLab article findings are reinforced by the NJ Counts, PIT report published by Monarch Housing, with support from New Jersey's Housing and Mortgage Financing Agency. In this report, the county published data highlighting information on its homeless populations on January 26, 2021.

Immediately, the report underscores the challenges that COVID-19 imparted on homeless counts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Preserving methods employed in previous years to measure the homeless population in Hudson County was simply impossible at a time with dwindling resources and increased safety measures. In response to these limitations, Hudson County officials adjusted their strategy to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information as possible. One challenge that data collection staff encountered was limited staff.

While in the past, Hudson County officials relied on Project Homeless Connect (PHC) events coupled with street outreach events supported by volunteers provided opportunities to interact with populations experiencing homelessness, the reduction in events and staffing

compelled researchers to alter their strategy. Specifically, the labor burden shifted from volunteer-oriented staffing to homeless service agencies and outreach staff (3). Other adjustments implemented in this count included an expanded window of time to conduct the count (14-days), a reduction in face-to-face interactions with clients served, a reduction in volunteers working in close proximity with clients, an increase in the distribution of PPP distributed to volunteers, and new advisories that supported the reduction in close contact.

Altering this methodology alone is not enough to account for the effects on COVID. Indeed, the methods we deploy to understand homelessness, and the data points we collect, remain impacted by COVID. Indeed, when the bias is inherent in the very tools we deploy, one of the most important measures we can take to address this bias is to simply name the bias. To record interactions with a system, clients must, at minimum, interact with the system. These systems might include outreach teams, emergency shelters, and transitional housing. The Hudson County report comments directly on what the CityLab article noted: that the complications that defined the COVID-19 era resulted in fewer people reporting to use homeless service systems. (5).

It should also be noted that counties are responsible for the methodology they deploy to satisfy the requirements set forth by the PIT count. In other words, a level of both independence and ambiguity in the research design, providing avenues for improvement as well as areas of vulnerability. So pertinent are these count discrepancies, that Hudson County specifically omits

references to previous years “as the significant methodological changes have rendered the data non-comparable.”

Clearly, the landscape that COVID-19 has produced requires a critical reevaluation of our approach to data collection and data coordination mechanisms deployed by Hudson County officials. Still, there is evidence to suggest that this is a problem that predates the COVID era. Indeed, the authors of the report note that the strength of the unsheltered count varies from community to community because of these methodological differences (12).

The data collected to support this report derives from two main systems, the HMIS system and client level interviews. Among the most important takeaways from the PIT Report, imperfect as it is, are the areas for intervention needed based on the report.

Understanding the Data

Hudson County obtained data for its PIT report from two main sources. Most data (59.6 percent) of the data contained in the report represent the product of client-level interviews. The other 40.4 percent of the data collected for the report was generated through HMIS.

Importantly, the report identifies the three counties with Hudson county with the highest number of homeless people. On the day of the PIT County, Jersey City, New Jersey reported the

highest number of homeless people, with a total of 56.1 percent of the homeless population in the PIT count. 78.4 percent of Jersey City's homeless population was sheltered (9).

The city with the second highest homeless population during the PIT count is North Bergen, New Jersey. The city reported 116 homeless individuals, all of whom were sheltered (9). Finally, the city with the third highest count of homeless populations is Union City, New Jersey, reported a homeless population of 76 on the night of the count, representing 9.2 percent of the total homeless population. About 75 percent of the homeless population in Union City was sheltered on that night (9).

There were a total of 882 homeless people reported across the nine municipalities in the report, the majority of whom (77 percent) were housed in emergency shelter. Around 23 percent of these homeless individuals are chronically homeless, and 18 percent are unsheltered.

