

Palm Beach County System Performance Report



June 2016

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Homeless Coalition of Palm Beach County (HCPBC) engaged Focus Strategies to assess the performance of the existing homeless system as well as individual project outcomes. This report presents our findings – including an assessment of the quality of HCPBC’s Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data, a preliminary assessment of system performance, and suggested next steps to improve both data quality and homeless system effectiveness.

Summary Results of System Performance Assessment

Key performance assessment results from our analysis are summarized below.

Key Findings	
Data Quality	This report assessed four performance-related dimensions of data quality: Missing data, unknown data, length of stay, and utilization rate. In general, data from all types of projects had relatively high levels of missing and unknown data. Some projects also evidenced unusually low or high utilization rates. Overall, the most pressing data quality issue identified is the degree of “missing” and “unknown” prior living and exit destinations for those who are served.
System Performance	Using data drawn from HMIS and individual program budgets, Focus Strategies assessed the performance of emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing on six metrics.
1. Bed/Unit Utilization	We found a relatively low utilization rate in programs serving single adults (54% for single adult shelter beds being the lowest), and higher utilization rates in family serving programs. This suggests that single adult system inventory is not being used to maximum capacity. Low utilization could partly be the result of programs having high barriers to entry and restrictive eligibility criteria.
2. Entries from Homelessness	Currently, many of the programs in the system are serving a high number of households who were not literally homeless upon entry ¹ . In particular, 26% of families entering shelter, and 29% of single adults and 38% of families entering rapid rehousing were coming from housed situations. This reflects the fact that each program may not require households to be literally homeless upon entry. In a high performing system, beds are prioritized for people who are literally homeless, while those who are still housed are diverted from entering the system using shelter diversion strategies. This finding may also be related to the presence of high entry barriers among some of the programs in the system.
3. Lengths of Stay	Lengths of stay are relatively high in the system’s transitional housing, where the average stay is 301 days for single adults and 327 days for families. Program

¹ “Literal homelessness” means living in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g. street, car, camp) or in an emergency shelter.

Key Findings	
	providers often structure their service models on the assumption that longer stays lead to higher rates of exit to permanent housing. However, as noted below, the data does not support this assumption.
4. Exits to Permanent Housing	The rate at which households exit all program types to permanent housing is relatively low, with transitional programs exiting only 65% of single adults and 33% of families to permanent housing. Rapid re-housing, which has a shorter length of stay, is faring slightly better on this measure, with 67% of single adults and 45% of families exiting to permanent housing.
5. Cost Per Permanent Housing Exit	The Rapid Re-Housing programs in Palm Beach have shorter lengths of stay, and while not appearing to exit to permanent housing at a higher rate, are more cost effective for those who do exit to permanent housing. The cost for each permanent housing exit from rapid re-housing is one thirteenth the cost of transitional housing for singles and one third the cost of transitional housing for families.
6. Returns to Homelessness	While it is early to fully assess this dimension of performance in Palm Beach (typically 2 or more years of data is needed to investigate returns), the early results suggest this is a measure to be further explored to better understand why there is a relatively high rate of return to homelessness by households existing from shelter and transitional housing.

Suggested Next Steps

The Palm Beach County community has invested in important data systems improvement work and has arrived at a place where HMIS data can begin to be used to generate meaningful information about system performance. Focus Strategies' analysis is a mid-point assessment that helps inform some immediate next steps to further improve data quality as well as to begin thinking about homeless system re-design:

Data Quality

Focus Strategies recommends that Palm Beach conduct additional analysis early next year that integrates data from 2016 and help determine the extent to which data quality issues have been addressed. In the meantime, we recommend HCPBC take the following steps to improve data quality:

1. Identify reasons for missing and unknown prior living and exit destination data and work with providers to improve data quality for these critical data elements.
2. Explore reasons for low and high utilization rates and implement solutions as needed. This could include making corrections to program bed capacity as recorded on the HIC and/or improving the quality of entry and exit date data in HMIS.

Program and System Performance

Although improved data quality is an important pre-condition for Focus Strategies to make strong recommendations about system performance and implications for system re-design, we can make the following general suggestions based on our initial assessment of system performance:

1. Coordinated Entry and Shelter Diversion. Given the relatively high rate of entry into programs from housed locations, we would encourage HCPBC to use coordinated entry and shelter diversion to identify those households who are “at risk” of homelessness and provide targeted assistance to prevent them from entering shelter and housing programs. We also recommend exploring whether programs have entry barriers that make it difficult for higher need households, including those who are unsheltered, to access shelter and housing.

