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ANALYSIS OF TEMPORARY SHELTERS AS A SOLUTION FOR HANDLING HOMELESSNESS IN MEDAN, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Homeless people are a vulnerable group resulting from poverty, urbanization, and socioeconomic inequality in urban areas. The Indonesian government has sought to provide shelters as temporary housing, but existing facilities are often inadequate and have not been integrated with long-term rehabilitation services such as social welfare homes. This situation creates a gap in the system for addressing homelessness, particularly regarding limitations in capacity, uneven distribution of shelters, and a lack of coordination among social agencies. This study aims to analyze the needs and role of a shelter model that combines basic protection, social rehabilitation, and supportive care as a solution to homelessness.

KEYWORDS: Homelessness Shelter, Social Institution, Homeless, Social Rehabilitation, Social Welfare

1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a social issue that persists due to socioeconomic inequality, urban environmental pressures, and limited access to social welfare services. Homelessness also remains a recurring and complex problem in several major cities in Indonesia, particularly in Medan. Although the government has implemented various interventions, including empowerment and social assistance programs, the number of homeless people has not decreased, and some even experience a “circular” situation in which they repeatedly become and leave homelessness. This vulnerable segment of society has long been homeless, meaning they typically have minimal or no access to the most basic human rights, including shelter, health care, education, and food. They are affected by various structural factors, including intergenerational poverty, intergenerational family economic instability, family conflicts, domestic violence, and limited access to employment opportunities. Conversely, rapid urbanization that is not balanced by inclusive housing policies exacerbates the situation, particularly in cities like Medan, which are experiencing rapid population growth. As a social protection program, the Indonesian government has established temporary shelters for vulnerable groups. The Ministry of

Social Affairs defines shelters as “temporary accommodations for street children or vulnerable groups as a means of providing welfare services.”

Furthermore, the number of such shelters in Indonesia is not geographically distributed evenly, and is not commensurate with the number of homeless people in cities. This indicates a gap between policy and practice. Shelters are also rarely linked to long-term social rehabilitation systems, including social housing, Social Rehabilitation Centers, or integrated service centers. Reintegration thus becomes unsustainable. Many homeless individuals also return to homelessness after leaving shelters due to the lack of long-term support. This underscores the need for shelters to be aligned with other social services to enable a cross-sectoral response. Consequently, these individuals return to the streets after leaving shelters. Thus, this cycle demonstrates that, to date, shelters have not functioned optimally in facilitating social rehabilitation. This study seeks to assess the need and urgency of creating integrated shelters that combine the functions of a shelter such as temporary housing with rehabilitation and social guidance capabilities, akin to a social housing facility. This study is centered around Medan as a central metropolis bearing a significant burden of urbanization and extreme socio-economic inequality, mixed poverty, and homelessness Medan stands among the most affected cities in this context.

We also know that the homeless are an “urban vulnerable group.” The international literature on homelessness states that the homeless represent a group with a high level of vulnerability shaped by extreme poverty, urbanization, and social inequality. According to the international literature, the majority of the homeless population tends to experience “chronic exclusion from housing, services, and economic opportunities” (Fitzpatrick, 2018). In Indonesia, studies show how structural pressures and family issues are factors that lead to homelessness. (See also Izudin, 2023). Other studies argue that the homeless are often exposed to social stigma, injury, and marginalization. Maryatun et al. (2023) state in their opinion: “In practice, there are indeed individuals in society who choose to be homeless and to beg.” This highlights homelessness as a complex social issue not a purely social phenomenon requiring organized interventions with complex structural designs, and it must be addressed.

