



Data Points

Systems in Focus: Homeless Response Mapping for Real-World Impact

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Overview

This episode features Kristin Lupfer, Jen Elder, and Abby Kirkman from Policy Research, who explore the [Homeless Response Systems Mapping \(HRSM\) Workshops](#)—a structured, community-driven process that helps local leaders identify gaps, build connections, and develop action plans to prevent and end homelessness.

Data Points is an ongoing podcast series produced by Policy Research that discusses research for social change.

Elianne Paley:

Policy Research Associates leads the nation in driving sustainable, impactful change for people with behavioral health conditions. Ready to transform your community? Contact us on our website at prainc.com to get started.

Now let's get to today's episode.

Holley Davis:

Welcome to *Data Points*, where we discuss research for social change. *Data Points* is the production of Policy Research. My name is Holley Davis and I'm the communications director of Policy Research.

In this episode, we'll be talking about the Homeless Response Systems Mapping Workshop or HRSM, a systems mapping event developed by Policy Research to help local leaders collaboratively develop community-based responses to homelessness. Today I'm joined by three of my colleagues who specialize in homeless response systems mapping workshops: Kristin Lupfer, Jen Elder, and Abby Kirkman.

Kristin Lupfer is the vice president for housing and income supports at Policy Research. She oversees Policy Research's housing and income support portfolio and brings extensive experience supporting people with disabilities and those experiencing homelessness.

Kristin Lupfer:

Thanks for having me. So excited about this conversation.

Holley Davis:

Jen Elder is a senior project associate at PRA. She has over 17 years of experience in housing, homelessness, and behavioral health, and she brings a public health lens to systems change.

Jen Elder:

Great to be here. Happy to do this.

Holley Davis:

Abby Kirkman is a senior project associate at Policy Research. She provides training and technical assistance on social security benefits access, and has expertise in helping communities navigate and implement systems-level change.

Abby Kirkman:

Thanks for having us today.

Holley Davis:

Kristin, let's start at the beginning. What is a Homeless Response Systems Mapping Workshop, and why is it important?

Kristin Lupfer:

Thanks, Holley. Great question.

These workshops bring together key community partners to develop plans around critical intersections of their homeless response system to reach essential goals, including stabilizing housing for those who are at risk of homelessness, connecting individuals and families experiencing homelessness with services, and helping people move from using homeless services to living in appropriate and safe permanent housing. The mapping helps to identify gaps in services, prevent or avoid duplication of services, and really maximize existing resources and opportunities.

Holley Davis:

Thank you so much.

Jen, how is an HRSM Workshop different from other types of community planning or systems consultation?

Jen Elder:

I see the Homeless Response Systems Mapping as enhancing the great work that communities are already doing. Many communities already have strong plans for parts of those systems, but the plans may not be coordinated and talking with one another and all focused in the same direction.

In public health we talk a lot about whole-person care, and so I see these mappings as whole-community care is bringing together everybody's efforts so we can focus specifically on helping people exit homelessness. But critically with that, we have to talk about how are people entering homelessness because it's one thing to help people exit, but we really need to think about how people are entering. What is their experience like while they are experiencing homelessness in that community? Is it shelters? Is it encampments? We have to look at of the systems they interact with, healthcare, public safety, housing.

That's what makes these homeless response systems mappings different. We can take that broader full-community lens to help people focus into the direction of helping people end homelessness.

Holley Davis:

I love that phrase, whole-community care. Thanks so much for bringing that and using that as a guide throughout our conversation here today.

Abby, the Homeless Response Systems Map is structured around key intersections, prevention pathways in conditions of homelessness, and pathways out. Could you walk us briefly through those intersections?

Abby Kirkman:

Absolutely.

The first intersection that we take a look at is prevention or diversion. This aims to stop homelessness before it occurs. What we would be doing here is identifying individuals or families before they enter the homeless service systems, and we can offer alternatives to mainstream homeless services, such as eviction prevention or employment services. Overall, we're looking at how can we prevent a family or an individual from becoming homeless.

Sometimes that doesn't always happen. If an individual or a family does enter the homeless service systems, it's because of a wide range of circumstances. It could be job loss, unexpected medical bills, a mental health crisis, or a financial crisis that has led to housing insecurities. We want to ensure that once someone is experiencing homelessness, they're able to exit as quickly as possible. We do this through stabilizing their housing, whether it be through rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing, long-term care, or other permanent housing options. What we'll look at in the community is what is available and how folks can access these services incredibly quickly.

