

Kārlis Lakševics
October 2025

Housing first for ending homelessness

*The paper is part of the project titled
“Affordable Housing: Best Practices
from around Europe.”*



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Housing first for ending homelessness

Rasma, soon to be 57, has just entered her new apartment – a feeling she has not had for 7 years, when she lost her previous tenancy. This should feel like a joyous moment, but for some reason, she feels tense. After spending several years in a homeless shelter and sharing a room with 10 women, it feels strange to be alone. At first, the silence is daunting. But the next morning, Rasma realises that she has slept better than she has in many years. Over the next two years, she will experience her ups and downs in finding and losing jobs, dealing with moments of alcohol abuse, and striving to improve her health. Yet one thing will become crystal clear – an apartment of her own was the key to regaining trust in herself and others, re-establishing her relationship with her daughter, and significantly improving her wellbeing and quality of life.

This is the experience of many people whose lives have changed due to Housing First, the most effective service and policy for reducing long-term homelessness and enforcing housing as a human right in Europe. For Rasma and her fellow tenants of the Housing First pilot project in Riga, Latvia, the first years have shown significant improvements in other domains of life, proving again that housing should be the first step in ending homelessness. With adequate housing, finding employment and improving one's physical and mental health are significantly easier. In Riga, the shortage of social housing was overcome by a subsidy and a guarantee for renting in the private market – a policy choice also prevalent in several other countries. While Rasma has had some moments of tension with her landlord, together with her support worker and social rental assistant, they have managed to make some improvements to the apartment over the two years. All in all, Housing First has improved the openness of landlords to include social goals in their agenda and encouraged the municipality to reform its direction from responding to homelessness to working on a framework for ending it.¹

Abstract

Housing First is one of the key services that ensures housing as a human right and provides both the values and tools for ending long-term homelessness. As such, it is one of the key pillars of socially responsible housing policy. The

recent experience of introducing Housing First to Riga, Latvia reveals both the socio-political challenges and opportunities of committing to ending homelessness through housing and social service policies. By exploring its design, gap-filling approach, and shortcomings, this paper reflects on the policy pathways to ending homelessness. Sourcing housing for Housing First within the unique circumstances of housing support systems demands not only a significant amount of flexibility, but also political support for non-profit developers, rental agencies, and municipal housing units.

Introduction

The rise of homelessness is one of the worst consequences of the lack of affordable housing. Economists Colburn and Aldren have shown that homelessness is higher in areas where the situation in the housing market is more tense². In Latvia, homeless shelter use has risen at least four times since 2002, suggesting a rise in homelessness during this period, as well as a rise in the use of temporary housing³. There was a decrease in shelter use during Covid-19, though this was largely due to restrictions on shelter use. In Europe, only a few countries have achieved a reduction in homelessness throughout previous decades, while in others, it has been on the rise. In Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands, this has largely been the result of national strategies for eradicating homelessness and mainstreaming the approach of Housing First (HF) – which ensures housing as the first step to ending homelessness.

In Latvia, the national strategy for ending homelessness is only in its early stages of development for 2026, as there have been no overarching political ambitions to end homelessness thus far. Nevertheless, the signing of the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness eventually resulted in the first HF pilot project in Latvia. The project has since been continued in the capital of Riga through municipal funds and incorporated into Riga's municipal Housing policy guidelines for 2024-2030⁴.

¹ This story combines actual experiences of two Housing First tenants in Riga into one fictionalised narrative. The names of the persons as well as their exact ages have been changed.

² Colburn, G., & Aldren, C. P. (2022). *Homelessness is a housing problem: How structural factors explain US patterns*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

³ Arklone, I. (2019). *Bezpakumtniecība Latvijā. Pētījums*. Rīga: LR Tiesībsargs. Available at: https://www.tiesibsargs.lv/wp-content/uploads/migrate_2022/content/bezpajumtnieciba_latvija_petijums_2019_1594305394.pdf

⁴ *Rīgas valstspilsētas pašvaldības Mājokļu politikas pamatnostādnes 2024-2030*. gadam. Available at: https://mvd.riga.lv/uploads/departaments/Majoklu_pamatnostadnes.pdf

Most importantly, it has mainstreamed the conviction that homelessness can be ended, which was rarely expressed before.

