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VESTA

Virtual Electronic Service Tracking Assistant

The HMIS Software Solution of the
Cincinnati/Hamilton County Continuum of Care
for the Homeless

VESTA is the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) software designed for the Cincinnati/Hamilton County Continuum of Care, in use since 2000.

In 1999 Caracole, Inc. built an Access database that was used by all of the family shelters to track their clients and produce grant reporting. VESTA an SQL Web-based system is the outgrowth of that work and was specifically developed by Caracole Inc., in cooperation with the local CoC's HMIS Committee.

In 2005 The Partnership Center, Ltd. (PCL) adopted the VESTA software from Caracole as they made a decision to return to their original mission of providing housing for persons with HIV/AIDS. The software along with the Caracole Information Technology staff were integrated into PCL. Now PCL's IT group continue to customize, build out and develop the software as well as support and manage the HMIS implementation of the software throughout the Continuum of Care.

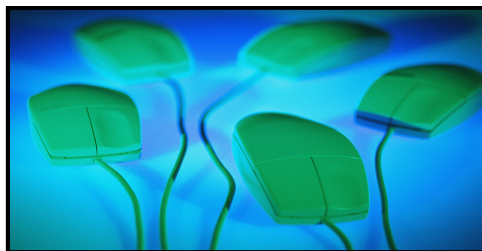
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VESTA User's View

Why chose VESTA?

- VESTA was developed and is managed by staff who understand the users, the need for the system and HUD requirements.
- VESTA has local programmers, administrators and support staff.
- VESTA is customizable - for agencies and communities.
- VESTA assures confidentiality and security of client data.
- VESTA is designed to promote accuracy through data validation and quality assurance.
- VESTA is responsive to the communities needs for client privacy.
- VESTA supports data sharing through partnerships.
- VESTA incorporates the Homeless Certification process.
- VESTA can produce the statistical data required by HUD for the Annual Progress Report.
- VESTA can produce the Annual Homeless Assessment Report.



How is confidentiality monitored?

In designing VESTA, the confidentiality and security of the data was a primary consideration. Originally, the software development team for VESTA was employed by Caracole, Inc. – a housing provider for people with HIV/AIDS. Our social services co-workers made it clear from the beginning that they considered data security crucial, and would not consider using VESTA unless we could make it virtually ‘bullet-proof.’

VESTA uses Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) protocol with 128-bit encryption; this provides a highly secure, encrypted connection between our server and the user’s computer. SSL is an industry standard and is used by many websites – including banks, credit card companies, and others with highly sensitive data – in the protection of their online transactions with their customers. Where we exceed the industry standard is in the use of digital certificates – a further layer of security which permits us to verify, each and every time a user connects to VESTA, that they are using a pre-approved computer.

To ensure that we had covered all of the bases, we hired a computer security firm to evaluate VESTA’s security. Their finding was that VESTA is “secure and well-structured to protect against known and unknown attacks.” In addition, they cited the digital certificates as an “unusual” level of security.

Our VESTA users are also “unusually” thoroughly screened and trained. In order to receive a digital certificate, a username, and a password, a user must go through the following steps:

1. Agency Directors must sign an agreement to participate in HMIS/ VESTA.
2. User Agreements must be co-signed by each user and their Agency Director.
3. An on-site tech assessment of a user’s computer and work station location must be conducted and approved by PCL, at which time the installation of digital certificates occurs.
4. A one-on-one training is provided for the user appropriate to job function, covering an introduction to HMIS and VESTA, confidentiality and security, consent, data sharing levels, data collection and entry, and reports.

We have taken every reasonable measure (and some that might be viewed as unreasonable) to ensure that the data contained in VESTA is secure. Our goal is

What programs does VESTA support?

- Outreach
- Emergency Shelter
- Transitional Housing
- Supportive Permanent Housing (SHP and SPC)
- Services Only Programs

Are reports standard in VESTA?

There are both agency reports and administrative reports which are standard builds into VESTA. Customers can order special customized reports which can be added at any time for individual programs, partnerships, or for the full continuum. Data is also available via export in both Excel and Access formats.

The standard agency reports include: Active Client Report, City Demographic (IDIS) Report, HUD Annual Progress Report, Outcomes Reports, and SPC Monthly Billing Report.

