Housing First Policy

Submitted By: Ministry of the Environment (Finland)

Organization Profile

Organization Name: Misc. (implemented by multitude of stakeholders)

Organization Type: National government

Website: https://ym.fi/en/front-page

Practice Details

Country(ies): Finland

City(ies): European cities

Start Year: 2008 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

In 2008, the Finnish government introduced the Housing First policy, aimed at eradicating long-term homelessness. This is a human rights-based strategy that provides housing and social services. Through partnerships between the state, cities, municipalities, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The "Housing First" policy in Europe provides permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness without requiring them to meet conditions such as sobriety or treatment engagement, believing that housing provides the stability to address other issues. While it is a well-recognized evidence-based solution to homelessness, its implementation varies, though the principle is being adapted in cities and supported by organizations like the Housing First Europe Hub.

Solution Developed

Housing First solves long-term homelessness by gradually reducing and abandoning the use of conventional short-term shelters and converting them into affordable rented accommodation units. The policy prioritizes people currently living on the streets, in temporary shelters and hostels. It also targets people at risk of becoming homeless, such as young people, people undergoing rehabilitation, or homeless released prisoners. Everyone is entitled to a settled place to live, regardless of circumstance, reversing traditional homeless aid approaches. Having stable living conditions makes it easier to look for a job and work on psychological and health problems. Homeless people can get an apartment without any preconditions. Being in a more secure position and having social worker support make it easier for them to find a job and take care of their physical and mental health.

Implementation

The framework respects choice and autonomy, allowing individuals to select treatments and services. Individuals are not required to solve social and health issues beforehand, like completely giving up alcohol or drug use. Moreover, support is tailored to the needs of the person, and this is made possible due to the high standards of public social services. Program staff undertake periodic visits to tenants to direct them to necessary health and social services through government or non-governmental institutions. The program targets individuals who have been experiencing homelessness for over a year or with recurring episodes in the last three years.

Enablers & Obstacles

Political commitment from senior officials, such as cabinet members or directors, is critical for aligning Housing First with strategic priorities.

When homelessness is a political priority, Housing First gains traction due to its alignment with goals of reducing public service costs and improving social outcomes. Collaboration with nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and advocacy groups, as seen in the U.S., leverages community resources and trust to deliver services effectively. Regulatory frameworks that allow rapid housing access, such as relaxed tenancy requirements or rent subsidies, are vital. In Finland, Y-Säätiö's model uses government-backed housing subsidies to ensure affordability. Policies that prioritize housing as a right, remove barriers like sobriety requirements, enabling broader access.

Results & Impact

The policy has gradually reduced the reliance on conventional short-term shelters, transforming them into affordable rented accommodation units. From 2008 to 2022, the number of individuals experiencing long-term homelessness in Finland decreased by 68 percent.

Replication & Scale Up

The same practice has been replicated mostly in some other European countries with varying degrees of success.

Scaling it up involves expanding from pilots or local programs to broader regional, national, or international levels to reach more individuals experiencing homelessness. This requires coordinated efforts across policy, funding, housing supply, services, and community engagement.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

Housing First has profoundly informed policy by providing a blueprint for rights-based, cost-effective homelessness solutions, leading to integrations in strategies like the Dutch and Irish plans, and pilots in the US and Europe.

Lessons & Takeaways

Housing First offers a proven framework for reducing homelessness, with lessons emphasizing evidence, political will, housing supply, and tailored services. Takeaways include the need for sustained funding, community engagement, and adaptations for specific groups while addressing systemic inequities.

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Note

Housing First model is implemented by the state, wellbeing services counties, municipality or city (and within them, for example, social services and/or health care), companies, organizations, real estate companies, property owners and developers.