

GRASSROOT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR PREVENTING LGBTIQ+ (YOUTH) HOMELESSNESS

While there is great need for structural changes to tackle the LGBTQIA+ homelessness, Vesna Štefanec and Jan Forjan point towards the benefits of bottom-up approaches. The grassroots approach of Društvo Parada Ponosa operates through the power of community lead action. This article focuses on the ideas motivating this approach and a detailed exploration of its implementation, outlining what challenges were faced and how these were handled, and how to improve grassroots approaches in the future.



By **Vesna Štefanec**, Program Coordinator, Društvo Parada Ponosa, Slovenia and **Jan Forjan**, Student Library Assistant, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

THE NEED FOR ADDRESSING LGBTQIA+ HOMELESSNESS

LGBTQIA+ youth are at a disproportional risk of experiencing homelessness (Morton, Dworsky & Samuels, 2017), with approximately 17% of LGBTQIA+ people surveyed across Europe experiencing housing difficulties (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

Sadly, there is a lack of specialised services for LGBTQIA+ youth within organisations tackling youth homelessness in Europe, with only eight organisations reported providing such services (Shelton et al., 2020). It is also worth noting, following the report about LGBTQIA+-specific organisations across Europe (Shelton et al., 2021), that 75% of respondents report having worked with LGBTQIA+ youth experiencing homelessness. What is worrisome here is that almost two-thirds of respondents from this survey also reported a lack of organisational confidence in knowing how to support LGBTQIA+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Comparative analysis from European homeless service organisations and LGBTQIA+ focused organisations (Ritosa et al., 2021) shows that, on the one hand, non-LGBTQIA+ specific homeless service organisations face challenges such as a lack of knowledge for working with LGBTQIA+ youth and the fear of LGBTQIA+ youth potentially experiencing violence or abuse in the service if their sexual orientation or gender identity is made visible. While on the other hand, LGBTQIA+ specific organisations are reporting challenges concerning the lack of research about LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness, lack of funding to tackle the issue, a lack of infrastructure, and political and governmental support (ibid.).

These findings show us is that there is a growing and urgent need to address questions about LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness in order to provide safety and basic human rights to all people. At the same time, these reports should give us a push to create new innovative services that respond to LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness faster and more efficiently.

GRASSROOTS APPROACH TO TACKLING LGBT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS?

One possible road forward could be grassroots organising and providing services that utilise the capacities of the local communities, and the co-creation of new bottom-up communities of support for LGBTQIA+ youth.

Staples defines grassroots community organising as a “collective action by community members drawing on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change” (2004, p. 1-2). Following this definition, grassroots organising encourages us to see community members as capable of making their own decisions about social change; acknowledge that they have the right, necessity, and capacity to define their own goals and objectives; and speak and act on their own behalf. As Staples (2004) argues, people joining together under a common cause have the ability to move beyond institutional decision-making and towards a collective social change.

Our own work, following a bottom-up grassroots approach, started with making the problem of LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness visible. Firstly, our non-profit organisation Društvo Parada Ponosa conducted the first national survey in Slovenia on the prevalence of LGBTQIA+ youth home exclusion and homelessness (considering ETHOS typology) (Štefanec & Morić, 2021), through which we gathered data on which to build upon. As it turned out, nearly half of the young LGBTQIA+ people (42%, n=250) who responded did not have a home that provided physical and emotional safety. The number is possibly even higher, with our data suggesting that 78% of young people who experience housing exclusion do not recognise it as such.

Also presented in the report of the mentioned survey (Štefanec & Morić, 2021) were findings from the peer support groups focusing explicitly on the experiences of housing issues and living conditions (conducted from 2020 and 2021 as part of the Društvo Ljubljana Pride's SQVOT program for reducing the consequences of minority stress and focusing directly on LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness). Young LGBTQIA+ people have identified several problems and proposed some recommendations, such as the need for LGBTQIA+ safe houses, more affordable housing and social housing in general, recognition of LGBTQIA+ identity as a factor in attaining more points to be eligible for such housing and providing advocacy and support to young LGBTQIA+ people when communicating with landlords. Fifty-three percent of the previously mentioned survey's respondents (n=59) are forced to hide their LGBTQIA+ identity, fearing for their safety. Despite the numerous calls from different LGBTQIA+ specific Slovenian NGOs for the establishment of safe houses to provide the necessary crisis shelters and accommodations in the event of, for example, their primary caregivers disowning them, this is yet to be implemented.

Here we saw an opportunity for a community-based grassroots approach of providing (at least) the bare minimum of safe living – crisis accommodation for LGBTQIA+ youth at risk of homelessness, provided by the people in the local community.

It should be acknowledged that these crisis accommodations provide a flexible, responsive, and immediate answer to LGBTQIA+ youth facing homelessness, by providing a safe space after the crisis occurs.”

Pride's SQVOT program started tackling the issue by sending out a call through social media, inviting people in the local community to get together and collaboratively develop a mechanism for short-term crisis accommodation, and building a network of people capable of providing short-term housing for youth. Fifteen people from various backgrounds responded to our call, including: adult LGBTQIA+ persons with lived experiences, straight allies, and even parents of LGBTQIA+ children.

