

Brussels, June 2023

## Homelessness is a health issue:

**A truly comprehensive European approach to mental health must consider the needs and access of people experiencing homelessness**

On the 7th of June 2023, the European Commission (EC) launched a *Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a comprehensive approach to mental health*. This initiative marks a turning point in the way mental health is addressed in the EU; the EC referring to it as the beginning of a new strategic approach to mental health. It aims to put mental health on par with physical, in a cross-sectoral manner which goes beyond health policy.<sup>1</sup>

The Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health focuses on both how to bring relief to people suffering from mental health issues, and on prevention policies. It draws on three guiding principles that should apply to every EU citizen: (i) to have access to adequate and effective prevention, (ii) to have access to high quality and affordable mental healthcare and treatment, and (iii) to be able to reintegrate into society after recovery. This initiative adds another pillar to the architecture of the European Health Union<sup>2</sup> by both reinforcing ongoing work and opening new workstreams, developed with all partners and including implementing actions.

This initiative is launched in a context of a world struck by multiple crises in the past years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, followed by an energy crisis and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health problems affected around 84 million people in the EU (one in six people)<sup>3</sup>, with significant regional, social, gender and age inequalities. During the pandemic, the number of people in the EU affected by loneliness doubled compared to pre-pandemic years, reaching up to 26% across some regions.<sup>4</sup> Increased loneliness and reduced social interactions, concerns about one's own health and that of loved ones, uncertainty about the future, anxiety caused by fear and loss<sup>5</sup> all contributed to post-traumatic stress disorders.<sup>6</sup> The war in Ukraine caused further insecurity, while forcing millions of people to relocate within the EU.

In light of the Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, FEANTSA will reinforce our advocacy for a systemic change to address mental health problems, particularly those present among people experiencing homelessness. The trauma of not having a safe shelter has a huge impact on people's mental wellbeing, can be a trigger for addictions, and have a significant impact on the individuals' overall health status. International studies conducted in the last 20 years have found lifetime prevalence rates for mental health problems for between 60 to 93.3% of people experiencing homelessness<sup>7</sup> – a much higher frequency compared to the general population. In Germany, for example, data show that homeless people are affected by mental problems at a 3.8 times higher rate than the general population.<sup>8</sup> A recent report from Spain also shows that there is a very close relationship between homelessness and mental health: 70% of homeless people interviewed by the organisation FACIAM were shown to be at risk of having their mental health affected, while 11.6% say that they have a diagnosed mental problem.<sup>9</sup> Among those interviewed, 41.3%

<sup>1</sup> [https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com\\_2023\\_298\\_1\\_act\\_en.pdf](https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com_2023_298_1_act_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union_en)

<sup>3</sup> [https://health.ec.europa.eu/state-health-eu/health-glance-europe/health-glance-europe-2018\\_en](https://health.ec.europa.eu/state-health-eu/health-glance-europe/health-glance-europe-2018_en)

<sup>4</sup> [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26_en)

<sup>5</sup> [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/new-report-loneliness-doubles-europe-during-pandemic-2021-07-26_en)

<sup>6</sup> [https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com\\_2023\\_298\\_1\\_act\\_en.pdf](https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com_2023_298_1_act_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Schreiter S, Bempohl F, Krausz M, Leucht S, Rössler W, Schouler-Ocak M, Gutwinski S: The prevalence of mental illness in homeless people in Germany—a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Dtsch Arztebl Int* 2017; 114: 665–72. DOI: 10.3238/arztebl.2017.0665

<sup>8</sup> Schreiter S, Bempohl F, Krausz M, Leucht S, Rössler W, Schouler-Ocak M, Gutwinski S: The prevalence of mental illness in homeless people in Germany—a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Dtsch Arztebl Int* 2017; 114: 665–72. DOI: 10.3238/arztebl.2017.0665

<sup>9</sup> Research report “Social exclusion and COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic on the health, welfare and living conditions of homeless people” December, 2021, Coordination: FACIAM Technical Secretariat Researchers: Esteban Sánchez Moreno, Doctor en Sociología (I.P) Iria-Noa de la Fuente Roldán, Doctora en Trabajo Social [https://informecovidpsh.faciam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/informe-Covid19\\_Faciam-EN-HR.pdf](https://informecovidpsh.faciam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/informe-Covid19_Faciam-EN-HR.pdf)

were of foreign origin, as opposed to 25.6% of Spanish origin. Women and young people are also more affected in Spain: greater psychological impairment and mental ill-health were present in women, and almost 80% of people aged 30 and under have a possible case of poor mental health.

