Research tells us, and practice experience affirms, that people experiencing homelessness want to, need to, and can work. However, available data show that homeless service systems connect far too few individuals and households experiencing homelessness to employment services and income supports. In 2016, the vast majority of people—about 8 out of 10, on average—exited the homeless service system without having increased their earned income. For a variety of reasons, many homeless service systems across the country lack effective and equitable pathways to employment and income. Equally challenging, the public workforce system often does not meet the particular employment needs and interests of homeless jobseekers. Homelessness persists when systems fail to support all people in obtaining the employment and income necessary for long term housing stability.

Individuals experiencing homelessness consistently rank paid employment alongside healthcare and housing as a primary need. When parents of families experiencing homelessness are asked to name one thing that would most help get their family back on its feet, the most common answer is employment.

Acknowledging this reality, a growing number of communities are seeking to increase employment and income among homeless jobseekers through systems change and collaboration. Many communities recognized that efforts to build more effective pathways to employment for homeless jobseekers require understanding their employment needs and interests. Homeless service system stakeholders in these communities leveraged the implementation of **coordinated entry systems** to gather this information system-wide by integrating income and employment-related questions into coordinated entry assessments.

Learn more about common barriers to public workforce and homeless service systems collaboration and how to address them in *Systems Work Better Together: Strengthening Public Workforce & Homeless Service Systems Collaboration*, a report by Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity.

This resource provides a rationale for and guidance on integrating income and employment-related questions into coordinated entry assessments and a set of **sample questions** communities can use to assess the employment needs and interests of people experiencing homelessness.

This resource was informed by interviews with representatives from NCEH's Connections Project sites who identified the integration of income and employment-related questions into coordinated entry assessments as a key step toward creating systems that more effectively connect homeless jobseekers to employment and income. More information about Connections Project sites can be found here.

Baltimore, Maryland
Chicago, Illinois
Hennepin County, Minnesota
Houston, Texas
Seattle/King County, Washington

COORDINATED ENTRY SYSTEMS: AN OVERVIEW

Federal programs providing housing and homeless services in the United States aim to meet the variable needs of people experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Despite these intentions, programs at the local level have historically operated independently of each other with little coordination across providers. Because communities lacked systems-wide mechanisms for effectively connecting people with housing and services, many individuals and families were left to navigate the various homeless services and programs on their own.

As part of the 2009 Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) attempted to address this issue by requiring communities receiving federal money for housing services to create **coordinated entry systems.** Coordinated entry systems are intended to improve coordination among local service providers and prioritize and match people seeking assistance through the homeless service system with resources and supports. Coordinated entry systems must include a standardized assessment and intake processes, referral methods that connect individuals with services that best match their needs and preferences, and the prioritization of those with highest levels of need for more intensive, resource-rich services. Core elements of coordinated entry systems are outlined in more detail [here](#).

While coordinated entry systems may improve delivery of housing and homeless services, they do not necessarily address **employment and income needs and interests of people seeking homeless services.** Asking about employment and income in coordinated entry assessments equips homeless service systems, along with workforce and other systems, with the information necessary to build more equitable and effective pathways to employment and income for homeless jobseekers.

WHY ASK ABOUT EMPLOYMENT IN COORDINATED ENTRY ASSESSMENTS?

The fundamental reason to integrate income and employment-related questions in coordinated entry assessments is because doing so is a step toward connecting homeless jobseekers to the employment and income they need to exit homelessness and get on track toward long-term economic security. More specifically, integrating these types of questions into coordinated entry assessments allows homeless service stakeholders in communities to do the following:

1. **Center the Desires and Interests of People Experiencing Homelessness.** Asking people experiencing homelessness about their employment needs and interests provides information based on people's experiences instead of assumptions made by program operators, administrators, funders, or policy-makers. This information can challenge myths, stereotypes, and harmful narratives about homelessness and its causes and lay the groundwork for data-driven solutions.

2. **Build Effective Pathways to Employment Services.** In communities where ample employment resources and services exist, responses to income and employment-related questions can be used to build referral systems that connect people with these employment and income interventions—especially those supports that best fit individuals' particular needs and interests.