Importantly, as CSH's extensive research with its RDDI reinforces, the proportion of various ethnic/racial categories in the homeless population do not reflect their proportions of the general population. Indeed, the white population is underrepresented in the homeless count, with the White, non-Hispanic/Latino category representing 28.8 percent of the Hudson County population but only 13.2 percent of the homeless population. Like in many other communities across the country, black individuals are overrepresented (Black/African American, non-

Hispanic/Latino), representing 10.3 percent of Hudson County's population but 39.1 percent of the homeless population. Finally, the Hispanic/Latino population is underrepresented, comprising 42.7 percent of Hudson County's population and 27.1 percent of the homeless population.

Methods

To address my research questions, I deployed a multi-pronged approach towards understanding the challenges and opportunities for CSH as they address issues of data-sharing in Hudson County, New Jersey. I performed a literature review locating the current conversations on data processes to create transparent governments, the effects of COVID on homelessness policy and data access, and precedents for successful data coordination. I strengthened this analysis with primary research, where I interviewed five experts with experience in homelessness data from both Hudson County and New York City. I then synthesized this research to generate recommendations for CSH as they continue to engage with Hudson County.

Interviews

From January 2022 to March 2022, I conducted several in-depth interviews to understand the current landscape for data-sharing in Hudson County and identify precedents for innovation through conversations with other stakeholders. I interviewed two individuals with expertise in

data analysis located in New York City, and three individuals who at one point were engaged in homeless policy in Hudson County. In this section, I elucidate the crucial messages discussed by the interview subjects and summarize the most relevant findings for my capstone client. ¹

Establishing Inefficient Data-sharing as a Problem Across Communities

I. Wenfei Xu, Weaknesses and Lessons Learned from the 2020-21 Data Coordination Initiative at the NYC Department of Homeless Services

Many factors might impact a client's capacity to report accurate demographic information. But, its weaknesses reveal the critical lens through which we might regard data as a tool for policy. Specifically, there is certainly potential for improvements in data standardization and coordination amongst the organizations recording this data in response to shared goals. And, Wenfei Xu, a former data scientist with New York City's Department of Homeless Services (DHS) who was hired to look at the agency's data suggested, there might be some room for proactive thinking.

This initiative highlighted the importance of the question of how stakeholders might consider who has what types of data, who uses it, and how this data informs decision-making. While Xu

¹ IRB AAAU0054

analyzed data spanning many subject areas, she was specifically tasked with looking at street homelessness, and determining what factors might increase the likelihood that one would secure permanent housing. Broadly, street homelessness is a task undertaken by several nonprofits across New York City, generally divided across geographic boundaries, not unlike the tendency for CDCs to serve the development needs across neighborhoods. These providers recorded several types of data, and specifically providers were asked to record instances of interaction with the client. Other types of information recorded include client demographics. This information, Xu, noted, is not always accurate (Xu 2022).

She elucidated the methods underlying the data collection process as well. Indeed, there are representatives from these organizations who record data, which is then transferred to a person who will record the information in their computer.

II. Development of HomeSTAT

DHS Official with over 7 years of experience in NYC government (preferred to remain anonymous)

Over the years, New York City has made formidable attempts to address the need for data describing homelessness. A city official with over seven years of public sector experience in New York City government mentioned the development of HomeSTAT as an important milestone in reorganizing the Department of Homeless Services Street Outreach program. As a part of this

endeavor launched in 2015, the city of New York built out a case management system to collect better data, and better serve clients. They described this process as “something no one was doing,” underscoring the innovativeness of the approach towards homelessness data collection.

They were tasked with combining data systems to look at all homeless services on a unified platform. To do so, it is important to get people to agree on definitions. Indeed, much of the data that the city had was “incomplete.” In short, the city struggled with a data standardization issue. Towards the end of the project they wrote an internal report on service usage patterns.

The lack of coordinated data is so apparent in New York City that there are several examples of innovative efforts to address this weakness. Built for Zero, started by the former CEO of Breaking Ground, a supportive housing developer, was launched as a framework to support communities in efforts to generate solutions to homelessness through coordinated data-sharing. The Built for Zero methodology identifies several weaknesses in the current systems to reduce homelessness. Specifically, Built for Zero locates homelessness as an issue exacerbated by a lack of integrated command centers, community-level measurement, real-time data, and data-driven housing investments. Adopted in over 90 cities and counties and the recent recipient of a Macarthur Genius grant, the methodology’s relevance is certainly proliferating (“The Approach.”). Built for Zero developed its own standardization metrics, which renders it an adaptable package for communities to utilize to address their own problems with homelessness.

