

The path to sustainable and safe housing for the homeless: project description

At the Association Kings of the Street we have been developing a model of resettlement of homeless people since 2008. Its most important shortcomings were related to the fact that we had to rent apartments for homeless residents at open market. Because the rent was high we were only able to offer cohabitation (two, three or four people living in the same apartment) and sharing some facilities, and the possible time of residence was limited to 18 months.

After a thorough evaluation of our work in 2011 we became aware of the facts, that i.) 18 months of supported housing is not enough for people to be enabled for independent living, ii.) many people would need permanent supported housing, iii.) we were not able to offer supported housing to those, who were most in-need or most at-risk – people with multiple and increased support needs, iv.) new subgroups of homeless people have been emerging, like older women and families of homeless parents expecting children, v.) there was a lack of general eviction prevention activities in Ljubljana and Slovenia.

The project addressed all these problems/challenges by observing two basic principles. One asked for the development of a model of flexible (“floating”) housing support, offering those services which correspond to the observed needs of residents, whatsoever they might be, so done in a generalistic and non-specialist way and offered in times of need (or crisis; not in the office-hours). The other was the principle of close, respectful and continuous co-operation between an NGO (Kings of the Street - KOTS) and a GO (Ljubljana’s Public Housing Fund - LPHF), where the former contributed the know-how about flexible housing support and then later contributed housing capacities and know-how about the management of housing stock. A lot of energy was devoted to the development of that “mixed” GO-NGO team and to joint training of staff from both organizations.

A project team was formed in the beginning of 2012, consisting of workers from LPHF and KOTS (while the third, a little bit more distanced partner was a DOMIZIL Stiftung from Zürich). This team has been meeting at least once every month, while many other meetings have been done in groups of two or three workers related to specific cases (residents or emergency housing units). Firstly, LPHF offered some housing units to the KOTS for the goal of housing people from three special subgroups of street homeless people – families with a newborn, older women and people with multiple problems (health, mental health, drug dependency, etc.). Secondly, LPHF called KOTS workers in cases, where some crises were observed with residents of emergency housing units, where they have been living for a shorter or longer periods already before the start of the project. The role of the KOTS field workers was to contact residents, develop a working relation with them and offer them all kinds of support to prevent their eviction from the emergency units. And finally, quite unexpectedly a new model of preventive housing support work was developed. It took place in a house (block) with 22 emergency housing units, where mostly single parents with children lived. The main form of work was a kind of mother-and-children center, which was being implemented in one of the 22 apartments, which was left unoccupied by the LPHF exactly for this aim.

The activity initially started in the framework of the 18 months lasting project co-funded by the Swiss financial contribution. It means that the project was well planned in advance, it was carefully monitored, the staff was enthusiastic and eager to learn and get new experiences. The team of the six persons implementing flexible housing support has been meeting weekly, a lot of energy was invested in clearing the goals, exchanging information, individual capacity building, mutual support and team building, etc. The project also involved outside experts and voluntary workers, who also participated in direct housing support. Once-a-month supervision sessions were organized, led by outside supervisor. A lot of evaluation activities were done periodically, and also a couple of original scientific papers were published with the results of evaluation of the project. Project also included a strong public relation element consisting of publishing a lot of articles for general public in different mass media, preparing leaflets, preparing TV emissions and other promotional material.

Project activities have continued in the same extent after the end of the initial project. All the emergency units are still in use by the KOTS (that is residents with experiences of homelessness), the cooperation with the LPHF is going on well, and the preventive housing support work is going on and is being further developed. A lot of plans have been also developed regarding the possible future broadening of project activities.

During the first 18 months of the project its funding was sufficient because of the Swiss financial contribution. After that period KOTS was not able to get additional funds for new activity developed by the project, so it had to diminish some of its other activities to be able to continue with the work which was started in this project. At the moment about 80 % of the project's expenses (48.000 € yearly) are covered by the funding from the Municipality of Ljubljana and from the budget of Slovenian Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Affairs, while about 20 % of expenses are covered by KOTS' own commercial activity, donations and own participation of the residents. Currently a restructuring of national system of funding of social welfare is taking place, and there is little place for hope of getting additional funding from this source for the further growth of the project's plans.

