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SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT – THE WAY TO INTEGRATION AND INDEPENDENCE FOR PEOPLE IN A HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

The supported employment model for homeless people is based on a holistic approach that combines professional, housing, health, and social support. The innovative nature of the presented model includes students as assistants supporting people in a homelessness crisis since young people particularly appreciate professional activity as a way to develop and meet basic needs and, as a result, to solve problems. Students make a personal effort and, at the same time, invest in their professional future. Simultaneously, their enthusiasm and commitment to solving some problems and their innovative approach may be important for the people who are supported in a homelessness crisis. A key element of the supported employment directed at such people is an individual approach to the needs of each person and long-term cooperation between institutions. Thanks to this, people with the problem of homelessness have a chance to permanently integrate into the labor market and return to full independence in their lives.

Keywords: homelessness, supported employment, student assistant, social integration of people in the homeless crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is one of the most serious social challenges of the modern world, which affects both individuals and entire communities. People with the problem of homelessness face a number of problems, including social exclusion, lack of access to basic services, as well as difficulties in returning to the labour market. One of the tools that can help overcome these problems is supported employment, which becomes a key element in the process of social reintegration of such people. It is an approach that is gaining popularity, both in Poland and around the world, as it gives a real chance for social and professional integration of people in a difficult life situation. It is becoming increasingly recognized as an effective method of social and economic integration that helps homeless people not only to return to the labour market, but also to rebuild their self-esteem and dignity.

The article will discuss the key aspects of supported employment for homeless people, its importance, benefits, as well as the challenges associated with the implementation of such programmes. The innovative approach involves the inclusion of support from students, whose resources may have significant impact on maintaining jobs by people with the problem of unemployment.

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People with the problem of homelessness, deprived of a stable place of residence, often remain on the margin of society, struggling with social, health and professional exclusion. Therefore, supported employment not only enables financial independence, but also contributes to the restoration of self-esteem and dignity.

In this article, I will discuss the supported employment model as a tool for the integration of people in the homelessness crisis, including student assistants in the help and activation.

2. HOMELESSNESS: SCALE, MAIN CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROBLEM

The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) assumes that there is no single correct definition of homelessness. This organization has developed a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion called ETHOS (FEANTSA, 2017; www.feast.org/download/pl_7386404743356865659.pdf). It draws attention to three aspects that shape the concept of home ownership: the physical aspect – i.e. having an adequate shelter from adverse weather conditions, the social aspect – having a suitable place where you can maintain privacy and social relations, giving satisfaction, and the legal aspect – a person has a legal title to occupy a given space. Failure to meet any of the conditions makes a person homeless.

Homelessness is a global and multifaceted phenomenon that affects people regardless of age, gender, or background (Fitzpatrick, Pleace, 2012). The current understanding of a person in the homelessness crisis in Poland is based on several criteria that are in line with European guidelines and Polish legal regulations (Królikowska, 2020; Olech, 2014).

A person in the homelessness crisis is a person who does not have a roof over their head, which may mean that they do not have access to a permanent, safe place to live. A homelessness crisis may include a variety of situations, such as:

1. **People without shelter** – living in non-residential places such as streets, parks, abandoned buildings, train stations, or other public spaces.
2. **People using night shelters or homeless shelters** – staying in temporary shelters offering basic assistance, such as night shelters, homeless shelters, warming centers, or similar facilities.
3. **People at risk of homelessness** – individuals who are at risk of losing their homes, due to reasons like eviction, financial problems, family conflicts, or other challenging life circumstances.
4. **People in institutions** – individuals residing in institutions such as hospitals, prisons or care facilities, who do not have the opportunity to return to a permanent residence after leaving these institutions.

In Poland, the definition of homelessness is also linked to the Social Assistance Act (consolidated text Journal of Laws 2024, item 1283, art. 6, sec. 8), which recognizes as homeless any person not residing in a residential unit, as defined by tenant protection laws, municipal housing resources, or not registered for permanent or temporary residence. This broad definition accounts for various aspects of homeless individuals' life situations to better tailor the social assistance system to their needs.