The last thing that we talk about is our wrap-around services, and these are some of the key services that a community will provide to ensure that families and individuals have ongoing stability. What this could look like is outreach from a case management team, any type of specialty services, engagement around employment or income supports or access to benefits, and consistent treatment so that they will not reenter into the homeless service system.

Holley Davis:

Jen, what kinds of communities participate in these workshops, and what are they hoping to achieve?

Jen Elder:

The Homeless Response Systems Mappings, they are very flexible. We meet communities where they're, so, some communities may be at the very beginning planning stages, whereas others have very advanced initiatives. Our role is to come in and help bring those together.

The commonality that I see across all communities that we work with or that reach out to us is they have a strong desire to do better for their neighbors and they need outside support in how to plan together, how to build momentum. Many times these mapping events are this catalyst where the community is coming together hyper-focused on this, and that's the jumping off point for their future work. We work to capitalize on the strengths of communities no matter what planning stage they're in. We can adapt the Homeless Response Systems Mapping, again, to meet them where they are at and help them move forward.

Kristin Lupfer:

I really think that having a third-party facilitator come into a community and talk with them about what is happening, what's working well, what they might be struggling with can help them see things that they may not have seen because they're so immersed in the work. Having another perspective, asking questions to learn more about how things are really functioning or what is not functioning as well as it could be can be really useful to those strong communities.

And then those communities that are still building their systems, we can bring in best practice examples from other communities that have tried it and really point out and emphasize the things that work really well and the things that are harder to achieve.

Holley Davis:

Thank you so much Kristin and Jen.

Kristin, I appreciate you bringing in that national lens, and I think that's something that PRA is so expert in having worked across the country through all of our different projects and mapping services. We truly have experience on the ground to really provide actionable examples of what communities could do to enhance their systems and serve their neighbors better.

Kristin, how does the Homeless Response Systems Model draw from PRA's other models like the [Sequential Intercept Model](#), and how did you build on that existing expertise?

Kristin Lupfer:

Great question.

Subject-matter experts from the criminal legal system and the homeless response system came together here at Policy Research and talked about how we navigate through these complex and distributed systems and communities. We have learned from decades of successful mapping workshops that we can help navigate within and across systems better when we know who the players are, what the barriers are to accessing services, what is working well, and where we need additional support or access.

We are helping communities communicate with each other and facilitating a space for individuals, programs, and organizations to understand their specialties and how each partner plays an integral role in the larger system. These are really the key elements in shaping the impact a system mapping can have on a community.

Holley Davis:

We'll be right back after this message.

Elianne Paley:

Hi, I'm Elianne from Policy Research. Ending homelessness takes more than siloed services. It takes collaboration. Our Homeless Response System Mapping Workshop blog explores how communities are improving the connection between housing, healthcare, and community. Learn more at prainc.com.

Now back to our discussion.

Holley Davis:

Abby and Jen, you have facilitated several of these homeless response systems mapping workshops. What is a session like and what kind of conversations unfold? Abby, would you like to get us started?

Abby Kirkman:

Sure. I think the first thing to point out is that it is amazing just to get everyone in the same room together. Oftentimes, individuals are working in the same field, but they could be siloed, or everyone is so busy and they don't often have the time to take a day and a half to come together to talk about how to better their systems. We will do mapping and we will talk about resources and the various intercepts.

The magic is really by getting everyone in the room together to look at the system as a whole.

Holley Davis:

Thank you. Jen?

Jen Elder:

One of the things that I think is really helpful in the conversations that unfold during these is we as third-party facilitators can help people have hard conversations.

As conversations are unfolding during the mapping workshops, one of the valuable things that we bring is we help communities have hard conversations. We can tell when a community doesn't want to talk about a certain topic. They haven't told us in advance, but we can tell that there is an elephant in the room and this is going to prevent the work from being successful. When we take a philosophy of leading with curiosity, we can ask those curious questions and have those transparent, safe space conversation. How are we going to recognize the pain points? How are we going to name them? How are we going to strategically plan around them?

