

FEANTSA Health and Homelessness Study Visit to neunerhaus, 8-9 May 2023

On the 8th and 9th of May, FEANTSA members from 7 countries gathered in Vienna under the auspices of neunerhaus for a discussion and exchange on the intersection of health and homelessness. The objectives of the visit were threefold; firstly, the discussions aimed at identifying the ways in which the homelessness sector supports people experiencing homelessness in accessing their right to healthcare. Secondly, we wanted to map health services provided by FEANTSA membership and partners. Lastly, the group's goal was to grow the capacity of and facilitate mutual learning for participants, by sharing each organisation's expertise around health and visiting the health centre established and run by neunerhaus.

Participants

FEANTSA members: Infirmiers de Rue, Belgium (Louise Allard, nurse in Housing First project), Doctors of the World, Greece (Anastasios Yfantis, Operations Director); outreach unit in Modena, Italy, fio.PSD member (Elena Zanichelli, Professional educator), Budapest Methodological Centre of Social Policy and its Institutions (Istvan Dande, Deputy Manager of health services), Hogar Si, Spain (María Mesegar Jiménez, Nurse), Saint Brother Albert's Aid Society, Poland (Małgorzata Sieńczyk, Director), and partner from Expert Focus (Stan Burridge, Director). FEANTSA secretariat was represented by Simona Barbu, Policy officer.

Austrian based FEANTSA members and partners. neunerhaus team: Elisabeth Hammer (Managing director), Paula Reid (Research and Innovation), Dr. Stephan Leick (Medical director, neunerhaus health centre), Sandra Stuber-Poirson (Operational director, neunerhaus health centre); Dr. Bernadette Becsi (Deputy medical director), Carmen Ploch (Peer worker, neunerhaus Praxis Psychische Gesundheit), Lisa Steiner (Manager, neunerhaus Praxis Psychische Gesundheit). Alexander Machatschke, (BAWO Managing Director and FEANTSA AC member), Julia Schratz (Dowas für Frauen), Thomas ADRIAN (Caritas der Erzdiözese Wien), Dr. Igor Grabovac (Vienna Medical University and CANCERLESS coordinator), Dr. Eleonore Miller-Reiter (Psychosoziale Dienste in Vienna).

Monday, 8th May: Official welcome

The study visit officially began on the evening of the 8th of May with the welcoming of FEANTSA members at the neunerhaus Café. Over the fresh, organic food, typically prepared in the Café participants learnt about the history of neunerhaus. A short overview of the activities of the organisation was offered by its managing director, Elisabeth Hammer together with the team.

neunerhaus was established over 20 years ago with the objective to enable people experiencing homelessness and people at risk of poverty to lead a self-determined and dignified life through access to medical care, housing and advice. Every year, more than 900 people who



Neunerhaus Café

experience homelessness are supported in the three neunerhaus residential supported housing services, or in their own apartment through the Housing First and floating housing support teams. neunerhaus has been at the forefront of bold and innovative approaches to ending homelessness in Austria: in 2012, neunerhaus brought the successful concept of Housing First to Vienna, the social property management subsidiary neunerimmo was founded in 2017, and a certified training course for peer workers in homelessness services was launched in 2019. A veterinary practice treats the four-legged companions of people experiencing homelessness.

neunerhaus has provided health services since 2006; the neunerhaus health centre opened in 2017, and a further much-needed service was launched in 2021 – the Praxis Psychische Gesundheit, the neunerhaus mental health service. neunerhaus primarily supports people experiencing homelessness and people who do not have health insurance. The organisation works on two pillars: first, by providing quality services for individuals in need, and second by cooperating with mainstream services, while advocating for them to become more open to people who face different challenges around access (for example, through lack of social security entitlements, language barriers, social exclusion, complex health needs etc).

Tuesday, 9th May

The 9th of May started with a detailed presentation of the different health services provided by neunerhaus. Paula Reid and Carmen Ploch provided insights from the work of the health centre. The centre offers health services to people experiencing homelessness or who do not have health insurance, free of charge. Around 5,800 people per year (60% of whom are uninsured) are supported through the neunerhaus health centre and the team of mobile doctors, who work in homelessness services across Vienna. The number of patients in the health centre increased by 32% between 2019 and 2022.

The team of the centre is multi-professional, formed of general practitioners, social workers, receptionists, peer workers, nursing staff, dentists, and dental assistants. The centre has the status of an ambulatorium, requiring facilities and standards similar to a hospital outpatient clinic. To overcome language barriers, a video interpretation service supports health and social staff to have conversations in more than 50 languages. This is an innovative method implemented by neunerhaus and provided by a social start-up in Vienna, which facilitates communication with the patients while considering culturally sensitive aspects. The services offered at the centre are:

- Doctor's surgery/general practice, including a nursing team
- Dental practice
- Praxis Psychische Gesundheit (PPG) – interdisciplinary mental health service
- Social work team, including peer work
- neunerhaus mobile doctors (working in 27 homelessness services across Vienna, additionally available through a telephone hotline – originally set up during the pandemic to answer specific questions