2. Reallocation of Low Performing Transitional Housing Programs. Our analysis reveals that transitional housing in PBC is extremely expensive per exit to permanent housing compared to rapid re-housing (which has lower lengths of stay and about the same rate of PH exit). We would recommend re-allocating funding from TH to RRH to help improve overall system performance. This will also improve PBC’s competitiveness for HUD CoC funds.

3. Build Capacity of Rapid Re-Housing Providers. Our analysis showed that the existing rapid re-housing programs in the community are not performing as well as might be expected based on national data. We would recommend that HCPBC work with rapid re-housing providers to identify some strategies to improve the rate of exit to permanent housing in these programs. Providers may need additional training to ensure they are working with fidelity to best practices in RRH.

DRAFT

I. Background and Purpose of Report

The Homeless Coalition of Palm Beach County (HCPBC) engaged Focus Strategies to assess the performance of the existing homeless system, as well as individual project outcomes. In recent years, Palm Beach County has actively worked to improve the community's use of information collected in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in an effort to move towards a fully performance-oriented system. As a result, the community changed HMIS vendors, and in the transition, restructured the projects captured in the Housing Inventory Count (HIC) and HMIS to align with HUD guidance and actual on-the-ground operations. This report focuses on the first year of data in the new HMIS (which combines both migrated and newly entered information) and addresses the following:

- Preliminary exploration of data quality as it relates to performance measurement
- Preliminary assessment of system performance²
- Suggested next steps

II. Methodology: Information Sources and Analysis Process

A. Data Sources

This report is based on work conducted by Focus Strategies from January through May 2016. To compile this report, we worked with HCPBC staff and used the following data:

- The community's inventory of emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing units as documented in the annual Housing Inventory County (HIC) submitted to HUD;
- Client data exported from the community's HMIS for the one year period from January 2015 through December 2015; and
- Program budget data collected directly from homeless program providers, including the total annual operating cost of each program, its revenue sources, and amounts.

The data sets were uploaded into a customized Web-based application developed by Focus Strategies (Base Year Calculator – BYC) which generates an analysis of HMIS data quality for each project, as well as the performance of each project across a range of measures. The analysis results are summarized in this report, with the project data presented at the level of program types: emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing.

B. Programs Included In Data Analysis

The performance analysis presented below incorporates data on programs in Palm Beach that provide housing, shelter, and services to homeless people. The programs analyzed fall into four categories: (1)

² Individual project performance is addressed in separate, individual service provider reports.

emergency shelters; (2) transitional housing; (3) rapid re-housing and (4) permanent supportive housing. The scope of the analysis is limited only to these four program types and does not include homelessness prevention assistance for people at-risk of homelessness, or other types of safety net assistance or mainstream system services provided to people who are homeless.

The universe of programs analyzed included those on the community's HIC, that participate in HMIS, and for which there was one year of data available.

III. Results: Analysis of System Performance

The sections below present our analysis of homeless system performance.

A. HMIS Data Quality

A key precondition to any assessment of system performance is the availability of high quality data. The BYC produces assessments of four dimensions of data quality for each project type including: the amount of "missing" data, the amount of "unknown" data, the validity of calculated lengths of stay, and utilization rate. Overall, the most pressing data quality issue identified for Palm Beach County's HMIS is the degree of "missing" and "unknown" prior living and exit destinations for those who are served.

The table below illustrates that a substantial amount of data is missing or unknown for each project type, with some like emergency shelter showing particularly high rates. Understanding the difference between "missing" and "unknown" data is key in developing a data quality improvement effort. "Missing" data is information that is simply not recorded in HMIS, which usually means that the project staff are not entering these data elements into the data system.

"Unknown" data, on the other hand, reflects the percent of entries and exits that do not have a meaningful response in HMIS. This includes: "data not collected," "client doesn't know," "client refused," "no exit interview conducted," and "unknown." The pattern of responses, therefore, suggests that data is not reflected in HMIS in either a compliant manner (high percentage of missing data), or a useful manner (with responses not relevant to performance measurement and system improvement). HCPBC staff should investigate the reason behind the relatively high proportions of missing and unknown data on these two key performance related variables.³

³ Unknown data on these variables can affect the performance measures to be reviewed, however, the specific impact is related to whether the unknown data should be: (1) entries from literal homelessness/exits to permanent destinations; (2) entries from housed locations/exits to non-permanent destination; or (3) a blend of both. For the purpose of these analyses we assume that the distribution of unknown responses resembles that of the known responses (option 3), which ultimately has no impact on the conclusions that can be drawn from the data.

