

Experimental Housing Solutions for Migrant Homelessness in Italy



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As migrant homelessness rises in Italy, two community-based projects are offering new models of support. In Cuneo, the Accoglienza Diffusa 2.0 project evolved from seasonal worker housing into year-round accommodation with tailored support, helping migrants transition from precarious work to stable living. In Agrigento, Casa Rahab assists migrants leaving reception centres by offering housing, legal aid, language training, and active involvement in community life.

This article explores how both initiatives challenge fragmented services and short-term solutions, showing that migrant-centred, integrated approaches can foster autonomy, dignity, and real paths to inclusion.

Background

In recent years, the presence of people with difficult migration paths has been substantial in traditional services for the people facing homelessness (night shelters, food distribution services, street outreach, soup kitchens, but also housing programs). This population is characterised by social, economic and health needs, but also specific needs more closely linked to the protection of human and international rights or the regulation of documentation processes. In such cases, it is easy to slip into a situation of severe marginalisation, where poor work, physical and mental health are combined with precarious and unstable legal conditions.

Italy has a long tradition of migration flows. It has always been a port of arrival for migrants from the Mediterranean route. In the last ISTAT survey on *Homeless people*, published in 2015, it was noted that foreigners in Italy accounted for 58% of the estimated 50,724 people, with an increase of almost 10% between the 2011 and 2015 surveys. These were migrants from North African countries (Morocco and Tunisia) and Eastern Europe (Romania). The conflicts in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and between Israel and Palestine have led to an increase in the number of refugees and war victims, many of whom, fortunately, receive support services. Additionally, the Balkan route is commonly used by migrants from Eastern Europe to reach Italy.

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A study carried out by fio.PSD (Federazione Italiana Organismi Persone Senza Dimora - Italian Federation of Organisations for the Homeless) among its members at the beginning of 2020 showed an increase in the homeless population of between 10% and 20%, linking this figure to the increase in migration flows. New comers often have personal histories shaped by difficult migration experiences. They frequently face challenges in securing stable employment and achieving independence, with their living conditions further worsened by poor health, addiction issues, or a lack of documentation and long-term residence permits.

What do migrants at risk of becoming homeless need?

Many third-sector organisations point out the attention to the fact that migrant people experiencing precarious and vulnerable living conditions are at risk of becoming homeless. The precarious residential status, the lack of affordable housing and discrimination in the housing market, and opportunities outside the reception system, and difficulty in finding employment can all represent barriers to gaining independence and improving migrants' living conditions.

The problem is not being a migrant but the vulnerable conditions and trajectories they experience. For example, some migrants establish economic and working ties in Italy (as in the case of the Cuneos' project) but are unable to build a dignified life for themselves due to poorly paid and seasonal work. They often turn to the reception circuit and homeless services to solve their basic needs. Newcomer citizens who lack immediate access to a regular residence permit in their host country risk becoming part of the phenomenon known in Anglo-Saxon countries as 'overstayers' - irregular immigrants who, despite losing their regular residence status, remain in the country and live in highly precarious and insecure conditions. Lastly, individuals who are excluded from, or have exited migrant reception systems, and are not yet prepared to manage life independently, often become vulnerable and turn to homeless services to meet their basic needs, including healthcare, shelter, psychological support, and legal assistance (as in the case of Agrigento's project).

Below are two examples of projects within the fio.PSD national network that focus on migrants at risk of becoming homeless.

Preventing homelessness for the migrant population: the case of "Accoglienza diffusa 2.0" project in the city of Cuneo

The territories of Cuneo and Saluzzo (Piedmont, Northern Italy) are areas with a strong agricultural vocation. During the summer period, harvesting work in the fields leads to an increased demand for seasonal labour. Every year, hundreds of workers, often foreign citizens from low-threshold services and other Italian regions, move to this area to obtain employment opportunities in agriculture. Within this context, the 'Accoglienza Diffusa 2.0' project was born. It is a good practice created to respond to the housing and social needs of these workers, offering them not only a roof but also human and professional support.

Since 2018, the project has been developed thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding chaired by the Prefecture of Cuneo together with the Piedmont Region, business associations, and trade unions, and signed

by 11 municipalities in the Province of Cuneo. The initial objective was to provide support (from June to November) for 225 seasonal workers in temporary accommodations and apartments. **The aim was to avoid informal settlements or situations of degradation, and to guarantee decent living and working conditions.**

Since 2020, the social cooperatives Momo, Fiordaliso and Emmanuele, together with the Caritas Diocesana of Cuneo-Fossano, have launched a second project called "Presidio" to provide 40 seasonal shelters in the regional provinces. The **multidisciplinary team** works side by side with the beneficiaries, offering concrete support during the collection period.

