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ACCOMMODATING A TRAVELLING LIFE

A JOURNEY BACK HOME SUPPORTING PEERS

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Restorative Justice and Homelessness

by Anna Simon Serra

Reconnecting with the community and restoring the sense of belonging and dignity is an essential part of the recovery process from homelessness. It is crucial that individuals link with services that can provide assistance so that they can start their wellbeing journey and properly address the difficulties they are facing. In order to achieve cohesive and proactive communities, one could turn to Restorative Justice for enhancing empathy and understanding, restoring broken relationships, and building strong communities as a form of conflict prevention.

“Restorative practices is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities.”

“For humans, the need to belong is nearly as strong a motivator as the need for food and shelter. Deprivation of meaningful relationships is as painful as hunger or exposure to the elements”

(Baile, 2019).¹

Restorative practices such as Mediation, Healing Circles, Group Conferencing, or Community Restorative Boards, give an opportunity for homeless people to come together with the affected parties and other community members to discuss a particular incident. Such approach focuses on establishing good communication, enhancing understanding, and repairing the harm done. Some of the positive effects of these practices are that homeless people are given a voice and are being heard by members of the community. Moreover, they are empowered to exercise agency on matters that relate to them, which contributes to restoring their sense of dignity, respect and belonging.²


Furthermore, the emphasis of Restorative Justice on repairing harm can also be beneficial for the recovery process of homeless persons. Their life situations tend to be really complex and difficult, which usually leaves them with a feeling of hopelessness. Being able to restore and repair a particular incident can give them a sense of self-agency and hope, encouraging them to move forward in their own recovery journey.³



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Restorative Justice practices can be applied in the context of homelessness in a variety of ways. Generally, they have been incorporated in shelters and supported accommodations as a method of conflict resolution. Due to the multiple disadvantages that homeless people experience, it is common for conflicts to arise in shelters where many people cohabit. Traditionally, conflicts arising from drug consumption or conflictive behaviour used to be dealt with some form of punishment such as expulsion from the centre.⁴ However, these methods fail to recognize the individual's needs and address the underlying issues that might be causing such behaviour.

Instead, restorative practices, such as Mediation or Group Conferencing, offer an opportunity for all parties involved in a conflict to discuss how the incident made them feel and what are their needs in order to heal. By asking questions such as: "What were you thinking about at the time?", "Who has been affected and in what way?", "What has been the hardest thing for you?" and "What needs to happen in order to make things right?"⁵ a space is created where the needs of the individuals are addressed, and compassion and understanding are fostered. Moreover, the parties also engage in compromises in order to repair the harm and prevent future conflicts from arising.



Through restorative practices, the parties engage in compromises in order to repair the harm and prevent future conflicts from arising.

An example of a successful application of restorative practices was detailed by Laura Mirsky in a report on The Stockholm City Mission (Mirsky, 2004)⁶, an organization that runs the Bostället Homeless halfway house, in which restorative practices are commonly used to engage clients in addressing their own behaviour problems, instead of using staff-imposed punishments. The described incident referred to female resident of the shelter, diagnosed with schizophrenia, who had slapped a staff member on the face. Any form of violence was not tolerated in the centre, and thus the woman would have had to be expelled. However, by using the alternative method of Group Conferencing, all parties were able to engage in a discussion on the incident.

Thanks to such process, the staff members were able to have better insights into the woman's inner world and understand her struggles better. Therefore, they were able to establish a form of conduct that would provide more adequate support for the woman, as well as prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future.⁷



Another example of a case where restorative practices were successful was explained by Dr Lindsey Pointer in her case study "How Does Restorative Justice Interact with Homelessness and Mental Illness?" (Pointer, 2016)⁸. The case concerned Joseph, a 64-year-old homeless man who accidentally caused a fire with a makeshift stove he was using to cook. The neighbours and general community were affected by the incident since they believed the fire could have caused damage to their homes and risked their lives. As an alternative to the criminal justice system, the case was referred to Restorative Justice, and a Group Conference was held with Joseph, some neighbours, and police representatives.

