

# WHAT IS HMIS — AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

*A Plain-Language Guide for Norman / Cleveland County Partners, Faith Communities, and Civic Leaders*

To end homelessness, you have to know exactly who is experiencing it — by name, by history, by need. Not a rough estimate. Not a once-a-year headcount. A living, real-time record of every person the system is trying to help.

*That is what HMIS does.*

## What Is HMIS?

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HMIS stands for Homeless Management Information System. It is the centralized, web-based software platform mandated by HUD for every Continuum of Care in America. Every provider that receives HUD funding — shelters, transitional housing programs, rapid rehousing providers, supportive services agencies — is required to enter client data into HMIS.

HMIS collects unduplicated, client-level data on individuals and families experiencing homelessness. It tracks who entered the system, what services they received, where they went, and whether they maintained stable housing afterward. It is the backbone of every evidence-based homeless response system in the country.

## A Brief History

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HMIS originated as a grassroots CoC initiative in the mid-1990s — communities recognized that without shared data, providers were duplicating effort and losing track of the people they were trying to serve. Congress formalized it through the 2001 McKinney-Vento reauthorization, requiring all HUD-funded providers to participate. HUD established privacy and security standards but left software development to private vendors.

Today, every CoC in America operates one HMIS for standardized Annual Performance Reports submitted to HUD. In Oklahoma, the statewide HMIS is administered by the Community Development Support Association (CDSA), serving multiple CoCs including OK-504 Norman/Cleveland County.

## How HMIS Works in Cleveland County

When a person experiencing homelessness in Cleveland County first makes contact with a CoC OK-504 provider — whether at Food & Shelter, Thunderbird Clubhouse, the Salvation Army, or any other participating agency — their information is entered into HMIS with their consent. From that point forward, every service interaction, housing placement, and outcome is tracked.

| What HMIS Tracks                         | Why It Matters   |
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| Every person by name, DOB, and unique ID | Eliminates duplicate counting — one person = one record across all providers |
| Shelter entries and exits                | Measures length of homelessness and shelter utilization                      |
| Services received                        | Shows what interventions work and where gaps exist                           |
| VI-SPDAT vulnerability scores            | Prioritizes the most vulnerable for permanent housing first                  |
| Housing placements and outcomes          | Tracks whether people stay housed — the ultimate measure of success          |
| Real-time by-name list                   | Powers the PIT Count and coordinated entry system                            |

## HMIS and the Path to Functional Zero

Every community that has achieved Functional Zero — Rockford, Illinois; Abilene, Texas; Houston/Harris County, Texas — did it with HMIS at the center. You cannot claim Functional Zero without the data to prove it. HMIS is that proof.

- **By-Name Lists** powered by HMIS identified 80% of unsheltered individuals before the 2025 PIT Count night, enabling targeted volunteer deployment
- **Deduplication** via HMIS auto-matching keeps error rates below 5% — ensuring Cleveland County's count accurately reflects reality
- **Coordinated Entry** uses HMIS vulnerability scores to ensure the most at-risk individuals are housed first — not first-come, first-served
- **System Performance Measures** reported via HMIS directly determine HUD CoC Competition scores — up to 40 of 100 points based on data quality alone

**Strong HMIS data quality is worth \$1–2 million in additional HUD grants for a mid-sized CoC like OK-504. It is not a back-office function — it is a frontline funding strategy.**

## Privacy and Data Protection

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HMIS operates under strict HUD privacy and security standards. Client information is never shared publicly. Every participating agency signs a data sharing agreement. Clients provide informed consent before their information is entered. Individuals have the right to review their own records.

Public-facing HMIS data — such as monthly unsheltered counts or average length-of-stay trends — is always fully anonymized and aggregated. No names, no identifying information, ever.

## HMIS in Cleveland County: Who Is Involved

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CoC OK-504 participates in Oklahoma's statewide HMIS, administered by the Community Development Support Association (CDSA). The local HMIS administrator for OK-504 is the Homeless Alliance, under Dan Straughan.

- **HMIS Administrator:** Dan Straughan — Homeless Alliance OKC

*danstraughan@homelessalliance.org*

- **CoC OK-504 Collaborative Applicant:** Thunderbird Clubhouse — Heidi Smith

*OK504CoC@gmail.com · (405) 321-7331*

- **Statewide HMIS Administrator:** CDSA — [cdsaok.org/services/hmis](http://cdsaok.org/services/hmis)

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