The standard administrator reports include: Active Users Report, Administer Data Report, Outreach/Prior Living Situation Report, System Activity Report, System User Agreements Report, System User Email Report. Additionally, a FLEXO report is included that allows the administrators to perform limited queries on the system and generate their own custom reports.

Are there special features in VESTA?

The following are special features which are standard in VESTA:

- Homeless Certification - a process is built into VESTA for the Continuum to use to facilitate documentation of homelessness on clients to be served.
- System wide messaging - for administrative postings on the home page.
- Printable forms downloading - VESTA can link forms used by multiple users on the system and make them available for downloading.
- Client messaging - VESTA supports private client messaging system where workers can leave messages for clients asking them to call them back.

VESTA Technical Overview

What kind of application is VESTA?

VESTA is an ASP.NET (C# and VB.NET) web application with a SQL Server 2000 back-end. It is used as a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and as a client-tracking and reporting database by social service programs.



The data and the program are on a server in downtown Cincinnati. Users access VESTA across the Internet using a web browser (Internet Explorer version 6.0 or higher).

Is the VESTA server secure?

The servers that run VESTA are owned by the Health Foundation Fund and collocated at the Cincinnati Bell Technology Solutions Data Center. The Data Center is monitored by camera, 24 hours per day, and provides a secure, temperature-controlled environment with redundant power, redundant HVAC, and disaster recovery.

Is VESTA reliable?

VESTA's availability has been about 99.6% over the past year. Occasionally (perhaps once per quarter) VESTA is down for a few hours for scheduled upgrades. We provide ample advance notice of scheduled outages and try to limit this to times of day and month which are convenient for users.

Who decides what information is collected by VESTA?

The core information collected by VESTA is determined by the need to produce a HUD Annual Performance Report and the requirement to conform to the Data and Technical Standards released by HUD. Any other data is collected solely at the discretion of the Continuum of Care and the individual participating programs.

How do data-sharing partnerships work?

Partnerships between programs are set up to share selected data about clients when programs participating in the partnership have decided that sharing data will help them to better serve their clients' needs.

Interagency sharing includes intake history and data about household members. Highly sensitive information about a client's special needs (e.g. HIV status), or services that might reveal special needs (e.g. mental health services) is NEVER shared outside of the originating agency.

How does client consent affect data sharing in VESTA?

- A program must have the informed consent of the client to share information outside of their own agency.
- Within an agency, access to data is permitted regardless of client consent.
- Even with consent, highly sensitive data is never shared outside of an agency.
- Clients may revoke consent at any time. Users will be permitted to revoke consent granted to their program at any time.
- Consent expires after a pre-defined period of time. Currently, all programs using VESTA sign a three-year consent, but this is configurable on a per-program basis.

What client data is shared without a sharing agreement?

In order to prevent the creation of duplicate records, a user must not create a new client record without first doing a system-wide search for the client. To search the system, the user must know either the client's social security number OR both their last name and date of birth. When searching for clients new to a program, VESTA will not 'find' a record for a client who does not have a valid consent on file. Clicking on a search result will open the intake wizard – it does not provide access to a client's entire record.

Who has access to data in VESTA?

Only authorized users of VESTA have access to any part of the application.

Authorized users are:

- Staff of participating agencies which provide services, shelter, or housing for homeless persons and
- The staff of PCL, which is contracted to provide data quality assurance, technical support, and user training.

VESTA has several layers of security that impact who can log in to VESTA, what data they can see, and which tasks they can do while logged in.

What is required to gain access to VESTA?

In order to access VESTA a user must have:

- A valid digital certificate approved by PCL staff installed on the computer they are using
- A valid user agreement on file with PCL staff and documented in VESTA
- A username
- A password which is less than 90 days old and composed of at least 8 characters (letters and numbers only, and must contain at least one of each)
- At least one program affiliation

What kinds of user levels are available in VESTA?

Whether or not users are permitted to access any given page in VESTA is determined by their security role/type under their current program affiliation in combination with the page's security definition. The user's security level must explicitly be granted prior to access to any secure page.

VESTA currently offers the following user levels within an agency:

- *Reports only* – no access to any client-specific data
- *Regular user* – all data entry and client review pages, but no report access
- *Power user* – all data entry and client review pages, plus reports
- *Supervisor* – same as power user, but has access to all data alerts for all users in his/her program

