HARP Tool Instructional Guide

Ohio Balance of State Continuum of Care

Background

The Housing Assessment and Resource Prioritization (HARP) Tool has been designated as the Ohio Balance of State CoC's (BoSCoC) common assessment tool. The Tool is designed to help providers evaluate the severity of participants' needs and determine who should be prioritized for available permanent housing (PH) resources.

For detailed guidance on assessment procedures, assessor training requirements, and how HARP scores influence housing prioritization decisions refer to the Ohio BoSCoC Coordinated Entry Operational Manual – available at https://cohhio.org/boscoc/coordinated-entry/

How Assessment Tools Work in Coordinated Entry

The HARP Tool is an assessment tool designed to help deepen understanding of the needs of people experiencing homelessness and help make prioritization decisions for Permanent Housing (PH) assistance.

Compare homelessness in your community to a mass casualty event that sends many people to the hospital emergency department: there will be some serious injuries that require immediate intervention, while others may be able to wait to be treated, and some injuries may not need medical attention at all. The emergency department staff will need to identify whom to treat first and why, based upon the best available evidence.

This tool similarly helps homeless service providers to assess and prioritize the universe of people who are experiencing homelessness in their community and identify whom to assist first based on the severity of their needs. The tool returns a score for those who complete the assessment – a higher score indicates more severe needs. The scores can then be used, along with other key information, to prioritize candidates for available PH options.

HARP Tools

The HARP Tool series includes four tools:

1. HARP HH with Children
2. HARP HH without Children
3. HARP YYA HH with Children
4. HARP YYA HH without Children

To access these tools, visit https://cohhio.org/boscoc/coordinated-entry/.

HARP HH with Children:
Use the HARP Tool for Households with Children when the household includes at least one adult age 25 years of age or older and at least one minor child (under age 18). If the household includes multiple adults who plan to live together, only one HARP Tool needs to be completed with the household. If the adult household members plan to live separately as part of their housing plan, complete the appropriate HARP Tool for each household member.

HARP HH without Children:
Use the HARP Tool for Households without Children when the household includes at least one adult age 25 years of age or older. This includes individuals on their own, adult couples, or any household group of adults—so long as at least one member is age 25 or older and the household does not currently include, nor intend to include, minor children in their housing. If the household includes multiple adults who plan to live together, only one HARP Tool needs to be completed with the household. If the adult household members plan to live separately as part of their housing plan, complete the appropriate HARP Tool for each household member.

HARP YYA HH with Children:
Use the HARP Tool for Youth and Young Adult Households with Children when the household includes one or more parenting youth, age 18-24 years, with at least one minor child (under age 18). If the household includes a youth (age 18-24 years) parent and an older parent (age 25+), use the HARP Tool HH with Children. If the household includes multiple individuals (18-24 years) who plan to live together, only one HARP Tool needs to be completed with the household. However, if the individuals intend to secure separate housing as part of their housing plan, a HARP Tool should be completed with each individual.

HARP YYA HH without Children:
Use the HARP Tool for Youth and Young Adult Households without Children when the household is comprised of individuals 18 - 24 years of age or unaccompanied youth under 18. If the household includes a youth and an older adult (over age 25 years), then complete the HARP Tool for Households without Children. If the household includes multiple individuals (18-24 years) who plan to live together, only one HARP Tool needs to be completed with the household. However, if the individuals intend to secure separate housing as part of their housing plan, a HARP Tool should be completed with each individual.

Transition from VI-SPDAT to HARP Tool

Upon completion of the required *Administering the HARP Tool* e-learning course, providers and provider staff may begin completing HARP Tools with clients newly entering the homeless response system after the transition date of June 3, 2025.

Clients who had a VI-SPDAT assessment completed within the past year, but who exited the system and are now returning to shelter or engaging with a CE Access Point, should be assessed using the HARP Tool.

Clients with an active VI-SPDAT (less than 1 year old) who are still receiving services within the homeless response system should not be reassessed using the HARP Tool until it is time for reassessment. More spectically, they can be assessed with the HARP Tool when one year has passed since VI-SPDAT was completed or, if sooner than one year from VI-SPDAT completion, when the client experiences significant changes in circumstances.

A tool is available on the COHHIO website to help users understand how HARP Tool scores can be compared to VI-SPDAT scores, supporting consistent prioritization decisions during the transition.

When the HARP Tool is Administered

The Ohio BoSCoC Coordinated Entry Operational Manual provides detailed guidelines for administering the HARP Tool, including the following key steps:

Emergency shelter/crisis response providers complete the HARP Tool no sooner than 5 days and no later than 8 days after shelter entry, for those households who are experiencing their first episode of homelessness.

