

BRIEF 7

First Working Hours Convergence France

France, in 65 cities

INSPIRING PRACTICE

ID CARD



PROJECT TITLE.

First Working Hours (Premières Heures en Chantier - PHC, in French)

MAIN OBJECTIVE.

First Working Hours is a programme that leverages work to help homeless individuals regain dignity and self-motivation, offering a highly individualised transition phase within Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) to support their re-engagement in housing, employment, and health.

TARGET AUDIENCE.

Convergence France collaborates with WISEs to support individuals primarily facing homelessness or living in emergency accommodation, and who are legally eligible to work in France.

IN NUMBERS.

69

WISEs are involved in implementing First Working Hours across 39 French *départements*.

1023

individuals participated in the programme (2024), with projections indicating that this figure will double by 2027.

67%

of people participating in the programme who were living in the street have found a shelter, in 2024.

SUMMARY.

First Working Hours leverages work to help homeless individuals regain dignity and self-motivation, offering highly excluded people—those sleeping rough or in emergency accommodation—a gradual (re)entry into professional activity through a highly individualised approach, with an hour-by-hour work schedule. Implemented by WISEs, it serves as a stepping stone, empowering individuals to actively seek solutions in housing, health, mental health, and professional integration.

CONTACT.



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Project description

An Effective Programme to Reach Those Furthest from Employment

Through the WISEs' network, First Working Hours reaches the 350,000 people in France sleeping rough or in emergency accommodation, a number that has more than doubled in the past decade. In 2024, First Working Hours supported more than 1,000 homeless individuals, aiming to double this by 2027. The average age of participants is 41, 76% are male, 86% are single, and 92% have experienced homelessness, with 50% sleeping rough for over two years.

Core Principles and Support through WISEs

First Working Hours prioritises work as a key lever for overcoming barriers and regaining self-confidence and stability. Key principles include:

- Co-working: Building trust through direct, field-based relationships with socio-professional educators.
- Adaptation and Progressiveness: A recruitment process with no selection criteria or prerequisites, and a programme tailored to individual needs, with rewards like cash payment in the first month.
- Multidisciplinary Support: Collaboration with social workers and WISE managers ensures continued support for long-term integration.

A Solid Budget Delivering Strong Results

In 2024, 69% of previously homeless individuals found shelter, 44% gained employment, and 69% of those with a detected health problem agreed to receive health support. Implementing PHC in one WISE for one year, supporting 15 homeless people, costs €66K, with public funding covering employee salaries. In 2023, the national budget was €3.6M, with €400K funded by Convergence France and the rest from local public funders.

TIMELINE

2009

Creation of the First Working Hours programme by Emmaüs Défi, aimed at helping homeless individuals re-enter the workforce through a tailored work integration approach.

2016-2018

First Working Hours entered a consolidation phase, leading to its inclusion in the National Strategy to Combat Poverty and securing national funding.

2020-2024

Under Convergence France, the programme expanded to over 60 WISEs across France.

Inspiration note

Employment as a Starting Point

The Housing First approach asserts that people experiencing homelessness should not have to prove their "housing readiness" before being offered stable housing. Similarly, the First Working Hours programme challenges the idea of "employment readiness" by adapting work to the individual rather than expecting them to adapt to work. Employment is more than an economic necessity; it is a gateway to social inclusion, self-confidence, and a sense of normality. By allowing people to access employment without preconditions, First Working Hours helps rebuild social connections, establish a daily routine, and access resources that aid reintegration. For some, employment is highly motivating, as it helps combat social exclusion and boredom on the streets.

A Work Environment Adapted to the Most Excluded

First Working Hours operates within Work Integration Social Enterprises (WiSEs), managed by NGOs supporting vulnerable workers. The programme's approach is unique: no productivity targets, a flexible workload (starting at just four hours per week), and continuous support from a socio-professional educator (ESP). This hands-on support fosters trust and helps develop professional and personal skills. Importantly, First Working Hours recognises that progress is not always linear—failure is not penalised but seen as part of the process, allowing participants to pause and return to the programme without losing their chance to re-engage. First Working Hours ensures a structured path towards sustainable employment, either within the WiSE sector for up to 5 years* or, when possible, the mainstream job market. By integrating excluded individuals into supportive work environments, First Working Hours lays the foundation for long-term social and economic inclusion.

**In France, the legal framework for integration employment contracts in WiSEs is limited to 2 years, except in exceptional cases. With the introduction of programmes like First Working Hours, the law has been amended to allow an extension to 5 years, providing more time for social support to address additional challenges faced by the employee.*



Arnaud VERNUS
EPOCH Practice officer, FEANTSA, France

First Working Hours offers a unique pathway to work integration for people experiencing homelessness, providing social connection, recognition, income, and a sense of normality. With gradual hours and no productivity demands, work adapts to the person. The programme opens a discussion on other effective practices such as Housing First, highlighting that employment can also be a starting point if properly adapted.

In France, this programme is grounded in solid experience, and its principles can be readily adapted to other countries and contexts by building on existing work integration projects.