



2017

White Paper on Youth Homelessness in Romania

Contributes to the



**SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS**



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The content of this document is created during the meetings of the **Working Group on Youth Homelessness**, which consisted of Romanian experts from the central and local public sector, as well as NGOs with experience in the field.



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Note: The present document does not necessarily reflect the official position of the institutions above.
In case of any translation differences, the Romanian version prevails.



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Summary

The White Paper on Youth Homelessness in Romania presents a general overview on the current situation of young homeless persons, starting from the main problems identified and continuing with possible solutions, as well as general policy recommendations. The document aims to become a relevant foundation point for future policy decisions on homelessness and youth homelessness in Romania.

1

Introduction and methodology

General considerations regarding youth homelessness in Romania; How the Working Group appeared and started its activity;

2

Main Identified Problems

The main problems that young homeless people are facing with in Romania and especially in Bucharest, as resulted from the Working Group discussions and meetings;

3

Potential Suggested Solutions

Suggested solutions for each of the identified problems, which can translate to public policy for the relevant public authorities in the field or, in some cases, can be applied by private organizations as well;

4

General Recommendations

Overall recommendations which can lead to a significant improvement to the quality of life and general situation of youth homelessness in Romania;



Introduction and methodology

In Romania, more than 162,375 people have no shelter, according to the 2011 Census. Exact figures and relevant statistics can't be easily identified, because the specificity of the problem makes the statistical analysis of the situation very difficult. However, in a country where **40.3% of the population aged under 35 is at risk of poverty and social exclusion**, homeless people, especially homeless youth deserve an increased attention. **Often, homeless people live in difficult conditions, have a low life expectancy**, and in the case of homeless young people there is a considerable risk of missing reintegration into society and even getting into delinquency.

Young homeless people are currently in a "grey area", being defined and treated differently by the competent institutions and the social actors involved. Often, they automatically fall into the "adults" category after the age of 18, which leads to ignoring the challenges and opportunities specific to young people. However, the potential that homeless young people reintegrated into society can have is very high, **with much greater opportunities for socio-professional reintegration** than for homeless adults who have lived in this situation for many years. Also, the causes that make

young people to become homeless often have special characteristics: domestic violence (in all its forms: verbal, psychological, economic, sexual or emotional violence), drugs or alcohol abuse, family carelessness, but also specific cases of discrimination based on sexual orientation, many young people being driven away from home because of belonging to the LGBT minority. Thus, we encounter cases in which young people leave their home, going either in the street or to some other persons from their circle of friends (thus leading to a **"hidden homelessness"** situation), as well as cases where parents drive away their children from home.

At the same time, the social services infrastructure dedicated to homeless people in Romania (both from the public and private systems - NGOs, Church) is relatively developed and technically responds to many of the existing needs.

¹ National Youth Strategy 2015 - 2020, adopted by the Government of Romania on January 14th 2015.

162.375

HOMELESS PEOPLE IN
ROMANIA, ACCORDING TO
THE LATEST CENSUS

Unfortunately, **the coordination between the institutional actors involved is very low**, which leads to a dramatic decrease of the impact and efficiency of the services provided. For example, many homeless people can benefit from free shelter and meals, but many do not want to go to shelters for various reasons (street habit, inability to use different substances or alcohol for addicts, etc.). At a first glance, the answer may be a negative one and a rejection of this attitude, but in fact, on a deeper analysis of the subject, we realize that the reasons are very well founded for a person living in that environment and in those conditions. Thus, **social services have to adapt to the real grassroots needs and to provide appropriate solutions tailored to what is really happening.**

In order to improve the situation of homeless young people, increasing their life expectancy and their quality of life, but also the chances of socio-professional reintegration, **public policy packages are needed to bring corrections, nuances, and new approaches.** In many cases small adjustments can lead to major effects, with no major law changes or a profound reform in this regard at this time.

Taking into account the existing situation, the Young Initiative Association started in 2015 a pre-research on the situation of homeless people and youth in Romania in general and in Bucharest in particular. As a result, we have been able to draw up a series of guidelines on the problem of homeless youth and decided to launch a collective public effort to identify problems and solutions. Thus, we wanted to bring

to the same table, for the first time, institutions and experts dealing with homelessness (directly or indirectly), setting the foundations for the **Working Group on Youth Homelessness.**

