

# “The Mobile Café”

A provider of care and contact to the homeless on the streets of Copenhagen



Published in 2005 by projekt UDENFOR  
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ISBN 87-987909-4-3

PROJEKT  
**udenfor**

## Preface

In the spring of 2001, a new phenomenon appeared in the streets of Copenhagen: a vehicle driving around serving food to the homeless. A meals-on-wheels project of this type targeting the homeless had never been seen before in Denmark. It came into being thanks to a social worker, who took the first steps in creating the project, and who was supported by her supervisor, her colleagues and a group of volunteers committed to putting ideas into practice. Today the project known as “The Mobile Café” is still going strong thanks to a great number of volunteers, who have taken their turn over the years, and thanks to our many contributors, which include private companies, funding agencies and local and governmental institutions. Without these contributors, The Mobile Café simply would not exist. As regards the specific process of producing this pamphlet, The Mobile Café owes a debt of gratitude to the Oak Foundation and to Umwelt, an advertising agency. The Oak Foundation has financed this pamphlet and the ongoing process of developing the café, while Umwelt has contributed with layout assistance.

The Mobile Café is a subproject of project OUTSIDE<sup>1</sup> (in Danish: projekt UDENFOR), a Danish NGO (nongovernmental organisation) established in 1997 with the aim of improving the living conditions for people who live on the very margins of society and who, for various reasons, do not benefit sufficiently from the services of the welfare state. In 1999, project OUTSIDE was registered as a fund.

The present pamphlet serves as a status document in the ongoing general assessment of The Mobile Café in preparation for future developments. It presents a collection and promotion of the experience The Mobile Café has gained during its four years of operation, including a number of recommendations for the benefit of others, who would like to start a similar project up. This pamphlet is relevant for a wide range of people dealing with the homeless or with marginalised people in general, also outside Denmark: project OUTSIDE is part of a European network, and the communication within this network suggest that the efforts to improve the living conditions of the most marginalised people have much in common across national borders. Please note that some parts of this pamphlet will need to be adjusted to another national context to be useful, while other parts will be more general applicable.

<sup>1</sup> *The reader might wonder, why project OUTSIDE is written the way it is: the first word starting with a small letter, even after a full stop, and the second word in capital letters. The “project OUTSIDE” should be seen as the name of the organisation – a graphic unit – not as two words that can be separated. As an organisation, project OUTSIDE includes various, separate projects including The Mobile Café.*



As an anthropologist and a staff member of project OUTSIDE, it has been my privilege to write this pamphlet. I have produced data from a variety of sources, including annual reports for the four years that The Mobile Café has existed, a variety of other reports, internal letters, project descriptions, application forms for volunteers, etc. Furthermore, I have carried out participant observations of The Mobile Café, including conversations with its users and an interview with a group of volunteers. This pamphlet also includes data and analyses from an earlier study I conducted. But first and foremost this pamphlet reflects the exchange of information and the discussions I have had with my colleagues: the coordinator of The Mobile Café and other outreach staff, the secretariat director and the director of project OUTSIDE. This pamphlet is, therefore, more a presentation of how we, as a team, picture The Mobile Café rather than an “objective” analysis.

This pamphlet consists of two parts. The first part presents a general overview starting with a short presentation of project OUTSIDE's activities, and followed by an introduction to The Mobile Café and how it fits into project OUTSIDE's framework. Then we will look back on the history of The Mobile Café in the form of an interview constructed in retrospect based on notes from a conversation between the primary initiator of The Mobile Café and the secretariat director of project OUTSIDE.

The second part of the pamphlet goes into more detail about the three prominent actors in The Mobile Café: the users, the volunteers and the coordinator. First, we will try to understand how daily life on the streets may look from the perspective of the homeless and which role The Mobile Café seems to play in this context.

We will also discuss aspects of exchange between "helpers" and "those in need of help". This will be followed by a presentation of the volunteers: their motives and actions, and the organisation of their work. This section also contains a reflection on people's reasons for volunteering in the first place and their reasons for staying on. This leads into recommendations for how to attract and keep dedicated volunteers. A case study will be given to illustrate specific characteristics and dilemmas of the work. Then the many facets of the job as a coordinator of The Mobile Café will be described. The pamphlet will conclude with a few considerations about the possible future of The Mobile Café and,



finally, a summing up of selected experiences and recommendations, which The Mobile Café especially wishes to call attention to.

Charlotte Siiger  
January 2005

## **PART ONE**

### **Staff and activities in project OUTSIDE**

The number of staff in project OUTSIDE is not a constant figure; the average is around 10 people – in some periods more, in some fewer. As of early 2005, the staff consists of a director, a secretariat director, two social workers, a coordinator, a researcher, a student social worker, a welfare-to-work referral, a person in a so-called sheltered job, an hourly-paid accountant and a nurse who's activities are exclusively carried out in Nakskov, a provincial town.

Project activities are financed by both private and public funds and cover three closely related areas of equal importance: 1) practical support 2) documentation and research 3) exchange, teaching and policymaking. Practical support implies the delivery of concrete, practical support on the streets based on the idea that each homeless and socially excluded person should be met and assisted as an individual on his or her own and equal terms. The work follows the principles of harm reduction. Harm reduction is a pragmatic approach to drug and alcohol misuse, where the efforts concentrate on minimising the harmful consequences of the misuse rather than regarding abstinence or rehabilitation as the only aims sought after. project OUTSIDE plays a particular role “outside” government structures, which creates possibilities of working more flexibly and experimentally than mainstream services. Documentation and research involves systematic documentation and improvement of practical methods at street level and the identification and study of mechanisms of exclusion from society. Teaching, exchange and policymaking is done through the production and sharing of knowledge and experiences with other professionals, volunteers, students, politicians, journalists, researchers, etc. From its position as “outside” the mainstream services, project OUTSIDE seeks to inspire, encourage debate, and point in new directions regarding both practical methods and political decisions about marginalised people.

Project OUTSIDE cooperates with mainstream social and health institutions, institutions for the homeless, the police, political institutions, the media, institutes of education and research, etc. To this can be added our international network. An important actor in this network is the association SMES-Europa (Santé Mentale Exclusion Sociale: Mental Health – Social Exclusion) of which project OUTSIDE is a co-founder. SMES includes members from approximately 10 European organisations, which deal with problems and challenges linked with homelessness, mental health and

social exclusion. Furthermore, project OUTSIDE is a member of MHE (Mental Health Europe); an organisation that predominantly deals with conditions related to mental disorders and exclusion. A third international cooperation channel is the umbrella organisation FEANTSA (Fédération Européenne des Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-abri: European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless), which has about 90 member organisations. Through these international networks, project OUTSIDE exchanges and shares ideas with outreach programmes in different parts of Europe.

### **Introduction to The Mobile Café**

The Mobile Café draws on a group of approximately 30 volunteers who take turns, two-three at the time, bringing meals to the homeless on the streets of Copenhagen roughly five times a week during evening hours. The work is organised and run by a coordinator employed by project OUTSIDE.

