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# ACCOMMODATING A TRAVELLING LIFE

A JOURNEY BACK HOME SUPPORTING PEERS

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Image: Bananayota / Pixabay

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# About the Project

Organizations and professionals working with people living on the street know only too well that winning and maintaining the trust of a homeless person - especially if she has been in this situation for an extended period of time - is one of the most difficult steps. However, it is also one of the most critical to the effectiveness of the intervention process. It is a frequent occurrence that people reject offers of help aimed at improving their social inclusion, going beyond a small gesture that satisfies their immediate needs such as handing out cash.

The ATL project is targeting this lack of social inclusion by offering innovative solutions to persons who find themselves living in the streets. With this project we will help organizations working in the field to conduct more effective interventions with persons living in the street by involving persons with first-hand experience in the intervention process. For that purpose, ATL introduces the figure of Journey Certified Supporters (JCS) - peer support agents with lived experience of homelessness, trained in the ATL methodology.

The ATL project will design a tailor-made training model built on the principles of a peer support methodology aimed at both trainers and the JCS-to-be. It will incorporate the restorative justice approach with the objective of contributing to the reestablishment of family and friendship ties and thus promoting reintegration.

Comprehensive information and a set of effective training tools will help the future JCS to take ownership of their previous negative experiences by utilising them to positively impact homeless people in the initial stages of reintegration. Additionally, the ATL training program will prepare professionals from the field to help the JCS integrate in the organizational structure, offer them the needed support and conduct interventions hand in hand with the JCS.



Image: Alexas\_Fotos/ Pixabay



# Baseline Study' Findings

An initial research was conducted in order to identify the needs and most recurrent barriers that face those pursuing recovery. It included 10 focus groups with persons with lived experience of homelessness and field professionals. We present a summary of the results below, grouped in four macro areas: social, health, housing and recovery.

## Social

The most relevant function of the Social Area is that of being a “bridge” to connect persons to services, a significant finding, especially when considering networking as a fundamental condition to improve the general process of recovery. Rigidity and standardization of services, high turnover of field professionals, distrust towards clients, limited time and insufficient knowledge about the phenomenon of homelessness of interlocutors, are the issues that were brought up most frequently during the interviews.

## Health

Most participants referred to the difficulty dealing with the health system while homeless, mainly due to high comorbidity rates (addiction, mental health problems, contagious diseases, general medicine issues), to social stigma and to a generalized disinformation about the condition and consequences of living on the street. These premises and the obstacle represented by an excess of bureaucracy, imply an inadequate response and a frequent phenomenon of delegation between services. The lack of stable housing contributes to an altered perception of the state of health and makes it difficult to comply with medical indications, especially in case of a chronic condition. Lack of technical means (phone, internet, transport...) and financial means (cash to pay for medicine) supposes an added difficulty to access medical services. A deficiency in structures that are dedicated to outpatient care - following discharge from hospital - is also reported.

## Housing

The main problems of the housing systems are poor reception procedures, lack of policies, funding and properties available for social housing, and the social stigma of the private estate owners, sceptical about renting their properties to persons with history of homelessness. The housing systems are characterized by a dichotomy between handling the housing issue by offering temporary accommodation at homeless shelters versus providing an own house as immediate answer to the condition of homelessness, as foreseen in the well-known “Housing First” homeless assistance approach.

The users denounce the decrepitude and shortcomings of the system based on collective and temporary accommodation, specifically highlighting these factors: inflexibility of rules, incompatible time schedule with users in employment, overcrowding, promiscuity, poor hygiene, insecurity, lack of future-oriented support. Contrastingly, providing private and stable housing as a first step in an intervention has an invaluable impact on the person's recovery in terms of perceived security and privacy, self-esteem, and personal care, all pre-conditions to move further in the process of recovery and social inclusion.

A key aspect of the latter is providing the individual with ongoing support to facilitate his adaptation to the new lifestyle and prevent him from feeling lonely or incapable.



image: Mehdi Sepehri/ Unsplash

## Recovery

Most of the participants agree that housing, employment, psychosocial and psychiatric support are key factors to recovery. They find the process of reeducation crucial after breaking out of the street, especially after having experienced long periods of homelessness, prison, addiction, abusive relationships and any other conditions that lead to feelings of mistrust and low self-esteem.