Other initiatives like openreferral.org are focused on interoperability of data in the social and public service sector. They have been working on getting data standards for various government services and creating a standard that other cities can adopt. Relevant to Hudson County, the founder has worked on HMIS data standard, according to the interviewee (Strategic Overview) .

In general, this interviewee identified the lack of knowledgeable staff as the number one barrier to adopting data-driven approaches to addressing homelessness. In the absence of government support, private organizations have sought to address the gap.

Part II. Successful Experiences Implementing Data-Sharing in Hudson County Provides Insight into Strengths and Opportunities

III. Katelyn Ravensbergen

Hudson County has been experimenting with improved data-sharing protocols for several years. These efforts and the positive impacts they impart underscore that policy value that coordinated data-sharing can unlock . Interviewee Katelyn Ravensbergen recalls a one-time data-sharing effort coordinated with CSH, where they were able to take a list from the jails in

Hudson County and people who had the longest length of stays, compared it to the list of people recorded as homeless in the county, and determine the gap of who was being served.

In this scenario, CSH assisted with the data-sharing aspects of the agreement generated between the jails and Hudson County's homeless service agencies. They then repeated this process with the hospital system, identifying frequent users of the hospital system, and flagged these individuals. This initiative and the challenges that arose underscored the weaknesses in Hudson County's data-sharing mechanisms, as well as the importance that improved data-sharing mechanisms more broadly.

The need to develop supportive housing has increased over the last few years. According to Katelyn Ravensbergen, the Program Director for Housing and Community Development in Hudson County, New Jersey, where she oversees CDBG, ESG and HOME grants, building housing at a time of increased demand is critical to reducing pressure on the housing stock. However, building housing is expensive, and when developers want to develop, fair market housing is the most profitable option unless the developer is a community-focused agency. She has been working with CSH for many years with her initial contact beginning in 2015. In that year, the county was focused on implementing FUSE projects targeting housing people who had been cycling in and out of jails and homelessness.

High-quality data is important for advocating for funding. And, while homeless providers have demonstrated success in their data-sharing, they are less adept at sharing with housing authorities. There is a distinct need for jails and hospitals to develop systems to communicate. Ravensbergen remarked that agencies might be good at “one to one” data sharing, however there remains challenges to “pulling it all one level up,” with data-sharing that focuses on programs as a whole.

Despite these formidable challenges, she is generally optimistic, and recognizes the potential to buy in from multiple municipalities. Importantly, she identified a “big push from the state” as a mechanism that might generate significant improvements to data-sharing among municipalities.

IV. Understanding the Importance of Coordinated Government Systems

Carol Sainthilaire

Ultimately, Hudson County launched coordinated entry in 2015, however problems in data coordination remain. First, New Jersey has fewer funding sources than CoCs like New York City, which has access to CAPs. Second, not all CoCs use the same HMIS system. This lack of standardization impedes the capacity of stakeholders to clearly understand the scope of homelessness across regions, and coordinate to obtain funding. Carol Sainthilaire is CEO at Community Enterprises Corporation, a subsidiary of the Collaborative Support Programs of NJ

(CSP), a supportive housing provider in Hudson County, and a former employee at CSH. Since 2014, she has been trying to coordinate data to create a homelessness response system in Hudson County.

She worked on the first iteration of the FUSE program in Hudson County, New Jersey, where she had access to HMIS data. Importantly, Sainthilaire remarked that HMIS “is not good at collecting data,” and administrators required five years to respond to the requests for data needed to implement the FUSE program. Despite the challenges of securing the data, doing so ultimately unlocked new opportunities for the county to apply for housing first funding. Indeed, with data in hand CSH in collaboration with Hudson County were able to determine that 19-20 percent of people described as HMIS Homeless had experienced jail time.

