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**Preventing Youth
Homelessness:
Case Studies from
across Europe and
North America**



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Preventing Youth Homelessness through Housing First?

Experiences and Perspectives in Vienna

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The support system for homeless people in Vienna has set itself the goal of establishing and strengthening integrated or “community based” services. This has mainly been discussed via the implementation of the Housing First model. Housing First can thus be seen as an opportunity to initialize and speed up a process of de-institutionalisation of the Viennese Homelessness Sector.

Homelessness in youth and young adulthood often comes along with a history of foster care. The youth welfare system in Vienna demonstrates that inclusive and community-based care is possible and that as a result of a political and professional movement which has led to the closing down of large institutional facilities, youngsters who do not live with their family can now be housed in foster families or in shared apartments. However the end of youth welfare’s responsibility¹ remains a crucial biographical moment concerning the housing situation. It does sometimes – and too often – lead to being houseless or to living in institutions within the Viennese Homelessness Sector.

Consistent with an evaluation at the European level (Aldanas 2016), an evaluation of the Viennese Homelessness Sector (L&R 2012: S. 75) states that the transition of youth care to young adulthood needs better guidance. We consider the existing projects which work on that interface as good practice examples.² But bearing in mind the aim to de-institutionalize the Viennese Homelessness Sector as well as the fact that young people do have to leave institutions within the Viennese Homelessness Sector more often because of a violation of institutional rules (L&R 2012: S. 76), it is reasonable to go one step further and guide young people – e.g. by an Housing First service – to independent living without the precondition of (successfully) living in an institution.

HOUSING FIRST IN VIENNA

The Housing First Model has been implemented in Vienna since 2012, after which it was adapted to the local requirements and structural conditions of the social system in Vienna by experts in the field of homelessness. (FSW 2012a) The evaluation of the three years implementation phase shows its potentials and successes. (L&R 2015; Neunerhaus 2015)

The following five principles have been formulated as “Housing First – The Viennese Model” (FSW 2012a, FSW 2012b):

- Direct access to one’s own permanent housing and tenancy agreement.
- Separation of housing management and personal assistance.
- Social inclusion.
- Self-determination and participation.
- Flexible Support for individual needs.

The target group was defined as “homeless persons (families, couples and individuals) who are in need of support and who see tenancy as a desirable goal in their lives.” (FSW 2012a) People with special needs are included as well as people in temporary crisis. The broad definition within the “Viennese Model” does not formulate a specific focus relating to age.

The separation of housing management and personal assistance is seen as a key element, as it changes the relation between social worker and tenant. The conditions governing the social support are fundamentally different: enforcing sanctions, such as a ban from entering the house, are simply not in the social worker’s repertoire, which allows them to engage in negotiation processes on an equal footing. That means that Housing First upholds key social work objectives. (Neunerhaus 2015)

Housing First is particularly feasible for supporting a broad target group, as it allows flexibility within the service and can be intensified through additional mobile support from other supporting systems (e.g. mobile services for disabled people, elderly people and mental health services). In Vienna it is explicitly intended to make use of existing support systems. The implementation of Housing First can thereby improve the interfaces between different support systems and provides an opportunity not only for the homelessness sector, but for the Viennese social system to achieve inclusion and trans-sectoral community-based care.

1 At the age of 18, in some cases at the age of 21

2 The overnight shelters “Away” provides emergency accommodation especially for young homeless (16 to 21 years of age), with the possibility to prolong their services if a longer term housing solution is to be expected. The transitional shelter for youth “JUCA” has a cooperation with the department for youth in order to avoid rough sleeping.



SUFFICIENT ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING AS A PRECONDITION

Currently the Housing First Model reaches around 200 people, which is small compared to the total number of around 4.300 places and nearly 10.000 homeless people within the Viennese Homelessness Sector (MA 24 2015: 156).

Access to affordable housing is an issue for the Homelessness Sector as a whole. Transitional shelters struggle to ensure a transition to independent living – in particular since the criteria for social housing were changed in 2015 and became even stricter for people affected by homelessness.

Sufficient access to affordable housing is a precondition for the Homelessness Sector and especially for scaling up Housing First. The 2015 Viennese coalition agreement indicates political will to continue the strategy of de-institutionalization. The interface between social and housing departments seems extremely crucial for a successful amplification; keeping in mind that the City of Vienna owns one quarter of the Viennese apartments and has the right to allocate in total around 11.000 apartments per year.

HOUSING FIRST IN VIENNA: FOR YOUTH?

A policy paper on Young Homelessness – which was published by a working group of professionals in 2014 – formulates specific demands for the target group. Among other things they ask for is more floating support and Housing First services to allow young people to move into independent living. (AG Junge Wohnungslose 2014: 15)

More than three years of experience show that Housing First in Vienna is effectively supporting young individuals and families too but that the access to these services is insufficient. We can therefore agree with Stephen Gaetz (e.g. 2014), that Housing First works for youth, as it works for everybody. The question is rather, how to adapt and develop Housing First in the specific local and structural conditions to (better) meet the needs of young people. Or, to put it differently, what are interfaces that have to be strengthened to ensure sufficient access to affordable housing as well as inclusive and tailored support for young people at risk of housing exclusion?

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