

Nothing like the promised land

When recently arrived EU migrants become destitute or homeless, they can't turn to the government for help. **Alexandra Topping** meets charities working with London's Polish community that step into the gap

When Wactaw Ziajka was dropped off by an ambulance at the Upper Room, a homeless charity with links to the Polish community in Hammersmith, he was still wearing his hospital pyjamas and dressing gown. Little was known about him apart from the fact that he had had an accident on a building site, and gone through extensive brain surgery and had spent the last three months in hospital. He had no documents, no idea where he lived or what he should do.

Sitting in the offices of the Upper Room, a small, independent church-run charity, the 49-year-old rubs his salt-and-pepper beard. He leans forward, rolls up the leg of his trousers to show that he still has the bright green pyjamas on underneath.

"It helps to keep me warm," he says in Polish.

Ambulance workers took Ziajka to the Upper Room because there was nowhere else for him to go. As a new arrival in Britain he cannot claim housing benefit or job seeker's allowance until he has worked for 12 months, so most hostels – which rely on housing benefit for their income – would not take him in. "If it had not been for this place I don't know what I would have done," he says. "I would have been out on the street."

Ziajka is just one of many migrant workers from EU accession who find themselves destitute and homeless after coming to Britain, says Bruce Marquart, project manager at the Upper Room. "The main problem for A8 migrant workers [from those countries that joined the EU in 2004] is the lack of any kind of safety net," he says. "There is a small but significant number of extreme cases who because of

industrial accidents or the inability to find work are forced into destitution, poverty and suffering."

Today charity leaders will discuss the impact of European migration on the voluntary sector at the NCVO annual conference. Ewa Sadowska, from the Barka Foundation – a Polish charity that helps homeless Poles to return home – will explain that her organisation was asked by desperate charities to help with the situation in London in 2006. "We take people home who are on the border of life and death, if they stayed here they would die on the streets," she says. Alistair Murray from Housing Justice Unleash – who, alongside the Simon community, formed a partnership with Barka in the UK in August 2006 – will argue that the government has a moral responsibility to help those to whom it has opened its borders.

"Small voluntary organisations are having to meet a need because of government policy failure. I am still extremely concerned that people can come here, have no help and if they fall into trouble after six months, it is tough luck," he says. "It is not a moral policy."

Migrants can apply for benefits if they can prove they have been working continuously for 12 months, with no more than a four-week break. But to do so they have to register with the Workers Registration Scheme at a cost of £90, and anecdotal evidence suggests many do not bother. Of 520 people who have used the Upper Room jobs service, only two registered, and they both worked for the charity. Out of 562,000 arrivals into the UK in 2005-06, only 16,000, or 3%, had claimed job seeker's allowance, incapacity benefit or income support within six months of registering for an NI number, according to official figures.

"The Workers Registration Scheme is a stealth tax on migrant workers and another barrier for A8 workers receiving benefits," says Marquart. "There seems to be an official ideology of starvation – these migrants are welcome here to support our economy but as soon as they cost anything at all they are banished."

It is a problem that is not going away, say the charities. Homeless Link, the umbrella group for homeless charities

from central or eastern European countries, in response to its members' growing concern. A similar survey of day centres, outreach teams and night shelters found that 15% of people who used the services were A8 nationals and more than three quarters of organisations were confronted with the problem.

A better life?

Migrant workers are attracted by adverts in their home countries promising work, accommodation and a better life, but it often does not turn out like that says Philip Burke, a trustee of the Simon Community, which provides a street service for homeless people. Often jobs do not materialise or are short term and accommodation is poor, cramped or non-existent. "Being on the streets leaves these people vulnerable to criminal gangs, alcohol abuse and all types of exploitation," he says. He estimates that around a third of the people that the charity helps are now from eastern or central Europe.

Jenny Edwards, chief executive of Homeless Link, says the issue was more difficult to deal with because it happened overnight. "It was a problem from day one," she says. "Day centres in London suddenly discovered this entirely new group." And it continues to have a significant impact on the provision of homeless services in the UK, she adds: "It is inevitable that voluntary agencies step in when there is a need, pending official services noticing there is a problem."

Small charities around the country are trying to bridge the gap, but a lack of funding and the size of the organisations involved mean that provision is far from comprehensive. The Barka Foundation UK repatriates Poles who have become destitute as well as providing advice about everything from building contractors' exams to how to get a bank

account. They also invite members of the Barka Community in Poland, where they have a comprehensive network of social cooperatives, to speak to fellow Poles and persuade them to go home. "There are many reasons people do not want to go home: unfulfilled promises to bring money home, for example. There is a lot of shame," says Sadowska. "People often hope that things will get better."

The East European Advice Centre also gives help with, among other things, housing, immigration law and education and several other homeless agencies have employed Eastern European-language speaking caseworkers.

The Upper Room provides some of the most diverse support in the capital. It launched its jobs club, UR4jobs, in November 2006 and also provides information on living and working in the UK, English classes and bilingual training. It is also running a pilot project with the Polish Psychologists Club providing free counselling in Polish and a movement therapy session for women.

There are signs that the government is listening to the complaints of this small, but vocal, part of the voluntary sector. Calls for a welcome centre and improved information for eastern Europeans arriving in Britain have so far been ignored, but Homeless Link have been commissioned to develop an action plan to reduce levels of rough sleeping among people from Central and Eastern Europe which will be completed in March.

Help cannot come too soon for many of those who are at the Upper Room to get a hot meal. It is a treat tonight: *bigos* made with real Polish sausages. A young man who does not want to be identified says it is his favourite meal, and one that he has not had in the three years he has been in the UK. During that time he has held several jobs and has lived in squats, parks, and now in cramped shared accommodation. At the moment he is living with six other people in a two-room flat. It is not ideal but his friends were homeless, and having been in that situation himself, he could not turn them away. Asked if the UK has lived up to his expectations he pauses for a second, and says: "I didn't think it



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