In her current role at CSP, she notes that HMIS is only useful for measuring beds. In short, data on individuals who are unstably housed is missing and/or incomplete. Sainthilaire, like other interviewees, advocated for greater intervention at the state level. Indeed, she remarked that “So many agencies at the state level do housing but don't say it.” This suggests that the siloed information channels and the lack of coordinated goal setting impedes the recognition that many stakeholders are working towards similar goals. To address this, Sainthilaire remarked that the state should consider creating a state-level data depository.

On the local level in Hudson County, challenges endure. Sainthilaire describes a lack of political will to address homelessness in a decisive, coordinated manner. To generate enduring change, “the systems need to talk to each other.” Currently, the public funding available is not adequately suited to the projects in which the city is engaged.

V. Advocates and Their Role in the Call for Improved Data-Sharing

Former Hudson County Employee

Commented [1]: edit for anonymity

Other interviews expanded on the themes explored in previous discussions. Specifically, data-coordination can not only inform policy decisions, but unlock new value in existing policies. A seasoned Hudson County homeless policy advocate with experience in nonprofits and public sector at the city and county level detailed her time rolling out the county’s various relief programs. They argued that creating coordinated avenues for data-sharing amongst stakeholders is a crucial step towards solving homelessness, they said. Doing so is particularly important for unlocking the values that many homeless relief programs provide.

The interviewee previously coordinated efforts to keep a county-run warming shelter open, where she again was confronted with the need for data to generate support for homeless services. Indeed, she was tasked with convincing county leadership to keep the homeless shelter open seven days a week. A major barrier she encountered including resistance from administrative offices to provide reports that might support her arguments. However, she

learned that obtaining the support of higher level officials for innovative initiatives is an important component of successful advocacy.

She argues, like her former colleagues, that reform must start at the state level. Further, they noted that it might be useful to create an office of homelessness at the state level to coordinate these activities, right out of the governor's office. Securing face-time with the state is arduous, however, Moore suggests that coordinated advocacy is essential to generating tangible change.

Interview Takeaways and Implications for Future Work in Hudson County

These interviews present several important takeaways for practitioners in Hudson County. First, the practitioners I spoke with at Hudson County underscored the weaknesses in ad hoc approaches to information sharing, and many suggested that steps be taken to address the lack of data coordination at a state level. The question, then that remains, is how to mobilize state buy-in. Unfortunately, it is clear that access to the very data that is needed to convince stakeholders that homelessness is an issue worth mobilizing for, is limited by these weak governance practices.

Data-sharing is not also essential for policy formation, but also for advocating for federal funds. Indeed, many of the stakeholders interviewed expressed the need for interoperable and accessible data to share information, maximize grant funding and understand what funding vehicles exist.

Stakeholders in Hudson County across sectors should dedicate time towards mapping out the motives of actors across the state, local, and national supportive housing realm, identify their interests, and determine what data they need to convince them that improving data-sharing is a necessary goal.

Who is Succeeding at Coordinating Data to Improve Outcomes?

Houston Case Study: Coordinating Stakeholders to Create Resilient Homeless Policy

The challenge of addressing homelessness is not confined to Hudson County. Cities across the nation are grappling with the most efficient means by which they can house unsheltered individuals. Orienting ourselves around the concept of success in this field involves more than simply bemoaning the missed opportunities and system shortfalls. Indeed, it requires an assessment of what shape success takes.

Importantly, many cities have demonstrated extraordinary success in addressing the needs of their homeless populations. Specifically, Houston, TX, despite reporting stagnant wage growth and rising rents, has demonstrated remarkable success in coordinating stakeholders to serve their homeless populations. Indeed, homelessness in Houston is no minor issue. The city reported one of the lowest counts of affordable housing for extremely low-income families, a

number surpassed by Nevada. Further, Houston's Harris County is second only to NYC in eviction rates. Despite its formidable challenges, Houston leaders tasked with confronting homelessness in the city reflect a particular orientation around the causes of homelessness.