In February 2024, according to data from the National Survey on the Number of Homeless People in Poland, 31,042 individuals in homelessness crisis were identified, 80% of whom were men (24,880) and 20%: women (6,162) (<https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/wyniki-ogolnopolskiego-badania-liczby-osob-bezdomnych---edycja-2024>; published

28/06/2024). This number includes both people living on the street and those using night shelters, homeless shelters, or other forms of assistance (protected, training, and supported housing). Among the individuals surveyed, 23,404 (76%) were residing in institutional facilities, while 6,648 (21%) were outside such facilities, in public spaces and non-residential places.

Homelessness is also considered in other categories: “involuntary homelessness” (related to external factors), and voluntary, or “self-inflicted homelessness” (exclusion due to internal factors) (Pindral, 2010). While it is stereotypically believed that homeless individuals are often addicts or have “chosen” this lifestyle, the reality is much more complex, as homelessness is often caused by multiple factors simultaneously (Olech, 2014). According to data from the 2024 Polish National Survey on Homelessness, “the main causes of homelessness, as identified by respondents, were alcohol addiction (19%), family conflict (17%), and eviction/deregistration from housing (11%). Other significant causes included relationship breakdown (8%), unemployment/job loss (7%), and poor health/disability (7%)” (<https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/wyniki-ogolnopolskiego-badania-liczby-osob-bezdomnych---edycja-2024>, published 28.06.2024).

Economic and employment-related causes are among the primary drivers of homelessness, as their consequences often trigger problems in other areas – a cascade effect that can lead to the loss of housing, family issues, and the inability to meet basic life needs (Dębska-Cenian, 2021). Providing a steady income through supported employment can alleviate some of these issues. Unemployment among people in the homelessness crisis in Poland is one of the key social problems, affecting both the scale of homelessness and the difficulties in escaping it. Such individuals face numerous barriers to accessing the labor market, including the lack of stable housing, health issues (both physical and mental), as well as limited professional qualifications (Dębska-Cenian, 2021; Dębski, 2020; Gałęcki, Kubiak, 2019). At the same time, homelessness leads to a range of negative consequences for both individuals and the society (Królikowska, 2020). People experiencing homelessness suffer from deteriorating physical and mental health, an increased risk of addiction, and further social marginalization. Prolonged homelessness also makes individuals lose their sense of self-worth and faith in the possibility of changing their situation. Society, in turn, bears the costs related to healthcare, social assistance, and lost opportunities due to the underutilization of human potential.

3. SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT: KEY ELEMENTS

Supported employment is an approach aimed at helping individuals who face particular difficulties in finding and maintaining a job, to enter the labor market and integrate professionally (Abramowska, Miękina, 2020; Grzegorzczak, 2015; Miklewska, 2009; Włodarczyk, 2017). It is a comprehensive process that involves not only assistance in finding employment but also support before and during employment, with the goal of maintaining positive outcomes and changing previous habits as much as possible. It is highly effective in the professional activation of not only people experiencing homelessness but also individuals with disabilities, the unemployed for long periods, or those facing various difficult life situations.

The supported employment process consists of several key stages. The first step is the assessment of individual needs, skills, career goals, and the barriers that may hinder a person's ability to find and maintain employment. At this stage, it is important to identify

the type of support necessary to ensure the person can effectively function in the workplace. It is also vital to diagnose their strengths and potential limitations.

Based on the assessment carried out, an individual employment plan is created, which includes career goals, necessary training, and support forms such as coaching, career counseling, or psychological assistance (Gałecki, Kubiak, 2019). The next step involves actively searching for suitable job offers that align with the person's capabilities and aspirations as they return to the labor market while also dealing with other challenges (Abramowska, Miękina, 2020). At this stage, collaboration with employers who are ready to hire people with difficult backgrounds is crucial. Once employment is secured, individuals using supported employment services receive assistance in adapting to their new professional environment. This may include support in building relationships with colleagues, developing professional skills, as well as monitoring progress and overcoming difficulties.

