

Presentation: Danish national strategy for awareness raising - and its implementation

Thank you for inviting me.

Attitude towards disability is an incredibly important issue. The attitudes people with disabilities meet in life have great influence on their lives. The Danish Disability Council have made a strategy to influence on people attitudes and break down prejudice towards people with disabilities. In the next ten minutes, I will try to give you some insight in the main points of this strategy and the initiatives that have been implemented afterward.

First of all, it is important to emphasize that attitudes and prejudice towards people with disabilities not necessarily are negative in their intention. Many of the reactions a person with disabilities meet, which is perceived unpleasant or prejudiced often stems from people being afraid of doing something wrong or people not knowing how to act around people with a psychical or mental disability.

You may know it from your yourselves? You see someone with a disability, but do not know whether to offer your help or not? Perhaps someone close to you have a mental disorder, but you never talk about it?

Background

First, let us get the background of the strategy straight. The strategy was an initiative in the former government's plan of action on disability "A Society for All 2013".

A radical change of attitude requires all sectors of society to take responsibility. Therefore, it was obvious to place development of the strategy at The Danish Disability Council, which advises the Danish government and parliament. There are 17 members of the council. Each with different backgrounds from different sectors such as labour unions, labour market parts, transport sector, housing association, disability organizations, municipalities and regions.

The vision of the strategy is a society where people with and without disabilities meet each other on natural ground and as equals. It can only happen if attitudes, prejudice and uncertainty do not disturb the relation.

If this is to be achieved it would mean more people with disabilities entering the labour market and the social communities.

Main points of the strategy

The first step we took in the development of the strategy was to collect data and make studies to get insight in which attitudes people with disabilities meet in society and what it will take to get rid of these attitudinal barriers.

We identified three issues, which influence our attitudes towards people with disabilities in a positive direction.

1. Interpersonal interactions on equal footing between people with and without disabilities - especially in childhood.
2. Increased awareness regarding people with disabilities being part of communities.
3. People with disabilities themselves play an important role - they can "guide" and alleviate uncertainty and show that they perceive themselves as part of the community.

Especially the personal encounter between people with and without disabilities is important if we want to change attitudes. The strategy therefore points to five different target groups in which the meetings can take place:

1. Children and young people
Studies show that people who become familiar with disabilities in childhood have fewer prejudices later in life.
2. Companies
At work, relationships and perspectives are formed, and competencies and personalities are put in play as well.
3. Associations
When we meet each other in our spare time in cultural and social associations - the focus is on interests, not disabilities.
4. Public authorities
1) Are representatives of standards of equality between citizens, 2) create the settings for meetings between citizens. 3) Have contact with people with disabilities who need help and support.
5. People with disabilities
Are reducing prejudices when they interact with others and can overcome uncertainty by "guiding" the outside world to how they want to deal with their disability.

Implementation

On this foundation, the strategy presented a number of initiatives that will be effective in influencing the target groups' attitudes towards people with disabilities. However, I must admit that the subsequent work on these efforts has not been easy - especially because there have been no resources to follow up on the strategy.

Here are some of the initiatives we have taken to ensure the implementation of the strategy:

- Image policy
A guide on how public authorities can present people with disabilities in their use of images. People with disabilities are primarily people as everyone else. In a manifold society people with disabilities must be part of the ordinary cityscape – a person in a wheelchair or with a white cane must be on an equal footing with everyone else when there is focus in the media on, for example, urban renewal or environmental themes.
- Volunteers
Cooperation with The National Council for Volunteering on people with disabilities opportunities to be volunteers. Focus on the fact that people with disabilities often have a lot of resources. If you have a disability, you can be well off as a volunteer and make a difference to others, for example as a volunteer doing reading lessons with ethnic minority children or giving lectures on local history to associations.
- Municipal Disability Councils
Collaboration with the municipality organization (KL) and the disability organization (DH) on support for the local disability councils and their work. In each of Denmark's 98 municipalities, there are a local disability council, consisting of both members of the city council and members of the local disability organizations. We have worked to strengthen their work so that they are prepared to push for the disability perspective when decisions are made in the municipalities.
- Empowerment
The process in which the citizens gain faith in their own resources and ability to carry out an action. The directorate of social services has held a conference on the subject and prepared a catalogue of different examples on how to empower people with disabilities.

An example of empowerment: Young people with disabilities have held workshops in school classes where they confronted students with dilemmas like: If you and I are on a sports team together, but I am very slow because of my disability, what would you think and what would you do? - Or could you imagine having a boyfriend or girlfriend like me?

- Occupation

We have been in contact with and held presentations for more than a few unemployment offices, and we have sent letters to various relevant participants. The letters contained good examples of how to get more people with disabilities employed.

Ending

The strategy has identified important factors in terms of attitudes towards disability and good initiatives have been launched. We know we can change prejudice with knowledge - about disability and the consequences of the disability, - we can change prejudice with Good Meetings - especially in childhood, or at work, in residential areas and in recuperation. But it requires a national public effort and is a long-termed move if we are to move fundamentally towards people's prejudices, ignorance and insecurity. It is crucial that people with disabilities are not isolated or put aside. We must focus on inclusion everywhere, wherever it is possible. We must think creatively and go new ways. Finally yet importantly, we must support people with disabilities to get out and be as proactive as possible.

Changing attitudes is hard work but also satisfying work - and we can always do better and more. I look forward to attending this conference and get inspired.

Thank you!