Next, we organised an introductory meeting where we presented our vision and discussed the roles of people from the community willing to collaborate. After our initial meeting, seven people decided to continue developing this work by becoming hosts and providing short-term accommodation. With the aim of making this process collaborative and participatory, we planned 4 focus groups for potential hosts where this mechanism would be instrumentalised, considering their wants, wishes, and capabilities.

In the following months, we conducted focus groups where potential hosts mapped out their common expectations, fears, and understandings concerning the housing issue for young LGBTQIA+ persons at risk of homelessness. Through four focus groups, we also tried to define what are the responsibilities of hosts and the young people staying with them. The result was a hosting protocol that we all agreed upon.

The program coordinator at Ljubljana Pride then conducted training for hosts where various important themes were addressed, ranging from a basic of understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community (while emphasising specific struggles of LGBTQIA+ homeless youth), to addressing self-care for hosts to prevent them from burning out. We

also focused on empowering hosts to react appropriately and reflecting on potential crisis situations to avoid the risk of LGBTQIA+ youth being subjected to even more harmful situations. Intensive work was done in the group but also individually with hosts to ensure all needed support from the organisation was given.

A crisis accommodation mechanism was then set in place. This new-found network of people from the local community offers the users of the SQVOT program (young LGBTQIA+ people facing homelessness), to live with the hosts for 14 days. When a young LGBTQIA+ person with a risk of homelessness reaches out to the program, the coordinator conducts an introductory meeting with the user that also involves a risk assessment. Based on the meeting, the coordinator then acts as a sort of 'matchmaker', identifying the host(s) that would, according to the specifics of the young LGBTQIA+ person in need, be the most beneficial. After that, a second meeting is conducted where all three actors involved get to know each other. A 24-hour period is then given to both, the LGBTQIA+ person and the host to make a finalised decision about the stay. If all agree, the person then stays with the host free of charge for a period of two weeks, with the informal agreement of the possibility of extension if required, with hosts providing them with food, shelter, and emotional support when needed.

The process remains collaborative throughout the whole stay, with the coordinator collaborating individually with the LGBTQIA+ person and the host. Meetings between hosts are held regularly, where they can get to know each other and exchange experiences and insights. Four times a year additional training is provided for hosts, with each addressing a different topic, some of them stemming from hosts' own unique knowledge and experience and focusing on themes important, primarily, to them.

CONCLUSION

There remain a few limitations, that changing would improve the grassroots mechanism for LGBTQIA+ young people at risk of homelessness at hand. This includes increasing the pool of trained and informed hosts, and extending the longest stay period for young people, allowing them to truly get back on their feet and find stable long-term housing solutions. The latter should also be addressed at a systemic level, by providing stable and safe housing for all LGBTQIA+ young people at risk. The grassroots community-based housing can provide a short-term answer and can be seen as a transitional model of housing for other, more systemic responses to the housing vulnerability of the LGBTIQ+ youth. It should be acknowledged that these crisis accommodations provide a flexible, responsive, and immediate answer to LGBTQIA+ youth facing homelessness, by providing a safe space after the crisis occurs with a primary focus on training the people providing these accommodations for these specific issues, thereby not deepening the initial trauma already experienced.

SOURCES

- European Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2020). LGBTI Survey Data Explorer. Retrieved 15. 3. 2023 from <https://fra.europa.eu/en/data-and-maps/2020/lgbti-survey-data-explorer>
- Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved 15. 3. 2023 from https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_NationalReport_Final.pdf
- Ritosa, A., Shelton, J., Stakelum, R., Van Roozendaal, B., Hugendubel, K. & Dodd, S.J. (2021). Perceptions: Comparative findings from a study of homeless service providers and LGBTIQ-focused organisations about LGBTIQ youth homelessness in Europe. FEANTSA, ILGA-Europe, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at Hunter College. Retrieved 15. 3. 2023 from https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Activities/events/2021/Perceptions_-_Comparative_Analysis_Compressed.pdf
- Shelton, J., Ritosa, A., Van Roozendaal, B., Hugendubel, K. & Dodd, S.J. (2021). Perceptions: Addressing LGBTIQ Youth Homelessness in Europe and Central Asia - Findings from a Survey of LGBTIQ Organisations. ILGA-Europe, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at Hunter College. Retrieved 15. 3. 2023 from https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Activities/events/2021/Perceptions_-_ILGA_Europe_Compressed.pdf
- Shelton, J., Stakelum, R., & Dodd, S.J. (2020). LGBTIQ Youth Homelessness in Europe: Findings from a Survey of FEANTSA Membership Organisations. FEANTSA, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at Hunter College. Retrieved 15. 3. 2023 from https://truecolorsunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Youth-Homelessness-in-European-Context_v5.pdf
- Staples, L. (2004). Roots to power: A manual for grassroots organizing (2nd ed). Praeger.
- Štefanec, V., & Morić M. (2021). Ljubo doma? Bivanjske razmere LGBTIQ+ oseb v Sloveniji: Raziskovalno poročilo. Ljubljana: Društvo Parada ponosa.