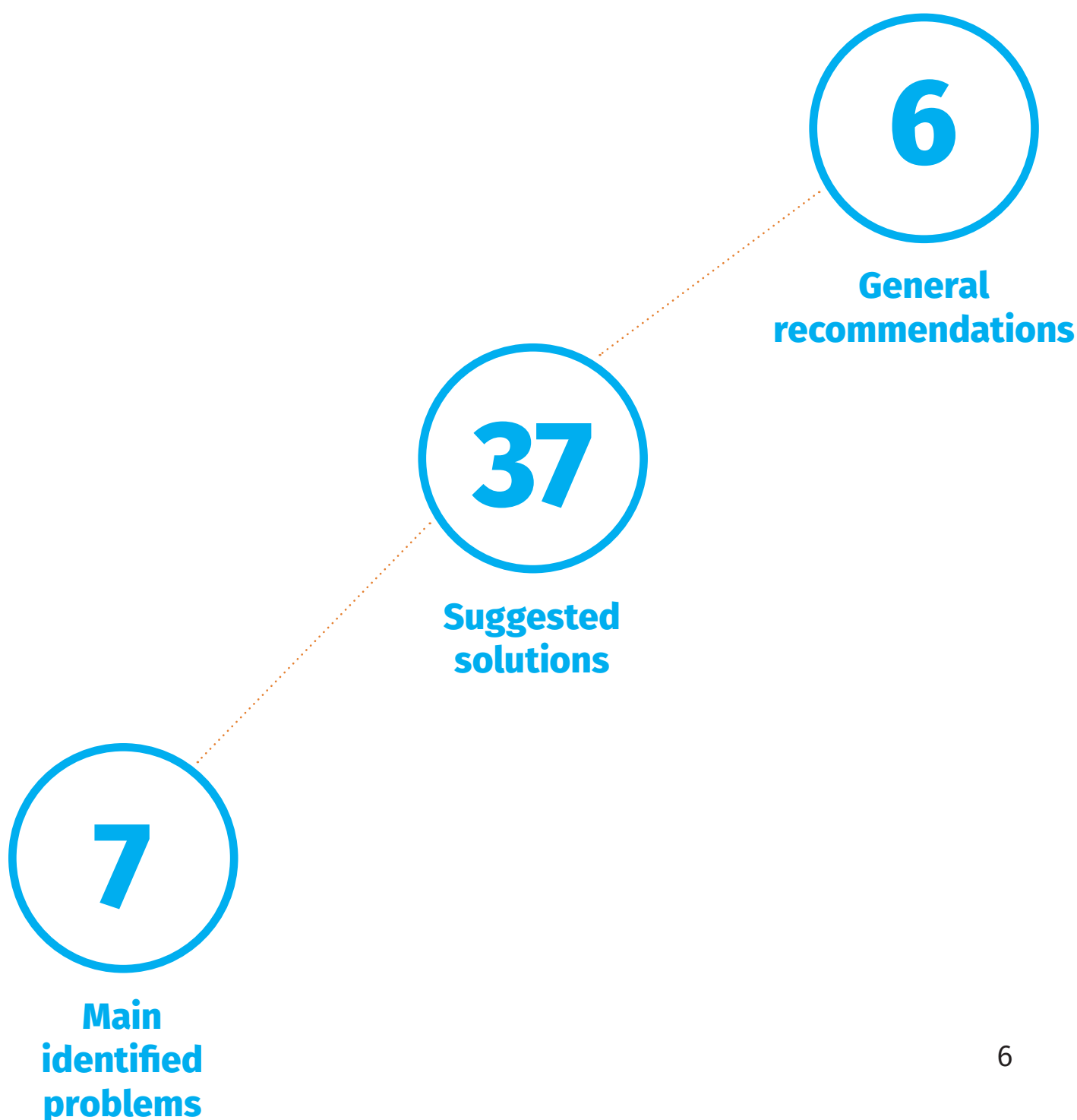
The Working Group includes representatives from public institutions and NGOs working with homeless young people or related to this target group, thus creating first of all a platform for communication and coordination on this topic, but also the opportunity to jointly identify the major existing problems and the potential solutions. **We consider the formation of the Working Group as a result in itself** and as a model of good practice that can be replicated, given the usefulness of the discussions for the daily work of its members and the extraordinary need for communication, coordination and sharing of information on the subject of homeless young people, a need that was specifically identified on this occasion. Therefore, we also discovered the motivational character of such groups on its members, thus creating a space of sharing, information and support.

We consider that the replication of such a structure is a way to invest in the development of human resources in the field of social assistance, both at the public and at the non-governmental level.

This White Paper reflects the findings of the Working Group on Homeless Young People, formed by experts in the field, therefore having an increased relevance.

Note 1: The document often refers to "homeless people" and not just to "homeless young people", because many of the problems and solutions mentioned cover both target groups.

Note 2: The positions expressed in the current document reflect the group discussions of the Working Group on Youth Homelessness, as well as research done by the Young Initiative Association, without making the involved organisations officially responsible for its content.



