

"We are not invisible": Innovative approaches to end homelessness, Slovakia

STOPA, originally a street-based social work organisation, now develops housing-led solutions in a data-sparse and challenging policy environment. It helps those experiencing homelessness in Slovakia and has developed a robust portfolio of services, supporting almost 1000 individuals with employment and volunteering opportunities, housing provision, mental health, and shared solidarity spaces.



What inspires us ...

This project is a beacon of inspiring good practice that has been developed despite, rather than because, of the wider political/funding environment. It demonstrates that evidence-led practice can be adapted and applied in imaginative ways to progress the right to housing – not just having a direct impact on people in real housing need but also helping to change public attitudes towards homelessness. It is an inspiring and rare example for organisations working in similar contexts. It also offers nuanced learnings for well-established housing-led programmes elsewhere on the application of housing-led models in less supportive environments.

Submitting organisation: STOPA Slovensko

Type of organisation: NGO

Key elements of the project:

- **Homelessness Support in Challenging Policy Environment**
STOPA has engaged 450 people through street outreach, processed 350 through its integration centre, housed 75 individuals in 8 years and moved 18 people into its own housing stock.
- **Adaptation of evidence-based practice**
Influenced by homelessness organisations across Europe, STOPA has adapted several housing services including data collection and employment schemes to the Slovakian context.
- **Pioneering Housing-Led approaches nationally & regionally**
One of the first examples of evidence-based, housing-led practice in the region, setting a strong precedent and serving as an inspiration to others.

Introduction

STOPA engages with, adapts and delivers well-evidenced housing solutions to successfully support those experiencing homelessness in Slovakia. It has learnt the lessons from various international partners and tailored what works to its own challenging context. In Slovakia there is no legal framework around homelessness. It is largely disregarded by the government and there is considerable prejudice towards people experiencing homelessness. Despite this, in just eight years, STOPA has developed a robust portfolio of homelessness services, housed 75 individuals, and supported almost 1000 people with employment and volunteering opportunities, housing, mental health, and shared spaces. STOPA's pioneering approach is an outstanding example of knowledge transfer in action and provides inspiration for other homelessness services in the region.¹

Context

Slovakia's significant levels of homelessness are mostly addressed on an emergency and temporary basis by shelters kept out of sight from the general public. Homelessness services are under-resourced and under-funded, leaving many without support and living on the streets. The availability of affordable, decent and safe housing is limited and there is no tradition of social housing. The social rented sector is minimal at 2%, and the private rental sector runs partly as a grey market.

There is no legal definition of homelessness and no reliable national data. The last country-level data from 2011 reported over 23,000 people in long-term transitional shelters, excluding rough sleepers and those in emergency accommodation. Recent counts in Bratislava showed around 2,000 homeless individuals, with 30% being rough sleepers and nearly a third in homeless accommodation services. Lone middle-aged men make up a big percentage of rough sleepers, with 50% having long-term health issues and 40% being homeless for over ten years². Since the early 2010s nearly 10,000 individuals accessed homelessness services across Slovakia, with significant increases in night shelter and hostel use.

¹ Housing-led or Rapid Rehousing approaches get someone into their own home as quickly as possible, providing them with the support they need to make it work. This minimises the time spent in temporary accommodation and the number of moves someone must make before they move into a permanent home. Housing First is one form of Housing-led solution to homelessness, which supports people with the most complex needs. Housing-led is a whole system approach, which seeks to apply the principles of the Housing First model to the homelessness system. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/resources-for-practitioners/crisis-consultancy-service/housing-led-transition/#:~:text=Housing%2Dled%20or%20Rapid%20Rehousing,move%20into%20a%20permanent%20home>.

² https://world-habitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/wh_housing-led-in-cee_BRIEFING-SLOVAKIA_EN_FINAL.pdf

To add to these challenges, the government has introduced a new amendment to the country's NGO law which could make it harder for civil society organisations to operate. The amendment requires organisations receiving over €5,000 (\$5,415 USD) annually in foreign funding to disclose all donors, risking dissolution for non-compliance.³

Project Description

STOPA's first activities focussed on street outreach and social work support for people living on the streets. During the last eight years, the NGO has looked to develop new approaches and change attitudes towards homeless people, finding evidence-based solutions often developed in other countries but with greater government support and access to funding. However, through its innovation STOPA has found effective ways to adapt them to a more challenging environment, with limited funding. It now offers:

