



FEANTSA

European Federation of National Organisations Working With the Homeless

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For Immediate Release

FEANTSA Speaks Out Against Miss Homeless Contest, Belgium

21 October 2009:

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless is an umbrella of not-for-profit organisations which participate in or contribute to the fight against homelessness in Europe. It is the only major European network that focuses exclusively on homelessness at the European level.

On Saturday the 10th October, Thérèse Van Belle was crowned Miss Homeless Belgium at a beauty pageant in Brussels. Her prize was a year rent-free in a flat. The other contestants will remain in homeless living situations. The organisers, social worker Mathilde Pelsers and her former beauty queen daughter Aline Duportail billed the event as an awareness-raising exercise; highlighting the issue of homelessness, developing the self-esteem of homeless women and even providing a framework from which they could move onto employment. The initiative has received considerable attention in the international press and was aired on Belgian television. It also attracted high-level sponsorship, including the City of Bruges and KBC bank.

FEANTSA is appalled by this event, which objectifies and undermines the dignity of homeless people. Housing is a fundamental human right, not a prize. It is unethical to place vulnerable people in public competition with each other to "win" their human rights. The organisers claim the jury evaluated the contestants' "inner beauty, strength and will to get themselves out of a difficult situation." FEANTSA condemns unreservedly the implicit suggestion that homeless people who are not "strong" enough, or lack sufficient "inner beauty" and "will" do not deserve housing or support.

Furthermore, it is entirely inappropriate to invite people in severe housing need to jump through the hoops of a beauty pageant in the hope of winning a home. People in such severe need are extremely vulnerable and their choices often limited. Given this context, FEANTSA would like to express concern about the powerful position the organisers of Miss Homeless occupy in relation to the participants. The voyeurism and objectification inherent in beauty pageants compound the extent to which this event risks subjecting very vulnerable people to disempowering or exploitative experiences. FEANTSA is disappointed by much of the mainstream press reporting on this issue, which has chosen to portray the event as neutral fundraising and not examined the power issues in this event involving very vulnerable people.

Regardless of the intentions of the organisers, FEANTSA considers such an event entirely unacceptable. Freek Spinnewijn, director had the following response;
"This event re-enforces an entirely inappropriate distinction between people who deserve support to get out of situations of extreme poverty and social exclusion, and people who do not. We cannot accept the idea that one homeless woman, having demonstrated her supposed positive attributes, is more deserving of housing than another. Miss Homeless is a patronising initiative that shows little awareness of the realities facing homeless people, the causes of homelessness or the extent of the problem."

Miss Homeless over-simplifies homelessness and reduces it to an individual problem that can be overcome by trying hard and making an effort with one's appearance. Often, experiences such as relationship breakdown, physical and mental health problems, addiction, eviction and violence are what trigger and sustain homelessness. External factors also play an important role. These include poor access to decent affordable housing, unemployment, precarious employment, discrimination, release from institutions such as prison, hospital or care, inadequate benefits systems and lack of service co-ordination.

Fighting homelessness means advancing the right of every person to live in dignity and to have a secure, adequate and affordable place to do so. It calls for strategic interventions and ambitious, long-term commitments from policy makers. There is a wealth of positive work on homelessness being carried out throughout Europe, and events such as Miss Homeless detract attention from this work. Awareness raising that reduces homelessness to an individual problem, treats fundamental human rights as a "reward" for a lucky few and focuses on short-term solutions is counter-productive. While FEANTSA commends the committed campaigning and awareness raising that many actors carry out on homelessness, it deplores the self-serving publicity generation of events like Miss Homeless, which actually serve to undermine efforts the fight against homelessness. The over-emphasis of publicity raises serious concern about whether the primary objective of Miss Homeless was helping homeless people or profiling the organisers.

For further details, please contact FEANTSA's communications officer Ruth Owen, at ruth.owen@feantsa.org

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■ European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless AISBL

Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri AISBL

194 Chaussée de Louvain ■ 1210 Brussels ■ Belgium ■ Tel.: +32 2 538 66 69 ■ Fax: +32 2 539 41 74 ■ office@feantsa.org ■ www.feantsa.org