Measuring Movement Toward Self-Sufficiency

What it means to build capacity — and how to rate the programs that do

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A practical resource for Continuums of Care, providers, and funders

> Self-sufficiency is increasingly the goal by which homelessness programs are designed, judged, and funded. Yet it names a *capacity* — something inferred, not directly observed — while it is typically measured through a few observable financial proxies. This resource examines that gap and works outward to its two practical consequences: how to design programs that build the capacity, and how Continuums of Care might rate and rank the programs that do.

Self-sufficiency is now a central goal in homelessness response. It shows up in program objectives, in how services are designed, and increasingly in how projects get judged and funded. For a Continuum of Care (CoC) and the programs inside it, that raises two questions that have to be answered in practice. How do you design a program that moves people toward self-sufficiency? And how should a CoC rate and rank the programs that claim to?

Both questions depend on one that usually gets skipped. What is self-sufficiency, and what would it take to measure movement toward it honestly? Until that is settled, the design and ranking questions cannot really be answered.

What we are measuring

Definitions of self-sufficiency almost always turn on one word: *ability*. The ability to meet your own basic needs without outside help. That word matters more than it looks. An ability is a capacity. People build it, lose it, and rebuild it. It is not a fixed status someone either has or does not have on the day you happen to check.

You cannot see a capacity. You can see what it produces: someone employed this month, earning a little more, off benefits, housed without a subsidy. The capacity behind those signals has to be **inferred**, and the inference goes wrong in both directions. Someone can clear every observable bar today and still be one setback from losing all of it. A lost job, a health crisis, a rent hike. Someone else can be receiving help right now while quietly building the kind of stability that lasts.

It helps to be precise about levels here, because the field has already made one important move and the **harder step is the next one**. Good evaluation shifted years ago from measuring *outputs* — how many beds were filled, how many people were served — to measuring *outcomes*, the actual changes in people's lives: income gained, housing kept. That shift was right. But an outcome is still not the same as the *construct* it is meant to indicate. Rising income and a housing exit are outcomes. Self-sufficiency is the underlying capacity those outcomes are supposed to point to. Measuring outcomes instead of outputs is progress. Mistaking a few outcomes for the whole construct is the error that remains.

These outcomes are signals of self-sufficiency. They are not the capacity itself.

None of this means those signals are useless. Income, benefit reliance, and housing status are real, and worth tracking. The mistake is treating them as the whole of self-sufficiency. There is good reason for caution here. When researchers have built tools to measure self-sufficiency in homeless and at-risk populations, they have found it to be **multidimensional**: it spans income and employment, psychosocial functioning, and social connection. And they have found that even a tool built specifically for the job captures only part of it. One study of the Self-Sufficiency Matrix concluded the measure "does not fully capture the construct of self-sufficiency," and warned against using it on its own to decide who gets housing and support (Cummings & Brown, 2019). The same study found the scores were not even equivalent across groups. The same number meant something different for a single adult than it did for a family.

So here is the takeaway, and it has teeth: **a handful of financial outcomes capture one dimension of a construct that has several.** They are useful signals. They are not a definition of success.

Designing programs that build capacity

If self-sufficiency is a capacity, then building the capacity and producing the proxy are two different design goals. A program can raise someone's income or move them into unsubsidized housing without doing much to strengthen their ability to hold onto either. It can also do real, lasting work on that ability in ways a single year of income or exit data will never show. The design question is whether services are aimed at the capacity itself or only at the outcomes it produces.

This is not the place for a prescribed service model. The evidence on specific capacity-building interventions is still thin, and honest design starts from good questions rather than a formula.

QUESTIONS TO ASK OF ANY PROGRAM

- **Which dimensions** of self-sufficiency does this program work on — income, yes, but also stability skills, health, social support, system navigation? Which are we neglecting because they are harder to see?
- Are we building **durability** — the ability to weather the next shock — or only producing a favorable snapshot at exit?
- Do our services match the **population**? For people not expected to work, what does progress look like, if not employment income?
- Are we tracking what happens **after** exit, so we learn whether the capacity held — not only whether the exit occurred?
- Where a person's constraint is **structural** (no affordable unit to move into), are we honest that individual capacity-building cannot remove it?

Designing toward capacity means treating those outcomes as evidence to be interpreted, not targets to be hit. The programs doing the hardest, most durable work are often not the ones that post the best numbers on any single measure, which leads straight to the ranking question.

Rating and ranking: what should count as success?

Every CoC has to rate and rank the projects it funds, and that process is anything but neutral. Programs orient themselves toward whatever the ranking rewards. That makes the rating criteria an intervention in their own right: they shape how every competing program behaves. Which puts one choice at the center:

Should ranking rest solely on observable binary outcomes — income up, off benefits, exited to unsubsidized housing — or should it look deeper, at whether programs build durable capacity and serve the people hardest to serve?

Ranking on the proxies alone is tempting for good reasons. The data already exist, the numbers compare cleanly across programs, and the process is easy to defend. Leaning on them *exclusively* is where the familiar problems start.

Creaming	Programs are rewarded for selecting clients most likely to hit the proxy quickly — and penalized for taking the hardest cases, where durable progress is slower and less visible.
Population mismatch	Judging programs that serve elderly or disabled people by employment-income gains scores the population they serve, not the work they do.
Unsustained exits	A high rate of exits to unsubsidized housing looks like success, but without post-exit data it cannot distinguish durable stability from a revolving door.
Goal displacement	When the proxy becomes the reward, programs optimize the proxy — which can quietly pull effort away from the capacity it was meant to represent.

This is not a case for ignoring outcomes. Outcomes are essential, and a ranking that rewarded effort without results would fail in its own way. It is a case for a rating system that pairs the binary outcomes with measures that can see more of the construct.

QUESTIONS FOR A RATING & RANKING COMMITTEE

- Do our criteria reward **durability** (returns to homelessness, post-exit stability) alongside the exit itself?
- Do we **adjust for who a program serves**, so taking harder cases is not punished as poor performance?
- Do we credit progress on **dimensions other than income** where those fit the population and the program's purpose?
- Are our measures **comparable across programs** without assuming the same number means the same thing for different populations?
- Have we been explicit about what our metrics **can and cannot** tell us — so we neither over-trust nor discard them?

There is no perfect rubric, and this resource will not pretend to hand you one. The point is narrower. What a CoC chooses to reward is a real design decision with real consequences, and it deserves the same scrutiny the CoC would demand of any program it funds.

The answer is not to measure self-sufficiency less. It is to measure it well enough to trust. If self-sufficiency is the goal, measurement is how a program learns whether it is getting there, and how a CoC decides which programs to back. Self-sufficiency is a capacity. Building it, and rewarding the programs that build it, means looking past the single number to the person it stands for. Their stability does not fit in one column. Their progress still deserves to be measured honestly, at the level the evidence can bear.

The Homelessness Response Lab helps Continuums of Care, providers, and funders measure what matters — honestly, and at the level the evidence supports. This resource supports stronger program design and fairer, more rigorous rating and ranking; it takes no position on any specific policy or funding decision. Measurement claims draw on C. Cummings & M. Brown (2019), “Psychometric properties of the self-sufficiency matrix among homeless and vulnerably housed individuals and families,” *Journal of Community Psychology*, 47(4), 979–994. · homelessresponselab.com