The two basic novelties of the project (working in a close GO/NGO cooperation and implementing a model of flexible/floating housing support for residents of emergency housing units) might seem simple and "small" but nevertheless they enabled better access of most vulnerable homeless people to accommodation/residence and better prevention of evictions of those people. It is the only project of this kind in Slovenia so it opens new horizons for all other subjects of housing and social welfare work in Slovenia. It brings a new consciousness that homelessness is not only a problem of not having accommodation, but a multidimensional problem of lacking many kinds of capital (e.g. social capital) and support. At the same time the project shows how to practically address this problem.

The project opened new options for new target groups that previously had few (or no) opportunities for resettlement. The dialogical way of working and managing the project, which is inherently part of the idea of flexible support work in the life fields of users also strengthens their role and empowers them. Having a safe and permanent residence makes possible for the residents to improve other of their spheres of living, such as employment, health, social networks, independent living and meaningful participation in society. While for all the residents of this project their inclusion is not limited by specific time limits, the staff encourages them to move on in life and to find other options of independent living.

As the project is backed up by the KOTS own street newspaper (10.000 sold copies every month) there are many ways to influence the public, to promote the project and to heighten the social esteem of the target group of the project. Many of the residents have also been authors of articles in the street paper.

The feeling of innovation (or going into previous unknown territories of work with people) was easily observed among the staff of LPHF and KOTS. There was a lot of joint learning taking place in their team work and a lot of new ways tried. In this way the project represented a very successful interdisciplinary work, connecting housing and social work sector, including workers and ideas from the fields of psychology, law, early child care and social pedagogy, sociology and anthropology. For Slovenian context the most important was cooperation between housing and social work sector, which has been till then virtually non-existent (or at least underdeveloped). In the field of homelessness one of the Slovenian problems is an obvious lack of interest and activities of the housing sector at national level. That's why the project was planned as a "model project", which should set model for other Slovenian local communities and which should send a message to the housing sector that many improvements can be done in the field of homelessness by their greater participation.

With this aim a conference was organized in May 2013 to which all the relevant national subjects were invited and also the majority of Slovenian local municipalities representatives. About 100 participants were learning about the new model and as a consequence some NGOs have already contacted LPHF to start similar engagements or project activities that were those mapped in our project. The interest of mass media for the project was big and positive, while this interest have not yet materialized in the form of getting more donations, which is hardly to expect in this time of economic crisis.

The project activities have been changing already in relation to changing needs of residents. The field which provokes a lot of such changes is working with the homeless families (that was also the biggest novelty for the staff offering housing support). As these families are by rule multi-problem families, they encounter new and new difficulties, and the project staff is challenged by the need of offering new kinds of support. Two of the needs emerging in the last couple of months have been the need for intensive family/partner counseling and the need for a place, where parents could go together with their children during the daytime, a kind of family centre with a place for children to play and parents to rest and get information, socialize, receive peer support and also involve in some creative activities. The project staff is currently investing their energy to answer these two new needs.

The project's work is approved by the local community (no surprise, as the local LPHF was invested in it from the beginning) and we hope for the future understanding and cooperation in the local community context. Similar positive signs can be seen by the national social care sector (as their representatives also approvingly participated at the project's conference), while we could see not so many promising signs from the national housing sector.

Notes to the attached pictures:

Photo 1: Playground around the house where house based eviction prevention program is taking place

Photo 2: Meeting of Grandpa Frost with the children participating in the project

Photo 3: Dissemination conference after the first 18 months of the project

Photo 4: A leaflet on »living together« prepared for the residents

Photo 5: Carnival in the house where eviction prevention program is taking place

Photo 6: Products of the creative workshop for mothers and children