

May 2020

DISABILITY, PERSONS LIVING WITH MENTAL CONDITIONS AND SYNDROMES, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Students and professionals in various fields, can play a fundamental role in enhancing the protection of persons with disabilities. Still, how much is taught at schools, universities or work places about the rights of persons with disabilities, is limited. The distinction between different forms of disabilities is not clear to many, as the type of measures required to reduce discrimination against those with physical disabilities is different from those with sensorial disabilities (deaf, blind, stuttering) or those living with mental conditions and syndromes.

The situation of persons living with mental conditions and syndromes is even more dire, and continues to be neglected, poorly managed, and permeated with misconceptions worldwide. Educational institutions are not immune from these high levels of discrimination. It is not just an issue of resources: persons living with mental conditions and syndromes are out of the radar screen. They are not recruited as staff – with news worthy exceptions – and students who are admitted, struggle with an education and teaching pattern designed for typical persons.

Educational and academic institutions also do not include much information on international treaties and conventions relating to the protection of the right of persons with disabilities. Students get very limited information on how they could engage internationally in their field of studies, and how in those contexts, persons with disabilities could be better served.

In humanitarian situations, the exclusion suffered by refugees living with mental conditions and syndromes is such, that they can be found tied, locked in, and deprived from development opportunities and even basic health, including vaccines, as well as basic hygiene. In the Western world, there is a tendency to over medicalization: strong reactions by persons living with mental conditions or syndromes – such as tantrums – are responded to through an injection, pills and sedatives, rather than half an hour of loving care, which might be what they really wanted to feel from those around.

The training proposed below is geared towards raising awareness and giving tools to the students to better uphold human rights in the disability field in general, but more specifically, for those living with mental conditions and syndromes. Both during their studies, but also to equip them to function more effectively later, in their professional life.

2. FOUNDATION LA VENTANA DE LOS CIELOS

A. About the Foundation

The Foundation La Ventana de los Cielos is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, and the purposes of the Foundation are established in its registration as a charitable organization within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 of the United States of America, established in 2006.

The Foundation provides skills development and training throughout the year, for children and youth with special abilities (various diagnosed mental conditions), in nature and thorough animal interaction, horse activities, water activities, art, music, fun practice, in a loving and caring environment. The activities provide for their development in the physical, psychosocial, cognitive, emotional and spiritual areas, as well as family relationships.

B. Trainers

This training course is led by the Executive Director Nils A Kastberg. In addition to key functions in the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development Authority, Kastberg also served in UNHCR in four continents and with UNICEF. In the latter, as Director of Emergencies, as Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, and as Representative in Sudan until his early retirement from UNICEF in 2012. Since then, Kastberg has served in the Board of Special Olympics International, which is precisely the world's largest organization of persons living with mental conditions and syndromes, as well as leading on a pro-bono basis the Foundation La Ventana de los Cielos.

Mr. Kastberg provides training to students from four Universities in South Florida as part of his work as Executive Director of La Ventana de los Cielos, and brings hands on, practical experiences which are useful for any professional who in the course of her or his work will encounter persons with mental conditions and syndromes.

Furthermore, in the course of his functions in the Board of Special Olympics, Mr. Kastberg has initiated and contributed to the start of Special Olympics programs in refugee camps in Tanzania, Kenya and Pakistan.

Mr. Kastberg teaches a segment of the Masters in International Relations of the Faculty of Law of the University of Barcelona, Spain, every year since 2011.

Other professional staff who volunteer at La Ventana de los Cielos, with expertise in various fields, will be drawn upon as needed.

C. Web based service training

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Foundation is conducting volunteer activities virtually, engaging with program participants and parents. As a student interested in the Foundation, you can participate in this extensive training, and this will be counted and certified as volunteer hours. In addition, we can explore additional virtual opportunities to serve until pandemic restrictions are reduced and physical, in presence, activities can resume at the Foundation farm.

3. COURSE OUTLINE

A. Session One: Disabilities

The first session outlines the distinction between physical disabilities, sensorial disabilities, and those living with mental conditions and syndromes. For the latter, sometimes the word “intellectual disability” is used. At La Ventana, however, we prefer to focus on the strength and abilities of all persons, rather than their disability. For this reason, we use below the term “special ability” or “special abilities”.. Issues of terminology. Overview of the course.

B. Sessions Two and Three: Characteristics of persons living with mental conditions and syndromes

These sessions are designed to explain in an easy to understand, practical way, in plain language, the characteristics of persons living within the Autism Spectrum, those with cerebral palsy, with syndromes such as Down, Williams or Prader-Willi. Also, characteristics of persons with learning difficulties due to very low IQ and who lived through chronic under nutrition. The objective is that even students familiar with a professional language, become acquainted with a language that could be used in dialogue with laymen: speaking so your grand-mother can understand. Communicating in an easier to understand way for a general public, is fundamental to start generating awareness to reduce discrimination.

C. Session Four and Five: Skills development programs

How can a future nurse, medical doctor, occupational therapist be better equipped to include in her/his activities, as well as engage, persons with special abilities? A number of examples will be given of public and private sector initiatives that have proved sustainable and provide opportunities for persons living with conditions and syndromes to develop skills, be protected and provided decent work opportunities in dignity within the limits of their condition,

D. Session Six: Human Resources and persons living with mental conditions and syndromes

This session builds on the previous sessions, to go deeper into how academic institutions, organizations, enterprises, private and public sector, sports and arts can work in the direction of being more inclusive. What is the role of Universities in moving the frontlines of public perceptions and actions in how persons with special abilities are treated in the next ten-fifteen years. How can academic institutions move in the direction of being a more inclusive one?

- E. Session Seven: International human rights instruments, International Humanitarian Law, the Sustainable Development Goals and persons living with special abilities. It is rights that makes us human; otherwise, we are like animals in the jungle. The difference between being object of care, to a subject with rights.
- F. Session Eight: This is a concluding session, which provides opportunities for more specific teaching relating to the background, concerns and interests of the students.

4. OUTCOMES

The training is useful not just for students but also academic staff, who wish to develop strategies to become a more inclusive entity.

The leadership will be in a position to better articulate strategies for the institution that are more inclusive, as well as motivate staff to better contribute to inclusivity.

All who participate in the training, will receive a certificate of hours from the Foundation. All are welcome to serve as volunteers at La Ventana de los Cielos once live, in site, activities recommence.

During the course, for those interested in direct engagement with persons with special abilities, we will communicate possible virtual engagement opportunities as well as hands on engagement as soon as a gradual opening of live activities commence.

To register for the course, send a text message or WhatsApp to

La Ventana de los Cielos: +1 305 3327259. Write your full name, your email and mention you wish to enrol in our Disability training.