Improving Survey Outreach and Assessing Satisfaction Among DHS Homeless System Clients

January 2020

BACKGROUND

Homeless services in Allegheny County are coordinated through the Allegheny County Continuum of Care (CoC), the county's community-based homeless planning and coordination network. The CoC, which is the collective membership body of representative stakeholders engaged in ending and preventing homelessness in Allegheny County, operates under the governance of the Homeless Advisory Board (HAB); day-to-day operations of the CoC are the responsibility of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), which functions as the CoC's infrastructure organization. The CoC has a formal process for evaluating the performance of homeless services projects within the CoC each year. The CoC Analysis and Planning Committee (CoCAPC), a subcommittee of the HAB, is charged with developing and implementing this evaluation process. While project evaluation has historically focused on housing and self-sufficiency outcomes for clients and administrative performance of homeless services providers, the CoC has recently tried to collect client experience and satisfaction data, with a goal of incorporating this information into the project evaluation process. This approach is in line with recommendations made by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that CoCs consider client experience and satisfaction data (e.g., perceived quality of care, effectiveness of intervention) as part of their process of evaluating and prioritizing projects for funding. The CoCAPC worked with DHS to develop a standardized client experience/satisfaction survey to collect this information and will determine how to incorporate its findings into scoring measures and to adapt future survey practices to collect system-wide client experience feedback.

This report describes the pilot process for the development and administration of the survey, analyzes its findings, and discusses insights and recommendations for future survey administration.

METHODOLOGY

Survey design

The survey tool was designed collaboratively by the CoC and DHS. It consists of 27 questions in areas such as intake and program processes, staff interactions, self-reported outcomes, satisfaction and demographics. See **Appendix A** for the full survey tool.

Survey administration and data collection

Survey data were collected from mid-February through mid-April 2018 across 27 agencies that provide housing and homeless services in Allegheny County.

Agency staff, trained by DHS staff, recruited clients from housing programs (e.g., bridge, rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing) to take the survey. A recruitment flyer (**Figure 1**) and recruitment tip sheet (**Appendix B**) were developed to facilitate and standardize recruitment by housing program staff. Participating clients could respond to either an SMS (text) or a web-based survey, indicating which agency and program they were receiving services from and providing feedback by entering a unique four-digit code (found on the flyer) in the survey.

In addition, the survey tool was completed by DHS staff not affiliated with the shelters during in-person interviews with clients in emergency shelters. The interviews were conducted at nine emergency shelters within the two-month period to collect feedback from as many clients as possible.

FIGURE 1: **Survey Recruitment Flyer**
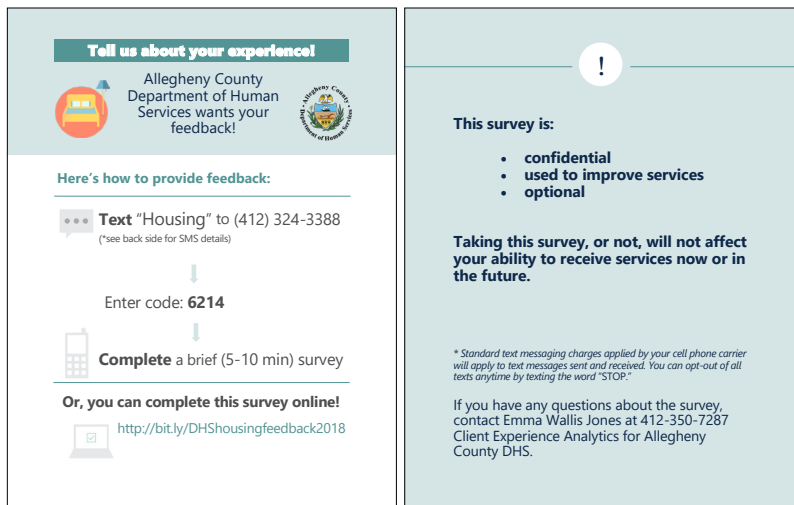
Survey participants

The survey response rate across providers is shown in **Table 1**. The overall response rate for the survey across all programs and providers was 12% (ranging from 0% to 60%) with 257 total participants. Aside from some variation across program types, the client sample is representative of the homeless population with the exception of permanent supportive housing clients (under-represented) and emergency shelter clients (over-represented). See **Appendix C** for full summary statistics comparing population and survey participants.

