

A significant part of outreach work is often done by volunteers. In this article, Jesús Sandín de la Vega and Enrique Cuesta reflect on the experiences, challenges, and rewards of social volunteering with homeless people.

VOLUNTEERING WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE: A NECESSARY REFLECTION



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The archetype of Robinson Crusoe provides an alternative understanding of the situation of homeless people: A character whose life project is shipwrecked and who has to rebuild their life and survive on an island that, contrary to popular belief, is not deserted but inhabited by a tribe of cannibals with whom it is best not to interact. A character that is not defined by their material deficiencies but by their abilities and resilience. A character whose greatest desire is not a good meal, clean clothes, or even a roof over their head, but to stop being lonely; to have someone to share their life with.

Homeless people should be seen in this light; their ability to get by, day by day, despite the circumstances, should be valued rather than be seen only as being in a state of need. Above all, we need to acknowledge the radical isolation of homeless people from “integrated” society. We need to understand that homeless people are not “the other”, but ourselves, only facing different circumstances and life processes, resulting from chance or centrifugal social dynamics. This is the one aspect that cannot be solved by professional intervention alone, nor by allocating social resources for homeless people. This explains the need for committed social volunteering projects devoted to building relational and affective bonds based on equality. Social volunteering should arise from a neighbourliness principle, significantly different from friendship. It is an encounter taking place in a collective space in which people share conversations, anecdotes, and ways of being, away from the exchange dynamics of certain services. The social volunteering model should be the basis of every intervention strategy with homeless people.

Each volunteer brings to the fore the objective value of the person they interact with on the street by choosing to volunteer during their free time; a scarce time dedicated to leisure, rest, family and social relationships. In this case the volunteer chooses to spend their free time being with those who sleep rough. And to be with them, not out of compassion or pity, nor to bring a blanket, clothes or food, but out of empathy and to chat, sharing the same willingness to be together in equality.

The horizontal relationship between different individuals, frequent among people not experiencing homelessness, is very rare for homeless people, who mainly interact with others living in the street. It could be argued that none of the people who regularly interact with rough sleepers (e.g. cleaning workers, those who take care of parks and gardens, shopkeepers, neighbours) interact from a position of equality. Furthermore, it could be said that those who work in mainstream social services do not do so either, and much less the police.

Social volunteers do. That is precisely social volunteering’s manifest objective and the key to its value. Any intervention model, from the classic “ladder” to “Housing First”, through all intermediate models such as “Housing Led”, pension places, supported accommodation, etc., would be much less successful without the mediation of social volunteers, who create a link that facilitates the intervention of other actors.



Social volunteering is also fundamental because of its contribution to the network of homelessness and social intervention services. Firstly, it effectively judges the climate of the situation; we detect when there is a conflict with neighbours, shopkeepers, or police, and activate the appropriate mechanisms to intervene from a preventive approach which guarantees the rights of homeless people. Our presence connects the care network and its professionals with potential clients who fall out of the usual mechanisms of detection and intervention, and thus serves as a gateway to the system for many homeless people. This is the primary purpose of our contact work with different professionals and social services; to practice networking that starts from respecting each of the parties and their autonomy. Volunteers deliberately limit themselves to their role as mediators, respecting the processes and guidelines of intervention, and professionals must respect volunteers' space for relationships without interference or dirigisme.¹

1 Translation from the Spanish word "dirigismo", tendency of the government or any authority to intervene in an abusive way in a certain activity.

Volunteers in this field are excellent awareness-raising agents in at least two ways. Firstly, by standing beside homeless people, volunteers weaken the "invisible wall" that usually surrounds them, making them present in the public space and in turn giving more visibility to the radical injustice of their experience. Secondly, volunteers' first hand experience of working with homeless people can, and should be, used to illuminate any understanding of homelessness that will be used in a pedagogical context. The mere account of the experience and the point of view of a volunteer to their social circle helps to change the stereotypical view with which homeless people are too often burdened. Based on daily experience, this knowledge can also provide the cornerstone for a mediation process when conflicts and coexistence struggles arise in neighbourhood and commercial spaces. The mediation is more likely to be successful when a volunteer is there to provide a link between the "us" of integrated society and the artificially created "other" of people experiencing homelessness. In this sense, the real success of this voluntary work is its ability to transmit to the general population, far from the everyday life of homeless people, the value of solidarity as a basic principle of intervention.

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It is important to point out and value the specific differences between volunteering with homeless people and other types of volunteering. It is a particularly complex, committed and difficult kind of volunteering as it does not work with a specific or static profile (all forms of social exclusion are found on the street in their most extreme form: the elderly, minors, the disabled, mental illness, addictions, various forms of violence, etc.). This type of volunteering is carried out with people in street situations who, in many cases, do not receive specific care or treatment and who also reject mainstream social services and the resources they provide. Finally, it is a voluntary service that has to face unique situations of grief, often caused by a lack of adequate care, aggressions, suicide, etc. In addition to all this, the activity takes place at night, is subjected to inclement weather and isn't directly supported by intervention professionals. We point all this out because it has a direct impact on the profile of the volunteers. In general, they are incredibly committed, which is reflected in more extended periods of volunteering and their capacity to be critical of their work. It is a very particular type of volunteering, which responds better when volunteers are given responsibility and decision-making capacity. For these reasons, quality training constitutes a volunteer's right and responsibility, as it is essential when working with people facing homelessness.

Furthermore, it is important to offer formal and informal spaces for reflection and conversation, where volunteers' experiences, opinions and knowledge can be socialised and reflected upon collectively and individually. It is also necessary to have the support of the formal care network and its professionals in training programmes, as well as the recognition from institutions of a model of volunteering that can be uncomfortable and critical with the very structures that support the care network itself. To support people to exit homelessness we need strong communities built on neighbourliness. In the end, Robinson Crusoe managed to leave the island, regain his life and return home, but this was only possible because he was no longer alone.

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