Supported employment should not end once a job is found (Włodarczyk, 2017). Long-term assistance is often necessary to maintain employment and support professional development. This stage includes regular meetings with career counselors, coaching, or help in addressing workplace challenges.

4. SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT MODEL FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

People experiencing homelessness represent a unique social group among the unemployed (Abramowska, Miękina, 2020; Grzegorzczak, 2015; Olech, 2006). They face a number of barriers that make it difficult to find and maintain employment. The most significant ones include the lack of stable housing, and consequently, the lack of a place to stay, difficulties in registering for work, receiving mail, health issues (including mental health issues), the absence of adequate qualifications or work experience, and social exclusion (Gałecki, Kubiak, 2019), as well as problems with the access to transportation and to the internet. Homelessness is often associated with the loss of identification documents, which may prevent legal employment (Królikowska, 2020). The process of recovering such documents is often lengthy and costly, further complicating the situation of individuals in the homelessness crisis. The inability to maintain personal hygiene and the lack of clean and appropriate work clothes can also be barriers both in job searching and in the workplace.

People experiencing homelessness often face stigma and discrimination from employers, who may be prejudiced against them due to their life circumstances (Abramowska, Miękina, 2020; Grzegorzczak, 2015). This stigmatization, in turn, reduces their chances of being hired, even if they have the necessary qualifications. Unfortunately, homelessness often means limited or no access to education, resulting in reduced professional qualifications, which makes it difficult to find a job, especially in a market that increasingly demands specialized skills. Even if a homeless person does find employment, maintaining that job may be challenging due to the aforementioned issues – unstable living conditions, health problems, and most importantly, the lack of support in dealing with everyday problems.

People experiencing homelessness often lack support from family or friends, which may lead to social isolation. The absence of a support network makes it more difficult to find a job and cope with workplace challenges.

Supported employment helps to overcome these barriers through an individualized and holistic approach tailored to each person, addressing their needs and abilities while working closely with employers. This form of activation combines professional support with other types of assistance, such as housing, health, or psychological support (Abramowska, Miękina, 2020; Grzegorzczak, 2015; Włodarczyk, 2017). This holistic model allows for a comprehensive solution to the problems that contribute to homelessness, rather than focusing solely on one aspect of an individual's life.

4.1. Assessing Needs and Individual Approach

Like all supported employment programs, those aimed at helping people in the homelessness crisis begin with identifying individual needs and tailoring support to them as well as to the participants' expectations (Włodarczyk, 2017). Although the program includes consistent elements-stages, it is essentially personalized and flexible. People facing homelessness frequently have to deal with diverse problems, thus choosing adequate assistance increases the effectiveness of supported employment. The first stage requires an individual assessment of each person struggling with homelessness in order to understand their specific needs, skills, and barriers related to employment. This includes analyzing the person's previous work experience so as to build a tailored support plan that outlines a path to reenter the labor market, utilizing the resources of the person exiting homelessness while minimizing previously experienced failures. Additional forms of support, such as housing or healthcare assistance, are also planned.

4.2. Preparation for Employment

People experiencing homelessness often have not worked for many years or have qualifications that are not competitive in the job market. According to data from the National Study on the Number of Homeless People 2024:

Most homeless individuals have vocational education – 41%, and 29% have primary education. Secondary education, including technical, was reported by 17% of respondents. The number of people in the homelessness crisis with higher education has increased by 0.57% as compared to the 2019 survey, and currently, people with higher education account for 4% of the total homeless population (source, published 28.06.2024).

