

## Sustainable ways of preventing homelessness (Copenhagen, 22 November 2013)

### Comments Paper from Austria<sup>1</sup>

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### The current situation in Vienna (Austria)

In Austria, the 9 federal provinces are responsible for providing support measures for the Assistance for the Homeless. Each province has its specific regulations and services.<sup>2</sup> Austria has about 8.42 million inhabitants;<sup>3</sup> 1.75 million live in the capital of Vienna.<sup>4</sup> The figures show that Vienna has an outstanding role as the capital city and attracts people from rural areas as well as from CEE countries. Hence, the phenomenon of homelessness is more acute and more important than in other Austrian cities.

As a consequence, the following report reflects the situation in Vienna rather than the circumstances in other provinces of Austria.

### The Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless

The Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW) (Vienna Social Fund), funded by the City of Vienna, plans, steers and monitors the varied services for homeless persons in close contact with its partner organisations. The FSW cooperates with more than 90 facilities of different organisations and funds their services.

The Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless<sup>5</sup> focuses on fast, non-bureaucratic help for people who are homeless (first stage). The second stage consists of helping people to live self-sufficiently (again) and includes various measures tailored to different target groups. People who cannot manage a self-sufficient life in a flat of their own any longer can live permanently in one of the *socially assisted living* facilities. Recent developments focus on adjusting services better to homeless people's needs by offering *floating support* in permanent apartments with secure tenancy instead of providing support in institutionalised, temporary settings.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, two "Housing first" projects (operated by "neunerhaus" (since 2012) and by "Caritas" (since 2013) for families, couples and single persons with a total capacity of 70 flats) and three floating support teams (operated by "wieder wohnen" (since 2012), by "Heilsarmee" (since 2012) and by "WOBES" (since 2013) with a total capacity of 110 persons) - which support

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<sup>2</sup> Magistratsabteilung 24 der Stadt Wien (Ed.) (2012) Wiener Sozialbericht 2012, Vienna (p. 185).

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.statistik.at/web\\_de/statistiken/bevoelkerung/](http://www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/bevoelkerung/) - download: 2013-10-24.

<sup>4</sup> The second largest city is Graz with about 266.000 inhabitants.

<sup>5</sup> [http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/201306\\_WWH\\_SupportStructure\\_EN.pdf](http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/201306_WWH_SupportStructure_EN.pdf) - download: 2013-10-29.

<sup>6</sup> Housing First - The Viennese Model (abstract), Vienna 2012 - <http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/20130304> - download: 2013-10-29.



formerly homeless people in the transition process from institutionalised living into their own flat - have recently been implemented. These services are an important pillar in the process of *deinstitutionalising* the Assistance Programme for the Homeless.

### **Prevention of Eviction**

Three players are responsible for eviction prevention: Tenants of municipal housing receive assistance from Municipal Department 11 (Youth and Family Welfare Office of the City of Vienna) and Municipal Department 40 of the City of Vienna (Social Welfare, Social and Public Health Law). The Centre for Securing Tenancy (FAWOS) is responsible for supporting tenants of privately owned flats and housing cooperatives at risk of losing their flat.<sup>7</sup>

### **Young homeless persons (homeless youth, "runaways", "at-risk-youth") and their specific needs**

Concerning the situation of young homeless persons, it must be stated that the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless is responsible for persons who have attained full age (18 years), while the Youth and Family Welfare Office of the City of Vienna supports minors.

In 2012, 19% of the service users of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless (including minors in families) were between 18 and 30 years (in total: 1,249 persons; 571 women and 678 men). This percentage has been quite stable in the last couple of years, while the absolute figures are increasing.<sup>8</sup>

Young people become homeless or are threatened with homelessness for a wide range of reasons that are often interdependent. The UK policy team "Homelesswatch" realised in 2011 that service providers and local authorities reported a very similar breakdown of the causes of homelessness. The most common cause was the relationship breakdown with family or friends – experienced by half of all young people who used the social services. Relationship breakdown often co-exists with several other causes of homelessness: financial problems, mental or physical health problems and drug or alcohol problems.

