

Practitioner article

Health in homelessness – a practical approach to a daunting problem

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Health in homelessness

Samuel Cumpsty, Deputy Manager, Edinburgh Cyrenians FareShare project, talks about the organisational aims and practical achievements of Health Improvement Services.

Edinburgh Cyrenians is an independent charity providing innovative help to hundreds of people a year whose lives are blighted by homelessness and poverty. It also works with all parts of the community to eradicate homelessness and promote social inclusion.

One of their service arms – Health Improvement Services – aims to improve health through education and training, supply and strategic use of food, as well as by promoting active lifestyles with its clients.

A practical approach to a daunting problem

The facts about the health of homeless people in Scotland make for sobering reading. The average life expectancy of a homeless person is 42 years of age. The factors that contribute to this appalling statistic are manifold, but include poor nutrition, substance abuse, and inadequate access to medical care. Added to this is the inevitable physical damage incurred just by living on the streets, and the psychological damage sustained in becoming disengaged from society.

Without basic health, both physical and psychological, it becomes virtually impossible for any individual to make his or her way out of homelessness.

Symptoms of malnutrition

A shocking 70% of long-term homeless people show medical symptoms of malnutrition. Three out of five homeless people have no daily intake of fruit or vegetables. The consequences of poor nourishment are both physical and psychological.

Most of us will know the low energy levels, the inability to concentrate, the mounting anxiety and even depression we feel when we have not stopped to eat properly and healthily. The physical impact of malnutrition is equally serious.

Some of the short-term consequences of a poor diet are:

- irritability and lack of concentration, through a lack of energy and continued low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia)
- anaemia (symptoms include tiredness and apathy), through lack of iron and vitamin C
- increased susceptibility to infection, through general inadequacy of energy, protein, vitamins and minerals

- constipation through lack of fibre.

Some of the long-term consequences are:

- an increased risk of premature mortality from coronary heart disease and cancer
- exacerbation of other specific illness disproportionately affecting people who are homeless, e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, mental health
- dental caries (through excess sugar) and gum disease (through lack of fibre).

Access to a nutritious and healthy diet is therefore of paramount importance in restoring and safeguarding the health of those who are homeless. It is also the essential platform from which people can hope to make a sustainable recovery from homelessness.

Re-engaging with society

Once a basic level of health is attained through improved diet, access to medical care, and enhanced awareness and motivation for self-care, the next important stage is for people to re-engage with society and find an opportunity for input. So often, it is the absence of opportunity to become a fully contributing member of society, together with boredom and isolation from having nothing to do, that leads individuals to lose any ground they might have gained.

With all these factors in mind, the **Edinburgh Cyrenians** set up the Health Improvement Services (HIS). HIS is charged with addressing the areas that affect the health of people who are homeless, and focuses especially on nutrition and exercise, seeing in these areas an opportunity for holistic support, given the interconnectedness of physical health, mental well being and social confidence.

The project portfolio of the HIS includes:

- **FareShare** – a food distribution service
- **Good Food in Tackling Homelessness** – a nutrition skills education programme
- **Supported volunteering** – re-engaging people into meaningful occupation

FareShare – a triumph of common sense

When it comes to food, the approach the **Edinburgh Cyrenians** adopt is to see food not as a hand out but as a hand up. We aim to help those who are homeless regain the resources they need in order to make a lasting recovery from homelessness, and not merely alleviate their immediate plight.

FareShare is one arm of the Edinburgh Cyrenians Health Improvement Service. This is a project which re-distributes surplus, nutritious food to homelessness projects all around the region. Each week six to seven tonnes of fresh, high quality food is delivered to over 40 homelessness centres in the Edinburgh region. This food goes towards providing approximately 4,000 meals each week.

Providing nutritious meals for the homeless

The real achievement of the FareShare scheme is to avail those who are homeless with highly nutritious meals they would not usually have access to. Homelessness charities are usually run on a shoestring budget and cannot afford nutritious and diverse menus. If individuals in these situations are going to stand a chance of getting their life stabilised again, physical and psychological health is absolutely essential.

FareShare is not just about meeting an immediate need and feeding hungry mouths, it is also crucially about giving those experiencing homelessness the opportunity to enjoy a basic level of health, which in turn will be essential to any progress they are to make in other areas of their life.

The way FareShare works illustrates what common sense can achieve. Every year, the UK retail industry throws away close to **£0.5 billion** in value of food, a third of which is still consumable. This is the direct offshoot of our culture of convenience shopping and consumer clamour for immediate diversity and availability.

