



Homelessness Data Improvement Framework

SEPTEMBER 2024

Introduction

Homelessness is a complex problem that extends beyond the scope of any single organization or sector. Its response requires a shared understanding about the problem, and a shared commitment to taking action. Data plays a critical role in solving complex problems. Data can help define the problem, analyze causes, generate solutions, evaluate options, implement and measure the impacts, while continuously learning and improving.

For the homeless-serving sector, the shift toward a data-driven, outcomes-based approach is relatively new compared to other sectors such as health and education. While persistent efforts have been made to collect and maintain data on people experiencing homelessness, the lack of permanent address or fixed location, hidden homelessness, and flow of people moving in and out of homelessness, create challenges.

A data-driven, outcomes-based approach is important in the homeless-serving sector because it can improve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. It can guide the identification and implementation of long-term solutions to prevent, reduce, and ultimately, end homelessness. Data can be used to identify the root causes of homelessness, including structural factors, system failures, and individual circumstances, in order to direct resources where they are needed most, and to develop programs and policies that support long-term solutions.

Background

The development of the Homelessness Data Improvement Framework (herein referred to as ‘the Framework’) has been led by Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC), as the policy lead on homelessness in the Government of Canada, and informed by intentional engagement and collaboration with the homeless-serving sector and its partners.

In June 2017, the Government of Canada convened the Advisory Committee on Homelessness. Through targeted engagement with homeless-serving sector experts and with communities and other stakeholders from across Canada, the Advisory Committee was tasked with supporting the redesign of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), which provided support and funding to communities to address their homelessness priorities. The mandate and activities of the Advisory Committee were also

shaped by the Government of Canada's commitment, through the National Housing Strategy, to reduce chronic homelessness by 50% by fiscal year 2027 to 2028.

In 2018, the Final Report from the Advisory Committee on Homelessness was released, offering 12 recommendations for the redesign of HPS. Among the recommendations was the call to support communities to shift from being program-driven (focused on individual program investments) to focusing on community-level outcomes and addressing homelessness using a coordinated, systems-based and data-driven approach. Another recommendation was for the implementation of a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) (the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System or HIFIS) to support coordinated service delivery at the local level, allowing for greater alignment in data collection and reporting, as well as streamlining intake, triage and assessment, and referrals for people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness as part of this new systems-based approach (referred to as Coordinated Access). In addition, the Advisory Committees called for "a new National Data Strategy to develop a comprehensive national assessment of homelessness in Canada and support the shift to data driven homeless systems."¹

In response to this recommendation, in 2018 the Government of Canada established the Homelessness Data Advisory Committee to support the development of a data framework to address critical knowledge gaps, and inform Government of Canada policy and program development.

Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy launched in 2019 and officially replaced HPS. This community-based program aims to prevent and reduce homelessness across Canada and provides program funding to urban, Indigenous, rural and remote communities to help address local homelessness needs. A key component of Reaching Home is its focus on advancing a data-driven, outcomes-based approach by supporting communities to:

- Adopt an **outcomes-based approach** to preventing and reducing homelessness where communities work with local organizations and service providers to achieve community-level outcomes and reach homelessness reduction targets.
- Introduce local **coordinated access systems** to prioritize people who are most in need of assistance and match them to appropriate housing and services.
- Implement and improve the use of the **HMIS** (e.g., HIFIS) to allow multiple service providers in the same community to access real-time data and to increase coordination of services.

Since the launch of Reaching Home, the Government of Canada has continuously engaged the homeless-serving sector and its partners to identify data-related challenges, needs and opportunities.

Challenges

The homeless-serving sector in Canada faces a number of challenges in making the shift to a data-driven, outcomes-based approach (Annex A). These challenges were identified through various engagement approaches, including discussions with key partners both within and outside the sector. HICC staff

¹ <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/advisory-com-consultatif-eng.html>

contributed valuable observations and experiences, enriching the understanding of issues at a national level. In addition, Reaching Home Designated Communities were invited to complete a National Homelessness Sector Data survey in December 2020 to identify how they worked with homelessness data, the challenges they face, and the innovative solutions they have developed to address these issues.

Specific challenges that were often repeated across engagement sessions, including:

- Sharing data within the sector, and with partners outside the sector, to improve overall outcomes.
- Managing reporting requirements and requests for data on homelessness.
- Understanding how to effectively use HMIS' after implementation.
- Building the necessary capacity and skills fully adopt a data-driven, outcomes-based approach.

