

# 20

## Barcelona Societat

Journal on social knowledge and analysis



Ajuntament  
de Barcelona

December 2016

**Key words:** homeless, Housing First, peer, housing access

### **Housing First at Arrels Foundation: A change of direction**

Arrels Foundation

**More than three years ago, Arrels Foundation focused its attention on a different care intervention approach for homeless people, with an emphasis on access to self-contained, dignified and stable housing, with a person-centred social intervention approach. That's Housing First, and it works successfully in many cities worldwide.**

**Arrels' commitment to this model has led to a reorganization of its teams, putting into practice new ways of working and dealing with doubts and challenges. If Housing First is addressed to rough sleepers, what happens to those in an entrenched situation, who fail to find any adequate support for their situation? Does living in an individual apartment make the person feel alone? How can the *peer* role be incorporated? And what happens if, because of the financial and social context, there are no affordable housing options available?**

### **Housing First at Arrels Foundation: a change of direction**

At Arrels, we've known Karl for many years. He had been living on the street for years, had alcohol abuse problems and a severe mental illness. When we asked him if he wanted to live in a flat of his own, he said yes, but one day we took him to the new flat without asking him first. The Social Work team and the Housing Support team tried for months to coordinate in order to support Karl, but we failed. We used to visit him several days in one week and then we didn't know about him for two weeks until the next visit; we cleaned the flat with him if it was needed, but we also cleaned it when he wasn't in the house... We were worried that Karl might have had problems with his neighbours resulting in him being forced to leave the flat. And this is what happened.

Karl was the first Housing First case and it didn't succeed. It wasn't Karl's fault, but Arrels', since many mistakes were made. We knew a chronic rough sleeper and we had an individual flat for him, but we lacked both an integrated team based on the Housing First approach, and a clear strategy to reach that objective.

Born in the United States and launched by the organization Pathways to Housing, the Housing First model has clear principles towards which Arrels has focused its attention:

- Housing is a human right
- Respect for all users
- Commitment to work with the person for as long as he/she needs it
- Self-contained and independent housing
- Separation of housing and treatment
- Person's right to decide

- Recovery-oriented basis
- Minimize the consequences of life on the street with a harm-reduction approach (for example, with relation to alcohol abuse)

The model provides entrenched homeless people direct access to stable housing, based on three requirements:

- The person provides 30% of his/her income
- A weekly visit from the professional team for the social support
- Keeping a good relationship with neighbours

At Arrels we knew about Housing First through the European Federation of National Organizations Working for Homeless People (FEANTSA), whom we form part of along with other European organizations. Since 2012, the European Commission has supported pioneer tests of the Housing First model in cities like Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Glasgow and Lisbon while countries like France and Belgium are implementing the approach with full government support.

In order to know exactly what Housing First was, in 2013 we decided to visit European projects using it and we participated in regional meetings about the topic. Each meeting or project we went to encouraged us to commit ourselves to the model, generating at the same time questions about how homeless people are attended, revealing a new approach, seen to be effective, to guarantee stable and dignified housing to long-term homeless people. Considering all that, in January 2014, we took the decision to launch the Housing First model in Arrels.

### **From staircase model to Housing First**

In March 2014, soon after taking the decision to implement the Housing First model, we were providing housing to 155 homeless people. Of these, 64 were housed in 24 shared flats, 52 were living in rented rooms, 14 were sleeping in pensions in Barcelona and seven people stayed overnight in social hostels. The 18 people left were living in individual flats (eight in apartments managed by Arrels and ten in apartments subsidized by the Municipal Housing Trust). In addition, Arrels' street outreach team visited 611 rough sleepers, 40% more than the previous year.

As in the rest of Catalonia and the Spanish State, we operated and attended homeless people using the staircase model. In our 2006 annual report it was clearly explained: "People who live on the street and come to Arrels are often individuals without income, so the cost of their housing and basic needs depends totally on the organization. At this moment, they usually access a hostel and, when they have enough autonomy, the possibility of entering a flat is considered".

