



U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Interagency Coordination Tool Report

May 17, 2022

The Honorable Brian Schatz, Chairman
The Honorable Susan Collins, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate

The Honorable David E. Price, Chairman
The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Dear THUD Subcommittee Leadership:

In response to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is pleased to provide an update on the development of an “interagency coordination tool” to offer communities and providers clearer information about which federal definitions of homelessness apply to different household living arrangements, which federal programs may be available to address those needs, and how those programs can be accessed. The Congressional directive required USICH to “ensure the development of the interagency coordination mobile application tool includes external stakeholder engagement to ensure a user-friendly format and compilation of data.”

Since this directive was issued, USICH has re-assessed the feasibility and utility of this work, whether such a tool should be prioritized over other priorities and initiatives. Following internal discussions and those with key federal partners, we have determined that the utility of such a tool at the community level would be limited compared to the resources that it would take to develop and maintain. Further, we believe that other mechanisms could provide clarification and guidance more effectively. Therefore, we have determined that the development of this tool is no longer a priority.

USICH does not intend to develop an interactive mobile app or web-based tool. As part of the implementation of our forthcoming Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, USICH will work with federal partners to determine whether the materials generated by the interagency working group should be repurposed to create a public-facing resource for communities. Such resources may take the form of infographics, fact sheets, and webinars.

Enclosed please find our report that provides further background and context on how we reached this decision.

Sincerely,

Jeff Olivet
Executive Director

ATTACHMENT: Interagency Coordination Tool Report



U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary..... 1

Background..... 1

Stakeholder Engagement..... 2

Revisions..... 3

Conclusion..... 4

Executive Summary

In response to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is providing an update on the development of an “interagency coordination tool” to provide communities and providers with clearer information about which federal definitions of homelessness apply to different household living arrangements, which federal programs may be available to address those needs, and how those programs can be accessed. The Congressional directive also required USICH to “ensure the development of the interagency coordination mobile application tool includes external stakeholder engagement to ensure a user-friendly format and compilation of data.”

Since this directive was first issued, USICH has taken the opportunity to re-assess the feasibility and utility of this work as well as the extent to which further exploration of developing such a tool should be prioritized in relation to other priorities and initiatives. Following both internal discussions and those with key federal partners, we have determined that the utility of such a tool at the community level would be limited compared to the level of effort and resources that it would take to develop and maintain. Further, we believe that there are other mechanisms to provide clarification and guidance that will have at least as much if not more local utility. Therefore, we have determined that the development of this tool is no longer a priority for USICH and the Council.

Background

Among USICH and our federal partners, there is a recognition that different federal definitions of homelessness, and different eligibility criteria for federal programs, can create implementation challenges in communities.

Numerous federal agencies administer programs either targeted exclusively to people experiencing homelessness (targeted programs) or available more generally to low-income populations (mainstream programs). Programs sometimes have different eligibility requirements and use different definitions of homelessness. This can be confusing for people in need of services and service providers, and the differences can make collaboration and data collection difficult.

In 2019, then-Chair of the Council, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Frank Brogan, charged USICH with creating a time-limited Working Group on Implementation of Federal Definitions of Homeless to help address these issues.

The time-limited working group, which was chaired by Assistant Secretary Brogan and facilitated by USICH, was part of a larger effort to improve the federal government's ability to support communities to understand and use a range of different sources of data to capture homelessness, including the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count results and school year data from the Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) Program. The working group's primary focuses were to move toward a stronger shared vocabulary to describe the different living situations that are captured within the federal definitions of homelessness, and to develop a resource to assist providers in connecting households experiencing homelessness to federal resources for which they are eligible.

To this end, the working group developed a decision-tree approach to provide communities with clearer information about which federal definitions apply to different living arrangements, which federal programs may be available to address those needs, and how those programs can be accessed. The working group also set a goal to build an interactive tool that would help service providers and people seeking assistance navigate what federal programs might be appropriate, able, and available to assist a household identified as needing services.

USICH member agencies identified programs administered by their agencies that target individuals experiencing homelessness. The working group's approach captured the range of living arrangements experienced by individuals and families. This approach aligns those living arrangements with various federal definitions and the related array of federal resources targeted to people experiencing homelessness. The working group presented the decision-tree framework to the Council Policy Group in November 2019 and to the Council at the December 2019 meeting.

