

“Housing Last: Intermediation Service for People in Process of Evictions and Occupancies”

THE PROBLEM

A large share of the population cannot access adequate housing, especially low and lower income households. Housing affordability is becoming a great concern in urban contexts across the EU, with more than 17, 3% of the population facing risks of the poverty, 11,4% of population living with housing cost overburden and with dropping investment in social housing (EUROSTAT). The widespread increase of homelessness is one of the outcomes of the combination of these factors (FEANTSA). Homelessness carries an enormous human cost for the individual or the family affected, but it also carries a large cost for public budgets. Keeping a family in their home is a much more cost-effective approach than paying for inappropriate emergency rehousing. According to the EU Commission Research mentioned in former sections, in countries like Austria and Germany, it has been estimated that each 1€ spent on prevention services may save 7€ of costs for providing temporary accommodation and rehabilitation for homeless households.

Besides, a number of national experts have identified deficits in the availability and accessibility of eviction prevention services according to the EU Commission Report, and cities are the best equipped to conduct this preventive intervention.

Finally, in order to meet the priorities of the Urban Agenda of the EU, the New Urban Agenda of the UN Habitat World Conference as well as the forthcoming European Pillar of Social Rights, this practice should be incorporated.

TIME FRAME DATES AND IMPORTANT MILESTONES

According to the ‘Unit Against Residential Exclusion’ (UCER) of the Housing Department, where the SIPHO operates, 679 families were attended in 2014, 1,020 families in 2015 and 1,574 families in 2016. That means an annual increase of almost 50%. This number does not correspond to an increase of evictions cases, quite the contrary. In 2016 the number of evictions decreased in 8%, however it remains extraordinary high, with 30 evictions a week just in Barcelona. Nonetheless, this last data should be read with caution, as it is not disaggregated between first homes and other kinds of Real State. Therein, the rapid increase of families attended by this homelessness prevention project responds to the firm commitment to strengthen this service by the local administration. Today 80% of eviction processes are attended by the UCER.

LINK TO ANY SPECIFIC STRATEGY

This practice belongs to the “Unit Against Residential Exclusion” of the “Right to Housing Plan 2016-2025” of Barcelona. The objective of the SIPHO is to avoid homelessness and to improve the preventive measures, in a way that the burden of cases currently addressed by the Municipality at this urgent stage gradually shifts to previous ones through improved ‘early warning’ channels and case identification that would allow earlier intervention. This practice is designed to become a permanent practice and seeks to achieve an effective coordination of the different actors and services involved during an eviction process. The ultimate goal of this practice would be, to gradually introduce a social impact assessment into housing policies to avoid homelessness.

MAIN OUTPUTS OF ACHIEVING OBJECTIVE AND INNOVATION ELEMENT

Traditionally, homelessness has been addressed as a social services issue. It is evolving from a 'staircase' model, where the person has to meet certain conditions to gradually have access to better and more stable housing to the 'Housing First' model, based on direct access to long-term housing together with social support. This has later proved more cost-effective and with better results.

The SIPHO program takes this same logic but applied to preventive measures deriving from housing policies. If 'Housing First' puts housing at the centre of social integration, this same principle should remain when evictions take place in case of vulnerability and exclusion. This program is the last resource against homelessness.

Its objective is to coordinate all the actors and resources involved through an integral intervention on urgent cases. The functions include: mediation between landlords and tenants, as well as between lenders and mortgagors, options to assume the existing debt and arrears and allow occupants to remain in place, arrangements for legal aid, advice and assistance, and competency to allocate alternative housing where evictions cannot be avoided. The intervention are directed to cases where evictions orders are being executed and debt settlements arrangements and income continuance have not been explored or have not been accepted

RESULTS ACHIEVED, MONITORING

Quantitative results have already being mentioned however qualitative ones should also be highlighted. The engagement of Municipal services pro-actively through the SIPHO project as well as the '*Unit against Residential Exclusion*' has not only decreased unrest but it has fostered other actors involved to adopt more proactive and participatory roles.

POTENTIAL FOR RE-USE AND IMPROVEMENT

The SIPHO intervention in eviction processes aims to coordinate all available resources and actors on an urgent basis in order to avoid or alleviate the traumatic and costly impact of evictions. This involves, effective coordination among the complex interplay of several services and administrations as well as civil society organizations. Therefore, this practice is extremely flexible to be adapted to other EU cities, as the concrete characteristics, actors and resources available are specific and any concrete practice should be tailored to each context.

However, the active engagement of Municipalities is not just pertinent and cost-effective but also complies with human rights "*To ensure the presence of government officials or their representatives during an eviction* (General Comment N°6 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). Barcelona's practice can be used as a model to build and escalate upon other cities because it has being conceived as part of the '*Unit against Residential Exclusion*' wider plan and it is embedded in the 'Right to Housing Plan 2016-2025'. It currently attends more than 80% of evictions taken place in Barcelona. And moreover, it has managed to do it, in a situation defined by many experts of extreme housing emergency. This practice's goal is not that dependent on the allocation of resources but to make the best with the ones available and use them in the most efficient way.