

Evaluation of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless

Abstract

Client:

Umbrella organisation of Vienna Social Institutions

Dachverband Wiener Sozialeinrichtungen

Authors:

Andreas Riesenfelder, Susanne Schelepa, Petra Wetzel

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1 Overview of the study

Topic	Evaluation of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless – Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe (WWH)
Client	Umbrella organisation of Vienna Social Institutions - Dachverband Wiener Sozialeinrichtungen 1070 Vienna, Seidengasse 9 office@dachverband.at
Project partners	Vienna Social Fund - Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW) 1030 Vienna, Guglgasse 7-9 wwh@fsw.at Municipal Department 24 – Health Care and Social Welfare Planning - Magistrat der Stadt Wien - Gesundheits- und Sozialplanung 1080 Vienna, Buchfeldgasse 6 post@ma24.Vienna.gv.at Association of Service Providers for the Homeless in Vienna – Verband Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe 1030 Vienna, Schlachthausgasse 41a office@verband-wwh.at
Agent	L&R Social Research 1060 Vienna, Liniengasse 2A Mag. Andreas Riesenfelder; riesenfelder@lrsocialresearch.at
Objective of the study	Analysis of offers, interfaces and forms of cooperation as well as effectiveness and success of the WWH, identification of problem areas of the target groups
Empirical implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preparation and analysis of longitudinal data, based on monitoring data of the facilities of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless (WWH) in the years 2006 to 2010 for subsequent illustration of individual courses of utilisation of offers and information about clients remaining in offers; n=38,330 ■ Personal interviews with clients of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless who were currently using housing and sleeping offers, conducted between September 2011 and January 2012; analyses by types of offer; n=201 ■ Qualitative problem-centred depth interviews with skilled workers of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless and with experts: individual persons and teams occupied in the facilities and in collaborating organisations; n=31 ■ Reflection on seven concepts from the area of work with homeless people in the form of a brief, written, open-ended questionnaire addressed to the skilled workforce working with homeless people (operative, strategic); returned questionnaires n=98
Project period	August 2011 – August 2012

2 The system of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless (WWH)

In Vienna a variety of offers exists in the field of aid for homeless people, which looks back on a longstanding tradition. The Vienna Social Fund (FSW), in close networking with various collaborating organisations, provides funding for this variety of offers. The number of collaboration partners has grown to comprise 21 organisations at present. As renowned partners of the FSW, they are significantly involved in the provision of a wide spectrum of services, with the result that, with more than 4,500 night shelters and housing places and a number of out-

patient services, more than 85 different offers are currently providing assistance for homeless people.

A tailored offer for a heterogeneous target group

The causes of homelessness and the circumstances surrounding it are manifold and have to be viewed in the context of the individual biographies of the affected persons and other factors that additionally complicate their current life situation. The lives of many people who seek contact with the WWH have been shaped by a series of potentially problematic experiences. The most important thematic areas are manifest poverty, the failure to be integrated in working life, health problems in the areas of physical health, mental health or addiction, or social crises in the family or partnership, and almost all of the clients have experienced problems in one or more of these areas. Among the “typically female” problem factors in the individual life stories are psychological and mental health problems as well as serious conflicts in their partnerships: more than half of the female clients have been affected by each of these biographical factors. Among the “typically male” problem factors are addictive patterns in relation with alcohol and drug abuse (more than half of the clients), while former prison convicts are also typically found in this group.

More men than women first establish contact with the WWH out of a situation of homelessness. However, the majority of clients, male and female, come from secure housing situations, about a fifth of them from outside Vienna. The causes for the termination of housing situations are undoubtedly gender-specific: for men the causes are mostly of a financial kind; for women, on the other hand, conflicts with persons and ending of partnerships play an additional important role in the loss of their home.