The Mobile Café drives a Citroën Berlingo equipped with shelves in the back to ease the keeping and transport of meals, drinks and other relevant items. The food is prepared and stored in project OUTSIDE's kitchen under proper hygienic conditions. The meals meet nutritional requirements, are appetising and are served with disposable dinner sets of a quality and appearance that makes the food easy to handle when consumed while sitting on a bench, a staircase or directly on the pavement. In this way, The Mobile Café seeks to combine a practical matter with a symbolic gesture: to show the homeless that they are as entitled to a proper, appetising meal as any other person.

The volunteers also provide for other basic needs by handing out clothes, shoes, sleeping bags and other kinds of goods. Of equal importance is the care that the volunteers show for the homeless by talking with them and observing their well being, as well as by reporting to the professionals at project OUTSIDE if a homeless person needs special attention or assistance. This work is indispensable, functioning simultaneously as a platform for and an extension of project OUTSIDE's area of operation. The Mobile Café operates as project OUTSIDE's "eyes in the darkness", e.g. when they spot or confirm early warning signs: the first vague signs of new phenomenon on the way. One example of an early warning sign can be "a new method of begging", such as when the

first beggar used a cardboard sign saying that he was homeless and hungry was noticed in Copenhagen in 1995 (Brandt 2002: 15). Today it is quite a common phenomenon to see beggars appeal for money by using a cardboard sign.

### **The Mobile Café as part of project OUTSIDE**

The activities of The Mobile Café have to be understood within the framework of project OUTSIDE. Obviously, the café meets project OUTSIDE's requirement of delivering practical support to the homeless on the streets. The objective to meet each homeless on his or her own and equal terms is reflected in the way meals are transported and served: The food is kept in containers and then it is up to each homeless person to decide how much of each dish from the "menu" of the day they would like on their plates. The Mobile Café finds that taking each person's preferences into consideration is also a way of taking their dignity into consideration.

With regard to documentation, the volunteers start by fill out a form, a so-called route report, during each trip. This route report specifies what meal was on the menu, whether the homeless liked the food or not, how many homeless were served and sometimes their names, where in the city The Mobile Café went and at what hour (the route report is attached as Appendix 1). This information helps project OUTSIDE to keep track of the number of people helped, the movements of the homeless throughout the city, the most popular meals, any need to change the pattern of services provided by The Mobile Café, etc.

The Mobile Café – and project OUTSIDE in general – does not seek to establish a "traditional" institution in areas where there are sensible alternatives within reach. The general policy of project OUTSIDE is to constantly be flexible and innovative in areas where no other agencies operate.





At one point it appeared that one of The Mobile Café's stops had gradually developed into an institution in that it had become a daily "place to dine" – a routine for a group of homeless, who could quite easily manage to seek out other places. It was clear from the statements of both the volunteers and the homeless that this specific stop had more to do with habit and traditions than with serving a proper meal to people who would not get adequate food otherwise. Consequently, The Mobile Café changed its schedule, introducing a stop at the location in question three hours later than usual. Soon the majority of the homeless concerned found other places to dine.

A message book supplements the above-mentioned relatively simple route report that the volunteers fill out. In the message book, the volunteers may enter any explanation in greater detail that does not fit into the more fact-oriented route report. The combination of the route report and the message book works as a satisfactory communication tool between the volunteers, the coordinator and the professionals at project OUTSIDE.

In the initial stages of running The Mobile Café, the volunteers would write a brief report in their own words. However, this way of reporting did not sufficiently serve the purpose of consistency and quick overview, and at times writing it was quite a tedious task for the volunteers. Based on these experiences, The Mobile Café recommends the use of a simple form, which asks only for the most necessary facts in order to document and evaluate project activities, supplemented by a message book for more detailed information.

Project OUTSIDE has neither the intention nor the capacity to assist each and every homeless person in need of help; the efforts are rather focused at those homeless who do not seek out any care or treatment services on their own initiative. Although the category of homeless people in general is marginalised, it is still a highly heterogeneous category, where some people are more marginalised than others. What project OUTSIDE strives for in its daily professional work is to reach those people who are the most marginalized, the most in need of help and the farthest from getting help from the mainstream system. The idea is, furthermore, to go into depth with a limited number of homeless people – quality rather than quantity – the argument being that thorough reflection on a few cases is the starting point in developing outlines for generally applicable methods. This reasoning is only possible because of project OUTSIDE's special position outside the mainstream system: the project does not have the same obligation as public welfare institutions to care for "everybody".



The Mobile Café ensures direct and daily contact with a group of homeless and marginalised people, which is broader than the group of homeless attended to by professionals during the daily work of project OUTSIDE. In that way, The Mobile Café opens a passage for gaining insight into and knowledge about “life on the streets” seen from an overall perspective, shedding light on how this situation is changing as a consequence of new policies and initiatives from the mainstream social and health services – for better or for worse. The knowledge of life on the streets is the foundation upon which project OUTSIDE builds its research, teaching and policymaking.

The City of Copenhagen has only recently, in the spring of 2004, established an actual outreach program. The establishment of this program was preceded by a pilot project with the aim of assessing the need for health and social services at street level among the homeless, and simultaneously to develop new practical work methods. The establishment of the outreach programme serves to illustrate how changes in government policies and practice affect the activities of project OUTSIDE. project OUTSIDE appreciates this new initiative and cooperates with the municipal outreach staff to exchange information and to identify how the role of project OUTSIDE and The Mobile Café should be adjusted to this new situation. So far it seems that the new outreach staff takes care of a group of homeless people that was previously within the domain of project OUTSIDE.

Still, it is the opinion of project OUTSIDE that there is a category of homeless people who does not benefit sufficiently from the municipal outreach programme: the homeless who live socially isolated on the streets. Among these we find the – often elderly – mentally ill, who carry their belongings with them, and who are generally categorised as “bag people” or “bag ladies” and “bag men”. Since project OUTSIDE and The Mobile Café strive to operate where there are gaps in the public social security net, our attention is focused on this category of isolated people. Interestingly, this takes us back to 1997 where it all started: to project OUTSIDE’s very first subproject, which was concerned with precisely this category of homeless people. However, over the years the socially isolated, mentally ill have always been a focus of project OUTSIDE, if not in the form of a separate subproject, then as an integrated part of other subprojects.

The above introduction to The Mobile Café and its attachment to project OUTSIDE leaves some questions unanswered: How and why did The Mobile Café start up at all? What experience did the initiators of The Mobile Café gain from the initial steps? To answer these questions, we will now

turn to the history of The Mobile Café in the form of an imagined interview of one of the initiators, a social worker. The interview is based on notes made by the secretariat director of project OUTSIDE during a conversation with the social worker concerned. Each statement from the social worker will be followed by comments, reflections and recommendations seen in light of today's situation.

## **A historical review**

### **First question**

Interviewer: *You are a former social worker at project OUTSIDE. Together with another staff member you began The Mobile Café in the spring of 2001. What motivated you to start up such a project?*

Social worker: "I was employed back in 1999 to do outreach work. As I came to know people who were homeless, it struck me time and time again that many of them did not consider proper meals a high priority in their daily lives. This was so despite the fact that many day centres offer free or very cheap meals for the homeless. The homeless had a variety of reasons for not paying these places a visit on a regular basis, such as they were not allowed to bring their dogs with them inside or they wanted to avoid certain other homeless persons, whom they feared. Some of the mentally ill were too paranoid to frequent these soup kitchens. At project OUTSIDE, we were convinced that for the homeless to gain energy to tackle life on the streets, or perhaps even to change their life situation, one of the first steps must be to eat satisfying wellrounded meals".

