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ACCOMMODATING A TRAVELLING LIFE

A JOURNEY BACK HOME SUPPORTING PEERS

In this issue

- 01** Assessing the ATL project's first impacts
- 02** Discovering the homeless services in Helsinki
- 04** Making visible the diversity of homeless people and their different needs

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Assessing the ATL project's first impacts

The European project “Accommodating a Travelling Life” (ATL) is already bearing its first results.

The partner organization met in Helsinki (Finland) in June for the fourth transnational project meeting to share the results of the pilot test of the developed training programme. It is dedicated to train professionals working with homeless people on the Peer Support model and supplying them with the necessary tools for training future “Journey Certified Supporters” – people with lived experience of homelessness who are at a fairly advanced stage of their recovery process and that can take advantage of their life experience to support peers in a situation of higher vulnerability.



ATL project partners attending the 4th Transnational Project Meeting in Helsinki

86 professionals working with homeless people in 5 countries have participated in the first implementation of the training programme on the Peer Support Model developed in the framework of the project and then they have trained homeless people. This training opportunity has been welcomed both by the professionals, who have seen it as a powerful opportunity to empower the people they work with, and by the homeless people involved in the training to become peer supporters, who also have enthusiastically welcomed this training that could give them the chance to use their own life experience to help their peers and progress in their own recovery process as well.

The project team also spent some time planning the pilot test of the ATL board game, a tool designed to offer a safe and playful environment for potential peer supporters, to improve their assimilation of the ATL training contents and reflect on how they would react to certain concrete circumstances, which they might have to deal with when undertaking such a role.

Discovering the homeless services in Helsinki

Besides discussing about the project, being in Finland - a country where homelessness decreased for the eighth consecutive year in 2020 (unlike in most European countries) - the project team could not miss the opportunity to visit Aurora-talo, a centre where the 'Housing First' programme is implemented, and Vepa, a day centre for homeless people run by the NGO No Fixed Abode.

Aurora-talo is one of many innovative facilities in Finland that are giving homeless people not only a home but the foundations for a better future. It implements the 'Housing First' programme, also implemented by other members of the ATL partnership, in which stable long-term accommodation is favoured over providing an emergency one. More than just housing, the programme also offers a range of services necessary to manage the complex needs of these people.



Photo by Tierra Mallorca / Unsplash

Aurora-talo residents live in independent housing, located in the same building, with common areas supervised by caregivers who provide the necessary support on a daily basis. Aurora-talo's range of services also includes housing scattered throughout the community, where people receive support while integrating into society. For some people, these houses are a lifelong residence; for other ones, they are the first step towards fully independent living.



Vepa, on the other hand, is a centre where homeless people can rest, spend time, have a hot meal, talk about their problems and receive support in finding and contacting the right services to get the help they need. They are also provided with clothes, toiletries, computers and telephones to carry out administrative procedures.



ATL project partners visiting VEPA

The centre is entirely run by experts by experience and volunteers. During the visit, we spoke to two experts by experience who told us their stories and how they became role models for the people who now come to the centre for support. We also met Juha, a homeless person who attends the centre. He told us that he appreciates this resource because it makes him feel understood by the people who run it and not judged, which has happened quite often to him since he became homeless.

The partners from Spain, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom left Finland with the wish and the intention that the role of the peer worker in the field of homelessness and the expert by experience will be increasingly promoted in their countries as well.



ATL project partners visiting VEPA

← hope →

Making visible the diversity of homeless people and their different needs

During our visit to Helsinki, we also met Juha Hyrkäs, a Finnish gay guy who, after returning from Argentina, found himself homeless due to a series of circumstances related to the impossibility of validating his academic qualification and the lack of income. For the past five years he has been living in different places, such as friends' houses, hostels, long-term accommodation provided by the Housing First programme and shelters, without receiving the proper support to find a way out of his situation. In addition, Juha is HIV positive but unmedicated due to his permanent homelessness.


Juha today, although homeless and without incomes, is a member of a political party in Helsinki and works full time to win a seat in parliament in the next elections in April 2023. As a public speaker he makes visible the conditions in which homeless people, especially those who, due to different circumstances, cannot access the support they need. He has launched the term rainbow homeless in Finland. LGBTQ+ people are 14 times more likely to get homeless. And being as a homeless they face 12 times more often sexual violence than other homeless people. Juha has made several police reports about physical and sexual abuse he faced.




We talked a lot about the Housing First model too and the problems in its implementation. He could access this type of facility time ago but he told us that sharing this space with people with drug or alcohol addiction was not easy. Due to his homosexuality, his experience was marked by discrimination and violence attempts. At some moment, he just realized that place was not the right one for him, because he felt very insecure. In a way, he felt abandoned by the system that was supposed to help him. Although the efficacy of this model has been proven by different studies, Juha's experience tells us that there are still many steps to be taken and that it is essential to listen to what people in this situation have to say. Listen to their different stories and take into consideration their different needs.

In this sense, the peer supporter figure can be very beneficial, because it allows social services to get closer to the real needs of homeless people. Regarding the peer support, Juha believes that the greatest benefit to introduce it is the possibility to get help from experts by experience who really has no prejudice against the homeless people. Many professionals in the field, unfortunately, although motivated to help people, often cannot fully understand what it means to be homeless.

He himself has found this type of support extremely beneficial and inspiring. Currently he offers support to other people in a more vulnerable situation. What must be avoided, according to him, is to create a helper type relationship in which the person relies completely on the peer supporter and loses the motivation and will to solve his own problems. Anyway, it seems that this figure could make a real difference in supporting the recovery process of homeless people, so we can only support its development.



“Each and every homeless is a different person, a living, breathing human, whose needs come from the person himself, not from the system”



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