And so I think that's something that is a huge benefit to have a third party come in and facilitate that because we are not ingrained in the community. I'm not going to have to see somebody at the supermarket the next day, so I can come in and say, "What is difficult about your system right now, and how are we going to plan in a solutions-oriented way?"

Kristin Lupfer:

I think one of the things that's so interesting and helpful when these conversations get going, like Jen was saying, that there can be a lot of misunderstandings about the availability of services, how to access it, who to contact. There are a lot of unknown or underutilized services. By bringing people together, you can clarify those processes. You can clarify your eligibility for programs. You can make sure that everyone's on the same page.

And so it's really an opportunity for that in addition to the resource mapping and gap identification that Jen was emphasizing.

Holley Davis:

Thank you all for that. When we were talking about the Sequential Intercept Model Mapping Workshops, a very similar theme emerged, where you're connecting people who really don't get the opportunity to work with one another. The synergy and ability to make connections and improve services for people is just a really special, unexpected component of these events.

Jen Elder:

Exactly.

Holley Davis:

Abby, could you give us an example of something surprising that's come up during a workshop? Maybe something that a community didn't realize until they saw their whole homeless response system mapped out?

Abby Kirkman:

I think that it's going to be different for every single community, but I think what's most impactful is when the group realizes who isn't at the table.

When some of the recent mappings that we did, it quickly became apparent that what was missing was representation from the foster care and youth space, and they were able to invite those individuals on the second day to be a part of the conversation. In another community it was also quickly realized that the housing authority needed to be at the table. By having them there, we were able to bring their services into this discussion as well.

I think overall it's identifying who isn't necessarily there, which will only serve to make the Homeless Systems Mapping more robust, richer, and have a better result in the end.

Jen Elder:

I love that metaphor about thinking about who's at the table, and I think so often that communities are operating from a resource scarcity mindset and instead we need to be operating from an expanding our table mindset. The resources are there. We have to be creative about who have we not invited, what have we not thought about, and make our table bigger. Because in order to end homelessness, we've got to be all in.

And so that's something that is very helpful to have third-party facilitators in your community because we can ask those questions and explore who might not be there because we're not so into the community that we have maybe all of the backstory. I think that's helpful because I think we can raise those points to say, "Okay, why have we not worked with them? How can we explore this relationship? How can we be all in on this community plan and make our overall community table bigger and more inclusive?"

Holley Davis:

Fantastic. Jen, the mapping doesn't just visualize problems, it also ends with action planning. What kinds of changes have communities made after participating in an HRSM workshop?

Jen Elder:

I think one of the most exciting changes that we see right after a workshop are those personal connections that people are making. We can hear them after everybody's wrapping up the workshop

and they are finding a time to have lunch with one another. They are putting meetings on the calendar. They are connecting. That I think is the most critical role in getting this momentum started.

Often we think of changes in terms of, did we change this policy? Did we bring in all this new funding? But really change starts with relationship building. I love people forming new connections through these workshops. Of course, I also do love to see when they bring in new funding or they re-allocate resources towards these goals, and that usually starts to happen when the first 1 to 3 months after a thing is when they're starting to get in those conversations.

Remembering that the mapping is a starting point. It's a momentum builder, but then handed over to that community and the community needs to take it and run with it. And so that's going to take time. It's looking at those short-term wins, those connections, those meetings, those ideas with the longer term wins and celebrating all of that, celebrating every step along the way from small to big policy change.

Holley Davis:

Jen, as you're saying that, it's making me think that a champion is really essential to bringing this work forward. Would you agree?

Jen Elder:

I love a champion, and what I love more than a champion is lots of champions. I do get concerned during a mapping if it starts to become apparent that only one person is being listed next to the action item and it is the same person because our plates are all full and we know that person can't possibly change a system by themselves.

And so what I want to see during a mapping is everybody feeling empowered to be that champion because they can be a champion in their own way in their own system and carry that forward. When we can build a community of champions and everybody feels empowered to make that change, that's the sweet spot. That's what we are aiming for.

Holley Davis:

Your answer really speaks to sustainability, and this really dovetails nicely with my next question for you, Kristin. Scale and accessibility, what would you say to a small or rural community that's wondering if this process is right for them?