Preventing youth homelessness needs early intervention to prevent rough sleeping and preventing young people from having to present themselves as homeless to housing option teams.<sup>9</sup>

Zide and Cherry (1992) identified four primary reasons why young people leave home prematurely: 1) to find excitement for adventure (running to); 2) to escape conflictual or dangerous family situations such as alcoholism, violence or neglect (running from); 3) because they are alienated from their families who have often given up on them and because they are in trouble with school or law enforcement (thrown out); and 4) because their families cannot longer financially support them (forsaken).

The US National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Alliance to end Homelessness found out 11 primary causes of homelessness among young persons:

- 1) family conflicts and severe economic hardship;

<sup>7</sup> Magistratsabteilung 24 der Stadt Wien (Hrsg.) (2012) Wiener Sozialbericht 2012, Wien (p. 179).

<sup>8</sup> Nowotny (2012) Jahresbericht 2012, Wohnungslosenhilfe – Übergangs- und Dauerwohnen, Wien (p. 37ff).

<sup>9</sup> See Homelesswatch (2011) Young & Homeless. A survey of services and local authorities, UK (p. 12ff).



- 2) 20-25% of the youth who arrive at shelters came more or less directly from foster care;
- 3) young persons who were released from juvenile prison became homeless because they lack support systems and opportunities for work and housing;
- 4) some homeless youth have run away from homes where they were victims of physical, sexual or emotional abuse;
- 5) substance abuse at home: more than 40% of homeless young people report that one or both parents had at some point received treatment for alcohol, drug or psychological problems;
- 6) a big number of homeless youth are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol;
- 7) a large number of homeless young women ran away or were kicked out of the home due to pregnancy. 10% of homeless and runaway girls are pregnant;
- 8) other homeless young persons are forced to leave home because of their sexual orientation;
- 9) there are homeless youth who are employed, but cannot afford rent, food and other basic needs;
- 10) neglect and lack of emotional and financial support from their families can also cause youth homelessness;
- 11) mentally ill youth may end up homeless because they do not have access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services.<sup>10</sup>

Current research conducted in the Netherlands (Krabbenborg & Boersma & Wolf, 2013) has shown that homeless youth are a highly vulnerable and heterogeneous group which suffers from a wide range of problems. Many young persons are physically, emotionally and/or sexually abused, many have experienced family conflicts and have parents who are unwilling or unable to care for them. Many of them have become dependent on services for homeless youth, have lived on the streets or have temporarily found shelter with friends. The majority of young homeless experience a low quality of life and lack the personal and social resources to hold their own apartment successfully. On average, they have little money to spend because of lack of income or high debts and a low level of education, are struggling to maintain a daily routine, and frequently, experience limited support of their social network, which mostly consists of other homeless people. Young homeless report health problems, such as headaches and skin and teeth problems. Many studies found heightened rates of substance abuse.<sup>11</sup>

These young adolescents are also at risk of substance abuse, delinquency, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. They are also at high risk of different forms of victimisation, including becoming objects of violence and becoming involved in prostitution.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.dosomething.org/actnow/tipsandtools/background-11-causes-teen-homelessness#> - download: 2013-10-26.

<sup>11</sup> See Krabbenborg M.A.M, Boersma, S.N. and Wolf, Judith RLM (2013) A strengths based method for homeless youth: Effectiveness and fidelity of Houvast (Study protocol), BMC Public Health, 13.

<sup>12</sup> See Whitebeck, L.B. and Simons, R.L. (1990) Life on the streets: The victimization of runaway and homeless adolescents, *Youth & Society*, 22 (1), 108-125.



Personal strengths, competences (resilience) and resources as well as the help from others are important factors to ensure that homeless youth are able to successfully navigate the "troubled waters".<sup>13</sup>

### Measures to prevent youth homelessness in Vienna (Austria)

A young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday is an important turning point in their lives, which represents a challenge and bears the danger of "falling between stools". In order to avoid this phenomenon, Municipal Department 11 (Youth and Family Welfare Office of the City of Vienna) is able to prolong their support measures in urgent cases (if the young person is not able to act self-responsibly) until the age of 21.

