

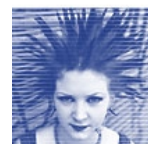


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Preventing and Tackling Homelessness

Comment Paper, Latvia



on behalf of

 European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





Social services for the homeless in Riga (Latvia)

In Riga there is one municipality shelter, which can accommodate 170, or if necessary (in cold winter months) up to 230 persons.

During cold winter months it is not possible to offer services to all the homeless in one municipality institution – the Riga shelter. Thus, in 2003, Riga City Council started to purchase facilities for men’s night shelter from several organisations. In 2004, services were bought from two non-governmental organisations: the religious body The Blue Cross (up to 100 places) and LatAISS Ltd. (up to 50 places).

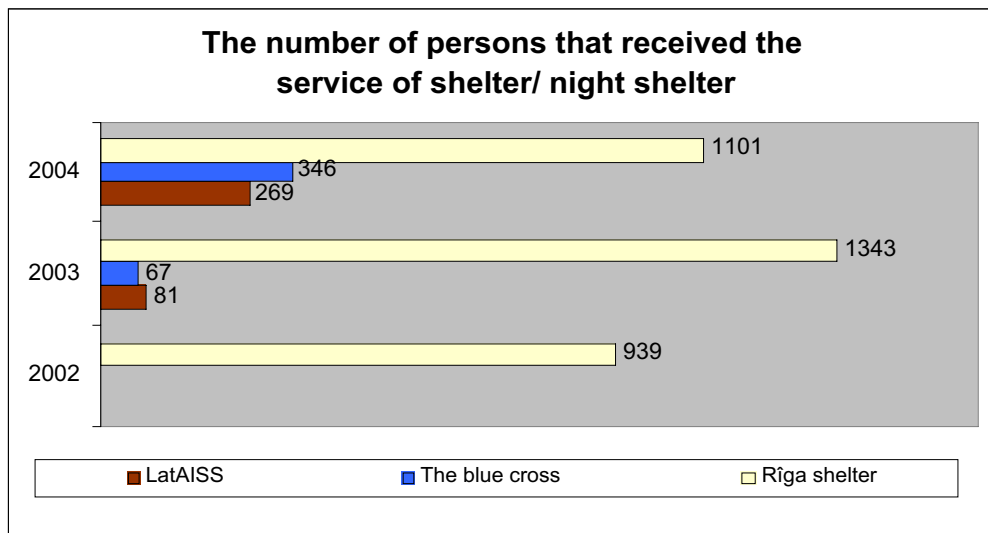
Number of places in Riga shelter/ night shelters in 2004

| Institution | Address | Service | No. of places |
|--|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Riga shelter | Maskava Street 208, Riga | Men’s branch of night shelter | 61 |
| | | Men’s branch of 24-hour shelter | 25 |
| | | Families’ branch of 24-hour shelter | 30 |
| | | Isolator | 4 |
| | Burddzicu Street 2, Riga | Women’s branch of night shelter | 36 |
| | | Women’s and women with children’s branch of 24-hour shelter | 14 |
| Subtotal in Riga shelter | | 170 | |
| | | | In cold winter months up to 230 places |
| Religious organisation The Blue Cross night shelter | Maskava Street 336, Riga | Service of night shelter for men | Up to 100 places |
| LatAISS Ltd. night shelter | Bebru Street 16, Riga | Service of night shelter for men | Up to 50 places |
| Subtotal in contracted organisations | | | Up to 150 places |

The number of people using these services testifies to the urgency of the homelessness problem. If, in 2002, facilities in the Riga municipality catered for 939



persons without definite accommodation or persons in crisis, then in 2003 the number reached 1491* (1343 persons in the Riga shelter and 148 persons in contract organisations' night shelters), and in 2004, 1716 people (1101 persons in the Riga shelter and 615 persons in contract organisations' night shelters).



In 2004, among the 1716 clients who used the shelter and night shelter services, 1342 people were housed in men's branches, 310 people in women's and women with children's branches (including 23 children), and 64 people in families' branches (including 33 children).

In the cold months of 2004, shelter and night shelter services were supplied on average to up to 385 persons a day. By comparison, during the cold months of 2003, the services were used by up to 350 persons a day, on average.

The numbers mentioned above reflect the number of persons who use the services of the shelter / night shelters, but they do not reflect the total number of homeless in Riga city. The full total cannot be determined, because many homeless people do not want to be helped, and that is why there are no data

* The total number of clients is not exact, because of the absence of a unified system of customer registration in the Riga shelter and night shelters. In other words, one person could receive accommodation in several shelters/night shelters during the year. A unified system of customer registration is now being examined and will possibly be developed in 2005.



about them. There is also so-called 'hidden homelessness', referring to people who live with their relatives but do not have definite accommodation of their own.