### **Comments on the first question**

The fact that many homeless do not make nutritious meals a priority in their daily lives was a major reason for starting up The Mobile Café, and it is still a main reason for continuing with this work today. The Mobile Café considers proper food important if one is to gain more strength to manage life on the streets. Some critics of The Mobile Café argue that serving meals to the homeless makes it easier for the homeless to remain on the streets, rather than making an effort to change their life situations. This argument is based on the idea that the homeless could and should pull themselves together and that the more they suffer, the more likely they are to do just that. Compared to the pragmatic approach of harm reduction, the idea behind project OUTSIDE is quite

the opposite: the homeless are more likely to take action if their health conditions improve. However, the main purpose of serving meals is not to make people change their lives. The purpose is more symbolic: to show the homeless that they have a right to delicious food like any other person.

### **Recommendations regarding the first question**

People often ask: “Why does The Mobile Café serve meals for free to the homeless? Don’t the homeless receive money from social benefits or pensions?” The answer to the last question is: Yes, in Denmark the majority of homeless people receive decent social benefits or pensions compared to other parts of Europe. Nevertheless, experience shows that homeless life tends to affect people in certain ways, making them neglect the need for nutritious food. One reason for this neglect is that, from the perspective of a homeless person, it seems like too much of an effort to seek out a proper meal compared to something like finding a place to sleep.

Another reason is that, although the staff at soup kitchens are generally tolerant, there are still some basic “rules of conduct”, which keep some homeless people away. When The Mobile Café hands out meals for free, with no rules about dogs or alcoholic drinks, it is an attempt to reach those homeless who do not seek out day centres or homeless projects offering free (or cheap) meals. The Mobile Café also differs from these other places in that the food is served right on the streets without a counter separating those who serve the food from those who receive it. In general, The Mobile Café recommends that meals for the homeless be served to those among the homeless who are the least likely to seek out an alternative option – in so far as it is possible to do so.



## **Second question**

Interviewer: *How did you get supplies of free food?*

Social worker: “It is generally known that there is a considerable amount of leftovers in a welfare society like ours. We asked ourselves: Why waste perfectly good food, which could benefit the homeless? Furthermore, we already had project OUTSIDE’s car at our disposal. This car was – and still is – used for outreach work during daytime hours. From that starting point, we approached different canteens and cafés to ask for leftovers. Generally, we received a positive response. In the beginning we received donations from a private café and The National Museum of Denmark, later mainly from two private companies, including Umwelt (the advertising agency that has given advice on this pamphlet). We were very grateful for these food supplies, and for the most part the food was delicious. However, we soon realised that when it came to nutritional quality and quantity, the donated food was too inconsistent. For example, there might be large amounts of salad, but not enough meat to go with it. The meals were suitable as lunch for people working in an office, but they could not meet the demands for a heavy dinner for people living on the streets”.

“We were also in doubt about the hygienic standards. Despite the fact that the food was kept in a refrigerator on the premises, where we picked it up, and despite the fact that we used transportable ice-boxes, we could not be sure of how it was handled for the entire process or whether it was hygienically safe to reheat it. On top of that, we found the whole process quite time consuming. Our time was spent on collecting food, rearranging it, supplementing it with missing foodstuffs and other practical matters, leaving very little time for actual outreach work. At that time project OUTSIDE resided in a small office complex with a very small kitchen, so we often had to use the conference room to have enough space to arrange the food. The whole situation was untenable in the long run”.

“However, the positive effects of these initial steps should not be underestimated. Many homeless people actually benefited from the food, and we gained invaluable experience. On top of that, other unforeseen advantages followed in the wake: our contact with the companies aroused an interest for volunteering among the staff, and both The Mobile Café and our donors were favoured by media attention. Many new volunteers approached us thanks to the news of The Mobile Café spreading through the media.”

## **Comments on the second question**

As the social worker indicates, a need soon emerged of more stable and reliable operation of The Mobile Café. This need was met by two actions taken. The first action was already taken in August 2001 when The Mobile Café was only a few months old: the appointment of a full time coordinator. The second action was not motivated solely by the problems faced by The Mobile Café, but also by project OUTSIDE as such: a general need for more office and kitchen space. So in May 2002, project OUTSIDE and its subprojects moved to a larger office complex. Here, a kitchen was constructed almost from scratch in accordance with legal requirements for the storage, handling and preparation of food. These improved conditions meant that The Mobile Café today is able to prepare and distribute 40-50 servings to the homeless from Monday to Friday on a regular basis. Since 2002, this arrangement has also included Saturdays in the summer from April to October, with barbeques for the homeless in a public park. This arrangement began because the homeless continuously complained that most of the soup kitchens were closed on that specific day of the week. project OUTSIDE's annual report for 2002 says:

**“In 2002, the café handed out approximately 10,000 servings, approximately 25,000 cups of coffee, tea, cocoa or broth and 400 sleeping bags. We give priority to high-quality, appetising food; food that we would like ourselves if we had it served the way it is served by the café. At the same time, it is important for us that the food is nutritious – but of course we also take our customers' preferences into consideration – food of high quality with lots of vitamins is of no use if it is not eaten” (Årsberetning 2002, projekt UDENFOR – annual report 2002 for project OUTSIDE in Danish only)”.**

## **Recommendations regarding the second question**

Starting a meals-on-wheels project that targets the homeless can easily bring about un-foreseen consequences which will probably vary a great deal depending on the specific possibilities and hindrances related to cultural, political and economic circumstances – locally and nationally. At the practical level, The Mobile Café discovered that the workload was much greater than originally expected. However, this experience should not prevent others from starting similar projects. Of course, one should consider possible challenges and problems before starting any new project, but it still pays to take chances. The Mobile Café recommends to others planning similar projects that they begin with a moderate set up and limited areas of service. A meals-on-wheels project can

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Siiger has translated all quotations – written and oral – in this booklet from Danish. This particular quotation has been slightly altered.

work even with limited and inconsistent resources and funds. From that starting point, a need assessment among the homeless can be carried out, which can provide good grounds for more viable



donations and funding. A vehicle might not even be needed, at least not in the beginning; a transporter bike could do the job. It is possible that private companies would agree to support such a project, e.g. with leftovers. Yet, even though donations are always welcome, they still might involve an extra workload in relation to the meals-on-wheels project. Therefore, the advantage of donations should be considered compared to the extra work they may entail.

The Mobile Café, however, is not only about food; it is also about

contact between the homeless and the volunteers – an issue that takes us to the next question.

### **Third question**

Interviewer: *How did you recruit the volunteers, and what type of people were they?*

Social worker: “We recruited potential volunteers by hanging up notices in educational institutions and through our homepage. About 30 people responded – by far the majority of them were students. The next step was to get together and share our expectations. During our opening meeting with the volunteers we began by stressing the specific characteristics and demands of the job so that the volunteers would have a chance to withdraw if it sounded too different from their expectations. One important issue was that being a volunteer in The Mobile Café is quite different from being a volunteer in an indoor location. In contrast to day centres, we are visitors – not hosts – on the streets”.

