

The following description depicts an example of how information use issues and policies are handled by one New York State agency. Officials at the NYS Bureau of Housing Services (BHS) had a problem they needed to solve. The agency - which monitors, inspects, and certifies close to 120 shelters that house more than 30,000 homeless families and single adults in the state - needed a better way to evaluate the effectiveness of the services delivered in the shelters. After defining their business problem, determining their stakeholders, and developing a business case, the staff decided they would create a database system that could track the homeless population and enable them to evaluate programs. The name of this new system, which is in the prototype stage now, is the Homeless Information Management System (HIMS). BHS is working with CTG on this project.

The project goals emerged to include: collect the demographic and service program information about New York's homeless population; evaluate the effectiveness of the housing, job, education, health, child care, and other services provided to the homeless; use existing electronic data from several sources, including social service districts, shelter providers, and BHS; use the results to do program planning and measure the true impact of welfare reform [Slide 6].

Slide 6

The information needed to track the shelters' clients and services is housed in several locations. The local social service districts keep track of the programs in their geographic area. The shelter providers keep track of the demographic and service information about their clients. BHS has facts about where the shelters are located and who runs them, as well as budget information. Much of the information, from all sources, is in paper format. There are also several database systems in use. Collection and accessibility of the data were two big issues that had to be addressed.

The collection of information about homeless people is governed by a set of rules that include state laws and department regulations that require specific reporting mechanisms, and interagency memorandums of agreement that cover the exchange of information. BHS discovered a different reality when developing HIMS. The agency encountered problems related to people, systems, and finances.

Taking all of their issues into account, the BHS team worked to gain the trust of the shelter providers and local social service districts and move toward their goal of creating the HIMS system. The entire group came together to mutually develop a set of goals and working environments in which people were comfortable. The participants jointly developed a set of preliminary rules, including standard service and data definitions and an understanding of how personal data would be protected, which were used for the purposes of the prototype development.

By making the development of the HIMS system an open, collaborative effort, the agency helped ensure the participation of required organizations. The group created rules to govern the collection and accessibility of the data.