



Is My Community Ready for SWAP? FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SWAP is a joint project of Focus Strategies and the National Alliance to End Homelessness. SWAP is designed to enable communities to use local data to understand what their current system is accomplishing and model what happens when system and program changes are made. The SWAP tools can be used to inform system planning and system change efforts to reduce homelessness over a period of up to five years.

The SWAP tools are available for free, along with technical manuals that provide step-by-step instructions about how to use them. However, many communities have questions about whether and how they can use SWAP. Below we have provided answers to some frequently asked questions.

1. Data Quality Concerns

Q. We are interested in using SWAP but are concerned about poor data quality in our HMIS system. What should we do?

A. Many communities we work with express concerns about the quality of their HMIS data. Often these concerns are based on anecdotal reports from users. These concerns typically indicate that the reports run from HMIS don't align with the results they expect to see. This kind of report is important, but different from a systematic assessment of data quality. We also find that often CoC and HMIS staff struggle to produce reports using the HMIS system that stakeholders find helpful, which is often more related to difficulties in constructing data queries that generate meaningful results or interpreting how results are useful to system performance rather than inaccuracies in the data.

In our experience, the most effective way to deal with data quality concerns is to do two things: (1) use the SWAP's built-in analysis of data quality to determine whether or not a problem actually exists, and, if so, what the specific issues are and (2) show the performance results to provider agencies and enlist their help in understanding the cause of any data issues or discrepancies.

The Base Year Calculator component of the SWAP is designed to help users assess whether their HMIS data is of sufficient quality and accuracy to support meaningful performance measurement. The SWAP tools generate a very easily digestible analysis of data quality for each program in the system, allowing the CoC and community leadership to assess: (1) whether there are systemic data quality problems, such as a widespread level of incomplete data entry for particular data elements; and/or (2) data quality issues limited to particular programs or program types.

For most communities we work with, we find that the HMIS data is of sufficient quality to allow the assessment of system performance to generate valuable results. For a small number of communities we have recommended that data quality be improved before addressing system performance. Even in these situations, the community often derives significant benefit from the work invested in populating the SWAP, because it pinpoints precisely what the data quality issues are and gets the leadership and all stakeholders onto the same page about what needs to be done.

2. Community Buy-In Concerns

Q. We are interested in using SWAP but concerned our community leadership does not understand the need for data analysis to inform system planning -- so using SWAP will not be a good use of time.

A. In our experience, community leadership can sometimes be resistant addressing homelessness using a systems-planning or data-driven approach, preferring instead to rely on local practice, anecdotal perceptions about “what works,” and loyalty to existing programs and providers. Shifting this way of thinking is not easy nor can it happen overnight. However, we have found that analyzing available data and presenting performance results to community leadership can be a good place to begin a conversation about system change. While leadership may not be open to considering a system re-design, they typically are interested in knowing more about how the existing system works and what is currently being accomplished with existing investment strategies. An analysis of current performance using SWAP can serve as a bridge towards a conversation about how to do things differently.

3. Staff Time and Capacity Concerns

Q. We are interested in using SWAP but have minimal community resources to pay for technical assistance. Can we use the tools on our own?

A. The SWAP tools are available free of charge on our website. The materials include not only the web-based and Excel workbooks, but also user guides and instructions to help walk a community through the process of using the tools. Communities that wish to run the SWAP on their own can do that using the materials Focus Strategies has made available. Focus Strategies also offers webinars from time to time to assist communities in using the tools without dedicated technical assistance.

Q. If we use SWAP, how much time will it take us to populate and use the tools? What staff expertise is needed?

A. The SWAP tools are designed to be user-friendly yet are analytically robust. They are complex; meaningful results depend on a commitment of dedicated staff time. The staff and time commitment includes work both on the part of CoC or other planning staff as well as HMIS or other data analysis staff.

- CoC staff activities include: exporting the Housing Inventory Count (HIC) chart from the HDX system, reviewing the HIC and selecting programs to be included in analysis, and developing a crosswalk of HIC and HMIS programs to determine how projects/programs will be configured in SWAP. CoC staff will also have to oversee the collection of program and project budget data directly from providers using a template provided by Focus Strategies. For more information about what this involves and estimates of the time needed, please see [CoC Tasks and Time for SWAP](#).
- HMIS or other data analysis staff activities include: exporting data from HMIS in a format specified by Focus Strategies, preparation of the data for uploading to SWAP (including addressing any data quality issues and rolling up records to the household level), and completing the upload of the HMIS data into SWAP. Either HMIS or CoC staff will also need to input the budget data collected from providers into the tool. For more information about the time commitment needed for these tasks, please see *Overview of HMIS Data Export and Preparation for SWAP – Coming Soon*.

Once the SWAP has been populated with data from HMIS and project budgets, CoC staff or other community leadership can use the tool to analyze current system performance and model the impact of different alternatives. This part of the work requires staff with strong analytical skills who are highly knowledgeable about the programs and projects in the community, have a strong familiarity with strategies for creating a Housing Crisis Resolution System, and are able to interpret the performance data, identify what is working and what could be done differently. This analytical piece of the work should not be assigned to the technical or HMIS staff but rather to staff responsible for system planning, with oversight from CoC and community leadership. If this is an emerging area of expertise in your community, you may wish to consider technical assistance from Focus Strategies or another skilled provider in developing housing crisis resolution systems (see next question and answer).

Q. When is getting technical assistance from Focus Strategies recommended?

In many instances, it can make sense for a community to contract with Focus Strategies for technical assistance in populating the SWAP and generating an analysis of the results. These circumstances can include:

- Need for role separation between the people collecting and entering data and the people analyzing and delivering results. In our experience, some communities experience a lack of trust between providers and the CoC leadership, community leadership, or other individuals responsible for data analysis. Performance assessment and data analysis conducted by the CoC is viewed with suspicion and the results are not welcomed or used as a basis for a community conversation about how to re-shape the existing system. In these situations, it can be helpful to bring in a neutral third party such as Focus Strategies to analyze the data and present the results.
- Help with understanding what the results mean and what strategies to prioritize. Some communities have the technical expertise to gather the data needed to populate the SWAP, but do not have the capacity to delve into the results and develop an understanding of what they mean and the implications for system re-design. Focus Strategies brings a wealth of experience in data driven system planning and knowledge of best practices from around the United States that can help a local community interpret the SWAP results and use that information to devise strategies to more effectively reduce homelessness.
- Lack of staff time or expertise to populate the SWAP. In many communities, existing CoC or HMIS staff do not have the time or the expertise, or both, to undertake the work of populating the SWAP. If this is the case in your community, we suggest that you consider having Focus Strategies assist with the process.

Q. What technical assistance does Focus Strategies provide and how much does it cost?

Our technical assistance is customized to the needs of each community and can range from very limited, as-needed Q&A as the community works through the SWAP, all the way to a full-service level of assistance in which Focus Strategies takes on the work of populating the tools using data provided by the CoC, conducts an analysis of the performance results, and walks the community through the process of modeling alternatives. Costs for our work will vary considerably depending on the size of the CoC, the number and complexity of programs to analyze, and the specific tasks the community would like us to undertake. We develop a detailed scope of work for each client that is aligned to the community's needs and resources.