Emergency shelter/crisis response providers complete the HARP Tool <u>immediately</u>, or take other action, in the following cases:

- *Individual/household is living in an unsheltered location and will remain unsheltered (i.e. individual declines shelter or limited bed/hotel voucher availability)*
- *Shelter resident seems to need assistance to exit shelter ASAP for their well-being*
  (e.g. exhibiting severe mental health needs/issues)
- *Individual/household has previous episodes of literal homelessness*

Information about past episodes of literal homelessness is collected at program enrollment. This data should be used to identify households needing immediate assessment.

Individuals/households should be re-assessed with the HARP Tool under the following circumstances:

- *The nature of their homelessness has changed significantly, i.e., someone has become seriously ill, the Head of Household has changed, or any*

situation that renders the individual or household eligible for greater or lesser intensity of services.
- *It has been one year since their last assessment.*

Coordinated Entry Access Point (CE AP) providers may complete the HARP Tool <u>immediately</u> <u>with households seeking assistance in the following cases:</u>

- *The household reports they are currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and are unable or unwilling to enter into an emergency shelter*

In these instances, the CE AP may complete the HARP Tool over the phone or in person, depending on how the household presented. If the household seeking assistance is currently housed, even if they will lose that housing soon, no HARP Tool needs to be completed.

If the household seeking assistance is currently unsheltered but has agreed to a shelter referral, the CE AP does not need to complete the HARP Tool.

Veteran Specific Guidance
In general, Veterans experiencing homelessness should be offered an immediate referral to the local VA-funded Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) provider. Emergency shelter providers do not need to immediately complete the HARP assessment unless the Veteran has declined SSVF assistance, is determined to be ineligible for VA assistance, or the SSVF provider is not immediately responsive. If the shelter providers do not receive a response from the local SSVF provider within 48 hours of making the referral, shelter providers should proceed with completing the HARP tool with the Veteran.

If a Veteran contacts a CE Access Point (CE AP) and indicates they are currently unsheltered and will remain unsheltered, the AP should immediately offer to complete the HARP tool assessment and continue efforts to connect them with the local SSVF provider.

Results of the HARP Tool should be recorded in HMIS, per the Ohio BoSCoC HMIS Policies and Procedures and Data Quality Standards.

Completing the HARP Tool with Participants

Introducing the HARP Tool

The HARP Tool begins with the collection of some basic information, such as the Head of Household's name, the assessment date, and head of household's HMIS Unique ID.

Assessors should utilize a standardized introductory script to help participants understand what the HARP Tool is, why it is being used, how the results will be used, and to explain privacy and request consent to complete the tool.

Consent

An individual must provide informed consent prior to the HARP Tool being completed. You cannot complete a HARP Tool with a participant without the participant's knowledge and explicit agreement. You also cannot complete the HARP Tool solely through observation or solely using known information within your organization.

Sample Script

My name is [assessor name] and I work for a group called [organization name]. I have a short survey that I would like to complete with you. The answers will help us determine how we can go about supporting and housing you. Most questions only require a Yes or No or short answer response. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. I'll be honest, some questions are personal in nature but you can skip or choose not to answer any question. The information collected will be put into our confidential database, HMIS, and any written surveys will be destroyed or stored in a secure location.

If you do not understand a question, let me know and I would be happy to clarify. If it seems to me that you don't understand a question, I will also do my best to explain it to you without you needing to ask for clarification.

Do you give your consent for us to complete this survey?

Assessors may choose not to use the provided sample script. However, if not using the sample script, assessors must ensure that the HARP Tool Opening Script highlights the following information:

- The purpose of the HARP Tool being completed – to help staff understand the household's level of need
- For families with minor children only –It is their choice whether or not they have their children present during completion of the assessment. If they choose to have children present, they can choose to skip questions if they don't want to answer in front of their children and can come back to them later
- That it usually takes about 15 minutes to complete, but could take longer
- How to answer questions – yes, no, or short answers
- That they can get clarification if they don't understand the question
- That any question can be skipped
- That the information collected on paper will be stored in locked, secure files, and that data entered into HMIS is kept confidential and private

- The importance of being as honest as possible and not feeling that there is a correct or preferred answer that they need to provide, nor information they need to conceal
- That some answers provided may need further verification from other sources, such as whether they meet the definition of chronic homelessness
- Consent to participate in the process

Components of the HARP Tool

The HARP Tool is organized into several sections:

Section One: Meeting Basic Needs

This section helps providers determine the level of immediate hardship a household is experiencing. This information may also be used to assist a participant in meeting their basic needs.

