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***Evaluierung Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe.
Zusammenfassung des Endberichts [Evaluation
of the Viennese Homeless Service System:
Summary of Final Report].***

Vienna: City of Vienna, pp. 112, available online at: <http://www.wien.gv.at/gesundheits/einrichtungen/planung/pdf/evaluierung-wohnungslosenhilfe.pdf>

This is a more than 100 pages “summary” of a 261 pages evaluation report with an appendix of 438 pages with tables covering the Viennese support system for homeless persons. It is in German, but has a (really) short English “Management Summary” of five pages.

When the author of this review read the report he immediately remembered the English saying, “you can’t have your cake and eat it”. In the introduction and the prefaces, the Viennese “step system” which has more than 4 500 places in shelters and transitional accommodation outside the regular housing market is praised for having an internationally acknowledged “excellent reputation” (p. 14), and being an example of European best practice (p. 6). The report shows that the number of places in this “secondary housing market” (Sahlin, 2005) increased between 2005 (when it provided only 2 460 places) and 2011 by more than 80 per cent (see Table 1, p. 18). In January 2011 the Viennese step system had – apart from advice centres and prevention services – 412 places in night shelters, 1 225 places in unspecified transitional accommodation (usually with shared facilities and common rooms), 379 places in transitional accommodation for specific target groups (either targeted on groups defined by gender or age, or on groups with additional support needs because of addiction and/or mental health problems), 279 places in transitional accommodation for families and mothers with children, and 1 089 places in time limited supported housing (where clients have to be more stabilized than in transitional accommodation, but are still seeking to become “housing ready”).

Furthermore, there were 1 076 places in so-called “socially supported housing”, a kind of “safe haven accommodation”, mostly for older homeless people in need of permanent support who can stay there permanently without a tenancy contract. The authors, researchers from an independent research institute, emphasise the “differentiated offer” and show that reaching “housing readiness” by moving “upwards” in

this system is an important requirement for getting access to what is termed in the Austrian discourse, the “final dwelling”; a permanent tenancy in a self contained flat with full tenancy rights. However, they mention as well, that single steps of this staircase system might be skipped and “gliding transfers” might be possible.

The Housing First approach, which has been developed following a critique of the staircase approach and as an alternative to keeping homeless people outside the regular housing market until they are “housing ready”, is presented as a “worthwhile amendment to the intervention options of the Viennese service system for homeless people” (p.104). However, in the same section of the report the discussion about Housing First is introduced as a “radical change of paradigm” and its’ turn away from a treatment first approach is acknowledged as being “a counter-thesis of some elements of the established Viennese step system”. The solution for the authors seem to be some “pilot projects” with the Housing First approach, a peculiar interpretation of the decision of the Viennese City Council that the Housing First approach “should be increasingly realised in future” (SPÖ Wien / Die Grünen Wien, 2010, p.36).

Some readers may ask why this should be done if the Viennese step system works as excellently as it is presented in the report. One reason might be the enormous costs of such a system, but unfortunately the report does not include any more detailed information about the costs of the system (although an annual amount of €43m is mentioned, see p.5) nor on the costs caused by homeless people using non-homelessness services (such as emergency health care and criminal justice services), because they are homeless. Perhaps the money spent in these areas could be spent much more efficiently and the numbers of homeless people could actually be brought down considerably by scaling up the Housing First approach. Other reasons mentioned briefly in the report (p. 84) are some “unnecessary barriers to moving up” in the step system; the problematic aspects of night shelters with long durations of stays, little privacy and the stress of being sent back to the street every day (the number of places in night shelters has more than doubled from 194 in 2005 to 412 in 2011); effects of “shelterisation” in communal temporary accommodation and the question whether skills learned there are of any use for living in a self-contained dwelling after being re-housed. The fact that in the step system, a “successful” stay in supported housing ends with the need to move on to the “final dwelling”, thus disrupting any established contacts with the community in and outside the house, is also mentioned as a critical point. If they ever arrive at this stage homeless people do not only have to move to another place but will as a rule also be left alone without further support in their new and “final” housing situation. Offers for “aftercare” for formerly homeless people in permanent housing are extremely limited in Vienna (p.71).

The evaluation informs us (pp. 66-67) that only slightly more than half of all users of transitional supported housing, and only less than a third of all the 5 188 users of accommodation services for homeless people in Vienna in the years 2009 and 2010, have managed to get a regular tenancy when leaving the service, either in Vienna's large municipal housing stock, or in private rented housing, housing cooperatives, or even owner occupied housing. A particular problem seems to be that old rent arrears in the municipal stock (the City of Vienna is one of the largest landlords in Europe with 220 000 municipal housing units), will lead to complete exclusion from accessing this important source of permanent housing in Vienna (see p.77).

While we know that point in time measures overestimate the duration of homelessness and underestimate the fluctuation in and out of homelessness over a longer period it is nevertheless remarkable that of the 200 homeless people interviewed for the study, 27 per cent had first contacted the service system more than three years ago and a further 40 per cent have been in the system for between one and three years (see Table 93 in the appendix of the study). There are also indications of a considerable proportion of "frequent flyers" moving between different offers without exiting the system.

The study provides a very rich analysis of data, based on 201 interviews with homeless clients, longitudinal data of service use (excluding the night shelters), between 2006 and 2010 for more than 38 000 stays, 31 in-depth interviews with experts, and a short questionnaire filled in by 98 experts employed by service providers. The report describes the system of services for homeless people in Vienna and presents the different services of this system as viewed by the clients; it analyses client profiles and housing/homelessness biographies; the course of utilisation of the service system; the effectiveness of different services; and cutting points with other services for homeless people and other target groups.

There is also a small section on "Housing First – an Alternative to the Viennese Step System?" Obviously the answer to this question by the authors of the evaluation report is "no, or perhaps, but later". Housing First is – for the moment – primarily seen as a small additional part of the menu of options, with pilot projects recommended. However, this author has found a number of good reasons in the report for a "yes", particularly with new evidence that the approach works in European contexts as well as in the US and elsewhere (see Busch-Geertsema, 2013). Given the favourable situation of back-up by the Viennese City Government, and housing options available in the large municipal stock controlled by this Government, scaling up Housing First in Vienna and re-housing homeless people as rapidly as possible into permanent housing with floating support would certainly not lead to replacing all other services for homeless people. But it could help reducing homelessness in Vienna to a considerable extent and diminish

some of the critical aspects of the Viennese step system with its weird conception of “housing readiness” which should no longer be praised as an example of good practice for other European cities.

► **References**

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