Homelessness Data Improvement Framework

Overcoming these challenges requires a collective effort. While many in the sector are already adopting innovative approaches and demonstrating a commitment to using data, others can be limited by issues such as a lack of resources, direction, or capacity. Embracing a data-driven, outcomes-based approach can help ensure that experiences of homelessness are rare, brief, and non-reoccurring. This requires resource investments, new and stronger partnerships, capacity building, and stronger infrastructure and governance models.

The Homelessness Data Improvement Framework (Figure 1) provides a visual overview, including its goal, key pillars for action, and principles to guide its implementation.

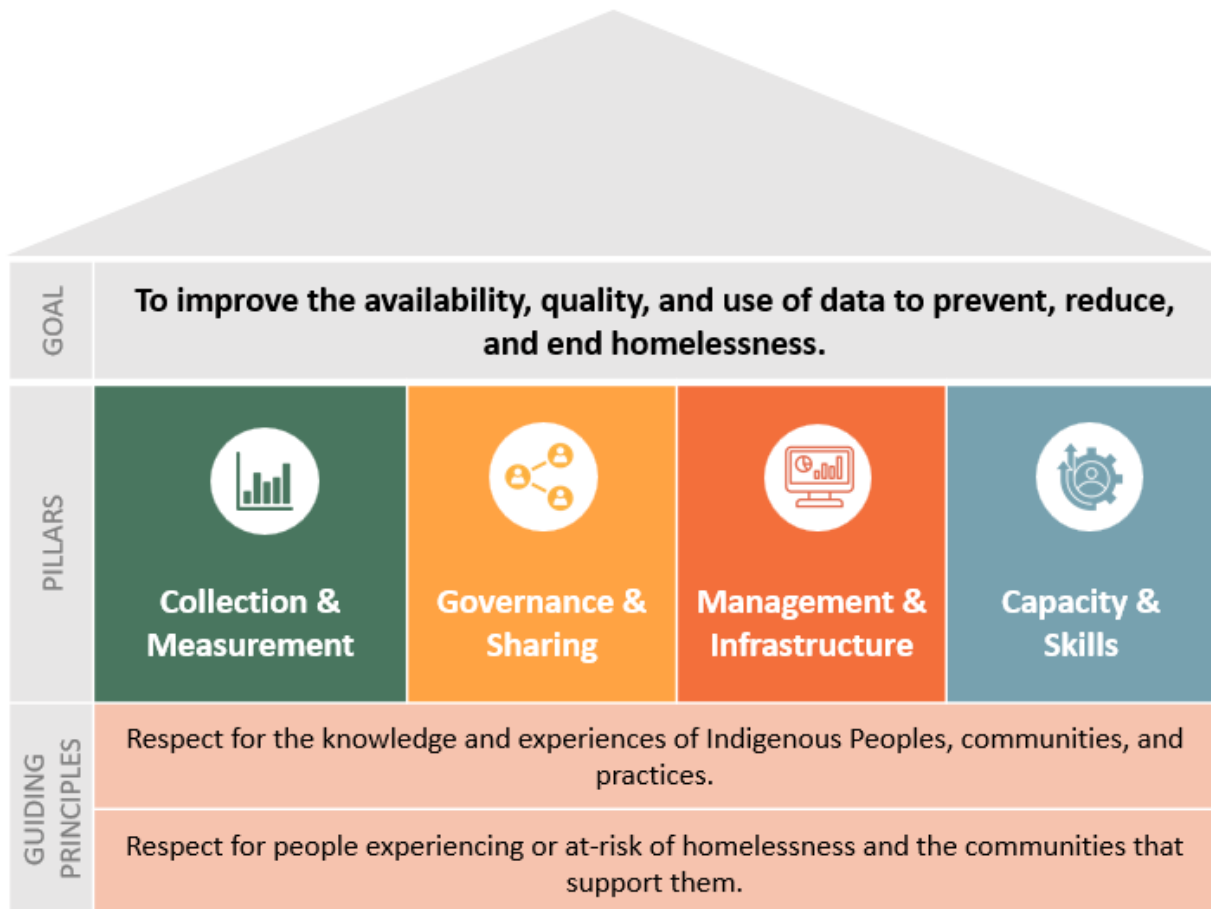


Figure 1: Homelessness Data Improvement Framework

The goal provided in the Framework is to improve the availability, quality, and use of data to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness.