In response to these varied and often accumulated risk factors, which are related either to psychological/physical or addictive conditions, to problematic relationships or to the client’s original family situation, a differentiated assistance offer has been developed in Vienna. The target group specific interviews have shown that:

- The clientele of transitional housing is characterised above average by persons who have had problems with alcohol or drug abuse in the past. More former prison convicts are also found in this group than in other offers.
- In facilities of transitional accommodation for specific target groups and in facilities of mother and child offers and family offers, more clients were affected by serious crises in their partnerships than clients of other types of offers. The aspect of psychological and mental health also plays a greater role in the biography of clients of this offer than other offers.
- Clients of supervised housing in apartments on the other hand are rarely affected by risk factors related to addiction, but experiences like frequent change of housing or dropping out of school as well as psychological and mental burdens are more commonly found in their biographies than in those of clients of other types of offers.
- The offer of supported living, where people live in their own, permanent apartments, is characterised mainly by the aspect of the clients’ physical health.

3 The offers of the WWH as viewed by the clients

From the clients' point of view the most important evaluation criteria involve the housing itself (reliability of accommodation, cleanliness, privacy and safety for the people and their belongings) and aspects related to the quality of support provided by the skilled workers of the WWH. On average, in the majority of offers clients assess these aspects as good to very good. Clients of the offer of general transitional accommodation are on average more critical in their assessment of these two thematic areas, although it is likely that the main reasons for this are the fact that these clients tend to show a higher degree of subjectively perceived pressure and the fact that the facilities are considerably larger in the field of transitional accommodation compared to other offers. The assessment of the same aspects by people who use night shelters is also below average; however, on the other hand night shelters also received the best assessment in the category "No waiting times for accommodation", which shows that the question of ensuring a low threshold in the accessibility of the services of the WWH is very well managed.

The assessment as to whether the respective offer is appropriate for the client's individual life situation differs in a similar way between the various groups. Assessment of the consideration given to their individual needs provided by clients of facilities of supported housing, accommodation for specific target groups and socially supported housing is at a similar high level (87% to 92% agreed that the offer was appropriate). The group using general transitional accommodation and the group using night shelters give a slightly less positive assessment of this aspect. Persons in larger facilities and with lower support levels tend to assess the offers more critically, which is an indication of the great importance of skilled workers: when positive assessment is given, this is largely attributed to their work, since clients mostly explain their positive assessment with the fact that they feel that they have someone they can talk to, that they feel that they are taken seriously and that their problems and concerns are being heard.

With the exception of clients of socially supported housing, the great majority (over 80%) would like to go back to living independently in their own flat in the long term. The persons concerned feel that achieving this goal will require material security, which must be reached through a regular and sufficient income from employment, reduction of debts and saving for agency's fees and deposit.

4 Courses of utilisation of the WWH

The counselling offers of the WWH are of vital and ever increasing importance for the first establishment of contact. Information on offers reaches the homeless clients essentially via informal sources.

The persons concerned access support services of the WWH in a frequently discontinuous way through repeatedly abandoning offers, changing between different types of offers, and re-entering offers: 8% to 10% of the current clients of an offer have used the same offer in the previous two years; without taking into account a restricted period of observation, this percentage is as high as 15% to 28% in some cases.

Many clients are informed of the existence of offers which extend beyond housing and night shelter, as well as of complementary offers of the WWH, and have accessed them in many

cases: the access rate in the area of various counselling offers is at approximately 80%, in the area of medical offers at approximately 29%.

5 Effectiveness of the offers of the WWH

The most desired effect of support is for the clients to be placed in a final home (council housing, private rent, association housing/ private property). The analysis of clients remaining in the offer based on longitudinal data shows the effectiveness of the various offers in this respect. Between 5% of leavers of the permanent housing form of socially supported housing and up to 55% of leavers of the relatively high-threshold offers of supported housing and mother and child facilities change over to a final housing solution after utilisation of an offer. The percentage is only half as high in the area of transitional accommodation; however, in this area a relatively high percentage of the clients change over to other, specialised types of offers of the WWH.