Missing/Unknown (% of all households)					
Project Type	# of Projects	Prior Living		Exit Destination	
		% Missing	% Unknown	% Missing	% Unknown
Emergency Shelter	9	14%	22%	11%	37%
Transitional Housing	8	12%	15%	0%	7%
Rapid ReHousing	3	4%	9%	1%	23%
Permanent Supportive Housing	18	1%	21%	0%	15%
<i>Total</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>7%</i>	<i>19%</i>	<i>3%</i>	<i>19%</i>

We also looked at the lengths of stay in programs and found that the data suggested no issues with the data quality. We specifically investigated whether the data show negative lengths of stay (indicates data entry error), or the average LOS being very different from the median length of stay (indicates extreme outliers). Both of these issues would indicate data quality concerns, however were not indicated in the Palm Beach data.

Finally, we investigated possible data quality issues regarding Utilization Rate (UR). UR might reflect data quality in 2 ways: a very low UR (indicates client stay data not being entered) or very high UR values (indicates people not exited from the HMIS program in a timely manner). The final factor that often affects UR is that the program’s capacity might be reflected differently in the HIC than it is actually practiced by the program. In this case, very high utilization might be a result of under-reporting capacity on the HIC; likewise, very low utilization might be related to over-reporting capacity on the HIC.

For Palm Beach, the average UR is reported and discussed in the next section.⁴

B. System Performance

In recent years, federal homelessness policy has shifted to looking at how well communities are performing in their efforts to reduce homelessness. To further these objectives, HUD has strongly encouraged communities to evaluate the effectiveness of both individual programs and overall system in meeting specific performance measures. Focus Strategies has developed a set of performance metrics that build upon HUD’s measures as articulated in the HEARTH Act and *Opening Doors: The Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness*. While the measures we use are all aligned with HUD’s goals, we also incorporate cost effectiveness, so communities may understand not only system performance, but also performance in relation to the level of investment and the likely impact of investing in alternatives.

This section presents our analysis of the system performance of Palm Beach on six measures:

1. Bed and Unit Utilization Rate
2. Program Entries from Homelessness
3. Lengths of Stay

⁴ Individual project UR ranges from a low of 21% to a high of 190% and will be discussed during the provider meetings when Focus Strategies is on site.

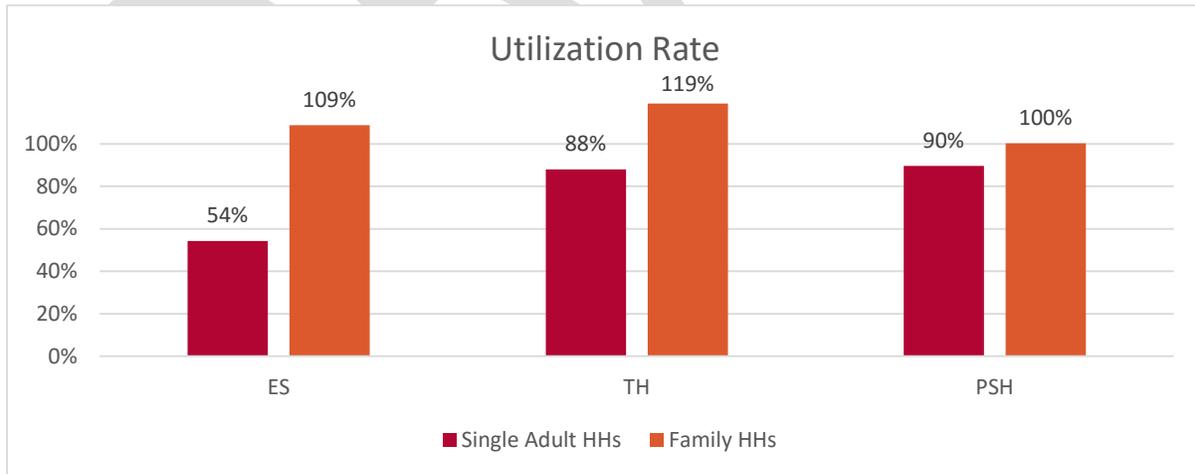
4. Rate of Exit to Permanent Housing
5. Cost per Permanent Housing Exit
6. Returns to Homelessness

1. Bed and Unit Utilization Rate

This metric measures the average daily occupancy of programs in the system, as calculated using HMIS data. Maximizing the use of available bed capacity is essential to ensuring that system resources are being put to their best use and that as many homeless people as possible are being sheltered and housed given existing inventory.

