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People experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 response in the WHO European Region

Situation

People experiencing homelessness are particularly at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations Secretary-General emphasized that homeless people and those living in inadequate housing should not be “negatively impacted by virus containment measures”.¹ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,² and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights³ have both highlighted the necessity of ensuring protection for people experiencing homelessness. Most countries across the Region are facing challenges ensuring adequate levels of testing for their homeless populations.

In the European Union (EU) on a given night, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, there were least 700 000 people who were sleeping rough or who were in emergency/temporary accommodation (hostels, night shelters etc.); an increase of 70% compared with 10 years previously.⁴

People experiencing homelessness are medically high-risk and frequently have poorer physical and mental health than the general population. People experiencing homelessness are often exposed to substandard environmental conditions; experience

problems accessing health care and basic services, and may live close to environmental or contamination hotspots and/or in dwellings made from nondurable materials.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the following measures are required to protect people experiencing homelessness:⁵

- Targeted, pro-active outreach and testing to meet existing health needs as well as COVID-19 specific testing.
- Ensuring equal access to health care, health services and referral to advanced medical care.
- Ensuring access to food, safe shelter, water and hygiene and sanitation facilities.
- Protecting the health and well-being of the workforce supporting the homeless sector.
- Ensuring protection from punitive enforcement measures and other discrimination.
- Provision of financial support to meet basic needs.
- Avoiding the stigmatization of people experiencing homelessness and promoting solidarity.



Actions

Across the WHO European Region action is already being taken to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness by governments (national, regional and municipal levels) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (national, regional and local levels), to provide:

- information on how to access health care;
- information on how to perform hand and respiratory hygiene and follow physical distancing recommendations;
- COVID-19 testing;⁶
- housing in hotels or other accommodation.⁷

WHO/UN/Inter-agency/other guidance published

- OHCHR – COVID-19 guidance note. Protection for those living in homelessness.⁸
- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Interim guidance: People experiencing homelessness and COVID-19.⁹
- FRA. Coronavirus pandemic in the EU: Fundamental rights implications. Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights; 2020.¹⁰

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¹ UN. Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. New York: United Nations; 2020. (https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_report_socio-economic_impact_of_covid19.pdf, accessed 24 April 2020).

² OHCHR. COVID-19 guidance note. Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; 2020. (https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_homeless.pdf, accessed 24 April 2020).

³ FRA. Coronavirus pandemic in the EU: Fundamental rights implications. Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights; 2020. (https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin_en.pdf, accessed 24 April 2020).

⁴ FEANTSA. Homeless in Europe, Spring 2019. Brussels: European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless.

⁵ The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has identified key measures that must be taken in order to protect people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 outbreak. These have contributed to the identification of the measures listed here and can be found at COVID-19: "Staying home" not an option for people experiencing homelessness (<https://www.feantsa.org/en/feantsa-position/2020/03/18/covid19-staying-home-not-an-option-for-people-experiencing-homelessness?bcParent=27>). FEANTSA has members in 30 countries within the European Region, including the 27 EU Member States (<https://www.feantsa.org/en/membership/member-map>).

⁶ These tests should be conducted at shelters or at venues which those who are homeless are familiar with and can easily access, e.g. NGO premises. Testing is happening in multiple countries. Official correspondence, FEANTSA, April 2020 and meetings of WHO European Healthy Cities Network for COVID-19 response.

⁷ This is happening in multiple countries. Official correspondence, FEANTSA, April 2020. Tsai J, Wilson M. COVID-19: a potential public health problem for homeless populations. *Lancet Public Health*. 2020;5(4):e186–e187. Meetings of WHO European Healthy Cities Network for COVID-19 response.

⁸ OHCHR. COVID-19 Guidance Note. Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; 2020. (https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_homeless.pdf, accessed 24 April 2020).

⁹ US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Interim guidance: People experiencing homelessness and COVID-19. (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>, accessed 05 May 2020)

¹⁰ FRA. Coronavirus pandemic in the EU: Fundamental rights implications. Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights; 2020. (https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin_en.pdf, accessed 05 May 2020)