

Stimulating political participation for persons with an intellectual disability

Belgium (Flanders) – Our New Future

SUMMARY OF PROJECT

Self-advocates of Our New Future explore the possibilities and barriers to participating in local and regional political meetings. They identify existing barriers to their political participation.. Self-advocates and advisors work both on accessibility of the intellectually disabled in the political process and on tools to support the councils, policy bodies, and advisors to better provide support for their participation.

“We want to make decisions or to participate in making those decisions. In that way we keep control over our own life. We find it important that people listen to us as well.”

—Stan, program participant

FACTS & FIGURES

- Whereas there were no persons with an ID participating in policy making in Flanders four years ago, today there are 11.
- Much effort has been put into awareness-raising through the concrete documentation of the various political trajectories of people with ID: booklets, a film, a game, and other public materials
- 117 participants attended a day-long meeting to review the ONT results for 2013.

PROBLEMS TARGETED

Research showed that no people with an ID were participating politically in Flanders, and there was a profound interest in addressing this shortcoming. The Flemish governmental organization for equal opportunities wanted to involve people with an ID in decisions concerning their lives and their environment, and urged ONT to do something with the results of their research. ONT then identified 10 people with an ID who had a powerful desire to participate in the policy of their own city. During the first year, however, it became clear that there was a mismatch between the desires of the persons and the expectations of participation (vocabulary, long hours that would undermine their focus, the need for a lot of preparation, difficult subject matter, etc.), and that more had to be done.

SOLUTION AND METHODOLOGY

Our New Future (ONT), a self-advocacy movement for people with an intellectual disability (ID), set out to evaluate the proper level of support for people with an ID: Where did they want to participate? How could they enter the process? What was necessary in order for them to follow the meetings? Once entered into the process, it was very important to follow them to see how their participation could be improved. ONT collected stories of people with an ID in order to dispel prejudices and stereotypes concerning their political participation. At the same time, self-advocates identified the thresholds that people with an ID encounter. ONT offers concrete tools and information addressing both the strengths and weaknesses of political participation for people with an ID, for policy makers, and for professionals and organizations who work with people with intellectual disabilities.

OUTLOOK & TRANSFERABILITY

People with an intellectual disability who have participated in the project have grown in confidence and have developed a stronger self-image. This at first appeared to be a slow and challenging process, but – taking into account the strength that people with an intellectual disability have demonstrated – effective and long-term development is in sight. It has also been noticed that policy participation is an individual process, different for each person. The whole process demands personalized support for every person with an intellectual disability from his or her ONT advisor and from the councils or policy bodies where they participate.

Photo: Yes

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