The graph below presents the utilization rate for emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing.⁵ This data uses bed utilization for single adult programs and unit utilization for family programs, as units in a family program might have unfilled beds simply due to housing smaller sized families than the unit is designed to accommodate.

We found that utilization rates in emergency shelters and transitional housing serving single adults is below 90%. Utilization rate for emergency shelters for single adults is the lowest at 54%. In a high-performing system, we would expect to see utilization rates at or above 90% for all system components. When programs are underutilizing their ability to serve homeless households, an opportunity to reach and assist more people is being missed. We often find that the existence of unfilled beds in a system is related, at least in part, to the existence of high barriers to entry which prevent some homeless individuals from accessing assistance.



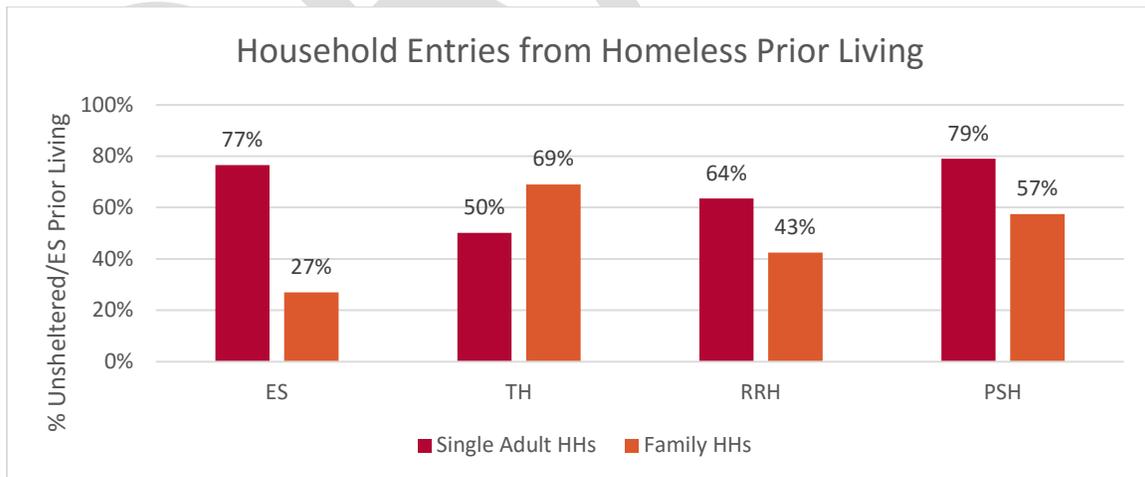
⁵ Note: Rapid re-housing is not included in this analysis because this program type does not have a fixed bed capacity and so the methodology applied to the other program types does not generate a comparable result.

2. Entries from Homelessness

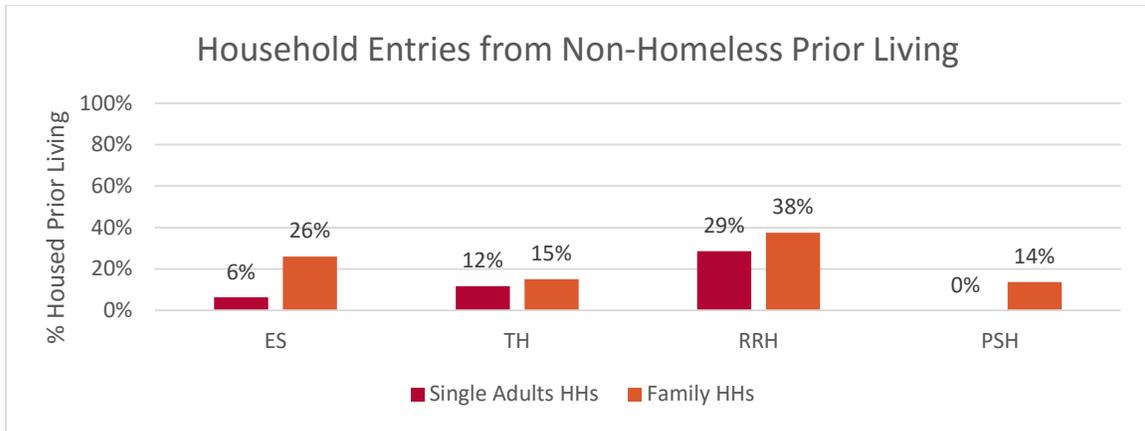
This measure looks at the degree to which programs are serving people with the most acute housing needs, namely those who are *literally* homeless (meaning they are living outdoors, in a vehicle, or in an emergency shelter). While certain funders may allow programs to serve people who are living in other situations (e.g. people living in motels, people in doubled-up situations, people living in their own apartments but at-risk of eviction), successfully reducing homelessness depends on prioritizing those with the highest need for the available units.