“We were also very much aware that the people we recruited were psychologically in balance and driven by a surplus of “social energy” rather than by a lack of social relations in their private lives. We wanted volunteers who had something to give to the homeless without expecting something in return, socially, economically or in any other way. During the first meeting, we also emphasised that serving meals was only one part of the story. Equally important was for the serving of meals help establish contact and confidence”.

“Later we arranged a more detailed introduction for those who accepted our terms and whom we considered suitable for the job. This introduction covered the more practical matters: every 6th week we would meet to plan the duty roster, and – of course – at least one volunteer on duty must have a driving license. We stressed that people should not feel forced into accepting more work than fits into their daily lives. For instance, it would be perfectly okay to slow down during examination periods”.

### **Comments on the third question**

Since then many different people have worked as volunteers in The Mobile Café. Some stayed with the project for only a short time, others stayed for longer, and a few of the present volunteers have been with the project from the very beginning. The average number of volunteers has consistently ranged about 30, which is suitable for running a project of this size five-six days a week. The requirements for becoming a volunteer have not changed over the years.

Up to today, the volunteers still meet every 6th week to plan the duty roster. As was the idea from the beginning, these “volunteer meetings” have, furthermore, developed into a forum where the volunteers and staff members of Project OUTSIDE meet to share and discuss any relevant themes. During the meetings, the staff members or invited external lecturers elaborate on facts and recent developments within the field of social services. This information is sometimes extended to include a visit to a day centre or an NGO that works with marginalised groups. Yet another initiative is that The Mobile Café invites volunteers to a party, picnic, sailing trip or other type of social activity twice a year (see also Appendix 2: Volunteer agreement).



### **Recommendations regarding the third question**

Volunteer work is the very foundation on which a meals-on-wheels project like The Mobile Café rests. Therefore, it is important that the volunteers are treated as an essential and integral part of the framework within which such a project operates – in this case project OUTSIDE – not as an appendix to other activities. This entails that the staff communicate relevant information about their observations and activities to the volunteers. Furthermore, the volunteers and staff should participate together in social gatherings, specialist sessions or the like. Apart from being ways to integrate the work of volunteers and professionals, these arrangements are also a way to acknowledge and “pay” the volunteers. The Mobile Café recommends that volunteers should be treated very well so they feel encouraged to stay on – provided of course that no changes in their personal lives prevent it.

The Mobile Café operates well with approximately 30 volunteers. The recommendation to other projects is to set a number of volunteers that fits the project size. Furthermore, it is advisable to be very clear on what is expected of the volunteers and prepare them accordingly. The Mobile Café expects its volunteers to agree with the overall objectives of project OUTSIDE, but at the same time it is important to be open-minded towards critical input from the volunteers. The volunteers are in a unique dual position as both “outsiders” and “insiders” at project OUTSIDE. This position makes it possible for them to contribute with perspectives on project OUTSIDE’s ideology, focus areas, methods and the like which might otherwise not be observed. In addition, the volunteers are seen as possible advocates for an overall better understanding of homelessness and social exclusion and this may, hopefully, have an impact on public opinion and social policy. Although volunteer work should be integrated into the project as such, it is simultaneously considered different from and complementary to other project activities. project OUTSIDE insists on this distinction with the argument that volunteers cannot and should not be used as “free labour” instead of the work of professionals – not in project OUTSIDE nor in any other care system.

Previously in this historical section, we suggested that homelessness has a certain impact on people, which explains why The Mobile Café hands out meals for free. What follows now is a further elaboration on the subject of homelessness and on the arguments for why The Mobile Café considers it a good idea to do what they do. This will take us to the second part of this pamphlet.

## PART TWO

### The users

There are a variety of more or less conflicting ideas in society of who the homeless are and why they live on the streets. One idea is that they are helpless, inactive victims, subjected to circumstances out of their own control; another is that they are to blame for their own misery, and that they could and should pull themselves together to change their lives. A third is that the homeless are people who have actively and willingly made a free choice to live on the streets, and therefore they should be left alone. Reality is, however, much too complex to answer “who’s” and “why’s” in any simple way. Homelessness calls for an understanding of how life on the streets may appear meaningful within a certain social and cultural context.

It is not the ambition of this pamphlet to provide an in-depth understanding of life on the margins of society, but we should at least be able to lift enough of the veil to understand how The Mobile Café and project OUTSIDE perceive their roles as intervening parties in the lives of homeless people. We will draw on the concept of “career” as the anthropologist Avril Taylor defines it in her ethnography on female drug users (1993). According to Taylor, the concept of career makes it possible to reduce prejudices against drug users, and instead try to understand their lives from an “inside perspective”, i.e. within their own world of experiences (1993: 5). In this pamphlet, however, the primary focus is not on drug users but on the homeless. Some homeless people fit into the prevalent categories of drug-addiction or alcoholism; some might be defined as addicted to both and some as non-addicts. Others are mentally ill or suffer from poor physical health conditions. Nevertheless, there are some skills, which transverse these categories and which are general useful if one is to make a career as a homeless person.

The reason for using concepts like “career” and “skill” is to avoid describing the homeless as mere victims. On the other hand, one should not go to the opposite extreme and regard homelessness as a free choice. Homelessness is, rather, a situation of last meaningful resort when all other alternatives seem exhausted – if not always in the eyes of the observer then, at least, in the eyes of the homeless. In line with this, the process of becoming a competent homeless person cannot be considered a dream career. It is more a question of getting the best out of an extreme situation. In the following, we shall elaborate on one of several skills that appear particularly useful seen

from the perspective of the homeless: the ability to make and save money. The description of this skill simultaneously provides the background for understanding why The Mobile Café works the way it does. If one were to mention another equally important skill, which is not elaborated here, then it would be the ability to establish alliances and friendships with other homeless people; allies and friends offer a sense of belonging and support when times are tough.

### **The ability to make and save money**

project OUTSIDE's professional services are focused on that specific category of homeless people who are characterised by living a socially isolated life on the streets and only very limited contact with mainstream services. People in this category differ from most other groups of homeless people in that they do not usually consume alcohol or drugs on a large scale. Otherwise, homelessness is, generally speaking, associated with large consumption of alcohol or drugs such as hashish, heroin, cocaine and a variety of pills. In accordance with the principles of harm reduction, we do not try, here, to determine the causes of this consumption or judge the moral aspects, but merely accept the fact that it exists and that such consumption is expensive – especially if the preferred drug is illegal. Homeless people also have extra expenditures compared to common households in that they lack a permanent place to keep food, clothes and other belongings. Furthermore, normal routines might be relatively expensive or performed with great difficulty, such as taking a bath, washing clothes, cooking, receiving mail, watching television or sleeping at night. It is difficult to save and keep money when one does not have a place to stay and has to pay for everything: “Even to get warm costs money” one homeless man says, referring to the hotels and cafés he frequents when he needs a place to get warm after spending time outside.