Given these limitations, it is crucial for people facing homelessness to be adequately prepared to find, secure, and maintain employment. It is also vital for prospective employees to have the competencies and qualifications that make them attractive to potential employers, ensuring that they are viewed in the light of their professional skills rather than the issues that led to their exclusion from the job market (Miklewska, 2009). To achieve this, vocational training and courses are organized, helping participants in supported employment programs improve their qualifications required in the job market. Future employees also have the opportunity to improve their social competencies through workshops on interpersonal communication, job interview preparation, building self-confidence, and even time management, as their lives will significantly change once they are employed (Miklewska, 2013).

For many people experiencing homelessness, preparing for work also involves starting regular medical treatment, including addiction therapy, so that health problems or substance use do not affect their professional functioning (Dębski, 2020). An essential

component of supported employment is providing psychological support to individuals struggling with homelessness, who wish to return to the job market. Past failures and fear of radical changes can discourage them from making such changes, which is why psychological support in supported employment is crucial at every stage of the model. Professional activity may also be challenging, but with the right support, it can be managed effectively. Regular sessions with a psychologist and/or career counselor help participants cope with the stress and concerns associated with returning to the job market.

People experiencing homelessness who are re-entering or entering the job market for the first time may face difficulties establishing contacts with employers. Career counselors and psychologists not only provide information on where and how to look for jobs but also prepare participants for interviews and support them throughout the process of application for various jobs (Abramowska, Miękina, 2020; Grzegorzczuk, 2015, Włodarczyk, 2017).

Given that many employers have reservations about hiring individuals in the homelessness crisis, an intermediary solution worth considering is offering internships and job placements. These allow employers to get to know potential employees, while people facing homelessness can experience professional activity. Psychologists and career counselors design such programs based on their knowledge of their clients' needs and capabilities, in collaboration with local companies that provide opportunities for gaining initial work experience. Incentives for employers to participate in supported employment programs for people experiencing homelessness often include wage subsidies or other financial incentives tied to involvement in these programs.

4.3. Support for Individuals in the homelessness crisis During and After Employment

People experiencing homelessness who have been out of the job market for an extended period of time often struggle to adapt to a new professional environment and a different daily structure. They may face challenges in following workplace rules, building relationships with coworkers, or managing time. Therefore, it is crucial to provide them with adequate support and to monitor their progress in the process of adaptation. Without this support, there is a risk of rapid burnout, difficulty in adjusting, or even job loss.

The supported employment model typically includes workplace support, which, as mentioned, helps individuals in the homelessness crisis adapt to new conditions and deal with any issues that may arise during employment (Włodarczyk, 2017). The forms of support provided can vary. In addition to psychologists and career counselors, mentoring and coaching are often used, giving those returning to the workforce a better chance of maintaining employment and gradually adapting to a new life. This approach also minimizes the risk of failure in retaining employment for people struggling with homelessness.

Group meetings are invaluable, where individuals experiencing homelessness can share their new experiences from workplaces, as well as their challenges and successes. The process of returning to professional activity is closely linked to a support plan tailored to the needs and capabilities of the individual. At every stage of its implementation, it is necessary to evaluate the intended outcomes so that changes can be made quickly and the plan can be adjusted flexibly, so as not to enforce potential problems or bad habits.

4.3.1. Innovative Form of Support

The innovative aspect of the presented supported employment program for people in the homelessness crisis lies in including students as assistants. Students, during coaching sessions, mentoring, or vocational internships (especially those studying social work,

psychology, economics, or management) or volunteering, can be excellent support for individuals experiencing homelessness who want to re-enter the labor market. By offering assistance at every stage of the project, they can provide not only emotional but also practical support, helping homeless individuals in adapt to a new work environment and deal with daily challenges. They possess up-to-date knowledge about the job market, job search techniques, and the latest recruitment trends, and, most importantly, they bring a lot of enthusiasm. Their energy and motivation can have a positive impact on the morale of the participants.

Students often have more flexible schedules than people working full-time, which allows them to dedicate time to volunteering or other forms of support. They are eager to engage in one-on-one assistance and are more available than people who deal with supported employment only on professional grounds. Moreover, they can create support programs or organize workshops, tailoring their involvement to the needs of homeless individuals. Including students as assistants ensures long-term support in the workplace for people in the homelessness crisis, enhances their persistence in maintaining life stability, physical and mental health, and helps them develop interpersonal and professional skills.

