

Rethinking the Homelessness Response Framework

Founded in 1998, [Simtech Solutions Inc.](#) provides technical solutions and consulting services, to support organizations' and communities' response to homelessness. Our tools and staff help regions quantify the extent of the problem, isolate the contributing factors, and implement data-driven decision-making processes into daily operations. As an example, we built the first HMIS data warehouse in the US to identify frequent users of shelter and healthcare systems. The work led to the shutdown of an emergency shelter due to lack of need and estimated savings of \$8405 per client moved into housing.¹

Communities face common challenges when attempting to effectively respond to the range of needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Examples of these challenges include:

- **Systems are overly focused on reporting.** Front-line staff often struggle with apathy and fatigue of using *Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)* as the focus is HUD reporting requirements instead of serving the client. Accurate reporting can and should be a byproduct of effective interactions with clients.
- **Data is fragmented between providers, systems, and regions.** Single, monolithic systems inadvertently create data silos within and between regions, inhibiting the ability for regions to have a truly comprehensive and coordinated response to a person or family's homeless situation.
- **Coordinated Entry Systems often exclude the most vulnerable.** The focus of HMIS on traditional "brick and mortar" shelter and housing providers tends to ignore people living on the streets. This is at odds with the goal of prioritizing housing to those who are the most vulnerable given the heightened service and healthcare needs².
- **First responders are being excluded.** First responders tend to have regular, and often ongoing, interactions with people who are homeless but are disconnected from the community providers charged with supporting this population. Jails and emergency rooms end up being a costly stopgap solution, rather than applying those same financial resources towards housing.
- **The data entry burden on staff, and the assessment fatigue on clients, is excessive.** The lack of data sharing between providers and systems forces staff to ask questions of clients that they have already answered. This is not only a waste of time but retelling and reliving past experiences can be traumatizing to a client.
- **Different funders have different reporting requirements.** Providers that have funders with different reporting requirements and/or operate in different regions often need to enter data into multiple systems.

To overcome these challenges, multiple technical objects, or services, can be integrated into a singular framework. Each service within the framework fulfills a specific functional requirement and works seamlessly with the other services through the adoption of established data exchange protocols. The approach is similar in concept to how Lego™ blocks each contain the ability to connect to other blocks, while also having the ability to be connected to. In technical parlance, this software design methodology is referred to as "Service-Oriented Architecture" (SOA).



The Building Blocks

As each community is unique, the structure of the response will vary. Response frameworks designed using SOA

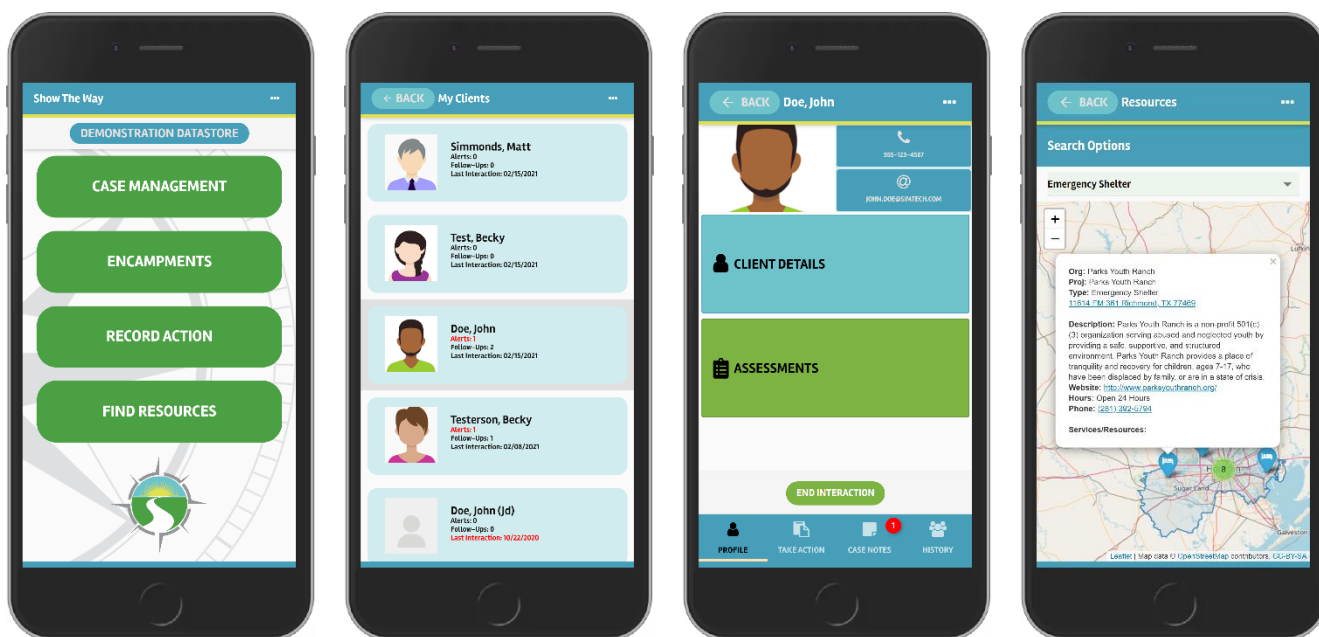
¹ [Comprehensive Usage of Data Analysis to Support Quincy's 10 Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness](#)