The food that FareShare re-distributes is donated by local supermarkets, retailers and suppliers, and all food distributed is within use by date and of the highest quality. Donors include Marks & Spencer, Pret a manger, Greggs, Caledonia Foods, Simply Organic, J Sainsbury plc, Capespan, and Scotmid. Every kind of food type goes through the FareShare depot – fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and fish, bread, pasta and rice, dairy produce, soup, even desserts.

Providing a balanced diet

The nutritional balance of the typical FareShare basket meets the recommended levels of fresh fruit and vegetable intake, as championed by the Food Standards Agency and Scottish Executive: on average fruit and vegetables make up 40% of food supplied by FareShare, with 33% being the minimum recommended to fight such ailments as heart disease, depleted immunity, nutrient deficiency and incidence of cancer.

This fact alone means that the diet of those homeless and accessing FareShare recipient project meal services in Edinburgh has changed enormously, and is providing the nutrients essential to good health.

Again, the central aim of Edinburgh Cyrenians is to use food as a means to an end, not just an end in itself: it is a means to stabilising people's lives, giving them the basic foundation of sound health, so that they stand a better chance of getting back on their feet. FareShare plays a big part in achieving this aim, and has grown in size and success year on year.

'It's nice to see the growth that has taken place since FareShare first started. Their services are more in demand than ever. And thanks to the cooperation of the retailers we're able to meet these demands.'

Flora, volunteer

In addition to individual supporters our business partners include Standard Life, Townhouse Hotels, Edinburgh Rotary Clubs, Petit Forestier and City of Edinburgh Council.

A further positive benefit of the FareShare scheme is the impact it has on local environmental stewardship and on the sustainability of our retail culture. Were it not for FareShare Edinburgh & Lothians, every year over 300 tonnes of perfectly unspoilt food would be put into landfill in the region.

Good food in tackling homelessness

The way food is used is of the highest importance, and the efforts that Edinburgh Cyrenians HIS makes to improve access to a healthy diet does not stop at the provision of free, fresh ingredients.

Very often, when a person without a home is assigned a new tenancy, with no or little support, it is an uphill struggle for them to be able to manage the transition to independent living. One of the main challenges they face is being able to cook for themselves.

For that reason, the HIS has put together a programme of education and training to equip individuals with the key skills. An 8-week cookery class course model was designed in 2002, with beginner and advanced classes available to match all abilities.

The model has been so successful that it has been replicated and was running at seven different locations in Edinburgh and West Lothian by the end of 2004.

Greyfriars Project

An example of this success has been the Cookery Class pilot at the Greyfriars Project in Edinburgh, where a service user has turned chef through participation in the class. Volunteers and service users regularly prepare meals for up to 50 people at the drop-in centre.

'The confidence of people who've been taking the course changes in two or three weeks. The first week, they will say 'I can't do that' and by the third class they are saying 'I can do that'. The change in the guys on the (cooking) course is amazing. It has changed my life'.

Gary, Cooking Class participant

Gary has now secured a place on a vocational degree course.

A key tool devised by Edinburgh Cyrenians is the **Good Food in Tackling Homelessness Handbook**, which contains a list of easy, cheap and nutritious recipes, as well as guidelines on how to run a Cookery Class.

The manual is a very useful resource, ideal for those wanting to brush up on their cooking skills. It is full of ideas and practical guidance, including relevant information on hygiene and budgeting, and is a must for any hostel or housing association staff, or key worker, to use with their clients.

Food forum

As well as client-centred classes and resource development, HIS hosts a Food Forum once a year, with representatives from homelessness agencies across the region. The Forum covers important aspects of nutrition, with keynote speakers.

In 2004, speakers from NHS Scotland delivered a number of talks presenting material in lectures and in discussion groups, all on the subject of healthy eating and engaging clients with the multi-faceted value of food, using it as an accelerant in their progress in sustaining their own tenancies.

Again, the idea put into practice by Edinburgh Cyrenians is that the most effective way to tackle homelessness is to enable individuals to see their potential and give them the skills they need to realise that potential.

'Cookery classes have been good, gaining new skills, which I've used a lot in my own time – I make an awesome bowl of fresh soup, and am a dab hand at the fish pie too'.

James, cookery class participant

'The things I have liked about the (cookery) classes have been eating more healthily, learning new recipes, meeting new people, just getting out of the house and getting used to being in a group and being more confident about cooking by myself.'