Furthermore, a cooperation model between the Viennese Assistance Programme and Municipal Department 11 allows young people to apply for support from the Viennese Assistance Programme a few months before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to reduce the gap between the two support systems.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, there are minors in need who do not make use of these offers. Therefore, low-threshold services like "a\_way" (operated by Caritas) offer a short-term stay and social support in a protected shelter for young persons from 14 to 20 years to fill this gap. The new project "reStart" (linked to "a\_way") offers low-threshold job opportunities for young persons; they can work a few hours in a repair and assembling shop and produce creative recycling products (such as modern bags).

The Viennese Assistance Programme has one facility – called "JUCA" (operated by Caritas) - which focuses on the problems of young homeless between the age of 18 and 30. The purpose of the facility is to train and support these young people with the aim of reintegrating them into society and into the (first) labour market. Furthermore, the "Housing First" project operated by Caritas has a focus on young persons.<sup>15</sup> The evaluation of this service is still going on; it started in 2012.

Due to the rising awareness of the specific life situation and growing number of young homeless, a working group was established in 2008 to evaluate the number, background and needs of young homeless in the Viennese Assistance Programme. The working group suggested to offer floating support to young homeless and to establish a special facility for young homeless persons before they reach majority age (between 16 and 24 years).<sup>16</sup> The FSW took up the following position: considering the fact that one fifth of service users are aged between 18 and 30 years, the existing services have to be adapted to the needs of these young people rather than establishing a new stigmatising facility which bears the danger of creating another parallel system and gaps between the regular support system. As a consequence, selected members of the working group visited existing services of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless to raise awareness for the situation of young homeless in these facilities.

As the report of the working group shows, the needs and backgrounds of young homeless persons differ substantially from those of older homeless persons.

The first are in an *instable stage of transition from childhood to adulthood*, they cannot revert to trained *coping strategies* with regard to homelessness, loneliness or unemployment, they do not have stable social networks or work experience.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Lindsey, E.W., Kurtz, P.D., Jarvis, S., Williams, N.R., Nackerud, L. (2000) How runaway and homeless youth navigate troubled waters: Personal strengths and resources. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17 (2), 115-141.

<sup>14</sup> L&R Sozialforschung (2012) – Evaluierung Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe, Wien (p. 75).

<sup>15</sup> Karner/Schuster (2013) Konzept Housing First, Wien (p. 4).

<sup>16</sup> Ettenauer et al (2008) – Junge Wohnungslose in Wien, Wien (p. 10f).

<sup>17</sup> Ettenauer et al (2008) – Junge Wohnungslose in Wien, Wien (p. 5ff).



Therefore, skills and networks have to be built up from scratch. As a consequence, support methods must adapt to these circumstances and rely strongly on (social) skills training. Other crucial factors are gender aspects, the heterogeneity of support needs at different age levels, the influence of peer groups and how to integrate this potential resource into support plans.

At present the question how the recent system and support methods can address the needs of young people is being debated in the City of Vienna.

### **Affordable housing for young people in Vienna?**

Young people in full-time care and education facilities of Municipal Department 11 (Youth and Family Welfare Office of the City of Vienna) turning 18, get easier access to their own municipal flat. In case that they still need social support, the floating teams of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless are entitled to provide services. In addition, there is a programme for young Viennese between 17 and 30 years who can apply for their first own (municipal) "starter flat" when they meet certain criteria (net income lower than € 42,250 per year, legal residential status, centre of living in Vienna for at least 2 years).<sup>18</sup> Despite this service, the programme reaches especially persons possessing personal resources (like families) or persons getting support from social services.

### **Key challenges in preventing and tackling homelessness**

In general, the need for services for homeless persons is an indicator for a hole in the safety net of the welfare system. Despite good circumstances like the availability of 220,000 municipal flats in Vienna and a great amount of social services, the numbers of persons getting support from the Assistance Programme for the Homeless has increased over the last couple of years (figures: 7,160 (2009), 8,180 persons (2010) and 8,280 persons (2011)).<sup>19</sup> One reason is the economic crisis linked with rising rental prices and a shortage of affordable housing. Due to these adverse circumstances, the need for prevention of eviction is evident. Effective ways of support to sustain housing have to be found.<sup>20</sup>

One main challenge for planning in the field of homelessness is the lack of reliable data concerning the number of persons at risk of being evicted or living on the streets and hence being in need of support by the Assistance Programme for the Homeless. Furthermore, the distribution of competences, especially the separation of the department of housing and the department of homelessness, requires regular exchange in order to find solutions with regard to the supply of affordable flats in general and in particular for (formerly) homeless persons.