- **Data availability** refers to the process of ensuring that data is available to end-users, when, where, and how they need it.
- **Data use** refers to instances where data are analyzed and used to inform action in policymaking, program planning, performance management, and/or service delivery.
- **Data quality** refers to the measurement of how well a dataset meets the standard for its intended use. The dimensions of data quality include uniqueness, completeness, comprehensiveness, timeliness, and consistency (Figure 2).

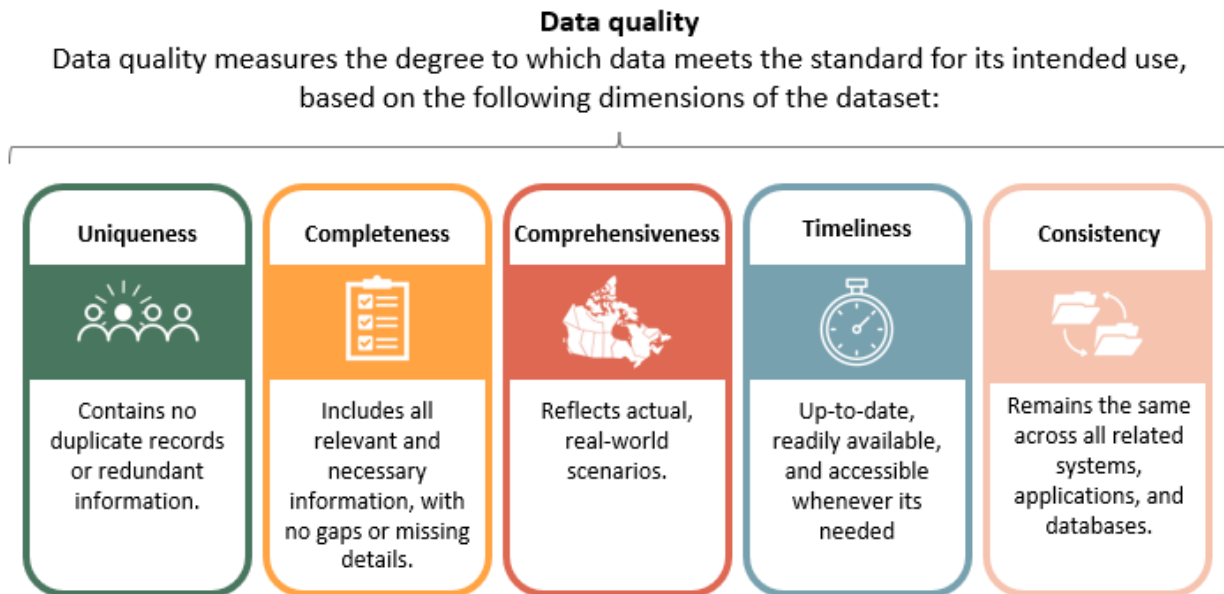


Figure 2: Dimensions of Data Quality

Using data to prevent, reduce and end homelessness requires that different levels of quality data are available to end-users, including system-level, service-level, and person-specific data (Figure 3). It is important to note that the quality of each level of data is dependent on the quality of data at the preceding level. In other words, having system-level quality data at a national level is dependent on the quality of service-level and person-specific data collected at a community level.

