

Ávarp

Jóns Kristjánssonar, Heilbrigðis- og tryggingamálaráðherra

á ráðstefnunni „Breaking the barriers – new thoughts in organizing vocational rehabilitation and other interventions.”

Hótel Loftleiðum 15. apríl 2005.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

It is with great pleasure that I thank you for your contribution during these last two days, in trying to find ways to increase the return of disabled people to employment. The number of disabled people, who are not active on the labour market, has been growing rapidly in most western countries during the last years. The result is a great increase in public expenses but more important, a lack of fulfilment among the disabled, as most people choose to be active on the employment market if they can. And most can, if they get the support and the flexibility they need. In these last two days, you have been working on finding some solutions to this problem.

Vocational rehabilitation is not new. Here in Iceland, already in the year 1945, the Association of tuberculosis patients organized a vocational rehabilitation at Reykjalundur, which is located close to Reykjavík. The purpose of this organization was to enable patients with tuberculosis, who had been discharged from a sanatorium, to get work that suited them. It also included training and the chance to study. From this beginning, Reykjalundur has been in the leading position in rehabilitation and vocational rehabilitation. In recent years others have followed in their footsteps in the vocational rehabilitation area.

Despite this, sixty years later, we have only seen increase in the numbers of disabled people who can not get employment that suits them. We are no longer dealing with the effects of tuberculosis, other problems are now the reason for disability. In our minds, disability is usually connected to severe handicaps, such as lack of physical mobility, deafness or blindness. But these are not the people who account for the big rise in numbers of disabled people. Most disabilities are caused by musculo-skeletal disorders and psychological disorders. Psychological problems are the biggest reason for the increase in Iceland in the last decade and one third in the OECD countries.

And here, like in other Nordic countries, the numbers have risen sharply in the last few years.

We have been discussing vocational rehabilitation as one of the answers to the problem of getting people back on to the labour market. I am convinced that we have to make a greater effort in vocational rehabilitation. But the problem is not only vocational rehabilitation. Even if people go successfully through a program of vocational rehabilitation, it may not be enough because this is only the means to an end, which is permanent employment.

The labour market needs to be flexible so everyone can participate, some need part time, and others need special equipment and so on. If the labour market is only for the strong, who can work full time or more and who can always give an optimal performance in their work, there is little room for the disabled. I think none of us wants a society that has no room for diversity. We need to be aware of the fact, that employers need some kind of support or incentives to make it feasible for them to hire disabled individuals. Society as a whole benefits from the employment of the disabled, and therefore we have the responsibility to provide the necessary framework and structure, to make such an employment a positive experience, both for the employers and the employees.

Recently a committee which has been working on a plan for vocational rehabilitation in Iceland, handed in the result of their work to me and the minister of social affairs. In the next two weeks the result will be introduced to stake holders to get their response. We hope this will take the discussion further. Then the work will be continued by our specialists and I hope to have a plan of action ready sooner than later

During these two days, many ideas have been introduced; they have been dissected, criticized and improved. I hope this will lead us towards a better future for all of us, because it is not only important to the disabled to be active in society, it is important to us all, that everyone gets a chance to develop ones ability as much as possible. It is our responsibility as a society to make sure this happens and at the end of the day, it will also be our gain and our reward.

I wish our foreign guests a safe journey home and thank you all again for your contribution.

(Talað orð gildir)