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# Swimming Can Better be Learned in the Water Than Anywhere Else

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## Introduction

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As Crane *et al* (2012) note in their contribution to the debate on ‘settling’ homeless people, there is no doubt that many homeless people with complex problems will need on-going support in order to sustain a regular tenancy, and to make further progress towards social inclusion. So the issue is not about support being useful for sustaining a tenancy. The basic philosophy of Housing First and Rapid Rehousing Programmes is to provide homeless people with housing as quickly as possible, and to offer the support needed to those who are re-housed while they are housed, instead of postponing their re-housing until they are deemed “housing ready”. One of the main reasons for promoting rapid rehousing instead of sophisticated “preparation” systems is mentioned in the article by Crane *et al* (and quoted by other respondents), but it is not really taken seriously by the authors of the article under review. It is the fact that otherwise most of those people who are homeless and have “problems” will just keep being excluded from mainstream housing and having to rely on temporary accommodation and informal solutions (sofa surfing, staying temporarily with relatives, etc.). The fact that “only 20 percent of departures of London’s hostels in 2008/2009 were into independent accommodation, while 39 percent were evictions or abandonments” (Crane *et al*, 2012, p.23) is mentioned in the article, but what does this mean for the main message of the authors, that “the longer (up to three years) a homeless person spends in supported accommodation, the greater is his or her preparedness for independent living” (*ibid*, p.34)?

However, in order to see where homeless people end up after spending years in the “secondary housing market” (Sahlin, 2005), the authors would have had to look at all users of temporary accommodation with support, and not just at those who have managed to reach the “final” stage of getting a regular flat. And very obviously

the results of such an analysis would have been depressing, showing the poor outcomes of such a system for a considerable part – if not the majority – of homeless people. Jeremy Swain, responding to the article in this issue, has added some more evidence on this for London and both Sahlin and Swain have pointed out in their responses that those making progress in the sector of hostels and shared accommodation are probably those with lower support needs and more resources.

## Housing First and Housing Ready

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It is important to emphasise some of the most relevant misunderstandings between a “housing ready” approach, which is apparently backed up by Maureen Crane and her colleagues, and the Housing First and Rapid Rehousing approaches which are increasingly promoted in many European countries (and indeed elsewhere), in order to reduce homelessness effectively – but are still far from being “mainstream” in most EU member states.

While Housing First and Rapid Rehousing approaches do not ignore at all the need for support of their clients, such approaches are based on the conviction that support (or “training” as Crane *et al* call it) to enable tenancy sustainment is more effectively provided if people are quickly provided with a tenancy, just as learning to swim is much easier when practising in water. The principle is also called “learning by doing”! It seems so obvious that managing a tenancy, getting on with neighbours, paying the bills and turning a house into a home is best practiced under “real” conditions in a self-contained permanent tenancy with the perspective of staying there, rather than in a communal or other institutional setting, where other requirements have to be met, or in “second stage projects” where one has to leave when one is considered “ready”, resulting in a complete cut off of relations to the community in and around the accommodation. When support needs diminish it should be the service providers who withdraw and focus on other users, and not the service user who has to leave the place where he or she has settled.

Intensity of support needs might differ greatly between formerly homeless individuals, and a significant number might not need any specialised support. It is important to acknowledge that support provided can only be effective if “co-production” takes place between providers and users of such support. Hence the particular emphasis in the Housing First approach on service user’s choice, and on taking client’s individual needs and preferences seriously when offering support to them. Such an individualised approach is much easier to realise in scattered housing than in any congregate “preparatory” setting. And ensuring “ontological

security” (Padgett, 2007) as the basis for further social integration can only be established in a situation where people have a place where they know that they can stay, develop their own perspective and get support as long as they need it.

The fact that Crane *et al* (2012), in their analysis for their article in the European Journal of Homelessness, do not distinguish in their sample from those who received support *after* being re-housed, and those who haven’t, suggests the downplay of the importance of providing floating support in housing (though in their full report, some influence of – often very low intensity – tenancy support on the probability of rent arrears and evictions is reported, see Crane *et al*, 2011, p.85). Their thinking is still largely dominated by the inappropriate alternative of either (1) providing specialised support outside the regular housing market in time limited special “preparation” settings, or (2) of living completely independently without any specialised floating support in regular housing. With Housing First and Rapid Rehousing approaches this traditional dichotomy is rejected, the time spent in temporary accommodation should be reduced to an absolute minimum and specialised support can nevertheless be provided if needed and as long as it is needed while formerly homeless people live in regular permanent housing.

## Conclusion

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The evidence that with the Housing First approach, even those homeless people with severe and complex support needs are able to sustain a permanent tenancy in the great majority of cases (and without spending years in any “preparatory” accommodation) is now overwhelming, not only in the US (see Tsemberis, 2010a and 2010b, for an overview), but also in Canada (see Goering *et al*, 2012; Gaetz *et al*, 2013), Europe (see Busch-Geertsema, 2013, summarizing positive results of four European “test sites”, and Pleace and Bretherton, 2013, with positive results of a Housing First project in London) and elsewhere. There is no reason (except for the vested interests of some service providers providing temporary shelter or hostel type accommodation, and the very relevant issue of barriers to permanent housing for marginalised groups), why other homeless people, with less severe support needs should have to endure “preparatory periods” of several years before they are re-housed, if the necessary support can just as easily and much more effectively be provided in regular permanent housing. Housing First does not make professional support redundant and there remains much to do for service providers in delivering the required levels of effective support in regular, self-contained and permanent housing.

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