



The Finnish model: no more temporary accommodation in shelters

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MINIMUM STANDARDS IN HOMELESS SHELTERS?

Finland has taken the decision to eliminate shelters entirely, believing that even the introduction of high quality standards do not make them a suitable enough solution for tackling homelessness. Shelters have proven to develop a subculture of their own that do not help clients move on to independent living and housing.

BACKGROUND

In February 2008, the Finnish Government made a decision-in-principle regarding a Government Programme to Reduce Long-term Homelessness in the Period 2008 – 2011, and decided on the implementation of measures under the programme. The key objective of the programme is to halve long-term homelessness by 2011. The programme is based on the report by the work group preparing the programme that set the objective of eliminating long-term homelessness by 2015. According to the programme, a total of 1,250 homes, supported housing units or places in care will be allocated to the long-term homeless in the 10 cities covered by the programme. Programme implementation is based on letters of intent drawn up jointly by the Finnish government authorities and the ten largest cities affected by homelessness, including concrete plans for projects to be implemented during the programme period.

The programme to reduce homelessness is a broad-based partnership agreement, based on the premise of sharing the responsibility for programme financing. The government's share is primarily 50%, and that of municipalities is 50%. The Government is prepared to finance construction investments included in the programme with €80 million, as well as the hiring of support personnel at a cost of €10.3 million. Moreover, the Finnish Slot Machine Association is prepared to contribute €18 million for the basic renovation of shelters and their conversion into supported housing units.

In addition, the programme entails an extensive development project for: organising supported housing for recently released prisoners; preventing youth homelessness; and preventing evictions, by for example providing and expanding housing advisory services.

Within the past 20 years, the number of homeless people in Finland has declined considerably. As late as in the mid-1980s, the estimated number of homeless people stood at about 20,000, while according to the latest estimates the number of homeless people totals approximately 8,000. The decrease in the numbers has been achieved as the result of a focused, determined policy. However, the measures undertaken have not helped the long-term homeless, who, according to cautious estimates, account for about one third of all homeless people. In fact, the long-term homeless form the 'hard core' of homelessness. These people have severe social and health-related problems, such as substance abuse and mental health problems, therefore requiring a considerable amount of services and support in order to ensure successful living. Previously, the service system for homeless people in Finland has primarily been based on a gradual housing model, and has not been able to meet the service needs of this group with their multiple disadvantages.

A key part of the programme to reduce long-term homelessness is the set of measures known as the 'conversion programme of shelters', which involves the gradual abandonment of shelters for the long-term housing of homeless people, and replacing them with housing units which facilitate independent, supported and supervised living. The abandonment of shelters was proposed by the 'group of four wise men' appointed by the Minister of Housing to prepare ideas for the programme to reduce long-term homelessness.

Shelter accommodation has a long tradition in Finland. Due to the post-war housing shortage, shelters intended for temporary housing gradually turned into a permanent part of the service system for the homeless, particularly in the capital, Helsinki.

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At their highest, the number of shelter beds totalled over 4,000 in Helsinki, whilst the current number is over 600. The oldest shelter home still operating was established in the 1930's. Some of the shelters have already undergone basic renovation into housing units that facilitate fairly independent living, and shelters no longer have large dormitories. In fact, the largest rooms are intended for four people. Regardless of the improved standards, shelter accommodation brings many problems, hence the intent to abandon them.

The group of 'four wise men' stated in its report that in future, shelter accommodation cannot exist even as a temporary solution to homelessness. The group proposed that housing solutions for the long-term homeless should be based either on tenancy, or service housing as specified in the Social Welfare Act. This principle also forms the premise for the programme to reduce long-term homelessness.

There are several reasons for the intent to abandon shelter accommodation. One of the key reasons relates to legislation. Shelters are regulated by the Finnish Act on Accommodation and Catering, i.e. the same act that applies to hotels and restaurants. Therefore, due to legislation, social welfare authorities sending residents to shelters do not have any legal possibility to intervene with the conditions and activities of shelters. Shelter operations have been undergoing radical change ever since the 1990's. Previously, the majority of shelters were maintained by private companies, while at present, practically all shelters are maintained by third sector organisations engaged in social work, who also cooperate with the social service authorities of the City of Helsinki. However, the current physical framework of the shelters significantly constricts their operational development, and their human resources do not facilitate a more rehabilitating approach either.