This measure reflects the federal policy goals of ending chronic homelessness and prioritizing literally homeless people for permanent housing. To create a “right sized” system in which there is an appropriate housing intervention for all homeless people, those who are not literally homeless must be diverted from entering the homeless system to begin with, thereby making resources available for those with nowhere to live.

The graphs below show the prior living situations for households entering emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing in Palm Beach County. The first graph shows the percentage of people coming from literal homelessness (streets, vehicles, emergency shelter) and the second one shows the percentage coming from non-homeless situations (e.g. living with friends and family, living in subsidized or unsubsidized rental housing, in a motel or in an institution).⁶ Currently, with the exception of emergency shelters and permanent supportive housing serving adults, most of the system components are far below what would be expected in an effectively performing system, which might see between 80% and 95% of entries from literally homeless situations.



⁶ Note that the figures from the two graphs below do not total to 100% of entries because some people are entering from unknown/missing locations, institutions, and miscellaneous other types of locations.

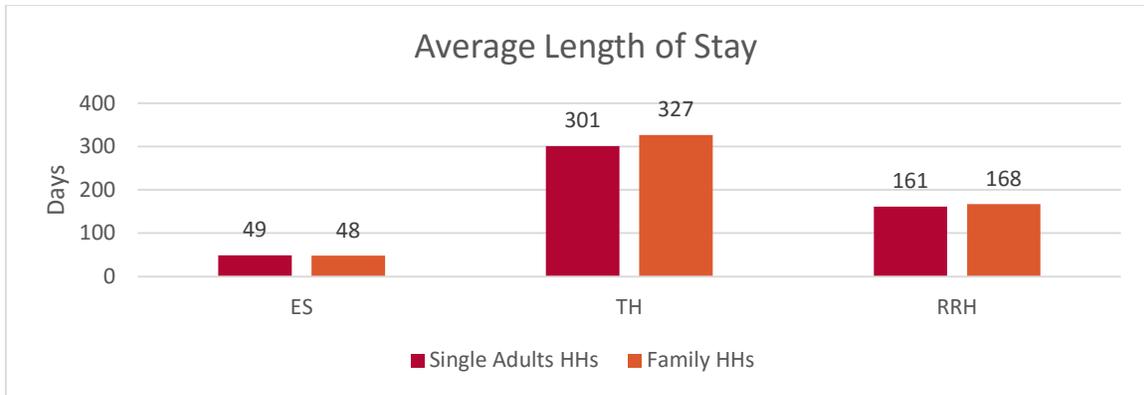


3. Lengths of Stay

Achieving relatively short lengths of stay in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing programs is essential to ending homelessness. Every day a person is homeless has an associated cost, and reducing lengths of stay results in a quicker rate of exit and a lower cost per exit, which in turn allows more people to be housed. The HEARTH Act has established a goal that no one is homeless longer than 30 days. As part of system right-sizing, the entire system must strive for the shortest stays possible to reach this goal.

Length of stay in Palm Beach County programs was calculated based on HMIS data using the entry and exit dates for each program stay recorded in the system. Currently, none of the system components have achieved lengths of stay shorter than 30 days. Transitional housing stays are the longest, with an average of 301 days for single adults and 327 for families. Rapid re-housing program stays, by contrast, are about half that for both single adults and families.

This data should be considered in particular in relation to the rate of exit to permanent housing, presented in the next section. Many transitional housing programs are designed with relatively long lengths of stay, based on the assumption that longer stays allow households to develop the skills and resources they need to successfully secure housing upon exit. However, this data shows that in spite of these longer stays, participants in transition housing have similar rates of successful exit to permanent housing as rapid re-housing participants. Longer stays in transitional housing are not yielding stronger outcomes.