But Houston is an exception to these trends, its deviation from the national trends is nothing short of remarkable. In fact, the city's homeless population decreased by 54 percent since 2011. And the city is justified in making the remarkable claim that along with other cities in Texas, have effectively eliminated homelessness among veterans.

In 2011 the city undertook a broad, multi-stakeholder initiative to tackle homelessness. In other words, the city pursued a policy shift that funneled time, resources and personnel to the issue. Without this crucial support, the Initiative might have failed before it began (Ingwerson).

Houston's success in providing housing for their homeless population derives from their policy approach. Indeed, while other cities might rely on temporarily housing homeless populations, Houston has adamantly insisted that its homeless populations receive permanent housing. The impetus for this approach stems in large part from the city's homeless policy architect, Mandy Chapman Semple. There are several aspects of Chapman Semple's approach to providing permanent housing for the homeless that distinguishes her city's policy from other, less successful practices. Chapman Semple's policy is tethered by core principles, one of which seeks to understand the mental states that place individuals at a higher risk for homelessness.

Importantly, many homeless individuals experience mental illness, which suggests to Houston's policymakers that housing alone will not extinguish the cycle of homelessness. Instead, Houston's policymakers pursue a service-based housing approach.

Houston's homeless policy can be reduced to several key factors. Houston maintains a primary focus on scattered site units, with the goal of connecting vulnerable populations with permanent housing as a priority.

Still, Houston's homeless policy architects resist the tendency to demonstrate what some might consider counterproductive empathy towards homeless populations. The city does not commit to policies that might be perceived as making residents too "comfortable." In other words, interventions are strategic and decisive (Gass).

When analyzing a policy initiative, it is vital that we locate not only the policy objectives, but where the impetus for implementation exists. In other words, who pursued this housing policy, and generated the support needed to ensure that the program endured?

What is Houston's approach?

Securing funds to support homeless populations identifying, either implicitly or explicitly, the source of this homelessness, and establishing policy goals that reflect these priorities. In

Houston, policymakers prioritized permanent housing and service provision. These solutions also included an explicit stance on homeless encampments. Indeed, Houston leadership, unlike other US cities, endorses a policy that combines housing with services, to ensure that the fundamental barriers to maintaining long-term stable housing are addressed.

Houston provides an important context by which we might begin to discuss Houston's own approach towards addressing homelessness. Specifically, Houston arguably achieved some measure of success in its endeavors to address homelessness given the robust, top-down support that its initiatives received.

Indeed, the architect of Houston's approach to addressing homelessness received the robust support of not one but two mayors. The first special assistant to the mayor for homeless initiatives, Mary Chapman Semple served in this position from 2013 to 2016. Broadly, many credit Chapman Semple's strategy with reducing Houston's homeless population by nearly sixty percent.

When Chapman Semple commenced her position, Houston reported a homeless population of about 8,000. While addressing this challenge posed no small task, Chapman Semple pursued an approach that coordinated over 100 public and private agencies. This broad coalition was jointly led and coordinated by the Mayor's Office for Homeless Initiatives and the Coalition for

the Homeless. The plan, called “The Way Home” has since resulted in housing over 23,000 people (Keomoungkhoun).

Clearly, strong homeless policy requires a united framework towards addressing the web of stakeholders that define the homelessness policy space. In Houston, there are several factors that distinguishes Chapman Semple’s approach from other US cities. Importantly, she regarded nonprofits as professional service organization.. Further with broad, enduring mayoral support, Chapman Semple’s plan did not weaken over time, but evolved and improved to adapt to the new challenges that COVID-19 generated for homeless populations (Keomoungkhoun).