The intervention model we were using from Arrels ten years ago followed a staircase model but, even then, we believed in something we still defend today: "The person needs stable housing to balance his/her life on many levels. And this is never provided by a pension or any temporary residential centre".

We believe that services must be adapted to people and not the other way round, and that's why we have been searching for different residential solutions based on different formula. In the 90s, for example, we paid for hostels; at the start of 2000, we promoted flat-sharing and created a specific group of social workers to support and provide social assistance to the people who lived in the flats. In 2007, after seeing many chronic homeless people with vulnerable health had no place to go while looking for a permanent place to live, we created the Pere Barnés Home; the same year, in collaboration with Sant Joan de Déu, Filles de la Caritat and Assís shelter, we created Mambré Foundation, aimed at promoting housing access for homeless people through private housing stock and fostering occupational plans.

With more or less success, the objective throughout all these years has been always the same: stable, permanent and dignified housing. That's what we have demanded for years for homeless people, as a strategy to tackling their entrenched situation on the street. And this is exactly what the Housing First approach is committed to, introducing at the same time a different professional and organizational approach.

We spent 2014 discussing the Housing First model and how to put it into practice. A lot of training, meetings with the expert teams and the volunteers team were made and we started explaining it to the homeless people we attended. In one of the meetings, Domènec, who has lived on the street for many years, looked at us, surprised, and asked us: "Did you have to do so much traveling and deliberate so much to get to know that what we need is individual housing?"

It seemed so easy, but so difficult at the same time! At the time of launching the Housing First model, at Arrels there were various aspects in our favour:

- Housing First was proven to work in cultural contexts similar to us.
- We knew the entrenched rough sleepers in Barcelona.
- Our professional approach always looks at mid-term/long term solutions when accompanying the person.
- We were experienced in housing management and we had shared apartments and resources to subsidize other types of temporary housing, while individual flats were sought.

Furthermore, we dealt with new challenges and dilemmas to promote Housing First:

- The majority of cities employing Housing First have started from zero, with entrenched homeless, without taking into account the people who slept in hostels or other accommodation services and in an undignified and severe situation.
- At Arrels, we knew many rough sleepers in Barcelona, but we also knew many others who were on the street intermittently because they were housed in hostels, sub-tenancy rooms and unstable facilities, or were unable to find an adequate resource because of their situation.
- Housing First doesn't just provide the homeless person with one social worker, but a whole team of multi-faceted and complementary workers where peers also intervene; that is, people who have lived on the street and in whom the homeless people accessing the Housing First model can see themselves reflected.

### **Changing the teams to apply Housing First**

Arrels has had to change its approach to accompanying people, training the professionals and the volunteers' team and merging teams.

Before starting with Housing First, there were two different teams charged with the task of supporting the person: on one hand, the Social Work team, formed by social workers and in charge of the social support of the person, paperwork, etc; on the other hand, there was the Housing Support team, constituted by social educators and Community Support workers who were committed to empowering the homeless person who accessed housing to reach the highest autonomy possible.

These two teams don't currently exist and they have merged into one team, the Support Team, subdivided into three teams formed by 4 or 5 professionals with complementary profiles and the support of a volunteers' team.

“The main change is the flexibility achieved by this new team”, says Ester Sánchez, Head of the Support Team. “For instance, the professional roles have been mixed. Before, a social worker was responsible for social support, procedures, interviews with the person, etc; but now he also makes educational and home care tasks, and the other way round. If the homeless person who lives in a flat needs help in the shower, for example, this duty is assumed by a team member without considering if he/she is a social worker, community support worker or educator”.

This change in the manner of working has also meant a shift for the homeless people we attend, since their individual relationship with their social worker has become a relationship with all the team where all the professionals are case managers.

