

**D**epaul Ukraine, part of the Depaul International group of homelessness charities, has supported homeless and marginalised people since 2007 through a network of accommodation and support services. It adapted its services first after the 2014 conflict, and now in response to the full-scale invasion of February 2022. Ewan Day Collins, Emergency Programme Manager at Depaul International, explains what these adaptations look like and what the most immediate challenges will be in the future.

# FROM THE FRONTLINE: HOW THE WAR HAS IMPACTED HOMELESSNESS IN UKRAINE



By **Ewan Day Collins**, Emergency Programme Manager, Depaul International

The experience of our staff is a microcosm of the social upheaval since 24 February. In that moment and the days that followed, almost everything inverted. Many in our teams, who have supported homeless people in the country for fifteen years, overnight became homeless themselves. Some colleagues are displaced. Some have lost their homes to shelling. Others have said goodbye to family members who escaped, whilst they stay to keep vital services running.

## BEFORE THE WAR

The need was already considerable. As the war began, Depaul Ukraine was running homelessness services supporting 8,500 people, through a combination of outreach teams, supported and temporary accommodation, and support programmes. We could have expanded these services many times over if we had had the funding because the need was intense.


Ukrainian society has shown its compassion and resilience to the world but, as almost everywhere, homeless people were often stigmatised and services fell short of meeting their needs. Depaul started work in Ukraine in 2007 by providing services to kids sleeping rough underneath Kharkiv's streets, wherever they could find warmth, sometimes next to the sewers, by the heating pipes. Over time, services to children have improved but attitudes to adult homeless people were often unsympathetic. The last time I was in Odesa, in the winter of 2018, a person sleeping rough froze to death (a common occurrence) and a community of homeless people were attacked and their tents set alight. Several came to our day centre in the city the following morning and I cannot forget the trauma and the tears on their faces. FEANTSA members will recognise these stories from across Europe. I recall doing a shift with an outreach worker who had been present for an almost identical incident in Finsbury Park in north London. He had dragged

the unconscious body of a person sleeping rough from their burning tent and started CPR to save his life.

Maidan and the 2014 invasion shook the system. War and revolution became a part of everyday life. Almost everyone knew a family member or friend fighting in the conflict; many knew someone who had not come home. The social protection system was overwhelmed. A total of 1.5 million people were displaced across the country, many going to Kharkiv and Odesa, where Depaul has services. Pressures of varying kinds coalesced. Thousands of displaced people arrived destitute. Availability of housing couldn't keep up with the influx of internally displaced persons, forcing some into homelessness. Dozens, sometimes more, would sleep in the central railway station in Kharkiv. I remember meeting an elderly gentleman who had lost his family home in the Donbas. Depaul supported him and thousands of others with emergency provision such as food and basic medical care. We also offered legal advice. Many people lost their identification documents in the rush to flee conflict, a barrier to accessing state support. Others desperately needed hospital treatment whilst soldiers injured on the frontline were prioritised. We established a programme to facilitate medical treatment for homeless and vulnerable people who were otherwise turned away.

## DURING THE WAR

These kinds of needs have intensified in the wake of the full-scale invasion this year. The situation now is dire and extreme. Traditional approaches to assessing need used by homelessness agencies such as Depaul struggle to provide clarity. You could argue that every individual in Ukraine is at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Europe has witnessed an extraordinary refugee crisis and Depaul teams from Ireland to Slovakia to the UK have seen the impact of this on



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our services. But, generally speaking, those who escaped were either close to a border or had the means and mobility to get over one. The poorest, those with mobility challenges such as the elderly or people with disabilities, and some with large families have often had little choice but to stay put, even if they had wanted to leave. Their needs are grave. The World Food Programme reports that one in two people in the south and east of the country are food insecure. OCHA, the UN coordination body, reports that 13 million people in Ukraine will need support with water, sanitation and hygiene by August.