Most homeless people in Denmark receive cash benefits or pensions. However, even though these benefits are known to be higher than in other countries, they do not go far in the life of a homeless person. Seen from the perspective of the homeless, resources are scarce or, at least, they have a short life span. There are different ways to supplement cash benefits, such as begging, stealing or collecting recyclable bottles for the deposits. One can also save money by following prices and buying beer and other necessities where they are cheapest. The homeless can also frequent day and night centres and shelters where food, beds, clothes and other items are available for a few coins or for free.

Homelessness tends to affect people's thinking in certain ways, making it difficult to plan and act towards a welldefined goal. This tendency not to plan is elaborated by the sociologist Robert Desjarlais in his research on life in a shelter in Boston (1997).



Many social scientists perceive the creation of meaning in human life as a matter of telling and living “whole” stories with a beginning, middle and end (e.g. Mattingly 2001: 84). But Desjarlais observed that some of the homeless in the shelter lived in a different way. When resources are



scarce and the world seems disturbing and beyond one's influence, some homeless people react by withdrawing from time and only relating to episodes in isolation, i.e. no meaningful wholeness, no story, is constructed from one event to another (Desjarlais 1997: 12-19).

The Mobile Café motivates its activities based on the fact that the homeless lead a life of continuous struggle to provide money and fulfil their basic needs combined with how a homeless life generally

shapes people's perceptions of time. In such a context, the serving of food for free is welcome – not only because it fills you up, but also because it relieves the homeless person of the task of planning where to eat. The policy in project OUTSIDE is that regardless of whether the homeless persons priorities might seem unfortunate from a health, financial or other perspective, this should not lead to moral judgements and blame. This is in line with our endeavour to avoid all set professional strategies. Thus, food is to be served unconditionally to the homeless in need – with those living a life in isolation as our top priority.

The homeless welcome meals from The Mobile Café, as well as meals served at day centres and drop-in centres: “There is nothing wrong with the food. It is nice all over, wherever it is served and wherever it comes from” (Frederik, approx. 55 years old<sup>3</sup> .

The following quotation illustrates how food is perceived as a scarce resource and, therefore, highly valued. At the same time, the quotation points to a problem, which is generally not acknowledged to its full extent: that a physical condition might cause a loss of appetite or lack of “space” in the stomach, which is yet another explanation for why the homeless do not eat properly:

**“I have received a meal from the van [The Mobile Café] only once. It was at Maria Kirkeplads [Maria Church**

<sup>3</sup> All oral quotations have been edited – some rather extensively – in order to narrow them down to a few essential points and to make them more readable. All names of informants are pseudonyms.



**Square, a well known hot spot for drug-users] the other day. At that time, I had not eaten for ten days – so it was very nice. The food was delicious. It was chicken and small potatoes. The only problem was that I could not eat very much. You know, when you have not eaten for ten days, you get used to an empty stomach, and then there is no space for more than two mouthfuls. But I tell you: those two mouthfuls were really delicious. I put the remaining food in a plastic bag and carried it with me for later”.**

*John, approx. 35 years old*

The gratefulness that the homeless express can be seen as an element of exchange based on reciprocity. On the face of it, the relationship between the volunteers of The Mobile Café and the homeless might appear to be simply a matter of one part presenting a gift to another part without any obligation to return the favour. However, according to the logic of reciprocity, people normally feel obliged to return a gift. As regards the homeless, they do not have much to return in the materialistic sense of the word; what they can give is in terms of “good” behaviour and gratitude<sup>4</sup>.

The Mobile Café would prefer that the users considered it their right to receive a proper meal rather than feel indebted. One can prevent the element of gratitude from being too dominant by ensuring that the volunteers in The Mobile Café do not offer their services on the grounds that they need to fortify themselves. At the same time, staff members and volunteers should not underestimate or refuse the homeless’ urge to show their gratitude as it can be considered a method of “pay back”, which creates a sense of balancing the asymmetric give-and-take relationship just a little bit.

All this does not mean that the homeless never complain about The Mobile Café. For instance, the strategy of flexibility and innovation is a recurrent source of discontent for certain groups of homeless. Again, this strategy must be understood in relation to the general policy of project OUTSIDE: not to establish yet another institution. At times, The Mobile Café develops a routine of stopping at certain sites at certain hours every evening, attracting “regular costumers” in large numbers, i.e. around 15-30 people. But this immediately makes us wonder whether the café is developing into an institution rather than being an alternative to (almost) nothing. In cases where The Mobile Café decides to change its route and cancels one of its regular stops, this obviously causes complaints from the users. The Mobile Café admits that it is a severe action to withdraw such a fundamental service as food, but on the other hand the action reflects a crucial element of project OUTSIDE’s

<sup>4</sup> *This chain of reason is inspired by an analysis carried out by the anthropologist Sue E. Estroff (1985: 159-162).*

raison d'être: to do things ways that differ from "the usual way". This implies continual consideration of how much it should allow itself to become institutionalised without losing its innovative and experimental natures. If this ideology is to be put into practice, then, of course, the staff and the volunteers must follow it. This is yet another good reason for the importance of integrating the work of volunteers with other activities in project OUTSIDE.

### **The volunteers**

The volunteers at The Mobile Café are a mixed group of people of different ages and with different backgrounds and training. The number of females is higher than the number of males, and the average age is said to be lower than among volunteers at other homeless projects, such as day centres, in that there is a relatively high number of students in their 20s. This is probably a result of The Mobile Café initially recruiting a good deal of volunteers through educational institutions: today's composition of the group of volunteers reflects the history of the project.

Generally speaking, a mixture of values, such as solidarity with fellow human beings, a desire for a more just society, curiosity about otherness, emotional affection and a promotion of own career or training in certain skills, motivates the volunteers. These motives are reflected in the following statements from three volunteers, who were asked in a focus group interview: "why did you decide to volunteer?". Their responses were:

**"I wanted to help my fellow human beings".**

*Christine, 22 years old*

**"There were different reasons why I volunteered. One reason was that I noticed that the number of homeless people on the streets of Copenhagen was increasing. I think there are more homeless people now than maybe 10-15 years ago. The problem may also have been there before, but it has become more visible. I often passed a specific local train station, and there I saw the homeless sitting. Then I thought I should do something about it and I registered for this project".**

*Karen, 23 years old*



**“I needed some other kinds of in-put in my place of work, and I would like to gain some experience working with people on the margins of society. At the same time, I have always been curious about how these people survive”.**

*Mary, 44 years old*



Only rarely does someone stop working as a volunteer on the grounds that he/she did not like the job or that he/she found it difficult to associate with the homeless. In the majority of cases, the volunteers report that quitting is caused by changes in their personal life conditions, such as moving away from Copenhagen, starting up a job that requires time and attention or becoming a parent.

