The Australian VI-SPDAT Version 3: Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool

FAQs

1. INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION ABOUT THE VI-SPDAT AND USING IT IN YOUR COMMUNITY

1.1 What is the VI-SPDAT?

The VI-SPDAT is a pre-screening tool that was developed and is owned by OrgCode, (based in North America). It has been adapted for use in Australia by the AAEH, in liaison with Orgcode. It is a tool which is used to interview people or families experiencing homelessness in order to understand their housing and support needs. The tool was developed in collaboration with people who have experienced homelessness as well as agencies and researchers. To ensure that it is trauma-informed it has also been reviewed by experts in domestic violence and trauma.

1.2 Is the VI-SDPAT an assessment tool?

No it's a pre-screen tool which can assist services and communities to triage people who are experiencing homelessness. Just as hospitals use triage systems to ensure that people with serious conditions are seen by medical staff before people who have non-life-threatening conditions, the VI-SPDAT helps each community to better understand and prioritise people experiencing homelessness with the right type of response. Some people's homelessness may be resolved relatively easily, whilst other people may need extensive assistance to obtain and sustain housing.

For more information about the development and appropriate use of the VI-SPDAT visit the Orgcode website: https://www.orgcode.com

1.3 How does the VI-SPDAT help services to respond to people's needs?

The VI-SPDAT is a simple concept, it works on the principle that you cannot match people experiencing homelessness with the right housing and support if you don't know what their needs are.

1.4 Does the VI-SPDAT help housing and support organisations to work better together to end people's homelessness?

Use of this screening tool with all people experiencing homelessness in a community helps collaborative decision-making and resource sharing across the housing, homelessness, health and support sectors. It provides better standard information which can inform workers about the right assistance required to house and support people who are homeless within their community. It is an essential component of building your community's 'By Name List' (BNL).

1.5 What is a 'By Name List' (BNL)

A BNL allows you to know everyone in your community experiencing homelessness in real time. Without this information, you cannot understand the scope of homelessness in your community or have accurate information in order to set goals to reduce and end homelessness. You also won't know if you are making progress towards ending homelessness.

The key components of a quality 'By Name List' include ensuring that your community collaboration is able to make contact with everyone who is homeless in your community and that you can accurately assess who is entering homelessness as well as being able to accurately track who has been assisted to leave homelessness and move into permanent housing.

The AAEH has developed, in liaison with Community Solutions, a 'By Name List Scorecard' to help communities establish a 'By Name List'. Further information about the score card can be found on the AAEH website. www.aaeh.org.au

1.6 Is the VI-SPDAT just another research project?

No, the VI-SPDAT's purpose is not as a research or data collection tool, but to help ensure all people and families who are homeless in your community get the right response, not simply to collect information about homelessness. It helps communities build their 'By Name List' (BNL) which is an essential component of working to end homelessness in every community. This BNL can then be used in a de-identified way to support better system planning and to advocate for the precise housing and support needed to end homelessness in your community.

1.7 Why is prioritising important?

The VI-SPDAT relies on people's disclosed information to assist in better understanding their needs. This helps us to understand exactly which people must be prioritised due to their significant vulnerability. The ideal situation would be to house everyone experiencing homelessness as quickly as possible. However, there are few (if any) communities who report they have an adequate supply of supportive, social or affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness. Decisions must be made about resources, it is important this is done quickly, transparently and effectively.

In addition, local de-identified data also helps to inform project and advocacy work that needs to be prioritised by each community in order to obtain additional resources to help end homelessness.

1.8 Can anyone use the VI-SPDAT or do users require training?

It is important that all workers and volunteers are trained in the proper use of the VI-SPDAT prior to using it. Some services who are involved in co-ordinating local collaborations already have the right staff to deliver training at the local level. Online training is also available on the AAEH website. The VI-SPDAT is a tool that can be used by workers and other members of the community who are contributing to a local collaborative initiative that is aiming to end homelessness. These local projects usually involve more than using the VI-SPDAT, they usually incorporate other systems and advocacy to track both homelessness and housing and support outcomes.

1.9 Can we change any of the questions on the VI-SPDAT

No, you cannot change any of the questions. However, if you believe that your community has some additional special issues that should be considered, you can add one or more questions at the end. This must be done in consultation with the AAEH and Orgcode.

Please also note that a number of the questions have been specifically written the way they are in order to ensure they reflect a trauma-informed approach and have been reviewed by experts in this field. It's important to ask the questions as they are written. More about this is detailed in the VI-SPDAT training.

1.10 Should we consider only information about an individual or family that is collected by the VI-SPDAT?

The VI-SPDAT doesn't make the decisions, but it can help inform better decisions. It is a pre-screen tool that cannot possibly include all information about an individual or family. Services and workers in housing organisations or support organisations to whom people may be referred are expected to undertake their normal assessments to ensure they respond to people appropriately.

1.11 Is the VI-SPDAT appropriate to be used with people who belong to First Nations?

The original tool in its earlier versions; version 1 and version 2, was 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.

It is anticipated that the VI-SPDAT Version 3 will be reviewed once we have enough feedback to ensure that the tool is appropriate and that it meets a range of criteria, including sensitivity to the experience of people experiencing homelessness who are indigenous and to First Nation's cultures.

