

Mental health community joins WHO/Europe for 2-day consultation on reform



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WHO/Europe recently connected mental health representatives from over half of the WHO European Region's 53 Member States to ignite action on mental health. A 2-day consultation working towards comprehensive reform of the Region's mental health systems involved more than 150 attendees from as far afield as the United Kingdom in the west to Kyrgyzstan in the east.

Participants consulted virtually over topics ranging from the use of digital mental health services to plans on reforming mental health care financing. Panellists emphasized the need to improve mental health literacy and to listen to people with lived experience of mental health conditions. Mr Nikolay Negay, a mental health consultant for the WHO Country Office in Kazakhstan, stressed the powerful effects of stigma on mental health and development.

Mental health has been a rallying point for countries in the Region in recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed numerous gaps in mental health systems. In 2021, WHO/Europe answered these calls with a plan for comprehensive mental health reform in national health systems over the next 5 years. This consultation was an initial foray into the process of turning that plan into action.

The consultation tested the Pan-European Mental Health Coalition, the expansive collaboration WHO/Europe launched to enact the European Framework for Action on Mental Health 2021–2025. The Framework was enthusiastically endorsed by all Member States at the 71st session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in September 2021.

Over the course of the 2 days, over 30 panellists discussed how to implement the Framework's 3 core themes: transforming mental

health services; integrating mental health into emergency preparedness, response and recovery; and promoting mental health for all ages.

The Coalition will hold its first official meeting in the first week of May 2022, with plans to develop and pilot 3 of its 6 work packages by the year's end. Related work in 2022 will include the launch of a new programme addressing the mental health of children and adolescents at the WHO Athens Quality of Care Office in March, a youth forum on mental health in Albania in June, and a series of events on transforming mental health services in the Western Balkans and the northern Mediterranean in June and September 2022.

“What was conceptualized more than 2 years ago when we were designing the European Programme of Work – making mental health a flagship of this office – is now materializing into a network for sharing experiences and resources,” said Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, in his opening statement.

Meanwhile, mental health advocate Mr Neil Kelders urged attendees to remind themselves of what they could do and take action, because “if you change nothing, nothing changes”.

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