

Summer Volunteering Program Gothenburg

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15 years ago the Summer Volunteering Program in Gothenburg, Sweden, started. This program offers volunteering opportunities for teenagers in their final years in high school. We've interviewed Marie Falk to tell us more about the program. Marie is the Gothenburg South-West area youth developer.

How did the program Summer Volunteering in Gothenburg start and what is it about?

Voluntary activities are an important driver in active citizenship and integration in Sweden. So we encourage volunteering from a young age. It's been 15 years now since we started running the Summer Volunteering Program in Gothenburg.

Young people in their final years of high school can apply for three weeks of volunteering work. They can choose in which area they want to work, for example in a hospital, in public areas, gardens, kitchens, or with younger children. Every summer, we have around 100 volunteers over a three-week period. Summer vacation in Sweden lasts for nine weeks, so it makes up for three cycles of these young volunteers working.

The goal is to develop and prepare them for the different tasks needed in diverse projects across the district. The volunteers also oversee the activities for younger kids. We always have a group who manages the creative activities, then there is a group who works with the beneficiaries.

The program needs to make sure that everybody has the same work opportunities. We have youth coming from all levels of society: from poor areas and rich areas, but there are also young people with disabilities and LGBT+ youth who volunteer. It's a very diverse program.

There is always a group of volunteers whose main task is to cook for the whole team. Another group is in charge of sports and outdoor games. Everyone connects during play time and meal time. Every group of volunteers has a coach who is 18 years old and at the end of the day, they have a session where they reflect on what they've learned. They discuss what went well in the day, and what are the things to improve the next day. Communication is very important for all these different groups.

At the end of the program we have an evaluation session. Each participant can then talk more about what they've learned and how the experience was for them. Volunteers get a recommendation letter, and their work counts towards work experience. We believe that they can benefit from it further when applying for their next job. So, this is a win-win program. The city gets plenty of help during the summer and at the same time, the young people get skills and experience for the job market.

One of the concepts you presented in Romania talked about promotional youth work. This is the type of work you do, as opposed to preventive one. Could you explain us the difference or the characteristics of these?

Promotional youth work is key to the Swedish youth work. We believe that if we're successful at promotional youth work, then it has a preventive effect. Promotional youth work can also be described as universal preventive youth work.

Promotional youth work starts from treating every child, every youngster we meet the same. No matter where they come from, what their economic status is, their ethnic or social background, or any sort of feature. We believe everybody should get the same chance when they come to us to volunteer and acquire some new skills and work experience that take them further towards future work and career. So there is no typical targeting of the kids, for example the ones coming from poor or troubled areas of the city. We want youth to know that all they need to do is to apply for our program and they will get the opportunities to develop their interests, grow in the community, and learn a lot during that summer work.

The promotional youth work is therefore about the trust and a positive relationship between youth and youth workers where we as workers have positive expectations from the young ones. We believe in their responsibility and ownership of the assigned tasks. We also have coaches that work with the young volunteers and coach them on important questions, such as what they would like to do, what are their interests, in which type of work they would feel fulfilled and happy? We ask them: 'What are your dreams? How can we make them happen together'?

The emphasis in our promotional youth work is also in the feedback from the volunteers. After they complete the summer volunteering, we always discuss their accomplishments. Sweden has developed a method for recognition of informal learning. The method is called ELD (Experience, Learning, Description). It recognises learning acquired by young people through volunteering experiences. ELD is a dialogue and documentation process for identifying valuable skills, talents, and character traits shown through real-life experiences. Every volunteer uses ELD to reflect on their experience with us.

How has the EGL Charter played a role in this program and how did you use it so far? Do you use other tools for quality development?

The European Charter of Local Youth Work is fully integrated in our volunteering program. Youngsters are guided from the beginning to first get to know and understand the principles of the Charter so that they know what quality youth work means and what it is based on.

We especially focus on the sections of the Charter such as Core Principles and Youth Workers. Youngsters learn what the core principles of youth work are, that it's a values-based work with emphasis on empowerment, inclusion, and self-leadership. We go over each of the principles and tie it to the work in the field; we give practical information to the young people so that they can understand each principle in practice.

And the same goes for going through the Youth Workers section from the Charter. We talk about what makes a youth worker effective in the field, how to create a trusting and safe environment for youth, how to grow own competencies and so on. We also talk about different social groups, like LGBT+ groups or any potentially marginalised groups, so that they can understand how we can foster equal opportunities for everyone.

We also use the Logbook system so we can track a whole range of important information from year to year. For example, we can see that we carried out 613 activities in 2021-2022. That accounted for 1.571 hours and there were 10.135 participants in them.

Having all that info together with the qualitative checks allows us to naturally put up targets, and we measure the difference between years. What went well last year, what didn't? How can we improve the programs and projects? And what types of activities should we do more? The analysis serves us to plan our youth work while always considering the quality levels.

You're very conscious about the values of youth work at a systematic level. Can you tell us why it's so important? How is it ingrained in your everyday work? What are those?

It's true. Sweden has a long tradition of youth work, participation, and active citizenship among its population. Young people have always been regarded as valuable and important stakeholder for the development and growth of civil society. What has been one of the most important things for us is the identity of the youth worker and what youth work really is. The fact that youth work is financed by the municipality supports the value-oriented culture.

How has youth volunteering enriched the local youth work and what is the biggest impact of the program?

For the youngsters who are 15 and 16 years old, it's really their first work experience. Also, it's their first time being coached for that working experience. It's also a big exercise in interaction and communication, teamwork, taking responsibility, and ownership. It's an opportunity to have accomplishments and contribute to the municipality development and growth, participate, and have their voices heard and skills put to practice. And often, the youngsters haven't had any work before. So, it's their first interaction with work, tasks, and responsibilities. It's a lot of skills that they develop during their time with us. Some might think that three weeks is not a lot, but it makes a big difference

in their lives. It is exciting, challenging, and at the bottom line also very enriching.

And there's the collective, social impact as well. For the city, it's rewarding to have active youth who take responsibility for their neighbourhoods. Young people who work together to help build it, clean it, and to work with younger children. And for us, the youth workers, we get to coach them, prepare them, give them support and encouragement for their future careers. They also enrich us with their stories, diverse backgrounds, and their dreams and wishes for the future. The Summer Volunteering Program in Gothenburg brings together many generations and builds communities. We know it is a win-win program that ensures quality development of youth work, personal development at the level of the young person who is about to enter the job market, and further growth of the city.