

Upcoming WHO¹ European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health: History and Recommendations

**A position paper by the Mental Disability Advocacy Center (MDAC)
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WHO's Regional Office will be facilitating a Ministerial Conference on Mental Health—*Facing the Challenges, Building Solutions*— in Helsinki, Finland from 12 to 15 January 2005. This meeting will be attended by invited governmental representatives of all 52 Member States in the European Region of WHO as well as representatives from selected non-governmental organizations. Ministers of health will discuss and agree on a declaration that outlines the principles of an action plan on mental health for all countries participating in the Conference. (The plan should be applicable to countries with different levels of policy development, services and resources.)

This conference evolved from the 2001 World Health Assembly, where 132 ministers from all over the world unanimously agreed to place mental health higher on their overall health agendas. In response, WHO published [*The world health report 2001. Mental health: new understanding, new hope*](#) and launched its global action program on mental health. At the 2003 session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, Member States requested the Regional Director to arrange a ministerial conference with the theme "facing the challenges, building solutions". The Conference aims are to:

- review the status of mental ill health in the region and of policies for tackling the problem, taking account of diversity at the regional and local levels and the needs stemming from it;
- explore the settings (such as schools, workplaces and health services) and age groups in which mental health and the social inclusion of the mentally ill should be promoted and mental ill health addressed;
- identify barriers to the promotion of mental health and the prevention and treatment of mental ill health in communities and individuals, especially those with little or no access to health care, work or education;
- suggest evidence-based solutions that could be shaped into common and sustainable policies, setting a priority agenda for European Member States; and
- develop an action plan that provides policy recommendations to Member States and WHO. Reference?

¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) is the United Nations specialized agency for health. WHO's objective is the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health. WHO is governed by 192 Member States through the World Health Assembly. The Health Assembly is composed of representatives from WHO's Member States. The European Region of WHO has 52 Member States. In each Member State there is a national counterpart in mental health. For more info, see <http://www.who.int/about/en/> and <http://www.euro.who.int/>

This Conference is a prime opportunity for WHO and the regional community to review the latest learning and experience within the field of mental health and to move towards greater inclusiveness and respect for the rights of people with mental disabilities.

The conference will feature the newest evidence of what works in the delivery of excellent services. Participants will have the opportunity to learn from a wide range of examples and experience presented by invited experts. Learning which is currently scattered throughout WHO's European Region will be assembled in one place. The conference can thus pave the way for shared analysis and agreement on guiding principles and commitment to action by all the Member States in the European Region."

Detailed information on the Conference, including relevant background information, the Declaration and the Action Plan is available at the www.euro.who.int/mentalhealth2005

The inclusion of civil society in policy development parallels the important shift of paradigm from a paternalistic approach to a rights-based understanding of mental health needs. This inclusion and especially the involvement of the user community in the work of various intergovernmental bodies has been occasional and non-transparent. **MDAC urges the WHO Regional Office for Europe to develop transparent and accountable mechanisms and policy for the future on the modalities of collaboration with civil society in general, and with user organizations in particular.**

MDAC's specific recommendations:

To WHO Europe:

1. User organizations and civil society in general have knowledge and expertise which can be called upon when implementing and evaluating the Action Plan. As a recent Council of Europe draft memorandum rightly emphasizes, the most effective way to prevent abuses in psychiatry and to spread user-centered mental health services is the equal participation of users. **User organizations** such as the [European Network of \(ex-\)Users and Survivors of Psychiatry](#) (ENUSP) and the [European Network for User-Led Projects](#), **should be invited to participate in implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Action Plan.** As much as possible, this participation should be recognized financially.
2. When implementing the Action Plan, user involvement should be an overarching, horizontal principle, as recommended by the UN Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons. **In countries without an organized user movement, WHO Europe should advance the formation of the user community**, in collaboration with existing European user organizations.
3. WHO Europe needs to commit itself to advancement of equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with mental health problems. Member States need to be made accountable in this respect. **WHO Europe should promote independent monitoring mechanisms in mental health**, with a particular emphasis on wide-spread abuses, such as arbitrary and unmonitored detention, inhuman and degrading treatment, right to self-determination, etc.

4. The problem of corruption within medical services needs to be unambiguously addressed. Lack of access to appropriate services is further complicated when corruption is wide-spread. Where independent monitoring mechanisms are not in place and governmental self-reporting is the only monitoring available, corruption may result in situations where authorities who are responsible for human rights violations are the only “guardians” or oversight bodies available. **Strengthening collaboration with civil society and user groups should be seen as a way to advance the fight against corruption.**

To the Member States:

1. In accordance with the UN Standard Rules (Article 18), Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation (Rec(2004)10, and other international documents, **States must involve user organizations at national, regional and local levels, in all stages of policy-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.**
2. **Provide transparent financial and technical support to create and develop an organized movement of service users.**
3. **Engage with civil society when implementing the Action Plan.** This may help create ownership of the process within the community, which is helpful in overcoming barriers.
4. **Set up independent, but funded, inspection mechanisms to prevent abuses and neglect within psychiatric institutions and social care homes.**
5. **Develop and strengthen community-based psychosocial services and close down large, custodial institutional facilities.**
6. **Empower—financially and technically—self-help and recovery-oriented activities run by users and former users of mental health services.**

To civil society organizations:

1. **Support the Declaration and Action Plan through awareness-raising, lobbying and participation in policy-making, implementation and evaluation.**
2. **Act as watch-dogs and pressure groups, identifying areas of concern and making governments accountable.**
3. **Collect and disseminate information on good practices of citizen participation.**
4. **Respect the diversity of opinions in a democratic society and ensure that the voices of the primary stakeholders, the users’ voices, are heard.**

The Mental Disability Advocacy Center (MDAC) is an international non-governmental organization based in Budapest that promotes and protects the human rights of people with mental health problems and intellectual disabilities across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. MDAC works to improve the quality of life for people with mental disabilities through litigation, research and international advocacy. MDAC has participatory status at the *Council of Europe* and is a cooperating organization of the *International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights*.