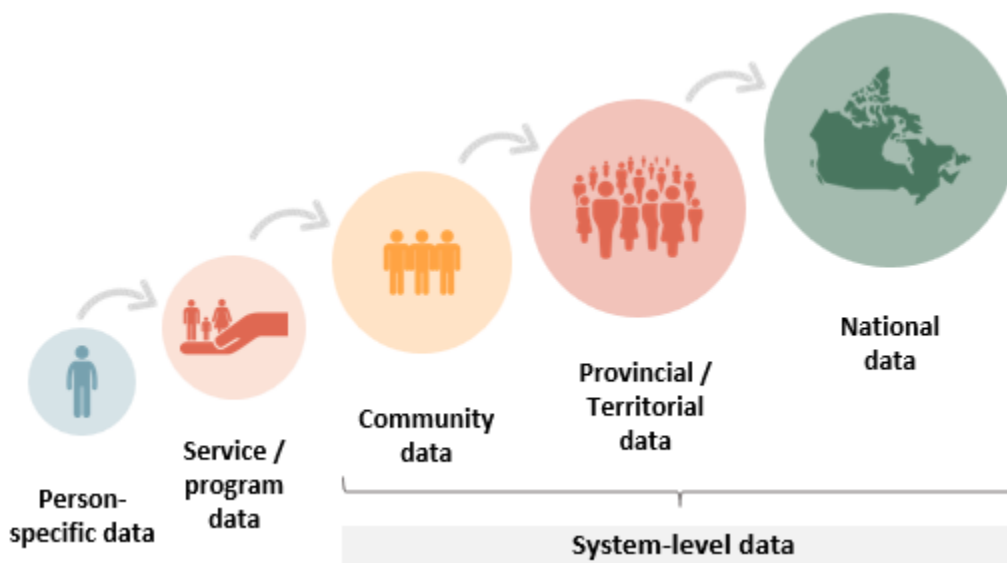


Figure 3: Levels of data on homelessness

Person-specific data includes information about unique persons experiencing homelessness in a community that is collected with their consent. Examples of this information includes housing and homelessness history, health information, housing and service needs, and demographic details (e.g., age, gender identity, racial identity, and whether or not they identify as Indigenous). These data are necessary for tracking person-specific service-level, and community-level outcomes and progress toward preventing, reducing and ending homelessness.

Service-level data includes person-specific data that is aggregated based access to specific service providers, such as a shelter or supportive housing program. This level of data is necessary for tracking service- and community-level outcomes, as well as informing provincial, territorial, and national trends.

System-level data includes person-specific data that is aggregated based on the service providers included. This level of data provides insights beyond an individual service provider or program. It can be used to track progress toward outcomes as well as inform policy and program development, community planning, and resource allocation. System-level data can be organized by community, region, province or territory, and at the national level.

Framework Pillars

The Framework pillars are key focus areas and objectives that are necessary to progress toward the overall Framework goal.



Collection & Measurement

This pillar supports progress toward the overall Framework goal by ensuring the data collected is complete, accurate and relevant. These elements of data quality are necessary for users to reliably measure and analyze the data. The objective of the collection and measurement pillar is **to collect the necessary data to improve the understanding of homelessness and to effectively measure progress toward the goal of preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness.**

Examples of activities under this pillar may involve adopting new methodologies and collecting new data, while continuously improving the quality and/or quantity of existing data collection efforts, to increase understanding of homelessness and address specific data gaps. Other activities may involve adopting common definitions and aligning measurement approaches across the sector to accurately assess the impact of different policy and program interventions.

The collection and measurement pillar is informed by challenges developing a comprehensive, real-time understanding of homelessness. Gaps in homelessness data collection, such as data from domestic violence shelters and temporary shelters, can lead to missed opportunities for creating effective policies and properly attributing impact on the ground. This pillar is also related to a lack of guidance on the data necessary to inform accurate indicators of changes in homelessness. This includes a sound understanding of Indigenous data requirements, based on Indigenous ways of

knowing. Inconsistent data definitions, requirements, and measurement approaches can lead to gaps in information and inaccurate conclusions.



Governance & Sharing

This pillar supports progress toward the overall Framework goal by ensuring that available data has been appropriately safeguarded before it is shared. The objective of the governance and sharing pillar is to **govern the collection and sharing of data, based on appropriate policies and procedures, and collaborative approaches.**

Examples of activities under this pillar may involve providing guidance on the development of comprehensive governance policies and procedures to ensure alignment with established privacy legislation and guidelines, as well as Indigenous data sovereignty principles. With good governance in place, users can have more confidence in sharing data and can develop trusting relationships with partners to leverage intersectoral data sharing opportunities.

The governance and sharing pillar is in response to challenges that limit the sharing of data within the sector, as well as with other sector partners, such as health. Fear of misuse and privacy concerns can limit data sharing, setting up obstacles for preventing and reducing homelessness. This pillar is also associated with a limited understanding of how to adapt governance policies and practices to reflect Indigenous principles, and inconsistent representation within data governance structures. These challenges can create mistrust within the sector and among those providing data, which can lead to a data hoarding and siloing, as well as withholding consent.



