

Pull-out quote: “The growing role of digital technologies and the dematerialization of administrative procedures are transforming the practices and missions of outreach social workers and changing the needs of homeless people”

The project Maraud’In or the use of digital tools by Outreach Social Workers in order to promote access to rights for the Homeless

This article deals with the digital tools used in the Maraud’In Project developed by the Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité (FAS), a French Federation which gathers more than 870 structures fighting against social exclusion of various public and notably homeless people.

Considering the growing part of digital technologies in today’s society, it necessarily has a major impact on the inclusion of individuals living in extremely precarious conditions. Indeed, according to the French Digital Agency authority, 13 million French people are a long way from the digital world.

Moreover, the growing role of digital technologies and the dematerialization of administrative procedures are transforming the practices and missions of outreach social workers and changing the needs of homeless people.

As a matter of fact, outreach social workers are using more and more digital tools, such as smartphones, to support people living in extremely precarious conditions to access their rights. Assisting them in their administrative procedures represents an increasing part of their working time. This practices’ transformation of social work is also linked to the closure of the French public administrations’ information desks that are dedicated to the assistance of users of public services which results from the dematerialization of public services policies.

As explained above, dematerialization has an impact on the inclusion of individuals living in extremely precarious conditions, including those who are homeless. Contrary to common belief, homeless people are not disconnected from digital technologies. Indeed, a study by Solinum, a French association, finds that 91% of respondents have a cell phone and 71% have a smartphone, but disparities in access to and use of digital technology remain.¹ In particular, the study shows that more than half of homeless people never do their administrative procedures online (62%). These problems were observed in the national FAS/FNSS Maraudes study.²

On that basis, the FAS decided to build a project, called “Maraud’IN” helping homeless people to be included in this digitalised world with the support of the AFNIC Foundation (foundation of the French agency dealing with domain name of websites ending by “.fr”) and the MedNum (a French cooperative gathering actors of digital mediation).

¹ National study led by Solinum in 2018 about the Homeless and the digital world notably regarding equipment, uses and digital skills of homeless people : <https://www.solinum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Pr%C3%A9carit%C3%A9-connect%C3%A9-Etude-31-Signets.pdf>

² National study on social round-up on homelessness led by the “Fédération des Samu Sociaux “(French Federation of Social Emergency Services) and the FAS of the 12th and 13th of January 2021: <https://www.federationsolidarite.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FNSS-FAS-Etude-nationale-maraudes-2021-Complete.pdf>

The project began in January 2021 and is intended to last 2 years. In 2021, Maraud'IN is in its experimentation phase, conducted through six teams of outreach social workers (called Maraudes in French) which are members of the FAS's network. In 2022, it will be extended through 10 more teams of the FAS's network.

The project pursues two main purposes: helping the outreach social workers to acquire digital equipment and training them in digital mediation practices.

Concerning the equipment, the outreach social workers need to use digital tools in order to assist homeless people in their administrative procedures and to help them in connecting with the world. To this end, they will be provided with electronics tablets and smartphones.

Each tablet will include access to a toolbox hosted on a platform which has been built by MedNum. This toolbox aims to reinforce training of the outreach social workers in digital mediation and to help them in assisting the homeless people to access their rights.

In the first part of the project, many resources related to digital mediation are provided. It will help the outreach social workers to learn how to support the homeless in their use of digital tools as creating an email address or use internet to inform themselves. In the part dedicated to access to rights, the resources are classified by rights categories. The main categories are, for example, the access to accommodation, to healthcare and to food aid. In each category, the relevant public services website will be listed as well as the useful places where the homeless can find assistance. On this last point, the toolbox references the Soliguide, created by the French association Solinum, which is an online platform that references useful and accessible places and services for people in difficulty.

In this context, the most important equipment of the outreach social workers are the tablets. Besides, this is the most accessible device for helping in administrative procedures or in researching information.

The project is also a means through which to encourage the use of digital devices by people experiencing homelessness. Maraud'IN aims to help homeless people to become autonomous in using digital tools. On this basis, some of the equipment will be placed at the disposal of homeless people, notably smartphones and charging stations for electronic devices. As studies have shown, the smartphone is the device that people experiencing homelessness feel most comfortable using for many purposes (researching information, chatting through social networks, contacting relatives, etc.). Moreover, electronic tablets will also sometimes be used by those people who are the most autonomous in using digital tools.

Concerning the training of the outreach social workers in digital mediation, the project aims to teach outreach social workers good practices for supporting homeless people to access to their rights by accomplishing their administrative procedures. The training will be handled by professionals of digital mediation. It will allow the outreach social workers to handle the digital tools and, above all, the toolbox.

The conception of this project underlines how the digital resources of outreach social workers are key in ensuring digital inclusion for people living in extremely precarious conditions. Indeed, it appears to be fundamental as the outreach social workers have the knowledge to support the homeless people

with dignity in various aspects and notably access to their rights. This said, successful digital inclusion of homeless people implies creating links between the voluntary sector and the digital mediation sector teaching the good practices in using digital tools to outreach social workers (such as protecting privacy of the Homeless). With the Project Maraud'IN, the FAS and all its sponsors believe that it will contribute to strengthen this link!



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