

# Rebuilding lives: How Taipei's homeless help themselves, others

Tuesday 3 September 2024, by [LAI Sunny](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2024).

**The streets in Taipei's Wanhua District tended to be calm on weekday mornings, but sounds of boxes being moved and lively chatter from an elderly woman's house on one Thursday interrupted the usual quiet.**

"Oh no, the pee has gone everywhere," exclaimed a man in his 70s after accidentally knocking over a chamber pot in the home of a woman who needed help with tidying.

The man surnamed Chen (陳) has been cleaning houses for elderly and disabled people since August 2022, when he was one of Taiwan's 3,000 registered homeless people.

## A gig that pairs up those in need

Launched in 2020 by Taiwan's social enterprise Do You a Flavor, the "Helping Hand Work Team" connects mainly homeless people in Taipei with disadvantaged residents who struggle with hoarding issues and need to clear out their homes.

Project manager Chen Ying-chieh (陳瑛潔) explained to CNA in a recent interview that the matchups gave homeless people a chance to earn a living.



*Chen Ying-chieh, the project manager of "Helping Hand Work Team" oversees the Thursday morning clean up. CNA photo Aug. 31, 2024*

The team handled around seven to eight three-hour gigs every week, she said, adding that everyone who cleaned was paid NT\$900 (US\$28.1) per shift in cash.

"Many homeless individuals need cash," as they often had no money on hand, or their bank accounts

were frozen, she noted.

## Homeless stereotypes



*Chen and his colleague (in red) are both members of social enterprise Do You a Flavor's "Helping Hand Work Team," which helps disadvantaged residents to clear out their homes. CNA photo Aug. 31, 2024*

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Chen, who has cleaned over 100 homes so far, said he is now fearless in the face of countless cockroaches. His biggest worry, however, is being wrongly accused of theft.

A rare but painful incident for him was when NT\$3,000 went missing from a resident's home and the team was blamed. "Being accused of being a thief while working was very uncomfortable," he recalled.

Maybe the resident just assumed homeless people were likely to steal valuable items, he added.

## Back to work hurdles

Chen told CNA that he still felt "comfortable" after filling 21 bags with trash from the elderly woman's house in Wanhua.

The cash he received from the job, along with the pay from a few other casual jobs, enabled him to start renting a home in January 2023.

While he might have succeeded in turning his life around, not everyone he worked with could manage so well.



*Chen and his colleague pile up 21 bags of trash from the elderly woman's house they were tasked with clearing out. CNA photo Aug. 31, 2024*

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Chen Ying-chieh noted that many homeless individuals had no problem diving in and diligently cleaning homes, but their life experiences might have impacted their communication skills.

"They might lack confidence and feel that no one listens to them, which hinders their ability to negotiate with employers," she said, adding that regular sessions were held to give them a chance to discuss any problems they had and build up their confidence so they could adapt better to the workplace.

In a different corner of Wanhua, another story of transformation unfolds.

Tung (□), a man in his 60s originally from Hualien County, ended up in Taipei around nine years ago after his family home had to be sold because of financial issues.

While jobless and homeless, he would often spend his nights drinking alcohol in Bangka Park and then sleep on the grass in the day, he said.

## **Get up and go**

Last summer, Tung's life took a turn when he saw a fellow homeless person working as a "City Navigator," helping tourists find their way around Taipei Main Station.

Intrigued, he applied for the job with the Taipei City Employment Services Office. Soon he was kitted out in the program's signature uniform, ready to help tourists with directions to restaurants and attractions near Longshan Temple Station.

The "City Navigator" program, which began in 2019, aims to help homeless people gain confidence and build up skills needed for the workplace. They work in and around Taipei Main Station and Longshan Temple Station — two places frequented by tourists.



*City Navigator Tung (left) and his colleague hold signs with directions to nearby attractions outside Longshan Temple Station in Taipei on a Thursday morning. CNA photo Aug. 31, 2024*

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Tung said he currently works four hours a day, five days a week, and earns around NT\$3,500 every week. He hoped to save enough money to rent a place to live soon.

Having worked as a “City Navigator” for more than nine months, he said the job prompted him to quit drinking as it was important to have a clear mind.

“If you drink alcohol, your brain will be scrambled and you will struggle to give correct directions,” he added.

Tung’s change did not go unnoticed. One day, a Wanhua resident saw him in the yellow uniform and remarked, “You’re different now, you have a job.”

That interaction was deeply meaningful for Tung.

## **Comprehensive support**

Wang Ding-hung (王定興), a supervisor at the office’s Wanhua Employment Service Desk, said that the program can help boost the self-esteem of homeless people because the uniforms and the assistance they provide help them temporarily escape their homeless identities.

“Instead of seeing themselves as someone dirty sleeping on the streets, we transform them into clean and capable navigators who are able to help others,” Wang said, noting that this build-up of confidence can help pave the way for their return to the job market.



*Wang Ding-hung, a supervisor at the Wanhua Employment Service Desk at Taipei City Employment Services Office prepares for another day of helping the most vulnerable people in the district. CNA photo Aug. 31, 2024*

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The office also provides employment assistance to other homeless individuals, including matching them with job vacancies and providing necessary resources, Wang noted.

For example, the office provides a bathroom for them to take showers and clean clothes before job interviews, he said.

## Getting back on their feet

According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, Taiwan had 2,934 registered homeless individuals in 2023, a figure that has remained steady since 2019.

A homeless man in his 50s surnamed Chen (陳) said he appreciated the services provided at the office.

“We need opportunities for people who genuinely want to get back on their feet,” noted the man who has been living on the streets for four years.

Based on office data, it matched job vacancies for homeless individuals 653 times in 2023. A total of 359 people were subsequently hired, mostly in cleaning or security roles, earning an average monthly salary of NT\$27,000.

Around 60 percent of homeless individuals in Taiwan are employed, but it does not mean they have stable, long-term jobs, said Yu Szu-hsien (余士賢), an adjunct assistant professor at the Department of Social Work at Soochow University.



*Yu Szu-hsien, an adjunct assistant professor at the Department of Social Work at Soochow University is passionate about helping Taipei's homeless population slot back into society. CNA photo Aug. 31, 2024*

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He explained that maintaining stable employment was difficult for many homeless people. They faced specific challenges from living on the streets, such as not having a regular place to stay, which often led them to “work for a few days, stop for a while, and then start working again.”

While some might stereotype homeless people as lazy and dirty, Yu said the situation is normally because they lack resources rather than a reflection of their efforts.

“Homeless people work very hard and are extremely determined to improve their situation, which might be hard for the public to imagine,” Yu noted.

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**Sunny Lai**

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