Being close to the latest technologies and working methods, young people can introduce innovative solutions in assisting individuals experiencing homelessness. They can usually build up attractive CVs, create profiles on professional platforms (like LinkedIn), and can teach others how to use new tools and apps to support job searching, as well as soft skills needed in the workplace.

Students' resource also consists in academic and personal networks that they can use to help homeless individuals connect with local companies offering positions within supported employment, as well as initiate contacts with non-profit organizations or mentors. Support from professors or university colleagues can also be valuable, for example, in the form of additional consultations or advice. Many universities and student organizations run pro bono programs where students offer free services (such as career counseling, legal aid, or psychological support) to people experiencing homelessness. They also organize workshops that teach essential job skills, such as computer literacy, time management, workplace communication, or entrepreneurship. For those interested in starting their own businesses, students can provide entrepreneurship training sessions and help create business plans. Such initiatives can be crucial for individuals trying to exit homelessness and return to the job market.

While supported employment offers many benefits, its implementation also faces certain challenges. Students often approach social problems with less rigidity, embracing new approaches and solutions. Their fresh perspective can lead to the development of unconventional strategies that may be more effective in specific cases. One of the greatest challenges is convincing employers to employ the homeless.

It is important to direct student involvement towards promoting supported employment among employers and contributing to the change of deeply ingrained negative stereotypes about people in the homelessness crisis. Employers have many concerns about the stability of employees who are in such crises, including worries about their mental health and the potential impact on the team (Dębski, 2020). Therefore, a crucial element of this program is the education of employers, e.g. by students' initiatives, as well as raising awareness about the benefits of employing individuals from challenging backgrounds.

Today's generation of students is often highly socially engaged and aware of social inequality issues. Thus, the social campaigns they create about supported employment constitute an excellent tool for educating the society and reducing the stigmatization of

people in the homelessness crisis. This sense of social responsibility may drive them to effectively help individuals in difficult life situations. With these qualities, students can play a significant role in the reintegration of homeless individuals into the labor market, offering support that is both professional and empathetic.

An important area of student activity in holistic employment programs is conducting surveys and interviews with people in the homelessness crisis to better understand their needs and barriers to employment. Based on this, as well as their observations from assisting their clients, students can be involved in assessing the effectiveness of this form of aid for homeless individuals, helping to develop even better support strategies. The foundation of such actions is, of course, the active participation of the students.

4.3.2. Institutional Support

Supported employment is only effective if individuals in the homelessness crisis are provided with basic living conditions, such as housing and healthcare (Miklewska, 2013; Dębski, 2020), as well as access to essential services. Otherwise, life difficulties may hinder their ability to maintain the job, leading to further marginalization. Therefore, one of the elements of supported employment for this group should be assistance in securing stable housing, which is vital to sustaining employment and full social integration. A good solution is to combine supported employment with access to transitional housing, which allows individuals in the homelessness crisis to take more confident steps toward changing their lives. It can be assumed that a combination of supported employment and the well-known European "Housing First" method by S. Tsembris, developed under the New York-based organization Pathways to Housing, could bring positive results (Strączyński, 2021).

Non-governmental organizations play a key role in the implementation of supported employment, as they have experience working with the homeless and understand the kind of support they need. Organizations like Caritas, the Barka Foundation, Monar Association, and Agape offer comprehensive support, which includes not only assistance in finding a job but also social care, psychological support, and legal assistance. Public institutions, such as employment offices, social welfare centers, and local governments, also play an important role. Their task is to create and implement support programs for homeless individuals and collaborate with employers and non-governmental organizations. Public institutions should also work to eliminate systemic barriers that hinder homeless individuals from returning to the labor market.

