



THE HEALTH MEDIATION PROGRAMME

SECTOR

Health and social services
for disadvantaged groups

COUNTRY

Bulgaria

LEAD ORGANISATION

[The National Network of Health Mediators](#) in Bulgaria, partner of the [European Public Health Alliance](#) (EPHA), Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health

CONTACT

Dilyana Dilkova, member of the Managing Board of the National Network of Health Mediators Association, Bulgaria,
d.dilkova@gmail.com



european public health alliance

DESCRIPTION

The National Network of Health Mediators (NNHM) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2007 on the basis of a health mediation project initiated in 2001. Its aim is to facilitate the link between members of disadvantaged and marginalised groups belonging to ethnic communities – particularly the Roma population – and health and social services and institutions. This is done with the help of “Health Mediators”, who are themselves members of the targeted community with the necessary language skills. Health Mediators are employed by municipalities that receive national public funding for hiring them. NNHM is governed by a Managing Board of nine members: five of them are practicing Health Mediators belonging to vulnerable Roma

communities, and four are experts and trainers.

Health Mediators spend most of their time carrying out work in the field with the people that they serve. In each neighbourhood they build contacts and collect information on people's health conditions. For example, they might identify children who are not subscribed to a general practitioner or with missed vaccinations, uninsured pregnant women, and chronically ill patients. The role of the health mediator is therefore crucial in ensuring medical follow-up for the most marginalised.

Their role is particularly important in Bulgaria; although Roma people constitute approximately 10% of the population according to unofficial data (about 5% according to official data), they are often treated unequally or openly discriminated against and segregated

because of their ethnic origin. Such discrimination is also reflected in the domain of health care, with some worrying practices such as segregation of Roma people in hospitals, or the reluctance of some general practitioners to add Roma babies to their patient list.

A SOCIAL INVESTMENT APPROACH

Several key aspects of a social investment approach are well reflected in this programme.

Firstly, NNHM endorses an inclusive approach. While it is generally up to patients to come to service providers, it had become clear that this logic was indirectly preventing vulnerable populations from having access to adequate health care in Bulgaria. By working with them on the ground, NNHM ensures that every individual is properly accompanied. The fact that Health Mediators belong to the community also reinforces the population's trust in the system, which is positive in the long term.

Secondly, the concept of prevention is at the heart of NNHM's work. This applies to child vaccinations or regular medical check-ups in cooperation with specialists, but the prevention work undertaken is also much broader. Health Mediators are encouraged to discuss sensitive topics with families, such as risks related to early marriage and early pregnancy, or the harm of early school leaving.

Thirdly, one of NNHM's objectives is to empower Health Mediators, as well as members of the

community as a whole. By appointing Health Mediators among members of the community who have graduated from secondary education at least, the aim is to send the clear message that school is an important inclusion instrument that enables people to integrate in society and the labour market. This is important since the Roma population often has the feeling that public administration is reluctant to hire people belonging to ethnic minorities.

The benefits of the service also cover several other areas: Health Mediators sometimes help people fill in job applications, make them aware of their rights with regard to non-discrimination, work with them on the issue of domestic violence prevention, and even discuss environmental issues with them. The objective is to empower individuals belonging to ethnic minorities and make them active citizens in society.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

The most tangible NNHM achievement is the prevention of the spreading of infections, such as tuberculosis, in the community. Thanks to hygiene recommendations and vaccination campaigns, high treatment and medication costs are avoided. General practitioners acknowledge that the Health Mediators' work increases the vaccination rate among vulnerable populations, including for non-obligatory vaccines.

Since the beginning of the project of health mediation in Bulgaria in 2001, about

350 Health Mediators belonging to Roma communities were selected, trained, and received professional certificates. The fact that the Bulgarian government decided to make this programme a national one in 2007 in order to ensure its sustainability proves that it has been a successful project.

In some municipalities, local hospitals have also decided to work in closer cooperation with Health Mediators who can help them establish better communication with patients belonging to ethnic minorities.

LOOKING FORWARD

The service could still be further expanded to more municipalities where the living conditions of vulnerable communities are not satisfactory in terms of health literacy and hygiene, or access to water and sanitation infrastructure. Given the diversity of communities and the necessity to take into account the specificities of each area, structures to support exchange of experience between Health Mediators, quality training and monitoring of the programme are extremely important. For the moment, this is only possible thanks to European and private funding, and long-term financial support will be needed in the future.

NNHM will also try to find ways to provide an accurate quality assessment of the results of the project in the years to come.