

Mirosław Starzyński and Julia Wygnańska (Eds.) (2007)

Second Opportunity – Wola Social Reintegration Programme.

Warsaw : published by the Office of the Wola District of the Capital City of Warsaw, Department of Social Affairs and Health.

It is a truism to say that the phenomenon of homelessness deserves to be recognised as an interdisciplinary problem. Proof of this can be judged by the multitude of definitions and typologies of homelessness that are frequently very detailed on the one hand, and formulated by a wide range of people representing various academic disciplines on the other hand. If we assume that behind the problem of homelessness lurk individual, personal tragedies caused by changes in the way of living and being, alcohol and drug addiction, mental and physical diseases, it can be seen that homelessness is both a social and an individual problem that should be tackled by medical and economic sciences. In other words, we can say that homelessness has various aspects that manifest themselves in various ways. If we want to effectively deal with such a diverse phenomenon, we should first of all reach for increasingly new methods of social work with excluded people, and second, place a strong emphasis on projects and programmes that can be described as ‘good practices’ in helping homeless people join the world of work and reintegrate into society.

Such a ‘good practice’ is undoubtedly exemplified by the ‘*Second Opportunity – Wola Social Reintegration Programme*’, carried out in the years 2004-2006 by the Office of the Wola District of the Capital City of Warsaw and the ‘Open Door’ Association. Without going into the substantive details of the project, one can generally say that it chiefly aimed to reintegrate homeless persons from Warsaw hostels and night shelters back into society by helping them gain occupational skills and take up stable employment, by making 10 social dwellings available to the participants in the programme who worked together refurbishing the flats, and by developing effective methods for a programme supporting the process of ending homelessness.

Pondering on whether the '*Second Opportunity*' programme was a success or not one should first find answers to two fundamental questions: what are the merits and faults of the project and what benefits does it yield? Speaking of undoubted merits one should point out that the entire project was preceded by a comprehensive diagnosis of the milieu of homeless people living in Wola hostels. Another obvious merit is the fact that the project was monitored and periodically assessed throughout the period of its implementation (monthly meetings in the flats of project participants; maintenance of a record of mutual commitments; an opportunity for the participants to seek continuous assistance from the Wola District authority, the "Open Door Association", the Wola District Social Welfare Centre and a social worker from the Caritas organisation; and regular semi-annual questionnaire surveys conducted among the participants, cyclical information – two to three times a year – about the participants submitted to the Wola Social Reintegration Team. The project was also valuable in economic terms as it established close cooperation with over 20 local companies that supported the implementation of the programme attracting considerable in-kind contributions from sponsors (e.g. providing building materials, furnishing elements for the flats, etc.)

Apart from the obvious merits described above one can also point to negative aspects of the '*Second Opportunity*'. The first fault I would like to draw attention to is that the period assigned for recruitment of project beneficiaries was too short. This turned out to be an critical factor because project participants were experiencing alcohol problems, which directly affected the quality and reliability of their work. It also seems to me that another drawback one could point to is the fact that the refurbishment of the flats and the training courses for the participants were taking place concurrently. Perhaps creating a more distinct divide between the components of work and education would have been a better way to put the project into practice. Analysing the target programme of the project it is also worth noting that the participants were only offered 'hard' training aimed to gain painting, refurbishment or related skills (confirmed by a final exam and a certificate). One can venture the opinion that the programme fell short on 'soft' training that emphasised the development of interpersonal skills (self-presentation, communication, conflict resolution, time management, etc.). Another shortcoming, directly related to the programme (although time-wise it has become evident only now, after the completion of the initiative) is that the programme is not being continued and expanded by new flats being made available to the homeless.

Overall one can say that benefits ensuing from the programme fall into three basic categories: (i) *individual benefits* for the homeless (labour inclusion achieved through a training cycle and gaining employment, possibilities for individual therapies, housing opportunities, etc.), (ii) *benefits for social policy* (helping the homeless get back on their feet, testing and implementation of innovative solutions in the process of ending homelessness, establishment of intersectoral cooperation aimed at combating homelessness), and (iii) *benefits for society* (raising awareness of homelessness issues, challenging negative stereotypes of homeless people).

Maciej Dębski, M.A

Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Journalism
Department of Social Sciences, Gdańsk University

Inquires concerning this project should be addressed to:

Julia Wygnanska, julkiw@yahoo.com, julia.wygnanska@bezdombosc.edu.pl

or

Mirosław Starzyński, Director,
Department of Social Affairs and Health,
Office of the Wola District of the Capital City of Warsaw
spoleczny@wola.waw.pl,
Skwer Kard. Wyszyńskiego 3, Warsaw