

The Right to a Home:

Does the Housing First Model work during a Housing Crisis?

This fifteen minute presentation will explore the effectiveness of the housing first model in respect to homeless people, with a particular focus on those with severe and enduring mental health issues. Given the theme of this conference, marginalization and social work in a changing society, the cohort being discussed could be categorised as some of the most vulnerable and marginalized in Irish society at present. The role of social work in trying to support homeless people with severe and enduring mental illness provides many challenges, particularly given the never-ending Irish housing crisis and all the issues that it entails.

Currently, the terms *en vogue* in Ireland are mental health and homelessness. Whilst it is important to continue this rhetoric and debate, to what extent are these discussions assisting in making the housing crisis situation any better? Even with the support of activists, such as Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy¹, there appears to be no forward steps by the Government in making this situation any better.

“While the Taoiseach², Enda Kenny, has accepted that we have a housing and homeless crisis, the response from his Government has not been a crisis one. Each day the numbers of homeless people is increasing and now needs an emergency response,” (Stan, 30/09/15)³

Although not an emergency response, the Housing First model has been effective in tackling homelessness which originates from Dr. Sam Tsemberis work in New York in the 1990's and has been employed in Ireland since 2009. It has been received widely as an effective and efficient way in housing homeless people with complex backgrounds (O'Sullivan, 2012). The concept is quite simple: source accommodation first and then combine that housing with wraparound supportive treatments in the areas of mental health, substance misuse, employment and general education.

In theory, this is an effective way in supporting those with complex needs, particularly mental health needs but how does this model work when there is no supply of houses? Furthering from this, how do mental health social workers support clients who have no hope in sourcing stable accommodation. Fundamental to ones mental health recovery is establishing Maslow's Hierarchy of Higher needs, the base of which is physiological needs, namely shelter. Without that basis, general management and eventual recovery of a severe and enduring mental illness is almost impossible, making this group of people incredibly vulnerable and marginalized.

This presentation will look into this vulnerability and examine how mental health social workers can advocate for such a marginalized group, within the changing society where a house is no longer considered a given or right.

¹ Sr. Stan, leading homeless activist and founder of the homeless organisation Focus Ireland.

² Ireland's Prime Minister

³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/right-to-a-home-a-debased-currency-says-sr-stan-1.2373314> (Accessed 20/05/16)