

Ventilen

YSI - Denmark - Country case 3

1. Basic information

Ventilen Denmark is a nationwide youth association working to prevent loneliness and help young people at the age of 15-25 years who are experiencing loneliness. Furthermore, they want to raise awareness and debate about loneliness among the youth.

The issue of youth and loneliness

6,4 % (or 64.000) of the 16-29 year old Danes express that they often or always feel lonely. This means that young people are more exposed to loneliness than older groups. By comparison, only 2,6 % of the 65-79 year old Danes express that they often or always feel lonely (Lasgaard & Friis, 2015). Other studies show, that there is a significant correlation between loneliness and social problems as bullying, depression and even suicide (Ventilen). Hence, consequences of having a shallow or small social network can reach further than loneliness.

Reasons explaining why so many young people experience loneliness are inconclusive. The study by Mathias Lasgaard and Karina Friis shows no correlation between loneliness and marital status or residential area, but it does find that a larger percentage of women feel lonely than men. Another conclusion is that a weak attachment to the labour market increases the risk of loneliness. The study does not take housing situation into account. However, in Ventilen they observe that moving out of home seems to be a risk factor in relation to loneliness.

History and organisation of Ventilen

Ventilen started as a social project in March 1993, where Karin Rue and Martin Klee, both already involved in voluntary social work, formed a new association called Lyspunktet (bright spot). Lyspunktet mainly offered facilitation of conversation groups for young people lacking social network. Besides conversation groups, the idea was to create a safe space to talk about loneliness and form new relations. Within the next years, Lyspunktet got their own facilities at Nørrebro in Copenhagen, they formalised the organisation and member counts began to accelerate.

In 1997, Lyspunktet no longer existed as the name was changed to Ventilen (the vent). At the same time, the change of the name became the first step in establishing the nationwide association Ventilen Denmark, that was officially formed in 1999 (Ventilen Anniversary pamphlet).

Ventilen Denmark is organised with an annual meeting as the highest authority. At this meeting the board is chosen. The board hires the secretariat and handles the political leadership. Besides these central organs, Ventilen Denmark consists of 20 local associations spread around most parts of Denmark - 15 meeting places and 5 KOMsammen initiatives, where the community revolves around exercise and diets (Ventilen). Ventilen Denmark has engaged six paid personnel in the secretariat and 250 volunteers. In 2016 Ventilen had 624 visitors in total and 1200 members.

Ventilen Denmark is funded by both private and public funds. Around 20% of Ventilen Denmark's revenues comes through the national budget. Another 20% from DUF (Joint Council of Danish Youth), which is public funds as well. Other revenues are from private funds and donations, membership fees and sale of material and services (Ventilen financial report 2015).

The local effort

Activities in the 20 local associations are mainly facilitated by volunteers. Ventilen arranges various activities, however, they are all social gatherings of different kinds. Most meeting places are open once or twice a week, where they host in house activities such as cooking and playing board games and out of house activities such as ice skating, bowling or going to the cinema. Once a month they have a meeting with all regular users of the meeting place, where they plan activities for the next month (Ventilen).

Besides meeting places, Ventilen also facilitate communities, where focus is on exercising and cooking healthy food together. This initiative is called KOMsammen (GETtogether) and is one of the newer initiatives from Ventilen Denmark. So far KOMsammen is offered in 5 locations around Denmark, and according to plan another 2 will start up before the end of 2018 (Ventilen)

Karen Lerstrup Pedersen, the current head of the secretariat, informs that identifying and reaching out to the target group, is one of the ongoing challenges. The main strategy is visibility - at schools and high schools, in youth centres that arrange leisure activities and on social media. Mostly, visitors at Ventilen come on their own initiative or incited by relatives. However, there is also some local cooperation agreements with municipal workers, which will be elaborated in the section about the role of the public sector.

In continuation of the first visit, volunteers will invite to an informal conversation to get to know the visitor and in general hopefully retain visitors (Ventilen).

1.1 Role of the public sector

Ventilen is a private initiative, thus the public sector plays a limited role. However, as mentioned earlier, around 40 % of revenues are public funds, that Ventilen has applied for. So the public sector does take part in financing Ventilen.

Furthermore, Karen Lerstrup Pedersen tells us, that there are several local examples of collaboration with social workers, teachers and job centers, where municipal workers have referred to Ventilen. However, cooperation is informal and developed locally over time very much depending on relations between volunteers and municipal workers. One of the obstacles in relation to collaboration is the principle of anonymity in Ventilen. If a social worker refer one of his or her clients to Ventilen, volunteers of Ventilen are not allowed to inform the social worker of attendance or progress. In Ventilen they value that they offer community and not institutionalised courses, why widescale intervention from the public sector is not necessarily perceived as desirable.

2. Recommendations

Currently, identifying and reaching out to the target group is locally organised and recruitment can seem random. It depends on the volunteers and on relatives of the young people experiencing loneliness. The most vulnerable group within the target group might not have any relatives to seek information on their behalf and present to them, what Ventilen has to offer. Additionally, if a young man or woman fitting in the target group is situated in a municipality, where volunteers has not succeeded in collaborating with the local authorities, their chances of knowing Ventilen are decreased. A recommendation could be to systematise and formalise the public sector channels of recruitment.

Ventilen themselves has observed that moving out of home is a time of transition that increases the risk of loneliness. If municipalities with a local department of Ventilen systematically sent out a pamphlet about Ventilen as a part of the welcome letter to young people moving to the municipality, it could be one way of systematising recruitment.

For people in complicated and tough life situations, free counselling options and voluntary social projects might be the only available offer. Unfortunately in Denmark, there has been examples of social projects initiated by persons without proper competences or even the right intentions. Consequences can be crucial for vulnerable people seeking help. Right now, there is no public quality control of social projects driven by voluntary workers. Instead, a trade association called RådgivningsDanmark (CounsellingDenmark) has taken the task of accrediting free counselling options and

social projects such as Ventilen. However, if social projects were accredited by the public sector, it might increase and open up possibilities of public and institutionalised referral to the projects from municipal workers.

3. Sources

Lasgaard, Mathias og Karina Friis 2015: *Ensomhed i befolkningen - forekomst og metodiske overvejelser*:

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Interview with Karen Lerstrup Pedersen, head of secretariat, Ventilen Danmark