TABLE 1: **Response Rate by Provider (n=27 providers)**

NUMBER OF PROVIDERS	RESPONSE RATE
4	0%
12	≤15%
5	>15%, <30%
6	≥30%

Analysis

Summary statistics were calculated, and open-ended survey items were summarized.

FINDINGS

About half of participating clients reported having a previous experience with homelessness. Clients were asked where they were staying before entering the homeless program. Of the 248[1] clients responding, 21% reported staying with friends and family, 18% reported living outside (e.g., car, street, under a bridge, tent/camp), and 16% reported living in a shelter or other homeless program. Additional responses included coming from home (11%), jail/prison (3.1%), a hospital (1.2%), a rehabilitation or recovery facility (4.3%), another state or community (6%), or a hotel/motel (4%).

Client experience and satisfaction

The majority of clients consistently shared very positive/positive ratings and feedback regarding the intake process and staff interactions. When asked about overall program and staff ratings, responses were slightly more varied, but still positive. Clients also varied in their responses regarding program outcomes, but overall, they reported very positive/positive results. For full summary statistics, see the Homeless System Satisfaction Survey Pilot dashboard here: http://bit.ly/2018ACDHS_HomelessSystemSurvey.

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[1] This was an open-ended comment.
   Some clients listed multiple places.

TABLE 2: **Percentage of Responses Indicating Positive Feedback, by Question Group**

INTAKE/PROGRAM	STAFF INTERACTIONS[2]	OUTCOMES	SATISFACTION
97% said the intake process was very clear or clear.	73% said that staff always listen to them.	81% said that they are very prepared or prepared to obtain or maintain their housing.	83% rated the program they are in, overall, as excellent or very good.
92% said they are very involved or involved in the planning of their services.	85% said that staff always speak to them in a way they can understand.	84% said that the program they are in is helping them to obtain or maintain their housing (very helpful or helpful).	85% rated program staff as excellent or very good.
97% said that they understand what is expected of them very well or well.	82% report that they are always treated with dignity and respect.		
	83% said that staff always respect their privacy and confidentiality.		
	91% feel that staff are very sensitive or sensitive to their cultural values.		

On average, clients in bridge housing and emergency shelter programs reported slightly fewer positive results than those in rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing programs. For example, when asked to rate their program overall, 90% of permanent supportive housing and 98% of rapid rehousing clients rated the program as excellent or very good, as compared to 75% of emergency shelter clients and 74% of bridge housing clients.

[2] Staff interaction percentages include the highest/most frequent single response option (always, excluding the question about cultural sensitivity). Other percentages capture the top two most positive response options. Response options are item specific.