As part of his reparation contract, it was agreed that Joseph would attend a centre where mental health issues were addressed through creativity and art. He would also have to create posters with information about fire safety, in particular on cooking methods commonly used by homeless persons. The conference was successful since Joseph was given an opportunity to repair the broken relationships with his neighbours and to link with adequate support services, which favoured his integration within the community.⁹

Heartfelt Help Ambulance

by E. Wesołowska and A. Czarnocki

Homelessness is typically accompanied by critical physical and mental conditions. Persistent stress, hostile environment, malnutrition, exhaustion, effects of substance abuse, limit the horizons of life to little more than survival.

For a homeless person, taking care of health and medical needs is of secondary importance. After several years on the street, a homeless person often becomes indifferent to long-term pain or underlying health problems. A more acute problem to be solved is that of how to make it through the day.



"After several years on the street, a homeless person often becomes indifferent to long-term pain or underlying health problems."

There are about 3,000 homeless people in Warsaw. Every year, a dozen of them dies as a result of physical and mental deterioration. Reaching out to these people is not easy, but for the last three years, it has been a vital mission for the Heartfelt Help Ambulance team. The beginnings of Heartfelt Ambulance date back to 2018, when several friends, medical students, and volunteers, had taken the initiative to fill the gap in medical assistance for the homeless by reaching out to the most vulnerable – those living in the forlorn places like streets, railway stations, abandoned buildings, shacks, etc.

Few of these people ever try to reach a doctor, hardly any are insured, few if any would be able to find their way into the anyway overcrowded public health facilities. So the Heartfelt Ambulance team reaches out to them. With a van provided with standard medical equipment, medicine students, young doctors, and paramedics visit regularly the places where homeless people reside, respond to emergency calls from passers-by, dress wounds, prescribe and deliver medicines, occasionally transport a person to a hospital or a shelter. After three years of service, the Heartfelt Ambulance has become an important element of the city's assistance network, connecting worlds far apart.



Heartfelt Ambulance operational basis is Caritas homeless shelter on Żytnia Street in Warsaw. The shelter with its facilities – showers, disinfection procedure, isolation rooms - provides institutional support making it possible for the team to put the acute patients under the roof for regeneration or preparation for further treatment. Heartfelt Ambulance, which started as a noble idea of a few, has now the support of the Warsaw City Council and cooperates with various street-working teams.

The Heartfelt Ambulance and the Caritas shelter have been working on a new idea to provide a short-term retreat for alcohol-dependent clients in the delicate incipient phase of giving up drinking. It is during that initial phase that things are especially difficult for the person because of withdrawal symptoms. Often, even though a person is willing to quit the habit she is unable to do it while on the street. Currently, individuals in such situation are refused access to any specialized facility while being still somewhat intoxicated, a situation that Caritas shelter and Heartfelt Ambulance want to change by providing a safe space and basic medical support throughout this important process.

Combating homelessness – a priority among EU policies

Following the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017, and especially its 19th principle “Housing and assistance for the homeless”, the European Commission launched in June 2021 the “European platform to combat homelessness”. This is the first attempt ever of the EU to establish a common activities plan addressed at combatting homelessness throughout the EU countries. The platform launch is the beginning of a process to establish a common understanding and commitment and ensure concrete progress in the Member States in the fight against homelessness.



This will enable all actors to better exchange their knowledge and practices, and identify efficient and innovative approaches, to make progress on eradicating homelessness.

The working program of the platform is already prepared. Great hopes, big expectations but also a need for both institutional actors and third sector organizations to row in the same direction.

For more information:

European Platform to Combat Homelessness

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=10032>

United Nations Human Rights Office on Homelessness

<https://europe.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=2603&LangID=E>

ETHOS - European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

<https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

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