Management & Infrastructure

This pillar supports progress toward the overall Framework goal by ensuring data consistency, completeness, and timeliness so that data is up-to-date, readily available, and accessible whenever its needed. The objective of the management and infrastructure pillar is to **leverage technology, particularly HMIS, to effectively enter, store, protect, process, and deliver data.**

Examples of activities under this pillar may involve supporting the implementation and use of appropriate technology and infrastructure, particularly HMIS, in order to make quality data available for use. This includes the continuous improvement of HMIS, user training and coaching opportunities, and guidance on how to maximize technology for quality data management. In addition, direction on how to integrate existing infrastructure and introduce appropriate infrastructure can contribute to confidence in a single source of truth on homelessness data.

The management and infrastructure pillar is in response to the challenges with the existing and varied infrastructure the homeless-serving sector uses to manage its data. Managing data outside of an appropriate HMIS, such as HIFIS, can cause inaccuracies and inefficiencies, and can limit important analysis. In addition, a lack of understanding or capacity to effectively *use* a HMIS can lead to ineffective data management practices.



Capacity & Skills

This pillar ensures that the sector has the appropriate data capacity and skills to support progress toward the overall Framework goal. The objective of the capacity and skills pillar is to **ensure the sector has the data skills, supports, and capacity to effectively collect, analyze, communicate, and understand quality data.**

Examples of activities under this pillar may involve committing investments to build the data capacity and skills in the homeless-serving sector. Investments may include stable and long-term funding for appropriate staffing, the development of opportunities to share data skills and knowledge, and the provision of ongoing training opportunities.

The capacity and skills pillar is in response to challenges facing the homeless-serving sector, including a lack of data skills and subject matter expertise, limited staff capacity to collect, analyze, and use data, and insufficient understanding of Indigenous data practices and principles. Data practitioners working at a community level can find themselves siloed within their organization and without opportunities to improve and share their knowledge and expertise. In Indigenous communities, the lack of data capacity and skills can lead to non-Indigenous narratives dominating analysis and a loss of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations.

Guiding Principles

While the overall Framework goal and pillars are expected to remain the same over time, actions implemented are dynamic and responsive to the changing needs and priorities in the sector. The guiding principles included in the Framework provide guidance to inform decision-making, planning, and practices as the Framework and its aligned actions are implemented.

Guiding principle: Respect for the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous Peoples, communities, and practices.

Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by homelessness compared to the general population. This is the result of Canada's history of colonization, historical trauma, systemic discrimination, and a need for more culturally appropriate services and supports. Addressing Indigenous homelessness requires the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous peoples, as well as Indigenous data sovereignty and governance. By working in collaboration and partnership with Indigenous peoples and communities, actions informed by the Framework can produce stronger outcomes that benefit those most impacted.

Guiding principle: Respect for people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness and the communities that support them.

Individuals with lived experience of homelessness have unique, valuable expertise to contribute to all stages of data (e.g., planning and designing collection, interpreting and analyzing findings, communicating results). Similarly, the communities who support them, including local service providers, advocates, and volunteers, develop similar knowledge acquired through opportunity and exposure. By elevating input and expertise from those with lived and learned experiences, actions informed by the Framework can deliver better and more inclusive outcomes.

Implementation

The introduction of the Framework is an important milestone for the homeless-serving sector as it shifts toward a data-driven, outcomes-based approach. The next critical step in this journey is to turn the Framework into action through implementation. The sector and its partners, such as health, education, and justice, can use the Framework to inform the identification and prioritization of data-related actions and resource allocation.

The following are a few select highlights of recent and ongoing actions that HICC is leading or supporting that align with the Framework.

HIFIS Training Strategy

● ● (Pillars: Infrastructure & Management; Skills & Capacity)

HIFIS is a comprehensive data collection and case management system designed, in part, to better understand what is happening at a community-level based on real-time, accessible data. Under Reaching Home, communities are required to adopt HIFIS as their local HMIS if they do not already have a comparable system in place. Currently, over 40 communities have implemented HIFIS across Canada, with many more working toward this goal.

The successful implementation and use of HIFIS across Canada is a critical component of the Framework, advancing the objectives of the Management & Infrastructure, and Skills & Capacity pillars. To support communities with HIFIS navigation, data extraction, reporting, and customization, HICC developed and began implementing a HIFIS Training Strategy for 2023 – 2025 to promote the use of HIFIS, update and maintain resources, and improve data quality for any community considering, implementing, or using HIFIS. Specific actions are being prioritized in six-month cycles, with input from the National HIFIS Working Group.

