Always Working Harder

Insights from the Homeless System

The Continuum of Care (CoC) program is the largest federally funded homeless services program in the United States. CoCs are geographically based groups of organizations that establish, plan, and coordinate local homeless assistance (Continuum of Care Program, 2012) and were intended to streamline the homeless assistance funding, increase coordination of homeless services, and promote the goal of ending homelessness (Burt, 2002).

Despite the program's emphasis on coordination across organizations, little research exists on CoC coordination or other CoC governance and planning methods. Existing research has not examined the interplay between homeless service system performance and CoC governance structures or coordination methods. Instead, CoC guidance, offers broad discretion to CoCs to implement governance and planning methods that meet the needs of their communities (Continuum of Care Program, 2012).

Background

Governance structures within homeless Continuums of Care (CoCs) that favor inclusiveness and participant control over time can lead to "burn-out" and inefficiencies as networks grow and governance responsibilities take up more time (Provan & Kenis, 2008). When CoCs do not invest in improvements to governance and planning structures, they can fall into capability traps that cause CoCs to manage problems as they occur by working harder through increased time-demands of board and committee members, increased utilization of current resources beyond previously planning, and increased "corner-cutting" to quickly stabilize and exit households from homeless services in attempts to free-up resources for those waiting for services (Lyneis & Sterman, 2016). To exit capability traps, CoCs must invest in smarter strategies to increase capabilities faster than the capabilities decay. Failure to invest in "win-win" opportunities that improve organizational performance and external social benefits (e.g. homelessness prevention) may be the result of governance structures that thwart CoCs' abilities to effectively provide and coordinate homeless.

Moreover, initial investment in capabilities typically results in "worse-before-better" (WBB) behavior in which performance decreases as resources are diverted from performance management to capability improvement (Lyneis & Sterman, 2016). WBB behavior may discourage CoCs from investing in capabilities because CoC funding is a competitive process that is partially determined by demonstrated yearly improvements to system performance (Continuum of Care Program, 2012).

Research Approach

A series of group model building sessions were conducted with both consumers and providers of homeless services. During these sessions, participants were guided through several activities to help them explore systems of homeless services through the language of community based system dynamics. Community based system dynamics is a participatory method to engage communities in the process of understanding and improving systems from a feedback perspective. Community based system dynamics connects providers as well as consumers of homeless services into the process of mapping gaps and looking for places to intervene (Hovmand, 2014; Meadows, 1999).
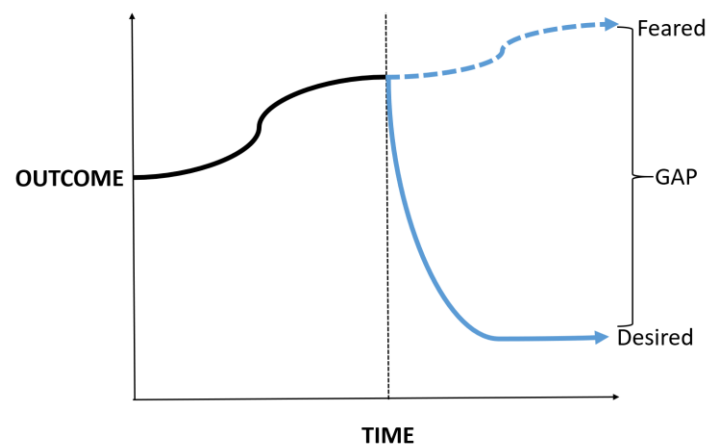


Example of a Data Collection Tool

Emerging Findings

Feedback Mechanisms

The group model building workshops with consumers and providers of homelessness services yielded insights about how different policies with this services system interacted in productive and unproductive ways. When these interactions are cyclical, with a change in one variable impacting a chain of other variable, and ultimately coming back to impact the initial variable, these interactions are called feedback loops. Capability traps involve a type of feedback in which actions that promote short-term gains ultimately reinforce actions that widen gaps in performance. Solutions require interventions in the feedback loops to offset or balance these actions (Lyneis & Sterman, 2016; Repenning & Sterman, 2002). Several capability traps were identified by the consumers and providers of homelessness services who participated in the group model building sessions.

Consumers: The consumer group identified feedback mechanisms that contributed to enduring vulnerability to homelessness and generated 21 ways to improve homeless services. Themes identified by consumers related to lack of quality programming, affordable housing supply, and employment opportunities. Consumers also noted a need for innovation and evaluation of housing programs that better meet their needs and contribute to self-sufficiency over time.

