

Nota Bene Luggage porters – homeless people help travellers at Bratislava main railway station



The luggage porters are selected vendors of Nota bene streetpaper, who help people with their bags and suitcases. They are recognizable by nobly uniforms they wear. The luggage porter job helps twice. It helps passengers with heavy luggage overcome the obstacles (long stairs with no lift and escalators) and Nota bene vendors gain personally enriching employment and chance to repay their debts and help others. The porters are employed by NGO Proti prúdu, which publish Nota bene street paper from 2001 and operates other pilot projects in Slovakia in order to help homeless people and work with public prejudices on homelessness.

Homeless people face many challenges. In order to work, they must have adequate housing. In order to be able to pay for it, they need a job to earn money. If they get a job, debt collection process reduces their wage heavily, which often demotivates them to work legally, and forces them to work illegally. They are unable to cover basic needs from the amount of money left after the payroll deductions taken by debt collectors. By law, they have to leave just 118 eur and in Slovakia/Bratislava is an alarming lack of affordable (inexpensive) public rental accommodation - the commercial providers of rooms asks 100-180 eur per month in shared room and shared facilities. Homeless people have dropped out of the social system, they don't take social benefits, but their debt on health insurance is growing and therefore they have right

just to urgent medical care. In order to help our clients to access the medical care and increase the chances of finding a stable job in future, we created supportive part time job scheme – luggage porters - with intensive social work and assistance in negotiating with creditors on instalments and discharge from other debts too, while offering clients a pilot debt pay-off program with innovative matching system. We duplicate every single euro saved by porter from his salary to help the porters in repaying debts mainly on health insurance, fully or partially.

Goals of the project

- to develop working habits, communication and social skills needed to maintain a porter job
- to encourage clients to repay their debts, especially on health insurance, partially or fully according to individual choices and circumstances of the client
- to develop the potential of self-help in the project, building relations among porters and increasing their own capacity - through work in groups led by social workers
- to motivate clients deal with official matters such as registration with the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and finding acceptable solutions to indebtedness
- to improve the perspective of the public's perception of the homelessness issue through positive personal contact of clients with the passengers and by communicating on the issues of employment and debts of homeless people in medias in generally, in the Nota bene street paper, social networks etc...



- to acquire expertise on issues such as employment and deleveraging (pay off debts) of homeless people, that serves as a basis for proposal of legislative changes worked out in cooperation with Pro bono layers group
- to inspire other future projects focusing on similar issues and present the topic at our annual 7th Conference on Homelessness, held in May / June 2015

Project activities

Important milestones so far in the project: to work with motivation of clients (bad experiences with debt-collectors and ex-employers etc.), setting up the pilot phase (number of porters, working hours, contract type) to client/public needs, obey slovak laws and overcoming the possible distrust of public to leave their luggage to homeless people. A very successful press conference and nationwide / foreign media interest accompanied the first working day of 7 men in history-inspired custom porter's uniforms on 8.12.2014.

Luggage carrying and coaching of luggage porters

Luggage porters in pilot phase, up to 28.2.2015, work every Monday, Wednesday and Friday 8:45:00 to 13:15, 40 hrs/month contract. At the beginning, we have chosen less busy times, to let our clients get used to their new job and to keep the street paper vendors job simultaneously. There was a complicated task ahead of them: to launch a completely new service and earn the trust of the people. Porters are supported by social workers directly at the railway station, which coordinates and solves possible problems, while bringing experiences from the clients' work habits into individual and group counselling at the office. Two social workers are in charge. After the initial phase, form 1.3.2015, porters will work at the busier times and porters who managed to agree on instalments with debt collectors.

Individual counselling

The project aims to provide intensive individual social work with every client / porter, which may have a "sensitive" nature (securing income, development of social and working skills, repayment of debts, financial literacy, gaining social contacts and dignity, dealing with conflicts on workplace, teamwork etc)

Group counselling

Group meetings take place for the whole period of the project. Social workers choose different frequency of meetings, while porters do not need to attend the same number of meetings for the same period of time. The topics reflect the needs of the clients (based on information obtained while couching at the train station and in individual counselling) and their social problems.

