Formed in 2009 as a part of a provincial 10-year strategic initiative to end homelessness, the Alberta Housing Collaborative connects housing-related service providers, community-based organizations (CBOs), regional funders, and the provincial Ministry of Human Services to provide Alberta’s homeless population with services for permanent and temporary housing, age-specific housing for displaced youth and elderly, healthcare, mental health and substance abuse treatment programs and more.

The strategic initiative, which in 2011 was awarded the Canada Award for Excellence by the National Quality Institute, called for a shift from managing the problem of homelessness to a Housing First approach that aims to break the cycle of homelessness by placing clients quickly into permanent housing and providing supportive services that move them toward stability and greater self-sufficiency.

Today, the initiative is leading the sector with outcomes-driven contracting and expansive coordination of services and reporting, even across agencies using different data systems, intelligence about changes in their service populations, and the ability to demonstrate ROI for a new intervention model.

“When selecting a platform for our HMIS, we were looking for something that could accommodate the size and scope of our network of partners, and be flexible enough to meet our changing needs as the Housing First approach was implemented. Social Solutions’ ETO software accommodated our needs and has successfully adapted and grown as we have evolved.”

–Sherry Desanko, Manager, HMIS Systems and Program Evaluation, Family Violence Prevention and Homeless Supports Division, Alberta Human Services
Supporting a Data-Driven, Housing First Approach

Moving to a Housing First approach necessitated a fundamental shift in the way Alberta government departments, institutions and homeless-serving agencies operated and coordinated with each other. No matter where homeless clients came into contact with the agencies, they needed to be rapidly moved to permanent housing and efficiently connected with appropriate supports, which required a higher degree of coordination between agencies and homeless-serving nonprofits at the provincial and local levels.

Additionally, to ensure effective case management and support services were provided to support families’ and individuals’ transition to stable housing, Alberta shifted to outcomes-focused contracts for homeless-serving CBOs. Outcomes-focused contracts have provided a benchmark against which CBOs can measure and monitor their success. If a CBO’s outcomes are not on track, having an outcomes-based contract fosters the opportunity for the Collaborative to engage with the organization and have conversations regarding challenges they are facing.

To support these measures, the Collaborative required a web-based, customizable off-the-shelf (COTS) data system to gather consistent, meaningful information about the homeless population to identify solutions and best practices, inform service delivery on the ground as well as strategic planning efforts, and help the province measure progress and success as it worked toward its goal of ending homelessness.

The province selected Social Solutions’ Efforts to Outcomes (ETO®) software to serve as Alberta’s Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to count, track, and understand the needs of the people they serve, and coordinate housing and support services provided by the Collaborative’s member agencies.
A Flexible Platform for Enterprise Systems

The ETO platform provided Alberta with a flexible system that could be configured to meet the complex needs of a broad and evolving network of agencies.

The Collaborative initially began by building enterprise structures, or Community Reporting Platforms, in ETO software for seven cities and/or major CBOs, and later widened its scope to collect data from 26 homeless shelters across the province. The Community Reporting Platforms provided lead organizations with full access to all data collected by its service providers. This access allowed lead agencies to easily generate reports without placing an administrative burden on service providers, as well as actively monitor each site to ensure correct and adequate usage of the data system and proactively address potential problems.

The ETO system also provided the Ministry of Human Services with full access to city/CBO sites, allowing the government to provide full technical assistance and have the agility necessary to conduct sophisticated analytics with real time data.

Today, the Collaborative’s HMIS is utilized by nearly 2,000 users at more than 100 sites and is continuing to expand. The Collaborative’s most recent expansion of its HMIS is the implementation in provincially funded youth shelters, which provide shelter and services to homeless youth. Data gathered from these shelters will allow the Collaborative to provide case management to homeless youth and identify effective preventative services for youth.

Robust HMIS Functionality

Even with the large size and scope of Alberta’s HMIS, ETO software has provided the Collaborative with a robust system that meets their data collection and management needs. Service providers track client intake, efforts and progress toward short term and long term Housing First outcomes within the ETO system using surveys and assessments. These tools collect both shared outcome measures across the Collaborative and specific measures tailored to the providers’ specific services and population needs.

The Collaborative is also exploring using ETO platform’s sophisticated case management functionality to help clients receive a continuum of care across the network of agencies within the Collaborative. Shelters and CBOs are also working toward actively monitoring data to identify individuals that are habitually using shelters and provide those individuals with referrals for additional services aimed at placing them in permanent housing.

Performance Reporting

Prior to the implementation of their 10-year initiative, there were few, if any, performance reporting requirements for Alberta’s funded homeless-serving, municipal and local agencies. Additionally, some agencies were funded by multiple sources, including multiple ministries of the same government, which would require separate and different reports.

“At a provincial level ETO software has been integral to helping us identify who the people we serve are and the issues and challenges they face. In order to create linkages to leverage partners, and for our partners to be effective, having this information is absolutely invaluable.”

–Sherry Desanko, Manager, HMIS Systems and Program Evaluation, Family Violence Prevention and Homeless Supports Division, Alberta Human Services
As a part of the implementation of the initiative, Alberta has and continues to develop standard definitions and common reporting standards, and streamlined reporting processes through the ETO HMIS to minimize the burden placed on homeless-serving agencies. Today, data is readily available through the ETO Enterprise system, and reports can be easily generated by service providers within minutes. Additionally, with the flexibility of ETO system, service providers could also generate unique reports for their other funder or stakeholder reporting needs.

The Collaborative is actively working to further enhance their reporting capabilities, including developing measures to increase data quality control, and developing reports to track staff accountabilities, housing milestones, and other achievement indicators.

Informing Policy and Solutions

Data from ETO software has helped the province make great strides in understanding Alberta’s homeless population, evaluating different community needs, and identifying systematic problems that contribute to homelessness. This has allowed the Collaborative to analyze homelessness in the context of each community. For example, the demographics and economic influences on homelessness is vastly different in northern communities than it is in urban centers or in southern Alberta. With this information, the Collaborative has initiated work to identify cultural issues and challenges that are impacting that population to develop appropriate interventions and services to address those needs.

In addition to informing policy and program decisions, ETO software will supply data to evaluate the cost savings of a housing first approach within Alberta. According to the Alberta Ministry of Human Services cost evaluation and estimate, the cost of managing homelessness for 11,000 individuals for 10 years is $6.65 billion, compared to a $3.3 billion investment to provide a housing first approach.

Data collected in ETO software will be instrumental to evaluating the ROI of the Housing First approach as the initiative progresses. Currently, the Collaborative is looking to cross-check their data with hospital and police records to measure the cost of homelessness. In addition the Collaborative asks clients to report health and justice interactions.