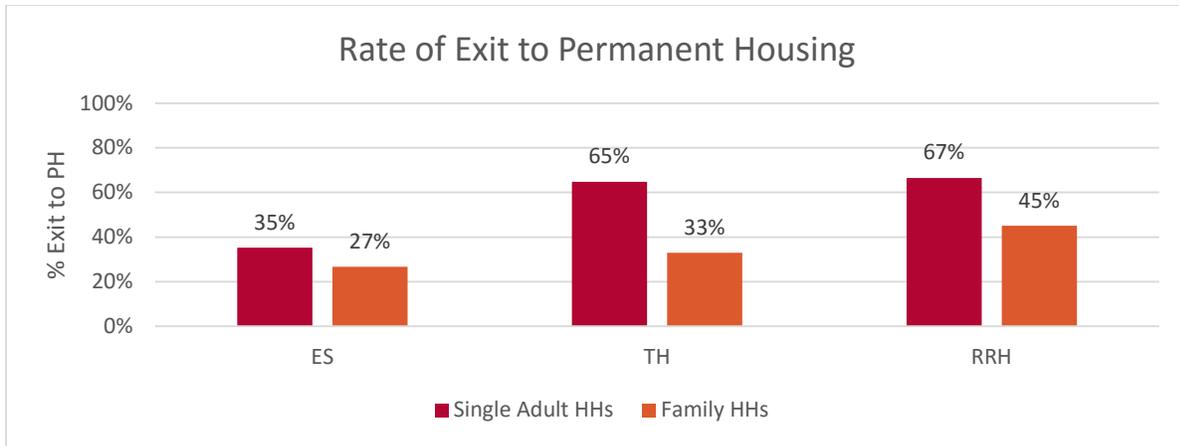
4. Exits to Permanent Housing

While helping households exit shelter and transitional housing as quickly as possible is a key strategy to end homelessness, understanding where people go when they exit is equally important. Rate of exit to permanent housing is a very important metric and one that HUD has asked communities to report on for several years. This measures the degree to which a project assists clients to move to a housed situation, and is a critical aspect of project performance.

The next graph shows the rate of exit to permanent housing for all emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing programs in Palm Beach County. For the purpose of this measure, “permanent housing” includes any housed situation that is not time-limited, including market rate apartment, a subsidized housing unit, shared housing with a roommate, or staying permanently with family and friends.

As shown in the table below, the rate of exit to permanent housing for emergency shelter programs is fairly typical at 35% for single adults, but on the low side for families at 27%. The results for transitional housing are somewhat better for single adults at 65%, but only marginally better for families at 33%; both are below what would be expected in a high performing system. As discussed in the next section, emergency shelters and transitional housing are not cost-effective strategies to reduce homelessness in general, and low performance on the rate of exit further reduces cost effectiveness.

The permanent housing exit rate for rapid rehousing in Palm Beach is very low, based on our experience in other communities as well as by recent guidance released by HUD, which recommends at least 80% of rapid re-housing clients should exit to permanent housing. PBC currently is only achieving a 67% PH exit rate for single adults and 45% PH exit rate for families. It is notable that in PBC the exit rate to permanent housing for rapid re-housing client is about the same as the exit rate to PH for transitional housing clients. In most communities we have found that rapid re-housing outperforms transitional housing on this measure. However, the lengths of stay in rapid rehousing were half that of those for transitional housing, thus, providing no evidence that staying longer in a given program results in a higher rate of successful exit.