COVID-19 and Houston

Further, Houston’s program not only endured multiple mayoral administrations, but recognized opportunities for innovation that built upon its successes. These significant achievements represent a remarkable feat in itself. However, the opportunities for impact are now amplified with increased government funding. Indeed, when funding is coupled superior project management and coordination, the opportunities for impact are remarkable. Importantly, as Houston’s program has evolved, leadership has recognized the opportunity that cross-county stakeholder engagement might impart on opportunities for federal funding. Indeed, CARES Act funding, when shared amongst counties in coordinated efforts, represents a more tailored approach to addressing homelessness. Houston, already a leader in its field, partnered with

Harris County and the Coalition for the Homeless in July 2020. The plan will deploy \$65 million in CARES Act funding with the express purpose to house the maximum number of people that these funds will permit.

Specifically, the plan proposes to build 5,000 new homes over the next two years. Deemed the community-wide COVID-19 Housing Program, the program is both ambitious and unprecedented in its ambition. In the mayor's press release, the city emphasizes the unprecedented need for housing the most vulnerable given the effects of COVID-19. The commitments from both the city of Houston and Harris County are nothing short of remarkable. Indeed Houston County committed an astounding \$29 million to the fund, while Harris County dedicated \$18 million to the initiative. While the pursuit relies on a variety of federal funding sources, the majority of these funds are sources through CARES Act funding. Importantly, the city partnered with the Coalition for the Homeless, a Houston-based homeless services nonprofit to coordinate and implement the program. With their local knowledge and ties within the community that these funds will serve, they can facilitate an efficacious implementation process.

The plan also presents bulwarks against the shortfalls of public funding, actively engaging philanthropies to compensate for shortfalls in public funding. This proactive approach helps to support the longevity of the project, and provides a buffer against the evolving political realm

(City of Houston, Harris County and Coalition for the Homeless Announce Joint \$65M Plan to House 5,000 People Experiencing Homelessness).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Of course, initiatives like this cannot simply sprout organically. They require decisive leadership that orchestrates coordination amongst several stakeholders. Houston's case and particularly the city's leadership illustrates the critical role that data coordination, organized systems change and resilient policies play in combating homelessness. Chapman Semple worked under Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and former Mayor Annise Parker, who both supported the project. Without continuous political support, initiatives will weaken and risk failure over time based on evolving political whims. **Houston's enduring success provides several important takeaways for Hudson County.**

1. First, employing a top down support renders the homelessness intervention policies less susceptible to political whims helps to promote the longevity of an initiative.

Houston's program received support from two mayoral administrations

2. Continuous work must be done for outreach and communication In its plan, In Houston, the city:

- Engaged local property owners to identify properties with which to partner
- Partnered with local experts beyond those serving official public offices

Engaged philanthropies when public funding falls short

3. Treat nonprofits as professional services organizations

- Understanding that even those tasked with addressing homelessness are not merely service providers. They are coordinators, data analysts and project managers with specific expertise required to address homelessness at a comprehensive level

Recommendations

Based on the research collected, it is clear that:

- Data is an essential tool to leverage funds and generate clear policy
- The current modus operandi is far too reactive, resulting in missed opportunities for collaboration that can address the challenge of data-sharing with the resources it warrants
- Top-down approaches are more effective at generating the type of long-term reforms necessary to address homelessness and support the development of supportive housing
- Ad hoc solutions are not equipped to address homelessness in Hudson County
 - Leads to missed opportunities to apply for funding, share information and advocate for change

I recommend that CSH

- Investigate opportunities to engage state leadership around homelessness
- Identify what nonprofits, city, county and state officials' work relates to homelessness
- Create a stakeholder map to determine the current opinions of leadership towards homelessness policy, their importance, and the capacity to engage
- Designate an official to advocate for improved data-sharing at the state-level
- Cultivate ties between Hudson County stakeholders to define goals and next steps in data coordination
- Create a working group engaging diverse county officials with ties to homelessness policy at the local level that meets monthly with clear objectives to improve data-sharing processes
- Improve data-sharing processes is not an initiative confined to one or two city offices. The county should create a long-term plan that outlines the its needs, the stakeholders involved, proposed solutions, timelines and anticipated benefits

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