Kristin Lupfer:

These workshops can be especially helpful to small and rural communities. When you have limited or dispersed resources and providers, knowing what each of you can contribute to homelessness response is even more important. Maybe one agency can offer transportation support while another has great telemedicine connections and can help connect participants with treatment and care from a distance.

What's nice is that each workshop is customized to the community. Based on the gaps and opportunities identified by the community, we can then strategically action plan around the community's priorities and needs.

Holley Davis:

Thank you, Kristin. I think that our customization is one of the things that really sets PRA apart in this work.

Abby, if I'm a decision maker who's listening to this episode and I want to bring a homelessness response systems mapping workshop to my community, how do we get started?

Abby Kirkman:

Yeah, we would be thrilled to work with you and your community.

The first thing would be to reach out to the [Systems Mapping and Training Center at Policy Research](#). Once you do, we'll engage with you through a series of discussions and really get to know your community and your community's needs. And then we'll move forward with planning the mapping.

Holley Davis:

What is the typical time commitment for a community interested in engaging in this workshop?

Abby Kirkman:

Typically, the engagement time with the community is around four to six months, and this will include your outreach to us regarding your interest in a mapping.

And then we'll have a series of planning calls. During these planning calls, not only will we identify a date for the event, but we'll also talk with you about your needs. We'll develop a list of invitees determining who should be at the table. We'll also talk to you about any champions or dignitaries from the community that may support the work and would want to come and be a part or give a welcome.

Then we'll have the day and a half event and follow up in a timely manner with the report and mapping. And then have a series of calls to make sure that it's just right for you, for your community, and if there's any additional support that we can provide.

Holley Davis:

Kristin, could you share with me what a community will receive at the end of their mapping process?

Kristin Lupfer:

Yes, absolutely.

Post-mapping we'll develop a comprehensive report that includes a summary of the gaps in services and opportunities. There will be a visual map of how individuals experience homelessness and move toward recovery. There'll be a ranked list of priorities for change. It will include the strategic action plan that was developed during the mapping workshop, and then will also include additional helpful resources. We deliver this report with that map. And action plan included four weeks of the mapping completion.

Holley Davis:

Jen, what excites you most about the future of this work?

Jen Elder:

Everything. I love the work that we do. I love the people that we work with and we support. The homeless system and the behavioral healthcare system, it's some of the most creative, passionate people that I've ever worked with. When you get these systems together and you have these conversations and you see the change that's possible, it is just so life-affirming and sustaining. There are experts across the field.

Something that I think Policy Research does really well is we work in partnership with others. We are not here to supplant somebody's work. We are here to lift it up. And so we work with communities who are working with other technical assistance providers and we bring them in and say, "Okay, well, what part are you playing in this strategic plan? What part are you playing in the mapping? What's your role?" Because we all have something to offer and we can all contribute to this.

And so that's something that just excites me as part of this is getting to work together with very smart, passionate people and seeing what's possible in our communities.

Abby Kirkman:

Another thing is that we genuinely enjoy getting to know your community, the people who are involved, and we really enjoy being able to come out and be in your space. The more different types of communities we get to come to will only help to strengthen our expertise and the services that we can provide.

Holley Davis:

Thank you all so much for joining me today. I've loved learning more about homeless response systems mapping workshops and how communities are using them to create meaningful change.

This has been an episode of *Data Points*, a production of Policy Research. Learn more about us by visiting prainc.com. If you have questions or comments about this episode, email us at communications@prainc.com. *Data Points* is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud.

This episode was hosted by me, Holley Davis, and produced, engineered, and edited by Elianne Paley. Policy Research Associates leads the nation in driving sustainable, impactful change for people with behavioral health conditions.

Interested in bringing a homeless response systems mapping workshop to your community. Contact the [Systems Mapping and Training Center](#), an initiative of Policy Research that provides cross-system mapping and training services. Visit us at smtc.prainc.com to learn more and get in touch.

About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. is a Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) founded in 1987. We offer four core services: research, technical assistance, training, and policy evaluation. Through our work, we enhance systems that assist individuals with behavioral health needs on their journey to recovery.

Contact

Policy Research Associates, Inc.

🏠 433 River St, Suite 1005, Troy, NY, 12180

✉️ pra@prainc.com

🌐 prainc.com

☎️ 518-439-7415