Furthermore, before, the homeless people linked to Arrels who accessed housing or other accommodation did it after building a relationship with Arrels’ Day Centre. Now however, with the Housing First model, people living on the street who are visited by Arrels’ street outreach team – but have never or rarely come to our centre– have the opportunity to access stable housing without going through all the staircase process.

### **A flat and a way to support the person**

Housing First means the house first. In this attention model for chronic homeless people, self-contained, stable and permanent housing is an indispensable condition. It’s also imperative that the organization or municipality responsible accompanies the homeless person throughout all the process, in a different way: respecting his/her choices, not putting conditions on the housing such as having to quit drinking or take medication, respecting his/her process...

In 2015 Arrels attended 1.798 people, the majority -89%- men aged between 35 and 64 and 16% older than 65. The street outreach teams visited 550 people who were sleeping rough and 232 people were offered housing.

All these people live or have lived in a chronic situation on the street for many years; many of them have alcohol abuse problems and others have mental illness. A high percentage live on the street and others live in undignified accommodation, such as hostels or sub-tenancy rooms with no hot water supply, where the person can’t cook or wash his clothes and where it’s difficult to maintain personal hygiene.

Faced with this situation, doubts emerged when we launched the Housing First model: should we focus only on the people who were sleeping on the street? What happens with the people who sleep in a hostel on and off and who don’t adapt to other types of resources? And what happens if we can’t find self-contained affordable apartments?

“At Arrels, we consider Housing First to be a valid intervention model for the entrenched homeless, but also for the chronic homeless who have been intermittently on the street for many years, unable to adapt to any type of accommodation” explains Ester Sánchez.

In this sense, we decided not to start from zero, applying the model only to rough sleepers, nor exclusively on the condition of a self-contained flat. As Sánchez says, “the most important thing is that Housing First promotes a people-centred approach”, the relationship with the person, the weekly visit, strengthening his/her link with the community and providing stable, dignified and permanent housing.

“We have evolved. We respect the person’s process and don’t force situations, working on the access to a self-contained flat on a voluntary basis, not as a prize. Another important change: we don’t put conditions on the housing. If the person who enters the flat has problems with the neighbours and his/her situation becomes untenable, the solution is not a return to street, but

instead we negotiate with them to find a housing alternative”, comments the Head of the Support Team.

### **How do Housing First users show improvement?**

As we described above, Karl was Arrels’ first Housing First case before we shifted our approach and the professional teams. In these two years, we haven’t forgotten about Karl and he now lives in a shared flat with social support based on the Housing First model.

In total, 19 rough sleepers have started living in a self-contained apartment since we launched Housing First in 2014. “One person entered the flat absolutely overjoyed and another person remained silent; another threw away all the furniture because he wanted to have his own furniture; another one couldn’t believe the apartment had so much light...”, exposes Anna Rodríguez Titos, Head of Arrels’ first attention team and their street outreach teams.

Lluís is one of these people. When he left the street to enter an individual flat we had already reconfigured the Support teams and taken on board the Housing First model, but, despite that, we had doubts. The main one? Loneliness.

Lluís was excited when he entered the flat. At first, he spent most of the day on the street and returned to the flat to sleep but, little by little, he started becoming withdrawn and stopped going out. He didn’t eat; he didn’t clean; he drank too much. The apartment was in Barcelona, but far from the area where Lluís had lived all his life; his support team visited him twice a week. Until he hit rock bottom and his health suffered. Lluís’ case has opened discussions between Arrels’ professionals: Are we doing Housing First well? Is an individual flat an option if the person’s situation worsens due to loneliness? How can it be tackled?

As of now, Lluís has happily returned to the flat and has quit drinking of his own accord, though his case has revealed the difficulty of tackling loneliness. “When a person starts living in a flat on his own in an area he/she is not familiar with, adapting to the neighbourhood is a slow process and it also depends on his capacity to socialize” suggests Ester Sánchez.