Main Identified Problems

The Working Group on Youth Homelessness identified the following categories of major problems existing at this moment, in the opinion of its members, regarding the homeless youth and the homeless people in Romania and especially in Bucharest:

A. Lack/Inefficiency of prevention programmes to reduce the risk of a person becoming homeless

Main causes:

1. Low integration between public policies of different public institutions at central and local level, leading to a poor legislative harmonization (for example, a homeless young person has access to school reintegration programmes but he/she needs a home in order to benefit from them).
2. A vision aimed at helping people who are already homeless, less so on the prevention area. At the same time, the services provided by the state encourage dependence on the system, cases of sustainable settlement of individual problems being an extreme rarity.
3. Legislative and bureaucratic restrictions that block a large number of initiatives that could support homeless people or people at risk of homelessness.

Consequences:

1. Increased number of people who become homeless because of temporary financial problems.
2. Poor integration of institutionalized young people aged 18 years in the post-institutionalized socio-professional life, with the risk of some of them not adapting properly or becoming homeless.
3. Increased pressure on the social assistance system by the rising number of people at high risk of becoming homeless.
4. Poor information level of the general population makes a large number of people unaware of the services that can be provided by the state to homeless people and thus can not guide them to those who can help them.

B. Reduced access to essential basic products for homeless people*

By essential basic products we refer, but without being limited to: personal hygiene products (soap, shampoo, clean napkins / towels, etc.), women's pads, condoms, diapers for the babies raised on the street.

Main causes:

1. Essential basic products are very expensive for homeless people.
2. Fear of stigmatization and discrimination of homeless people, some of them not wanting to access the services of a shelter or residential center.
3. Excessive bureaucracy and obstacles that limit the possibility for public institutions to offer such products free of charge, especially to those who don't have identity papers.
4. Lack of trust of the homeless people in the existing shelters and centers, often existing an inherent fear towards the state authorities.

Consequences:

1. Reduced self-esteem and personal hygiene for the homeless people.
2. Increased rejection rate in society and the stigmatization of homeless people because of their precarious hygiene (although a large number of homeless people want to live under normal and hygienic conditions and not to be automatically labelled as "dirty people").
3. Increased risk of developing psychological and behaviour problems and addictions in the case of homeless people, as well as a general decrease in the quality of life.

C. Lack of identity documents for a large number of homeless people

Main causes:

1. The lack of a house leads to the impossibility of issuing identity documents with a validity longer than 1 year.
2. The departure of homeless young people from the institutionalized system leads to losing their home and, in time, to the loss of documents, after expiration.

Consequences:

1. Impossibility to access social, educational and especially health benefits by homeless people who don't have identity papers.
2. Increased associated risks and bureaucracy in case of certain undesirable medical or criminal events.

3. Very low interest from the homeless people to make efforts for obtaining an identity document, as they do not see its usefulness.

4. Homeless people can obtain in Romania only provisional identity documents, with a very limited validity, which leads to their rapid expiration and the repetition of the situation of not having identity documents.

3. Difficulty in offering basic products or services to people without identity papers.

4. Increased stigmatization of homeless people and strengthened feeling of being "lower class citizens".

D. Insufficient authentic statistical data regarding the number and location of homeless people

Main causes:

1. Difficult identification of homeless people, requiring extensive and long-lasting resources in order to accurately locate these people and to avoid double counting.

2. Lack of identity documents for a large number of homeless people, leading to increased difficulties in identifying them and including them in statistics.

3. The reluctance of homeless people to disclose to third parties information about their way of living or other elements considered personal.

4. The high mobility of homeless people leads to major difficulties in locating them, in some cases.

5. High costs associated with an in-depth research in the field, both from a financial perspective, as well as considering time and qualified and empathic human resources.

Consequences:

1. Difficulty in formulating and justifying efficient public policies for a target group that is difficult to dimension, evaluate, and locate.

2. The impossibility of monitoring and evaluating the way in which the situation of homeless young people and homeless persons evolves in time (and at the same time, to see the impact / effect of certain policies).

3. Increased complexity of providing social services by NGOs and public institutions to such a target group.

4. High degree of uncertainty about the real situation of homeless people in a community (it is not possible to determine with precision or with a high degree of confidence how many people are homeless, how many are young, how many of them need important medical care, how many can be reintegrated into the educational system etc.).

