

Workshop 1

Employment of homeless people: right or requirement?

Key points of discussion

Presentations

Right versus Requirement

The two speakers, Anne-Marie van Bergen and Paolo Pezzana, of the workshop provided both perspectives on the issue of employment of homeless people as a right or requirement through examples relating to Italy and the Netherlands.

Paolo Pezzana started with a reference to Art. 1 of the Italian Constitution which states that all Italian citizens have a right to work. In Art. 1, there is also reference to the concept of “public responsibility” in the Italian Constitution in relation to employment, both as meaning society should provide an enabling environment for all citizens to find work, and also for the job seeker to take up responsibility in contributing to society through engaging in employment. He also referred to the importance of the black economy in Italy as sometimes the only way into employment for people experiencing homelessness due to its flexibility and adaptability to skills of homeless people. However, there is still a basic problem of recognition of homeless people as a target group in Italy – employment activation programmes very seldom make reference to people who are homeless, but rather target unemployed people or people with disabilities, or even people who already have a job.

Anne-Marie gave an overview of general policy in the Netherlands for handling unemployment and lack of income. She then referred to ways through which homeless people are incorporated in this policy. She provided information about a project she is working on and some other examples of local practice and the effects on the homeless people involved, thereby illustrating her opinion that employment for people who are homeless should be a right as well as a requirement. She referred to the pros and cons of this more coercive approach. The pros included the initial push that some homeless people need to help them gain self-confidence and to make them understand that they have some skills to offer. The cons included the mismatch between job supply and job demand for homeless people in these employment programmes which sometimes offer jobs which are not at all adapted to the skills and needs of the homeless person, and therefore the stress of being forced into a job.

Both speakers referred to coercion or requirement as a useful first step to help people gain self-confidence, but this must also be combined with quality and appropriate job offers to help people regain their dignity. There is historically a strong link between welfare and sanctions. We should not be scared of requirements /activation/sanction, as this is also a way to help homeless people help themselves.

Questions and discussion

The main issues which emerged from the discussion are the following.

The perception of a “good quality job”

The perception varies from one person to another, according to skills and needs. It is especially important to provide the opportunity for a homeless person to regain confidence and dignity. A

“boring” job may be of great value and interest to some and not others. The very signing of a contract with an employer can have a positive psychological impact in terms of regaining self-confidence, recreating an initial link with society, and feeling like a real and visible person through seeing a name on paper.

The need to adapt and reinvent the concept of “work” for some people

Many homeless people have talent and skills, but society does not always allow them to use their full potential or these skills do not fit in with mainstream societal or labour market structures. It is useful to sometime reinvent the concept of “work” to adapt this to the variety of skills and the needs of the person. Some homeless people need a step-by-step approach towards mainstream employment allowing them to regain confidence through other forms of employment, activities, occupations.

Homeless people and self employment

People who have experienced homelessness are generally people who have developed survival and coping strategies. This resourcefulness is also a skill that can be used for employment purposes and may be more adapted to certain people enabling them to be their own boss rather than to work for a company/organization in a regular daily job.

The responsibility of society to provide good quality jobs for all

Like anyone, a person experiencing homelessness will want a motivating job which makes him or her feel useful and valued. Society should therefore provide opportunities and choices, including the choice not to work if the labour market does not offer adequate job solutions.

Targeted versus universal approach to employment of homeless people

Targeted approaches to active inclusion of homeless people may work in some cases, but in other cases it may be best to use a universalist approach to labour market integration focusing not specifically on homeless people but on a wide range of vulnerable groups under one programme. This allows for less stigmatization. What works for people in poverty can also work for people experiencing severe forms of poverty. However, for those who are not the target of general welfare or employment programmes or who do not have access to these programmes, targeted measures with extra support if necessary (housing, health, counseling) can be appropriate. Targeting homeless people can also be an excellent starting point for developing policies to reduce poverty and exclusion in a society. If a policy works against homelessness, it can maybe also prove useful for tackling less severe forms of poverty and exclusion.

Low wages as a disincentive to take up a job

The sometimes small gap between income support and minimum wage as an incentive to stay in the benefits system rather than to take up a low-paid job. If income support or housing allowances are decreased with the acceptance of a job offer, this can be counterproductive