Language difficulties, aging, long periods of inactivity, low levels of education, bureaucracy, all of these are barriers to employment. The participants refer to "gig jobs" and physically demanding ones as the only employment homeless persons can access. They also bring up the difficulty in holding on to a job when unhoused due to persistent fatigue and incompatibilities with the schedules of canteens and shelters.

## Conclusions

There is a clear necessity to promote a more proactive approach to the services provision, increasing the access and the flexibility of services, with a special focus on the availability and coverage of outreach services. More customized interventions are required to answer the multiple needs of the homeless population.

The act of reorienting the services is closely linked to raising awareness and transferring knowledge about the phenomenon to interlocutors in the process. This is why training programs shall be put in place for civil servants and other staff who are likely to be taking part in the process, as well as ongoing networking between public social services structures and NGO's shall be promoted.

# *“My Experience Working with a Peer Support Agent”*

by Sari Rantaniemi, Deaconess Foundation

Over the last three years, I have worked on the ‘Securing housing for women’ project at Deaconess Institute NEA. One of the goals of the project was to create a model where a social professional and an expert by experience (EbE) work in pairs. During the pilot, there were 10 women in the intensive clientele of myself and my working partner - all of them homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. We provided them with ongoing support all the way from the street to their own home and, by the end of the project, all the women were housed, either in the framework of a supported housing program or in independent housing. No one's homelessness recurred.

If you asked me which were the most important factors in the project's success, I would point to the intervention being conducted by an integrated team. But is a good co-operation of two workers with such different backgrounds something you would take for granted? Probably not. So, what makes it work?

In our case, the basic precondition for successful cooperation was that both of us had a genuine will to work together and learn from each other. My partner acclimatized to work incrementally, and, thanks to that, we had enough time to get to know each other. We did our best to build a relationship based on trust, as we saw it essential to operate as a team. For me, it meant that I couldn't hide behind my professional role. It forced me to share information about me and my life in a different way than I did with my “professional” colleagues.



image: Art Tower/ Pixabay

Before setting to work on a case, we had spent a long time building a common understanding of the goals, contents and methods that would lead our work. We also discussed our own personal values and the values of our organizations, and how we would reflect them in our work with homeless women.

What was important to me as a professional was that my partner's own life situation was stable and she had taken perspective of her own experience of homelessness. She admitted to feeling nervous about working with a professional, at first, but I also felt nervous about work with a peer support agent. I had many insecurities and questions: Does she think I am sensitive enough with our clients? Does she find me a good enough professional?

I had to learn to give up the authority derived from my professional expertise. In practice, this meant that my partner - the peer support agent - was allowed to work alone, make independent decisions and take on a diverse range of tasks. Giving up the authority would not have been possible without constantly reflecting on my own ways of working and asking her for feedback.

You can learn more about our cooperation in this [video](#)

In addition to working on our cases, it was my priority to support my partner in her work. I oriented her in different aspects of working life, project work and acted as a link between her and other professionals. At its best, the mentoring was complementary to the collaboration.

During the cooperation, deep respect for each other's expertise was born between us. She had the service user's vision and experience of the service system and I had knowledge of how to navigate the services system and get the right kind of services that a client needs.

***"Even after years of working with homeless people, I must say that working with an expert by experience has made me learn more than I could have ever expected."***

Far from being competitors, we complemented each other. Together we were able to give the best support possible to the homeless women. It was also important for the women to see that a professional and a woman who had experienced homelessness were able to work together.

Even after years of working with homeless people, I must say that working with an expert by experience has made me learn more than I could have ever expected. With her help, I got a much more thorough picture of our clients' situation and a better understanding of the reasons that had contributed to their being homeless. It was also easier for clients to trust me as a professional with my partner's involvement. Her own story inspired hope for in the women and made them feel less ashamed about their situation. My partner encouraged me and helped me believe in our work even when women's situations seemed particularly hopeless.

Working with an expert by experience was a truly eye-opening professional experience and has helped me grow as a professional more than any other education has done. I want to encourage all professionals to think about how current and former clients can be involved in the job. It's worth it.

# Project Partners



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