3.   **Identify Gaps in Employment Services and Systems—And Advocate for Improvements.** Many communities currently lack the workforce resources and services necessary to meet the demand for employment support among homeless jobseekers. In these communities, information about the employment needs and preferences of people completing coordinated entry assessments can be used to identify and quantify the existing mismatch between the demand and availability for workforce services. Responses to income and employment-related questions may also reveal specific systems and service gaps as well as racial and other disparities among people seeking or receiving employment services. Homeless service stakeholders can leverage these types of findings and data in advocacy efforts—including those aimed at the public workforce system—that ask for the resources, improvements, and systems collaboration needed to close the gap. These data are also essential to building out eventual referral mechanisms that are both equitable and match people to the types of employment services they want and need.

> "If we are able to leverage data about the need and demand for employment, this could increase community buy-in and help employment partners see how they can plug in."
>
> **– Casey Schleisman, Hennepin County, MN**

4.   **Improve Homeless Service System-Wide Performance Related to Employment Gains.** As the federal government increasingly holds communities accountable for employment and income gains among people experiencing homelessness, incorporating income and employment-related questions into coordinated entry assessments—and using these data to connect individuals to employment and training services—is a tangible way for communities to advance employment and economic opportunity for people experiencing homelessness and to position themselves competitively for performance-based homeless service system funding.

BUILDING BUY-IN AND SUPPORT

Stakeholders who contributed to this resource explained that, in each of their communities, the integration of income and employment-related questions into coordinate entry assessments required building buy-in and support for the idea across multiple stakeholder groups, such as homeless service system decision-makers, administrators at homeless service provider agencies, and frontline staff.

One way to build buy-in among decision-makers in the homeless service, workforce, and other relevant systems is to **lift up the examples of other communities that have integrated income and employment-related questions into coordinated entry assessments and how they have used the information in important ways,** including the communities that contributed to this resource. In Houston, for example, responses to income and employment-related questions were integrated into a triage tool that matched people receiving homeless services to employment and income support. Between May 2016 and December 2018, around 2,300 people entering Houston's homeless services system were connected to employment assistance. In Chicago, a preliminary analysis of responses to employment questions in Chicago revealed that roughly 65% of people completing coordinated entry assessments in the last year want immediate help finding jobs. Stakeholders in

Chicago know that accommodating this level of demand for employment services of homeless jobseekers is beyond the capacity of the current workforce system. Quantifying and describing the mismatch in demand for and availability of employment services tailored to the needs and interests of homeless jobseekers is one way advocates in Chicago are using this information.

> "We couldn't get any resources anywhere to support employment strategies for people coming into the homeless response system if we didn't know how many people wanted help with employment."
>
> **–Carrie Thomas, Chicago, IL**

Building buy in among frontline staff within relevant systems is also important. Stakeholders in Chicago and Baltimore built buy-in among frontline staff in the homeless service system by providing training around how and why to ask income and employment-related questions in coordinated entry assessments. This is important because many people who work in the homeless service system may have little experience with the workforce system and may not feel comfortable asking about income and employment. In Houston, homeless and workforce system stakeholders attended workshops that deepened their cross-systems knowledge and increased their capacity for collaboration.

National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity

Heartland Alliance's **National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity** is dedicated to ending chronic unemployment and poverty. We believe that every person deserves the opportunity to succeed in work and support themselves and their families. Through our field building, we provide support and guidance that fosters more effective and sustainable employment efforts. Our policy and advocacy work advances solutions to the systemic issues that drive chronic unemployment.

This resource is published as part of the **National Center on Employment and Homelessness** (NCEH), a national initiative which seeks to ensure that every homeless jobseeker who wants to work achieves employment and the income needed to support stable housing. NCEH works to advance an acknowledgement and commitment by providers, policies, and systems, at all levels and geographies, that employment in quality jobs is a key element for ending homelessness.

January 2019

INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT-RELATED QUESTIONS FOR COORDINATED ENTRY ASSESSMENTS

The following Coordinated Entry (CE) Income & Employment-Related Questions may be used to support communities in integrating employment-related questions into their CE systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Tailor questions to your community. Income and employment-related questions will be most valuable if used in ways that make sense for each community. Communities may want to choose only a select set of questions, excluding questions that are duplicative of questions already being asked elsewhere in the coordinated entry assessment. Additionally, the particular HMIS software and the assessment tool used locally (e.g., VI-SPDAT) might impact how questions can be incorporated and changed.