- **Streetwork:** To address the lack of reliable data on the individuals experiencing homelessness, STOPA [maps and assesses](#) the scale of homelessness in Bratislava and then takes action. It targets early intervention to prevent long-term homelessness and has created a network to identify short-term homeless people and then signpost them to facilities that can support them. Its interventions take many forms, ranging from crisis intervention for those at immediate risk of death to longer-term interventions focused on motivating people to go to STOPA's 'integration centre.'
- **Integration centre:** This is a specialised facility focused on both prevention and reintegrating people experiencing homelessness. It provides legal support, financial advice, employment assistance, housing support, communication support with authorities, and familial support, among other services. It also offers work therapy to help people develop skills through paid work, including urban gardening.
- **Specialised counselling:** Tackling issues resulting from a person's experience with homelessness, including trauma, fears, communication, conflicts and cognitive behavioural issues, to support independent living.
- **Solidarity café:** This non-profit garden cafe opened in August 2023. It runs an urban gardening project and provides barista training, as well as training in communication and language skills. It helps participants prepare for future employment with a paid salary and job experience. It also challenges stereotypes around homelessness, highlighting that many homeless individuals are actively working to improve their situation.

STOPA delivers three main housing services:

- **Crossroad:** STOPA has renovated four apartments to provide permanent housing. The resident receives social support services and professional counselling to help build an independent life, and is not under any time limit to leave. There are five people currently living in these apartments (two people requested to share). The first two months are rent-free while STOPA helps individuals find a job and to get certain support (occupational

³<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/slovakia-anti-ngo-law-a-full-frontal-assault-on-civil-society/#:~:text=The%20NGOs%20with%20an%20annual,reporting%20and%20FFO%20labelling%20obligations.>

therapy, pension schemes) in-place. After those two months, apartment residents will co-pay €100 Euro (£85 GBP) per month. The co-payment amount can never exceed two-thirds of the residents' income. There is also a crisis bed provided for free for quick interventions.

- Housing First: STOPA currently houses nine clients⁴ in its Housing First project that uses several municipal dwellings. It also offers significant psychological and mental health support. The flats are bought by a bank and rented to STOPA at non-market price on one-year leases.
- Housing Benefits: This is the preventative, co-financed model of support for short-term rough sleepers or those in crisis. STOPA supports individuals with housing, financial and employment support and other services to help them regain control of their life. Housing benefit support is limited to three months. STOPA supports about five people, families or couples each year.

These housing services are offered and adapted to the client depending on their preference and need.

The services and STOPA's apartments are located in a building directly opposite the Presidential Palace, preventing the ghettoisation of those experiencing homelessness to the outskirts of the city and meeting one of the organisations key goals – to make homeless people more visible and part of the local community. This goes against the state approach which often "hides" homeless people in terms of public policy, data collection and in the setting of homeless services.

STOPA has engaged 450 people through its street work and supported 350 people through its integration centre and work therapy. It has housed 75 individuals in eight years.

STOPA has been active since 2016, its integration centre started in 2017 and its Housing First work began in 2021. The project is ongoing.

Organisation implementing the project

STOPA Slovensko is a non-governmental organisation working on homelessness prevention and social inclusion and is the only organisation in Slovakia working on housing-led solutions. Formed in 2016, its work focuses on street outreach, housing provision and helping people living on the streets to learn new skills. Their work is supported by OZ PRIMA, delivering substance misuse and alcohol support to people across Bratislava.

It is a member of World Habitat's European End Street Homelessness Campaign.

STOPA is adapts well to changes in the surrounding social and political environment, helping those at risk during the COVID pandemic (2020) and refugees from Ukraine (2021) and Syria (2023). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, STOPA provided refugees with humanitarian supplies and quickly established temporary shelters, hotel accommodation and welcome centres with childcare support. It set up housing programmes within communities for refugees to access safe and secure housing in host homes. It provided emergency support for refugees to connect with relatives and

⁴ In this project summary, clients are used interchangeably here with people experiencing homelessness. This is the terminology used by STOPA and so will be used throughout this project summary.

access social services and psychological support. Now, it is helping refugees with longer-term integration, primarily housing. It also reconnects people with family abroad and fills the gaps left by national governments supporting Ukrainian nationals that are unable to return home.

