

The Ears to the Soul Volunteer Program

INTERNATIONAL

Source: https://www.eoslhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/FINAL-2020-Annual-Report_web.pdf

PROBLEM

The Ears to the Soul Volunteer Program, a phone hotline for the lonely, was launched in May 2020 by the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Slovakia, in collaboration with a local volunteer centre. The programme was developed using the concepts of service-learning in response to the existing coronavirus scenario, which includes heightened stress and a sense of powerlessness due to current events, as well as a growing sense of loneliness and social isolation. In this circumstance, older individuals have little social interactions due to the risk of contracting an infection when they interact with their family, friends, neighbours, etc. **The purpose of this programme was to support individuals in overcoming feelings of social isolation, sustaining social connections, and sharing their emotions.**

ACTION

The intended audience for the show was mostly lonely persons who felt alone and longed to connect with someone (mainly senior citizens, but also people in at-risk groups such as patients with chronic and oncological diseases and people with cardiovascular and respiratory problems). The programme took a one-on-one strategy, pairing up volunteers with lonely people to ensure an individualised approach, improved mutual understanding, and consideration of the person in need. The volunteer frequently called a particular person (three times a week). We gave social work students the chance to finish the programme in place of a paid internship, which they were unable to do during the summer semester. The program's pedagogical objective was to foster client communication skills, empathy, and social and personal responsibility. These represent some of the essential competencies for a social work graduate.

Students were chosen for the programme after being recruited based on a registration form that was completed and an introduction interview. After the interview, they took part in an online training session. Client and student pairs were gradually formed after the training. The major assignment for the students was to make phone calls to lonely people at least three times per week, always on their own initiative. Every week, students completed a form detailing the calls they had made. These also included a succinct review and assessment of client interactions. A lecturer from the Department of Social Work was given the responsibility of being each student's tutor.

The curriculum also required group supervision, which was designed to help participants reflect on their interactions with clients in difficult circumstances. Three months of working in the programme were scheduled after the training course. Students took part in the final online supervisory group meeting of the programme. Additionally, they had to complete the final written self-reflection and evaluation questionnaire, as well as wrap up the collaboration with the clients. After the partnership term ended, evaluation interviews with the clients were also undertaken.

RESULT

A total of 12 social work students participated in the programme from May to July 2020. Out of the 14 consumers that expressed interest in it, 12 people ultimately participated. With an average of 348 minutes per student, the students made 4,178 minutes of calls. The programme did not complete the requisite number of hours for professional social work practise in the field or facility, but the evaluation showed that it had achieved the required educational and service objectives.