

Czech delegation visits Bergen, Norway and brings back inspiration for mental health care.

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I love finding out about towns and cities where locals have found ground-breaking solutions to common problems. Inspiring places like that can be found all around the world. In the Czech Republic, several municipalities have come up with interesting projects for eco-friendly energy management that don't involve pollution. One example is the White Carpathian village of Hostětín, which was even visited by King Charles III of the United Kingdom. Other European cities, such as Freiburg in Germany (Vauban district), have reduced traffic congestion by encouraging other modes of travel, while maintaining the same level of mobility for local residents.

As a person with experiences of mental health problems, I was excited that there are also places offering inspiration in terms of care for people with mental health challenges. Apart from Trieste, known to people thanks to a film documentary, there is the very interesting city of Bergen in the western part of Norway. I came to know Bergen through my participation in a project under the Polytechnic University of Jihlava. Thanks to this project, I could also visit the city in person and now I'm happy to share my take-aways from the expedition.

Our impressions of Bergen's social services

We were a group of several people with lived experiences who visited Bergen for a week. Our experiences with this city and its health and social services were very pleasant and emotional. The facilities we saw were often very spacious and designed to feel modern and comfortable. We were able to get a glimpse of the health and social workers' lives and share some insights of our own as well. We also met a lot of peer support workers. Music was made on several occasions – we listened to originals and covers played by the service users, like gentle folk songs

and hard rock tracks by Judas Priest. In return, our colleague Tibor played his song with a light mystical touch to the Norwegians. We tried peanut soup – as a big fan of peanuts I was surprised I didn't know such a delicacy existed!

We found some aspects of local life in Bergen particularly interesting. For example, the users of the Bergen services aren't called "patients" as is customary in the Czech Republic, but "members". The Norwegians we met also put great emphasis on the healing power of music in mental health care. Music rehearsal rooms were a frequent feature, and we were told locals can study music therapy at university when they wish to.

In Bergen, people with mental health problems are not hidden away from the public; they are part of the local community's daily life. During an excursion to ALF, an organisation that mediates jobs for people with mental illness, I learned that we were actually staying in a hotel run as a social enterprise. The reception, breakfast, afternoon tea and daily cleaning were mostly in the hands of ladies who had previously struggled with mental health problems themselves. We bought souvenirs at the local ALF shop that sells products handmade in supported workshops. We even met the same people in health and social services and then later on in local bars.

The road is long, but we can get there too

Compared to the Czech context, there were many peer support workers in the facilities. But this had not always been the case. Audun Pedersen, senior advisor, told us how he and his colleagues had to fight in the past to have the city government recognize peer support workers as an enrichment of care given by professionals with no lived experience with mental health challenges. They didn't give up, though, and now there are several dozen peer sup-

port workers in the city's various services.

Audun Pedersen's determination and drive are a source of admiration for me. He is active in developing political action plans in the mental health and substance abuse field. Together with colleagues he has dedicated his efforts to making sure that his city's community services are progressive and meet high quality standards. And he has already come such a long way. I've personally been interested in politics for a long time, but people around me think it's impossible to get anything done. That's why I am always happy to see others work close with the political level to push public affairs forward. It shows me that it's worth trying to make a difference, either in the civic sphere or in politics. And perhaps it is the municipal level that is richest in opportunities.

Wrapping up the week

We exchanged contacts so that we could keep on sharing experience and best practices between our countries. It's possible that some members of the Czech expedition will soon go back to Bergen for an internship.

On the last day, peer support worker Suzanne from the Bergen Recovery College told us her life story and brought many of us to tears. Audun Pedersen, the main organizer of our itinerary for the week, revealed that the staff of the facilities we'd visited felt happy and proud to be able to share experiences with peer support workers and university people from abroad the useful work they were doing.

We were lucky to see a great deal of interesting projects, and also quite tired on our way back to the Czech Republic. But the inspiration had already taken root and I looked forward to coming home and writing up reports from our visit to Norway.

Each of us was personally inspired.

I believe our trip was significant not just because we visited places we were curious about. We found inspiration for what could be done back home. Some of us, for example, dream of setting up an equivalent of the Norwegian Amelie Skrams Hus. This is a place where people with hurting souls can come to make music, draw, work with wood, etc., which empowers them and brings out their strengths and potential.

As an active author and editor in the field of mental health care, I was inspired in my own way. I learned that in the past, people with mental health problems could sell the magazine of the local ALF organisation in Bergen and keep part of the earnings. Also, one morning during breakfast, we discovered a supplement in the local newspaper with stories of several people suffering from mental health problems, written in a highly destigmatizing manner. I took several copies of various newspapers and magazines home with me, and my mind is already busy with ideas. Perhaps in the next couple of years, I might try to set up a mental health section in Nový prostor ("New Space"), a Czech street magazine sold by the homeless? Or pioneer a destigmatizing supplement in one of the national dailies? The sky is the limit!

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