Therefore, the experience of introducing Housing First to Riga offers important lessons about developing affordable housing and homelessness policy.

The principles of HF, which emphasise housing as a right and the service infrastructures required to make it work, provide a strong foundation for values, collaboration, and policies that have the potential to address the most severe housing insecurity. At the same time, in many countries in Europe, the approach is not systematic. In these countries – including in Latvia – the challenges of increasing the scale and efficiency of HF reveal the pathways and political choices that can lead to more sustainable policies for ending homelessness and dealing with the consequences of unaffordable housing.

The development of HF includes several directions, each of which involve policy choices that are organised differently across Europe, but that follow common principles. This paper is, therefore, not only the story of Riga; rather, Riga serves as a comparative example to situate HF as a policy that can be implemented in any country and city. The main part has three sections. First, Housing First service and its development in Europe is described. Second, strategies for ensuring housing in HF are compared. Third, and most importantly, ways to make the approach systematic and aligned with certain political values are suggested.

Housing first as an affordable housing policy

Housing first in Europe

Housing First was initially developed in the 1990s in New York (the United States) by the clinical psychologist Sam Tsemberis, who was then running the organization Pathways to Housing. He observed that what is now called the “staircase model” – where individuals experiencing homelessness have a chance of acquiring housing only after doing rehabilitation and earning significant income – is not effective⁵.

In fact, the mindset that people have to “earn” housing and prove housing readiness was a way to systemically exclude them from housing.

⁵ Padgett, D., Henwood, B. F., & Tsemberis, S. J. (2016). *Housing First: Ending homelessness, transforming systems, and changing lives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This was especially tough on individuals experiencing mental illness, addiction, or both. Tsemberis assumed – and many researchers have since proven this correct – that providing people with housing first, would make addressing their other challenges more effective due to an increased sense of security and the possibility to choose which issues they can manage by themselves.

Since the original *Pathways* service, HF has been piloted and expanded to many countries and cities. While there are different potential ways of arranging the service, it is organised around the original principles that have proven most effective. According to *Housing First Guide Europe*, there are 8 guiding principles for the service: (1) Housing is a human right, (2) Choice and control for service users, (3) Separation of housing and treatment, (4) Recovery orientation, (5) Harm reduction, (6) Active engagement without coercion, (7) Person-centred planning, and (8) Flexible support for as long needed. Following these principles requires the strong integration of housing, social, and health support infrastructures, as well as policies. Thus, it depends on the political will at both national and local levels. For example, while the service was designed in the US, its success there has been limited due to a lack of political support, while countries like Canada and Australia have made more significant steps to develop the service.

In recent decades, Housing First has become one of the central services for ending homelessness in Europe.

Several countries have made national strategies to combat homelessness, using HF and its principles as an example. In 2019, it was included in 9 countries’ national strategies and 4 countries’ regional strategies⁶. While some countries have managed to reduce homelessness levels with the approach, others, such as Ireland, still experience a rise in homelessness despite the successful scaling up of services allowing them to end homelessness. Nonetheless, the service has proven to be effective for ending homelessness for many people around the world, with programme evaluations indicating better success rates than other approaches⁷.

If countries in Western and Northern Europe have longer experience in using HF as part of homelessness reducing policies, those in Eastern Europe have faced numerous challenges. There have been less pilot projects; some projects have been funded by the European Social Fund, rather than national governments; pilot projects have not always resulted in project continuity; and it has not always been possible to ensure adherence to the original HF principles. In some countries, like Poland and Hungary,

⁶ Pleace, N., Baptista, I. & Knutagård, M. (2019). *Housing First in Europe: An Overview of Implementation, Strategy and Fidelity*. Brussels: Housing First Europe Hub.

⁷ Woodhall-Melnik, J. R., & Dunn, J. R. (2016). *A systematic review of outcomes associated with participation in Housing First programs*. *Housing Studies*, 31(3), 287-304.

there are HF services that are run through NGO fundraising rather than through national and local funding.

