

WORDS FROM EXPERIENCE

THE SENSE OF GENUINE EQUALITY IS A KEY ROLE OF FULL PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISATIONS WHICH OFFER HOMELESS SERVICES

I worked as a member of FEANTSA's Participation working group between the years 2007-2017. The group created participation tool-kits, arranged seminars and trained people all over Europe in participation. But the most important choice of the project was that half of the people in the group had lived experience of homelessness and half had a professional status.

In organisations there are different levels of participation; from been asked your opinion to full participation and shared power. Of course, some people have more structural power, but we all have the power of interaction. In our Housing unit "The house of Fellows" (The first

Housing first Unit in Finland) I asked a resident at the beginning: "What actions would you like to participate in?" He stared at me for a long time, eventually replying "Now I would like to participate in my own life, nothing else."

In my own organisation, which was founded by the homeless themselves, we have used participation since day one. Participation penetrates the whole organisation from the ground level to the top. One fourth of our paid staff has experienced homelessness and we have a team of experts who train and mentor professionals and experts by experience nationally in Finland. Our first executive manager has experience of homelessness. My boss has experience of homelessness. First, he contacted our organisation by sending notes under the door. Gradually he came into our services and one day he was offered a paid job and after he retired, he was asked to be the chair of the organisation.

We once received a large donation from the city photo exhibition and some people were a little suspicious that the money would simply go to some overall expenses. We told the donor to tell people that we used the money to hire two people who had experience of homelessness to work with us.

EDITORIAL



By **Sanna Tiivola**, Executive Manager, Vva ry/No Fixed Abode, Finland

We participated in a competition to create a housing first unit together with Y-foundation in the first period of the Finnish national program to end homelessness. The city of Helsinki offered to the winner the building and land where the unit could be established. Our group consisted of a person experiencing homelessness, residents of a housing first unit, staff of both organisations, an architect and a constructor. A member of a group and a resident in our housing unit asked me if he could do a work practice period at the same time - I can still remember the worker from employment services phoning me to say “How come this person’s title is the project manager?”

There are many stories like this, but the main offer to people who come to our organisation and services is the opportunity to feel genuinely equal, otherwise people don’t feel that the power and resources are shared. Full participation means access to the same possibilities that everyone else has.