But what is it about the volunteer job that makes

volunteers stay? As described above, the division of roles between the homeless and the volunteers is well defined: one is the giver and one is the receiver. Therefore, the position of the volunteers easily provides a rewarding feeling of being a morally good person: “We only do good without demanding anything,” as one of the volunteers put it. In general, the volunteers’ accounts are full of what they achieve from the job even if they do not demand anything. To add yet an example of what the volunteers achieve, apart from “being morally good,” there is the actual access to another world which they would otherwise not have known:

**“I learn so much from the homeless, because they are so different from the people I associate with in my daily life. And they have so many other kinds of values; basic values that we forget in our daily lives, such as mutual solidarity and friendship. And then they are usually very, very humble. They have a kind of humble attitude towards life, compared to people with enough money who think, “I have paid for this and that, and therefore I have the rights of such and such...” So the main reason for me to continue is that I learn from the homeless”.**

*Karen, 23 years old*

Meeting the homeless, then, seems to be an eye opener and a push towards broadening somebody’s knowledge and personal experience. One statement takes it even further, describing work as a volunteer as something that catches people: “when first you have started, then you really want to continue.” In other words, “you are caught”.

Earlier in this pamphlet, we stressed that The Mobile Café not only aims to deliver free meals and other goods to the homeless. The goal is also to be project OUTSIDE’s web of extension, that is the volunteers 1) observe the homeless at both an overall and an individual level 2) establish and maintain contact, and 3) report back to the professionals. But let us go more into detail as to how the work is organised and carried out in practice.

### **Volunteer work with The Mobile Café**

The food is prepared and packed for transport in project OUTSIDE’s kitchen by the staff. When the two-three volunteers report for duty at around 5:30 p.m., the staff briefs them on where to go, whom to look for on the streets and any relevant news. The volunteers also read the reports in the message book.

The route is outlined by the coordinator beforehand, but up to a certain point the plan remains flexible in order to give the volunteers the opportunity to make independent decisions regarding where to go and who to serve. In this way, the coordinator signals confidence in the volunteers’ abilities to make their own judgements and, hopefully, this will be reflected in an open approach towards the homeless and tackling challenges in work situations.

The number of sites visited by The Mobile Café varies from evening to evening. It might be as low as three sites or as high as fifteen – the average being somewhere in between. Being a volunteer with The Mobile Café implies seeing the city and the people dwelling and moving within it from a specific angle. People who are on their way home from work and sightseeing tourists become a homogeneous, irrelevant crowd. In this context, the homeless are the main actors: Who are they and where are they? Who is back from prison or a treatment institution? Are there any newcomers? Are there people from Sweden, Norway, Finland or Greenland – or from a country even further away? Who is drunk, lonely, happy, sick, in mental or physical pain, etc.? Are people hungry or in need of any assistance?

An entrance to a shop and certain benches on a square are regarded as convenient places for the homeless to dwell and are, therefore, places where the volunteers look for them. The volunteers sometimes move fast from one place to the next, only to slow down, watching people discreetly through the window of the car to look for specific persons whom the staff of project OUTSIDE has asked them to look for, thinking: “Does he fit the description?”. All the while, the volunteers share their reflections on who might be homeless and who might not: the woman transporting big plastic bags on a trolley, the elderly man searching for something in a public dustbin or another elderly man with a bushy beard, dressed in rags and sitting alone on a bench.

### **Case study**

On a specific evening in late summer 2004, the first stop is at a local train station not far from project OUTSIDE’s office. The first few people approach the car, most of them with a bottle of beer in their hand. They ask in a lively tone: “What’s on the menu today?” and get the answer: “Cumberland sausage with boiled cabbage in white sauce”. People queue up and dinner is served. “Would you like ketchup? Mustard? Salt and pepper?” the volunteers ask. The homeless sit down on the pavement or stand up, eating with what seems like great pleasure, some quietly, others chatting. Their dogs get a share of the food. One of the volunteers leaves the car to look for “customers” in the vicinity, wondering why “so and so” has not come to see The Mobile Café as he usually does. Maybe he is not feeling well? A homeless woman has certain “female” problems and wants to talk with the volunteers, both women, in private – out of earshot of the other homeless people, all men. The volunteers spend some time talking with the woman, and they promise her, that one of the social workers at project OUTSIDE will get in touch with her next day.



From here the volunteers drive to another local train station approximately 10 minutes away. This is a hot spot for some of the mentally ill. At this location, the communication proceeds in a more moderate tone than at the previous train station. The volunteers take time to converse with two regular “customers”, an elderly man and an elderly woman. The woman is neatly dressed and keeps her belongings in a suitcase trolley. She looks more like a grandmother on her way to visit the family than a “bag lady”, a rough sleeper, who spends her days wandering around, and her nights sleeping in trains. The man is dressed in clothes with stains, but nor does he at a first or even a second glance look like a rough sleeper. They both enjoy the meal from The Mobile Café – the lady also takes some fresh fruit with her for later.

The evening proceeds in a similar fashion with one stop after another. Each site has its own mixture of well-known and new “customers”. In some places, an eager group of homeless can hardly wait to get the food, and in other places people are more restrained and not quite sure if they can eat anything at all. Along the way, the volunteers spot somebody who seems to be socially isolated

and mentally ill. Sometimes it is a well-known person – sometimes not. In most cases, the volunteers stop the vehicle and ask if the person in question wants something to eat.

The volunteers also make follow up visits to apartments “customers” have recently moved into. The purpose is to maintain contact and help the person manage indoor life so that he or she does not end up on the streets again. Around 10 p.m., the last site is visited, which in most cases is either one of several hot spots, where food is in great demand, or a specific day and night centre for female prostitutes.

The volunteers hand out food and other goods, observe the homeless in the city, establish contacts and report back to project OUTSIDE. The Mobile Café also takes along students, journalists, politicians, researchers, professionals and others who are interested in the homeless situation and the work the café is doing. project OUTSIDE is always in a dilemma when people request to be introduced to the homeless. On the one hand, fulfilling such requests corresponds with project OUTSIDE’s general policy of being open to the surrounding society and making an effort to influence the public debate on social policy, exclusion and poverty. On the other hand, project OUTSIDE wants to prevent the homeless from feeling obliged to cooperate with these visitors out of gratitude or good will towards volunteers and staff. All the more reason to point out that although The Mobile Café can introduce visitors, these visitors must then establish their own contacts, independently of project OUTSIDE if they want to do any further research.

After the final stop, the volunteers return to project OUTSIDE’s premises, empty the vehicle, rinse the used kitchen items and write in the message book if relevant. An evening summary might, for instance, be: “a nice and peaceful evening”, “people were grateful for the food” or “people were in a good mood”. On rare occasions, a volunteer remarks: “some homeless people threaten to smash the car”, “somebody gets annoyed because the sleeping bag he receives is really wretched” or “the homeless were feeling cold because all their clothes and their sleeping bags have been stolen”.



Although most homeless people are grateful for The Mobile Café, the latter remarks suggest that the nature of the work also confronts the volunteers with various challenges. For instance, the insecurity of how to respond when the homeless complain and get angry or the despair at not being able to help in urgent situations. Due to these and other challenging aspects of the job, the coordinator of The Mobile Café organises training and discussion sessions on such issues as: How to act in threatening situations? How to observe people who are mentally ill? What to do in emergency situations? Another frequent challenge is the dilemma of how at all to determine whether or not a person is even homeless.

