Medical Xpress

Researchers explore new approaches to support work practices in homeless shelters

July 9 2020

Researchers from Bentley University, in partnership with Pine Street Inn, New England's largest homeless shelter, have been exploring the ideas of process modeling to better understand and improve triage practices at homeless shelters. Conventional wisdom places the sequencing of standard tasks at the center of process models. In contrast, work in homeless shelters requires customizing work processes in response to individual guests.

By constructing a model of the triage work at the homeless shelters, the researchers demonstrate the need for this approach. The study illustrated challenges such as discretionary tasks and varying knowledge intensity, and explored an emerging technique that corresponds to the reality of triage work in the homeless shelters.

"A modeling approach that focused on the individual guests, providing options and tools to the employees and volunteers at the homeless shelter shows clear promise," says Dr. Sandeep Purao, a professor of information and process management and one of the lead researchers. A technique called CMMN (case management and modeling notation) has emerged over the last few years with industry backing and tool support that has the potential to support such work. "There are many approaches and tools that are developed in the for-profit domain that can be useful in humanitarian settings," says Dr. Monica Garfield, a computer information systems professor who also participated in the study.

The results of this work were published at the European Conference on

Information Systems in June 2020. The team will continue the work by combining on-the-ground studies of work practices at homeless shelters and developing additional models and tools to support this work.

The work is important because homelessness continues to be a significant concern in the US. The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress shows that 567,715 people—about 17 of every 10,000—were experiencing homelessness across the United States. The homeless shelters represent the first line of defense for preventing homelessness. Understanding, improving and supporting work practices at the shelters can, therefore, have a direct impact on the problem.

More information: Purao, S., M. Garfield. 2020. Process Modeling in Humanitarian Settings: A Case Study and Lessons Learned. European Conference on Information Systems. aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2020_rp/211/

Provided by Bentley University