



Homelessness Task Force of Greater Kansas City

Building a Common Agenda Series: Service Prioritization Tool

Service providers in the Kansas City region strive to assist all persons and families struggling with homelessness. Limited resources do not enable the community to serve all those needing support. Around the nation, communities are adopting a service prioritization approach. Service prioritization attempts to look at multiple domains (spheres of activity) of an individual or family's lives for those factors known to contribute to vulnerability towards homelessness. Agencies assign values to the degree of vulnerability that a person or family exhibits across the various domains. Those individuals or families with higher scores across the multiple domains may require more intensive interventions and integrative treatment planning and service delivery. Serving these individuals and families may also require greater collaboration among providers. Service prioritization supports the notion that more complex cases need and deserve more attention. Conversely, low to moderate risk scores can be successfully treated with more modest intervention strategies. Service prioritization encourages providers to provide housing and develop treatment plans that match the client's level of vulnerability, thus improving the quality of care and reducing the cost of care.

The Homelessness Task Force of Greater Kansas City believes that service prioritization should be part of a Unified Homeless and Housing Placement System. Here are some of the questions we are using to guide our choice of the most effective tool for our community in developing service priorities:

(From: Iain De Jong: <http://www.orgcode.com/2013/08/19/assessment-prioritization-tools-what-to-look-for/>)

1. Is it grounded in evidence?

There are a number of tools that have been developed to assess service prioritization. There is no shortage of ideas on what may be a good thing to assess when a homeless person or family seeks services. Unfortunately, too many communities come up with their own list (sometimes LONG list) of things to assess without those ideas actually being grounded in *evidence* of what works, and the main currents of thought and practice in service delivery. The assessment tool should be grounded in knowledge and data, not unsubstantiated thoughts or feelings.

2. Has it been tested?

Given the assessment tool informs which type and intensity of service an individual or family may be offered, it is important to make sure the tool actually does the things that the designers of the tool thought it should do in the first place. This requires extensive testing and feedback in trial versions of the assessment tool. It also requires testing the tool against other potential tools and the use of no tool at all.



3. Has it been independently evaluated?

Any progress to develop or implement a service prioritization tool requires establishing a process for evaluating the tool. After implementation, having a credible independent evaluation completed is a good idea. An independent point of view can examine the data that comes from the tool from a fresh perspective, explore the processes involved with the tool, and also look at the outcomes that arise from using the tools.

4. If two different people are using the tool, will they get reliable results?

The only way to know this for sure is to have an independent examination of inter-rater reliability in the use of the tool. What this really gets at is whether independent bias or other related factors unduly (and even unintentionally) sways the results of the assessment.

5. Is feedback from end users of services, frontline staff and others incorporated?

Any assessment tool worth its salt will take the time to robustly gather feedback from a broad cross-section of individuals and families with whom the tool has been used to better understand what they think of it and how the tool could be improved. Getting the input from frontline staff that either undertake assessments using the tool and/or use the data from the tool to inform support services should also be given an opportunity to provide feedback and input into the tool improvements.

6. Does it help inform decision-making?

Assessment tools don't make decisions – they inform decisions. It is a mistake to anthropomorphize a tool and think that it has a brain or speaks. It doesn't. The information gleaned from the assessment feeds into a prioritization process. If there isn't a defined process for how to use the information from the assessment to inform prioritization, then the assessment information is misaligned with how it needs to be used.

7. Is there any utility to the tool after the initial assessment?

Having a score or conclusion on depth of need or type of support from an assessment begs the question – so what? The assessment information should help guide service delivery for particular populations with specific types of needs. It is even possible to use the same tool that was implemented at initial assessment at predetermined intervals to actually see if acuity of the individual or family is going down over time.

8. Will it improve housing outcomes over the longer-term?

Longitudinal information helps inform whether the support programs that the individual or family gets connected to as a result of the assessment actually improves housing stability. If the assessment tool highlights the areas that benefit from the most intensive types of supports so that housing does not become destabilized, then the tool is also important for promoting and even supporting longer term housing stability.

Service Prioritization Tools Available

1. SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) Versions:
 - a. Prescreen Assessment for Single Adults blended with the 100,000 Home Vulnerability Index (VI)
 - b. SPDAT v3 for Singles
 - c. F-SPDAT v1 for Families
2. DESC Vulnerability Assessment Tool
3. Community Supportive Housing (CSH) TAY (Transition Age Youth) Triage Tool
4. Synergy Intake and Screening Assessment Tool