There is also another reason related to legislation: the Finnish Constitution ensures domestic peace and privacy protection for all citizens, but shelters do not meet these criteria. These basic rights defined by the Constitution also form a serviceable basis for defining the level of housing solutions for the long-term homeless.

Even though shelter accommodation is basically intended as temporary only, it has become a long-term solution for many homeless people. Shelter accommodation is a poor solution for homeless people with multiple problems, because such accommodation offers few possibilities for rehabilitation from substance abuse or mental health problems.

As concerns all shelters operating in Helsinki, the city authorities and the organisations operating the shelters have cooperated in composing plans for basic renovations, and operational modifications. Some basic renovations of shelters are due to commence this year, while most will begin in 2010. After the basic renovations, the number of beds in the shelters will be cut in half, because the shelters will be converted into supported housing units operating on a new basis. Supported housing units offer a form of accommodation intended for the long-term homeless, closest in comparison with service housing for the elderly with 24-hour care. Supported housing units are intended for homeless people with multiple problems in need of a lot of support, and it is the key element in implementing the new principle of 'housing first'.

In brief, supported housing units can be described as follows: housing is primarily long-term accommodation, based on tenancy or on a care agreement. Hence, this is not temporary or fixed-term housing, from which the resident should move to another form of housing after rehabilitation. Residents are not required to commit themselves to certain rehabilitation targets, even though the intention is to provide active support for reaching them. However, placement in a supported housing unit facilitates rehabilitation far better than accommodation in a shelter.

The basic principle in designing facilities for supported housing units is to ensure sufficient privacy which, in practical terms, means a personal residence lockable with a key for each resident. The residences are typically of different sizes, in most cases fairly small units with toilet and bathroom facilities and, variably, with kitchen facilities. The premises in old shelters pose special restrictions on room space arrangements, but the intention is to group the residences into small units comprising of a few apartments, with shared common facilities.



However, the major change necessary in comparison with shelter accommodation is the human resource capacity allocated to the units. The requirement for supported housing units is one support worker with training in social services, per two residents. The human resource allocation comes close to the equivalent in care for the elderly. The units are also staffed on a 24/7 basis. This human resource allocation is estimated to suffice in securing the residents support that meets their needs. Naturally, residents in supported housing units are entitled to use the same social and health services as other citizens.

The conversion programme of shelters poses special challenges to the finances of the organisations managing the units. As the capacity of the units decreases, their income, based on payments, risks decreasing. In order for the units to be able to ensure sufficient human resources, with rents reasonable even from the residents' viewpoint, basic renovations will be granted government subsidies and other subsidies of up to 50%, as well as advantageous loans.

The elimination of shelters does not mean that Finland will not offer emergency housing to the homeless in acute need of help. In this respect, too, a service modernisation process is underway. The aim is to abandon even the former low threshold emergency shelters that offer accommodation for those in need of acute help, and to replace them with service centres for homeless people. These centres are engaged in active and target-oriented work, forming a kind of system of reception and assessment units. The first such unit was recently inaugurated in Helsinki.

The service centre on Hietaniemenkatu in Helsinki offers a 24/7 emergency accommodation service, with 47 beds for men and 8 for women. This service is intended for homeless people without a place to sleep, and is provided free-of-charge. In addition to the emergency service, the unit offers temporary accommodation with 43 beds for men and 9 for women. Moreover, the unit runs a day centre operation offering meals, washing facilities and a self-service laundry. The centre employs staff comprising professionals in both the social and health care sectors. All homeless people that arrive at the centre undergo a situation review and, if necessary, a personal service plan is prepared for them, including a plan for a permanent housing solution and, if need be, care and support. No-one stays in the centre on a long-term basis.

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