FIGURE 2: **Responses by Program Type**

■ Excellent ■ Very Good ■ Average ■ Poor ■ Terrible

Overall, how would you rate the program?
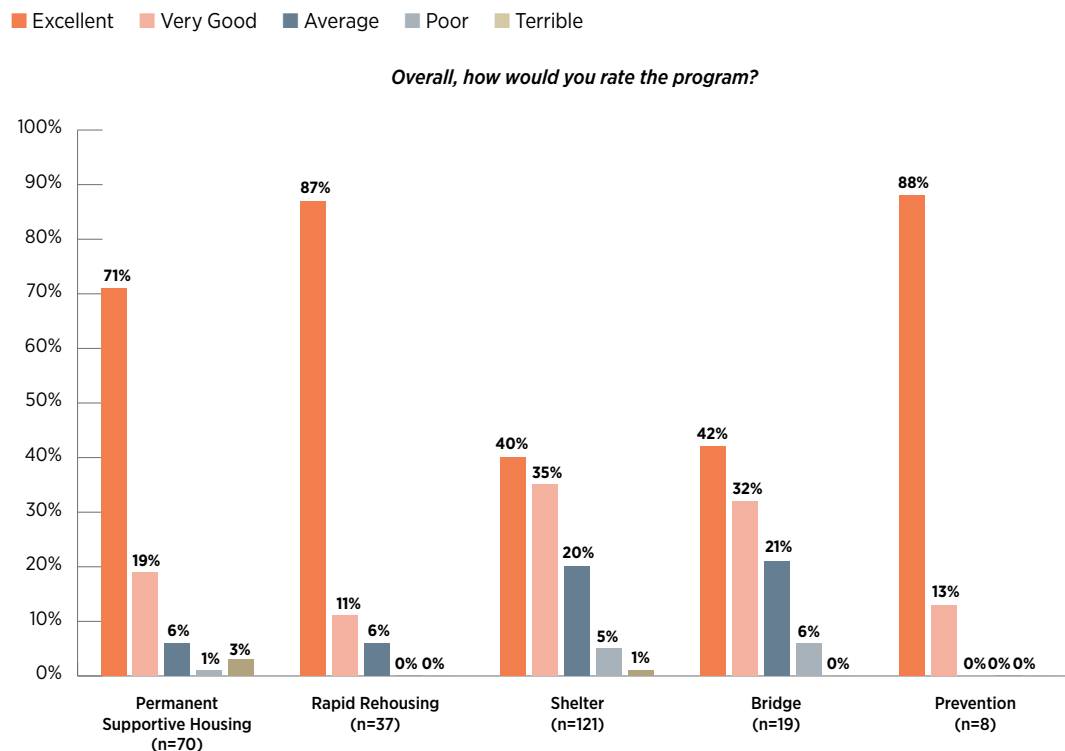
> *"The most helpful aspect of the program, even second to the financial assistance, are the relationships that I've built with staff. They have been supportive and meaningful beyond compare."*

TABLE 3: **Response Rate by Program Type[4]**

PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING	RAPID REHOUSING	SHELTER	BRIDGE	PREVENTION
7%	8%	31%	13%	6%

Of the 244 clients who identified what was most helpful about the program, 41% mentioned help with meeting their basic needs,[3] such as meals provided by agencies, housing or a place to stay, and access to healthcare. Clients also identified the support they received from agency staff (34%), help with getting connected to resources (15%), and help with paying for housing and utilities (9%).

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[3] As an open-ended response question, participants could indicate any number of things that were most helpful to them.

[4] Of all of the active clients in a program type during the time the survey was distributed, this is the percentage who participated in our outreach.

SUGGESTIONS, INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

"Checking in. While it may come off as just another ear amidst many ears that I have out there supporting me, it is an important one. The monthly check-in actually feels like it matters. It makes me feel like I matter. Checking in with [agency staff] just keeps me grounded, adds to my security, and is a reminder of the dignity involved in the process."

Insights from findings

Quantitative and qualitative findings confirm that staff interaction is important to a positive client experience and satisfaction with services. Feeling supported by staff and having access to the resources necessary to meet basic needs are reportedly most helpful to clients. Clients remarked on the value of staff working with them to build supportive networks and relationships within their communities while providing and connecting them to services to address their current and most immediate needs and building the supports necessary to maintain housing once it is achieved.

Quantitative data indicate relatively consistent differences between rapid rehousing/permanent supportive housing programs and emergency shelter/bridge housing programs. While the CoCAPC has identified a few possible reasons for this difference, a deeper dive into each of these program types could provide additional insight into these differences. The possible reasons that CoCAPC discussed are based on clients' status. For example, clients in rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing programs are more stably housed, whereas clients in shelter and bridge programs are still actively homeless, which could contribute to lower satisfaction ratings for these programs. Additionally, clients in rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing programs may interpret some of the survey questions differently, potentially with concern for maintaining housing through their program.

Insights from the pilot process[5]

Through this pilot survey process, we learned that it is easier to get client participation with facility-based programs as illustrated by higher response rates for bridge and shelter program types. Additionally, provider staff reported receiving feedback that the survey was too long, and therefore more challenging for anyone with limited literacy. Our effort to develop a survey tool with relevant questions for all program types may have also caused confusion among participants in various programs, contributing to some variation in response by program type. For the next iteration of this survey, we will look at surveying by program type as well as recruiting clients and distributing the survey in ways that may be most effective and relevant to that program type.

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[5] Process insights from this successful pilot have informed ongoing client experience data collection.

"The stability of being able to house the children and then the staff helping to prepare. It's a wealth of information and programs contained in one environment."