Gesundheitszentrum

regarding COVID19, since January 2023 this is operating as a general health advice line for the homelessness sector)

Peer work in health services: two peers are employed in the neunerhaus health centre as part of the multidisciplinary teams. Peers have an important role in establishing trust relationships with patients and making them feel comfortable talking about medical and other concerns, as people often have previous experiences of being stigmatised.¹ neunerhaus also has a further health service, based in a different location. dock is a health and social service run in cooperation with the Vinzenz Gruppe, a healthcare provider in Vienna. It offers specialist medical care to people without health insurance. Medical specialities include gynaecology and obstetrics, internal medicine, orthopaedics and pain medicine, urology, and ophthalmology. Doctors work on a voluntary basis and neunerhaus social workers provide additional support to patients as needed.

“The special thing about neunerhaus is that here the doctors have the time to look people in the eye and listen to their problems. People are not just a number. And people feel when you are really interested in their problems.” - Carmen Ploch, peer health worker.

Presentations from FEANTSA members who shared their work in the area of health: Pt.1

In **Greece**, Doctors of the World (MdM Greece) established Open Polyclinics, as an entry point to housing and social care for people facing homelessness where they offer a warm welcome, respecting diversity. The provision of medical services is a response to a violation of the right to health where individuals do not have access to care and health services. Half of MdM Greece’s beneficiaries are refugees, Roma, and Children (Greek schools require a full vaccination report to enrol children). MdM Greece operates with 60 places in their centre to support 1600 homeless people, through an intercultural, person-centred, and community-based approach with a comprehensive case management (led by the beneficiary) and medical digital data; the cycle closes when people have access to housing.

In **Belgium**, Infirmiers de Rue (Street nurses) work with the vision that housing promotes wellbeing, and it is also a health treatment. Successful integration of people experiencing homelessness is achieved through sustainable health, hygiene, and talent development. Infirmiers de Rue work to build relationships of trust with patients and develop networks – raising awareness through presentations in hospitals and in various organisations that work with the public that IdR supports. Developing tools is also part of their work: prevention and information tools on the importance of hygiene; maps of drinking water fountains and toilets; hypothermia, warmth, BCB – tool to assess the vulnerability from a distance; and Hestia – assessment of the risk of housing loss. The IdR advocacy team mobilises public authorities, organisations, and citizens to design sustainable solutions together.

Hogar Si is a social initiative entity from **Spain** working with housing for health recovery as a solution to homelessness. The housing for health recovery program ensures access to shared housing and 24-hour support; it coordinates directly with the national medical system for treatment, and every 6 months an individual evaluation is conducted on the impact of the program and on what objectives people want to follow. Public support is only possible in Madrid where funding comes from the municipality. Services offered focus on recovery, chronic diseases, and palliative care.

¹ Since 2018, the neunerhaus Peer Campus has supported the development and scaling up of paid peer work in homelessness support services in Vienna with three components: training and further education, offering support to peers on the job, and a ‘think tank’ on the topic of peer work.

The importance of lived experience was raised by our guest Stan Burrige coming from the **UK** where he is the Director of Expert Focus. Stan highlighted that there has been a historical overreliance on 'learned experience' - neglecting the lived experience which brings all that is read and learnt about to life. Stan raised the three-dimensional aspect of the involvement of people with lived experience; where homelessness is usually faceless, combining lived and learned experience humanises theory. Lived experience goes beyond stories of 'my journey'; experiential familiarity and knowledge can offer valuable insights into how to shape and develop practices. Peer support has also the potential to remind professionals in the area of homelessness why they do what they do - it helps them to remain fresh and challenged.

Discussion on 'Health and Homelessness – What is the Role of the Homelessness Sector?'

In the second part of the day, FEANTSA members from Austria (BAWO, Dowas für Frauen, and Caritas der Erzdiözese Wien) and other partners joined for a discussion on the role of the homelessness sector in facilitating access to health services for people facing homelessness. To initiate the discussion, a short overview of the work of FEANTSA was given by Simona Barbu (FEANTSA Policy Officer), followed by a brief presentation of relevant EU priorities in the area of public health. Health priorities for the 2021-2027 period include a focus on crisis preparedness following the experiences of the COVID19 pandemic (including the establishment of the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)); the Europe Beating Cancer plan; a new initiative on 'A comprehensive approach to mental health'; and the European Health Data Space. These initiatives and more are part of the European Commission framework titled the European Health Union.

Presentations from FEANTSA members: Pt.2

Saint Brother Albert Aid Society in **Poland** provides medical care for people in street homelessness. The most common forms of street medical services are: joint patrols of street workers with doctors; outpatient clinics for homeless people; mobile or stationary (Gdansk - occasional, Wroclaw and Warsaw - permanently); ambulances dedicated to people in the homeless crisis patrolling non-residential places (Warsaw, Bialystok); and paramedics in various types of mobile forms of assistance (e.g. Mobile Counseling Point, SOS Bus, Winter Police Car - Gdansk, Wroclaw, Warsaw, Bialystok) – seasonally in winter.