Shelters also serve as a government response. On the one hand, shelters in Indonesia have become a crucial social intervention for addressing vulnerable groups within the government’s housing policy response. As a social welfare service, the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia describes them as temporary housing for street children. Siregar, Ritonga & Ginting (2023) further support this claim, stating that the provision of shelters has effectively helped the city of Medan reduce the presence of homeless people and beggars. The purpose of shelters is to serve as basic temporary protection before individuals can be referred to rehabilitative services. Facilities and infrastructure for managing homelessness under Law No. 13 of 2011 provide the following: social housing, social rehabilitation centers, education and training institutions, social welfare centers, shelters, and facilities. Limitations of shelters in Indonesia. Research findings indicate that the availability of shelters is still far from adequate. This shortage is concretely reflected in several research citations. A study on the

number of shelters nationwide states that 6 shelters would not be sufficient for the homeless, as there cannot be more than 6 shelters nationwide. Additionally, an analysis of social welfare policies notes that funding for shelters is often inadequate. They lack shelters due to a lack of funding, as financial support has not yet been directed toward social welfare agencies. Furthermore, the distribution of housing and shelters tends to be concentrated in a few cities, such as Medan, which has only one shelter (Medan Tuntungan), rather than in areas with high homeless populations. This situation indicates that facilities are not evenly distributed nationwide.

Integrating Shelters and Social Housing as a Model. The integration of shelter and social housing functions has been implemented in several countries abroad. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2021) notes that the concept of a continuum of care can serve as a model for homeless services in various countries. This model provides a seamless continuum of services, ranging from shelter to rehabilitation to social reintegration. The idea is that “continuum of care” social facilities provide not only sleeping quarters but also recovery spaces, educational spaces, skills training spaces, medical services, and support facilities to address the root causes of homelessness. Homelessness centers, as proposed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2020), constitute a continuum of care (CoC) comprising:

- Emergency Shelter. Emergency shelters that provide the most basic necessities: beds, bathrooms, food, and safety. Usually, they can stay for only 1–2 weeks.
- Transitional Housing (Social Rehabilitation). Usually, they can stay for only 3–24 months that provides training, psychological support, and assistance in achieving self-sufficiency.

METHODS

Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study aims to understand the overall picture of how the process of accommodating and sheltering homeless people is carried out at the Rumah Perlindungan Sosial (RPS) established in the city of Medan, as well as how service provision is hindered by infrastructure, facilities, and resource constraints. Given these factors, a qualitative approach was adopted because, as with other qualitative projects, it allows for a detailed examination of the social context and behavioral dynamics of the homeless, as well as the complexity of interactions between RPS staff, service users, and policies that influence the provision of social services. Furthermore, the qualitative approach aids in more accurately understanding treatment patterns, operational barriers, and rehabilitation needs that cannot be explained by numerical data.

The research site is the Rumah Perlindungan Sosial (RPS) of Medan City, located in the Medan Tuntungan subdistrict. This RPS is the only official shelter owned by the Medan City Government, and serves as a temporary shelter for various vulnerable groups of all ages from children, adolescents, and adults to the elderly who have lost their homes or have been rejected by their families. This location was chosen based on its role as the initial response center for the homeless and destitute in Medan, and because this facility reflects the real-world conditions of social service delivery, which faces various

challenges including capacity constraints, human resource limitations, and inter-agency coordination issues.

The analytical strategy in this study focuses on three main areas of analysis: operational service analysis, analysis of the characteristics of homeless individuals and their needs, and structural barriers in the delivery of social services; it encompasses three fields of study. Operational analysis involves examining the flow of care in the management of homeless individuals through a field-based intake process, including identity data collection, preliminary assessment, and temporary assessment, followed by the return of the homeless individual to their place of origin or referral for further assistance. Characteristic analysis pertains to various contexts of homelessness, such as age, socioeconomic status, street-living patterns, and basic needs. Structural barrier analysis covers the identification of challenges faced by RPS in providing sustainable services, facility limitations, and a lack of coordination among government agencies. Document analysis was informed by shelter management guidelines from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Medan City Social Services Department's annual report, and RPS's internal operational documents. The document analysis aimed to understand the policy framework, the workflow for individuals with social welfare issues, and the role of the agency in carrying out rehabilitative functions.

