



Access to shelter in France

By **Hélène Chapelet** and **Carole Lardoux** (Project Officers at *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* (Action for Solidarity Federation))

Support and accommodation services for homeless people are generally delivered by NGOs which are funded by the state. In a context of ever-increasing numbers of homeless people and people experiencing housing deprivation, the current system – marked by an insufficient supply of temporary accommodation, which is accessed via an emergency number that is overwhelmed by the volume of calls – struggles to provide appropriate, long-term responses, adapted to these people's needs.

THE 115 HELPLINE: THE WAY TO ACCESS EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

In France, access to accommodation is through an emergency number for homeless people: 115. In use since 1997, this emergency number is one of the main pillars of service provision to homeless people, and is managed by geographical area, the French *départements*.¹ It is free to call 115 and calls are answered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Its aim is to provide information about and signposting to available services over the phone to people who ask for help through it (single people or families, young homeless people, women fleeing domestic violence, etc...) but also general information to individuals or information for social workers about:

- Emergency accommodation and day centres available in the area;
- Facilities providing access to health care, showers, free food, etc.

The legal principle of unconditional access to shelter for “any person who is homeless and in a medical, mental health or social emergency” is one of the mainstays of the homelessness sector in France.

With a phonecall to 115, people can be signposted to hostels ('emergency accommodation centres' or 'CHU'), night stops,² low-cost hotels paid for by the 115 service, temporary accommodation ('centres for accommodation and social reintegration', 'CHRS'), even supported accommodation units, as well as facilities that are only open in winter (hostels, gymnasia, etc.).

Spaces are managed according to what is available on the day:

- Someone who has not managed to get through to 115 – because of a lack of call handlers – or who has not been found a solution on a particular day must ring back the next day, and the next day until they get a positive response;
- People can be given a space in accommodation for a night, several nights (a set number of nights) or for an unspecified time depending on which services they are signposted to.

So as to make the process of providing solutions fairer and to increase the reach of the 115 service, in 2010 the State set up Integrated accommodation and advice services (SIAO). They coordinate all roofless service provision (the 115 helpline, outreach teams, day centres), accommodation (CHU and CHRS) and housing with support (family hostels, move-on housing, temporary accommodation with support). The aim is to centralise provision and requests for accommodation and housing by geographical area, *still* at *département* level, through an emergency component (the 115 helpline) and a social integration component. Everyone who asks for help from the SIAO is given an assessment of their social circumstances, carried out by a social worker. This is now the only entrance point into accommodation. The SIAO has put an end to providing accommodation 'on the door' that previously went on in parallel with the 115 helpline service: homeless people could access shelter by going straight there or after a phonecall from a social worker who contacted the unit directly.

THE 115 MONITOR: A TOOL FOR MEASURING ACCESS TO ACCOMMODATION

For several years now, the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* (Action for Solidarity Federation), which brings together most NGOs and accommodation providers, has regularly produced a “115 Monitor”. This tracks, month by month, the trends in requests for emergency accommodation received by the 115 helpline, the solutions provided on the day and the profiles of the people making those requests. The data, coming from around forty *départements* that

1 For information, there are 101 *départements* in France (Metropolitan and Overseas).

2 Place intended to provide people with shelter but in theory not intended for bedding down.



regularly collect information on 115 helpline activity using software called ProGdis 115/SIAO,³ is compared with that of the previous month and the previous year at the same time. This way, the monitor gives objective indicators of how effective the accommodation services are.⁴

The government has developed its own software to measure the activity of the SIAO, which it has been using since 2010: SI SIAO (information system for the integrated accommodation and advice service). It will be used by all SIAOs by the end of 2018. The challenge for the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* is to carry on independently producing a study of the social situation by analysing the solutions found for homeless people.

UPSURGE IN THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE PHONING THE 115 HELPLINE, WITH A NOTICEABLE INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF FAMILIES

For several years, the monitor has been showing a significant increase in the number of people asking for help from the 115 helpline, especially families. The count carried out on the night of 4th September, the day schools went back after the summer, demonstrated an alarming state of affairs.

That night, more than 50% of the requests for accommodation came from families, amounting to 2,120 different people, compared with 32% from single males, 8% from single females, 5% from couples with no children and 1% from groups with no children and unaccompanied minors. Children included in a request for accommodation made up 29% of the whole population recorded by the 115 helpline. Minors are therefore the most represented age group and 363 children among them were under three years of age. More than half (58%) of these children were not provided with accommodation.

On 4th September 2017, only 36% of the people asking for help from the 115 helpline were accommodated. Of these, 39% were single males, 40% were single females, 25% were couples with no children, 34% were families and 30% were groups without children. 1,404 people in families were therefore left without accommodation.

Each night in Paris, the 115 service accommodates more than 4,500 families, amounting to more than 14,000 people. Even so, not all requests are answered with accommodation. On 4th September 2017, 247 families (743 people, of whom 386 minors) made a new request to the Paris 115 service. Of these families, only 33 (67 people, of whom 34 minors) got a positive response. 214 families (678 people, of whom 352 minors) were therefore left without accommodation because of a lack of available spaces – more than 87%.

