

Helping the homeless beyond putting a roof over their heads

There are complex physiological, emotional and social needs involved. Making them feel at home, included and supported is important too.

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Moves by the Government and those on the ground such as social service agencies and volunteers to address the complex issues faced by Singaporeans who are homeless have expanded to include different approaches over the past few years.

They are moving away from traditional approaches of seeing the solution as simply putting a roof over someone's head.

However, more can be done to tackle the fact that homelessness is neither solely an individual nor a housing problem.

Research conducted by the lead author of this piece points to a combination of external and personal circumstances in homeless people's lives that weaken their social support system, rather than a specific event or personal issue.

People who have lived on the streets for years do not always find the prospect of a shelter transformative or appealing. Often, housing support is rejected because it might be far from places homeless people are familiar with, potentially taking them away

from their social networks and sources of income.

The experience of homelessness also extends beyond that of sleeping rough, and includes different forms of unstable housing circumstances and non-housing-related issues.

People who have experienced homelessness for more than a year are more likely to have complex mental and physical health needs and suffer multiple forms of social exclusion such as divorce, poverty, eviction and substance abuse, studies show.

The same research by the lead author of this piece also shows that long-term homelessness is strongly associated with a lifelong institutional circuit of prisons, halfway houses, hospitals, addiction rehabilitation centres and homeless shelters.

Long-term homeless people typically experience recurrent episodes of sleeping rough and, for a few, exiting homelessness is often a lifelong affair.

How are things changing in Singapore, and what more is needed to tackle the homeless problem?

HOUSING SHOULD NOT BE THE ONLY SOLUTION

Early ideas about homelessness date back to medieval British and European vagrancy laws. It was

thought that homelessness resulted from idleness and vices that necessitated treatment and rehabilitation. These ideas influenced, for a large part, an institutionalised response to homelessness.

By the mid-20th century, a different narrative about homelessness gained prominence in the West. Scholars in the United States argued that homelessness was fundamentally a problem of inadequate housing, brought about by socio-economic conditions that people had no control over.

At the same time, the United Nations declared adequate housing to be a basic human right. This became the impetus for the Housing First movement that has swept across the US and Europe over the past 20 years.

It advocates that the homeless should be given access to permanent housing without the pre-condition of being treated or rehabilitated. Only once they are housed is a network of services made available to help them work towards recovery (if needed), reintegrate into the community and sustain their new way of living.

However, providing housing without any conditions proved harder in practice than in theory. In the US and the United Kingdom, many programmes interpreted "housing first" as "housing only"

without some form of mandatory treatment, and with little to no complementary support services to address mental illness, substance addiction and social inclusion.

Experiences of long-term homelessness in Singapore reinforce these findings in the US and the UK that housing should not be the only solution to homelessness.

The availability of complementary support services to address the challenges that homeless people encounter is equally integral.

HOW ARE THINGS CHANGING HERE?

In Singapore, there is a shift towards a whole-of-society approach in tackling homelessness.

Earlier this year, a pilot initiative to remove the requirement for singles to find a flatmate before applying for public rental flats was introduced.

This attempt to streamline the existing Joint Singles Scheme indicates an awareness by the Government of the need for a shorter and quicker pathway to usher homeless people into permanent housing in Singapore.

On the ground, a significant move from the traditional institutionalised approach to a community-based social work approach – one that relies more on social service agencies and community volunteers to engage with the homeless – is apparent.

In 2019, the formation of the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers

(Peers) network was initiated by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

The Peers network is supported by government agencies, social service agencies, community groups and befrienders, and continues to facilitate direct communication among these groups to coordinate and offer support to the homeless.

As Singaporeans retreated into their homes during the coronavirus circuit breaker period last year, more than 40 religious and community organisations offered their premises as Safe Sound Sleeping Places (S3Ps) to temporarily house the homeless.

Rough sleepers staying at S3Ps would then move into transitional shelters developed by MSF where 24/7 shelter and onsite social work intervention is available.

With the help of community partners working closely with government agencies, almost 1,000 rough sleepers have received temporary shelter and social assistance since April last year. About half have since moved on from the various shelters to longer-term housing.

With more people in the community involved through the whole-of-society approach, the social service sector is also better equipped to tackle the complex issues related to long-term homelessness.

A MINDSET CHANGE

The irony of the homelessness issue lies in its need for a response beyond housing provision. Homeless people, like each and

every one of us, may have complex physiological, emotional and social needs. As a result, a whole-of-society approach to tackling homelessness requires greater participation from experts and community groups across various fields.

Moving on from homelessness is not a forceful change in lifestyle for the sake of conformity, but an invitation to walk towards social inclusion in society.

As a society, we must change our mindset and move from a symptomatic approach to homelessness. We cannot reduce social inclusion to mere one-off efforts that end only in shelter or housing provision.

Instead, we must recognise that exiting homelessness, especially for those who have lived on the streets for years, is a lifelong journey.

If we truly perceive this arduous journey to be worth taking with the homeless, we cannot demand to reap what we sow based on a timeline we arbitrarily impose.

Housing, whether temporary or permanent, does not always keep people off the streets. Fostering a community where homeless people can feel at home, included and supported does. That is why a whole-of-society approach is crucial.

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