



## Is SWAP Right for Us and Is My Community Ready for SWAP? FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

Many communities have questions about whether SWAP is appropriate for them and how they can use SWAP. While most of the SWAP tools are available for free, along with technical manuals that provide step-by-step instructions, Focus Strategies designed these tools to be used within the context of systemwide planning and those interested in accessing SWAP should review this document to ensure it is appropriate for their role and situation. We have provided a guide to determining whether SWAP is right for you and your community, as well as answers to a number of frequently asked questions.

### 1. System Planning and Community Context

#### **Q: Is SWAP right for my community and who can use SWAP?**

A: SWAP is designed to help communities assess the impact of systems changes and prioritize those changes to bring about the greatest possible reduction in homelessness. Our suite of tools is designed to be used within the context of systemwide planning and long-term change efforts, rather than short-term or isolated projects. SWAP also requires access to system-level HMIS and budgetary data to produce its intended results that capture a holistic view of the local homeless response system. For these reasons, SWAP is intended for use by a community's Continuum of Care lead agency, in collaboration with the HMIS lead agency (if these agencies are different). If you have any questions or concerns about whether SWAP is right for you, don't hesitate to contact us at [info@focusstrategies.net](mailto:info@focusstrategies.net).

### 2. 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. While this kind of report is important, it is 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, than inaccuracies in the data.

In our experience, the most effective way to deal with data quality concerns is two-fold: (1) use the SWAP's built-in analysis of data quality to determine whether a problem 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 an easy-to-digest 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.

In most communities we work with, we find that HMIS data is of sufficient quality so that the system performance assessment may generate valuable results. For a small number of communities, we have recommended improving data quality prior to calculating system performance. Even in these situations, the community often derives significant benefit from time and effort invested in populating the SWAP, as it pinpoints precise data quality issues and facilitates leadership and all system stakeholders to get on the same page about what must be done to solve such issues.

If your community is interested in SWAP but unsure about the quality of local data, it is possible to complete a Base Year Calculator (BYC) trial run. Because the BYC can be completed without budget information, a trial run of the BYC may be a low-risk, time-efficient way to determine if SWAP is appropriate for your community. If this sounds like an option that you may be interested in, please contact us at [info@focusstrategies.net](mailto:info@focusstrategies.net) for more information.

### **3. Community Buy-In Concerns**

**Q: We are interested in using SWAP but are concerned that our community leadership does not see the need for data analysis to inform system planning. Will SWAP be a good use of time?**

A: In our experience, community leadership may be resistant to addressing homelessness using a systems-planning or data-driven approach, thinking that systems change efforts have been underway for years and that now is the time to focus on existing initiatives. In other communities, leadership may prefer to rely on local practice, anecdotal perceptions about “what works,” the direction of political leadership in the community, and/or loyalty to existing community programs and providers. Shifting these ways of thinking is not easy, nor can it be done overnight. However, we have found that analyzing available data and presenting performance results to community leadership can be a good place to begin a meaningful 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 being accomplished with existing investment strategies. An analysis of current performance using SWAP can bridge current local conversation to strategies that achieve the best results.

As mentioned in the previous section, it is possible to complete a Base Year Calculator (BYC) trial run without collecting budget information from providers. If you are interested in SWAP but are concerned about community leadership buy-in, a trial run may be a good way to show possible outcomes and use within systems planning efforts, as well as create community buy-in for a more complete performance analysis SWAP project.

### **4. 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: Most of the SWAP system performance tools are available free of charge on our website. The materials include the web-based and Excel workbooks, as well as 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 so by using the materials Focus Strategies has made available. Please carefully review the FAQs about skills and time needed to be successful with the tools if you are working independently.

**Q: If we use SWAP, how much time is needed to populate and use the tools? What level of expertise is needed from local staff?**

A: While the SWAP tools are designed to be user-friendly, they are analytically robust and complex; meaningful results depend on committing dedicated staff time. Staffing and time commitments include work both on the part of CoC or other planning staff, as well as HMIS or other data analysis staff.

CoC staff must 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 tools 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 can interpret the performance data, identify what is working, and what could be done differently. This analytical 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 (see next question and answer).

**Q: In what cases is getting technical assistance from Focus Strategies recommended?**

A: In many instances, it may 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 may be 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 circumstances, it can be helpful to bring in a neutral third-party to analyze the data and present the results.

- Help with understanding the meaning of results and which strategies to prioritize. Some communities have the technical expertise needed to gather the data needed to populate the SWAP, however lack 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 locality 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 and/or the expertise to undertake the work behind populating the SWAP. If this is the case in your community, we suggest considering assistance from Focus Strategies during the SWAP process.

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

A: 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 full-service assistance. In cases where communities need a higher level of assistance, Focus Strategies may take on tasks including: populating the tools using data provided by the CoC, conducting an analysis of the performance results, working with each provider agency to share performance results and identify provider areas of concern, walking the community through the process of modeling alternatives, assisting with developing strategic plans, and technical assistance on implementing system changes. Costs for our work 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 customized and detailed scope of work for each client, aligned to the community's size, needs, and resources.