

## Local services to tackle homelessness and mental health

### Report from Eurocities' mutual learning in Zaragoza, 22-24 March 2023

*Mental health and homelessness are pressing intertwining challenges leading to a cycle of vulnerability and marginalisation in cities. Among the elements that make this situation worse are social stigma, lack of access to healthcare and isolation of people experiencing homelessness. In order to thoroughly discuss this phenomenon and its consequences in the short and long term, cities came together to share their experiences in this area and learn from each other.*

*For this purpose, on 22-24 March 2023, city representatives gathered in Zaragoza to learn from the host and share their experiences. This meeting report gives an overview of the different good practices shared, discussions and issues raised during the meeting.*

### Zaragoza's first chance plan

The city of Zaragoza is adapting the accommodations available for the people experiencing homelessness and is working on dignifying their access to services. Its municipal plan for homeless people is focused on early detection, prevention, raising awareness and generating knowledge. Zaragoza's first chance plan, since it was launched in 2018, has introduced a comprehensive approach that tackles the specific needs of people experiencing health issues, while including a gender perspective.

The city recognises the significance of tailoring interventions to individual needs, aiming to restore dignity and include the people experiencing homelessness. Zaragoza offers several alternatives ranging from individual or family housing to emergency shelters and shared housing with other people. including all the services abovementioned, the city can offer shelter to up to 275 people.

These activities are organised following six lines of action:

- Prevention, awareness raising, knowledge generation and sharing.
- Housing as a right.
- Coordination and networking among stakeholders.
- Adaptation of accommodations and dignification of lodging and processes from a care perspective.
- Empowerment of upcoming projects.
- Incorporation of a gender perspective.

By shifting from exclusionary pathways to inclusionary trajectories, Zaragoza's first chance plan exemplifies the city's holistic approach to homelessness. This plan has introduced a person-centred strategy, encompassing various elements contributing to social exclusion.

The goal is to support people experiencing homelessness in building life projects autonomously. Zaragoza's activities focus on three pillars: ensuring accommodation, implementing both a comprehensive training and an integration plan, and guaranteeing an easy access to healthcare. This commitment to practical change is reflected in many ways.

As a result of the first chance plan, the city has not only increased the availability of sheltered and accompanied housing but is also dedicated to establishing specialised resources like housing for women. The plan's emphasis on various activities and training, coupled with investments in improving the municipal shelter, signifies a concerted effort to meet diverse needs. Additionally, the city's collaboration with Zaragoza Vivienda<sup>1</sup> indicates a promising commitment to enhancing social housing opportunities, further facilitating the reintegration of individuals completing insertion itineraries.

## The Municipal Shelter



Figure 1 The main entrance of the Municipal Shelter | © Carolina Picot

The mutual learning in Zaragoza was an opportunity to visit the building of the Municipal Shelter and learn how its staff coordinates the different services provided. The shelter is a reception and integration centre for people experiencing homelessness. It aims at maintaining a minimum quality of life, and guiding its users to the social resources they may need.

In the past, the building that houses the municipal shelter belonged to the Church. Nowadays, it has undergone a change of use to meet the different needs of the users. When entering through its main entrance, users must pass by the reception desk to obtain admission to the facility.

In general, the admission requirements are minimal. Therefore, people experiencing homelessness can easily access the shelter, regardless of their financial situation or health conditions. This service is also made accessible to undocumented people.

In addition to a holistic approach, the shelter offers large spaces in a multiple floors' layout and a spacious courtyard available to users.

The municipal shelter in Zaragoza divides its services into short and long-term stays.

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<sup>1</sup> Zaragoza Vivienda is a private association supporting the city to achieve greater efficiency in the municipal measures concerning urban rehabilitation, housing and other buildings and the urbanisation of land. Their actions are mainly focused on bringing about an integrated rehabilitation of degraded urban areas and reduce the sale and rental prices of houses.

According to the rules, each user is allowed to stay at the shelter for six days every three months. Access to the shelter for a short stay is open to all those who need it. Once admitted in the shelter, users can access a canteen, a dormitory with a private room and a shared bathroom. Moreover, if needed, social services take care of each user.

Since the municipal shelter offers multiple services to meet the different needs of its users, it is possible to stay beyond the short-term stay. In fact, the internal rules easily allow exceptions to be applied according to individual needs. As an example, the stay is extended in case the procedures undertaken by the social services network of the municipality are to be finalised.

However, a prolonged access to the shelter and its services requires a more specific case-by-case analysis.

Families and people who have recently secured a job can have access to small private apartments. In addition, those who benefit from the shelter's services and have a medical condition (which includes both mental and physical health conditions) that requires special attention are directed to shared apartments. In these spaces, people have a private room and share common areas with a few people.