1.12 What is the purpose of the question about discrimination?

The question in the VI-SPDAT 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 discrimination. Some communities are recognised to be experiencing intergenerational issues which result in weaker rental histories and increased evictions. In these instances, the individual's experience has to be understood and addressed and there will also be a need for wider advocacy to address these systemic issues.

1.13 Is it appropriate to ask participants about their mental health diagnoses? Could it traumatise the participant?

Homelessness is a traumatising experience and likely to be more damaging than being asked about your needs and being asked a series of questions for a specific purpose. Research indicates that asking about mental health conditions does not usually cause adverse reactions in participants, who may routinely be asked these type of questions.

It is always important, though, to think about how you pose these questions to participants. Always advise the person of the subject of the questions to come, for example "the next set of questions will be about mental health". This allows the participant to prepare for the questions ahead and, perhaps, let you know they would prefer not to discuss that subject today.

1.14 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 may 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 VI-SPDAT would be beneficial.

All questions in the VI-SPDAT are optional, and the participant being interviewed has the right to decline to answer a question if they do not wish to answer it.

1.15 Can the VI-SPDAT be used to improve advocacy?

Communities can use the collective de-identified data from the VI-SPDAT to inform service planning and advocacy. No more guesswork, you will know what resources your community needs to plan for in order to end everyone's homelessness.

1.16 If your community and local services want to use the VI-SPDAT to better understand and meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, how do we do that?

It is really important that all workers using the VI-SPDAT are trained in its use. Contact the AAEH at info@aaeh.org.au for information about its use and online training opportunities. The AAEH also encourages all cities, regions and areas to be part of the national 'Advance to Zero' campaign by supporting and resourcing communities to end homelessness in their locality. The VI-SPDAT is an essential tool for communities to use as part of that campaign.

2. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF VI-SPDAT VERSION 3

2.1 Who Developed the VI-SPDAT?

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

2.2 How useful is a tool that was developed in North America for Australia?

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

2.3 Why are there different versions of the VI-SPDAT?

There have been a number of versions of 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.

2.4 What factors have influenced the latest version of the Australian VI-SPDAT?

The latest Australian version of the VI-SPDAT is Version 3. Following evaluation from

national researchers, and in consultation with OrgCode, the VI-SPDAT has been updated to ensure more accurate information 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 VI-SPDAT builds on existing local data analysis as well as creating a national data base to influence addressing the gaps in service and policies that address homelessness in Australia

2.5 What is the process for reviewing the use of Version 3 of the Australian VI-SPDAT?

The AAEH is committed to reviewing the Australian Version 3 of the VI-SPDAT. However, methodical reviews require resources and it's not yet clear when that can be done. The AAEH, however, invites all users to provide ongoing feedback on the VI-SPDAT.

2.6 Will there be a Version 4 of the Australian VI-SPDAT?

It is important that a tool of this nature is not changed too often. People need to be trained to use any newer version. It would also mean that de-identified information that can inform us about the national picture of homelessness might not be able to be compared from year to year or version to version. The review and subsequent creation of a version 4 of the Australian VI-SPDAT is an issue for the communities who are actively involved in the Advance to Zero Campaign to decide collectively and to contribute the necessary resources.

2.7 Have the questions in Version 3 of the VI-SPDAT been tested with people with lived experience?

Many of the questions that are in the VI-SPDAT are directly included from previous versions, which were trialled and tested through OrgCode's methodology, which included the involvement of people with lived experience of homelessness. 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 need to be monitored and reviewed over time. Orgcode and the AAEH would welcome feedback on the use of Version 3.

3. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF THE VI-SPDAT AS AN ADVOCACY TOOL

3.1 What is the potential for the VI-SPDAT to influence prioritisation of those individuals and families who are most in need?

The VI-SPDAT provides data that can identify the individuals or families that will require more time investment by a given service due to them having a higher acuity score. It can also inform workers in which order they may want to discuss the option of engaging the person or family in other systems of care.

Clearly, the VI-SPDAT tells us what needs should be discussed and addressed with an individual or family. It also 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 immediate access to services cannot always be assured.

3.2 What is the potential for the VI-SPDAT to inform us of national variations?

Apart from its primary use as a practice tool, the VI-SPDAT provides de-identified data that the housing and homelessness sectors generally does not obtain through any other means. De-identifed data gathered from different regions and States can paint a coherent, data driven picture of housing needs for people who are experiencing homelessness, alongside other data sources. This is useful for planning at a local, regional, State or Territory and at a national level.

The information from the VI-SPDAT is designed primarily to enable communities and practitioners. to house and support people as quickly as possible.

3.3 How can the VI-SPDAT assist with national advocacy on ending homelessness?

De-identified data from the VI-SPDAT collected together can contribute to the national discussion and improved policies and planning for homelessness and housing. There are several communities who have already used the VI-SPDAT to create a business case for why further investment in particular types of housing and support is justified in their communities.

4. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Consider joining the Advance to Zero Campaign. All communities are welcome to be part of this national effort to end homelessness, using effective and timely information to match people experiencing homelessness with the right housing and, if needed, the right support services to sustain that housing. Every community who is part of the campaign now uses the VI-SPDAT Version 3 in Australia. Should you have any further questions, please email us at info@aaeh.org.au