The mental health of homeless children and young people is a focal issue of concern, especially considering the frequency of late diagnosis and treatment - if a diagnosis is made at all.<sup>10</sup> For example, a study on the mental health of 90 homeless young people in the UK (including 46 children under 18) found that 88% of them had a psychiatric condition, compared to 32% of the age-matched general population. Yet, only 31% of the young people experiencing homelessness in the study had accessed a form of mental health service.<sup>11</sup> In France, the absence of housing and the precarious situations that result from this have serious consequences on the mental health of children, as shown by UNICEF and Samusocial Paris.<sup>12</sup> Due to a sore lack of mental health professionals, children and adolescents have great difficulty in accessing adequate care. This is particularly worrying considering that childhood is an essential period of development during which the psychological, emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioural bases for mental health are established.

In this context, FEANTSA welcomes the EC Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, particularly point d) *'Helping those most in need'*, under which the situation of people experiencing homelessness is mentioned. We fully support the Commission's call towards Member States for collecting data on the mental health status of people in vulnerable situations, including those living in homelessness. Furthermore, we encourage the allocation of EU funding for mental health projects and measures for supporting people experiencing homelessness under funding streams such as the EU4Health programme.

FEANTSA also underlines that the importance of housing as a health determinant must be fully recognised under the initiative given the strong impact that living in extreme poor conditions and deep marginalisation has on mental health of people. The current reference to the European Platform on Combating Homelessness is not sufficient to ensure that people facing homelessness will receive the much-needed support in improving their well-being and mental health. We call for developing structural, holistic, and crosscutting interventions to support people experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion.

FEANTSA strongly believes that more consideration should be given to the situation of marginalised communities in the recent Communication, and we call for targeted measures formulated under a flagship initiative that should work towards ensuring that people in vulnerable situations, including those experiencing homelessness as well as LGBTBI people, people who use drugs, prisoners, sex workers and undocumented migrants,<sup>13</sup> have access to mental health care. As the needs of, and subsequently successful support measures for, marginalised groups vary, such a flagship initiative should be developed and implemented in close collaboration with organisations representing people in marginalised communities in Europe. For developing adequate measures to support people experiencing homelessness we formulate the following recommendations:

- a) **Recognise the impact that homelessness has on people's mental health.** The trauma of not having a safe shelter has a huge impact on people's mental wellbeing and should be addressed consequently.
- b) **Improve mental health care and follow up as a form of preventing homelessness** (for example, proper discharge from mental health care facilities to avoid discharge into homelessness).
- c) **Learn from the COVID-19 pandemic lessons** – this period has greatly affected people experiencing homelessness, in particular their mental health.<sup>14</sup> COVID-19 also served to highlight the importance of

<sup>10</sup> Crowley, 2012; Rosenthal & Lakhanpaul, 2020; Society for Adolescent Health & Medicine, 2018; Summerside, 2013 quoted in *Homeless children and young people A review of interventions supporting access to healthcare services, Prepared as part of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) project, September 2021. Authors: Lucy Hocking and Emma Leenders*

<sup>11</sup> Hodgson et al., 2014 quoted in GRANDIR SANS CHEZ-SOI. Quand l'absence de domicile met en péril la santé mentale des enfants, UNICEF France and the Samusocial of Paris, 2022

<sup>12</sup> GRANDIR SANS CHEZ-SOI. Quand l'absence de domicile met en péril la santé mentale des enfants, UNICEF France and the Samusocial of Paris, 2022 - <https://www.unicef.fr/article/lunicef-france-et-le-samusocial-de-paris-alertent-sur-la-sante-mentale-des-enfants-sans-domicile/>

<sup>13</sup> For more details on how to improve healthcare access for marginalised people please consult the website of the Nobody Left Outside initiative at <https://nobodyleftoutside.eu/>

