

Seminar 14: The Policy Context of Housing First (Room: 02.13)

Chair: **Volker Busch-Geertsema, DE**

Elisabetta Leni, FI: Homelessness Deinstitutionalization Policy in Finland: Housing First and Perspectives from the Ground



Elisabetta Leni is a researcher at the Y-Foundation, Finland. After working several years in the non-profit sector in Italy, she obtained a PhD in Economics at the University of Essex, UK. The current focus of her research is on homelessness and social housing.

Deinstitutionalisation (DI) describes the replacement of institutional care with community-based services. DI has become a central policy objective for the EU, but homeless people have rarely been considered among its target groups. However, people living in shelters, hostels, and temporary accommodations are often exposed to an institutional culture characterised by a lack of rights, rigid routines, strict rules, and few opportunities to participate in society. Despite being intended for short stays, shelters, hostels, and temporary accommodations often become places where people live for years or even permanently, reproducing the negative consequences of long-term institutional care. A community-based response to homelessness involves a) promoting rapid access to permanent housing; b) introducing housing support with the primary goal of preventing the recurrence of homelessness and promoting social inclusion; and c) strengthening mainstream services, particularly substance abuse, mental health, and elderly care services, to meet the complex needs of people who have experienced homelessness. In Finland, the DI of homelessness has been pursued through national programmes based on the Housing First principle. The first of these programmes was launched in 2008 and supported the conversion of shelters into permanent housing for the homeless, who were provided with housing support to live independently. The year 2008 is considered a turning point, as the homeless service system began the transition from a staircase-based system to one based on Housing First. This research aims to describe the homelessness DI policy that has taken place in Finland since 2008 through a review of historical documents and interviews with service workers. The interviews investigate how the ethical, legal, and socio-economic perspectives that motivated the transition to the “new” system have unfolded and how their meaning has shaped in relation to the housing solutions that characterise the Finnish Housing First system (i.e., scattered housing and supported housing units).

Maarten Davelaar and Dorieke Wewerinke, NL: The Final Breakthrough? Experimenting with Housing First as System Approach in the Netherlands



Maarten Davelaar is a researcher at the Research Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht. His focus includes governance issues in housing, homelessness and community development. He is involved in research on the contribution of (collaborative) housing concepts to social inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups in society.

Dorieke Wewerinke, researcher at the Research Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht. She is an expert on Housing First, co-founder of the national Housing First course for practitioners and policy makers and is currently leading the first Ethos-light point-in-time research in the Netherlands.



Over the last couple of years (2021–2023), the Utrecht agglomeration has experimented with providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness. In this large pilot project 16 municipalities (in highly urbanised as well as rural areas) and numerous homeless organisations, care organisations and social housing associations participated. Through it, more than 200 people have found a self-sustained, independent home, directed directly from street or shelter



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to permanent housing. The Housing First model is already applied in many cities throughout the Netherlands, but until now mostly in projects with a limited scale and target group (mainly aimed at people with a long history of homelessness and facing a multitude of problems). In this new project, however, an attempt was made to apply Housing First to a broader group. It also aimed at preventing inflows into shelters and other forms of temporary or emergency accommodation in a bid to replace the still dominant staircase model. This makes it the first large-scale experiment in the Netherlands to apply Housing First as a foundation for the fight against homelessness: Housing First as a system approach. Utrecht University of Applied Sciences has mapped out the strengths and weaknesses of the new approach and formulated lessons for further improvement through action research with former homeless persons, professionals from the housing, homeless and care sectors and policy makers (building on the results from in depth-interviews by the University of Amsterdam focusing on individual beneficiaries of the approach). These lessons might contribute to the implementation of the new 'National Homelessness Action Plan: First a Home' that runs from 2023 till 2030 and aims at a 'paradigm shift' from providing shelter to housing people. The National Plan sets the ambition to significantly and structurally reduce homelessness in the Netherlands, in line with the Lisbon Declaration to end homelessness by 2030.