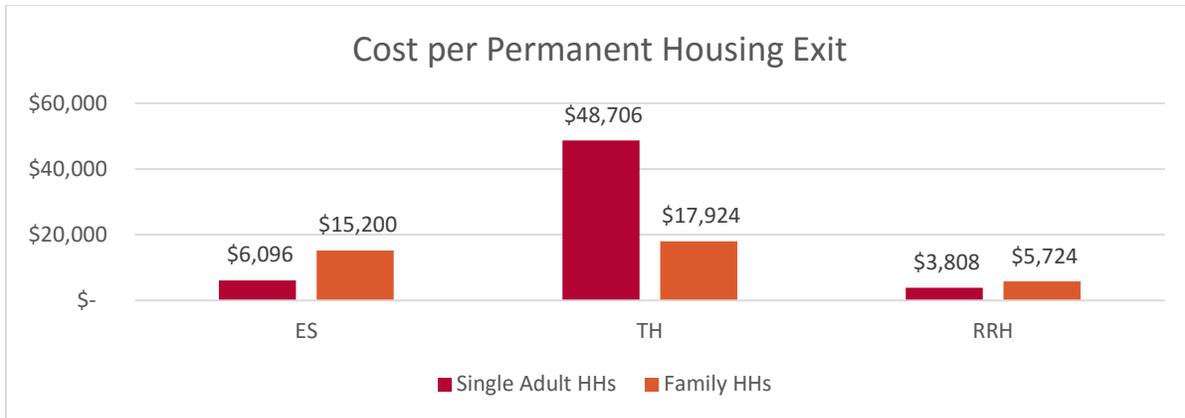


5. Cost Per Exit to Permanent Housing

To create a more efficient system, aligning investments with the objective of ending homelessness is essential. Cost per permanent housing exit is a key performance measure, as it assesses not only whether a program is helping clients to move to permanent housing, but also whether they do so in a cost effective manner. As funds are shifted from expensive programs to those that are more cost effective per person served, system capacity will increase and the numbers of homeless people will be reduced.

The graph below shows the average cost per permanent housing exit for all program types. These figures are calculated using the total program cost, utilization of beds/units, and client length of stay (cost per day is calculated, then multiplied by the number of days the individual/family was in the program).

As the graph shows, the cost per permanent housing exit for transitional housing programs is much higher than the cost for rapid rehousing programs. On the single adult side, each successful transitional housing exit costs about 13 times more than a successful rapid rehousing exit (\$48,706 vs. \$3,808, respectively). This difference is not quite as striking when considering the family programs, however, rapid re-housing is still one-third of the cost of transitional housing per permanent housing exit. This is consistent with national studies, which have found that rapid re-housing is typically more cost effective and achieves better housing outcome than transitional housing. If investments were to shift from these more costly interventions to those that are more cost effective, the overall system would be able to house many more homeless households.

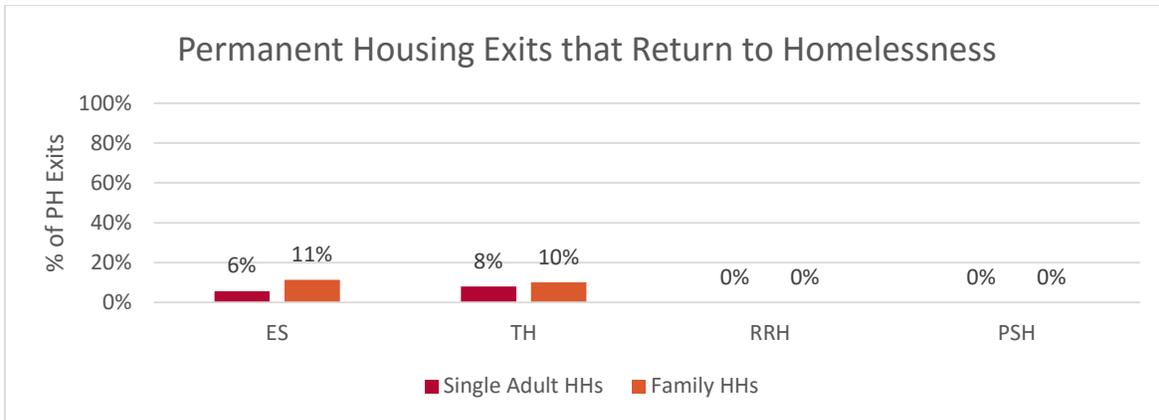


6. Returns to Homelessness

Reducing lengths of stay and increasing rates of exit to permanent housing must be balanced by ensuring that people who exit programs do not return to homelessness. Tracking this metric allows communities to assess whether programs are helping place clients into permanent housing situations that “stick” and are appropriate for their needs. For the purpose of this analysis, returns to homelessness is calculated by looking at all households who exited programs and determining whether any re-entered into a homeless program in the following 12 month period.

The next graph presents rate of return to homelessness for people who exited emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing with a permanent housing exit destination. Because Palm Beach County had only a single year of data available due to their recent system conversion, there is not sufficient data to fully interpret the results of this performance measure. Specifically, the number of exits to permanent housing from transitional housing, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing reflected in the data are relatively low, and a full year after exit was not available unless the exit occurred at the beginning of 2015.

