

Interview – Cornerhouse/Menhely Foundation

- *What brought the program to life?*
- Both in national and city level political discourse there was a stronger and stronger need to remove homeless people from public areas.
- *In your opinion what typical services does the program provide service users with that is not provided by homeless services sufficiently?*
- It is the close personal contact. We used informal language with service users, they had our private phone numbers that they could call any time. When it was necessary, we got into the car in the middle of the night. They could count on us. We had them sit in our own cars (also used by our families). We dared to talk about ourselves, did not only ask questions about them. They knew that we believed in them. We believe that they are able to get out of their miserable situations. They are able to take a step ahead. We treated them as human beings. We cooked together, we made excursions, we travelled and looked for a job together, we exchanged experiences and evaluated together. We dedicated loads of time for them. This cannot be financed by homeless services, because it is too expensive and the results are questionable from the funder's point of view.
- *What were your role and tasks in the project?*
- I was a case worker. I took care of 1-4 service users parallel and led group sessions. Group sessions are a very effective tool of giving feedback, to keep a mirror for service users, we thought groups were indispensable. In many cases they proved to be more important than individual case work. In the first phase of the program we held 2-3 group sessions a day.
- *What kind of professional challenges did you face? Were you prepared to everything that happened during the implementation of the program?*
- We didn't know what we undertook, we only believed in it. And it was exciting to try and put together something very new. Many of us had experience of leading group sessions and all of us had done intensive support work and case work before. Administration and documentation workload was much greater than we expected. All of us took part in these. Communication with the supporter and reporting were tasks of the project manager and the assistant, this way it was easier for me.
- *What kind of novelties did the project bring regarding teamwork, for example distribution of tasks, managing conflicts within the team?*
- We really did not want to have a classical project manager but to decide on everything as a team. We were afraid that it would affect dynamics within the team in a negative way if the previous egalitarian way of working broke.

However the supporter insisted on having someone filling the project manager's position. Therefore I stayed out of administrative and financial decisions, but we always decided on professional issues as a team. We had weekly team meetings and exchanged many emails between meetings as well. We made a detailed documentation of every group activity and shared them with each-other. This fact was of course shared with service users, too. This way we almost always knew what was going on with service users. Within the team we did not have very sharp conflicts. Maybe sometimes the project manager wanted to be more serious and expected the same from others, but during such an intense work it was impossible to always stay serious.

- *Before starting the project did you have any idea about how much time it would consume and how it would respect work-life balance?*
- I expected the project to take a lot of time and that I wouldn't be doing a classic 9 to 5 job. In fact we had very little free time, we only allowed ourselves to have more free time towards the end of the project. With time, instead of 2-3 of us holding group sessions, it was only one of us. In the beginning we loved group sessions so much that we didn't mind that they took so much time.
- *How did your experiences in the project affect your private life?*
- I think it was difficult for all of us to synchronize this job that required full commitment with our family lives. My marriage started to crumble during the project and it ended finally. Staff of the project were originally my friends as well, or became friends. Thanks to lots of conversations with them I didn't have to bring home problems and heavy life stories of service users.
- *What were the strengths of the project that made it worth being part of it?*
- It was important that our job was well-paid. It was also very inspiring that we were free in how we worked. We created the frameworks, tools, working methods together - there was no pressure coming from above. We could fly, weren't restricted by the usual professional framework. For me our personal relations and communication with service users were great experiences.
- *Which elements of the project did you like taking part in the most?*
- Leading group sessions. Maybe this is what I have the most experiences in, I have led many groups before as a supervisor.
- *Which elements suited you the least?*
- Obviously the administration. I am bad with deadlines. It was difficult to make myself sit down and do administration when often I arrived home around midnight.

- *What elements of the program didn't work or worked less efficiently than previously planned?*
- There is no exact answer to this question as we continuously changed things during the program, we had the freedom to do so. We didn't have to stick to protocols, when something didn't work, we changed. For example we didn't want to use alcohol breathalyzers, but after a while issues arising from alcohol consumption became so frequent that we started to use them. Otherwise it helped us to make an objective judgement in such conflict situations.
- *Are there any methods used in the project that you would like to share with other professional support workers?*
- It is the directness. The transparency of our work towards other staff members and service users alike. The importance of groups sessions and the honest belief in the service user.
- *In your opinion in what areas should you develop? What kind of help/support do you require for it?*
- Maybe besides group supervision we could have used individual psychotherapeutic support as well. We had to, and I still have to work on my credibility. For example once service user with alcohol addiction issues arrived directly from rehabilitation. Then some of us made a promise that we wouldn't drink alcohol for a year either. We would have needed more reflections like this to be even more credible to represent the direction, not only a way.