

Projekt UDENFOR (Project OUTSIDE, in English) was born out of an observed need in Denmark for work with homeless people that took place at street level. In this article, Tabita Nyberg Hansen and Lise Torp Burmester discuss how and why the organisation works today to serve those who are excluded from mainstream services.

TIME, PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE: REACHING OUT TO VULNERABLE ROUGH SLEEPERS IN COPENHAGEN



By **Tabita Nyberg Hansen** and **Lise Torp Burmester**, Social street workers, projekt UDENFOR

Projekt UDENFOR (project OUTSIDE) is a Danish NGO working to improve the living conditions of socially isolated and mentally ill rough sleepers in Copenhagen. Through outreach work at the street level we look for and reach out to this group of people who have fallen through the cracks of the Danish social welfare system, and we offer them care, practical help and social relationships. The outreach work is a time-consuming activity in which we must balance a basic respect for the individual and a duty to act when confronted with human suffering and undignified living conditions.

FIGHTING SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Our story begins 30 years ago when projekt UDENFOR's founder Preben Brandt, then a chief physician at a grand old facility for homeless people in Copenhagen, was contacted by a desperate mother. Her mentally ill son had left home to wander on the streets, and she worried for his safety and wellbeing. At the time there was no professionalised outreach social work in Copenhagen, and no authorities had been willing or able to help the mother. Preben Brandt took on the task; equipped with only a photograph he went out on the street. It took some time to find the young man and even longer to convince him to talk to Preben Brandt, but after months the two connected and the young man got help. This experience changed Preben Brandt's perspective on responses to homelessness – a work which in Denmark primarily had taken place within the homeless facilities. He started doing outreach work in his free time, and among the socially marginalised and mentally ill people that he met in the streets, left to themselves, he recognised a need to act. In the years to come he created the foundation for the NGO, which eventually was founded in 1996.

Since then projekt UDENFOR has combined street outreach with documentation and knowledge dissemination to draw attention to and help the vulnerable group of rough sleepers in Copenhagen. Many of them live with severe and untreated mental illnesses, life-threatening substance use, and other social problems. They struggle with social isolation, loneliness and the fear of harassment and assault. Furthermore, they move in an increasingly hostile environment due to “dark design” in the larger cities and national punitive legislation.

Projekt UDENFOR helps them because no one else does. The people we work with are often not able to, or do not want to, access either mainstream services or those that target people who experience homelessness. Many of them have been let down multiple times by the social welfare system, and they have lost faith in the system. Some do not believe that they can be helped at all. By reaching out, creating social bonds, and offering them unconditional help, projekt UDENFOR insists on their opportunity for a better life and return to society.

STREET OUTREACH

Working with a group of people who live (or hide) in the streets, and who are socially excluded in society, makes street outreach a central part of our work. In order to identify and find our target group it is crucial to be present in the street as much as possible. We need to have a good sense of the street, its population, design and rhythm. We therefore walk a lot observing not only people but also the city itself. Are there any abandoned buildings someone could sleep in? Which fast-food restaurants are open 24-7 providing a safe space during the night? At what train station will the guards let homeless people stay? We know the location of the public toilets, we keep track of the libraries' opening hours, we are attentive to police activity, and we note trends among the rough sleepers. When trying to identify people



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in our target group, we observe what people are wearing and how they behave. Are their shoes worn and torn? Maybe they are talking to themselves. Are their belongings stacking up or do they seem to own nothing at all? People who experience homelessness do not always look homeless, but maybe they keep recurring in the cityscape, wearing the same clothes and walking purposelessly around the city.

We keep the first attempt of making contact short. We say 'hi', ask if the person is okay and introduce ourselves. Because of distrust of the system or fear of surveillance and registration, it often works to our advantage that we are not part of the Danish social system. Yet it is not uncommon for us to be rejected. Usually, people turn us down politely but also in a firm and quick way, or they simply ignore us. Sometimes we are shouted at. We always respect an explicit or nonverbal rejection, and we will leave the situation immediately. The street belongs to our target group after all. We are merely guests on the street entering their "homes". Yet, in our view a rejection, together

with other indicators, is just as much an indication that the individual is precisely our target group, and we will return another day. It can take weeks, months and even years before we succeed in establishing contact, but it always turns out to be worth the time and patience.

When we manage to connect with people, we sit down and listen. Sharing a cup of coffee on a bench in a park, we listen to their individual circumstances, thoughts and needs. We ask questions but are careful not to be too interrogative. Meeting after meeting we get to know each other through conversation; this phase must not be rushed. It is about being curious about the person facing you, more than the ambition to fix her homelessness situation. Our goal is to build a social relationship and create trust as this is essential if we want to help our target group create positive change in their lives. When a trustful and supportive relationship has been built, we can begin taking steps together towards improving their living situation - whatever it involves - helping people reconnect with a family member or to move off the streets.

Marie

To further demonstrate our often lengthy and persistent outreach work with vulnerable rough sleepers, the case of Marie makes a good example. Marie was a Danish woman in her forties, and at first glance she did not stand out from the crowd. Yet something about her caught the eye of one of projekt UDENFOR's social street workers who realised that the woman was always wandering around alone and that she had no interaction with other people. The social street worker began to observe Marie and found out that she slept many hours during the day and often fell asleep sitting up. Her clothes were neat and clean, but when you came close to her inside the public library, where she often stayed during the day, it was clear that she had difficulties maintaining personal hygiene.

With time Marie's personal care worsened significantly, and she showed signs of mental illness which increased our concern for her. The social street worker tried several times to start a conversation with her, but every time Marie turned her back and walked away. Parallel with these attempts to make contact, we continued to keep an eye on her, and we learned that Marie never used any homeless services. She kept to herself, and we managed to identify her preferred locations. At night Marie stayed at fast-food restaurants and mainly slept during the day. Thus our chances to find her and try to make contact were always best at night. When she occasionally disappeared in the cityscape during the day, we would intensify our work at night or in the early morning, where we would approach her when she left the fast-food restaurant.

After almost two years without a breakthrough, we changed our strategy. The next time Marie walked away ignoring our greeting, the social street worker told her: *"I will walk with you for five minutes and then I will leave you again"*. The social street worker followed Marie for a short while and instead of asking Marie questions, she told Marie about herself. Nothing private, but she shared personal details based on the idea that we cannot expect someone to trust us, when they don't know us. Then the social street worker left again.

Some time after, Marie was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The social street worker came to visit her, and when she entered the hospital room Marie greeted her: *"hello Tabita, how nice of you to come and see me!"*. Then Marie invited the social street worker to enjoy a cup of coffee with her. This was the breakthrough we had been waiting for. In the following months, which unfortunately involved several hospitalisations before Marie finally received the necessary treatment, the social street worker visited her regularly building a relationship. Today, five years after we first saw her in the streets of Copenhagen, Marie lives in her own apartment. She has re-established contact with an estranged sister and works 10 hours per week in a store. When she calls us occasionally, to say hi, we get the impression that she is happy and content in her life.

There are no short cuts in this field. Reaching out to socially excluded people, who have been left to fend for themselves in the streets, takes time, patience, and persistence. In our outreach work we need to be patient and progress in a way and at a pace that makes sense to the person concerned. We need to adapt our efforts to the individual and not expect the person to fit into the predefined boxes and categories

of the established social system. But we must also be persistent and keep offering our support and help even when we are rejected. In our view, we are all social individuals who want the best for ourselves and who want to be part of the society - some are just a place in life where they need some help along the way.