

## **Česká zkušenost – Rapid Re-Housing Brno - Czech Experience (RRH)**

The RRH project is the first housing project based on Housing First principles in the Czech Republic. Its bearer is the city of Brno and the partner of the project is NGO IQ Roma Service (member of the Czech Platform for Social Housing), which provides social work for 50 families with children supported by the project. A more detailed description of the project is given in the expert guide. In the following text, we will only deal with the role of peer consultants in supporting families which have acquired new housing.

A selection of 50 families (of about 420 families with children identified in Brno as living in housing distress) was drawn by lottery. The criterion for inclusion in the project was only housing distress, parameters such as competence to keep the housing, merit (to obtain housing), threat rate, etc. were not assessed.

(1) A large number of selected families have lived outside standard housing (in hostels, asylums, etc.) for a long time (even several years) and project implementers assumed that competencies to maintain standard housing in these families would not be sufficient and that there would exist complex phenomena (risks) that can threaten housing. At the same time, they assumed that social workers would encounter new problems with which they had no experience, it would often be difficult to orient themselves in the family situation, and for many risky phenomena there would be hidden causes which identification would require great trust between the worker and the client. These were the main reasons for creating project positions for 2 peer consultants, although there was practically no experience in peer consultants use of support housing for families with children at the time of the project launch.

The Peer Consultant should improve the quality of social work in families, which main objective is to reduce the risk of losing housing and, of course, to support the families in other life situations, thus maximizing the housing quality improvement potential for qualitative changes in other areas of life.

Collaboration with peer consultants should improve the following expected limitations of cooperation between the social worker (SW) and the client:

1. SW has a different life experience than supported families and can not adequately understand some situations
2. SW can not always establish a completely confidential relationship with the client
3. Clients often do not believe in the stability of positive life changes and SW life story can not serve as an example of successful problem solving
4. The relationship between SW and a client may be limited by some learned social work tools

The involvement of peer consultants in the support team had at least two main objectives.

The first was to overcome the listed potential barriers to cooperation - to understand the client's situation and to motivate them for a specific action, to avoid misunderstandings and to offer the client various forms of interaction. The second goal was to give, with reference to the life experience of the peer consultant, the client's hope and proof that change (in our case, the acquisition of stable housing) is sustainable and work towards effective steps to prevent housing loss and maximize the positive effects of improving the situation living on other areas of life of the client and his family. The of the peer consultant role is defined primarily by the ability to use his own life story in the client's accessible form (language, critically friendly interaction), to reflect own experience of changing housing which had required a change in previous life strategies. We also expected the peer consultants could be more assertive in communication when asking for behavior that will keep housing then social worker.

The ulterior objective was to increase the team's competencies in defining the specific roles of its individual members, improving communication, organizational flexibility with respect to the roles in the team, etc. Social workers without housing distress experience should be able to gain other insights into clients 'situations, learn to understand the hidden causes of clients' risky behavior, gain critical insight into their actions and, last but not least, learn to use specific knowledge of peer consultants in the support process.

(2) On the basis of the goals set, we have formulated a peer consultant's basic profile. It was a person who lived with children in situation of housing distress, managed to find and maintain standard housing, and had the will and communication skills to use this experience to help families who had recently acquired standard housing. We anticipated the will to learn new things, the ability to understand the client's life situation and, above all, the ability to collaborate on the team in finding, planning and implementing adequate procedures to address risky situations in clients' lives.

(3,4) When looking for peer consultants, we soon found out that the expected (required) attributes we were not able to find. There were a total of 6 peer consultants in the team and none of them did completely fulfill the original project idea.

Above all, it was not possible to find peer consultants with the characteristics of family (with children) transition out of housing distress to standard housing. Nor was it possible to find a peer consultant among the families who entered the program. Participant families were selected by drawing lots and so the most vulnerable families were not preferentially supported, we relied on the fact that after a short period, some of the project participants could be involved as peer consultants. This assumption was not incorrect in terms of the competence of some clients, but it turned out that this activity was not interesting for the program's clients - the change in the family life situation brought them many worries and joys and their ambitions were de facto fulfilled. And even now, more than a year after the first families have been settled, we do not expect that the project participants would like to be involve in the peer-to-peer support process.

