

Positive Practices in Disability Inclusion

“Taking a team approach”: Overcoming barriers, starting with attitudes

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Lebanon and its partners are strengthening community-based approaches through a network of community centers across the country. Thirty-four community centers throughout Lebanon are now providing services and assistance to both Syrian and Lebanese communities. These centers are also promoting inclusion and reducing the social isolation of persons with disabilities.

At the Caritas-supported Community Center in Rmeileh (Mount Lebanon, Southern District), social workers, case managers and other key staff members are creating opportunities for children and adults with disabilities to participate in program activities, including psychosocial activities, mind-stimulating games, support groups and livelihood activities.

The staff members at the Caritas center are passionate about including persons with disabilities, as they recognize the positive impact that well-facilitated disability inclusion can create for all beneficiaries. Rami, a social worker who facilitates activity groups for children, explains: “The more diverse and unique the children are in the group, the more interesting the groups tend to be for everyone. Most of the children with disabilities who come to us usually do so with their siblings; this seems to work well. I always try to highlight what it is they are good at and encourage them in those activities.” Manal, the center’s senior social worker, added: “The young people with disabilities who are participating in group activities have shown positive changes in their attitudes and self-esteem. They now show more willingness to participate in the group.”

Caritas staff are increasingly consulting with persons with disabilities and their family members on ideas for programming, such as designing specific activities, ways to facilitate these activities and solutions for different barriers encountered. Persons with disabilities,

parents, siblings, cousins and friends can all play a role. Though the center is on the second floor and challenging to access, the staff has developed a number of strategies to overcome these barriers. They work to identify those who are socially isolated and would benefit from assistance with transportation to and from the center. In certain situations, they mobilize young people to travel in groups or pairs when traveling to and from the center. This strategy is used to encourage children with disabilities, who may have a difficult time traveling alone, to be able to participate. Refugee volunteers are also mobilized to assist people with mobility issues to come up and down the stairs in the center building.

The staff at the center promote a family and community-based approach when they are working with persons with disabilities. Instead of only working from an individualized perspective, the team also works closely with parents, caregivers and other family members to ensure that they, too, feel well supported. Family members are encouraged to engage in a number of activities at the center, including support groups, positive parenting sessions and life skills sessions. The center hosts community sensitization events to raise awareness about disability and ensure



Kids Club, where children with disabilities are included in the activity

that family members are an active part of decision-making at the center.

Amir, the father of an 18-year-old boy with an intellectual disability, whose family regularly attends the Rmeileh Community Center, said: “We feel welcome and like we are family here. My son has a strong connection with his social worker. He likes her because she consistently makes an effort to communicate and engage with him. She always includes him in recreational and social activities, which he really missed when we first arrived here from Syria.”

By mainstreaming activities, young people with disabilities are making friends in their new environment and building up their network of peers, restoring their self-esteem, increasing their capacity and resilience and enhancing their life skills. Children and young persons with disabilities are showing others their skills, talents and abilities and the artwork produced by these children hangs proudly in the center.



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Key messages

- **Work with the entire family:** Engagement of the wider family unit is a critical component to successful inclusion of children and young persons with disabilities in community center activities.
- **Strengthen the support network of persons with disabilities:** The vast majority of persons with disabilities who are attending community centers do so with a family member, friend or support person.
- **Target transportation assistance:** Many refugees with disabilities and their care-givers who are regularly accessing services at community centers are able to do so because they are receiving some level of assistance for transportation. The benefits of transportation assistance can be significant, particularly for those who are extremely isolated or face serious obstacles in movement.
- **Consult with the individual and their family on reasonable accommodations:** Persons with disabilities and their families are the best people to advise on adaptations to facilitate their participation and inclusion. Most adaptations will not require resources or expertise. Often by simply being creative and working closely with the person with disabilities and their family members you can come up with a number of helpful ideas on how to improve their access and inclusion.

Additional Resources

UNHCR (2011) *Need to Know Guidance: Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement*. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4e6072b22.pdf>

Women's Refugee Commission (2013) *Disability Inclusion in the Syrian Refugee Response in Lebanon*. <http://wrc.ms/1qCJypp>

Women's Refugee Commission (2014) *Disability Inclusion: Translating Policy into Practice in Humanitarian Action*. <http://wrc.ms/DisabilityInclusion>.

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) has been partnering with UNHCR Lebanon on disability inclusion since 2013, conducting field visits to identify strategies to promote access and inclusion for persons with disabilities in humanitarian assistance. These positive practices were identified in the WRC's third field visit to Lebanon in May/June 2014. More information is available online at: http://wrc.ms/disab_inc_Leb.

For more information, please contact:

Betsy Sherwood, Disability Program Officer,
Women's Refugee Commission:
betsys@wrcommission.org

Rami Taleb, Social Worker, Caritas's Rmeileh
Community Center: rtaleb@caritasmigrant.org.lb
+961 76 047875