Action Research on Chronic Homelessness in Hamilton, ON

● *(Pillars: Governance & Sharing)*

In Budget 2022, the Government of Canada invested \$18.1 million to conduct research to identify further measures needed to help eliminate chronic homelessness and contribute to broad learning and new approaches that can be used in communities across Canada. In response, the Action Research on Chronic Homelessness (ARCH) initiative was created by HICC. The goal of ARCH is to support a select number of communities to identify and document persistent barriers to preventing and reducing chronic homelessness, and to test potential approaches to address those barriers and document success and challenges.

Many actors in the homeless-serving sector recognize the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty and governance, but have encountered challenges when implementing practices. Led by the Coalition of Hamilton Indigenous Leaders and in partnership with the City of Hamilton, the ARCH-Hamilton project will build, implement, and conduct developmental evaluation of an Indigenous Cultural Capacity and Accountability Framework for Hamilton's Coordinated Access System. Grounded in local Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, the framework will guide the development of key tools and structures to formally embed Indigenous knowledge, culturally supportive practices, and data governance principles into program delivery and system coordination. The goal of the action research component is to identify and assess the processes and relationships necessary to advance collective and community-wide accountability to Truth and Reconciliation within Hamilton's Coordinated Access System while contributing to an evidence base for other communities and sectors who may be interested in adopting similar processes.

Data Collection E-Learning Module

● ● *(Pillars: Collection & Measurement; Skills & Capacity)*

The [Homelessness Learning Hub](#) provides free professional development and community capacity building for the homeless-serving sector, with development and maintenance support from HICC. This

Hub includes self-directed training opportunities, a resource library, and learning materials based on relevant examples that reflect the reality of working in the sector.

Building knowledge capacity of quality data collection practices has been identified by the Hub and the Framework as a critical area for improvement the homeless-serving sector. This was based on Hub survey feedback, and broad engagement with key sector partners and support organizations, including those with front-line experience collecting data on homelessness.

The Hub will provide online, self-paced Data Collection training in early 2024. The training is intended to build skills and capacity in the sector by increasing knowledge of the importance of collecting administrative data for homelessness prevention.

How to Use the Framework

The Framework being introduced provide guidance for communities and partners to improve the quality, use, and availability of data on homelessness by:

- Identifying and aligning data-related goals and objectives across communities;
- Providing a point of reference to facilitate prioritization and decision-making on strategic actions;
- Helping to inform the allocation of resources toward data initiatives;
- Supporting synchronization of strategic initiatives to ensure all are working toward preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness, with minimal conflicts, overlaps, and contradictions; and
- Improving communication about the types of strategic initiatives being undertaken and demonstrating commitment by offering a clear description of the aim and responsibilities.

Using the Framework entails a systematic approach to problem-solving or decision-making. Initially, understanding the Framework's goal, pillars, and guiding principles is crucial. The Framework is designed to be flexible, and users are encouraged to adapt for their local context. The challenges identified in this document (including in Annex A) provide a good starting point, but communities are encouraged to use local data and experiences to generate a thorough understanding. Mapping these challenges against the Framework pillars can help identify where issues are concentrated and/or can help inform priorities.

Once a specific challenge has been identified, communities can work to identify an objective and map out a plan, including how they will measure their change. The process of using the Framework is not linear, but allows for refinement and adjustments as new information emerges or circumstances change. Evaluation of outcomes informs ongoing learning, enabling continuous improvement in decision-making practices. By following this approach, communities can effectively address complex problems, make informed decisions, and achieve desired outcomes while remaining responsive to the evolving needs of their local context.

Next Steps

The release of the Framework is a critical step in supporting the transition of the homeless-serving sector toward a data-driven, outcomes-based approach. As a tool, the Framework can help to guide organizations within the sector as they take intentional and essential steps toward an aspirational future where quality data is available and used to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness.

Next steps will be essential to the successful implementation of the Framework and involve the sector working together. This includes:

- **Engaging** - Homelessness in Canada, and the needs of the homeless-serving sector, are changing rapidly. Ensuring that the Framework is well communicated among partners both internal and external to the sector and remains responsive to those changing needs is essential. The Framework will also be a tool to inform engagement with partners to identify aligned actions and new opportunities.
- **Knowledge sharing** - By sharing promising practices and lessons learned based on actions that align with the Framework, the sector can ensure that resources are being maximized, and efforts are synchronized.
- **Monitoring** - While it is not expected that the framework itself will change significantly, it is understood that the issues and priorities will evolve over time. Ongoing engagement with the sector and its partners, along with continuing analysis of trends reflected in data, may impact the direction of the Framework and the actions necessary to progress toward its overall goal.
- **Reporting** – To remain transparent and accountable, HICC will report annually on departmental initiatives, and highlight best practices from across the sector that align with and advance the Framework. Reporting on the implementation and impact of the Framework is an opportunity to spread awareness of successful activities, lessons learned, and progress made toward the Framework goal and pillar objectives.