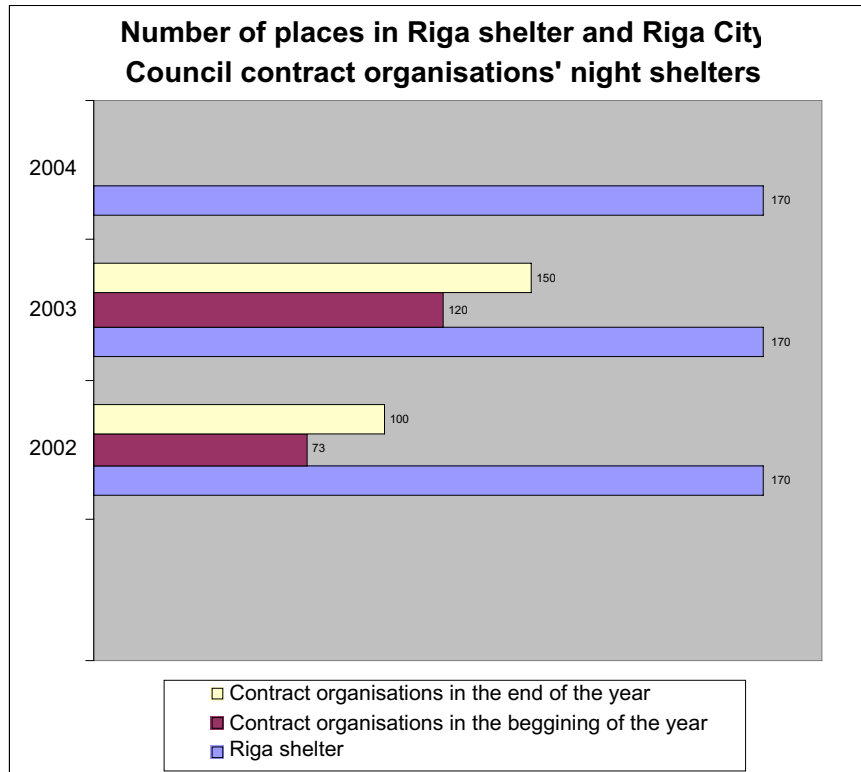
Inquiries, research

In view of the rapid growth in the number of homeless people in Riga, staff at Riga City Council welfare department and the Riga shelter set out to examine the needs and problems of the homeless through a study at the Riga shelter in February 2003. The aim was to improve 1) the quality of life for the homeless, and 2) opportunities to integrate them in society by developing social services for the target group in Riga municipality.

The other problem in Riga, which is connected to homelessness, is **begging**. An information project entitled *How to help you?* was set up to inform the people who beg on the streets of Riga about opportunities for receiving social services and social assistance, as well as to find out the beggars' point of view about their present situation. This involved the distribution of information leaflets to beggars (in Latvian and in Russian), and interviews with 50 adults and five children (all male, from 11 up to 15 years old). They were found in Old Riga, near the central bazaar, train station and bus station, by the churches, stores, on the streets near Matisa bazaar, and also in Pardaugava (other side of the river Daugava). Some of these people confirmed that they did not have a definite place to live.

The main problems for the homeless are a lack of social skills, a lack of affordable apartments, insufficient qualifications and motivation to work, addiction problems, bad health, and finally the stereotypes in society that promote the exclusion of these persons. Normally, homeless people can solve their problems up to a certain level, but in most cases they cannot maintain that level. They never have only one problem, which is why work with this group in society is very complicated and requires large amounts of work and financial investment, as well as a many-sided approach to resolving the problems in order to get a result.

As the number of homeless people has been growing every year, Riga City Council started to purchase shelter/night shelter services from contract organisations. Thus in 2004, a night shelter service was provided for an additional 150 persons. Social work with homeless people was improved in municipalities, with a view to reintegrating them into society.



In the Riga shelter and contract organisations' night shelters, social workers organise consultations for the homeless. In these institutions, social work specialists offer customers support and consultation on how to solve social problems in line with the person's individual social rehabilitation plan (for example, in 2004, 11606 consultations were carried out in the Riga shelter). People who do not want to receive shelter or night shelter services can see a social worker in the Riga shelter or a social work specialist in a social services agency. However, it has to be noted that there is a proportion of the homeless who do not want to participate in solving their social problems and who are satisfied with street life.

