

Peer Involvement in the Czech Republic.

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The Czech mental health care system has been struggling with its outdated structure and poorly functioning services. Mainly a preponderance of inpatient beds in big asylums, a lack of community based services and inadequate coordination among different service providers.

In such a fragmented system, the lack of common principles or a basic philosophy of care is obvious. The main goals of the two projects, which were delivered by the Centre for Mental health Care Development in 2012 – 2014 were to support the orientation of recovery and the involvement of peer specialists into mental health teams and in the education of future professionals.

The projects involved 20 people with lived experience currently recovering from severe mental health conditions, who were trained and employed part time.

In the first project, ten people were trained and hired as peer specialists and became regular members of mental health teams in 10 regions. As part of their preparation for this role the peer

specialists, they all went on study visits in the Netherlands. During these visits they established contact with and gained a greater understanding of their role from experienced peer specialists working in FACT teams. The project also supported the members of the professional care teams through the initial phases. This focused on their values and motivation to engage peer specialists within their teams. Throughout the project both groups of stakeholders were provided with ongoing support and coaching. That helped the teams to maximize the benefits of peer integration.

The outcomes of this project were very encouraging. Firstly, nine out of ten involved mental health teams decided to prolong the employment of peer specialists beyond the timeframe of the project. Secondly, it was found that the peer specialists were not more on sick leave compared to other workers and the time spent in direct contact with clients was the same. Finally their fellow workers recognised their positive contribution to the culture and values of the care teams.

In the second project, further ten people with lived experience attended a specially designed course which enabled them to teach pre-graduate students at universities. Subsequently they created four 6-hour courses on *Recovery, Stigma and discrimination, Self management* and *Peer programmes* in cooperation with experienced teachers and mental health specialists. Peer specialists from the UK and the Netherlands were involved in the development of the courses.

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These courses were offered to students in social work and psychology programs at two participating universities in Prague. The students who attended the courses highly valued them for bringing new insights and a unique perspective to them. At both universities, the process of inclusion of these courses into the regular curricula has begun.

These two projects were successful. Both the practitioners in the mental health teams and students at universities reported positive and unique contributions made by the peer specialists. At the same time the peer specialists made a remarkable

progress in their own recovery, improvement of their social status and an increase of self-confidence. We are convinced that the results of these projects bring a new hope for positive changes to the mental health care system in the Czech Republic.

Currently we further develop peer programmes in the Czech Republic. If you would like to get in contact, don't hesitate and let us know. We are keen to cooperate internationally. cmhcd@cmhcd.cz