In Latvia, the first Housing First pilot project in 2022 was funded by the European Social Fund after the initiative of Ministry of Welfare and the Society Integration Fund. This project took place in 3 municipalities: Riga, Liepāja, and Valmiera. Unfortunately, despite successful outcomes of project participants, Liepāja and Valmiera did not manage to secure funding or overcome administrative obstacles to continue the service after the end of the pilot project⁸. In contrast, the city of Riga made significant arrangements to continue the service and integrate it into its affordable housing strategy. This came as a result of strong support from both municipal government officials and elected politicians, as the project was carried out at the time of the development of the first affordable housing strategy of the city. Thus, there was a rising awareness across municipal departments that housing issues need to be regulated and stimulated on multiple levels.

Sourcing housing for Housing First

At the centre of Housing First is ensuring that people exiting homelessness have access to housing. Since there are many differences in housing systems and affordable housing policies, each country and municipality chooses a slightly different approach for ensuring housing units. In Riga, social housing units account for only 3% of the housing stock and have been on the decline. This is the result of mass privatisation efforts since the 1990s when municipalities overtook housing from factories that often oversaw it during Soviet times. They have since facilitated the privatisation process with municipal housing units steadily declining since the 1990s. The process has been slowed down only by the development of affordable housing strategy, largely due to significant social housing queues. While the queue has been brought down from 3,183 households in 2020 to 1,656 in 2025⁹, many people in homeless shelters have been on the list for years, and for several, HF became their chance to secure an apartment in the private sector.

In Latvia, national legislation does not include individuals experiencing long-term homelessness as eligible for social housing. This was one of the stated reasons that the city of Liepāja used to discontinue the service after the pilot project ended. Nevertheless, it is likely that in the Affordable housing law that is currently in development, this group will be included.

The major state instrument for preventing homelessness and fostering affordability is a housing benefit.

People are eligible for a housing benefit if their income – after paying housing expenses – is lower than the applicable coefficient of the guaranteed minimal income¹⁰. At the same time, people experiencing homelessness often face discrimination in the housing market and are not able to pass the threshold of a rental contract to receive the benefit. Therefore, at the moment, HF has served as a way to pass these infrastructural legislative and social obstacles to secure housing.

Due to these circumstances, in Riga, the city pays for rental and social support services for people in HF to secure scattered-site housing in the private rental market. For comparison, there are at least four strategies for ensuring housing in HF.

- **Social developers/non-profit landlords.** In Finland, where HF has been central to reducing homelessness, housing is organised by the Y-Foundation, funded through rent and state grants¹¹. This allows the most significant strategic oversight, flexibility, and affordability of housing units.
- **Social rental agencies**¹². In countries and cities where the subsidised private housing market is used to source housing, it is often arranged by organisations helping to ensure contracts and housing support. In Latvia, the NGO providing the social support services also acts as a social rental agency, finding apartments in the private market and working with landlords; however, in Spain, the social rental agency Provienda collaborates with different HF social support service providers.
- **Municipal social housing.** In countries and municipalities with strong social housing provision and systems, such as Vienna, HF uses social housing units¹³. In Latvia, Liepāja and Valmiera were using municipal social housing units. In Budapest, an NGO volunteer program refurbishes municipal apartments that are then rented to HF clients.
- **Social landlords.** In countries where individuals can register as social landlords by renting their apartment below its market value, such as in the UK, housing for HF is often arranged through this regulation. In Ireland, an empty apartment programme allows landlords to take

⁸ Lakševics, K., Zalāns, K., Korpa, V., Cēbura, I., Veitners, K. 2023. *Bezpajumt-niecības novēršanas pakalpojuma Mājoklis vispirms izmēģinājuma projekta īstenošanas rezultāti*. Rīga: Saŕeģe Baltija.

⁹ Rīgas dome. Rīgas pašvaldība nodrošina dzīvokļus 11 000 ģimeņu; piecu gadu laikā rinda uz mājokļiem samazinājies par 50%. LV portāls. Available at: <https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/373257-rigas-pasvaldiba-nodrosina-dzivoklus-11-000-gi-menu-piecu-gadu-laika-rinda-uz-majokliem-samazinajusies-par-50-2025>

¹⁰ Sociālo pabalstu veidi Rīgas valstspilsētas pašvaldībā 2025. gadā. Available at: <https://ld.riga.lv/sociala-palidziba/socialo-pabalstu-veidi-rigas-valstspilsetas-pas-valdiba-2024-gada/>

¹¹ <https://ysaatio.fi/en/about-us/>

¹² FEANTSA (2012). *Social Rental Agencies: An Innovative Housing-led Response to Homelessness*. Brussels: FEANTSA.