In 2021, the operators affirmed that the majority of seasonal workers live in the country on a permanent basis, have documents and residency in Italy, but are unable to access affordable housing. They are often housed in night shelters or low-threshold services during the winter period, and migrant workers find themselves living homeless. Social workers decided to listen to the workers to understand their needs and design a new solution.

In 2022, the "Accoglienza Diffusa 2.0" project was born. The promoting organisations decided to support two apartments throughout the year, providing accommodation and personalised care for 15 young men, mainly of sub-Saharan origin, aged between 20 and 35. Each of them will receive personalised support covering all aspects of their lives: from legal and health services to access to employment, from training to bureaucratic support.

Since 2023, the two shelters have had the solid support of the Common Ground project and have welcomed victims and potential victims of labour exploitation, giving continuity to the tried and tested path.

The innovative elements of the project were:

- Bottom-up design, listening to the needs of seasonal migrant workers experiencing homelessness
- Recognising that the temporary nature of services is not sufficient to meet people's ongoing needs
- The empowerment of the beneficiaries, who offered an economic contribution to the housing costs
- Community work involving public institutions, associations, social and health services.

Thanks to the “Accoglienza diffusa 2.0” project, it has also been possible to set up apprenticeships, vocational and language training courses and socialisation activities, opening up new prospects of integration for the beneficiaries.

“Accoglienza diffusa 2.0” represents an example of territorial integration and social inclusion, representing the evolution from a model of seasonal accommodation to a model of permanent housing for the most vulnerable workers.

A migrant-centred approach: that makes it possible. The case of the Casa Rahab in Agrigento

Casa Rahab is a place of welcome and support for people in situations of housing fragility, located in the city of Agrigento (Sicily, Southern Italy) and managed by the Diocesan Caritas of Agrigento and the Mondoaltri Foundation. It focuses on migrants who are leaving institutional care, often without having acquired the necessary skills to build an independent life project. In this transitional phase, when the risk of extreme marginalisation is very high, **Casa Rahab offers a space for rest, orientation, and new beginnings.** Thanks to its proximity to the island of Lampedusa (traditional landing point for people from North Africa), many of Casa Rahab's beneficiaries are migrants who need support to start an independent life.

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The approach adopted is based on a **holistic vision of the person.** The welcome offered goes beyond simple access to accommodation: each beneficiary is included in a shared path that links the various services active within the Mondoaltri Foundation. Specialised social workers offer individual listening sessions, training courses, job placement, Italian language courses and volunteer opportunities. This method is useful in tackling two recurrent problems: the fragmentation of services and the lack of accessibility. The people welcomed often do not know how the local context works, they do not know the language and have difficulties understanding the opportunities available. The aim of Casa Rahab is to make social intervention as clear, coordinated and accessible as possible.

Casa Rahab is not a traditional care service. The active participation of the residents is encouraged. Beneficiaries take care of the common areas, contribute to the day-to-day management of the house and, where possible, volunteer for activities such as serving in the foundation's soup kitchen. This involvement creates a sense of belonging, strengthens relationship skills and promotes a gradual but solid path of empowerment.

In our territory, migrants who find themselves in a situation of homelessness face very specific difficulties. The resources available are few and poorly coordinated, while the needs are complex and often ignored. One of the most serious problems is the lack of access to information: from the first moments of their arrival, people are confronted with ineffective communication methods that prevent them from having a real understanding of their rights and obligations. Many do not know, for example, that leaving an institutional reception centre means losing the right to housing and that a declaration of hospitality is required in order to regularise their situation. This single bureaucratic step, multiplied by hundreds of people without stable housing, makes access to regularisation virtually impossible. This creates a cumbersome mechanism that feeds on itself and ends up blocking any path to autonomy. In this context, information is a fundamental pillar to overcome the difficulties in accessing rights and services. Casa Rahab offers literacy courses, cultural mediation, support in accessing social and health services, and legal advice to help people escape a sense of disorientation and invisibility.

Casa Rahab is also a promoter of dialogue and collaboration in the territory, organising events such as the *Festa del Vicinato* and the World Café, which foster a climate of trust and inclusion. This approach to social advocacy aims to build a shared future by strengthening the community's resources and responding to the real needs of the territory. **Casa Rahab is a laboratory of social innovation, where diversity meets and new life possibilities are built.**