Measuring the success of assistance for homeless people should be based on the different preconditions and individual risk situations and not only on the eventual placement in a final home. Thus, in the evaluation, the question about effectiveness was posed in terms of broad access in an effort to find any improvement reached in various areas of life of the clients from the moment they first established contact with the WWH.¹

- **Income, employment and life maintenance.** The life area of housing is strongly connected with material life maintenance, which again is connected with employment; one fifth of clients of the WWH have employment. Not many clients are able to increase their mid-term integration in working life²; the areas of accommodation for specific target groups and supported housing show the highest rates in this respect (30% and 25% respectively). When contemplating also other forms of income (transfer payments), 43% to 55% of clients experience an increase. This means that even if there is no significant increase in working life integration, subjectively felt positive effects of the assistance can still clearly be achieved: 33% to 60% of interviewed clients experienced a subjective improvement of their employment situation through, amongst other reasons, a perceived (re-)introduction to the world of employment.
- **Social environment.** Improvement in the life area of the social environment can be of vital importance for social integration (establishment of new contacts), but also in cases of conflictive relationships in the family or with the life partner and especially for ensuring psychological stability. 36% to 56% of clients subjectively perceive an improvement of their situation in this respect.
- **Health.** The clients seem to be particularly burdened in this respect: approximately three quarters of clients are confronted with one or more health problems. About 43% of the clients report an improvement of their physical condition. Approximately two thirds of clients with psychological problems can improve their situation thanks to the assistance provided by the WWH; this is also due to the fact that acute homelessness is often experienced as a factor which increases psychological distress.

¹ Clients of night shelters are not contemplated in the following due to their frequently short stays in the system of the WWH. For detailed information see report.

² Increase in days with income from employment compared with the previous year

6 Interfaces and cooperation

A network of the size of the WWH, which aims at providing a stringent system service in order to be able to offer optimal assistance for clients, requires a considerable number of interfaces and coordination measures. On the whole, strategic networking and coordination with collaborating organisations and facilities is functioning very well; on the other hand there is room for optimising aspects in the practical implementation of the assistance provided for clients.

- **Internal interfaces within the system of the WWH.** In isolated cases, cooperation in the field of direct work with the clients shows weaknesses related to transparency and the uniformity of the conception of access criteria for all those involved, the question of possible case transfers (transfer management) and follow-up care for the clients upon leaving the WWH. In all of these three areas, discussion processes, and in some cases even corresponding projects, have been initiated.
- **External interfaces.** The facilities of the WWH cooperate with a variety of external organisations, covering all life areas of the clients. The interface with Municipal Department 40 (Social Welfare, Social and Public Health Law) is viewed as showing a relatively high threshold on a structural level as regards the securing of life maintenance. In the field of health, special importance is given to collaboration with professionals from the area of mental health; in this field cooperation with the liaison psychiatric service is characterised as very good but as insufficient in quantity. Cooperation with stationary facilities on the other hand is more problematic, especially the area of release management. The third area to be mentioned in the field of external interfaces is youth aid, since the reduction of the transition point between youth aid and adult aid with special regard to the target group of young adults should receive more attention.

7 Summary

The months of field work in the framework of the evaluation confirmed a high quality of the services offered and great involvement on behalf of the skilled workers of the system of the Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless. As revealed by the empirical results of this study, the causes for homelessness as well as the biographical characteristics and risk profiles of the clients vary greatly in nature and thus require a differentiated approach to the form of assistance offered. The heterogeneity of the target group is met by the wide range of offers provided by the WWH, ranging from night shelters to transitional accommodation, accommodation for specific target groups, mother and child facilities and family facilities, supervised housing in apartments and permanent housing in the framework of socially supported housing. It seems that a strong willingness to innovate on behalf of all those involved and a high disposition for content networking are the reasons why, in spite of the wide range of offers, no significant unnecessary duplication could be observed. All in all, the contents and forms of offers showed high levels of variety and quality. Correspondingly, it has been possible for considerable success rates and essential steps to be achieved by a large majority of the various target groups in their pursuance of independent living.