Aims and Objectives

This project exists in a country:

- a. Without a legal definition of homelessness;
- b. Where this is limited available decent, safe housing that is affordable;
- c. With a model of using homelessness shelters segregated from the general public;
- d. Where there is considerable prejudice towards homeless people.

STOPA considers its work fundamental to providing safe and secure housing to the most marginalised. It aims to:

- a. Prevent long term homelessness by intervening early
- b. Deliver inclusive services that are specialised towards groups lacking support;
- c. Increase housing availability for those currently or at risk of homelessness; and
- d. Cultivate broader policy change and improve public perceptions of homelessness.

The project aims to provide services to:

- People immediately at risk of death on the streets
- Those who have just lost their homes
- Short-term rough sleepers / those in short-term crisis
- People who have just left prison

STOPA works with a significant number of elderly clients and those that have experienced homelessness for extensive periods. Previously it has supported those in crisis during the COVID pandemic (2020) and Ukranian (2021) and Syrian refugees (2023).

In terms of scale, STOPA hopes to increase its housing stock by two apartments in 2024.

Key Features

Multi-faceted and Tailored Support. Clients can access holistic co-financed support that helps them with housing as well as social, psychological and economic support services. The project understands that different people need different types of support at different stages of homelessness, based on

their preferences and background so it aims to meet those diverse needs. It provides crisis interventions and services to people immediately at risk of death on the streets. It targets those who have just lost their homes, are short-term rough sleepers or have just left prison with the housing benefit scheme to prevent longer-term homelessness. The Crossroad project supports both; it houses those who have a long history of homelessness, but also offers “trampoline beds” for those in a short-term crisis. A significant number of STOPA’s clients are elderly and have experienced homelessness for long periods.

Direct Involvement. Clients and residents are consulted regularly on the services offered, as well as smaller day-to-day work and living questions. Clients working in the cafe gradually take over its management, while others make lifestyle requests that are accommodated as best as possible. For example, when a situation of concealed drinking arose, STOPA closely consulted with clients about introducing a controlled drinking scheme but decided not to after two clients were concerned of risks to their sobriety given their history of severe addiction.

Civil Society Partnerships. STOPA works with partners on the local to international level, to provide housing support services. It works directly with NGOs to help people access specialist services. For example, NGO Prima provides support that helps with addiction and risk reduction. STOPA also works with Bratislava Volunteer Centre and is a practice site for social work and psychology students.

Evidence-based Adaptation. Through the European End Street Homelessness Cities (EESH) alliance, STOPA adapted its model from crisis response to wider homelessness prevention and housing led services. STOPA adapted the ‘Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool’ for its pilot street survey during the EESH Connections Campaign. The survey was used to connect and understand the needs of those experiencing homelessness and also to counter the state-led narrative at the time that homeless people ‘do not exist.’ STOPA launched its ‘No-one is Invisible’ campaign, advocating for government recognition of homelessness and highlighting the gaps in support services. Other services including the Solidarity Cafe and Housing First model have been inspired by EESH partners and adapted to Slovakia’s context.

Crisis Response. STOPA mobilises its services very quickly to respond to crisis situations, including in response to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees as discussed. It also has ‘trampoline’ beds for individuals in short-term crisis helping those at immediate risk, before providing them with more support as needed.

Non-segregation. Non-segregation is key to STOPA’s wider advocacy role. This was enacted by the ‘No-one is invisible’ campaign where white masks symbolised being ‘lost’ and shirts with ‘outsiders’ were worn to challenge the legal invisibility of those who experience homelessness. The Solidarity Cafe also invites the public to learn more about solutions to homelessness and interact with those experiencing homelessness, which counters harmful stereotypes and bridges understanding. This is seen as crucial to bringing the public together and strengthening voices calling for decent social services and support services. Finally, STOPA’s housing stock is in the center of the city to prevent the removal of those experiencing homelessness to shelters in the city outskirts where they are out of sight.

Innovation

Within Slovakia, STOPA is the first NGO to offer stable, secure housing provision with the attached social and mental health services. Housing First, for example, has been piloted by other NGOs in Bratislava but they do not provide the comprehensive support services offered by STOPA, particularly counselling services and psychological support. STOPA emphasises this as critical to reducing the risk of recurring homelessness.