E. Reduced cooperation between institutions and organizations that work for homeless young people (both intra- and cross-sectorial)

Main causes:

1. Reduced or no communication between public institutions and NGOs working for homeless young people or which have responsibilities in this field.
2. Lack of coordination between stakeholders, including at the legislative level, which leads to uncorrelated provisions and divides responsibility to several institutions in a non-unitary way, which doesn't involve inter-institutional collaboration.
3. The legislative framework does not encourage / oblige to cooperate.
4. Homeless youth do not usually constitute a policy priority.

Consequences:

1. Lack of policy coherence in the field of homelessness, blocking a large number of support initiatives.
2. Limited knowledge of the support system framework so that each institution and organization knows very well its own responsibilities and services, but very little of what other institutions have to do or to offer.
3. Reduced impact of the programmes and policies targeted to homeless persons, due to the lack of synergy.

F. Youth homelessness does not have a customized and commonly shared definition and practice

Main causes:

1. National legislation defines "young people" as being persons between the ages of 14 and 35. In addition, each institution has its own definitions when establishing its services (most of them consider young people up to 24/25/26 years, as in most EU countries).
2. Confusion regarding homeless young people, who are often wrongly considered to be the young people in the protection system (institutionalized youth).

Consequences:

1. Lost potential for homeless young people in Romania who can access a range of services and benefits and have a high chance of reintegration into society with the appropriate support.
2. Lower degree of socio-professional reintegration among homeless young people compared to the potential level.

3. After the age of 18, homeless youth automatically fall into the "adult person" category, benefiting from the same services as a 50-year-old, although there are radical differences in needs, approaches and potential for reintegration.

3. Services that are inadequate to the real needs and age-specific characteristics of homeless young people, which present important psychological, physical, professional and educational challenges.

G. Reduced information level among people who interact directly with homeless people, especially from related institutions

Main causes:

1. Lack of special training and awareness raising programmes for the staff working in public institutions such as the Police, public libraries, educational institutions, etc. in order to be able to identify, prevent and effectively communicate with those at risk of becoming homeless or who are already homeless.

2. Low degree of knowledge about the services that can be accessed by homeless people. Thus, when staff come in contact with homeless people or identify young people who are soon at risk of homelessness, they only know in exceptional cases what solutions they have at their disposal and what would be the right steps to follow.

Consequences:

1. Increased number of homeless young people getting in the street or in the general situation of being homeless, although the situation could have been avoided with institutional intervention.

2. Poor contact and reduced cooperation between the local community and the homeless young people living in the area.

3. Providing limited, one-time support, which often depends on each individual and past experiences, not on an institutional framework.

4. Increased degree of mistrust between homeless people and employees in the local community, leading to stigmatization, mutual fear and even hate or violence.



Suggested Solutions

The Working Group on Youth Homelessness analysed all major problems described earlier and identified potential solutions for each of them, as detailed below.

A

Lack/Inefficiency of prevention programmes to reduce the risk of a person becoming homeless

- 1 Improving the current system for monitoring the evolution of young people getting out of the institutionalized system, offering support for employment, developing independent living skills, social benefits, including through public-private partnerships.
- 2 Informing the public about the services that are already provided by the state system (e.g: emergency aid, rent support).
- 3 Creating integrated counselling and support centres for young people, which would also offer support to homeless young people.
- 4 Developing a tailored educational programme to develop basic housing abilities for homeless young people and for institutionalized young people.
- 5 Changing the social assistance approach from putting pressure on the beneficiary to access the services provided by the state and NGOs to outreach (the beneficiary is directly targeted and invited to access the services).
- 6 Integrated support programmes for homeless young people: Unique Contact Point. In parallel, training programmes for professionals who are part of the intervention teams.
- 7 Harmonizing emergency relief legislation that can prevent certain people or families from getting in the street.

8

Reducing bureaucracy and deadlines for obtaining emergency relief and social benefits (from 30 to 5 days).

9

Encouraging local authorities to develop local prevention programmes based on identified needs at community level.

10

Increasing investments in parental education programmes.

11

Increasing the number of school counsellors (at present there are also cases of 1 counsellor for 2000 pupils) so that the needs are adequately covered. In parallel, school counsellors should have the necessary training for prevention and intervention if they identify potential young homeless people at risk of school dropout.

12

Encouraging the placements of "mobile caravans" in strategic locations that could offer services to homeless youth.

B

Reduced access to essential basic products for homeless people

1

Partnerships with local commodity producers and the provision of tax incentives to those who support in a concrete and measurable way homeless people through direct programmes.

2

Installing automatic machines and help points for homeless people in key locations with free access to the basic products they need.

3

Encouraging social shops with subsidized prices for homeless people.

4

Regular distribution of basic hygiene products / materials among homeless people.

5

Creating special stores in hospitals and clinics, where homeless people can obtain free of charge products without bureaucratic procedures or the need for human degrading behaviours.

