

## Peer counselling as an approved profession

Austria (Upper Austria, Directorate Health and Social Affairs) - AMENDMENT OF THE SOCIAL PROFESSIONS ACT

Acknowledging that peer counselling is crucial to empower persons with disabilities, Upper Austria established – for the first time worldwide – peer counselling as an official social profession, approving people with physical, psychosocial, and intellectual disabilities as skilled professionals in their field.

### IN BRIEF

A peer counsellor has intimate knowledge of disabilities, is emphatic towards similarly affected people, and is uniquely able to provide guidance and assistance to help others take greater control of their lives – in their homes, their communities, and their work place. With the help of the regional Independent Living Centre, Upper Austria introduced peer counselling as a social profession in 2008, and it remains the only region to do so worldwide. In addition, nowhere else is peer counselling based on such comprehensive qualifications, or places such value on the experience of disabilities.

### FACTS & FIGURES

- Since 2009 disability-specific qualification courses (psychosocial, physical, intellectual, etc.) have certified more than 70 professionals.
- In 2014, 76 peer counsellors offered up to 1,320 hours of service per week, tailored to various types of disability.
- Counsellors are active in a variety of organizations.

### INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

#### Disability as an asset

As a role model, a peer counsellor's experiences, knowledge, and coping skills uniquely equip him/her to provide guidance and advice to other persons with disabilities.

#### Professionalism

Establishment of peer counselling as a social profession provides for a high standard of qualification, the formalization of rights under collective agreements, and professionalization – thus enhancing the lives of both the counsellors and the peers that they serve.

### Empowerment

A peer counsellor does not solve problems for others, but rather provides the necessary support to help a person with disability to find the right solutions on her or his own.

### HISTORY

When persons with disabilities first began to attend the University of California at Berkeley, they made use of peer counselling. This proved crucial for the development of the Independent Living Movement, which demanded equal opportunities. In the 1980s the concept of peer counselling was further developed, with courses generally offered by centres for independent living; and since the 1990s most health institutions have increasingly requested such a qualification. This was the case in Upper Austria, where peer counselling was formalized under the state's Social Professions Act to complement and augment the other services offered under the state's Equal Opportunities Act.

“As a peer counsellor with psychiatric experience, I would like to encourage people with psychiatric problems to engage openly with their problems and to accompany them with compassion.”

—Gerda Stöllnberger, certified peer counsellor with psychiatric experience

### KEY FEATURES

A peer counsellor is one who has personal disability-related experiences, who is a good listener, and who has been trained in a variety of problem-solving techniques in order to provide support and guidance to similarly affected people. They can serve as a critical link between the person with disabilities seeking help and the service providers and/or the family. Since 2009 four qualification courses designed for various disability experiences, such as physical, intellectual, and psychosocial, have been offered by FAB Organos – the responsible training organization – at the regional Empowerment-Centre of the Upper Austrian Independent Living Initiative. The qualification process, which is financed by the region, is comprised of 240 teaching units and 80 hours of internship. Accommodations are provided. The curriculum addresses knowledge for communication, counselling on independent living, and disability-related laws and services in Upper Austria.

## OUTCOME, IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS

- Upper Austria facilitated job opportunities, and now service providers employ 72 peer counsellors.
- Peer counsellors have achieved a better salary grade.
- A professional association of peer counsellors has been established.

## TRANSFERABILITY, SCALABILITY AND COST-EFFICIENCY

To date, no other region or country has developed, implemented, and/or recognized disability-specific peer counselling. However, other Austrian regions (e.g., Styria and Salzburg) as well as European countries (e.g., Sweden and Bosnia) are planning to introduce a similar policy.

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## SOURCES

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