




COMMUNICATION UPDATE

TO:	Mayor and Members City Council
DATE:	November 28, 2022
SUBJECT:	Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
SUBMITTED BY:	Angela Burden General Manager Healthy and Safe Communities Department
SIGNATURE:	

The Housing Services Division is providing this update in response to councillor questions that have been received with respect to how the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) is used and how information is shared.

HIFIS 4.0 was launched in October 2019. It is a database that enables information-sharing across more than 30 agencies across the homeless-serving sector to support coordinated service delivery and system improvement. It is a complex system and use of this database is still evolving in our community. Over the past number of years work has been occurring to build an integrated data system that allows for the tracking of a client through an integrated system of care.

Application of HIFIS and the By-Name List

The system is used in real-time across 31 funded agencies to: create, update, or view HIFIS profiles; ensure up-to-date housing history and goals; documenting admissions; sharing bed availability; indicating service restrictions; recording low barrier goods and services provided by Street Outreach and drop-in programs; case management; and internal communications.

Information in HIFIS helps support implementation of a **By-Name List (BNL)**. The BNL is a real-time list of everyone known to be homeless in the community who has provided consent to be included in our HIFIS. It's important to note that the BNL is not a waitlist. It is used in a dynamic way to understand who has interacted with the homelessness system in the past three months, to prioritize and match people to specific housing resources

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(primarily Intensive Case Management and Rapid Rehousing programs). The BNL is used to measure inflow (people new or returning to homelessness) and outflow (people moving from homelessness to housing, or inactive). It helps us keep track of everyone who is currently accessing the homeless-serving system.

Access to HIFIS

We have 31 agencies across our sector working together through this shared database. There are common practices to align our approach as a community and ensure people only need to tell their story once to gain access to homelessness supports. This is a value for our clients as they have access to all available system resources based on their need and preferences regardless of where the access to the system occurs.

Given the sensitive and confidential nature of the information shared and stored in HIFIS the need for security and confidentiality is significant. Information sharing across the homeless-serving sector is enabled through a robust data-sharing protocol signed by senior leadership of all participating agencies and each individual staff person using HIFIS is required to sign a confidentiality agreement. We also have a common consent form for the Homeless-serving Sector, used by all participating agencies with all clients to ensure informed consent is confirmed before any information is entered about an individual.

All City funded shelters, street outreach, transitional housing, and case management programs use HIFIS. There are currently about 560 active users. The database is set up with access permissions so that users are only able to access data pertinent to their role. Additionally, all user activity in HIFIS is logged and audited. This helps prevent unauthorized access to client personal information.

Maintenance and Operation

The HIFIS software is 'owned' by the federal government and they maintain program development while offering the software to communities to implement locally. City of Hamilton is the local host and administrator of HIFIS. The City's role as HIFIS host includes responsibility for establishing policies and processes for data security, data standards, equity, quality assurance, and overall management and protection of HIFIS data. This work is managed through Housing Services Division. From a technical perspective, HIFIS is hosted on the same server as the City website and offers the same degree of protection. The database is accessible to HIFIS users at participating agencies through a web application available on any internet connected device where each user has a customized user profile and password to prevent unauthorized access.

HIFIS is structured with a series of modules used for service delivery. All client information is recorded including intake forms, consent, triage assessments, and case management notes. To maintain data protection standards and integrity of HIFIS data, we cannot

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authorize access to HIFIS to anyone who is not using it for the purposes of operational service delivery or system administration.

Reporting

The system is large and made up of multiple modules and tables and so there is no option to simply extract or download all HIFIS data. Some reports are built nationally while some we build locally. We are continually working to improve our reporting initiatives through HIFIS. Analysis of data and reporting through HIFIS is complex at times. This work must be balanced against ongoing significant operational pressures involved in managing a database of this size, including onboarding, training, and support for almost 600 users as well as development and compliance with data standards and quality assurance practices.

As Administrators working in City government, managers and directors working in Housing Services Division have access to several reports in HIFIS that we use regularly to look at the system including: identifying the total number of individuals experiencing homelessness, inflow and outflow, shelter population and stay statistics, as well as a number of audit reports for monitoring data quality.

As a HSD division, we continually work to develop reliable reporting mechanisms and work with programs and funded community organizations to ensure consistent standardized data entry that will allow us to generate data that we can report on with confidence. This collaborative process will take time to build all the reports we want, and the outcome will serve us all in our shared goals to understand and relieve the needs of people experiencing homelessness in our community. As we refine the reports available and the information made available to us we will look to continually improve and expand the sharing of information with our partners, stakeholders and the community overall. [Hamilton's Housing and Homelessness dashboard](#) is an example of transparency and the information shared through the dashboard is derived from sources such as HIFIS.

As we work to address the challenges within the housing and homelessness sector we share in the desire to support stable housing for everyone in our community, even as we are up against some serious challenges with the exacerbation of housing unaffordability and level of need in our community. HIFIS is a system that allows us to better understand the clients using the homeless sector services and better plan for service delivery across the sector with our partners.

For questions related to the HIFIS (Homeless Individuals and Families Information System) please contact Michelle Baird, Director Housing Services (Michelle.Baird@hamilton.ca)