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The Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) Fact Sheet and Q&A

The VI-SPDAT is a screening tool used by practitioners to support collaborative decision-making within and across agencies so as to provide the assistance required to house and support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The information gathered in the survey assists practitioners to understand the needs of people, so as to effectively match the appropriate housing pathway, healthcare and community services to enable an individual to make choices in line with their personal needs and available resources.

The tool relies on people's disclosed information, to assist in prioritising the most vulnerable and to rapidly resolve crisis, focusing on collaborative prioritisation to organise our work to match housing, healthcare and social services in order to meet an individual or families' dynamic needs.

The VI-SPDAT is not a research or data collection process. The scores are indicators and are complimentary to case coordination, knowledge of support workers, healthcare providers, and allocation and eligibility of resources. At times, further assessments that are specific to need may be required to find a solution to meet an individual or family's need.

Collectively, organisations can use the de-identified data to advocate for the change and resources needed to end homelessness in our communities, based on the needs of the people who experience homelessness and housing stress in the community.

The VI-SPDAT is an essential tool for communities to use as part of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness' Advance to Zero Campaign.

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1. Who Developed the VI-SPDAT?

- » OrgCode Consulting, based in, and working from both Canada and the United States, developed the VI-SPDAT. OrgCode works with non-profits, government, private companies and non-governmental organizations to be catalysts for better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

2. What factors (field experience and research) have influenced the latest version of the Australian VI-SPDAT?

- » Following evaluation from national researchers, and in consultation with OrgCode, version 3 has been updated to ensure more accurate data capture around lived experience of homelessness, physical and mental health factors that impact on homelessness, as well as the risk of violence and domestic violence experienced by those who are homeless.
- » The new survey builds on existing local data analysis as well as creating a national data base to influence gaps in service and policies to address homelessness in Australia

3. Have the questions in this survey been tested with people with lived experience?

- » Many of the questions that are in the VI-SPDAT are directly included from previous versions of the survey, which were trialled and tested through OrgCode's methodology. There are new questions (i.e. health and mental health questions) which were not in the previous versions, and therefore, although they have been approved by OrgCode for inclusion, will be tested in about 6 to 12 months after the survey has been conducted for this length of time. We would welcome feedback on the use of the new survey.

4. Why are there different versions?

- » There have been a number of versions for the VI-SPDAT created by OrgCode, Version Three – was an adaptation of the tool for use in Australia by OrgCode in partnership with the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness.

5. How many VI-SPDAT's are there?

- » In Australia we have previously had 2 adaptations of the tool in use, however both previous versions continued to reflect the same questions used to fit a North American context. With version 3, the tool was specifically adapted to reflect the Australian context.
- » There are three VI-SPDAT templates available for use.
- » These are:

- i. Individuals: to be used for adult individuals aged 25 years and above. Couples that do not have dependents or children should complete separate surveys
- ii. Families: to be used with presenting units where an adult or couple are accompanied by dependents or children, regardless of age
- iii. Youth: to be used with young people who are under the age of 25 years and presenting on their own

6. In comparison to previous versions of the survey, it is noted that the acuity scores are higher in this, version 3 of the Australian VI-SPDAT. Does this affect the acuity scores that an individual may reach, and will this affect its comparison to previous versions?

- » There are no concerns raised in regard to version 3's comparison to the previous versions. However, it is acknowledged that due to the increased weight given to Wellness, that an individual could score much higher in version 3. At this time however, it should still be comparable to version 1 and 2.

»

7. Will the categories that determine whether the score's ranking is low, medium or high, be redistributed, given the higher scoring range?

- » The categories will be re-evaluated after 6 to 12 months of data collection. Having enough data to review will provide OrgCode with the information they require to determine and advise of any changes to the categories.

8. The survey looks quite long. How should we introduce or explain the length of the form? Will participants be willing to sit through the full survey?

- » Once we have completed about 20 to 30 surveys, will have a better understanding of how long the survey will take to complete.
- » OrgCode advise not to dwell on or emphasize the number of questions, but rather work through the survey depending on the pace required to complete.
- » OrgCode also advise that sometimes progressive engagement is required to complete a full survey, and so if the survey cannot be completed in one sitting, it is perfectly okay to revisit the individual and continue where you left off, on the following engagement.
- » Researchers have further shared that when a participant is given an opportunity to share their voice, participants will sit through the survey, regardless of how long it may take to complete, in most circumstances.



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9. In regard to the weight of the domains, how will the stronger emphasis on wellness influence the scoring overall? What is the rationale for wellness weighing so heavily on the scoring compared to other factors?

- » The survey will identify individuals who are medically vulnerable. The rationale behind the increase in weight on the scoring is due to the higher impact that health can have on an individual while experiencing homelessness and the higher rates of morbidity for rough sleepers.
- » Previous research has identified the correlation between homelessness, increased use of emergency health services and higher risk of mortality.

