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Every night 30,000 New Yorkers go to bed homeless. Shelters approved by BSS temporarily house 20,000 people, 12,000 of whom are children. Homeless services have come a long way since the 1970s when shelters were primarily concerned with providing "3 hots and a cot"-three hot meals a day and a bed to sleep in at night. Today, homeless people are given a full range of services including preparation for permanent housing, education, health care, job training, counseling, and life skills. New York State spends \$330 million a year tackling the problem of homelessness.

BSS needed a more effective way to manage programs, evaluate services, and devise strategies for helping people permanently break out of the cycle of homelessness. The agency's first step was to define a service objective: develop a uniform automated database to provide management with information needed to track homelessness and to more effectively manage the program.

Out of that objective came specific project goals:

- Collect demographic and service information about homeless people
- Evaluate effectiveness of services provided
- Use existing electronic data from several sources
- Make the system voluntary for providers
- Use results to do program planning at all levels by sharing information with providers and local districts

In order to meet the service objective and fulfill project goals, BSS had to engage homeless shelter providers and local social service districts. BSS was able to secure the support and participation of these groups through open communication and taking the project idea directly to the stakeholders. In addition to inviting the primary stakeholders to be full partners in the project, the team worked hard to involve shelter providers and local districts from the beginning. The team earned the trust and support of the stakeholders by assuring them that the system would not be mandatory, and demonstrating how it would benefit their work.

Once everyone was on board, the project team had to work through several issues regarding confidentiality and data. BSS worked closely with providers about:

- Protecting client information through specific agency protocols
- Restricting access to individual shelter data to the shelter itself
- Making aggregate data available to all users
- Establishing internal and external controls
- Including only demographic and service data in the system
- Excluding case notes from the system
- Creating key identifiers to standardize information

The team developed a model for how they would evaluate homeless services. This model involves using shelter providers and local social service districts to identify indicators of success. Those indicators include reduced use of public assistance or a decrease in recidivism in the shelter system. The model also relies on providers using the new standard definitions and other state agencies providing collateral information. These requirements went into the HIMS prototype, which focuses on a subset of the family shelter population data.

All of the relationships that were forged, issues that were resolved, and discussions that took place helped BSS build its business case for the HIMS system. That business case is being used to prove the value of an integrated system to track and manage homeless services. The case is also an important tool in the effort to secure support and funding to build the full HIMS system and implement it across the state.

The most important lesson learned by BSS involves the process of building a bridge from the original idea to the actual system. The team feels it did this by defining a service objective that meets real business needs, developing a business case that shows how the project will work and what benefits it will provide, establishing partnerships with all key stakeholders, encouraging open communication among all participants, building and testing a prototype, resolving problems, and being persistent.

