

“HOUSING FIRST IN POLAND – WHY THIS WAY?” EDITORIAL BY JULIA WYGNAŃSKA

The “Housing First” programme was developed by Dr Sam Tsemberis from the New York-based organisation Pathways to Housing Inc. in the 1990s. It is addressed to a group of people in an extremely difficult life situation: persons who have been experiencing homelessness and using traditional help (meal centres, night shelters, shelters, transitory housing) for many years, but nevertheless still remain homeless. Under the programme, people are first offered transferral to an independent flat, meeting (depending on the financial abilities of the person and the programme) their expectations in terms of its location, neighbourhood and furnishing, and only secondly, basing on the sense of security resulting from having “one’s own” place, they are offered the commencement of the difficult work on their serious problems which are normally connected with chronic homelessness, such as mental disorders, addiction, physical health, social relations and interpersonal skills. The sequence in which the assistance is provided has been reversed – in the traditional “ladder” or “staircase” systems, people need to show that they deserve independent housing by proving their “housing readiness” and showing progress in their therapy as manifested in the maintenance of sobriety, improvement of relations with their families, and having work. In the case of people for whom the “Housing First” programme was developed, reaching housing readiness and progress is an endless process, and they never reach the prize in the form of housing.

The Polish system of assistance to persons experiencing homelessness is such a traditional ladder or staircase system, under which the provided “roof over one’s head” is marked by a minimum physical standard and overcrowding. There are some individual novelties in the form of programmes based on supported, training flats, which to some extent draw on the idea of “Housing First”. However, these novel solutions do not change the nature of the system and do not solve the problem of long-term homelessness.

This publication is to convince you – the reader – that we need a change and provides some advice on how to introduce it. The ideas on which the “Housing First” programme is based have become a flywheel of deep changes in assistance systems in many places globally.

Chapter one sums up the results of research showing that there are potential clients of “Housing First” programmes among people experiencing homelessness in Poland. They are people suffering from mental disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, personality disorders and addiction to substances, who have been trying to “move out of” homelessness in the traditional system for many years. We can meet them both in individual shelters and in non-inhabitable places, and they can be seen among users of services provided to the homeless in Warsaw and among persons counted as homeless in the national count. In the course of their homelessness, they have been the subjects of interest to a variety of institutions dealing with

social welfare, health, employment, and the law, but this has never translated into the end of their homelessness. They are still on the street.

In chapter two and three we share our ideas on how to implement the “Housing First” programme in the Polish system of housing assistance, community psychiatry and social assistance, which is very demanding and includes many barriers. Having got acquainted in detail with Tsemberis’s programme, our experts carried out an in-depth analysis of possibilities, and found out that the implementation of programmes based on the Housing First programme is feasible.

The four chapters in the last, largest part of our publication contain the Polish language version of the source guide on the “Housing First” programme written by Sam Tsemberis, its founding father, in 2010. We can therefore learn straight from the programme’s creator what principles the programme is based on, what to start with when implementing the programme, how to organise housing assistance and how to provide specialist support to its clients. This part is rich in the testimonies of those clients of the “Housing First” programme, who owing to it found new life.

“Housing First” in Poland – why this way?” is a book written by experts involved in the “Housing First – Advocacy Based on Evidence” project implemented owing to the co-financing obtained under the Citizens for Democracy programme from EEA funds by Fundacja Ius Medicinæ in 2014-2016. It is the

voice of people who know homelessness second-handed: via their professional or private contacts with persons experiencing homelessness and suffering from mental crisis, and, perhaps mainly, from reports and studies describing the life of the homeless. Our expert experience tells us, however, that voices “in favour” of the “Housing First” programme are cast by our neighbours living next to our homes among the bushes, in allotment huts and bin shelters, sometimes in night and other shelters, sometimes at a friend’s place, sometimes on the bus. We are only strengthening these voices and trying to make them more convincing to you. Home is *the* base behind the sense of security in life, the basic human need and the right we can all try to implement.