A literature review was conducted to establish theoretical parameters for the analysis of homelessness management, international shelter models, and the continuum of care concept, which served as a framework and starting point for integrated social services. This literature also helped identify best practices in integrating shelters with post-discharge social rehabilitation from other countries with social reform initiatives. The initial investigative process includes problem identification and the establishment of research areas regarding the performance of shelter services in the city of Medan. Subsequently, secondary data will be collected and field context obtained through information gathered from researcher survey responses. Thematic analysis involves linking field observations with theory and policy regarding responses to homeless individuals. This analysis aims to identify service delivery systems, service gaps, and structural barriers to care, such as a lack of professional staff, insufficient rehabilitative facilities, and the disassociation of regional agencies. The final stage of this research consists of compiling findings from the analysis, which establish that an integrated shelter model is necessary one that must go beyond emergency services and include sustainable rehabilitation and social empowerment. This combination led to the development of conceptual recommendations tailored to field conditions and situated within the social context of the City of Medan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings at the RPS in Medan indicate that this facility serves as a temporary shelter for various age groups ranging from children, adolescents, and adults to the elderly who have lost their homes or been separated from their families.

Table 1: Annual summary of homeless people

Year	Homelessnes ss
2017	221
2018	276
2019	242
2020	372
2021	414
2022	249

The RPS in Medan is the only official shelter operating in the city, making it the primary point of temporary care for the homeless and others facing social welfare issues. Data indicates that the number of homeless individuals increased from 2018 to 2022, as shown in Table 1, and field observations reveal that the facility is quite overcrowded, consistent with the large number of service recipients. Based on resident admission and discharge data compiled by the RPS, 218 homeless individuals were accommodated, with the largest number 37 people coming from Medan Amplas. This data indicates that the distribution of homeless people in Medan City is uneven and that there is a concentration in specific socio-economic areas.

The intake process for residents begins with identity registration and background verification. According to Ms. Juni, one of the RPS staff members, identification is typically conducted through self-reporting and biometric checks, such as iris scans, to ensure identity matches when homeless individuals are returned to their families. However, in practice, many homeless individuals provide false information regarding their addresses and family circumstances, making the tracing process difficult. Some of them are even found wandering the streets again despite having previously been returned to their families. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Munder et al. (2020), who noted that the high rate of relapse among homeless individuals in various countries is attributed to a lack of family support, social pressure, as well as the instability of their mental and economic conditions.

The interview results also revealed that RPS staff face a number of challenges in dealing with homeless individuals. One of the main challenges is that the behavior of homeless individuals differs significantly from that of the general public, particularly for those who have experienced trauma, substance dependence, or have lived on the streets for a long time. According to Ms. Juni,

understanding their behavioral patterns requires a specialized approach, while staff are often not equipped with in-depth psychosocial training. Additionally, there are cases where families refuse to take back their family members, viewing them as an economic burden or due to unresolved family conflicts. This highlights the lack of social support, which is a key factor in successful reintegration, as emphasized by Wong et al. (2021), who note that social reintegration requires active involvement from families and social networks to prevent homeless individuals from returning to the streets.

The next issue concerns the limited scope of services provided. According to Ms. Juni, RPS staff lack the authority or capacity to provide follow up services such as job training, economic assistance, or long-term psychological rehabilitation. Yet the majority of the homeless individuals housed there are of working age and require skills training to become self-sufficient. This limitation arises because the social services department does not work in coordination with the labor, health, and education departments, nor with non-governmental organizations. This situation aligns with Sahdan's (2020) findings, which note that issues concerning the homeless in Indonesia generally remain unresolved because service-providing institutions lack a continuum of care system, functioning instead merely as temporary shelters.

The continuum of care concept emphasizes that the process of addressing homelessness must encompass the stages of outreach, temporary shelter, recovery, empowerment, and social reintegration (Hopper, 2019). However, research findings indicate that the Medan RPS is only capable of addressing the first two stages: outreach and temporary shelter. The lack of follow-up services causes residents to face the same vulnerabilities again after being discharged. This is what prevents the cycle of homelessness from ever truly ending, as noted by Ms. Juni that some residents who have been discharged "often return" because their socioeconomic conditions have not changed significantly.

From the perspective of space management, the findings of the observation indicate that the RPS facility has functioned as a relatively adequate emergency shelter, but has not yet supported rehabilitative needs. The sleeping quarters are communal, there is no optimal separation by age, and facilities for daily activities remain limited. These conditions highlight the limitations of the architectural design of social services, which should not only function as a shelter but also as a space for psychological and social recovery. This aligns with the study by Parsell & Watts (2017), which emphasizes that the quality of space within a shelter can influence levels of comfort, emotional stability, and an individual's readiness to undergo the rehabilitation process.



