

Title: Homelessness is a question of will.

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Introduction

Four issues are in the forefront with the homelessness issue in Finland: 1. The government embarked on a plan to half homelessness by eradicating shelters and replacing them with support housing. This project would span three years; 2008-2011¹, 2. Entering the year 2009 this plan is stagnant. This is largely due to the NIMBY effect (“not in my backyard”) which is currently in full force reeling from the political and media backdrop of the recent Municipal elections in November 2008, and 4. The global state of affairs and the looming international threat to the Finnish economy is already starting to show effect to the homelessness issue.

The chronic homeless of Helsinki today are mostly men that fell out of the system during the previous economic depression and time of unemployment in the early and mid 1990’s when Finland suffered a recession.² Should we now be worried that there is another generation of homeless coming from the current economic turn of events?

Homelessness in Finland is an effect of multitude of causes, a complex web of health and social issues. It is therefore important to study carefully and implement measures that are likely to support and strengthen existing societal structures.

NIMBY

Timo Kopomaa (2005), in his study about the possible NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) effect on support housing plans, discovered that the successful endeavours have all managed to take care of the following issues:

- Suitable place
- Local dialogue
- Good planning
- Managed image

¹ Ohjelmatyöryhmä AHKERAT Report, (10.1.2008) ”Pitkäaikaisasunnottomuuden poistaminen vuoteen 2015 mennessä - Pitkäaikaisasunnottomuuden vähentämisohjelma”, Helsinki.

² Unemployment rate rose from 2% to be higher than 12% for 5 years between 1992-1997 (Wikipedia - Internet)

- Winning the fight with media
- Control and support, and
- Sensitive management of the environment issues³

He therefore concludes, taking care of these issues in the future should also lead to positive and easy integration of social housing into the already existing neighbourhoods potentially feeling threatened by the social vices that might come along with the new housing plans.

The most important point to come from Kopomaa (2005) study is that the NIMBY effect in Finland is often met with the more educated and better off middle-classes than with areas that have had to deal more with the issues beforehand, namely poorer neighbourhoods; areas with houses rather than flats, areas with distinct borders and specifically areas where the residents can feel an invasion or a threat from outside to their neighbourhood. From this, it is therefore clear that if the government would carry out a sensitisation programme to counter the NIMBY effect, it would target this group of the more educated middle class.

The study on NIMBY effect was ordered by the Ministry for Environment for the new housing plan year 2005. During the next two years plan of action was studied starting from the "group of the wise" and ending to the action plan by the group AHKERAT January 2008. Now local observers say NIMBY effect has stagnated the program for support housing.⁴ From this we can see that this resistance was foreseen but nothing was done to counteract this phenomenon such that the project would run smoothly.

Stigma

Stigma fuels the NIMBY effect in Finland. The presence of stigma or the fear of stigma by an individual suffering from homelessness has a catalyst effect into chronic homelessness. Stigma can be life threatening. Outi Lithén, the former executive director to AIDS Tukikeskus - the biggest AIDS support centre in Finland - says that during the years of the AIDS scare in the 1980's more people were killed by the stigma than the disease itself.⁵ This unfortunately applies to homelessness as well. It is stigma that prevents the homeless from accessing much needed social and health services not to mention the housing itself. There are currently 2500 chronic homeless in Finland and 60% of them live in Helsinki.

The Finnish societal view on homelessness is that, it is a self inflicted condition. This is because the individuals who suffer from homelessness are normally unemployed alcoholics, in their fifties and they are viewed as rejecting the social welfare state.

Oxford University

The complexity of homelessness has led to a lot of research and practical trials and projects on how to best deal with different homelessness cases around the world. The University of Oxford course on

³ Timo Kopomaa, (2005) *Naapuruussuvaitsevuus - Tuetun asumisen ja palvelutoiminnan yhteys lähiympäristöön, asukasvaikuttamiseen ja kaupunkisuunnitteluun*, Ympäristöministeriö, Hankintakeskus, Helsinki.