Given this limitation, the rate of returns to homelessness for those who exited from emergency shelter and transitional housing are surprisingly high. There are a few possible explanations for this finding. If the programs are targeting very high need/high barriers households, then a 10% rate of return would not be unexpected. However, if these are lower barrier households then this could indicate that there are programmatic changes needed to improve the rate at which households secure permanent housing that “sticks.” We would recommend taking a closer look at the data on who is being served in these programs to see if there are factors that appear to impact the rate of return to homelessness.



IV. Conclusion and Next Steps

The Palm Beach County community has invested in important data systems improvement work and has arrived at a place where HMIS data can now be used to generate meaningful information about system performance. Focus Strategies' analysis is a mid-point assessment that helps inform some immediate next steps to further improve data quality, as well as to begin thinking about homeless system re-design. In general, we encourage HCPBC and the County to continue on their present course – continually assessing what is needed to make HMIS and other community homelessness data useful for performance analysis that points the way to systems changes that are most likely to reduce the number of people in the community experiencing homelessness.

Data Quality

Focus Strategies identified some significant data quality issues in the HMIS data for Palm Beach County. As we have noted, some of these are likely related to the transition to a new HMIS vendor while some are indicative of a need to take a closer look at HMIS policies and practices, particularly the training of providers to ensure the data they enter is of the highest possible quality. Focus Strategies recommends that Palm Beach County do another round of data analysis in early 2017 that incorporates data from 2016. This will provide some additional information about data quality and help determine the extent to which data issues we identified are related to the database conversion. With two years of data, any anomalies related to the conversion and new start-up will be minimized because of the larger data set; there will also be opportunities for staff to identify and resolve issues relating to the conversion over the course of 2016.

In the meantime, we recommend some specific next steps that HCPBC can take to improve data quality:

- 1) Identify reasons for missing and unknown prior living and exit destination data and work with providers to improve data quality for these critical data elements. While these are not among the Universal Data Elements that HUD assesses when evaluating data quality, they are critical to helping the community understand system and program performance.
- 2) Explore reasons for low and high utilization rates and implement solutions as needed. This could include making corrections to program bed capacity as recorded on the HIC and/or improving the

quality of entry and exit date data in HMIS. Using HMIS to check program utilization rates on a monthly basis is a helpful method for determining whether HMIS data is accurate and up to date.

Program and System Performance

Although improved data quality is an important pre-condition for Focus Strategies to make strong recommendations about system performance and implications for system re-design, we can make the following general suggestions based on our initial assessment of system performance:

1. Coordinated Entry and Shelter Diversion. Given the relatively high rate of entry into programs from housed locations, we would encourage HCPBC to use coordinated entry and shelter diversion as critical system-level components that will help identify those households who are “at risk” of homelessness and provide targeted assistance to prevent them from entering shelter and housing programs. This will free up capacity to serve those who are unsheltered or living in emergency shelter. A related recommendation is to explore the degree to which programs have entry barriers that make it difficult for higher need households, including those who are unsheltered, to access shelter and housing.

2. Reallocation of Low Performing Transitional Housing Programs

Our analysis reveals that transitional housing in PBC is extremely expensive per exit to permanent housing as compared to rapid re-housing (which has lower lengths of stay and about the same rate of PH exit). We would recommend re-allocating funding from TH to RRH to help improve overall system performance. This will also improve PBC’s competitiveness for HUD CoC funds.

The table below summarizes the total estimated budgets of the programs we analyzed using our SWAP tool, and shows there is about \$4 million currently invested in transitional housing that is not yielding strong performance.

Project Type	# of Projects with Budget	Total Budget	Total Projects	Total Estimated Budget
Emergency Shelter	8	\$5,928,302	9	\$6,669,340
Transitional Housing	7	\$3,559,552	8	\$4,068,059
Rapid ReHousing	2	\$916,505	3	\$1,374,758
Permanent Housing	18	\$6,981,765	18	\$6,981,765
Total	35	\$17,386,124	38	\$19,093,922

3. Build Capacity of Rapid Re-Housing Providers

Our analysis showed that the existing rapid re-housing programs in the community are not performing as well as might be expected based on national data. We would recommend that HCPBC work with rapid re-housing providers to identify some strategies to improve the rate of exit to permanent housing in these programs. As a beginning, we would advise reviewing the RRH Standards recently released by the National Alliance to End Homelessness and conducting an assessment to determine how well existing programs in PBC are aligned with best practices in the field. Providers may need additional training to ensure they are working with fidelity to best practices.