### **The volunteer's dilemma:**

#### **Who is entitled to receive food from The Mobile Café?**

The target group for The Mobile Café is people who are homeless and marginalised, and who do not have a place to store food and cook or who do not take enough care of themselves to obtain proper meals. Most homeless people who make use of The Mobile Café obviously belong to this group of people. But sometimes it can be difficult to determine whether the people asking for food actually belong to the target group. One difficult situation is the thought provoking embarrassment of addressing somebody on the street because he looks homeless – only to find out that he is a person on his way home from work. Another situation is to make the mistake of not recognising a homeless person in need in an attempt to avoid serving food to someone who is not homeless. Is the young, shy man, who speaks English with an indefinable accent and who approaches The Mobile Café in the town hall square, a mentally ill person in need of help? Or is he a middle class traveller from Belgium, who wants to explore the 'free life' on a low budget before he starts college? Does the talkative, middle-aged woman, who tells entertaining stories about imagined secrets in her shoes, have her own apartment? And is she able to care for her own basic needs?

These questions are not easy to find quick answers to. project OUTSIDE's general attitude is that it is better to serve ten meals to people who are not within the target group than to exclude just one homeless in need. On the other hand, food can at times be in short demand, and the image of the café as a service for the homeless can be damaged if too many people, who do not belong to the target group, eat from the café. The Mobile Café appears to have developed an image of symbolic dimensions; it is associated with "positive" values such as tolerance, solidarity and helpfulness

(and good food). The visible “proof” is the way the homeless address new volunteers: as if they were old friends even though the two parties have never met before as individuals. The Mobile Café attempts to live up to this symbolic status and to maintain the image of a café for the homeless – not to develop into a café where anyone can eat for free.

The volunteers not only share and discuss the challenges and dilemmas of work during the volunteer meetings held every 6th week, they are also welcome to contact the coordinator at almost any time. This points to an important aspect of the job as coordinator: he/she must make him/herself available and be sensitive to the volunteers’ way of experiencing things. This means that the coordinator organises meetings, social gatherings and training sessions in accordance with the volunteers’ wishes and tries to establish an environment where the volunteers feel confident to express and share their concerns. The coordinator of The Mobile Café has recently started a digital forum for volunteers on project OUTSIDE’s homepage, which shows promise in relation to strengthening mutual communication. However, these are only examples of the coordinator’s qualifications.

### **The coordinator**

A volunteer program with a staff of about 30 does not work without proper management. To be a coordinator of The Mobile Café is a full time job consisting of recruiting volunteers and organising their work. This also means that he/she, in agreement with the volunteers, has the authority to exercise a certain discipline. For instance, he/she is the one who ensures the volunteers fulfil their commitments once they have put themselves down for a shift. In principle, the volunteers may only cancel a shift if they are sick or have an acute problem. There are, though, also certain seasons of the year where one has to accept that The Mobile Café operates at half speed. This is particularly the case during the summer months when the volunteers go abroad on holiday.

The coordinator must be able to assess whether people are fit for the job as volunteers: whether they will be loyal to the ideology of project OUTSIDE and whether they are capable of managing the specific challenges of the work. He/she must have an eye for the volunteers’ resources and be confident that they are able to run The Mobile Café independently and without too many restrictions or too much control.



The coordinator also takes part in project OUTSIDE's outreach work. He/she maintains in regular, direct contact with the homeless on the streets in order to understand their current needs and what is going on in their lives and adjust The Mobile Café services accordingly.

Moreover, the coordinator is responsible for a whole range of practical and legal issues, such as the ensuring hygienic and nutritional standards of the food, organising and establishing kitchen facilities, observing regulations on working conditions, maintaining the vehicle, making sure that the refrigerator, the freezer and the dishwasher are functioning, etc. The coordinator also establishes contact with possible donors who might be willing to contribute to The Mobile Café, e.g. with meat, bread, fruit, cleaning products, training sessions or even advice on the layout of this very pamphlet.



The job as coordinator of a volunteer program most likely differs greatly from project to project and from country to country. The multifaceted character of the coordinator's job at The Mobile Café is related to the fact that project OUTSIDE only employs about 10 people. In such a small group, each staff member has, on the one hand, his/her own area of specialisation and is engaged, on the other hand, in a broader set of activities than is probably the case in places with a larger group of staff.



Since the coordinator's work covers a variety of disciplines, his/her formal training seems to be of less importance. What counts is generic skills like management, flexibility, a knack for making

quick decisions, willingness to change directions, tackling practical matters, sensitivity to other people's problems, etc.

The Mobile Café is quite a success in the eyes of everyone involved: project OUTSIDE, the volunteers and the users. But this does not mean that project OUTSIDE sit back and relax. It has been said several times in this pamphlet that the policy of project OUTSIDE is to be flexible and innovative. Consequently, project OUTSIDE is currently in the process of reviewing The Mobile Café and how it can be improved. The following presents some of the considerations currently being discussed.

### **Perspectives for the future**

project OUTSIDE's reflections on the future of The Mobile Café centre around a few key questions: What should remain the same, what should be changed – and how? One prevailing idea is that the café should play a more central role in project OUTSIDE, perhaps becoming an actual basis for concrete social and health services. In that way, the café would develop into a mobile unit providing a variety of services and combining the efforts of volunteers and professionals even more. At the moment, project OUTSIDE is considering how such a stronger integration of the work of professionals and volunteers can be implemented.



Recently four staff members at project OUTSIDE went to London to visit different projects that provide services for the homeless. From conversations with staff on these projects, it was explained that the government in Great Britain discourages meals-on-wheels projects for the home-

less on the grounds that: “it is not enough with soup and sandwiches,” as one staff member in London pointedly remarked. This argument reflects the general scepticism of the British government towards low-threshold services, which resemble the policy put into practice by project OUTSIDE: a service like The Mobile Café cannot stand alone; it must be supplemented with professional services. On a more concrete level, one of the issues under consideration is: How would the role of the volunteers be affected, if The Mobile Café expanded its professional services? Experience shows that professionals easily become too dominant at the expense of volunteers in projects where the two groups work together, and that there is a tendency for feelings of mistrust to develop on both sides. So the challenge is how to maintain both the volunteers’ independent running of the café and their spontaneous approach in meetings with the homeless, while strengthening the professional services. During the visit to London, the staff of project OUTSIDE met with an organiser of training programmes for volunteers and professional staff. She suggested a possible way to prevent mistrust between the two groups: to be very clear about each party’s role and to let the volunteers make the first contacts with the homeless and then refer to the professionals when need arise.

The social workers at project OUTSIDE spend a good deal of time on cooperation with mainstream services. This includes, among other things, accompanying the homeless to various mainstream services to ensure that they will even turn up and that they will wait until their case is attended to. However, this type of escort is, more often, to ensure that staff of the mainstream services perform their duties, that is to keep reminding the authorities that their legal and moral responsibility to care for all citizen includes the homeless and most marginalised people. This effort to bridge the gap between the homeless and the mainstream system must obviously take place during daytime hours when public institutions are open. Since The Mobile Café operates in the evening hours, this raises the question: How will project OUTSIDE’s efforts to incorporate the homeless into the mainstream system be affected, if professional resources are moved from day shifts to evening shifts?