Engage both the Homeless Service and Workforce Systems in Shaping Questions. By coming together to craft the income and employment-related questions to be included in coordinated entry assessments, homeless service and workforce system stakeholders are forging an initial partnership that may help to facilitate future collaboration necessary for building effective pathways to employment and workforce services for homeless jobseekers.

Be clear about why you are asking these questions. It is important that people completing coordinated entry assessments understand how the responses to income and employment-related questions will be used—especially in communities in the early phases of this work where a person's responses are unlikely to result in a connection to employment and income supports. In cases where an employment referral is not forthcoming, frontline staff can briefly explain that responses to income and employment-related questions will be used to advocate for better pathways to employment and income support for people experiencing homelessness.

CORE QUESTION	SAMPLE QUESTIONS	

Currently Employed	**Are you Currently Working?**
	( ) Currently employed
	( ) Unemployed
	   ( ) Unemployed for 0 – 3 months
	   ( ) Unemployed for 3 – 6 months
	   ( ) Unemployed for 6 – 9 months
	   ( ) Unemployed for 9 – 12 months
	   ( ) Unemployed for 12 months or more
	   Dates of last employment From: _____ To: _____
	( ) Never been employed	

Employment Interest	**What is your Employment Goal?** *(Check all that apply)* ( ) Get a job to increase my income ( ) Get a job to support myself completely ( ) Secure disability income **Are you interested in any of the following?** *(Check all that apply)* ( ) Completing a specific training or certification to access the career you want ( ) Practicing interviewing, communicating, and networking to access the career you want ( ) Gaining work experience to access the career you want ( ) Completing additional education (literacy classes, HSD, GED, college) to access the career you want	( ) Finding a job (full time or part time) ( ) Exploring a career ( ) Securing job leads or access to employers to access the career you want ( ) Learning about volunteer opportunities or volunteering ( ) Increasing my income through employment ( ) Securing disability income

Current Income	**Do you have income?**
	( ) No, I do not have income
	( ) Yes, I have income
	    ( ) If so, how much do you receive or earn
	       per month? $_____
	Where does this income come from? (Check all that apply)
	( ) Currently employed ( ) TANF
	( ) SSI ( ) VA Service Connected Disability
	( ) SSDI ( ) Retirement Income
	( ) SSI/SSDI ( ) Other Income_____

Reason for Job Loss	**Why did your last job end?** ( ) Laid off ( ) Disabling Medical Condition ( ) End of Contract ( ) Started new job ( ) Quit ( ) Other – Please explain: _____ ( ) Fired
Barriers to Employment	**Do any of the following make it challenging to gain or keep a job?** *(Check all that apply)* ( ) Alcohol use ( ) Lack of appropriate clothing ( ) Chronic medical condition ( ) Lack of childcare ( ) Criminal record / Involvement with justice ( ) Lack of social support system ( ) Lack of transportation ( ) Domestic and intimate partner violence ( ) Mental Illness ( ) Developmental delay ( ) Physical challenges ( ) Lack literacy skills ( ) Limited English proficiency ( ) Low Educational attainment ( ) Other _____ ( ) Drug use **Do you believe your current drug or alcohol use makes it difficult to keep a job?** ( ) Yes ( ) No
Currently Receiving Employment Services?	**Are you currently receiving any employment/career services** ( ) No ( ) Yes If yes, what services are you receiving and from where? _____
Longest Stretch of Employment	**What is the longest stretch of employment you've had at one company?** ( ) less than 3 months ( ) between 1 – 5 years ( ) between 3 – 6 months ( ) between 5 – 10 years ( ) between 6 months – 1 year ( ) 10 years or more
Employment Type(s)/Skill Sets	**If you have worked in the past year, do you primarily work in:** ( ) Day Labor ( ) Temporary Staffing Agencies ( ) Permanent Employment ( ) Contract Employment ( ) Self Employed
Military Service	**Were you ever a member of the armed forces?** *(Check only one)* ( ) No ( ) Yes, Active Duty (Currently Serving) ( ) Yes, Veteran (Previously Served) **What was your discharge?** ( ) Honorable ( ) Other than Honorable
Education	**What is the highest level of school you have completed? (Check only one)** ( ) 8th grade or less ( ) Some college ( ) Some high school ( ) Associate's degree ( ) High school graduate ( ) Bachelor's degree ( ) GED ( ) Master's degree or higher
Disability	**Do you have a disabling condition?** ( ) No ( ) Yes