Section Two: Housing Stability

This section is intended to help providers understand the depth and breadth of a participant's housing instability experience and extent of barriers that may impact a future housing search. The length of time without stable housing indicates urgency, while eviction history and frequency show patterns of instability. Identifying housing discrimination ensures providers address barriers to access.

Section Three: Income, Employment, and Education

Assessing income, employment, and education helps identify financial barriers to stable housing. Determining whether financial struggles led to homelessness helps highlight individuals needing more urgent assistance. Debt and credit issues can create additional obstacles to securing permanent housing. Education level influences job opportunities, and less formal education is correlated to lower income overall.

Section Four: Experiences of Homelessness

Assessing homelessness experiences helps identify those at highest risk of chronic homelessness. Multiple episodes indicate recurring instability, while total time homeless highlights potential chronicity. Childhood homelessness may signal intergenerational cycles and is also an indicator of a greater likelihood of future homelessness.

Section Five: Health and Wellbeing

Assessing health and well-being helps identify individuals with medical needs who may require specialized housing and support. Identifying elderly household members ensures they receive appropriate care, while disabilities or health conditions that led to housing loss highlight key stability barriers. Frequent hospitalizations signal urgent medical needs, and evaluating health impacts on housing helps determine the need for accessible or supportive housing.

Note: A hospitalization is a single occurrence, regardless of length of stay.

Section Six: Interactions with Other Systems and Experiences of Trauma

Assessing interactions with other systems and experiences of trauma helps identify individuals facing barriers to housing stability and safety concerns**.** Criminal justice involvement and housing-related convictions can limit housing and employment options, requiring advocacy and specialized support. Juvenile justice and foster care history indicate early instability, often leading to long-term housing challenges. Recent or ongoing domestic violence requires immediate safety planning and secure housing solutions. Additionally, experiences of violence since homelessness began help providers identify those with vulnerabilities.

Section Seven: Household Composition (Households with Minor Children)

Children directly impact housing, in part, because they increase the number of bedrooms required and housing cost.

Note: Both children currently residing with the family and those anticipated to join the family once they secure housing should be included in responses to assessment questions in this section. Even if these children have not yet moved in, this question aims to evaluate whether the household is actively seeking housing that can accommodate the additional children.

HARP Tool Considerations

Referencing HMIS Data/Reducing Assessment Question Redundancy

Several questions in the HARP Tools instruct the assessor to reference the most recent **HMIS program enrollment** or the **HMIS Client Profile** to document the appropriate assessment question. For these assessment questions, assessors should document the question response based on the relevant data elements in HMIS rather than asking the participant the question directly. Doing so minimizes the burden on participants since they already provided the information during the program enrollment process. The assessor can review HMIS records and/or enrollment forms before, during, or after completing the HARP assessment to document accurate assessment question responses.

For non-HMIS participating agencies that use a comparable database and/or collect the same information at program enrollment as HMIS-participating agencies, assessors should strive to document these assessment question responses using information previously provided by the participant during program enrollment. For agencies/programs that do not collect the HUD-required universal or program-specific data elements at program enrollment, assessors may seek responses by asking participants directly.

Considering All Adult Experiences for Assessment Question Responses

When assessing a household with multiple adults, consider the experiences of all household members to determine the appropriate responses to assessment questions. If household members have differing experiences, document the response that reflects

the most significant challenges or barriers, except for the assessment question about income sources (see section below for additional details).

If all adult household members are not present during the assessment and the responding adult is unable to recall the experiences of the other adults for a specific question, the assessor should record preliminary responses based on the information provided by the responding adult. If the household later provides corrected information, the assessor should update the HARP Tool responses accordingly. These updates must also be documented in HMIS, though a full reassessment is not required.

Household Income Sources Assessment Question
When completing the assessment question about income sources, consider all household members' income collectively. For example, if one adult receives SSI while another has no income, the household would receive a score of 1, indicating that "Household income includes income from SSI or SSDI." *See example question 9 for additional guidance.*

Dependent Questions in Assessments
Some questions in the assessment are *dependent questions*, meaning that the initial response to a key question determines whether or not subsequent, related questions should be asked or scored. When a dependent question is presented, the assessor should ask the initial guiding question first. If the respondent is able to answer, their response will inform and activate the follow-up questions.