The shelter also offers services that target women's specific needs. Primarily, elderly women experiencing chronic homelessness have access to a space called "Open House", which is adjacent to the shelter. During their stay, in case of physical or psychosocial deterioration, they can easily access further services offered by the shelter.

Furthermore, as part of the first chance plan, Zaragoza organises workshops targeting the needs of homeless women suffering from cognitive damage.



Figure 2 The Open House | © Carolina Picot

### A holistic approach to mental health

As introduced in the previous section, Zaragoza's approach to homelessness is a holistic one. This is also evident when it comes to the services provided by the cities in the field of mental health.

During the visit, two representatives of 2avia<sup>2</sup> – a cooperative working with individuals grappling with severe mental health issues – were invited to share their expertise in working with a community-focused approach.

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<sup>2</sup> More information is available here: [2avia](#)

2avia's work is centred around the concepts of dwelling, home, and housing. Their approach is rooted in the idea that all integration journeys begin with "having a place to call home".

Their interdisciplinary team collaborates closely with Zaragoza and the regional Government of Aragon. The services provided by 2avia bring out an inclusive approach. In fact, its staff supports everyone in need, making their support easily accessible even for those who are undocumented. Moreover, they incorporate a gender-specific approach.

Another example of the Zaragoza's approach in this regard, emerges from the strategy put in place by Fundación La Caridad<sup>3</sup>. In 2003, the foundation has initiated a project for people who are experiencing homelessness and have severe mental health problems. This project was named "Centro de día El Encuentro", which can be approximatively translated into "Day centre Getting Together". It is a psychosocial rehabilitation centre hosting its users during the day.

Within its day centre, La Caridad offers many facilities, including an individual follow-up for its users. This is made possible thanks to its highly qualified staff. At the foundation, users can in fact take advantage of the services offered by psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists. Moreover, La Caridad offers a canteen service (including breakfast, lunch and the possibility to take away dinner).

El Encuentro's activities range from sports to artistic activities, including cognitive and social skills workshops. Something that makes the foundation peculiar is its intergenerational approach. In fact, El Encuentro project takes place in La Caridad building, which houses a school as well.

This has resulted in workshops and activities between the users of El Encuentro's services and the children. Based on the educational needs of the children and those of the day center's users, these activities raise awareness about mental health issues from an early age, making the foundation an open space for intergenerational exchanges and overcoming stigmas related to mental health.

## **Alternative pathways to social inclusion**

Zaragoza's approach has given the chance to bottom-up initiatives to develop. To learn how these were created and how they work nowadays, the study visit has included sessions led by people who benefit or have benefited in the past from the city's services for people experiencing homelessness.

### **Gambaru: employment as a pathway to social inclusion**

Gambaru is an abbreviation of "Ganbarimasu", a Japanese philosophy that can be translated into "I will do my best". The term calls to be constant, try hard and stubborn to reach one's objectives. Gambaru has one peculiarity that distinguishes it from all the associations and activities in Zaragoza. Those who founded Gambaru and are part of it today are not social workers, educators or experts qualified to work in the field. Gambaru was founded by a person who was a user of the municipal shelter and involves people who know the reality of being homeless. Their awareness allows them to bring an added value that other associations do not have.

Gambaru was born in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, after Zaragoza's proposal to those living in the municipal shelter to participate in the distribution of face masks to the most vulnerable people living in the city. This activity gave rise to further initiatives organised within the "first chance plan", offering to the users of the shelter tailored pathways to tackle the different causes that usually lead to severe social exclusion. The municipal shelter has organised a series of workshops to train the users of

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<sup>3</sup> More information is available here: [Fundación La Caridad | La Caridad es Zaragoza](#)

the municipal shelter and support them in developing job skills. The courses' purpose was to reverse social exclusion processes and transform them into inclusion pathways. After the workshops, Zaragoza has supported the participants in building autonomous projects. One of them is Gambaru. The courses were a chance for the members of the association to acquire skills to work in the catering industry. Nowadays they cooperate with a network of bars and restaurants in solidarity with Gambaru. These local businesses can hire them for short or long term periods. Otherwise, Gambaru's staff provides catering services.

As one of its members affirmed, Gambaru's activities lead its participants to labour market insertion, which restores their dignity. In doing so, the association adds value to the essential services the city already provides for homeless people. In the close future, Gambaru's members would like to become part of a poverty advisory board in Zaragoza.