C

Lack of identity documents for a large number of homeless people

1

Extending the validity of the provisional identity card to a minimum of 2 years.

2

Extended access to services with the provisional identity card (health, education, social assistance).

3

Assignment of streets / addresses by local public authorities to homeless people for the purpose of issuing identity documents.

D

Insufficient authentic statistical data regarding the number and location of homeless people

1

Performing field assessments in order to obtain statistical data and relevant information regarding the situation of homeless people.

2

Support NGOs and other interested institutions from the logistic point of view to carry out such research, with or without external funding.

Reduced cooperation between institutions and organizations that work for homeless young people (both intra- and cross-sectorial)

- 1 Creating a shared Knowledge Base on the topic of homeless people, especially at the level of local communities.
- 2 Establishing a cross-ministerial collaboration protocol between the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth on the topic of homelessness, including youth homelessness.
- 3 Increasing public-private cooperation between public institutions and NGOs, but also companies that may have an interest in the field (eg: companies that distribute basic products in an efficient and structured way).
- 4 Creating an inter-institutional network dedicated to vulnerable groups, including to homeless people. The network would bring together professionals (employees, volunteers) from the public and private sectors with a view to an integrated approach to homelessness.
- 5 Creating effective consultation mechanisms and processes to create measures that can be implemented in public-private partnerships.
- 6 Introducing the topic of youth homelessness in the relevant financing programmes as a funding priority.
- 7 Supporting the creation of informal networks in local communities that can lead to increased inter-institutional coordination and cooperation at local level in the field of vulnerable groups.
- 8 Organizing training courses with cross-sectoral participation in order to increase the capacity to meet the needs of people in vulnerable groups. These courses would have a mandatory component of sharing good practices and experiences using non-formal learning methods.
- 9 Creating communication channels between the shelters where homeless young people are located and nearby schools to access existing scholarships and educational reintegration facilities.

F

Youth homelessness does not have a customized and commonly shared definition and practice

1

Harmonizing the legal framework in order to identify a common definition of young people, including the homeless youth.

2

Creating tailored services packages for homeless young people, other than those intended for children and / or adults, adapted to the real needs and age particularities.

G

Reduced information level among people who interact directly with homeless people, especially from related institutions

1

Organizing training sessions for staff in public libraries, museums and other institutions with public access, who enter in contact with homeless young people, so that they are properly prepared for prevention actions and reference to the competent institutions for solving their problems.

2

Launching sensitivity training programmes for the personnel which enters into direct contact with homeless people in order to improve their attitude towards homeless people and to make communication with them more effective.

3

Publishing easy-to-understand guides that present the specifics of homeless young people, the existing services infrastructure, the steps anyone can do to help a homeless person.

4

Professionalizing human resources working with homeless people and youth (and generally with vulnerable groups) by introducing a compulsory practical training for social workers of minimum 4 months. The Service would take place voluntarily in an NGO or in other public institution working directly with vulnerable groups anywhere in the world.

General Recommendations

Taking into account the previously presented context of homeless persons and youth, we formulate the following general recommendations for improving the situation of this target group and increasing their quality of life, on a medium and long term basis:



Improving inter-institutional and cross-sectoral cooperation at European, national, county and local level between public institutions and NGOs with responsibilities in the field of homeless people/youth.



Improving "early warning" efforts, in order to prevent a person from becoming homeless.



Defining and clearly identifying homeless young people as a vulnerable target group with specific needs and opportunities.



Simplifying the procedures for issuing identity documents for homeless people.



Increasing access of homeless people to essential basic products that are needed for normal hygienic life conditions.



Launching training programmes for both public and private social service providers and staff in institutions working with the public (libraries, museums, etc.) in order to increase the rate of positive outcomes of those who come into contact with homeless people or with people at risk of becoming homeless.

Taking into account the results of the Working Group and its usefulness, which addresses real cooperation needs among relevant stakeholders, we strongly recommend encouraging the formation of such working groups on the topic of youth homelessness, as well as for other vulnerable groups, including at an official level. In Romania, there is a large number of organizations and public institutions that bring positive changes in the community, which provide quality services and benefit from expertise that can translate into an increased level of quality of life for the most vulnerable members of our society. But if these organizations work separately, their impact is limited, and often motivation decreases over time. Together, we can talk about synergies and sustained impact.

Together, through communication, co-ordination and open cooperation, we can bring homeless young people back into society as active members who can equally enjoy their rights and responsibilities as Romanian and European citizens.



Thank you

JORG HUTTER
SONYA LABIDI

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Overhope

Strategic Partnerships

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