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SUCCESS STORIES

Cooperation in Practice in the City of Graz

Scope and main objectives of the project:

In order to document the project, we conducted an interview with the head of drug street work.

We talked about regular networking meetings between street work, the municipal police and another organ of public security – all of them professions in public space.

These networking meetings are not considered as an educational project. We rather consider them as a practice-based example from which SWaPOL can benefit.

The trigger for these meetings was the need for networking between the different professions in public space due to the fact that in certain public areas of the city problems and escalating situations with drug addicts occurred (collapsing people, sleeping people in the park, needles in the park which was dangerous for children etc.)

These networking meetings take place once a quarter since approximately 8-10 years. Usually between 12 and 17 people attend these meetings (fluctuation is considered – new people are integrated quite fast)

Sense and purpose of these meetings:

- to professionally exchange
- to reduce prejudices against the respective other professions
- to have clearance about assignments and operation styles of the respective other professions
- to improve the joint work during incidents in public space
- to build trust between the different professions
- to use resources reciprocally

Administration of the project:

The meetings target professionals who work with clients in public space. At the beginning only streetwork, a certain social work organization and the municipal police participated. The organ of public security joined the meetings 3 years ago.

Particularly important was to pay mutual respect in communication as well as to focus rather on the commons than on the dividers of the participating professions.

People in leading positions organised the framing conditions for the meetings in order to make them work. Nevertheless, participants in these meetings are always people on the employee level who work in public space and are in direct contact with clients on the street.

At the beginning the meetings took place at a neutral place. After some time, the level of trust between the professions was high enough so that the place of the meetings became irrelevant. Meanwhile, the meetings take place in rooms of each participating organisation.

Participants in these meetings:

- Different social work professions
- The municipal police: police inspection
- Organ of public security (only since 2-3 years).

Usually open-minded people with high social competencies from each profession are sent to these networking meetings.

Organisational responsibility is taken by drug streetwork – they coordinate time, place and send out official invitations.

Findings and conclusions from the project:

In general:

The neutral place of the meetings at the beginning was necessary prior to develop mutual trust between the participants.

In the meetings people shared their different assignments at work as well as their personal experience in daily business.

The processual character of networking is particularly important for this project. It is about a continuous awareness raising on the commons between the professions rather than on their dividers.

Formal vs. non-formal:

It was very important to integrate people in higher positions of the participating organisations (especially at the police). In other words – it needed a formal organisation and agreement of upper hierarchy levels for these networking meetings.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep the formal structures in the meetings rather low. It must be possible to speak openly about the people's feelings when they are working with the clients as well as together with the other professions in public space. This is important to let grow mutual trust. For these meetings, it is necessary to find the right proportion of formalisation and handshake quality.

Positive effects:

The meetings affected the joint work of the professions in public space positively. Meanwhile, there are no clichés within the collaboration between the participants in public space anymore. Mutual respect is the highest bid. The meetings have a strongly deescalating effect on the daily collaboration in the field.

The participants work as multipliers in their respective profession, meaning that they spread the word with the effect that prejudices as well as clichés are further reduced on different levels in their respective organisation.

Meanwhile, the participants know each other and use their resources mutually, e.g. in certain situations of daily business with clients: A teenager had to make a police interview but there was no adult reference person in place. So the police called a streetworker whom they knew from the networking meetings. The general picture of work in public space of different professions changed, e.g. a fight between clients threatened to escalate. A streetworker went in between and the police didn't know he was a streetworker and was very nervous. Then they heard someone saying that he is a streetworker and the situation deescalated drastically.

Social workers perceive networking as a very important part in their daily work. This awareness also grew for participants of the police and the organ of public security.

Themes and settings:

Themes that are discussed in the networking meetings are:

- Public space in general → Who is when at which place?
- New information in general that could be of interest for the other participants
- Talking about action strategies and suggestion for developing trainings in that relation
- Homelessness, mental state of exception, crises in public space, overdoses of drug addicts
- Generally, different topics are discussed and questioned critically
- Overdoses → training with naloxone → coping with cases of drug emergency.