² [Health Conditions Among Unsheltered Adults in the US, California Policy Lab](#)

can be tailored to meet local requirements and fill the gaps of existing systems. Examples of components a region might include in their own response framework are described below.

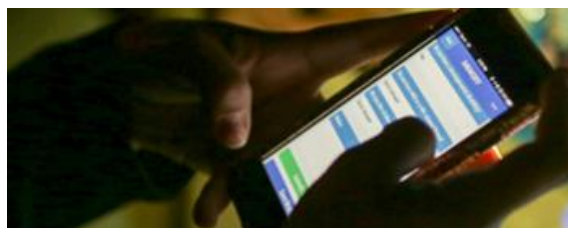
Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) are the “doors” into the coordinated entry system for people who present at shelters and homelessness service organizations. HMIS tends to be the primary data management system and usually includes case management functionality aimed at better serving clients.

Street Outreach Apps such as [Show the Way](#) can provide “light touch” intake, assessment, and referral for people living in unsheltered situations. Following human-centered design practices, the app is an instrumental tool for street outreach providers as they work together to guide people currently experiencing homelessness towards stable housing.



All contacts and engagements are accounted for which is a crucial step towards ensuring people experiencing chronic homelessness are prioritized properly for permanent housing in accordance with the [HUD Prioritization Notice](#)³. GPS capabilities make it easier for outreach staff to locate and assist a person over time while also helping to better adhere to [the CDC guidance](#)⁴ to enable those in known encampments to shelter in place when individual housing options are not available. *The Regional Command Center* receives the GPS-enabled data from the app to provide centralized oversight to ensure coordination amongst outreach teams to help target efforts in a manner that is as efficient and impactful as possible. The app also includes a *Resource Directory* that displays organization and projects from the region’s HMIS system alongside other helpful information such as services provided, operating hours, and contact information.

Point in Time (PIT) Count Apps such as [Counting Us](#) complement the data collection by street outreach using Show the Way to support a comprehensive canvassing of an entire region to locate people experiencing homelessness. This Federally mandated initiative provides both communities and HUD with a baseline from which to measure progress against



³ [Notice CPD-16-11: Prioritizing Persons Experiencing Chronic Homelessness in Permanent Supportive Housing](#)

⁴ [Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) for Homeless Service Providers](#)

and informs the allocation of funds. The GPS-enabled data captured from the PIT can be used to target street outreach just as the work of street outreach providers can inform where to send volunteers for the PIT. The *Count Team & Region Management tools* are utilized by regions as large as the Texas Balance of State to split the count area up into more manageable sub-regions, define coverage areas for teams, and assign volunteers to these teams.

Counting Us is the industry-leading mobile app developed specifically for the HUD Point in Time Count and has been used to conduct counts in over 30% of the continental US.

A Data Warehouse, such as [HomelessData](#), can combine data captured from HMIS and non-HMIS sources to build a repository of key information while providing the tools to transform data into knowledge. HomelessData receives data from every HMIS and supports a direct integration with the Clarity HMIS system. While HMIS systems can produce the required HUD reports there are significant advantages beyond reporting for utilizing a data warehouse. These include:

- *Resource Management Tools* use geospatial mapping to identify gaps and redundancies in the current system and inform the distribution and potential reallocation of resources.
- *Rating and Ranking Tools* feature customizable scoring to shift funds towards local priorities and foster a fair and transparent process for the annual *HUD Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA)* competition.
- *Data Quality Monitoring Tools* bolster the integrity of the data and the findings that are derived.
- *Prioritized By Name Lists* inform the allocation of housing resources in an impactful manner.

Performance Management Dashboards arm decision-makers with the evidence needed to inform policies and provide ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the system. The HomelessData warehouse facilitates the timely refresh of the dashboards. The length of stay analysis below is from [San Diego's Project Performance Dashboards](#) and can be used to identify cohorts that may need targeted assistance. The *Weighted Length of Stay* chart on the bottom highlights the need for targeted assistance, such as [Housing First](#), for the population living on the streets who are homeless for a year or more.