Our challenge, amid overwhelming and universal crisis, is to identify those most in need. The humanitarian imperative demands that every individual has a right to assistance, including those in hard-to-reach areas. Depaul teams have bravely remained in cities under siege to provide for vulnerable groups, reaching well over 10,000 people with daily food and hygiene assistance and keeping vital services such as shelters open. This poses delivery and security challenges. Homelessness charities are used to managing the risks of supporting unpredictable client groups. Our philosophy to take proportionate risks to reach the most marginalised remains, even as the risks themselves

change. In Kyiv, we are reaching vulnerable individuals in the villages and towns surrounding the city. Many have lived through occupation over March and April, including plunder and sexual violence. Some of these towns have become synonymous with the brutality of war, including Bucha where civilian mass graves were uncovered. Our staff provide vital assistance to those who survived. Navigating the risks of mines and unexploded ordnance is now a daily reality. In Kharkiv our teams are at risk of shelling and gunfire. Life and death are the drumbeat of existence. Depaul staff and volunteers spend their days distributing life-saving aid while attending funerals for dead relatives or neighbours.

Despite the risks, civil society in Ukraine has galvanised. We are flooded with volunteering offers and contributions from communities in Ukraine. Volunteers tell us that providing assistance to vulnerable people gives them purpose in a time of isolation and turmoil. In Kharkiv, a group of cyclists who used to ride together for pleasure now form a vital network taking Depaul aid to hundreds of vulnerable households.

## WHAT NOW?

I was asked to write about the impact of war on homelessness in Ukraine, but the truth is that we are still trying to make sense of it. Amid the unending speculation about how the war might turn, a lot of the shorter-term focus is on winter. With temperatures plunging to -20°C, winterization work will become a priority. Some people have grown tired of living underground or far away from home and are returning to their hometowns even if their houses are unsafe or no longer exist. Providing adaptations to damaged homes, or those cut off from the energy supplies needed for heating, will be vital to prevent a further increase in homelessness. Our outreach and emergency shelter programmes will operate, with an expectation of increased demand. Emergency assistance will need to continue for many months, likely years, although as markets reopen the intention is to move increasingly to cash assistance to improve agency for beneficiaries and stimulate the local economy.

In the longer term, the context has ruptured and our programmes will adapt to this. There are new groups of homeless people. In our shelter in Kyiv, we are accommodating some international students who did not make it home. They have been trapped in a war zone in a foreign country for three months. Longer-term programmes will need to be reshaped. Depaul Ukraine operates a successful through-the-gate criminal justice programme, making strides in preventing homelessness for those exiting prisons. We are still managing to provide case work online for some at risk people but not at the scale we had previously. Instead, prisons are calling us for urgent provisions such as food assistance. Reviving systems change work should be an aim when realistic to do so. We expect that our counselling programmes will be at capacity supporting those whose mental health problems have been exacerbated by the experience of conflict. So much has changed but

the system is not broken. We continue to work with social services in Kyiv, Odesa and Mykolaiv to identify and assist vulnerable individuals. Whilst not infallible, government social protection – in contrast to other conflict contexts – has not collapsed in the face of war.

The kinds of programmes Depaul has expertise in running around the world will remain relevant. A person-centred, strengths-based approach with mainstreamed trauma-informed care provides foundations on which to support individuals to rebuild their lives and adapt to the new reality. The language of recovery, so fundamental to homelessness services worldwide, should resonate in Ukraine as society shifts to whatever comes next.

Where do our teams take heart amid the misery and the suffering? We have seen remarkable generosity from international donors, and alongside the enterprise and dedication of local people this is allowing investment in Ukraine's services. Of course, the needs they are trying to meet have deepened significantly but I hope it is not too optimistic to think that crisis can be a catalyst for change. We have seen this in our sector elsewhere. The COVID-19 pandemic forced changes in thinking and implementation that would have seemed inconceivable before. In England, accommodation was opened using hotels for thousands of people sleeping rough – abandoning a labyrinthine system of priority need which left many on the streets – because the government and the sector simply decided it had to be so. Whilst such silver linings seem far off, we have to hope that the generosity shown towards Ukraine will continue so Depaul and other agencies can deliver services which allow individuals to survive and then recover when the war does end. We are at the start of a long, tough story but our teams and the people who need their support will be there long after the world's attention drifts to whatever crisis comes next.