HICC is committed to leading these elements with the continued support of the homeless-serving sector and its partners.

Annex A: Summary of Identified Data Challenges

Overarching issue:

There are inconsistent and superficial data governance approaches being applied in the homeless-serving sector, compromising the ability to share data both within and outside the sector.

Challenges	Impacts
Lack of understanding of relevant privacy legislation	• Data becomes siloed, leading to analytical blind spots • Access to data is mismanaged (restricted unnecessarily or freely given) • Difficulty in maintaining compliance with privacy or protections laws • Potential misuse of sensitive information
Limited understanding of how to develop and implement participatory governance policies and practices.	• Incomplete or non-existent standards or policies in place
Lack of comprehensive data-sharing agreements within the sector, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and organizations, and with other sectors	• Decrease in trust level between communities and organizations
Limited understanding of how to adapt governance policies and practices to reflect Indigenous principles	• Failure to incorporate necessary governance policies and practices
Inconsistent representation within data governance structures	• Implementation of ill-informed data governance policies and practices
Lack of comprehensive data-sharing agreements with other sectors	• Failure to strengthen richness of data and address root causes of homelessness

Overarching issue:

There is a lack of established and shared processes used in the homeless-serving sector to identify, prioritize, formulate, and validate the data needed to achieve objectives and measure progress.

Challenges	Impacts
Data needs identified and/or requested do not align with efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness.	• Contributes to “data smog” – an overwhelming excess of information • Further stretches limited staff capacity
Lack of guidance and shared understand of the essential data needed to measure efforts to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness.	• Unnecessary data collection • Insufficient data to inform decision-making
Inconsistent data definitions applied within and across communities	• Makes it difficult to manage and reconcile essential data within and across communities

Limited understanding of Indigenous data requirements for preventing and reducing homelessness	• Unnecessary data collection • Insufficient data to inform decision-making
Multiple reporting requirements that require different data	• Further stretches limited staff capacity • Contributes to “data smog” – an overwhelming excess of information

Overarching issue:

Technology, including Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS), is being inconsistently and inefficiently used for data management, include capturing, storing, protecting, and processing community-level data.

Challenges	Impacts
Blank fields, spelling mistakes, and incorrect variables are not being effectively managed in HMIS	• Contributes to inaccurate data
Data is being entered into multiple databases/systems (e.g. HMIS and Excel)	• Contributes to inconsistent data
Some Indigenous communities and organizations are hesitant to adopt HMIS	• Failure to capture comprehensive understanding of Indigenous homelessness
Navigating HMIS to find appropriate forms and fields is challenging	• Inefficient processes stretch staff capacity
Lack of Information Technology support at a local level to support HMIS issues	• Failure to adopt HMIS
Some rural and remote communities without access to wi-fi	• Failure to capture comprehensive understanding of rural and remote homelessness
Some communities do not have local server to host HMIS data	• Failure to adopt HMIS • Resources allocated to server costs rather than direct programs and supports
Difficulties retrieving necessary data stored within a database (e.g. running Crystal Reports from HMIS')	• Communities unable to retrieve data required to inform decision-making

Overarching issue:

There are varying degrees of data skills and capacity among those working within the homeless-serving sector, yet the sector is dependant on those actors to collect, analyze, communicate and understand quality data that can drive the prevention and reduction of homelessness.

Challenges	Impacts
Lack of homelessness data skills due to limited post-secondary opportunities	• Data is not used or it is misused

Lack of homelessness data skills due to limited professional development opportunities in the field	• Data is not used or it is misused
Lack of funding to support staff capacity to collect, analyze, and use data	• Data is not used or it is misused
Limited opportunities for peer-learning and networking among data staff within and across communities	• Data practitioners are siloed within and beyond their organization • Missed opportunities to share knowledge and expertise
Insufficient understanding of the application of Indigenous data practices and principles	• Loss of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and organizations • Misuse of Indigenous data • Non-Indigenous insights dominate analysis