### Caidos del Zielo: empowerment through a participatory approach

The mutual learning in Zaragoza was an opportunity to get to know Caidos del Zielo (which can be translated as "Fallen from the Sky"). Caidos del Zielo is an artistic project combining the participation of people at risk of social exclusion with professional actors and actresses. The project has created a



Figure 3 Participants of the theatre workshop in Zaragoza | © Carolina Picot

space for the people taking part in it to meet, communicate and create together. Their plays and advocate for social inclusion in the city and are performed in different theatres.

The session that included Caidos del Zielo allowed participants to take part in a social theatre workshop. This format was made possible by using a universal language such as theatre. Participants were involved in some improvisational theatre exercises, connecting

and empathising with the members of Caidos del Zielo.

The added value of this format is precisely in putting all participants on an equal footing, leaving out all social differences and building bridges, instead of walls that exacerbate inequalities.

### Supporting cities in preventing homelessness for people with mental health problems

To support cities in developing their own solutions to prevent homelessness when people have severe mental health problems, participants discussed some pathways to face this challenge. Together, they

came up with concrete proposals and suggestions, focused on potential concrete solutions and identifying the actors that need to be involved.

One of the main challenges on which all participants agree is the **outreach effort**, which are essential to identify and assist individuals at risk of homelessness due to mental health issues.

Participants identified Zaragoza's Day centre El Encuentro as an initiative which includes key dimensions to put in place prevention measures. La Caridad provides services which create a routine for its users and a sense of security. This also means it becomes a **safe space** for the users, allowing them to ask for professional support if needed. Moreover, their mixed use of spaces, which was deepened above, fosters a supportive **community**, and this is an essential instrument for prevention purposes.

In addition, **harm reduction and early intervention** have been highlighted as two key elements. Below are the main instruments that came up with participants as the main instruments to understand the drivers of homelessness among those with mental health issues:

- Conducting research to identify pathways to homelessness.
- Collaborate with the other local services/ that provide support before homelessness occurs.
- Identify early signs of housing instability or crisis and intervene promptly.

Another important element that emerged during the discussions is the need to develop **trauma-informed care** and train the staff to work with substance abuse. For this purpose, it is key to create services targeting specific mental health needs, combined with the general ones. This ensures that individuals receive the personalised care they need. When it comes to the **training** of the staff, there are many different dimensions to take into account:

- The staff needs to be aware of the legislative framework and protocols for addressing substance abuse issues in conjunction with mental health challenges.
- It is needed to create and establish procedures for emergency accommodation to provide immediate assistance when needed.

## Improving the support for mentally ill individuals in shelters

The services in place to support people who have mental health problems and live in shelters represent have many challenges. Starting from Zaragoza's work on the topic, cities gathered to find practical suggestions to address their specific needs.

The first element raised is the one of **flexibility and inclusivity**. Having an open and people-centred approach allows to find responses to the unique needs of all the users. Moreover, humanising people experiencing homelessness and mental health problem and recognising that they are citizens like any other people is the right way to overcome stigmatisation and discrimination.

The concept of inclusion can be applied more broadly to the **accessibility of health services**. By overcoming the double stigmas that people who are homeless and have mental problems face, a link can be established between social and health services. If needed, an innovative system can be created, where actors cooperate to **mainstream mental health support** within the shelters. This could be feasible by having at least one psychologist in all the structures providing services for homeless people in the city.

One of the main issues is the unaffordability of housing solutions. This exacerbates when it comes to people who suffer from mental health problems, as they also require targeted professional support, which is not always easily accessible and free of charge. To overcome this challenge, different measures can be put in place:

- Both housing solutions and mental health services should be affordable and truly accessible.
- Political attention should be raised in this regard by highlighting the concrete risks and making the issue visible and urgent. Sharing success stories is important to raise awareness.
- Even though financial support might be a challenge, cities can overcome this by demonstrating that **investing in mental health and in ensuring housing** reduces long-term societal costs.
- Working with all the actors involved could enhance **cooperation with private actors**, such as landlords.

Participants highlighted that when creating solutions to face the double challenges of this vulnerable group, it is important to think and plan **long-term solutions**. Developing strategies aiming at a solution on the long-term translates into keeping the spaces dedicated to crisis intervention, while developing parallel alternatives to prevent the crisis.

One of the suggestions that could lead to long-term solutions translates into cooperating with different stakeholders to offer a holistic support. To do this, several elements are needed:

- Engagement of landlords and housing providers
- Ensuring seamless **coordination between social workers in shelters and hospital teams** to address complex mental health needs.
- Involve the community: **educate** the inhabitants of the city about mental health problems and homelessness. **Promote community involvement** in supporting shelter residents. Encourage neighbours to look out for one another.



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