
Housing First Europe: A “social experimentation project”

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Background

Homelessness exists across the EU, even in developed welfare states. The need for innovation in the homeless sector is therefore crucial, especially with the increasing awareness that shelter systems and other forms of temporary accommodation are not providing sustainable solutions to homelessness. Housing First approaches are thought to be effective in tackling long-term/chronic homelessness, which is why they have received broad interest in Europe. Housing First was originally developed in the United States and has been primarily used to tackle chronic homelessness, especially for people with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse. Housing First, pioneered by the organization Pathways to Housing in New York, has demonstrated high degrees of success in both housing and supporting those who are homeless with multiple and complex needs. In contrast to ‘staircase’ approaches, which predominate in many European countries, and which require homeless persons to show evidence of being ‘housing ready’ before they are offered long-term stable accommodation, Housing First projects place homeless people directly into long-term self-contained housing with no requirement that they progress through transitional programmes. But Housing First does not mean “housing only”: Substantial and multidisciplinary social support is provided to the re-housed homeless people assertively, though it is not a condition for them to participate in and comply with therapies or show sobriety and they cannot lose their tenancy for failing to do so.

Objectives

In Europe, the Housing First approach to homelessness is currently being tested in a number of cities and some evaluations are going on at the local level already. A number of articles and small studies have been published recently assessing the potential (and the limits) of the Housing First approach in different European welfare contexts. While different intervention methods to re-house homeless persons with complex problems have been tested and evaluated in the US, this has never been done systematically in any European country. An application to the 2010 Social Experimentation Call in the framework of the PROGRESS programme of the European Commission (DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) for an evaluation and mutual exchange project called *Housing First Europe* was recently selected for funding. *Housing First Europe* started 1st August 2011 and is planned to last for 24 months. It will test and evaluate Housing First projects in five European cities, leading to greater clarity on the potential and the limits of the approach, as well as the essential elements of Housing First projects. It will also facilitate mutual learning with additional partners in five “peer sites” cities where further Housing First projects are planned or being implemented and with a steering group including FEANTSA and HABITACT as European stakeholders, experienced researchers, representatives of national homelessness programmes and Sam Tsemberis, the founder of *Pathways to Housing* in New York.

Methodology

The main contractor of *Housing First Europe* is the Danish National Board of Social Services (with Birthe Povlsen as the main responsible person) and coordinator of the evaluation and exchange strands is Volker Busch-Geertsema, Senior Research Fellow, GISS (Association for Innovative Social Research and Social Planning) in Bremen, Germany, and coordinator of the European Observatory on Homelessness. The partnership involves a wide range of stakeholders including NGOs, service providers, local authorities, universities and public authorities. The five Housing First projects (or “test sites”) to be evaluated are in the following cities: Amsterdam, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow and Lisbon. The five “peer sites” taking part in three of the five project meetings are in Dublin, Gent, Gothenburg, Helsinki and Vienna. The last meeting will be the final conference, which will take place in June 2013, in Amsterdam and will be open to the public. For comparability purposes, *Housing First Europe* focuses on test sites which have a strict definition of Housing First according to the original US model, namely projects:

- With self-contained living units (e.g. not hostel accommodation);
- Where tenants have some form of secure tenure;
- Targeting people with mental illness/drug/alcohol problems or other complex support needs (i.e. who could not access housing without support);
- Providing pro-active support (but housing is not conditional on acceptance of this actively offered support);
- Where access is not conditional on stays in other types of transitional accommodation or any other type of “preparation”.

Housing First Europe will be implemented through two principle strands:

1. A Research and Evaluation strand which will assess the Housing First projects and draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the approach: Key research questions will allow for detailed information about the organization of the local Housing First projects, access criteria, profile of actual clients, flow of clients through the projects and information about length of stay and numbers and reasons for drop-outs, support provision and support needs, costs involved, effects in quality of life etc.
2. A Mutual Learning strand, which will bring together different stakeholders to discuss the results of the assessments, and will generally facilitate exchanges on different Housing First projects across the EU and beyond (USA, Canada). Meetings (of the steering group and project partners) will be used to discuss commonalities and differences between the projects and common challenges, which will contribute to develop mutual understanding on Housing First concepts.

Differences in existing Housing First approaches will be discussed and analysed: for example the role of choice, the type of housing provided (scattered site versus congregated housing), the type, duration and intensity of support provided. The difficulties and successful approaches of support agencies to get access to regular housing, to manage financial risks for service providers etc. will be documented. It is planned to develop recommendations for dealing with typical challenges of the approach (like relapses of service users into street life, neighbourhood complaints, non-payment of rents, unmet support needs and rejection of support, social isolation, worklessness, substance abuse etc.) and for possible use of the approach on a wider scale.

By the end of 2011 main details of the test sites and further information about the project will be available at www.housingfirsteurope.eu.