

**Mental Disability Advocacy Center on the WHO European Ministerial Conference
on Mental Health: a follow-up**

18 January 2005

The World Health Organisation (WHO) European Regional Office, in conjunction with the European Commission and the Council of Europe, held a major conference in Helsinki, from 12 to 15 January. More than 400 participants came together from the Region, and what made the occasion even more historic is the presence of organizations of users, family members and the larger civil society.

As part of the conference an historic agreement was reached by health ministers and other government representatives from the 52 countries in the WHO European Region. The Mental Health Declaration and Action Plan for Europe was adopted on the 14th January.

The Declaration and Action Plan were also backed by physicians, psychologists and researchers, and supported by people who use mental health services and members of their families.

"These documents are not just fine words", noted Dr Marc Danzon, WHO Regional Director for Europe. "They summarize all that we have learned about what works in mental health - in treatment, care, promotion and prevention - and the protection of human rights. They are just a starting point, but they give a clear pointer to the way forward for mental health throughout Europe."

Executive Director Diana Beth Hoover, Legal Director Oliver Lewis and Advocacy Coordinator Gabor Gombos from MDAC attended and contributed to the conference. MDAC exhibited a poster on its Guardianship Project and copies of their reports. Gabor Gombos had a keynote presentation and also participated in a panel discussion on stigma, representing the European Network of (ex-)Users and Survivors of Psychiatry.

While MDAC supports the Declaration and the Action Plan, also underlines that there are gaps to be filled.

1. WHO Europe needs to commit itself to advancement of equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with mental health problems. Member States need to be made accountable in this respect. **WHO Europe should promote independent monitoring mechanisms in mental health**, with a particular emphasis on wide-spread abuses, such as arbitrary and unmonitored detention, inhuman and degrading treatment, right to self-determination, etc.
2. Legal aid should be made available to challenge human rights violations in mental health care.
3. Only health ministers committed themselves to the standards and actions expressed in the Declaration and Action Plan. Mental Health care is an intersectorial area, and many of the services are under the auspices of the Ministries of Social Affairs. There is a danger that that the number of long-term mental beds increase in social institutions, but remain unnoticed by WHO, which will misinterpret the change as successful deinstitutionalisation.