PONT-ON: bridging the gap between mental health and youth work

Name of the organisation
OverKop Gent

Website of the organisation
OverKop Gent

Location of the organisation
Drabstraat 18, 9000 Gent, Belgium

E-mail address of the organisation
gent@overkop.be

Good practice aspect(s)/themes of youth work
- Diversity
- Non-formal education/-learning
- Lobbying/advocacy for youth work

Good practice category
A practice of processes and methods

Good practice aim & purpose
PONT-ON is a project that aims to bridge the gap between youth work and mental health care. The project originated from the organisation OverKop Gent, which is an open house for youngsters between 12-25. OverKop supports youngsters with a mixed methods approach in a cross sectorial cooperation between different youth work and mental health care partners.

We support youth workers who are facing challanges related to the mental health of the youngsters that they work with, their colleagues or themselves. We do this by organising free trainings, workshops and intervisions related to specifiic mental health topics, giving consultation to youth workers related to specific cases or general topics, and by refering them to the organisations with the right expertise to help then. We also work with mental health services to make them more aware of the opportunities and challanges youthworkers are faced with, and coaxing them to make their services easier to use by youth workers.

The PONT-ON project started as a small project with support of the local government in 2021. It was quickly picked up as a innovative practice and motivated the flemish government to allocate more resources to similar projects in the Flanders region.

Good practice description
PONT-ON reinforces the bridge between mental health and youth work in three ways:

- Free consultation tailored to youth workers giving advice on how to act in a certain case, which services are best suited to refer to, evaluating the next steps the youth workier can take, giving advice on how to reinforce the team of youth workers etc… The consultation is valued highly because it is based of the cross sectoral expertise of the OverKop partners (youth workers and mental health professionals)
- Monthly workshops, intervision on mental health topics, specific to the role of the youth worker (how to recognise the signals, how to handle the converstation, where the refer to). We have an open offer where any local youth worker can sign up for, but also give workshops tailored to an organisation.
- We connect youth workers and mental health professionals by speaking at events, informing both sectors of the advantages of a stronger collaboration and advising the city in policy making.

Good practice result & concrete effects
Even though the project is quite young, we note some positive outcomes:

- Youth Workers feel empowered to act when they have concerns about a person, and know better how to act.
- Youth workers are more likely to contact the expertise of a mental health professional when it is a familiar face that is easily accessible.
- Mental health professionals have a better understanding of what youth work entails, the role youth workers play as confidant for youngsters, and the benefits of working together.
- Youth workers get free training on topics that are relevant for them
- Youth workers feel supported when they are facing mental health challenges within their team

After a possitive evaluation of this small local project, the flemish government allocated funding to the OverKop Network to install similar projects spread across flanders.

Good practice chapter of the European Charter on Local Youth Work
Core principles of youth work