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## **VOLUNTEERING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**

### **POLICY POSITION OF MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE**

**- Issued on the occasion of Mental Health Europe's debate in the  
European Parliament on 17 November 2010 -**

#### **Volunteering and its impact on social inclusion**

Voluntary work is usually defined as "Work undertaken in an organised context, without obligation or payment, for the benefit of others or the society". According to a Special Eurobarometer on the European Social Reality, three out of ten Europeans claim to be engaged in voluntary work.<sup>1</sup> This rate varies strongly in the different European countries, with a high figure in for example Austria, Germany, the Scandinavian countries and the UK, while in the new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe volunteering is often not as well developed. An important obstacle sometimes is a lack of information on volunteering possibilities.

Volunteering activities have been increasing in recent years. This is caused by a number of changes in society, such as on the one hand the ageing of the population with an enlarged need for elderly services, and on the other hand early retirement and an overall decrease in working time gives people more free time, allowing them to engage more in voluntary work. Also due to the current economic and financial crisis which is resulting in budget cuts for services which were traditionally taken care of by the state, more people volunteer since the need for care and support is more present than ever.

The year 2011 has been designated by the European Union as the European Year of Volunteering. In the European Union, almost 100 million citizens of all ages invest their time, talents and capital and make a positive contribution to their community by volunteering in youth organisations, schools, hospitals, care facilities, cultural or sports activities etc. Many volunteers help out in the mental health field and give valuable support to the reintegration process of people with mental health problems. Mental Health is and has always been a less attractive and not very well developed sector for voluntary engagement in many EU countries. Voluntary work is an act of solidarity. Special skills and a certain degree of sensitivity are required. Volunteers in mental health mainly work in telephone help lines, hospitals and community care services, aid to victims of crimes and refugees, but also as buddies or accompanying

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<sup>1</sup> Special Eurobarometer Survey 273 66.3, February 2007: European Social Reality

groups of people with mental health problems on trips and holidays or providing logistical support to groups or associations of people with mental health problems.

People who are suffering from mental health problems themselves often take up volunteer positions which can be very beneficial for their own inclusion in the community. The impact is especially positive where a participation in the labour market is not possible for a certain period. Through volunteering, they can intensify interpersonal contacts and relations and prevent further social isolation. Volunteering gives the volunteer the opportunity to bring in his/her specific social skills and at the same time allows them to widen their own competences and to grow personally. This can have a very positive impact on the social inclusion of a person who has been suffering from mental health problems. Friendship without prejudice and partnership have great importance for coping with everyday life.

## **Conclusions**

Voluntary social engagement is an important resource for preservation and further development of the community. Voluntary work is an important component for shaping and improving Europe's Social Reality and the Social Cohesion of Europe's Society of today and tomorrow.

Volunteers can be valuable partners for people with mental health problems. People engaged in voluntary work create and achieve new skills and capabilities like leadership and organizational expertise. They also widen their own social networks. Voluntary engagement is therefore a fundamental instrument of the Lifelong Learning Strategy in the EU and is improving Europe's Social Reality of the future.

Volunteering in mental health is extremely important; according to the World Health Organisation one out of four persons face some form of mental health problems at least once during their lives. Therefore it is essential to ensure that the frameworks for facilitating involvement in voluntary activities in this field are taken forward by policy-makers.

If voluntary work shall fulfil its different challenges, it needs acceptance and recognition in society as well as support and encouragement from policy-makers by providing an appropriate infrastructure and financial support for all actors.

## **Mental Health Europe Recommendations for Policy-Makers**

Recommendations addressed to European Union policy-makers:

- Create a positive framework for education and training of volunteers to build up the competencies of volunteers
- Adopt minimal quality standards for voluntary work in a European quality framework for volunteering
- Make use of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for exchange and dissemination of best practices between EU Member States

- Adopt mechanisms to encourage EU Member States to put in place legal measures that protect volunteers
- Encourage and finance research on the impact of volunteering on the mental health and social inclusion of people with mental health problems
- Broaden programmes for volunteering so that they are not limited to specific age groups or areas of activity only. Widen the programmes to support volunteering among all age groups and in all areas of activity

Policy Recommendations addressed to policy-makers on the national level:

- Use the momentum of the European Year 2011 of Volunteering to promote volunteering by pointing out the different areas of engagement and the valuable impact volunteering has on and within society
- Organise and finance training and supervision of volunteers working in the mental health field
- Adopt measures that protect volunteers on a legal basis, such as through insurances etc.
- Encourage networking and cooperation between voluntary organizations and the related sectors such as education, research, government, local authorities, and make use of synergies
- Raise awareness among citizens of volunteering possibilities and mobilise individuals and civil society in all European countries to become engaged and active in giving support to people suffering from mental health problems to participate in societal life.

#### **About Mental Health Europe**

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.

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