¹³ Pleace, N. (2016). *Housing First Guide Europe*. Brussels: FEANTSA.

60,000 euro loans without interest if the apartments are rented below market price for 10 years¹⁴.

In general, relying on non-profit developers and social housing units has proven to be more effective where possible.

It is easier to manage situations in which a rental contract may be jeopardised than in the private market, where the best possible scenario is relocation to another apartment. Unfortunately, in Riga, there is a high chance that after a rental contract is compromised, people could return to a shelter. While this is not how the situation is treated in the original Pathways model, in a scenario where landlords are not willing to sign rental contracts with individuals with experience of homelessness, the municipality feels that it has little leverage for relocation after breaking agreements. While the ideal in HF is for clients to hold their own contracts, countries such as Latvia and Spain often use contracts held by the support of the provider/social rental agency to be able to gain access to private market apartments.

Overall, the next steps in Latvia to source housing for HF include increasing social housing units, including people experiencing homelessness to groups eligible for social housing; developing and funding social rental agencies; using the national housing benefit to fund the housing part of HF; and finding ways to relocate people after rental contract breaches. This will enable the scaling up of HF, thereby reducing long-term homelessness. In the long-term, a nationally supported non-profit developer should be considered.

Systematic approach to ending homelessness

HF requires investments in housing, social, and health services for people who are often receiving below or around minimal income, are underinsured, excluded from the labour market, and limited as tax payers. Therefore, it is often associated with a strong welfare state approach as well as a commitment to ensuring human rights. This means that there is a high dependence on the political will of the coalition parties to develop, continue, and scale up the service. Since it emphasises consumer choice, well-trained and paid social work support, and a harm reduction approach in treating addictions, HF aligns more with parties and groups that support these causes.

HF integrates many approaches, with housing support leading to cross-sectoral collaborations. HF uses assertive community treatment (ACT) teams to support people with mental illness and addiction, which is a development that demands social worker training in motivational interview-

¹⁴ FEANTSA (2022). *Urban challenges, housing solutions: Understanding cities vacant housing potential to provide adequate affordable housing solutions*. Brussels: FEANTSA.

ing and the involvement of other specialists, such as psychologists, in social work. This leads to integration with other approaches, such as trauma-informed care and community integration¹⁵. In Latvia, as in other countries, developing this approach is often a challenge and more traditional case management is initially used. In Latvia, two-person teams are used as social support to deal with the issues faced by HF clients – from handling debt and health issues to finding work. In some countries, low-threshold work or Individual Placement and Support (IPS) employment models are used since many people with long-term homelessness experience have limited working capacities due to disability and health problems.

On a societal level, HF receives the highest endorsement from researchers, who value the proven high effectiveness of the service and commit to high social service standards.

Other stakeholders, however, tend to be more skeptical¹⁶. Next in line are social service providers, while politicians find it more difficult to commit to the cause as homelessness often holds a high social stigma and is not among the top priorities of the electorate. HF is more commonly supported by parties with a more social-democratic orientation, and is less prominent on the agenda of parties on the right. HF has received critique both from the far right for being too liberal and expensive, and from the far left for being only a band-aid to the root causes of homelessness in the housing system¹⁷. Nevertheless, there are some countries, like Finland, who have achieved – if not full commitment from most – then relatively stable multi-partisan support over an extended period of time.

Evidence shows that reducing homelessness is easier in countries where housing systems include more units overseen by limited profit and municipal housing¹⁸

Nonetheless, the units still have to be provided, especially for rough sleepers – a task that involves specific types of long-term street and community social work¹⁹. There is also a need for a monitoring system, tools for homelessness prevention (such as early warnings for eviction risks), social worker training, and research on the effectiveness of

¹⁵ Tsemberis, S. (2020). *A Housing First Manual for Ireland*. Dublin: Dublin Region Homeless Executive.

¹⁶ Pleace, N., Baptista, I. & Knutagård, M. (2019). *Housing First in Europe: An Overview of Implementation, Strategy and Fidelity*. Brussels: Housing First Europe Hub.

