

Own Keys 2: Experts by Experience as Trainers and Mentors

Vlada Petrovskaja, Vva ry - No Fixed Abode, Helsinki, Finland

Nothing about us without us!

Experts by Experience as Trainers and Mentors project aims at strengthening the role of experts by experience in the planning, development and application of homeless services. The paid experts by experience working for the project have experience in being homeless and its side effects and long-term experience in developing services for the homeless. The project is designed to support the work of professional homelessness workers through the expertise of the experts by experience. The project offers concrete advice and models for communities in how to incorporate experts, with experience in homelessness, in planning services; how the expert knowledge may be applied; and what expertise by experience may mean under specific conditions at given communities and services.

What does expertise by experience look like to our project team

What constitutes as enough experience and what type of experience is applicable? Is it enough to be an expert of one's own experiences and, furthermore, is it possible to be an expert simply by having life experience? Experiences are part of everyone's life and, whether they are good or bad, they accumulate consciously and subconsciously. Experience is accumulated through various events, which are part of life and results of interaction with the surrounding world. Therefore, is it possible to claim that a person is an expert of her own experiences while another person is not entitled to be an expert of experiences? ***The term needs a clear definition in order for it to be understood and used or disregarded.*** Many experts by experience we have encountered find the term alien and somehow "derogatory". Expert participants do not feel they can claim to be experts by experience, as if they would elevate themselves to a higher position in front of others.

How much experience does one need to gain in order to act as an expert by experience?

Is it possible to call a person, who has been recruited to a professional team of homeless services planners, a homelessness expert by experience simply because they have experience in being homeless? Does the term not rely on an idea or hope that a designated expert by experience is qualified to share experiences on the issue and perhaps the ability to reflect their own experiences on a larger group? Does the term simply exist for authorities and professionals for them to be able to, ostensibly, prove that they have consulted persons who the services are for? What role does the term

'expert by experience' play? It is clear that a person with experience in being homeless is part of a professional team, but is it necessary to use the title expert by experience?

The recognition and use of the term in Finnish municipalities varies. Within the homelessness community, expert by experience have been mainly used in gathering feedback on activities and services from those who use them. The One's Own Keys 2 project workers feel that, even today, the role of experts by experience is a precisely defined one that follows strict guidelines. **A good example is the situation where an expert by experience helps a service user to fill in a query designed by a service provider. Another example is the situation where an expert by experience acts as peer support or as a, so called, transaction interpreter between a client and a professional.**

In both examples, according to the project workers, the role of the expert by experience plays only a minor role. **Our project has come to the conclusion that expert by experience is an undefined, multidimensional process that continually evolves with its surroundings, and with the needs and possibilities involved with it.** Mainly the role of an expert by experience is seen as one that accompanies another person in their life and is a person to another person.

Expert by experience is the reflection and application of experience-based know-how, the emotions, and the modes of actions needed for survival at a larger scale: whether towards others with the same experiences, the services system or society itself. Expert participation turns out to be a strength and a tool in providing information. It is a route towards an alternative way to influence and a tool for working. Expertise by experience is a prism that allows one to see the diversity of a situation in all its nuances. It is also a richness and a skill that keeps the mind open and unprejudiced.

Acting as an expert by experience is somewhere "in-between", a path that opens up a possibility to see both the development of a service provider and its reflection on the user of the services. The job of an expert participant opens up possibilities towards acting bilaterally and across sectors. The experience provided by the project is therefore more than what is understood and seen in the participant municipalities, which is why the project

workers have often been able to create an independent environment where demand and possibilities meet without a pre-formatted model.