In **Hungary**, the Budapest Methodological Centre of Social Policy and its Institutions (BMSZKI) works in 19 premises in Budapest. Health services are provided through the coordination of one hospital for people experiencing homelessness, 2 General Practitioners, staff for rough sleepers, 24 hours open Health Centres for homeless people, including convalescent rooms, Psychiatric, Dermatology and Trauma-conscious gynaecological service (Winner of the Sozial Marie Prize for Social Innovation 2023).

Proximity social services in Modena, **Italy** works with an outreach unit for people experiencing homelessness who use drugs. The service was born in 2008 and it is called "the camper". The services offered are



Meeting with FEANTSA members and partners

mostly sanitary, low threshold, and based on harm reduction. They are in the street 7 days a week with a multidisciplinary team made up of an educator and psychologist, nurses, doctors and cultural and linguistic mediators. The focus is on supporting people using drugs through syringe exchange, providing medication (including painkillers and antibiotics), and screening tests for HCV, HBV and HIV. Migration flows changes many things in Modena, which is a crossroads for migration and drug trafficking. People without documents may request temporary health insurance, which is necessary to book exams in hospitals, and valid for rehab centre entry.

Discussion on ‘The role of the homelessness sector in facilitating access to health for people experiencing homelessness’

The presentations were followed by an open discussion where participants could analyse and share their perspectives on the role of homelessness organisations in facilitating access to healthcare for people experiencing homelessness. The discussion also approached themes of involvement of people with lived experience in health settings, how to develop collaboration with the authorities/mainstream health services, and formulated recommendations of topics for FEANTSA to address in the future. This exchange will represent the starting point for a FEANTSA position on the intersection of the homelessness sector with health. Here we summarise the main conclusions:

- The involvement of homelessness organisations in providing health services is often done as a response to society’s failure to include the most marginalised people and respect their basic right to health (and housing). It is an unwanted role that homelessness organisations are taking on to fill the gaps in provision for groups excluded from mainstream services. On the positive side, the sector has developed good practices in how to implement co-developed, accessible, participatory, holistic, and integrated approaches that support people in vulnerable situations, and which can be showcased and scaled up by authorities.
- Organisations identify the clear risk of creating a parallel health system, which provides high-quality care more cheaply, as the scope of homelessness services increases in connection to health care. This needs to be addressed by ensuring that the focus remains on sharing our expertise; on lowering barriers to access for people and supporting them to connect to and navigate the wider health system; on educating and challenging the mainstream services to become more inclusive and accessible; and creating a bridge between the social and the mainstream services.
- The sector has a role in informing and educating the public and mainstream services on homelessness in general, as well as on: existing entitlements; the complexity of issues that need to be considered when providing health care for people experiencing homelessness; harm reduction approaches; providing evidence of cost effectiveness (social economics); and moving from the charity perspective to a rights-based approach.
- To enhance collaboration between the homelessness sector and the mainstream health services communication and networking must be improved. There is a need for education in both directions, for example: making doctors in offices aware of the complexity of problems faced by someone who experiences homelessness and ensure training opportunities for workers in the homelessness sector – this will allow for effective communication between the different sectors. Another way to achieve this exchange is by bringing mainstream services into the homelessness sector. Training and sharing good practices are also necessary; this should already be done for medical students as part of their education, in order to better equip health systems to interact with

people in vulnerable situations, and always with involvement of peer workers. The homelessness organisations should focus on promoting good practices and the multidisciplinary work done.

- Policy work must be conducted jointly by the homelessness and health sectors to bring homelessness into health policies and for closing existing gaps (e.g., providing step-down care, ensuring intermediate care for uninsured people, or developing projects that support bridge-building between the two sectors with proper financing and resources).
- Advocacy is also needed from homelessness organisations on the right to health care - following up on existing entitlements in the legislation, raising awareness when this is not respected accordingly.
- Involvement of people with lived experience should be done by genuinely consulting people on what they need and want, and not assume this is already known. Funding services should be made dependent on involving people with lived experience. To obtain genuine involvement and not a tokenistic one, we need to stop asking people to tell their stories and recognise the full range of their expertise - they should not need to explain and justify their presence in a room. Instead, train and employ more peers, using a comprehensive curriculum developed with service beneficiaries and other experts from health and homelessness sector.

For more information on the FEANTSA members described in this report, please consult the individual Power Point presentations uploaded on our website.

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FEANTSA members and partners present in Vienna

“We were pleased to be able to share our expertise and experience at the intersection of health and homelessness during the FEANTSA visit. At the same time, it was also an opportunity for us to learn from the experiences of others and to think together about how we can make health care in Austria and in Europe even more accessible to people experiencing homelessness in the future.”

- Elisabeth Hammer, neunerhaus managing director.

For more information a blogpost (in German) is available here:

<https://www.neunerhaus.at/blog/feantsa/>