

Understanding Inputs, Outputs, and Outcomes in Homeless Services Programs

Why Performance Measurement Matters

HUD Continuum of Care (CoC) funding is intended to support programs that measurably improve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. Strong applications do more than describe the services a program provides — they describe the changes that result for people served.

A helpful way to think about program performance is:

Resources → Activities → Results → Impact

The Difference Between Inputs, Outputs, and Outcomes

Inputs: What the Program Invests

Inputs are the resources needed to operate a program.

Examples:

- CoC funding
- Staff and partner capacity
- Housing units or rental assistance resources
- HMIS/data systems
- Community partnerships
- Organizational expertise

Key question:

What resources are we using to deliver this program?

Outputs: What the Program Does and Produces

Outputs are the direct products of program activities. They show the amount of work completed, but not necessarily whether the work achieved its intended purpose.

Examples:

- Households enrolled
- Outreach contacts completed

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- Housing searches conducted
- Case management sessions provided
- Referrals made
- Units secured

Key question:

What services did we deliver?

Outcomes: What Changes Because of the Program

Outcomes measure the results or changes experienced by participants because of program services.

Examples:

- People exit homelessness to permanent housing
- Participants obtain or increase income
- Housing remains stable after program exit
- Returns to homelessness decrease
- Length of time homeless decreases

Key question:

What improved because of the program?

Example: Rapid Rehousing Program

Performance Area	Example
Input	\$500,000 in CoC funding; housing specialists; rental assistance resources
Activity	Housing navigation, landlord engagement, financial assistance
Output	150 households received housing assistance
Outcome	120 households exited homelessness to permanent housing and remained housed

The difference:

“We provided services to 150 households” describes program activity.

“120 households exited homelessness and maintained housing” describes program impact.

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Strong CoC Applications Connect Activities to Outcomes

When describing a project, applicants should be able to answer:

1. **What resources are we investing?**
 2. **What services will we provide?**
 3. **How will we measure whether those services worked?**
 4. **How will the program contribute to reducing homelessness in the community?**
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Common Performance Measurement Mistake

Counting services is not the same as demonstrating success.

Example:

 “Our program provided 2,000 case management hours.”
(Describes an output)

 “Our program helped 85% of enrolled households obtain permanent housing.”
(Describes an outcome)

Both matter — but outcomes demonstrate the difference the program makes.

Bottom Line

For CoC-funded programs:

Inputs show what you have.

Outputs show what you do.

Outcomes show why it matters.

Effective programs use data to demonstrate that investments lead to meaningful improvements for people experiencing homelessness.