

It is about ending homelessness

A short personal note

The first time I worked with homelessness was in the 1980s, first as a social worker and later for several years I was responsible of the daily services for homeless people in the City of Helsinki. After 20 years in developing social services as a researcher and consultant I returned to homelessness sector in 2007. I was invited as a secretary in the group appointed by Minister of Housing to outline principles for a new homelessness policy in Finland. From 2008 to 2012 I worked as the program leader in the National Program to End Long-term Homelessness. Before retiring in 2022 I worked for nine years as the CEO of Y-Foundation, which is the biggest non-profit organisation in Finland providing housing for people experiencing homelessness and affordable housing for people with low incomes. Today Y-Foundation has over 19000 homes and it is the 4th biggest landlord in the country.

This is what I have learned of ending homelessness, so far.

Changing the perspective

Year 2008 was a turning point in Finland. The old way to tackle homelessness had come to the end of its road. The old, traditional way was the so-called staircase model where a homeless person is expected to move from ladder to ladder: first from living outdoors to shelters, then to supported housing and finally to independent living in an own rental apartment.

All experts agreed that this way was not realistic, it simply didn't work and help people out of homelessness. So, we had to change perspective. If we think that housing, a safe decent place to live, is a basic human right, we must act accordingly. Out of these discussions was born a new approach which we labelled Housing First.

For us Housing First is a systemic, basic philosophy, not a specific service model mainly focusing on a limited group of homeless people with complex problems. We start with an obvious fact: no matter what are the reasons that someone ends in homelessness, the only common thing with all homeless people is that they lack a home.

For us the starting point is housing, a permanent place to live, an apartment with your own rental contract. Housing is the foundation for living which gives possibilities to solve other problems one might have. But it is not only housing. People have different needs, some may need more intensive support, and you have to tailor the support according to each individual's needs.

In practice this means that there has to be different housing solutions and different support arrangements. In Finland the main option has been for a longtime an independent scattered site rental apartment with support if the person needs and wants it. Living completely on your own is not a perfect solution to everyone. Some may need a more community type housing. For this reason another option is available. Supported housing units provide independent rental apartments in a housing block with common facilities like a community kitchen and on-site staff to provide support.

Most of the former shelters and hostels have been renovated and converted into supported housing units. This has been a consistent policy. We recognise that a certain amount of crisis accommodation is always needed, especially in a country with cold winter, but if shelters are the only or main solution, we know from experience that it is not ending

homelessness. In our statistics people living in shelters or other forms of temporary accommodation are still homeless.

What it takes to end homelessness

The easiest, cheapest and most effective way to end homelessness is simply to prevent it from happening at all. Here again we must talk about housing. Prevention is not possible if there are not enough homes available, homes that people can afford. The best structural element of prevention is affordable social housing which in Finland has been subsidised by the State. In recent years different forms of social work -based prevention has been developed like housing advice services which quite successfully has managed to prevent evictions.

In theory homelessness is a simple social problem. We know the solutions. It all starts with housing, some people may need support or services for their social and health problems, and all need means, income for daily living and to pay the rent. So why is it so difficult?

To provide housing and services for people in homelessness costs, but we also know that it costs less in the long run than keeping people in homelessness.

In Finland with our self-styled Housing First policy we managed to reduce homelessness significantly during ten years. Now, sadly homelessness is rising again because the Government has cut social welfare benefits and housing support. Our present Government has a blind faith that free market will solve all problems. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support this ideological view. But we won't give up and the work continues.

Ending homelessness is a question about human value and human rights and therefore it should be an issue for the whole society. It takes passionate individuals to do the hard work, but it also requires wise, value-based decisions from our politicians. It doesn't matter what names we give to our policies. The only thing that matters is what do the people experiencing homelessness gain from our efforts at the end of the day, both literally and metaphorically speaking.

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