Concerning the support of homeless EU citizens (especially from the last two EU enlargements) with no legal residential status in Vienna, the Viennese Assistance Programme faces the challenge of not being able to offer support due to the legal framework except for emergency accommodation during winter.

### **Main learning value of the Danish model**

The fact that Denmark managed to implement a nationwide strategy to tackle homelessness is impressive. The allocation of competences and the above

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<http://www.wienerwohnen.at/interessentin/wohnungenfuerjunge/aktionfuerjungwiener.html> – download: 2013-10-29

<sup>19</sup> Fonds Soziales Wien (2013) Leistungsbericht 2011, Zweiter Band, Wien (p. 48).

<sup>20</sup> L&R Sozialforschung (Hrsg.) (2012) Evaluierung Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe, Wien (p. 104f).



mentioned special role of Vienna would make it difficult to implement a national strategy in Austria. There is no doubt that there is the need of a strong political commitment to the "Housing first" approach to implement a national strategy like Denmark.

Another outstanding fact is that a lot of homeless persons were reached with a relatively small budget (€ 65 million in 4 years). The report did not answer the question how these resources were allocated and in which ways existing resources of the Danish support structure were useful in implementing the strategy and what the next steps after the end of the strategy programme will be.

The report describes that persons with complex support needs were reached with the "Housing first" approach within the framework of the national strategy. Most of them were supported by ICM and CTI teams. It would be very interesting to know whether "hard-to-reach" persons needed a higher support which could not be covered by these teams. If this was the case, it would be interesting to find out if a "creaming effect" could be observed. This means that we would like to know if fitter persons were more likely to be allocated to the "Housing first" project than persons with complex needs. Was there perhaps a group of homeless young persons with other special needs which did not find the right support for their specific life circumstances? Was it possible to get in touch with "hard-to-reach" clients and to find out their specific support needs?

Furthermore, the report does not explain if legal circumstances - especially with regard to the residential status - were the reason why some persons could not be integrated into the programme.

The report states that the ACT team is an adequate way of covering the special needs of persons with complex needs. For Vienna, it would be difficult to find arguments for an additional service like ACT, because the main goal of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless is to direct homeless clients to regular social and health services rather than to establish parallel systems.

With regard to young homeless persons, it is important to state that their specific needs must be considered before implementing services. We would like to point out that the "Housing first" approach might be an adequate way of responding to youth homelessness, but it is risky to think that this concept is a one-fit-all model.

Hence, we call for a needs assessment (which is oriented on the needs of the relevant target group and service users) before planning new services to promote the empowerment, social inclusion, personal resources and self-responsibility of homeless persons and to avoid their stigmatisation.

The prevention of youth homelessness demands new concepts which integrate the experiences of youth research (youth culture, lifespan psychology, etc.), youth welfare, youth organisations, services for homeless persons, gender-specific aspects as well as the experiences and thoughts of the target group itself.

### **Questions for further discussion**

- We could not identify a concrete explanation how the sustainability of the Danish national strategy to prevent homelessness will be measured or proofed. (Is it e.g. planned to have an evaluation after some years with a control group?)
- It would be interesting to differentiate between homeless men and women (gender aspect)
- What are the "success factors" for the project?



- Could the perspective of service users and their feedback concerning their needs be integrated in the concept?
- Do the service users have opportunities for active participation when they are clients of ACT, CTI or ICM?
- Was peer-to-peer-learning integrated in the strategy?
- Who coordinates the different activities in the different municipalities after the project-period (when the national strategy will be implemented all over Denmark)?
- The project description does not say that it is only focusing on Danish residents. (Are there homeless persons from other countries – non-residents - in Denmark? Is there support for these persons too?)
- Is the prevention of homelessness part of an urban development-strategy?

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