

Speech of Mile Mrvalj, former homeless person and user of library services for the homeless in Zagreb City Libraries

First of all, I would like to emphasise what a great honour it is for me to participate in this gathering, and I would like to greet all the attendees and viewers.

My name is Mile Mrvalj and I am 55 years old. I was homeless for four and a half years and for the past five months have been receiving social assistance with which I can pay the rent for my apartment but I am still part of a high risk group of extremely poor citizens.

I started using library services for the homeless around two years ago. There are a number of reasons why I attend programs for the homeless is the library. First of all, to become more computer literate, and second of all, and the most important reason for me, that I feel like a person who is welcomed with respect and acceptance, that I can talk about my problems and that the coordinator, Sanja Bunic, as well as the volunteers, are willing to help me. I can gladly say that many of my problems were solved thanks to the staff that led this project.

Besides IT knowledge, I also receive information about all the government institutions that I can go to for help, as well as NGOs and other organisations. I like to participate in all programs organised by the library where the homeless person's creativity is encouraged, small exhibitions, poetry evenings, etc.

Unfortunately, the fact that a large number of homeless people do not know about these programs is a big problem, and I think we should work towards spreading this exceptional project to other libraries in Zagreb, Croatia and the entire world. Word of mouth is very important and I found out about this project from my friend, and I have also told many friends about this project, etc. It would be a good idea to hand out leaflets so that the homeless are even better informed.

I would like to say that there is a law in Croatia which regulates the right of the homeless to register their place of residence as the Centre for Social Welfare and shelters for the homeless. However, there are many cases where this law is not put into force. This is why the homeless have to make enormous efforts to persuade the bureaucratic systems to enforce this law. The enormous administrative system causes a large number of obstacles and it is the reason why many homeless people give up and become depressed.

I have to explain that all homeless people live among rubble and in other abandoned places that are under the existential minimum, without electricity, water, a toilet, where rats, moisture and filth are their surroundings. But I have to emphasise that there are two types of homeless people, the first and unfortunately the largest group is made up of homeless people in difficult, depressive states, with a mild or serious

psychological disorder, and unfortunately there are many alcoholics amongst this population. The second group of homeless people are psychologically stable and are not extremely depressed, they want to get out of the social position that they currently find themselves in, and even though they live in very difficult conditions, they accept various small jobs in the black market and take care of their hygiene as much as possible. I have not come across a homeless person in the library that has been so dirty as to be a health threat to other visitors or the staff. It should be emphasized that the only constant source of income for many homeless people is collecting secondary raw materials from waste containers, e.g. plastic, glass, metal, paper. That is why many of them carry plastic and shopping bags with them and I suggest that lockers be made so that homeless people can leave their belongings in them.

I suggest that small mobile libraries be introduced where the homeless can borrow a book for only half an hour or where they can use internet services for half an hour. I think that libraries should not only be institutions where citizens can borrow books or obtain IT knowledge, they should also promote the most important civilizational and humanistic values. In addition, libraries should connect with national and international organisations that work in humanism.

In the end, I would like to ask you to read the UN's Declaration of Human Rights, and if you agree with it, then I call for each person in the world to work and behave in accordance to this declaration.