

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here and to be speaking to you in this special building right in the heart of Rotterdam. Coming together from so many different European countries to exchange ideas about “equal opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities” in our society is an effective approach. In this respect, it is useful to share what we have learned here in Rotterdam with representatives from government agencies and institutions in Barcelona, Hamburg, London/Canterbury and Lidingö/Uppsala. Working together, we can realise more than any of us could do alone!!

Rotterdam is a city that wants to work on improving the quality of life for the people who live here. Achieving this goal sometimes demands considerable creativity and courage – the kind of creativity and courage you can also find in my own city district, the submunicipality of IJsselmonde, where we are conducting a pilot study that I would like to present to you within the framework of this conference. This is a pilot study for providing both care and employment. It focuses on a collaboration between OMIJ, a foundation that creates jobs for the long-term unemployed (including persons with intellectual disabilities), and the Pameijer Keerkring Foundation, which is the agency in Rotterdam that promotes the interests of the intellectually disabled. The pilot study is an example of how the social integration of care can be accomplished by working together in the field of employment. After all, we know that people with intellectual disabilities can take on an independent and more self-assured position in society when they can live, reside and work within society. So providing them with the opportunities to do so is essential.

This collaborative project that focuses on employment is special for a number of reasons:

- First of all, I would like to point out that this project provides a special situation that enables persons with an intellectual disability to find meaningful daytime activity in the form of work – work in which their own specific qualities and skills are expressed and in which the product or service they supply serves as valuable evidence of their abilities. For the participants, the significance of this is unprecedented and considerably reinforces their feeling of self-esteem.
- Secondly, this project provides an exceptional work setting. In setting up and organising this project, attempts were focused on carrying out the activities as based on the right combination of qualities and people. In real terms, this means that people with intellectual disabilities work shoulder to shoulder with job-seekers and paid workers to achieve results. This is an exceptional situation that puts the intellectually disabled in a new position in which their interaction and cooperation with “others” promotes their emancipation.
- Thirdly – and something that makes me as an administrator in the submunicipality of IJsselmonde especially proud – is how this collaboration is taking shape in practice and how it is apparent to those of us living in the community. At the project sites in our submunicipality - such as a certain laundry and a second-hand store - as well as outside where our participants work to maintain public green spaces, the citizens of IJsselmonde can come into daily contact with participants and the results of their work. It is an enrichment for everyone living in IJsselmonde that all of this is being

achieved as based on actual contact and interaction between people with intellectual disabilities and the local community.

And these are just some of the reasons that make this project unique. Another is how the OMIJ and Pameijer Keerkring foundations are each investing in the project as based on their own backgrounds and objectives. The organisations and staff they have involved in this project should be given a great deal of credit for how they are enabling participants in the pilot study to attain a better position in society step by step.

Follow-up activities

Shouldn't what IJsselmonde is accomplishing and making apparent on a daily basis become the accepted norm throughout society? Shouldn't what we are doing here be realised on a much larger scale? I think it should.

But to accomplish this will require a different approach to the problem. For one thing, it will take a change in how care-giving agencies think about and deal with offering the intellectually disabled meaningful daytime activities. For another, it will take a change in our ideas about employment that relate to offering the intellectually disabled opportunities to be useful in the public and private sectors and to move on to other types of sheltered employment. To make these changes will require not only a different and creative approach to the issue but also a willingness to make changes in legislation and regulations and to enter into new partnerships.

I must tell you that the submunicipality's role in all of this is limited. The national government decides about regulations and the availability of financial means, and the municipal administration also has a say in this sometimes. So the submunicipality has only a facilitating role and is limited to following decisions made by higher levels of government. Even so, based on its administrative relationship with the city, the submunicipality can request attention to problems and, in this case, can request cooperation, results and the necessary continuation of the project. And this is what I am attempting to do: to promote the submunicipality's intentions to stress the importance of the project in its contacts with the city and other agencies and its intentions to demand that attention be devoted to this initiative and its improvement in the future. For me, it is obvious that the pilot study is important and that its continuation is essential for the participants and our society as a whole. I thus hope and trust that the collaboration between OMIJ and Pameijer in IJsselmonde can be continued and will be followed up.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to conclude – and I am sorry that I will have to leave so soon due to other obligations – by wishing you an informative and enjoyable conference, and I hereby call on you to work together as based on both your diversity and your European unity, in contributing to the creation of equal opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities.

Thank you.