¹⁷ Pleace, N. (2021). Neoreaction and housing first: A review essay. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 269-288.

¹⁸ Allen, M., & Benjaminsen, L., O'Sullivan, E. & Pleace, N. (2020). *Ending homelessness?: The contrasting experiences of Denmark, Finland and Ireland*. Bristol: Policy Press.

¹⁹ Smith, C. (2022). *Homelessness and Housing Advocacy: The Role of Red-Tape Warriors*. New York: Routledge.

different services for ending homelessness, which would support informed policy decision-making. A key aspect for the success of these initiatives is a commitment to everyone's wellbeing and the belief that each individual that expresses the desire deserves housing and should be supported, despite potentially challenging tenant-landlord relationship challenges. As experience in Finland and other countries shows, this means diverse housing solutions and instruments – from scattered-site apartments, as the original HF approach suggests, to more supported units, such as the transformations of shelters into apartments.

Conclusion

Housing First has time and time again been proven to be the most effective and cost-efficient way to end homelessness and ensure housing as a human right in practice. While Riga is only beginning its path toward a systemic approach to ending homelessness, the introduction of HF has been crucial to developing the values and infrastructure needed for people to believe that homelessness can be ended with integrated housing and social policy. Many cities in Europe are further down the road than Riga, while others have yet to begin. A city can take ownership of the service even if national policy lags behind, as long as municipal departments and political leadership support its value, and HF is backed by the affordable housing policy in the city.

HF brings together a rights-based approach, improved implementation of housing benefits and/or an increase in social housing units, supported employment, and harm reduction. While these are more effective with multi-partisan support, they are well aligned with social-democratic values. The scaling up of HF and supporting non-profit hous-

ing development demands even more social commitment which, for example, is still lacking in Latvia due to post-socialist and neoliberal transformations of the housing market. At the same time, the severity of the issue – recognised as important by most mayors of Riga – as well as the cost-effectiveness of the service suggest an untapped potential for appeal when a supportive national policy framework is developed.

On the policy level, there are several directions for recommendations in Latvia that are also relevant elsewhere. First, the principles of HF should be applied to affordable housing policy in general to ensure that everyone has the right to housing. This means mainstreaming and prioritizing housing-led approaches to solving issues faced by people experiencing homelessness. Second, a systematic approach to ending homelessness on national and, where it applies, federal and municipal levels, should be created. A major requirement is to have an efficient strategy for sourcing housing for HF. This means either to form a nationally funded developer to build housing units, increase the social housing stock, create a system for social landlords, support social rental agencies, or build a comprehensive system of housing benefits to survive in the private rental market. All of these instruments are important for affordable housing policy in general, but of critical importance to those facing most exclusion. The example of Riga shows that relying only on the latter two is insufficient to scale up the service. At the same time, the introduction of these two instruments has allowed people experiencing homelessness to either skip the queue for social housing or to qualify for housing when homelessness is perceived as “not enough” to qualify. Third, housing policy should be integrated with social, health, debt relief, and employment causes. These tend to become closely connected when people face challenges in one of these areas.

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Housing first for ending homelessness



Housing First has emerged as the most effective approach for addressing long-term homelessness by prioritizing housing as a human right. It shifts the perspective from conditional housing based on rehabilitation or income to providing stable accommodation first, which enables individuals to improve their health, employment opportunities, and social reintegration. In Riga, Latvia, the implementation of Housing First has shown that providing secure housing is the foundation for personal stability and wellbeing, even for people who have experienced years of homelessness.



The success of Housing First depends on the ability to source housing through a combination of municipal units, social rental agencies, non-profit developers, and subsidies for the private market. In contexts with limited social housing and competitive rental markets, such as Riga, municipal support and flexible funding mechanisms are essential to scale up the service and ensure its effectiveness. Housing First demonstrates that local governments can play an important role in providing affordable housing and overcoming structural barriers in the housing system.



A systematic approach to ending homelessness requires integrating housing with social, health, and employment support, alongside strong political commitment. The experience in Riga highlights the importance of mainstreaming Housing First principles into municipal and national housing policies, ensuring long-term sustainability and effectiveness. With implemented consistently, Housing First can transform homelessness from a persistent social problem into a solvable policy challenge, providing a model for other cities and countries.

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