

Template article WP1

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Country name: Iceland

Organization name: Hlutverkasetur

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Introduction

Hlutverkasetur is an open activity center for adults. Hlutverkasetur has hired over 40 Peer Support Workers (PSW) since 2009. Today there are six PSW working at the center, most of them part-time. The main purpose of the center is to gain or find meaningful roles, fighting stigma and isolation and promote mental health and well being. It offers peer support, helps individuals to influence their environment and participate in society. The center is a private company, non-profit, with free admission, sponsored by the government, the social security fund and the city of Reykjavík. Other staff members are occupational therapists and artists. Those attending the center are mostly individuals with history of mental health challenges with different backgrounds. People decide themselves what they do at Hlutverkasetur. Some come, simply to drink a cup of coffee, others to attend a wide range of seminars and workshops. Most of the classes are open, in the sense that people can take part when they are up to it.

The status of PSW/Peer Supporters in Iceland

Before 2023 there wasn't a formal training or education in Iceland to become a PSW. Traustur Kjarni, a non-profit organization, provided the first courses according to the Intentional Peer Support framework. Intentional Peer Support (IPS) is about opening new ways of seeing, thinking and doing and examining how to make things possible. They offer training programs designed to equip individuals and organizations with the skills and insights that are necessary to foster transformative relationships. Each program is developed with the core principles of IPS and aims to enhance personal growth, strengthen community connections and promote an environment of mutual support.

Based on Shery Mead's book, *Intentional Peer Support: An Alternative Approach*, Core Training is a 40-hour introduction to a new innovative framework. In a highly interactive environment, participants learn the tasks and principles of IPS, examine assumptions about who they are and explore ways to create relationships in which power is negotiated, co-learning is possible and support goes beyond traditional notions of "service." IPS is all about opening new ways of seeing, thinking and doing. Once participants complete the Core Training and begin practicing IPS in their relationships, lots of questions emerge - most commonly, "How do I make this stuff work in my particular environment?" A 24-hour Advanced Training course is offered to take IPS practice a step further, by playing out the principles and tasks using real-life scenarios, heightening self-reflection, enhancing ways of building mutual connections and sustaining the practice. Advanced Trainings are for anyone who has completed a Core Training or needs a brief IPS refresher and are tailored to fit the organizations or the community's needs.

Train the Trainer is a 5 days in-person / 11 days virtual course. It is a hands-on seminar designed to prepare and designate IPS Organizational Trainers.

These trainers can then teach the Core Content within their own organizations, helping to ensure the fidelity and sustainability of IPS.

The role of Hlutverkasetur, is that the center is in close collaboration with Traustur Kjarni. Hlutverkasetur often host their courses, their meetings and facilitate a bi-weekly study group to further incorporate the ISP model. The founder of Hlutverkasetur is also a mentor for many of the PSW projects, writes articles published by the media online, and participates in radio programs to educate the public of this new profession and its importance. The founder has also attended many meetings with stakeholders and the Minister of health and Minister of labour and social affairs how this approach is in line with their own government policy.

How are PSW viewed in said country?

PSW is increasingly viewed, for the most part, as a necessary component in effective mental health services in Iceland. However, development and funding are currently lacking. For example, there is willingness from the leadership of mental health services at Landspítali University Hospital to involve more peers in their practice, but funding remains an unresolved issue.

Hired PSW are working alongside other staff in most of the settings. Their role is seen as supporters and experts with lived experience. They work mostly public and are paid workers in the mental health sector. However, in prison settings they are mostly volunteers. There are around 140 that have taken the Core course, a few have taken the Advanced and the Train the Trainer one. Around 15 PSW are now working in paid work, mostly part-time. They are associated with the public sector and work in hospital settings, community outreach programs, the Recovery College and low threshold activity centers like Hlutverkasetur.

Any changes in the near future?

Until now most of the trainers come from abroad. In the next years more teachers will be locals. Also, the aim is to offer courses online and in other languages than Icelandic or English. People living outside of the main city in Iceland can now take courses, some have been held in the west and north of Iceland.

The group that is working together in the Nordplus projects, mapping what each country is at concerning PSW gives a good overview. It will also give groundwork and knowledge what PSW means and the possibilities that this kind of work holds.

Politicians are coming aware of this new profession and have e.g. supported financially an education at Yale university. A program for recovery and mental health called 'LET(s) Lead Transformational Leadership Academy' was born out of the efforts of Yale PRCH staff, most of whom identified as leaders with lived experience. Yale PRCH faculty created a course that provides emerging leaders

with lived experience knowledge and opportunities for leadership skill development, including a mentorship with a current leader(s) in the field. Potential fellows enter the program with an idea for a transformational change project that targets the community in which they live or with whom they work or the behavioral health system itself. Through knowledge acquisition and mentorship, these emerging leaders can strengthen and enhance their projects before bringing them to their communities.

Sixteen pupils from Iceland are now taking the LET(s) Lead course. Their projects vary from making a podcasts, working with young people, creative work, supporting inmates and immigrants, education in rural areas, etc. There are many small projects which PSW are leading now or will be leading in the future, like working placement and support, peer respite/peer farm and crisis coffeehouse.

Conclusion

The last two years have given many peers hope. They can see themselves working in areas in which their experience can make a difference, be valued and demand for. The Nordplus project fits well in this new set of thinking and gives a broader perspective. People from the Nordic and Baltic countries are working together, finding new paths and learning from each other. It's of great value to know what the other countries are doing and learn from those who have experience in this field.

Literature

<https://www.hlutverkasetur.is/>

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