Questions on this pilot survey tool contributed to the development of standardized client experience questions with relevance across DHS program areas. Future iterations of this survey tool should be specific by program type and reduced in length, to have no more than 10–15 questions in total. We recommend that program-specific surveys include no more than five standardized questions consistent across program areas, a few system-wide questions, and one or two program-specific questions.

The development of a public dashboard to for sharing quantitative findings with provider agencies and staff is also being piloted with this iteration of the survey. This dashboard allows viewers to see the aggregate response rates across the homeless system, to sort by program type, and to view by demographic characteristics. A second visualization allows providers to view responses specific to their agency, and compare those responses to the system-wide aggregated responses, using their unique four-digit code (due to client confidentiality concerns, agency data cannot be filtered any further). Pending agency response and usage of this dashboard, additional visualizations might be developed in the future.

CONTENT AND ANALYSIS
Emma Wallis Jones, Mike Mitchell and Erin Dalton

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A: SURVEY TOOL — SMS FORMAT

Thank you for taking the time to tell us about your experience with homeless and housing services. Please enter the 4-digit code found on your survey flyer.

To confirm you are receiving services from the <Agency, Program Name> program, reply Y.

If not, re-enter the 4-digit code found on your flyer.

You may reply with SKIP to skip any question. This survey will take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete.

How clear was the intake process at the <Agency, Program Name> program?

A. Very clear

B. Clear

C. Unclear

D. Very unclear

How involved are you in the planning of your services?

A. Very involved

B. Involved

C. Not so involved

D. Not at all involved

How well do you understand what is expected of you?

A. Very well

B. Well

C. Not well

D. Not at all well

Overall, how would you rate the <Agency, Program Name> program?

5- Excellent

4- Very good

3- Average

2- Poor

1- Terrible

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APPENDIX A

Do staff listen to you?

A. Always

B. Sometimes

C. Rarely

D. Never

Do staff talk to you in a way that you can understand?

A. Always

B. Sometimes

C. Rarely

D. Never

Do staff treat you with dignity and respect?

A. Always

B. Sometimes

C. Rarely

D. Never

Do staff respect your privacy and confidentiality?

A. Always

B. Sometimes

C. Rarely

D. Never

Are staff sensitive to your cultural values?

A. Very sensitive

B. Sensitive

C. Not so sensitive

D. Not at all sensitive

How would you rate the staff at the <Agency, Program Name> program?

5- Excellent

4- Very good

3- Average

2- Poor

1- Terrible

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APPENDIX A

How prepared do you feel to obtain/maintain housing?

A. Very Prepared

B. Prepared

C. Unprepared

D. Very Unprepared

What makes you feel more or less prepared to obtain/maintain housing at this time?
Please describe your experience.

Is the <Agency, Program Name> program helping you to obtain/maintain housing?

A. Very helpful

B. Helpful

C. Not so helpful

D. Not at all helpful

When you think about the services that you receive from the <Agency, Program Name> program, what is most helpful? Please tell us about your experience.

When you think about the services you receive from the <Agency, Program Name> program, what needs to be done better? Please tell us about your experience.

On a scale from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely), how likely is it that you would recommend this program to someone needing these services?

What's the most important reason for your score (likelihood of recommending or not)?
Please tell us about your experience.

How long have you been in this program?

A. Less than one week

B. 1 to 3 weeks

C. 1 to 2 months

D. 3 to 6 months

E. 7 months to 1 year

F. More than 1 year

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APPENDIX A

Where were you staying before this program? Please reply with your response.

Is this your first experience with homelessness?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Prefer not to answer

The next few questions ask how you identify yourself. If you don't want to answer these questions, you can reply with SKIP.

What is your age?

A.18-24

B. 25-34

C. 35-44

D. 45-54

E. 55-64

F. 65+

G. Prefer not to answer

Please indicate your ethnicity.

A. Hispanic and/or Latinx

B. Not Hispanic and/or Latinx

C. Prefer not to answer

You may also reply with a description.

Please indicate your race

A. African American

B. Asian

C. American Indian

D. Multiracial

E. White

F. Prefer not to answer

You may also reply with a description.

Please indicate your gender identity.