Facilitating access to healthcare, including specialists in addiction, mental health, and other issues (Gafecki, Kubiak, 2019), helps prevent potential failures in long-term employment retention, since challenges in these fields significantly impede effective functioning as an employee. Participation in social support networks and local initiatives (non-governmental organizations, support groups) also helps prevent life crises. Long-term support after securing employment is crucial for homeless individuals to retain their jobs and develop professionally. Without such support, they may experience rapid burnout, difficulties in adaptation, or even job loss.

People in the homelessness crisis seeking employment often face negative stereotypes about themselves (Dębska-Cenian, 2021). Changing this negative perception and combating prejudices can be achieved through informational campaigns targeting employers about hiring individuals with homelessness issues, offering training for employers on working with those who have experienced homelessness, and helping create inclusive workplaces. As mentioned earlier, it is also important for potential employees coming out of homelessness to be seen through in the light their skills and engagement in

work, rather than just the challenges they face. A comprehensive support system involving public institutions, non-governmental organizations, and businesses would be a good solution.

Moreover, securing long-term funding for supported employment projects for individuals in the homelessness crisis, such as from the state budget and EU funds, combined with government support programs, would enable the development of sustainable solutions rather than just temporary measures.

5. BENEFITS OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT FOR INDIVIDUALS IN THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

Supported employment is an effective aid model because it provides comprehensive support that helps homeless individuals not only find work but also maintain it while integrating socially (Włodarczyk, 2017). This model offers people in the homelessness crisis a real chance to regain life stability and independence, which is crucial in the process of overcoming the issue.

For these individuals, the opportunity to work is essential in regaining control over their lives, rebuilding dignity, and enhancing self-worth. Employment gives them a sense of purpose, brings satisfaction, and allows for the formation of social connections. The value derived from feeling needed and appreciated by others is invaluable in the process of overcoming homelessness.

Securing a job also provides individuals with a stable income, which is necessary for maintaining housing and meeting basic needs. Regular income allows homeless individuals to cover essentials such as rent, food, and healthcare (Dębska-Cenian, 2021). Employment reduces their reliance on social assistance and enables them to independently work towards improving their financial situation. Financial stability, in turn, gives them the chance to support not only themselves but also their families, which constitutes the first step towards escaping homelessness and managing their lives independently.

Working in a professional environment fosters new social connections, which can support the process of overcoming homelessness. These individuals also gain a sense of belonging to a community, which is crucial for their social rehabilitation. Supported employment often includes participation in local social initiatives, further enhancing their integration into society.

6. SUMMARY

Supported employment for individuals in the homelessness crisis is one of the most effective tools in combating homelessness and social marginalization. With a personalized approach, comprehensive support, and collaboration with employers, individuals have a real opportunity to re-enter the job market and achieve social integration. Increased public awareness of homelessness issues and growing engagement from employers and public institutions create real opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of these programs. Continued involvement from all stakeholders – non-governmental organizations, public institutions, employers, and the beneficiaries themselves – is essential.

In the future, innovations and new technologies should be introduced to better tailor support to the needs of homeless individuals. Legislative changes, the development of support programs, and increased public awareness of homelessness issues are further steps that could contribute to a lasting solution. Supported employment is not merely a tool for

providing jobs; it is a “key” to dignity, independence, and a better life for thousands of people who have found themselves on the margins of society.

Social and professional integration of individuals in the homelessness crisis is extremely difficult, and unemployment rates in this group remain very high. Many individuals facing these two issues, even after finding temporary shelter, encounter significant difficulties in finding stable employment, leading to prolonged social exclusion and continued homelessness.

Addressing unemployment among homeless individuals requires a comprehensive approach that includes not only job search support but also access to housing, healthcare, education, training, and combating stigmatization. Assistance programs must be tailored to the specific needs of this group to effectively support their reintegration into the job market. Collaboration among various institutions and legislative changes are also necessary to facilitate the implementation of such programs. Proposals to increase the effectiveness of supported employment include such solutions as tax incentives for employers hiring individuals with homelessness issues, easing access to social housing, and strengthening workers' rights protection.

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