10. In regard to the weight of the domains, is the history of homelessness now underweighted?

- » Yes, in comparison to the wellness domain, the history of homelessness does look underweighted, however it is important to note that this survey is to be used with individuals who are experiencing homelessness only. Length of time of homelessness is still a factor that all communities need to prioritise when looking at housing allocation.

11. What is the purpose of the question inquiring around discrimination?

- » *The question in the survey is “when it comes to homelessness services, or housing, do you feel you have ever been discriminated against because of things like your age, race, appearance, disabilities, gender identity or sexual orientation?”*
- » The purpose behind this question is to unearth communities that have experienced racial disparities in their data. Some communities are recognised to be experiencing intergenerational issues which result in weaker rental histories and increased evictions.

12. Is it appropriate to ask participants about their mental health diagnoses? Will this be accurately reflected in responses and will it not traumatise the participant?

- » Researchers have found that asking about mental health does not cause adverse reactions in participants and routinely ask these questions.
- » It also depends on the way the question is posed. Always advise the participant of the subject of the questions to come, for example “the next set of questions will be about mental health”, to ensure transparency and allow the participant to prepare for the questions ahead.

13. In relation to the questions around risk of violence, why does question 8 score 1 and question 9 score 2, resulting in a potential score of 3?

- » Question 8 is “Are you currently being harmed or risk of being harmed by another person such as a spouse, parent relative or friend?”
- » Question 9 is “Have you experienced violence or threats of violence, such as punching, kicking, attempted strangulation, use of weapons or controlling behaviour, in the last six months, that has had an impact on feeling safe?”
- » These questions are being trialled in the Australian VI-SPDAT Version 3, and have been added following advocacy from the domestic violence sector.
- » If there is imminent risk to the participant’s safety, this should be addressed immediately as a first priority.
- » The points allocated to these questions reflect the vulnerability of participants sleeping rough, who are also experiencing violence while being on the street, particularly for women.
- » The wording of these questions has been carefully crafted following consultation with specialist domestic violence groups.

14. Why do we ask the intersex question? Is it appropriate to ask this question?

- » The purpose of the intersex question is to identify a particular cohort of the population that have particular needs that need to be addressed.
- » This question allows for this cohort to be heard and identify potential gaps in services.
- » This question is not an unsafe question to ask, and perhaps further training for staff to feel confident in administering the survey would be beneficial.
- » All questions in the survey are optional, and the participant being interviewed has to right to decline to answer a question if they do not wish to answer it.

15. What is the potential for this tool to influence prioritisation of those most in need

- » The VI-SPDAT provides data that can identify the individuals or families that will require more time investment due to higher acuity.
- » It also informs in which order you want to engage in other systems of care.
- » The VI-SPDAT also informs what needs may need to be discussed and addressed.
- » It assists with matching the person or family to the most suitable service and appropriate housing options to meet their needs.

- » The information is part of a prioritising process that is inevitable when housing supply does not match demand and access to services can not always be assured.

16. What is the potential for this tool to inform us of national variations?

- » The VI-SPDAT provides data that the homeless sector generally does not have through any other means.
- » Aggregate data gathered from the different regions, can paint a coherent, data driven picture of housing needs for people that are homeless alongside other data sources.
- » The information is designed primarily to enable communities and practitioners. to house and support people as quickly as possible.

17. What is the potential for this this tool to provide the basis for national advocacy?

- » Aggregate data from the VI-SPDAT can contribute to national discussion and policy on homelessness
- » There are several communities that have used the VI-SPDAT to create a business case for why further investment in particular types of housing and support interventions is justified in their communities too.

18. How should we collectively collate feedback from people with lived experience (and those conducting the interviews) about their lived experience of doing this version, to inform of any future iterations of the survey?

- » At the of end of 6 months, there will be some data and experience that can be used towards evaluating the survey. OrgCode will advise, at the end of the 6 month mark, of how to collect feedback following the methodology that they currently use.

19. Is this tool appropriate to be used with Indigenous Communities?

- » The original tool in its earlier versions; version 1 and version 2, has been tested with focus groups that consisted of indigenous participants to ensure that the tool is appropriate. Training must be provided to front line staff administering the tool as well as cultural awareness to ensure that the tool is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- » The current version; version 3, released in 2019 and developed to fit the Australian context, will be reviewed in late 2020 by OrgCode, to ensure that the tool is appropriate and meets all the testing criteria, including use by front line staff, accuracy to reflect the person's homelessness situation,



- and appropriateness with participants experiencing homelessness as well as participants identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- » Participating Advance to Zero communities will be provided with guidelines to assist with collection of data for the review for the tool when the review process commences.

Have more questions?

The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness supports the use of the VI-SPDAT in Australia. Should you have any further questions, please email us at info@aaeh.org.au