Stakeholder Engagement

USICH, with the Department of Education, held three listening sessions between November 2019 and February 2020. The three stakeholder engagements consisted of the National Association for Education of Homeless Children and Youth (November 2019), The National Association of ESEA of State Program Administrators (February 2020), and the Department of Education's Annual State Coordinators meeting (February 2020).

During the National Association for Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) conference USICH held a listening session in conjunction with our federal partners, Department of Education and Department of Housing and Urban Development, with attendees to obtain feedback on the Federal definitions and the work generally. USICH heard themes during the listening session that consists of pregnant and parenting youth, racial equity, the VI-SPDAT, a whole family approach, unaccompanied youth, and individuals being turned away from resources. For the federal Definition Working Group Tool, attendees shared their interest in learning the following topics:

- Understanding which federal agency can help with providing best practice guidance.
- Whether the tool would include non-federal programs?
- The integration of 211 services for this tool

- Understanding how the federal government provides flexibility for communities whose priorities may not match those of the federal government.
- Addressing the issue of doubled-up families and having that data incorporated as part of the VI-SPDAT

During the National Association of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) State Program Administrators (NAESPA) conference, USICH presented with the Department of Education (ED) during the Homeless Listening & Input session. During the session USICH explained the working group's time-limited focus to help communities quickly identify the resources that are available and how to help individuals access support from federally funded programs. The themes heard during this listening session included the following topics:

- Accessing Resources
- One Stop Shop Approaches
- Funding Availability Information
- Intentionality of including Tribal Nations and Coordination of Services
- The Integration of 211 services for this tool
- Affordable Housing and Livable Wages
- Understanding how Department of Education and Department of Housing and Urban Development are working to align their definitions
- Intentionality of incorporating the education system into CoCs
- Guidance that would simplify access to state IDs, birth certificates, and social security cards for individuals experiencing homelessness, including unaccompanied youths Tool being interactive for training purposes
- Piloting the tool
- Sustaining services when a student experiencing homelessness leaves the school district
- Utilizing funding from Natural Disasters for students experiencing homelessness
- Data Collection
- Intentionality with funding opportunities to serve underserved kinship caregivers (e.g., grandparents) and unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 10
- Youth in and exiting foster care

During the ED Annual State Coordinators meeting, USICH and ED once again partnered to host a listening and input session on the decision tree tool. During this session, the following questions were posed to stakeholders:

- How would this kind of tool be helpful to you in your work? What's missing?
- We're thinking about different platforms for how this tool could be accessed (e.g., online, phone app, printed document) – do you have preferences for how you might access this kind of tool?
- What additional stakeholder groups should we be talking to as we continue to refine our approach? What about when we're ready to test (and eventually launch) the tool?

Revisions

Prior to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, USICH intended to hold stakeholder engagements until March 2020, followed by:

- **April-May 2020:** Revise proposed tool in response to stakeholder feedback
- **June 2020:** Test tool with select stakeholders
- **July-August 2020:** Revise tool in response to stakeholder feedback

- **September 2020:** Release tool

While USICH was unable to take the above steps during this time, USICH was able to pursue discussions with universities with technical expertise in mobile applications. USICH built a relationship with the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and discussed having their master's students develop a prototype mobile application as part of a capstone or independent study. Ultimately, after USICH engaged in internal discussion, it was determined that this was not a viable option, due to intellectual property issues and ongoing use concerns, and the lack of capacity at USICH to manage this process by developing a blueprint for such an app.

USICH currently does not have a stand-alone technology department and has not requested the roughly \$150,000 we estimate would be required for initial development costs and additional funding for maintenance of a mobile application. Furthermore, we believe that the tool would have limited utility at the community level as there are often additional local and state rules that also apply. It would be nearly impossible to build an off-the-shelf tool that could easily be maintained, and which would be useful to homeless services providers.

Conclusion

USICH does not intend to develop an interactive mobile app or web-based tool. As part of the implementation of the Federal Strategic Plan, expected to be released in fall of 2022, USICH will work with federal partners to determine whether the materials generated by the interagency working group should be repurposed to create a public-facing resource for communities. Such resources may take the form of infographics, fact sheets, or webinars.