Providers: Providers generated 39 variables representing five major themes related to growing need, reduced resources, and inability to affect systemic change. Providers hoped for expanded housing supply, improved housing stability among consumers, and greater efficiency of agencies and committees to serve homeless individuals and families.
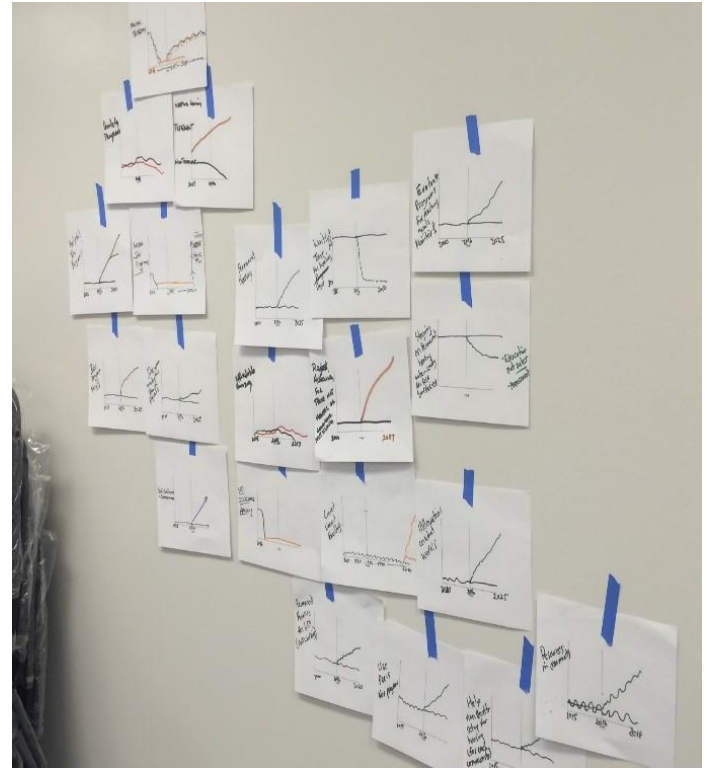

Consumers' desired and feared outcomes of homelessness services as collected through community based system dynamics

Areas for Change

The results of the group model building sessions indicated four areas of need to address capability traps: committee structure and meeting practices, quality assurance procedures, governance and decision making, and prevention. Two key leverage points emerged from this conceptualization of the homeless service delivery system. First, an improved quality assurance process should be established by which systemic problems are identified, solutions generated, and an efficient decision-making mechanism selects the most effective option, with ongoing evaluation to assess changes in system performance. Second, homelessness prevention strategies should be given greater emphasis to address the overwhelming influx of consumers seeking services, reducing system-wide resource burdens, and allowing providers to better meet consumer needs.

While meetings may be the most effective way to plan and implement system change, providers cited frequent meetings as a barrier to efficient practice, as they reduced time available to serve consumers. Meetings were the most common way to address systemic issues, but unstructured and inefficient meeting practices contributed to problems. Effective meeting practices should generate solutions to identified systemic problems, as well as incorporate a decision-making strategy to select the best solution, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of outcomes to observe system improvements.
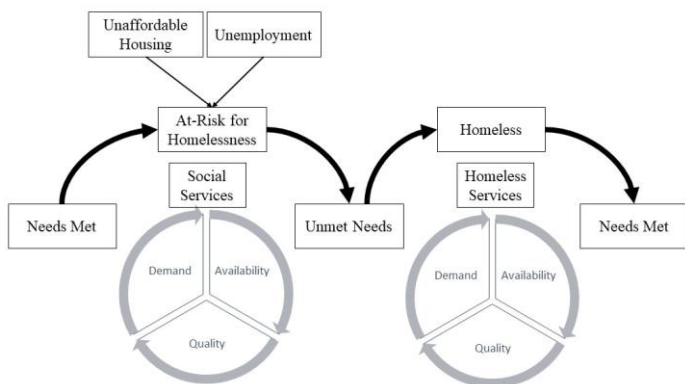
Cycle of Homelessness Risk and Unmet Need

Implications for Policy and Practice

CoCs should implement smaller and more structured committees and should seek to avoid membership on multiple committees by individuals and organizations, establish term limits and consistently rotate committee membership while emphasizing diversity in knowledge and experience when assembling committees. Meetings should be limited to 30 or 60 minutes to encourage efficient use of time and prioritization of tasks.

CoCs should design efficient methods of system performance review including methods to efficiently identify high- and low-performing agencies and collect feedback on the utility of performance reports. Efforts to identify and measure key metrics of homeless system performance, including prevention, should continue, and design, testing, and improvement of data collection and analysis should be reviewed on a continual basis. CoCs should implement gaps analyses in the future that collect qualitative information on system functioning in addition to ongoing quantitative assessments.

Governance charters should clearly explain the decision-making process for the continuum. In particular, policies and procedures should describe the activities for which each CoC entity is responsible. CoCs should share information on committee decisions with all CoC members, including the voting process and results.

CoCs should create a standalone CoC committee on homelessness prevention to develop aims and responsibilities, as well as design initial strategies to prevent homelessness. This diverse group of community members should document current initiatives that address prevention and identify existing gaps, develop and test ways to slow the in-flow of people into the homeless system, and identify and monitor key metrics of homelessness prevention.

Acknowledgements

References

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