Justice Involving Volunteers in Europe (JIVE)

Issue 5 | February 2015

This newsletter provides regular updates about the work of the JIVE project and useful information for voluntary sector organisations, networks and volunteers within Europe working within the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

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Introduction and project update

Apart from highlighting examples of good practice from organisations working with volunteers in Italy and Hungary, this edition also includes some of the first hand experiences of ex-offenders in Portugal, a mentoring programme specifically for women based in the UK, and volunteers working with sex offenders in The Netherlands.

Here is a brief update on the progress of the JIVE project:

- We are currently drafting a report from the results of our survey carried out last Summer with the view to publishing and disseminating the final report in June 2015.
- We are well underway with drafting the ‘toolkit’ which organisations can use in the recruitment, training and support of volunteers which we aim to test in partner countries during Spring 2015.
- We are starting to identify examples of effective co-operation between voluntary sector organisations and private/statutory organisations. Along with focus groups, we will use the data to write a report.

Portugal: Thank you for teaching me how to be happy!

“Impulsive actions, wrong thoughts and wasted opportunities. It was you Companheiro that taught me and enlarged my horizons. There was resolve, and construction. Thanks for teaching me how to be happy!”

(Resident in O Companheiro, IPSS, 2013)

O Companheiro is a Private Social Solidarity Institution (IPSS), founded in 1987 by P. Dâmado (former prison chaplain) and a group of prison visitors (volunteers) with the purpose of supporting (ex) offenders and their families with supported accommodation.
Evidence has shown that the first few months of probation are the most critical in the rehabilitation process. The risk of reoffending remains high during this stage, so it is vital that appropriate interventions are used to target the needs of individuals and keep them on track.

Many of the service users are affected by a variety of issues including a breakdown in family relationships, unemployment, social exclusion, health and housing issues. As well as residential support to service users, IPSS aims to provide basic personal and social skills, boosting the chance to lead independent lives.

All of this is only possible by promoting social responsibility and active citizenship, the importance of volunteering, and pressing for a fair and equal CJS. Through sharing knowledge and experience, volunteering helps to improve the understanding of resettlement of prisoners, and in turn contributes to removing pre conceptions held of (ex) offenders as they reintegrate into society.

José de Almeida Brites, Director, ‘O Companheiro. For more information visit their website

Italy: Emmaus House, a volunteer led organisation

Emmaus House is a volunteer led organisation based in Sardinia, founded in 1988 by Professor Domenico Grillo. It became a social enterprise in 2014, and aims to support people who are dealing with serious social exclusion.

The organisation operates through a number of groups including the Residential Therapeutic Community for people dealing with substance misuse issues, based outside of prison; a centre for women and mothers with children; a home for adolescents and young people suffering with mental health issues; and the Welcome Service for foreign nationals temporarily present in the country.

Typical day to day activities include cultivating fruit and vegetables, gardening, pet care, and art courses. As for returning to employment, users of the service are supported by a specialist team who assess individuals’ knowledge and skills, with the view of identifying suitable employment opportunities.

From 1999 to 2013 Emmaus House welcomed almost 1,500 people from the ages of 15 to 70 years. 80% had been in prison. For this reason, in 2000 the organisation signed an agreement with the Italian Ministry of Justice.

Most recently Emmaus House has managed two major projects. The RELI project, based in the community, launched in 2010 to support the re-employment drug users. And the DODECA project aims to provide a living space alternative to imprisonment that could allow service users to develop
independent lives within their communities.

UK: Brighton Women’s Centre, Mentoring Service
Volunteers’ contribution and commitment is central to the work of the Brighton Women’s Centre Mentoring Service, based in England, UK. The Service has recently achieved the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation’s Approved Provider Standard which found that the volunteers were ‘well-informed, passionate and committed’ and were ‘well supported, and felt appreciated’.

Volunteer mentors develop caring, honest and safe relationships with the women referred to the service in order to empower those mentees and support change. Mentees flourish with this support with one mentee reporting her mentor saw “potential in me when I couldn’t or didn’t think anyone else did.”