The 6 peer workers recruitment were based on the informal ties of the expert team. Each of the peer consultant had some attributes that were potentially usable in clients support, but the experience and skills were only partial, and therefore we were unable to involve peer consultants in support of families as we originally assumed. The related problem was also the inexperience of the organization, when the only experience with engaging a peer consultant in a social work team was in a family support program, where the peer consultant had worked in team for about one year. Actually neither the organization nor the housing support team was prepared to worked with peer consultants, no procedures have been developed for the selection and involvement of peer consultants in the team. Moreover the social work in the organization was not perceived as a really teamwork and that structures that would support this form of work were not so generally created.

The peer consultants involvement in a housing support team meant to create a cooperative system in the client support process, it was a lot of searching and, from time to time, a certain frustration for both peer consultants and social workers, when everyone felt that cooperation was not what it could be. We focused mainly on finding forms of cooperation both within the team and using peer consultants in communicating with clients in the first project year. And we succeeded finally. We have managed to define the role of peer consultants and actually use them to support clients. It has been shown that the ambition of having peer consultants with a complex register of competencies is not realistic. Supporting housing of families with children is too complex and it has been shown that it is appropriate to use peer staff in specific situations with which they have experience and to use them in the motivation process, when they can use their life experiences and and communicate them in the appropriate language.

Very positive was the disruption of the routine in the work of a team of social workers when they had to think about the efficient cooperation with peer consultants and plan adequate support for their work. Peer consultants are now an integral part of the team, participating in all team meetings and supervision. They were (together with social workers) included in the training course of conducting Motivational interviews and they are allowed to take part in the external training courses required in the Czech Republic for workers in social services, which provides them with the prospect of continuing their work after the end of project funding. Social workers have learned to use the specific skills of the current 2 peer workers, so cooperation in support of the particular family always defines the role of the peer worker and the main topic he/she is dealing with. Work with a client is either in couple peer consultant and social worker or, in some families, peer consultant works independently. Peer staff consult and reflect their activities both individually with a social worker with whom they work in the household and in joint meetings and supervises.

(5) After almost two years of project implementation, we can summarize the experience of cooperation with peer consultants:

1. To support families with children in housing programs, it is advisable to use peer consultants in specific risk situations. Good experience has been identified in the following

areas:

- addressing situations of domestic violence, improving the position of women in families
- motivation to pay rental debts and adjustments to the family's financial budget
- Supporting communication with neighbors, engaging clients in neighboring communities
- escorts in dealing with institutions
- the role of a "critical friend"
- Flat maintenance and small repairs

2. Involvement of peer workers is a major asset for a team of social workers who have to think innovate about their work, reflect the effectiveness of the chosen processes, and design new practices with people who have totally different experience and style of work - these are limiting, on the other hand, opens up other options for dealing with risk situations

3. The team of social workers (and whole organization) were not sufficiently prepared to involve peer consultants in the support process. However, we have found an adequate role for peer consultants and perceive this gradual process as very useful for improving communication and planning specific support within the team.

### Challenges

In spite of listed achievements (teamwork improvement, greater effectiveness of client support in specific areas), some challenges remain for the future.

- a) Providing incentive tools to involve more peer consultants in short and thematic ad hoc contracts
- b) Creating self-support groups of clients led by peer consultants
- c) Intensive work in the neighborhood - use of peer consultants for community activities
- d) Creating a network of peer consultants at the city level - creating a platform for formulating the peer consultants needs
- e) Extend the activities of peer consultants to other areas of direct work with clients, including public administration
- f) Standardization of peer consultant work and consequently ensuring stable financing of peer consultant position

