

# HOMELESSNESS IN POLAND IN THE TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC: FROM INNOVATION TO FUTURE PREPAREDNESS

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Poland shook homeless services awake, writes Malgorzata Sienczyk. In this anecdotal article the author considers the resilience of services, reflecting on how her own organisation, The St. Brother Albert Aid Society, adapted their services quickly in a crisis. The pandemic showed their strengths, but also revealed underlying weaknesses, areas these services could work on in the recovery period.

By **Malgorzata Sienczyk**, Director of the National Bureau, St. Brother Albert's Aid Society

No one was prepared for what was to come in early 2020 and continue into subsequent years. We were suddenly alienated from a once familiar world. Following the outbreak of the pandemic the stay-at-home order and social distancing became the norm... and endured. The new normal. Stay at home and do not go out! was heard on almost every TV or radio channel. Stay at home! Do not take risks! It was repeated like a mantra. Very well, we can comply, but what about people who do not have a home?

*Mr Marian also asked himself this question, allowing himself to add a few harsh words. What home? What are they talking about? I live on the street; this is my home. From this corner to the entrance to the sewer all is mine. Here, on the street, he had spent most of his adult life. Marian, like many others experiencing homelessness at the time, found himself in a completely new reality. A reality for which nobody, including him, was prepared. Mr Marian's world was turned inside out. He felt trapped. He got locked into a systemic loophole that nobody at the turn of 2020 thought about. It is hardly surprising; the priority was to try to save the world that everyone, except perhaps Marian and people in a similar life situation to his, knew perfectly well. I'm done for, thought Marian, for it was the first time in his life when he really did not know what to do. Life was never pleasant for him, but he always found a way out of the situation. This time it was not going to work. I'm done for, it's over - it was going through his head. With this thought, he fell asleep in his "nook" in the canal, uncertain of the future and aware of the fact that on the surface the world is changing beyond recognition.*

*Boom! Crack! echoed throughout Marian's makeshift home. Hello, is anyone there? The voice came out of nowhere. It took Marian a moment to understand the situation. Ah, it has happened at last. I didn't even notice how this whole COVID had tired me out... I'm coming, Saint Peter...! He sighed under his breath, angry that he failed to open the bottle he had been keeping for years for a special occasion. What Saint Peter, man! I'm Grzesiek. From another saint. I'm from Albert!*

Grzesiek has worked in the St. Brother Albert's Aid Society for a few years. Recently he started to work as a streetworker. It wasn't easy. The first weeks in the streets were especially difficult, but Grzesiek did not give up. The important thing was that he was helping, that he saw sense in it, that he could change someone's life. Or rather, he could restore that sense. Both the Society's streetworkers and the whole organisation were brutally and forcefully roused from their sleep by COVID. It turned out that after "waking up" it was *time* that was missing the most. Quick decisions had to be made. Isolate? How? Who? How not to let the invisible invader enter our shelters and services. Grzesiek's work took on a new meaning, a new shape. Not only did the priorities have to be changed, but also the very way of providing help. A new player appeared. A ruthless attacker. In all this disorder, however, Grzesiek never lost his sense of a certain social justice. *How can I help those who cannot help themselves in this chaos?* thought Grzesiek.

The St. Brother Albert Aid Society has been helping homeless people for over 40 years, regardless of their gender, age or any other detail. Providing security, however, for those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic required a new, unconventional approach. While residents of the Society's hostels and night shelters may have felt some security, the rules of the shelters had to be changed. Direct return to shelters was no longer possible because of the risk of the virus quickly spreading to other residents. The Society had to act quickly in other areas too. On the one hand, it was necessary to protect employees, on the other hand, to help and support those in need.