Lisa, Cookery Class participant

Hospitality and community

A core principle the **Edinburgh Cyrenians** employ in HIS, is that food is not just about physical health. Food has always been at the centre of hospitality and communality, and the way we prepare, serve and share food conveys important messages about how we value people. Food is a prime area of neglect and deprivation amongst those who are homeless.

In developing the 'Good Food in Tackling Homelessness' programme, the Edinburgh Cyrenians are dedicated to turn back the tide and help as many individuals as possible regain their physical health, personal autonomy and sense of social value.

Contributions towards the cost of Edinburgh Cyrenians Good Food in Tackling Homelessness Programme include

- NHS Lothian
- Scottish Community Diet Project
- City of Edinburgh Council
- Waste Recycling Environmental

Supported volunteering – from being the helped to being the helper

Once an individual has begun taking steps on the route out of homelessness, finding meaningful occupation becomes a priority. Perhaps the person has recently moved into his or her own tenancy, or off the streets into temporary accommodation. He or she may have determined to try and find employment, or to permanently sustain a break from substance abuse.

It may even be that the person is trying to build relationships with other people for the first time, to overcome a habit of seclusion. He or she may be aiming to improve their mental health through interaction with others, or to achieve greater integration into the community. Whatever the situations, finding something that will constructively and rewardingly assist in occupying his or her time can be a real challenge.

This kind of 'social' health is harder to define, and also harder to tackle. This is where the H.I.S. projects and staff team generate opportunities for individuals with these kinds of goals.

Volunteer openings

The FareShare project, for instance, provides many worthwhile openings. The FareShare team is made up chiefly of volunteers, with just 2.5 members of paid staff managing the

day-to-day operation. The volunteer team is comprised of 70 people, almost half of whom are or have been homeless, and who all take part in the many varied tasks involved in running the depot.

There is the driving of the two FareShare refrigerated vans, which make the daily collections and deliveries. Volunteers assist each driver in the manual task of loading and offloading.

A food sorting team gathers each afternoon at the depot to execute the quality control on incoming produce, to carry out stock checks, and to complete general administration.

A cleaning team is in charge of ensuring the depot meets the highest standards of cleanliness and hygiene, essential to any food-handling operation.

All these activities provide a hugely valuable opportunity for people to get involved in a fulfilling and engaging activity, helping many to develop a structured and socially integrated lifestyle, and offering exposure to different kinds of work and training in different kinds of skills.

'I've learnt lots of new skills, like introducing new volunteers to the project and looking after them, being myself now one of the most experienced volunteers.'

Richard, volunteer

'I've learnt how to work with others and get on with them, meeting different types of people. I find this difficult sometimes, as I can be quite introverted, so volunteering brings me out of my shell.'

Willie, volunteer

For many, this helps them in turn to stave off the loneliness and boredom of isolation, to overcome associated depression and mental health problems, and the temptations of substance abuse that come with being isolated and feeling down.

'I have been able to cut down on my drinking since I started volunteering at FareShare.'

David, volunteer

'I have been off the drink for nearly five years now, thanks to this place. From the first time I came down here, I could see what it could do for others and for me!'

Jimmy, volunteer

Success stories

The success stories abound, with a number of volunteers going on to full-time employment after a stabilising stint with the project.

Case study

x was encouraged via a Drugs Rehabilitation Project to look at volunteering opportunities with Edinburgh Cyrenians. A year of volunteering gave him purpose to his life and assisted him in his endeavours to get back into a situation where he had structure and purpose in his life. As he grew in confidence, driving the FareShare van about town and carrying responsibility for its payload, he arrived at the stage where he felt he was ready to look for a permanent job again. He is now employed in a full time job with a local Bus Company.

'I would never have been considered for the job had FareShare not trusted me with the van driving. I was able to demonstrate to my future employer that I was able to be responsible and was reliable.'

Not every case ends up in success, but even for those who continue to struggle with addiction, loneliness and unemployment, and have relapses in their progress, the project offers an opportunity for people to get back on their feet again and have another attempt at working towards their goals and aspirations in life. Many volunteers who encounter such setbacks return to the project, a possibility not usually present in the world of employment.

Above all, being involved in a project that supports other people, helps individuals to see they are able to make an important contribution, it endows them with a sense of responsibility and significance, and helps them make the transition from being just the helped to also being the helper in their community.

'I have learnt a whole new job, like nothing I have done before, it's very rewarding. I can see how it helps other people who are in the situation I used to be in.'

Eddy, volunteer

Further information

If you would like to contact Samuel for more information, please email chip@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.