A. Female

B. Male

C. Transgender Male

D. Transgender Female

E. Prefer not to answer

You may also reply with a description.

Please indicate your sexual orientation.

A. Heterosexual/straight

B. Gay

C. Lesbian

D. Bi-sexual

E. Prefer not to answer

You may also reply with a description.

Thank you for telling us about your experience. If you have any additional comments about this experience, please reply with them now.

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APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B: HOMELESS SYSTEMS 2018 SATISFACTION SURVEY:
CLIENT RECRUITMENT TIPS

1. **Give brief overview of survey** (it can be helpful to do this at the end of a meeting)

   "Staff with Allegheny County DHS are conducting a survey of clients receiving housing and homeless services to better understand their experience and perspectives. The survey will help us improve services."

2. **Distribute Flyer**

   Make sure that they are aware that their responses will not be linked to their name and will not get back to you or the service provider, except in the aggregate with all other responses regarding the program/provider.

3. **Highlight some key features about the survey.**

   - Confirm provider/program/services they will be giving feedback about

   - Survey is confidential

   - Brief; 5-10 minutes to complete

   - Option to complete it online

4. **Feel free to answer any questions or help them start the survey**

   - Enter word to initiate survey and then **four-digit numeric code from flyer** when prompted

   - If needed, let them know about the opportunity to take the survey online, or through Facebook messenger.

** ADDITIONAL INFO: Text reminders to complete the survey may get more responses**

   - Provider staff should be sure to include information about terms and conditions and confidentiality.

   - Ex. **Please give us feedback! Text Housing to 412-324-3388 for 5-10 min survey. Numeric Code: #### Survey is optional and confidential and used to improve services. Std msg rates apply.**
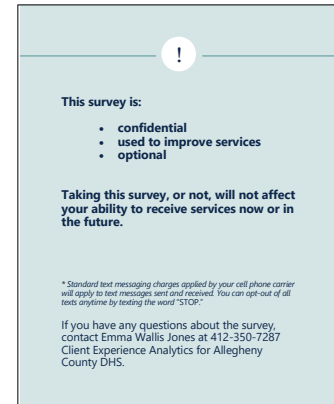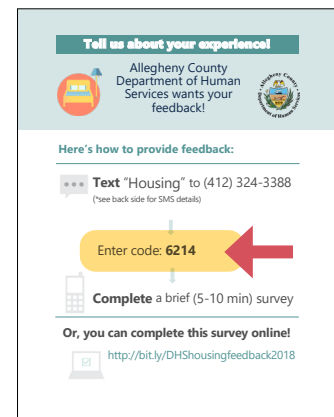
Questions? Contact Emma

Users may also use this contact if they have any technical difficulty while taking or starting the survey.

Emma: emma.wallisjones@alleghenycounty.us

APPENDIX C: COMPARISON OF SURVEY SAMPLE AND TOTAL PROGRAM POPULATION

Demographics of Survey Participants

CHARACTERISTIC	SURVEY SAMPLE		POPULATION	
Program Type	**%**	**n**	**%**	**N**
Permanent Supportive	27%	70	49%	1,052
Rapid Rehousing	14%	37	20%	438
Bridge	7%	19	7%	150
Shelter	48%	123	18%	398
Prevention	3%	8	6%	125
Gender	**%**	**n**	**%**	**N**
Female	43%	107	46%	2,077
Male	53%	132	53%	2,385
Transgender Female	2%	4	0%	6
Transgender Male	0%	0	0%	1
Gender Non-Conforming	N/A	N/A	0%	2
Refused/Prefer not to answer	2%	6	N/A	N/A
Race	**%**	**n**	**%**	**N**
African American or Black	41%	101	55%	2,415
American Indian or Hawaiian	1%	3	1%	36
Asian	1%	3	1%	25
Multi Racial	4%	10	4%	172
White	43%	106	40%	1,753
Other	5%	12	N/A	N/A
Refused/Prefer not to answer	5%	13	0%	16
Ethnicity	**%**	**n**	**%**	**N**
Hispanic and/or Latinx	6%	14	4%	146
Not Hispanic and/or Latinx	63%	155	96%	3,594
Prefer not to answer	18%	43	0%	16
Other	14%	33	N/A	N/A