It is very important to render well-timed help. The longer a person is homeless, the harder or even more impossible it is to integrate him into society.

The NAP (National Action Plan) stated that within the framework of the Community programme EQUAL there would be better policy for the re-socialisation of homeless persons. It also declared that state support to municipalities for



developing social housing would start with the allocation of special purpose grants. The undertaking mentioned above will enable some homeless persons to obtain cheap living space. Considering that the majority of the homeless are concentrated in Riga municipality, it is very hard to offer adequate cheap living space immediately. People can wait years for help from the municipality. That is why some of the clients in shelters and night shelters stay there for a year or longer, despite the fact that these institutions provide short-term help. One social groups affected is the recipients of state pensions, who have an income but cannot find cheap enough living space to rent. Some able-bodied people also do not have a large enough wage to rent a flat. Most of these, in line with normative documents of the Republic of Latvia, are not registered for municipal help in solving housing issues.

Housing benefit from Riga municipality acts as a preventive measure to help people avoid losing their accommodation.

Because of the health problems of the homeless and difficulties in registering with a family doctor in Riga, these people have the opportunity to meet the primary health care physician.

| Main conclusions | The necessary action |
|---|--|
| There is a lack of research on homelessness in Latvia | Research about homelessness in Latvia is necessary |
| The homeless are threatened by social exclusion and isolation from society | With mediation of media, action to promote understanding about the problem of homelessness in our country, so as to reduce the social isolation of homeless people and help them integrate in society |
| Necessity of cheap dwellings | State programme that would provide inhabitants with long-term credit at a reasonable interest rate for the purchase of dwellings |
| | State support programme for municipalities for renovation of housing fund |
| The homeless have difficulties in competing on the labour market | It is necessary to form social enterprises by scheduling tax preferences to create opportunities for enabling persons who have problems to compete in the labour market – for example people of pre-pension age. |
| There are very few service providers that could offer services for the homeless to largest municipalities | To schedule state co-financing for development of services for the homeless (shelters/night shelters, day centres) |



Comments on the Problem of Homelessness in Denmark

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my opinion and my comments on the material you developed and sent. From the information at my disposal, I can understand that in Denmark it is difficult to identify the number of homeless people as services to homeless people are provided by many non-governmental organisations. As a result, there is no single customers' accounting system, and the precise number of homeless people using short-term dwelling services is not known.

Various social services and health care services are widely available to homeless people in your country. This includes services for people who have addiction problems, as well as people who have chosen homelessness as their way of life and are not motivated to change anything in their lives. There is enough space in shelters/night shelters and, if a person is on the street, it is his/her own choice to be there since the rights (human rights) of every person are respected.

Homelessness is considered to be a temporary and not a permanent state. The strategy for resolving homelessness moves from social care, towards motivating and supporting, and target-oriented assistance to the customer. The holistic approach is relevant to solving the problem of homelessness, which involves employment for homeless people, their shelter, health care, including psychiatric assistance, and necessary social services. Training of employees is considered to be important. Homeless people have the services of night shelters, specialised shelters, halfway houses, alternative houses and day care centres available. Street social work is being developed. Services are financed both from state and local government budgets. A lot of services are provided by non-governmental organisations, which demonstrates good inter-professional and interagency cooperation.

The housing problem is being solved by doing business with cooperative companies, hiring dwelling space from them. The possibility of living in a social flat also exists. Material assistance is guaranteed in case of need. *The Homeless Street Paper* gives a positive example of how to speak about the problem of homelessness, as does the chance for people without a definite place of residence to take a role in solving their problems. There is provision for the involvement of volunteers in work with homeless people.



Conclusions

1. Compared to the Latvian situation, a varied choice of services is being offered to homeless people in Denmark;
2. In Riga municipality, shelters of various levels and types should be developed. For instance, shelters of lower level would allow any person to stay the night, shelters of a higher level would give the customer more comfort, and shelters should be established to meet the needs of the age, gender, etc., of the customers;
3. Day care centres for homeless people should be established;
4. More active co-partnership with non-governmental organisations should be promoted, for providing services to homeless people;
5. The possibility of creating a mobile team and a newspaper for homeless people in Riga should be considered;
6. There should be opportunities for consultations with a psychiatrist, addiction specialist, or gynaecologist in the Riga shelter/night shelters;
7. The chance for representatives from different Member States to exchange their experiences in resolving social problems with regard to homeless people in each country, and learn from positive examples, is very useful. It is also important, taking account of the experiences of different states, to develop understanding of the principles and specific arrangements in each state, directed towards the elimination of homelessness and improvement of the situation in that country.