The homelessness support services, and housing-led models used in this project are not new globally. STOPA has adapted and localised many of the services from its partners in the European End Street Homelessness Campaign. Crossroads was originally inspired by Brussels campaign member Infirmiers de Rue who delivered a similar model through modular housing. When STOPA was unable to acquire land for modular housing, it adapted Crossroads from an Australian model and utilised an existing building. Its ability to re-direct and adapt is unique.

Housing-led homelessness services are sparse across Central and Eastern Europe. The region faces specific challenges, including the regulatory environment, a significant shortfall in housing, and overwhelming demand for homelessness services. STOPA works incrementally to transform shelters to homes, by transitioning from the traditional 'staircase' model to a housing-led one.⁵ Its project delivery, the challenge and barriers it faces and the progress it has seen are pioneering for the region and could provide useful lessons globally on delivering housing-led models in such a context.

Funding

STOPA's funding is sourced from multiple areas. Registered services are financed by the city, city districts and the Bratislava Region according to the law on registered social services (Ministry of Labour, Capital City Council, Bratislava Self-Governing Region). STOPA also receives several grants from various companies, regular donors, and corporate partnerships. The annual budget is €195 052 Euro (\$211,226 USD). The expected budget for 2024 is the same.

Within that budget, Crossroads costs €180,000 Euro (\$194,929.20 USD) and is pre-paid for 10 years. STOPA does not own the flats, but they are under its management for those 10 years with the option to extend. The funding source is quite unique for Central and Eastern Europe as it comes from various grants, donations and private donors including Odyssey 44 Foundation, SLSP Foundation and CAP Foundation.

Funding is secured for the Crossroads until 2031 while other services (Housing First apartments, Housing Benefits) are funded through city and regional funding. The Housing First flats are rented out to STOPA on one-year leases at around half the market price €350 Euro – €450 Euro (\$380 USD - \$488 USD).

⁵ Staircase Model: Progressing homeless people through a series of separate residential services – typically emergency shelter programmes, transitional housing and supportive housing.

World Habitat is funding STOPA with an innovation grant of €4,999 Euro (\$5,413 USD) this year.

World Habitat asked STOPA about the potential funding risk due to a proposed amendment to the NGO law, restricting foreign funding to NGOs. If STOPA were to win the monetary prize of €11,641 Euro (£10,000 GBP; \$12,698 USD) for the World Habitat Award, it would be labelled a “foreign backed organisation.” STOPA is not concerned by this and are confident in the support network they have built, nationally and internationally, to protect their work. Moreover, STOPA believes the law will not pass. Even if the Government were to liquidate the entire NGO sector, they designed Crossroads and the Solidarity Cafe to not have any state funding to ensure sustainability. With this same donor, it has developed a long-term agreement for more support in the coming years.

Impact

Financial

- In eight years, STOPA has found safe and secure housing for 75 individuals.
- STOPA has renovated four apartments to provide accessible, safe housing to those experiencing homelessness. In its first year it focused on housing people in crisis – 18 people over that period. 15 of these 18 transitioned to stable housing situations.
- The four apartments are now set up to provide both crisis support – trampoline beds for individuals in crisis - and permanent housing. Five residents are currently in permanent housing. Two of the rooms are shared, at the request of the residents themselves as they knew each other previously while the third room is single occupancy.
- The focus on work therapy and skills training encourages the economic integration of clients to help them earn their own incomes long-term. In the Crossroads housing project, five people have found permanent work.

Social

- The Solidarity Cafe has enabled clients to develop business and service skills, as well as integrating with the wider community. 15 people a day visit the Café.
- 350 people – those experiencing homelessness and people at risk of losing their housing – have received social, economic and housing support from the integration center.
- People are not only physically healthier but receive psychological support to process trauma and the mental impact of experiencing homelessness, improving their wellbeing and mitigating the risk of recurring homelessness.
- Those experiencing homelessness have a stronger sense of ownership, particularly through their involvement in the Solidarity Cafe’s Garden.

- Occupational therapy through urban gardening and green space activities, focused on planting and transforming public spaces that have outlived their purposes. Clients plant and carry out renovations in senior citizens' homes, schools and kindergartens.
 - This creates greater cohesion between seniors and children working with those experiencing homelessness.
 - Occupational therapy has been effective with Ukrainian refugees through planting, making bird houses and other environmental activities.
 - Clients remove illegal tipping in urban forests and they have begun to recycle and remove waste from the forests improving conditions for those living in makeshift shelters in the area.
- STOPA's social, homelessness and housing support services were used to provide support to 395 Ukrainian refugees, including 113 mothers and 195 children. It rapidly set up childcare services, temporary shelters and welcome centres before transitioning them to longer-term integration support when needed.

