
CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Building bridges between organisations and the local community

23rd International Conference on Integrated Care, Antwerp, Flanders, 22-24 May 2023

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Introduction: People long for connection. Yet, our society is increasingly diverse and people can be vulnerable in a number of ways (poverty/(mental) illness/language barriers/...). There is an ever growing need for inclusion, for openness.

Objectives and methods: Since 2016, I sought to improve my wellbeing - even to recover - by participating in activities outside of the mental health sector. A chance meeting led to a volunteering opportunity for opgewekTienen vzw, a citizen's initiative in my home town. This led to a string of other opportunities, both for myself and others. I helped members of the community - vulnerable or otherwise - to become participants or to enter this vast network of volunteers and witnessed others do the same. Partnerships were forged between the community, the city and a number of social organisations, between the informal and the formal sector, to increase inclusion, both among volunteers as well as participants.

Key findings: People can experience (social) recovery, an increased sense of purpose and belonging, as well as significant personal growth through volunteering. There is a degree of chance in entering the volunteer network. Bridges (bridge figures/partnerships) are helpful and often even instrumental in the participation of vulnerable groups, either as volunteers or participants. Bridges can be built starting from either side (citizens/professionals). However, more often than not it is the community that takes the lead. Employees can be volunteers after work without either the employee or the employer taking advantage of this existing link. Some of the strongest leaders in the volunteering community are employed in the social/mental health sector. Inclusion is not always easy for the network of volunteers. Support is welcome, but can be lacking.

Conclusions: Bridges foster inclusion.

Implications: Be open as an organisation and look actively around for citizen's and community initiatives in your area. Even the smallest of informal initiatives can offer opportunities for inclusion.

Identify, reach out and connect with bridge figures and social entrepreneurs. Explore existing links: volunteers in your own workforce. Stimulate employees and clients to volunteer or participate. Foster interconnection.

Turn these links into a win-win situation and provide support, not by 'taking over' but by being present.

References: www.opgewektienen.be