The aid strategy itself was divided into two main pathways - basic and special. The basic path involved providing staff and volunteers, i.e. those directly involved in providing aid, with the necessary personal protective equipment. This option was used by 54 of the Society's Circles (branches) across Poland. The special path required changes in the way of providing assistance and adaptation to new conditions. Due to the high risk associated with the introduced changes, high

costs and risk of failure, the new solutions were implemented as a pilot project in five cities - Gdańsk, Gliwice, Jelenia Góra, Warsaw and Wrocław. Due to the differences and specificity of each city or the level of epidemiological threat, the introduced changes were of a slightly different nature in each of them. Nevertheless, the common denominator was the isolation of residents from potential sources of infection.<sup>1</sup>

The night shelters in Gdańsk and Wrocław were transformed into 24-hour centres, which reduced the need for residents to migrate. In the 24-hour centres, residents were encouraged to stay for the whole time; they were at the same time provided with all necessary personal protection means, food and leisure time activities. The possibility of visits by outsiders was also suspended. New residents had to undergo a fourteen-day quarantine in specially opened additional buffer facilities before admission. These were completely independent, fully equipped quarantine centres where care was provided by specialist staff. In addition, to minimise the risk of residents developing infections, the staff shift system was changed from 12 hours to 7 days.

Grzesiek's face was lit with a smile when he first saw the Mobile Aid Bus. *It will be easier to reach everyone*, he thought. Mobile aid stations appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic in three cities in which the 'special path' was implemented: in Gdańsk (SOS Bus), Warsaw (Mobile Counselling Point) and Wrocław (Street Bus). Social workers, streetworkers and medical rescuers reached people living on the streets, offering them warm meals, food, hygiene products or personal protection means. Buses ran every day in the evening and at night on strictly defined routes, stopping in places where people in need stayed most often.

<sup>1</sup> Developing and testing procedures for streetworkers and the way they provide assistance to homeless people in public spaces in crisis situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic – dr Paweł Jaskulski.

The initiatives undertaken by the Society made it possible to successfully survive the first wave of the epidemic - in the five cities participating in the special path, no case of coronavirus infection was recorded among either residents or staff. It is worth stressing here that in the same period, apart from the mentioned institutions, 58 cases of coronavirus infection among homeless people were recorded in Poland, of which unfortunately one case was fatal. The solutions proposed by the Society proved to be effective and can certainly be implemented if needed in the future.

Although the numbers do not reflect the extent of the help that the Society provided to those in need during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, nor do they illustrate the enormous effort the staff and volunteers put into this help, it is perhaps worth presenting them, albeit in general outline.

- 20,000 people (both the homeless and our staff) received personal protective equipment (e.g. several dozen thousand face masks, several dozen thousand disposable gloves, visors, thermometers, protective suits).
- 1,166 persons were accommodated in our institutions through the possibility of quarantine in buffer facilities.
- 11,516 overnight stays were offered as part of the buffer facilities.
- 372 persons in crisis of homelessness benefited from night shelters in Gdańsk and Wrocław.
- 5,471 overnight stays were offered to persons in need in Gdańsk and Wrocław.
- 2,417 people were offered help by streetworkers.
- 75,571 people were helped by Mobile Aid Stations (Mobilne Punkty Pomocy, MPPs).
- 90,268 meals were served in Mobile Aid Stations.

- 8,729 items of clothing were issued at the Mobile Aid Stations.
- 160,525 social services (in total) were provided to people in crisis of homelessness.

The unique situation of homeless people makes them particularly susceptible to the danger of infection, rapid development of new outbreaks of the disease in the assistance centres, and due to high mobility in urban spaces they may quite significantly increase the propagation of the virus. That is why, institutional support for this group by specialised and experienced units of the social assistance sector, especially non-governmental organisations focused on helping people in situations of homelessness, is so important. Homeless people don't have the resources (the main one being a home) to cope with the virus and the attached risks on their own. It is therefore crucial to create, in pandemic conditions, an airtight system of isolation and quarantine of wards located in assistance centres and to provide all the necessary personal protection means, both for people who are regularly helped by services and those outside the centres.

Although difficult and demanding, the work of streetworkers is irreplaceable. Every day they support people in need not only by providing them with necessary materials, but also by educating them about emerging threats and directing them towards support services. During the pandemic, mobile aid stations and 24-hour aid facilities with low admission thresholds proved to be a novel solution.

The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic was a serious test for the social assistance system, including assistance to people in experiencing homelessness. It showed our strengths, but also revealed any weaknesses, gaps in the system or lack of preparedness for dynamically changing conditions. And although it was a painful lesson for the Society in coping with unprecedented conditions, we are better prepared for the challenges of the future. The rapid adaptation of existing solutions to changing needs while limiting administrative procedures to a minimum has made it possible to protect those in need from the surrounding invisible threat.

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