IUB HPER Professor Volunteers at Mental Health Institutions in Kosovo

While on sabbatical in November 2002, Bryan McCormick, associate professor of therapeutic recreation in the Department of Recreation and Park Administration at IU's School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (HPER) learned a great deal about the state of mental health services in the Balkans.

In a 2002 report condemning human rights abuses of people with psychiatric and mental disabilities living in institutions in post-conflict Kosovo, MDRI stated, "detention in Shtime usually means segregation from society. . . . People spend their days in inactivity, without any semblance of privacy, living in filth. . . . Many people spend their days sitting on benches, wandering the grounds, or sleeping on bare concrete floors." In addition to unhygienic conditions, the report cited inadequate staffing levels for general and medical care, neglect, sexual abuse, and violence.

Several factors combine to create the desperate situation at Shtime. The first among these is the inability for the recently-decentralized economy to support social services. Though Kosovo is a UN protectorate, foreign aid resources are disappearing. The number of organizations providing funding and services has decreased by a third, from 600 to 400, since the Balkan conflict ended in 1999. Among those that remain, resources are dwindling. These economic conditions are combined with an enduring stigma attached to mental illness, a mindset of shame among the families of the mentally ill, and the complete lack of training for mental health practitioners in Kosovo.

McCormick believes that with economic growth, slowly the situation will improve. As it does, the population will become able to place more value on quality of life for the mentally ill. Crucial to this will be the ability to care effectively for individuals with developmental disabilities and integrate them into community mental health structures, such as group homes. This will come, he adds, with the development of educational programs that support the training of direct care professionals.

Currently, high school education is the highest education level of people working with the 212 individuals residing at Shtime. Restraint and seclusion are the only tools that nurses and technicians have to deal with behavioral difficulties. These are at the base of the human rights concern expressed by MDRI.

"They have no concept of mental health counseling in Kosovo or any experience in the allied health professions such as occupational therapy or recreational therapy. Their lack of staff training and conditions for clients is reminiscent of the United States some 80 years ago," McCormick said. "They are facing a very challenging transition.
from total institutional care to community-based rehabilitation. It's just a totally different mindset."

"These problems are not unique to Kosovo," he added. "The need is similar in many of the Balkan states."

During his observation at Shtime, McCormick planned a training project that would meet the greatest need of the clients and caregivers at the institution. He conducted training in basic tools of behavior modification so that unskilled nurses and technicians would be able to deal more humanely with clients' behavioral issues and instructed them in the creation and use of activities to develop the skills of developmentally disabled clients. The training was attended by Shtime staff, as well as representatives of foreign health care assistance organizations.

Although conditions were depressing at times, McCormick says he wants to return. He is exploring the possibility of assisting in the development of a therapeutic recreation exchange program at the University of Pristina. In addition to faculty exchange, he says, "students can be valuable in the development of international mental health programs as well. We should be building international experience into therapeutic recreation programs, exposing students to the situation of people around the world, so they don't just see how things are in the United States. It would certainly provide the students with a greater perspective than what is available in the Midwest."

Therapeutic recreation specialists provide treatment services and recreation activities to encourage individuals with disabilities, illnesses, and other disabling conditions to recover abilities and socialize effectively. IU's School of HPER offers B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in therapeutic recreation, with an annual average of 10 and 3 students in the two graduate programs, respectively.

Although no formal international therapeutic recreation internship programs yet exist, this summer, one IU therapeutic recreation student will join McCormick's colleague Daniel Ferguson of Pittsburg State University, Kansas, on a fieldwork trip to Romania to work in an orphanage for developmentally disabled children and children orphaned by AIDS.

McCormick hopes that, in the future, academic internships and exchange opportunities can be created that will help students and professionals in the United States and abroad to respond to crucial mental health needs in critical world regions.

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With contributions from Richard Doty, IU Media Relations

For more information:
IU Therapeutic Recreation Program: www.indiana.edu/~iutr
International Organization for Migration: www.iom.int
International Organization for Migration, Kosovo: www.iom.ipko.org