Anna Rodríguez Titos shares the same view, and also remarks how the situation of rough sleepers has improved after entering a flat under the Housing First model. “You can see how health improves, how consumption is reduced and how their hygiene improves because they can have a shower whenever they want and how their self-esteem improves”.

### **Challenges in the shift towards Housing First**

Two and a half years after starting to implement Housing First in Arrels, the shift continues. In May 2016, the organization provided housing to 162 people, 49 of who were in individual housing. The number of people who live in shared apartments is similar to 2014, but, on the other hand, the number of people living in rented rooms has decreased from 52 to 34. All the people housed, no matter where they live, have social support based on Housing First and housing stability has risen remarkably.

In order to know if we are applying the Housing First model correctly, in June 2016 the Support Team participated in a survey that tests the fidelity of the model, a survey that is also used in other countries where this model of attention is promoted. The evaluation focuses on housing access and requirements, the person’s social support and the alternatives he has in case of losing the housing; the types of services offered, the economical contributions of the clients and the housing benefits, structure of the teams etc.

In total, there are around 40 indicators and the top score is 100% fidelity. The result of Arrels’ survey was 72% fidelity.

We face many challenges. Some of them are very difficult and have to do with the difficulties in our social and political context, like the high housing prices or the difficulties people have to obtain a sufficient and stable income, either through employment and jobs adapted to their reality or through social benefits.

Other challenges we can and must face:

- Reinforcing teams with *peers*. In other European cities where Housing First is used, the support teams include people who have slept on the street and offer their expertise. In the process we have started at Arrels, this is a pending challenge which we need to understand better and, as of today, some people who have lived on the street collaborate and accompany people on some occasions; for example, to medical appointments.
- Facing loneliness. When a person lives on the street, he/she breaks almost all –if not all– his social bonds and to leave it a huge effort to create a new social network and deal with loneliness is needed. When the person enters a flat and starts living alone, loneliness is also present and must be handled in order to offer the person more options than just staying at home watching TV or going to Arrels' centre.
- Accompanying couples entering a flat under the Housing First model. It sometimes happens that a person enters an individual flat and he/she is followed by his partner soon after. At Arrels, we respect these decisions, since they decide what they want to do with their lives and the apartment is their home. The difficulty with the social support starts when there are relationship problems linked to loneliness and lack of respect, and when the flat is managed by Arrels.
- Finding individual housing at an affordable price. Arrels is currently offering housing in Barcelona, Cornellà, Granollers and Hospitalet de Llobregat. Finding small apartments for less than 500€ is becoming impossible, due to the situation of the real estate market. In these two and a half years of implementing the Housing First model and looking for individual flats, we have also encountered unwillingness from landlords, as they are reluctant to let a homeless person live in their apartment.
- Preventing a person who has lost his housing from returning to the street. At Arrels, we believe in self-contained and stable housing as a very good solution for the chronic homeless who have tried to live in other residential facilities such as hostels, rooms or shared flats. Sometimes, though, problems with neighbours (keeping a good relationship with the neighbours is one of the Housing First requirements) force the person to leave the house. The challenge is to find other housing solutions; temporary resources we still lack or even don't know of which would prevent the person from returning to street.

There's a sixth challenge as well which is also very important and worries us: what happens with the people who sleep on the street and who tell us that they don't want to live in a dignified and stable housing? We have encountered these situations, especially with people suffering mental illness, and we ought to know how to tackle them. Maybe for these cases, individual housing is not the solution and we should be more imaginative. Nevertheless, what we do know is that offering them social support following the Housing First approach enables us to respect their decisions to the fullest.

Our experience with Housing First confirms to us that it's a valid model for fighting homelessness in Barcelona, where there are currently 941 people sleeping on the street. It will be a challenge and what can be done in the meanwhile also needs to be taken into account, to stop rough sleepers suffering from the weather conditions, the insecurity of sleeping rough, the lack of intimacy and the difficulties in exercising their right to dignified and stable housing.