

The Amsterdam story: better access to shelter, better access to housing

The latest issue of FEANTSA magazine featured an article on the services to the homeless in the Netherlands' capital. Last year's findings of the Amsterdam Audit Office formed a large part of the foundation of this story. The audit results were both informative and urgent, not to say critical at the same time. On the issue of the access to homelessness services, the City of Amsterdam have already taken action, and did so last winter. By the time the Feantsa article was published the situation had much improved, judging by the experience of the clients and social workers of HVO-Querido, Amsterdam's largest organization working with the homeless. Besides that, the picture as represented in the article was far from complete. **What's the story as regards access to housing? Time for the wider perspective.**

The authors of *Access to homelessness services and housing in Amsterdam* describe the situation in Amsterdam as inadequate and disappointing. More narrowly, they focused on the access to shelter for the homeless. Indeed, there is room for improvement. Homelessness is a phenomenon that certainly still exists in Amsterdam. But what does it look like exactly? What is the true story?

First of all, it is very hard to specify the exact number of people that can be qualified as 'homeless'. We know that the number of people sleeping rough is relatively small, a far greater number stays for different periods of time at different locations, and for different reasons. We also know that the claim of the authors that Amsterdam contains 1.635 homeless youngsters is misinformed: the number applies on children that live in youth care and foster care. Their problems are serious, but are not related to the issue of homelessness.

Secondly, in spite of what the title suggests, the article in reality discusses access to homelessness services in Amsterdam, rather than the access to housing. And it is about access to housing where Amsterdam has an interesting story to tell.

As regards to homelessness services, Amsterdam has indeed developed a bureaucratic process – in the positive sense of the word. A reliable and predictable procedure has been drawn up that helps assign expensive and scarce resources to Amsterdam residents who are vulnerable. For this purpose, mental health professionals conduct intakes with homeless people. In cases of complex problems they organize a second screening, in order to determine the most suitable solutions taking into account the several fields in which people may struggle.

The audit office analysis focuses on opening hours, on information that is given to clients, on the fact that they are confronted with different officials and the tardiness of the application process. This important negative feedback has been taken very seriously and is momentarily being addressed by the city government. But to qualify the situation in Amsterdam as inadequate and disappointing is a gross exaggeration, certainly in a European context where conditions on the whole are far worse.

Housing

The biggest omission in *Access to homelessness services and housing in Amsterdam* is the access to housing in Amsterdam. The 1,553 homeless adults that the Audit Office refers to, for the greater part have independent housing, according to the principles of Housing First. Ever since 2015, Housing First has been the standing city-wide policy for solving homelessness in Amsterdam. At this moment, more than 80 percent of the people who have applied for homelessness services have received independent homes. The number of houses that have been offered to clients has

increased from 385 in 2016 to 885 in 2017. A truly great achievement in a city with a very tight housing market for people of every social class and budget. Amsterdam has adopted a policy that deals with this scarcity: 30 per cent of all social housing is reserved for people who belong to our target groups.

The challenge to offer Housing First to no less than 60 percent of homeless people and people with psychiatric problems is well on its way. In fact, this year we expect the 1000th Housing First home will be granted to our organization.

And there is more than just numbers: between the City of Amsterdam, housing corporations, and care organizations a set of working guidelines has been developed. Among other things these entail agreements on how we work together and keep an open eye, should things not work out as we had expected on a client to client basis. Thanks to these guidelines we are within easy reach of each other, and swift action is available when required. Other efforts are geared towards gaining public acceptance of people who belong to our target groups.

Therefore, the Amsterdam story is one of addressing homelessness problems where they arise, of close collaboration between partners, of increasingly efficient access to shelter, and of effective access to housing.

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