<sup>14</sup> FEANTSA HOMELESS IN EUROPE MAGAZINE AUTUMN 2020 - THE IMPACT OF COVID19 (October 2020) and FEANTSA report The Impact of Covid-19 on Homeless Service Providers & Homeless People: The Migrant Perspective (March 2021)

adequate housing as a social determinant of health.<sup>15</sup> The lessons learnt in this period (such as sheltering people sleeping rough, allowing for unconditional and prioritised access to health care, etc.) could also be relevant for the upcoming initiatives on mental health.<sup>16</sup>

- d) **Promote and advocate for the implementation of ‘Housing first’ as a measure to improve people’s health situation.** ‘Housing first’<sup>17</sup> projects ensure that people have a safe home and have been proved to bring major benefits on mental health by allowing people to focus on treatment and rehabilitation,<sup>18</sup> leading to better engagement with support services.<sup>19,20</sup> It is, therefore, necessary to ensure coordination between policies addressing housing, homelessness, and mental health.
- e) **Developing mobile/outreach mental health services.** Homeless people are severely marginalised and excluded from society and, consequently, often only seek healthcare in cases of emergency. Their healthcare can be fragmented and lack coordination, and they may face stigma when attempting to access services.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore important that mental health supports, as well as health services in general, are brought to the locations of people who need it.
- f) **Support health services to become more inclusive and develop knowledge about discrimination against/stigma attached to people experiencing homelessness** who may feel pre-judged and rejected by the health systems. Measures need to be introduced at the level of the medical system and in medical schools for combating discrimination and stigmatisation of people experiencing homelessness (such as training, health inclusion projects).
- g) **Address specific challenges among people experiencing homelessness** – within the homeless population certain groups encounter specific inequalities in accessing health services, and their mental health is hugely impacted by the intersection of homelessness and additional factors such as: racism, discrimination related to gender, ethnicity, age, against LGBTI people, or discrimination and restrictions determined by migration status. For example, asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants living on the street, in insecure accommodation or asylum centres were at high risk of experiencing mental health problems in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic;<sup>22</sup> rates of conduct disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, anxiety, behavioural issues, suicidality and stress are high among homeless children and youth.<sup>23</sup>

**Finally, as the next steps are taken in the development of the proposed measures under the comprehensive approach to mental health, we call on the EC and Member States to include measures on homelessness across the flagship initiatives put forward.** Cross-cutting actions concerning homelessness can be implemented, for example, under flagship initiatives aimed at addressing capacity building, promoting mental health, depression and suicide prevention, helping people navigate through available support services, boosting the mental health of children and young people, reinforcing mental health systems, and improving access to treatment and care, or breaking through stigma.

FEANTSA strongly believes in the right to mental health and calls for support actions that will truly reach every EU citizen, including those experiencing homelessness or housing deprivation, under the Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health.

<sup>15</sup> FEANTSA statement - COVID-19: “Staying Home” Not an Option for People Experiencing Homelessness (March 2020)

<sup>16</sup> FEANTSA research note COVID-19 Response and Homelessness in the EU, Ruth Owen and Miriam Matthiessen, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Housing First Europe Guide, <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/publication/guide-managing-transitions-in-housing-first-services/>

<sup>18</sup> Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited 2018, <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/e1395547-292e-4236-be86-eaff9a4f1e92/Housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change>

<sup>19</sup> Greenwood, Ronni, Byrne, Steven, O’ Shaughnessy, Branagh, 2022/11/30, National Housing First Implementation Evaluation Findings Prepared for the National Housing First Implementation Committee, DO - 10.13140/RG.2.2.13376.20482, <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/NHFFinalReport220922.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Louisa Steele, Housing First and Homelessness Project Manager, Standing Together 2022, ‘[Westminster Vawg Housing First Service Second Year Evaluation](#)’

<sup>21</sup> FEANTSA Homeless in Europe Magazine: Homeless Health, Health and Homelessness: Overcoming the Complexities, 2011

<sup>22</sup> WHO Apart Together survey, Preliminary overview of refugees and migrants self-reported impact of COVID-19, 18 December 2020

<sup>23</sup> Homeless children and young people A review of interventions supporting access to healthcare services, Prepared as part of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) project, September 2021. Authors: Lucy Hocking and Emma Leenders