However, if the respondent does not know or cannot answer the initial question, the assessor should make a reasonable effort to assist—such as by rephrasing, providing context, or helping the respondent recall relevant information. If, after this assistance, the respondent still cannot provide an answer, the assessor should mark the response of 'client doesn't know' or 'client prefers not to answer', whichever response is most appropriate. The dependent questions should then **not** be asked or scored, as doing so would not yield accurate data.

The dependent questions in the HARP Tools include:

- Questions #3 and #4:
    - Within the last 5 years, have any adults in the household been evicted from housing unit?
    - If yes to #3 above, in the last 5 years, how many times have adults in the household been evicted from housing unit?

If the household provided a response to question #3 indicating they don't know if anyone has been evicted or forced to leave (response = 'client doesn't know'), then the assessor documents the response of NA to #4. Question #4 is only applicable if the response to #3 is 'yes'.

- Questions #17, #18, and #19 (question numbers are slightly different across the different HARP Tools)
  - Do any household members have a disability or health condition, including a mental illness or substance use disorder, that has contributed to a loss of housing in the past 3 years?
  - If yes to #17 above, how many times in the past year has the household member(s) been hospitalized because of the health condition or disability?
  - If yes to #17 above, does the health condition or disability currently make it hard to maintain housing?

If the household provided a response to question #17 indicating they didn't know if a household members has a disability or that they don't know if the disability contributed to a loss of housing in the past 3 years, or if they provided a response that they prefer not to answer, then the assessor should document the response of NA to questions #18 and #19. Those dependent questions are only applicable if the response to #17 is 'yes'.

Additional Assessment Question Guidance

Question 1: Is the household able to do the following on most days? For those currently in emergency shelter, please respond based on your experience immediately prior to shelter entry. (Please check boxes.)
- The assessor should collect responses from all adult household members and then total all "no" responses.

Question 2: How long has it been since the household lived in stable, permanent housing?
- If household members have different answers, the assessor should assign points based on the highest barrier present.
- **Example:** If Household Member A has been without stable housing for less than 6 months and Household Member B has been without stable housing for more than 12 months, the assessor should assign points corresponding to the response of **"more than 12 months."**

Question 3: Within the last 5 years, have adults in the household been evicted from a housing unit?
- If household members have different answers, the assessor should assign points based on the highest barrier present.
- **Example:** If Household Member A has been evicted via a verbal or written 3-day notice, or something similar and Household Member B has experienced a court-ordered eviction, the accessor should assign points for **"Both B and C, or multiple evictions or involuntary exits."**

Question 9: Did any adult household members report any income in their current program enrollment?
- Assessors should consider all household members' income collectively, when determining the appropriate response to this question.
- **Example:** If Household Member A receives SSI while Household Member B has no income, the assessor should assign points indicating that **"Household income includes income from SSI or SSDI."**

The Types of Questions in the HARP TOOL
In general, the HARP Tool questions are structured to collect the following response types: "Yes," "No," short answer, or a numerical value indicating the frequency or duration of an event (e.g., number of occurrences or months). The tool does not require or recommend elaboration or detailed narrative responses. Participants can always respond with "Client doesn't know" or "Client prefers not to answer."

Each question must be asked, and a response must be recorded for every question, even if the response is "Client doesn't know" or "Client prefers not to answer."

Calculating the HARP TOOL Score
After completing the HARP Tool assessment, the scores for each question will be totaled to generate subtotals for each section, ultimately determining the overall HARP Tool score. This score helps prioritize participants during Permanent Housing (PH) prioritization meetings.

Assessment Tool Challenges

This section provides explanation of challenges that may arise during the assessment process and offers some proposed solutions for how best to address these challenges.

Assessment Question Response Options
The HARP Tool is designed to elicit "yes" or "no" responses or short answers.

While the HARP Tool requires these specific responses, we encourage providers to take a person-centered approach when administering it. We also suggest allowing time after the assessment for participants to discuss any sensitive topics that may have been addressed.

Clarifying Questions for Informational Purposes
Some questions may include terms that not all participants understand. As referenced above in the opening script, if a participant does not understand a question, clarification can be provided. It's okay to define terms, rephrase questions, or provide examples to clarify intent.

Trusting the HARP Tool and the Resulting Score
Providers may express concerns that common assessment tools such as the HARP Tool may not return scores that accurately reflect their participant's true need for services. It is important to remember that the BoSCoC encourages providers to utilize the HARP Tool score to inform housing prioritization decisions, but it is not the only piece of information used to make that decision. If there are instances where the score does not adequately reflect the household's level of need, staff may advocate for their

participants in PH Prioritization Workgroup meetings using information at their disposal (i.e. information shared during case management) that is not reflected in the score.