Clearly, in France, accommodation stock is grossly inadequate for the number of homeless people, but neither is it adapted to the profiles of people: temporary accommodation for families is few and far between. That's why, in the majority of cases, families are accommodated in hotels. A hotel room cannot be an adequate and long-term solution that guarantees a child's development. Conditions are overcrowded and there is a lack of privacy, there is nowhere to cook meals, nowhere for children to do their homework and nowhere to relax, children can't have friends over, etc. Because of this situation, the system of accommodation for homeless people urgently needs redesigning, giving precedence to direct access to housing, to ensure accommodation and living conditions that are adapted to people's needs and respect their dignity and their privacy, as well as their right to family unity.

Lastly, the stiffening of migration policy and the increase in the number of people fleeing war and persecution have led to worsening conditions of service provision for foreigners in France. Today, half of all asylum seekers do not have access to accommodation centres for asylum seekers, which forces people to seek help from the general accommodation services through the 115 helpline. What's more, people whose status relates to the Dublin regulations and foreigners with no leave to remain, including refused asylum seekers, are doomed to living in extremely deprived conditions, between rough sleeping, makeshift shelters and emergency accommodation, because of limited escape routes. Being granted leave to remain, that allows access to housing and work is, still today, the only sustainable solution for these people and, more widely, the whole of society.

³ This way, *départements* with a lot of activity like Rhône, Isère, Bouches-du-Rhône, Val-d'Oise and more rural *départements* like Aisne, Dordogne, Charente, Guadeloupe, etc are included. This diverse sample reflects the activity of the 115 helplines. Data on the Paris 115 helpline is also presented separately.

⁴ It is important to point out that the 115 helpline activity does not give a complete picture of the phenomenon of homelessness in France, as a significant proportion of homeless people never or no longer try to access emergency accommodation structures, as shown by the latest point-in-time outreach survey carried out at the end of September 2017: 77% of people met on the day of the outreach activity had not used the 115 helpline.



“Clearly, in France, accommodation stock is grossly inadequate for the number of homeless people, but neither is it adapted to the profiles of people: temporary accommodation for families is few and far between.”

STILL ALLOWING THE THERMOMETER TO DICTATE PRACTICE

Every year in France, from the 1st November to the 31st March, the volume of accommodation is expanded by opening temporary spaces – opened when temperatures oblige it – and evictions are suspended.

In spite of a large increase in the number of accommodation spaces this winter, more than half of people who phoned the emergency number on 13th March 2018 was not accommodated,⁵ according to a survey carried out by the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* in five of the most over-stretched areas.⁶ The enhancement of accommodation capacity in winter-time is not enough to meet demand completely. What's more, for the first time, this winter the SIAO were instructed to prioritise accommodation for families, whatever the facilities made available: hotels, temporary accommodation, night stops, gymnasia, etc. Although the situation is clearly worrying, prioritising groups in this way goes against the principle of unconditional access to accommodation which must allow every homeless person access to emergency accommodation. Moreover, these temporary shelter facilities are not adequate, long-term solutions allowing people to integrate into society. This violates the law that says that emergency accommodation must offer “accommodation conditions that respect human dignity”.⁷

On a different note, those people who are accommodated over the winter are confronted with the lack of places from the 1st April, which marks the closing of the winter structures. Living conditions for rough sleepers are difficult all year round, the more so since some services for rough sleepers, like day centres and outreach teams, work reduced hours in summertime.

Between 10th June and 10th July 2017, the monitor actually showed 11% more requests than in January 2017 (when the winter effort was at its highest).⁸ It also showed the worsening in accommodation conditions compared to summer 2016: increase in the number of single-night stays (+44%) and huge increase in the use of accommodation in hotels (+75%). People accommodated for one night had to ring 115 every day in the hope of getting a more stable and long-term accommodation solution. The worsening and inappropriateness of the available accommodation drive a significant number of homeless people to stop trying the 115 helpline.

Consequently, accessing the accommodation system remains a laborious process for all homeless people who seek help from the 115 helpline, in view of the shortage in places and the inappropriate facilities. When competition between population groups is introduced, this system leans towards prioritising and “creaming” among the profiles they accommodate, jeopardising the unconditionality of accommodation provision. Direct access to housing for homeless people is one of the solutions, which is why the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* supports the five-year *Housing First* plan announced by the government last September. Still, the success of this type of policy presupposes the preservation of the temporary accommodation units that today are feeling the impact of drastic budget cuts. The reduction in accommodation stock must be the result of a *Housing First* policy that is working, not its starting point.

You can find all the monitoring reports published by the *Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité* on its website: <http://federationsolidarite.org/>

5 In the week beginning 13th March 2018, 15,848 extra accommodation spaces were opened as part of the winter reinforcement; these were added to 133,354 long-term accommodation spaces open all year round [According to the Ministry for regional cohesion website, accessed on 03/04/2018].

6 Survey carried out using 115 data from Paris and four *départements* (Seine Saint Denis, Val d'Oise, Rhône, Bas-Rhin).

7 Article L.345-2-2 of the Code for social care and families

8 Between 10th June and 10th July 2017, more than 92,500 calls were made to 115 in the 41 *départements* in the monitor. Of these, 84,468 requests for accommodation were made by 20,845 different people.