Environmental

- With environmental stability can also come social stability. Therefore environmental initiatives are directly tied to psychological and mental wellbeing work; STOPA also has an in-house environmental ecologist that integrates environmental considerations into homelessness support services.
- The Solidarity Cafe includes a garden where clients can plant various trees and shrubs. STOPA aims to contribute to reducing the so-called heat island of Bratislava and increase green spaces that have a cooling effect.
- In the garden, STOPA encourages biodiversity of species while the garden is irrigated with collected rainwater. It uses natural fertilizers and no industrial pesticides, while attracting different insects through insect hotels.

The herbs grown in the garden are used in the Solidarity Cafe's menu and the cafe itself recycles all materials. The dishware and accessories are all second-hand and the takeaway cups are compostable.

Learning, evaluation, and recognition

Evaluation & Learning

The project is measured according to the following indicators:

Direct (individual):

- a) A person who needs support through the integration sector
- b) Access to safe, permanent housing

- c) Shifts in self-perception
- d) Employment status
- e) People receiving mental health support/treatment for their severe addictions.

Indirect (community/society)

- a) Number of cafe and garden visitors
- b) Shifted perceptions around homeless people

World Habitat has evaluated the project through the European End Streets Homelessness Campaign impact reports.

Recognition

- STOPA's Director Pavol Sabela was the first social worker in the field of homelessness to receive a Civic Award from the Mayor of Bratislava in recognition for his work in the sector.
- Hosted the Annual Gathering of cities bringing together representatives from across the European End Street Homelessness Campaign (2019).
- Panel speaker at the International Social Housing Festival (2023).
- Ran two workshops at the CRESCER international congress on Housing First (2023).
- It has received coverage from, but not limited to, the following:
 - The Borgen Project – [Addressing the Homeless Crisis in Slovakia](#), April 7, 2024
 - Dobrenoviny - [Nie sú len tí, čo žobrujú alebo vyberajú odpadkové koše. V tejto kaviarni vás obslúžia ľudia bez domova](#) [Slovakian], August 27, 2023

Transfer and future plans

Despite political resistance, STOPA plans to continue promoting Housing First and housing-led solutions to relevant decisionmakers in Bratislava. However, this project purposely does not hinge on government support, ensuring it can grow in a challenging environment. It plans to influence non-governmental organisations nationally and regionally, encouraging them to create similar projects and it strongly believes in open-source knowledge exchange.

The project is currently stable with plans to expand housing capacity with two more apartments targeted at senior women with a history of street homelessness. STOPA would also like to increase its psychological support services for those experiencing homelessness.



STOPA plans to complete a large-capacity stormwater catch basin to be stored underground and used to service the Crossroads project. It also plans to build raised garden beds for useful crops that can be used by those experiencing homelessness. It will also install beehives, green roofing and solar panels. The donor working with STOPA on Crossroads is prepared to fund these planned greening measures.

An external evaluation would highlight other opportunities and lessons and enable the organisation to continue to improve its services.

As far as the proposed new amendment to the NGO law, World Habitat asked about the security situation and risk to STOPA in receiving a World Habitat Award. STOPA explained that they believe that the European Union has been quick to learn from a similar situation in Hungary and is reacting more supportively against these anti-civil society trends. STOPA does not believe that the Slovakian government will risk a disagreement with the European Union. Moreover, civil society in Slovakia is stronger than in Hungary so mass mobilisation around these issues may deter the government clamp down. The Government has committed to tackling homelessness by 2030 and this year STOPA plans to train ministry staff and other important partners to help influence decisionmakers in housing-led/housing first solutions.

Finally, they believe that the international recognition from the World Habitat Awards will provide them with even greater protection.

World Habitat Reflections

STOPA is a beacon of good practice that has succeeded despite the challenging political and funding landscape in Slovakia. The Crossroads project exemplifies how evidence-based approaches can be adapted and applied imaginatively, to advance housing rights. It directly improves the lives of those facing homelessness, as well as improving public perception towards it. Moreover, STOPA's housing-led approach offers a rare and inspiring model for organizations navigating similar contexts. STOPA embodies the core values of the World Habitat Awards by harnessing the power of knowledge sharing and transfer to achieve local impact and progress the right to housing.