Figure 1: Zonning concept of emergency shelter and social rehabilitation if into a single facility

Therefore, in response to this issue, why not incorporate the functions of an emergency shelter and social rehabilitation into a single facility that serves as both a rehabilitation center and a temporary shelter. This way, when the families of homeless individuals refuse to take them back, they can immediately receive mental health training and skills to live independently in society. Thus, this design serves as a solution to reduce homelessness in society.



Figure 1: Zonning concept of emergency shelter and social rehabilitation if into a single facility

In addition, the data indicates that RPS must accommodate residents from diverse backgrounds within the same facility, resulting in highly complex social dynamics. The process of adaptation among residents does not always go smoothly, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly. Limited spatial zoning and a lack of structured activity areas have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. From a service perspective, RPS staff also face a heavy workload because the number of workers is not proportional to the number of residents, while the complexity of each individual's case is quite high. These conditions highlight the need to increase the ratio of social workers, provide training in psychosocial competencies, and strengthen coordination among agencies.

Overall, the research findings indicate that the system for managing homelessness at the RPS in Medan City remains focused on temporary shelter and does not yet include the continuum of care required to address the root causes of homelessness. Limited facilities, a lack of family support, minimal cross-sectoral interventions, and the absence of long-term empowerment programs are the primary factors

causing homeless individuals to frequently return to the streets after leaving the RPS. Given these conditions, integrating the functions of shelters and social welfare centers becomes relevant as a more comprehensive service model, capable of providing both temporary housing and sustainable social rehabilitation, mental health, life skills education, and job preparation programs. These research findings underscore the need for a transformation in social architecture design that not only provides shelter but also supports more effective recovery and social reintegration processes.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the provision of social protection services at the Rumah Perlindungan Sosial (RPS) in Medan plays a crucial role as the frontline in addressing homelessness, particularly as a temporary shelter that provides basic protection, meets daily needs, and facilitates family identification through iris scanning. Nevertheless, the current service model indicates that the RPS's operations remain at the initial care stage and are not yet supported by a sustainable continuum of care mechanism. This is evident from field findings that many homeless individuals, after being reunited with their families, return to the streets due to a lack of post-reintegration support and limited social support from their families.

Additionally, data on the intake and discharge of homeless individuals at the Tunttungan RPS shows that during a single period, 218 people were admitted to the facility, with the largest number of individuals originating from Medan Amplas, totaling 37 people. This figure indicates that the issue of homelessness is not merely an individual problem but a social phenomenon linked to regional economic conditions, family networks, and the functionality of the residential environment. These findings reinforce the view that the homeless constitute a vulnerable group requiring multidimensional interventions, not merely temporary housing.

Interviews with RPS staff also revealed the significant challenges they face in dealing with residents. The behavior of homeless people is often unpredictable; some provide false identities during the registration process, while others are rejected by their families, causing them to return to the streets and re-enter the system. Staff also face structural barriers due to limited authority and resources, such as the inability to provide employment opportunities for homeless individuals of working age without the involvement of other agencies, such as the Department of Labor. This situation demonstrates that the problem of homelessness persists not because of a lack of initial intervention, but due to the absence of an interconnected social service system across agencies.

Overall, this study concludes that the RPS in Medan is at a critical juncture in the homeless response chain, but its functions have not yet been able to address the long-term stages of rehabilitation and social reintegration. The causes include limited facilities, a lack of multidisciplinary support staff, the uneven distribution of shelters in Medan City, and the absence of the inter-agency collaboration needed to build a service system based on the continuum of care concept. Therefore, it is crucial for local governments and policymakers to develop integrated service models—such as the continuum of care

concept—that not only provide temporary shelter but also rehabilitate, empower, and prepare homeless individuals for reintegration into society with sustained support. Through the strengthening of an integrated social service system, the RPS has the potential to become a more effective social rehabilitation center capable of comprehensively addressing homelessness issues.

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