This pamphlet presents experience gained by The Mobile Café during its first four years of operation. Hopefully, it will inspire other projects in Denmark and abroad that share project OUTSIDE’s ultimate aim of improving living conditions for the homeless and other socially excluded people. project OUTSIDE does not claim to possess all the “right” answers, rather this pamphlet should be considered a contribution to the general experience and knowledge, which has been gained in recent years’ social work.

For clarification, we will conclude this pamphlet by repeating project OUTSIDE's basic argument and recommendation regarding meals-on-wheels projects for the home-less. Then, we will summarise the experiences gained by The Mobile Café, highlighting some of the recommendations already made in the preceding text. These experiences and recommendations are organised under three headings, which are in line with – but not identical to – the way project OUTSIDE's activities were classified in the beginning of this pamphlet:

- 1) Practical matters and organisation of work
- 2) Documentation, research and development
- 3) Exchange and policymaking.

## Summary

### **Basic argument and recommendation**

- project OUTSIDE and The Mobile Café generally recommend meals-on-wheels projects, which serve nutritious food to the homeless right on the streets. This recommendation is based on the experience that many homeless are reluctant to seek out proper meals – despite the fact that hardship on the streets demands all the strength a correct diet can give. However, meals-on-wheels projects are not a substitute for or in competition with pre-existing indoor services that cater adequately for the basic needs of the homeless. Furthermore, meals-on-wheels projects should be flexible and withdraw from areas where realistic indoor alternatives for the homeless emerge so the project can identify new areas of operation.

### **Practical matters and organisation of work**

- Meals-on-wheels projects can begin with moderate resources, offering only limited services. From that starting point, a need assessment among the homeless and an identification of relevant locations for stops can be carried out. This means that a vehicle is not a necessity; a transporter bike could do the job – at least to begin with.

- The meals should be well rounded and appealing to the senses: smell, sight, taste. They should be served in a way that shows respect towards the homeless, e.g. dinner sets should not only be practical but also appear nice, and the personnel should behave politely. This emphasises the symbolic value of serving meals for this group of people, who generally feel that society does not care about them.



- A meals-on-wheel project and the actual serving of food is an obvious opportunity – or even as a means – for a care service to establish and maintain contact with homeless and marginalised people.
- It is a good idea to have volunteers carry out the work. However, services provided by volunteers must not stand alone, they should be combined with professional services. This requires a balance between volunteer work as an appreciated and integral part of other project activities, and volunteer work as a different kind of service that is not a substitute for the work of professionals. This means that the project staff and the manager must be very clear about what they expect from the volunteers, and about the division of roles between volunteers and professionals.

- The organisation of volunteer work entails regular meetings to plan the duty roster and to exchange ideas and experiences.

- The work carried out in meals-on-wheels projects of a certain size calls for at least one person to take charge of the task of coordination, management and organisation of training sessions and social gatherings for the volunteers and staff. He/she should be able to exercise a certain discipline and still leave room for the volunteers to exercise a relatively large degree of freedom in the performance of their work.



The person in charge can also be responsible for complying with relevant legal standards and ensuring that any odd and unforeseen jobs in the project are carried out.

## **Documentation, research and development**

- It is a good idea to register facts and work experience drawn from meals-on-wheels projects on a daily basis, combining at least two reporting tools: a simple form that is quickly filled out and another that allows more in-depth descriptions of specific persons or themes. The reporting system serves several purposes: to document the work carried out and give an idea of its impact, to ensure mutual communication among volunteers and staff and to build a reservoir of experiences.
- Volunteers for a meals-on-wheels project should comply with the basic values and general ideology of the project. However, constructive criticism from the volunteers should also be encouraged and welcomed by staff and management as a source of reevaluation and further development of the project.
- Meals-on-wheels projects are a useful entry point for gaining an overview of the homelessness situation and how it is changing – seen from a street-level perspective. It can be the first step for identifying early warnings for further research or for themes in political debates.

## **Exchange and policymaking**

- Volunteering for a meals-on-wheels project is a unique opportunity for people who live a mainstream life to get to know and understand people who live on the margins of society. Furthermore, volunteers are seen as possible advocates for improving the overall understanding of homelessness and social exclusion, hopefully, influencing public opinion towards a more tolerant attitude towards and feeling of solidarity with marginalised people.
- In general, meals-on-wheels projects can be combined with efforts to make an impact on public opinion and social policy with the ultimate dream vision of one day rendering oneself superfluous.

## Appendix 1: ROUTE REPORT

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**On duty:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Menu of the day:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Did they like the food?:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Comments for the day:** \_\_\_\_\_

Possible names	Exact time	Location	Total no. served	What is served	Comment



## Appendix 2: VOLUNTEER AGREEMENT

Name:				
Address:				
Telephone:	Mobil:	E-mail:	Driving license:	Copy of license:

### Welcome as a volunteer for Project OUTSIDE.

As a volunteer, I agree to take on a number of shifts which vary from month to month and which are planned at volunteer meetings held every 6th week (Mondays 6 p.m.) in cooperation with the volunteer coordinator. The shifts last 4.5 hours, between 5:45 and 10 p.m. on weekdays. Saturday shifts only as agreed.

### As a volunteer for project OUTSIDE, I agree to take on responsibility for an evening shift from 5:45-10 p.m. to perform the following functions:

1. Meet at 5:45 p.m. at project OUTSIDE, ready the “Berlingo” van and prepare the food for transport.
2. Drive along the planned route, serve food and hot drinks, etc. Enter into dialogue with the homeless, observe and determine the needs of each homeless person and situation, note these on the route report and possibly make arrangements for contact with street-level workers the following day.
3. Drive the Berlingo back to project OUTSIDE, empty it, clean up and submit the route report to project OUTSIDE.

Any absence must be planned with the volunteer coordinator well in advance. Sickness must be reported to the volunteer coordinator as soon as possible at mobile phone no. xxxxxxxx.

In relation to these tasks, I will participate, free of charge, in the following organised by project OUTSIDE:

1. Experienced person to accompany me on the first (few) shifts with introductory training and follow-up supervision. (as needed)
2. Group supervision and/or lectures on other organisations that work with homelessness or substance abuse problems approximately two hours every 6th week (Mondays) followed by a social gathering. (as needed)
3. Three Saturdays a year, social gatherings will be held: a birthday party in spring, an autumn party and a Christmas party in December.
4. A volunteer certificate describing the nature of the volunteer work, possibly accompanied by a statement.

This working relationship depends on mutual loyalty. The volunteer is expected to behave in a positive and loyal manner in line with project OUTSIDE's goals and to be loyal to his/her colleagues on the volunteer team.

The volunteer shall maintain confidentiality regarding conditions the person might become privy to during his/her work as a volunteer and when the confidentiality of such is inherently required or ordered. Similarly, project OUTSIDE shall maintain confidentiality regarding any aspects of the volunteer's private life to which project OUTSIDE might become privy. As a volunteer, you must never have any type of financial arrangements with the users, buy or sell things nor act as an intermediary without the consent of project OUTSIDE.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Volunteer coordinator: \_\_\_\_\_

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