⁴ Interview, Executive Director Saana Lehtonen, VVA ry, Helsinki, 30.12.2008.

⁵ Lithén, Outi (2 Jan. 2009), *YLE Teema*. YLE Television, Helsinki, (television program).

homelessness targets professionals working with the homeless. Two things that stand out about this course are the fact that there is no other course on homelessness enrolling professionals ranging from doctors to nurses to lobbyists to social workers to volunteers, in exchanging ideas and experiences together with world class experts. Secondly, the course provides a platform to gain knowledge and skills on how to better employ our existing working methods to suit the target group. This is facilitated by inter professional interaction and debate among the various professionals. As professionals, we all agree that the only way to avoid the 'revolving door syndrome' which plagues the chronic homeless is to provide them with more suitable accommodation to allow stability therefore better care. That would be support housing. The Finnish government realises this hence the Zero Shelters to support housing project 2008-2011. A year into this much anticipated plan, "Oskari" is still on the streets moving from shelter to street to shelter in -15 degrees Celsius.

Conclusions

The support housing project cannot happen in a vacuum. The whole Finnish society needs to come together and support the project for it to be a success. Efforts to do this should first be done before embarking on a project of this scale.

The Support housing plan 2008-2011 is currently stagnant. In writing this article, my aim is not to highlight where the project has gone wrong but to highlight the issues that I think are important to reignite this project. This initiative is a much needed one and should be given all the support it can so as to benefit not only the targeted group but Finnish society as a whole.

1. Having media as your partner.

It is quite evident that private media is less likely to support social welfare efforts such as the Support Housing Plan because they live off ratings and papers sold⁶. Public media, such as Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) for example, could make partnerships to promote the cause. It is a two way stream, if the YLE wants to survive they need to make partnerships with civil society and causes that justify their existence among private media.

2. Training responsible professional against stigma.

It is important to highlight the value of anti stigma campaigns among professionals that deal with this vulnerable group of homeless. To break the cycle of stigma and social exclusion, we must begin with the professionals that work with this group ranging from doctors to nurses to social workers to hostel wardens to receptionists. It is also evident that to be of better service to this group, all professionals involved should work together.

This would clearly have an effect as we belong to this group of the educated that are so much against the support housing programme in their neighbourhoods. The stigmatisation of this group primarily by the professionals that are in contact with them is the biggest enabler of chronic homelessness. The more we shun this group, the deeper they get engrossed into homelessness they are, which not only puts a strain on themselves, but on society as well primarily at the health system. As their problems become more complex, so do their health needs.

⁶ This conclusion was made in Council of Europe meeting on discrimination and media, Strassburg, 20.11.2008

3. Inter professional networking to combat the revolving door syndrome

Assertive outreach programmes and community work based methods would yield more results in fighting homelessness. At VVA ry (Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa), there is an outreach bus project (Yökiitäjä) which has proved to be very successful. Yökiitäjä is a nightly support centre for the homeless, offering information services on social benefits and a warm café with snacks. Also some nursing services and first aid are available. The bus has certain stops during the night in Helsinki and the near district. This is the only such project in the city of Helsinki. One of the vices of the Social Welfare system in Finland is the bureaucracy and no community work based methods, therefore leaving this responsibility to 3rd sector organisations like VVA ry. We clearly need to adopt new working methods. Either the Social Welfare system should adopt new working methods and employ a more hands on approach or then the 3rd sector should be met with much increased funding.

The revolving door syndrome needs to be addressed, Support Housing plan, 2008-2011, NIMBY works against progress and stigma leads to social exclusion of the homeless. University of Oxford offers a unique opportunity to learn to plan and execute considering all the complexities of the issue. It has created a forum much needed in this field.

There is a Ndebele proverb that says good luck does not come twice. We are in a very fortunate position to have a national plan to eradicate homelessness. This is historical. With the University of Oxford Programme, such a programme is unprecedented. We have the means. There is no alternative to fail. "Oskari" has the right to have a door to call his own .