The Service matches volunteer mentors with women with multiple vulnerabilities in order for the mentee to identify and achieve personal goals. Currently all referrals for the Service come from the Inspire project, which works with women at all stages of involvement in the CJS from point of arrest, as an alternative to custody, in custody and on release. Inspire has been developed by a partnership involving the women’s voluntary sector in Brighton and Hove, England.

Volunteers commit to volunteering for a minimum of one year with the service and are matched with a mentee for up to six months. During this time mentors and mentees meet in the community in informal settings to identify goals around five outcomes: improving emotional and psychological wellbeing, reducing risk, employability, access to services and improved financial situation. The mentoring relationship focuses on empowering the mentee in taking steps towards achieving these goals.

One woman said that meeting with their mentor has “meant that I actually went out and left my home. I always stay indoors and if I didn’t meet my mentor I would be sitting at home waiting for when I could have my next alcoholic drink”. For more information email Rebecca Barkaway

Hungary: The volunteer programme at the Eötvös Loránd University’s Criminology Department
The volunteer programme at the Eötvös Loránd University’s Criminology Department has been operating since 2003. Students help juvenile and young adult offenders prepare for their release and assist them temporarily after release.

At the start of each year the programme appears among the available courses on offer with a short description, including the core elements and the responsibilities expected from students to be successful in the role. The vast majority of the applications are based on the recommendation of previous students, and each year the University aims to recruit students from a variety of faculties.
During the first semester the students acquire the theoretical knowledge of the course. Throughout the semester, guest lecturers (prosecutors, judges, prison staff, psychologists) are invited along. Students will also meet with the institution and begin to conduct ‘life story’ interviews with one or two offenders. The University will help them prepare for these interviews in class by drafting interview questions and by role-play. The students are required to write a report on their institution visits and on the interviews conducted. In addition, the University will assess their progress.

At the end of the semester a 3-4 day training session takes place, covering topics such as developing self-awareness, motivations, and building on required competences to fulfil tasks. Afterwards students are organised into pairs for the practical work; each pair is assigned an inmate, and will be visited regularly until their release. The students have to write a log after each meeting which are then used in class based discussions.

In the past 10 years, approximately 250-300 students participated in the program. For more information email Sarolta Horvath

The Netherlands: Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), voluntary support to sex offenders

Harry Nigh, ‘the founding father’ of Circles started the first circle ‘by coincidence’ in Canada when a sex offender was released from prison in 1994 and people from the community decided to deliver customised support for them.

So what is a circle of support? Once the core member is committed with their volunteers, they are collectively known as the ‘inner circle’ and they meet together weekly.

The equality amongst the inner circle gives the opportunity to start equal relationships. Core members appreciate volunteers because they are willing to spend their spare time with them in an unpaid position. They are grateful for the honesty, openness and neutrality in conversations as well. In most cases core members disclose a lot of personal information in what they view as a reciprocal relationship with their volunteers.

The ‘outer circle’ consists of professionals (see diagram below) such as probation officers, therapists, police etc.

The ‘circle coordinator’ organises the entire process of the inner circle and outer circle in terms of inclusion, behavioural change and risk reduction. In addition, he/she is responsible for recruiting, training, supporting and supervising volunteers.

So what does this feel like in practice? Audrey Alards, Circle Co-ordinator, describes her experiences of the programme: ‘I remember one core member who used to introduce himself to people by saying “nice to meet you, my name is Charles, I am a paedophile”.

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He knew he would not be accepted and as such he learned to live his life in secrecy.

‘Volunteers are often in a position to provide more of a personal response. They can provide an invaluable link to the community which can be very important when challenging public perceptions about (ex) offenders’

He lives life in fear and isolation, and worries that the community will discover details of his sexual preferences. Because of his anxiety and need to talk about his preferences (which prevents him from creating victims) Charles decided to take part in the CoSA project.

Our volunteers began supporting Charles to build a life for himself using their own ideas and values. He values his group of volunteers and the fact that he can speak freely among them, and many core members simply ask for volunteers who can ‘just be there’.

Under the project Circles4EU, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium supported the implementation of circles in Europe with pilots in Bulgaria, Latvia and Spain, while implementation in France, Hungary and Ireland is being prepared. For further information visit www.circles4.eu

Audrey Alards, LLM, Circle Co-ordinator, the Netherlands

For more information about the JIVE project please contact robert.price@clinks.org

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