Beyond Anecdotes: Using Data to Support an End to Homelessness

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The 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign in Perth, Western Australia aims to provide sustainable housing and support to Perth's most vulnerable rough sleepers using the Housing First approach. An integral component of this campaign is the collaboration between 50 multi-disciplinary service providers in Perth and strong grounding in data and evidence.

Several homelessness service providers across Australia use the VI-SPDAT to run Registry Week projects and to inform service delivery and Housing First campaigns. In Perth, the Registry Week and 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign is coordinated by Ruah Community Services. Registry Week data on homelessness has been collected every two years since 2014. Ruah uses this data to support the 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign and identify and resolve challenges to provide clients with sustainable support and housing. The data is also utilised by researchers at the University of Western Australia's Centre for Social Impact (CSI) in their external analysis of the 50 Lives 50 Homes project.

The VI-SPDAT questionnaire is an amalgamation of the Vulnerability-Index (VI) and Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) developed by OrgCode Consulting, Inc. The VI-SPDAT includes around 100 questions on an individuals' or family's history of housing and homelessness, demographics, interactions with health and emergency services, daily functioning and health status. This tool is used to triage the needs of homeless people in Perth and identifies the most vulnerable (those with a score of ten of more) to participate in the 50 Lives 50 Homes project.

The 50 Lives 50 Homes collective impact campaign brings together individuals and organisations from services across Perth (for example, Police, Centrelink and Hospital). Fortnightly working group meetings are held to discuss both housing and support needs. Through this process, service gaps and bottlenecks that prevent rapid allocation of housing are identified; and issues and concerns relating to the participants are raised. The data helps to identify service gaps. Some examples are discussed below.

In Western Australia (WA), ambulance call outs can cost over $900 for individuals without private insurance and there is no system to ensure those on low or no income can access this service free of charge. Thus, homeless people with complex health needs either incur large debts or will refuse an ambulance when required. The 50 Lives 50 Homes team used the data from the VI-SPDAT to map the usage of ambulances by rough sleepers and build a case to address this issue. The outcome is a microfinance project in partnership with WA No Interest Loans (WA NILS) to enable vulnerable rough sleepers to purchase ambulance cover from a health insurance provider.

In the social media space, the campaign uses VI-SPDAT data to raise public awareness about specific issues effecting the rough sleeping population. With over 1,200 surveys completed, the campaign can speak with confidence about the level of need among the homeless population. For example, for National Diabetes Week, the campaign posted on Facebook about how rough sleepers in Perth are three times more likely than the general population to have diabetes — yet don't have access to a fridge to store medication. In using the data in this way, the campaign has raised awareness about the complexity of homelessness.

The Registry Week data is also an important component of the evaluation being undertaken by Centre for Social Impact, UWA. UWA researchers have evidenced the effectiveness and accuracy of the tool in identifying the most vulnerable rough sleepers; and will use the data to document change in outcomes for 50 Lives 50 Homes participants. The Housing First approach links the provision of stability through housing and wrap-around support with improvement in individual health and justice outcomes.

We are hoping to prove that Housing First is a cost-effective method of providing sustainable support in the community. Repeating the VI-SPDAT will provide information on how these facets have changed through engagement with the project. Qualitative interviews will also be used to explore the story behind the change to understand more about what dimensions of housing and support are important to have an impact on health and justice outcomes. Self-reported data on hospital and emergency department use from the VI-SPDAT will be linked with de-identified hospital data to track changes in health outcomes.

In addition to capturing a picture of homelessness in Perth, the data generated from Registry Week has an important role to play in the everyday elements of the 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign. We are interested to hear the innovative ways others have used their Registry Week data to support ending homelessness.

For more information about the 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign go to https://www.facebook.com/50Lives50HomesPerth/