

ABSTRACT

Housing First – ‘Das Wiener Modell’ (Housing First - The Viennese Model)

Housing First is an approach developed in the U.S., in which homeless persons are given access to accommodation of their own and, if needed, provided with mobile support in their homes. The effectiveness of this approach in terms of residential stability, health, consumption of drugs and customer satisfaction has been evaluated with very good results, and in the international discourse Housing First is seen as an alternative to the common ‘staircase model’ used in services for homeless persons, in which a transition has to be made step by step from emergency shelters to transitional housing and then to permanent accommodation. Housing First is a paradigm shift, where independent living is the starting and not the ending point of a service relationship – it is ‘housing first’ rather than ‘treatment first’.

The ‘Fonds Soziales Wien’ (designated by the City of Vienna), department of supported housing, together with the NGO ‘neunerhaus’, a service provider within the services for homeless persons, invited experts in the field of homelessness in Vienna to take the internationally discussed success criteria of Housing First and develop a Viennese model of Housing First that is adapted to the local requirements and structural conditions of the social system in Vienna.

‘The Viennese Model’ of Housing First is characterized by the following five principles:

1. Direct access to one’s own permanent housing. Direct access to one’s own apartment is the focus at the beginning of the professional support relationship. The leases in Housing First projects offer long-term residential security, which is essential for stabilization.
2. Separation of housing management and personal assistance. The mandates of housing management and social support are generally not connected. The dual roles of employees as social supporters and landlords in one person are avoided.
3. Promoting social inclusion. One’s own permanent housing is offered in a conventional housing environment, and social inclusion is promoted by supporting the development of social networks and daily routines.
4. Self-determination and participation. Social support is based on normalization as well as self-determination and participation on the part of users. This applies to the location and layout of the apartment as well as social inclusion.
5. Flexible support for individual needs. Individual support is given to ensure stabilization as regards the psychosocial situation and housing. If required, the support service co-operates with external resources and assistance systems. Advice and support can be continued even during long stays in hospital, imprisonment or loss of accommodation, thus ensuring continuity in crises.

The target group of the 'Viennese Model' consists of homeless persons (families, couples and individuals) who are in need of support and who see tenancy as a desirable goal in their lives. The 'Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe' (support system for homeless people in Vienna) sees Housing First as an opportunity for people with special needs who have not been able to achieve residential stability within the framework of the existing system. The new approach may also be a solution for individuals in temporary crises, who can be guided back to independent living without any of the negative effects of hospitalization through quick support and immediate re-location to an apartment.

The extent of the support is contingent on the individual needs of users. The support consists of the traditional areas of social work (case management, securing income, building relationships, etc.) with a special focus being placed on supporting integration in the neighbourhood. Social work is seen as the core profession in the Housing First support teams. Depending on the needs of the target group, other professions such as educationalists, social care workers and psychiatric nurses may be members of the teams. The underlying objective is for the service gradually to withdraw, while the users remain living in their apartments. If the service needs to be continued, it will be provided continuously by the general social system (external social services). Housing First requires co-operation between various fields, particularly housing, health and social affairs.

The following interfaces are of special importance within the 'Viennese Model':

- A rapid, transparent and, if necessary, mobile assessment and approval of support is necessary to ensure access to services through Housing First teams.
- The co-operation between Housing First teams and the offices in charge of the prevention of eviction is especially important in terms of averting homelessness and optimally using the existing social system.
- To ensure the availability of affordable housing, it will be necessary to develop co-operation with all sectors of the housing market (municipal housing, co-operative housing, subsidized new construction, private housing sector).
- The goal of Housing First in Vienna is to promote the best possible use of the existing social service system in the medical, psychiatric and nursing care fields, thereby preventing the occurrence of parallel structures. Collaborations with existing services in these areas need to be developed.

The implementation of Housing First in Vienna is to be seen as a process of de-institutionalization. In-patient (on-site) services in the field of transitional accommodation and night shelters will be reduced in favour of mobile services in apartments.

