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Services for Homeless Mobile EU Citizens

By **Mauro Striano**, *FEANTSA Policy Officer*

I am one of those who have left the country in which they were born to move and settle in another European Member State. I had the luck to find the opportunities I was looking for, I studied, have been working for many years, obtained permanent residence, I have a new family here. Had I not adopted the nationality of my new country, I would be called a “mobile EU citizen”, according to European jargon. That term would not describe my situation: I am not mobile, I have spent one third of my life here. And sure, I have forgotten that I am technically an immigrant. Things could have gone differently had I not had some financial support from my family during the first months I arrived as a job-seeker, had I not had some friends who helped me find my first low-paid jobs, had I not had the right to get student jobs while I finished my masters, had I started my professional career a few months later when the effects of the financial crisis kicked in and finding a job became harder. And even on my smooth personal journey, I met landlords who rented without rental contracts and did not want me to register at the address where I was living, and I met employers who did not want to give me a job because I was not registered. Funnily enough, once, the owner of a movie rental shop did not accept me as a customer because I was not registered at the municipality.

Thousands of EU citizens have moved to another Member State and have become homeless there. The number has increased over the last ten years. The reasons are many, but just to give an idea of the kind of profiles, here is a short list: people working with low salaries and struggling to find affordable housing; people who have lost their job and have not contributed enough to have access to the social assistance system; people who have lived in the ‘country of destination’ for ten, fifteen and even more years, who used to work without a work contract and have become too old to work or have had an accident; people who have been living in the street for too long and are affected by mental illness or substance abuse disorder; sex workers

whose accommodation depends on their employer and even when they could potentially register as self-employed they are forced not to do that. Provision of services is therefore particularly complicated because there are many different profiles and vulnerability factors.

Over the last few years, several specific programmes for destitute mobile EU citizens have been developed. It is important to stress that most of these programmes were set-up because there was a clear demand for low threshold homeless service providers. It is therefore homeless organisations that took the initiative, rather than public authorities. Services such as Europa Brücke in Münster – presented in this issue by Stefanie Beckmann – and Kompasset in Copenhagen – presented by Maj Kastanje – aim at guiding destitute mobile EU citizens through administrative procedures, help them find a job and to obtain health insurance. Other types of support provided includes registering a postal address, obtaining a tax number, opening a bank account, enrolling children in school, appealing a decision taken by the administration and so on. The same kind of advice programmes are currently implemented by other homeless service providers. The Stockholm City Mission was one of the first homeless providers that developed such advice and counselling services, namely *Crossroads*, which was later implemented in other Swedish cities such as in Gothenburg and in Malmö by the respective City Missions. In the same line of thought, GEBEWO and Caritas Ambulanz in Berlin set-up *Frostschutzensengel*, which provides mobile support in health clinics and day centres.

Several years of FEANTSA working on homelessness among mobile EU citizens, and particularly the project we are currently carrying out – PRODEC, Protecting the Rights of Destitute mobile EU Citizens – have identified the weak, or missing, link between professionals working with homeless people and legal expertise as one of the main challenges. On one hand, homeless service providers

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We would like to give you the chance to comment on any of the articles which have appeared in this issue. If you would like to share your ideas, thoughts and feedback, please send an email to the editor, emma.nolan@feantsa.org



do not often have the legal expertise to adequately respond to their beneficiaries' needs, and on the other hand, legal experts may lack specific knowledge related to destitute mobile EU citizens' issues. It is therefore paramount to try and connect these two separate worlds. With this aim, the Public Interest Law Unit (PILU) launched a phone advice and referral line, advertised through frontline organisations working in the homelessness and migration sectors across London. As Jean Demars explains in his article, PILU also delivers monthly legal clinics through 8 partners where large numbers of homeless EU nationals search for housing, welfare benefits and access to employment support. As is the case for other services working with mobile EU citizens, their advice and counselling work is coupled with street outreach. PILU does that along with the Roma Support Group (RSG) as many Roma people have been affected by Immigration Enforcement operations over the years.

Besides precarious working conditions, labour exploitation, administrative obstacles and the lack of housing solutions, access to primary healthcare is a major challenge for destitute mobile EU citizens who do not have health insurance in the country where they now reside. Particularly with regard to the treatment of chronic illnesses, for which regular and continuous administration of medication is necessary, mobile EU citizens who are not insured face a great problem. To prevent these chronic illnesses escalating and requiring emergency treatment, access to primary care is necessary. In Vienna, *neunerhaus* runs a health clinic which is accessible by all patients, insured or not, and destitute mobile EU citizens are this way able to get the treatment they need. The video interpretation service that the service uses during the doctors' consultations in order to communicate with patients who do not speak German is very useful.

In a perfect world, all individuals should be able to access the services they need in the city where they live. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Access to social benefits and to services is conditional on having the right to reside. Residence rights for mobile EU

citizens can be a very difficult matter. EU law clearly covers certain categories of mobile EU citizens while for others it is unclear. On top of that, the interpretation made by national authorities and, therefore, the implementation of EU law at national level can be particularly problematic. In recent years, there has been a clear tendency to restrict residence rights for mobile EU citizens. In light of this, can voluntary returns – also called 'reconnections' – be considered one of the solutions? I personally think that there are many conditions to be met, among which: there must be individual will so that the option is not imposed, or induced; there must be an adequate phase of preparation; the service that reconnects must make sure that the individual 'lands' properly, i.e. in certain reconnection programmes, the social workers go with the person who decides to go back and stay a few days with her or him; a follow-up mechanism must be put in place so as to adequately monitor voluntary returns in a European framework. The question is also whether a few dozen people reconnected every year is an effective answer to homelessness among mobile EU citizens. These questions and others are discussed in an interview with *Barka*, a Polish NGO that runs reconnection programmes in several EU cities, including Brussels and Antwerp.

Public authorities, especially cities, are frantically looking for solutions. Collaboration between public authorities and homeless service providers needs to be improved, also to avoid situations in which NGO resources are conditional to activities that can jeopardise mobile EU citizens' residence rights. Over the last few years, political choices are putting a lot of pressure on homeless service providers, especially when it comes to providing support to irregularly-residing migrants, including EU citizens. As FEANTSA we defend the access to services for all, regardless of the individual's administrative status, and we are aware of the challenges that our members have been facing and the difficult decisions they have to take.

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