Teambuilding activities

For supporting mutual cooperation and building a team spirit among porters, free time activities will be used (eg. trips, barbecues, cinema, etc.).

Social assisting (accompaniment)

In situations where the client himself is unable to successfully perform a particular activity himself, he gets the support of the social worker (meeting the health insurance representative to agree on instalments schedules, meeting the debt collectors, doctors, representatives of Labour office etc.)

Activities leading to systematic change in Slovakia

Project gives us necessary expertise for ongoing cooperation we started in 2014 with pro bono lawyers group of Pontis foundation (Advokáti Pro Bono Nadácie Pontis), which aims to systematic change of laws restraining homeless people to integrate into society e.g. law on personal bankruptcy etc. We negotiate the direct involvement of layers into work with our clients and help them deal with debt collection process.



Results

- at least 10 Nota bene street paper vendors employed as porters
- at least 10 individual plans agreed with clients – emphasis put on repaying debts
- at least 3744 hours paid to porters with social and health insurance covered
- several articles in Nota bene on issues of homelessness / debts / employment / health insurance

Financing

The budget for the project is 50 000 eur plus 10 000 eur represents allocation to pilot matching system in our “debt pay-off program”. The overall yearly budget of our organization is +- 460 000 eur. Till 31.10.2015, we have partially secured financing of Luggage porter by project financed by EEA grant scheme (see www.notabene.sk/?project-under-eea-grant-scheme), by individual giving and small grant proposals and decided to allocate further own resources also in year 2016, so that the ongoing social work with heavily indebted clients is successful and the project continues as a new scheme for highly motivated clients. We have meetings with railway company and business partners to negotiate further financing of the project, while setting up also all fundraising options: individual (online www.dobrakrajina.sk/sk/projekt/nosici-batoziny-nota-bene or SMS) and writing grant proposals, thinking also how to make it more self-sustainable. Our organization is securing 60% of the income by the streetpaper, 8% represents assignation of the tax, 8% we receive from the government grant scheme, 4% by advertisement and remaining 20% are covered by individual and company gifts / grants.

Organizational aspect

Civic organization Proti prúdu has been established by three university students of social work on 20. 3. 2001 with aim to help homeless people integrate into society, to work on the prevention of homelessness and positively impact public attitudes towards homeless people.

The main and first project – publishing street paper Nota bene, gives monthly chance to get a decent income, self-esteem and social contacts to 350 homeless people in 17 towns in Slovakia. In Bratislava, we provide by 4 social workers individual social counselling, as well as counselling in groups or through streetwork activities. We offer homeless people access to the computer, internet and telephone, correspondence address, we contribute to cover the costs of prescribed medicaments etc. In cooperation with partners, we also provide lawyer assistance. Since 2001, we have worked with more than 3,500 homeless people in Bratislava.

Thanks to strong vision and financial stability, there are other pilot projects we started and implemented or helped to found in Slovakia there. In 2007-2011 we operated outreach program Streetwork (now it is operated by NGO Vagus who won the Sozial Marie prize in 2014 for this project), we started Theatre Nota bene with homeless people (now it is operated by NGO Homeless Theatre), in 2005-2007 we have provided to Nota bene vendors worksheltered jobs with accommodation in a complex project Krištof. In 2006 we helped to found low-threshold nightshelter St. Vincent Depaul and we are cofounders of Daily center St. Elizabeth from 2011.

We are active in cross-linking organizations working with homeless people, we prepared several proposals for law amendments and managed to change the laws, this year we organized 7th annual international professional conference on homelessness and we have published 3 books based on our experience.

We organize cultural projects to change public perception on homelessness (e.g. Homeless ball.) Our vendors represented Slovakia several times on The Homeless World Cup in football.

We believe it is important to give voice to homeless people. We have published 5 books written by our vendors, invented with them the table game on homelessness, in 2014 we published first illustrated children's fairy tale book on homelessness and our trained vendors go to the discussion in schools to speak on homelessness.