

House of Generations: a one-stop shop for providing health and social services in Schwaz, Austria

Overview

In Austria, changing demographics over time have shifted towards an ageing population and narrowing family structure. As a result of these changes, the Municipality of Schwaz observed a growing need for social support, notably for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, people with mental disabilities and young families of low socioeconomic status.¹ However, assistance with daily living and support services were not readily available in the community and health and social services in the Municipality of Schwaz were fragmented, hindering their ability to meet increasing demands. In 2006, the mayor for the Municipality of Schwaz put priority to resolving growing disparities by proposing a new model for health

and social services targeting lower socioeconomic status individuals in greatest need. In 2007, the House of Generations was opened as a “one-stop shop” for social, health, municipal and community resources. Private apartments within the house provide assisted living arrangements for the elderly and affordable housing for young families. Communal areas offer a chance for residents to interact, fostering community spirit through regular events such as craft workshops, educational seminars and seasonal festivals. Residents have also formed their own self-organized “helping hands” service to support each other in day-to-day life, whereby individuals exchange services depending on their strengths and capacities; for example, an older resident helping

a working parent to take care of their children in exchange for meals. Several additional facilities are available at the House, including a village shop, which hires and trains people with mental disabilities as a means to support their independence and develop their skills within a protected environment. A new municipal afterschool day-care centre and senior centre were also built onsite, providing easy access to these services for residents and linking the House to the wider community. At present, the House of Generations continues to grow its community and offer social assistance services in Schwaz. While no official evaluation has been conducted, residents report high satisfaction with House services and an improved quality of life.

Problem definition

In the early 2000s, mirroring national trends, the Municipality of Schwaz observed ageing population trends coupled with a narrowing of family structures. In response to changing demographics, municipal health and social services became increasingly demanded, particularly by vulnerable populations such as the elderly, individuals with mental disabilities and families of lower socioeconomic status. However, the fragmented

organization of health and social services within the municipality, coupled with a lack of coordination between the various actors involved, hindered the system’s ability to meet increasing demands and resulted in unmet health and social needs for vulnerable groups (Box 1).

Box 1

What problems did the initiative seek to address?

- Increasing demand for municipal health and social services linked to an ageing population with narrowing family structures.
- Increasing unmet health and social needs of vulnerable groups.

- Suboptimal organization of health and social services within the municipality causing fragmented services provision.

Health services delivery transformations

Timeline of transformations

During the early 2000s, municipal actors in Schwaz became aware of the need to strengthen social services provision for vulnerable populations. In response, the municipality worked in partnership with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Caritas Tyrol to develop an idea for a new centralized, integrated facility to provide for local health and social care needs (Table 1). In 2007, after a one-year planning period, construction began on the “House of Generations”. Two years later, in 2009, the House of Generations officially opened, welcoming its first occupants and beginning to offer services to the community. Since opening, there has been a gradual extension of services and activities offered through the House, which continues to expand today.

Description of transformations

Selecting services. The House of Generations provides assisted-living apartments for the elderly and housing for income-eligible young families. In addition, a number of social support services are available

onsite for both House residents and the wider community. A village shop at the House supplies residents and the wider community with daily necessities. This shop also hires and trains employees with mental disabilities, helping develop their work-related skills in a supportive environment. A “living room” in the House of Generations is a registration-based service offered to elderly residents as a social space to interact and receive a midday meal. This service also offers activities such as access to mobile salon services and computer skills coaching. The living room further serves as a respite care facility for family caregivers and offers professional nursing and social care services. The municipal senior centre is also located onsite and provides a space for senior citizen associations and clubs to host events, bringing elderly people together for social interaction, lectures, music, exercise and games. An onsite municipal day-care centre provides afterschool care with a nutritious meal for children between the ages of six and 12 for a small fee. Part of the day-care centre also operates as a gymnastics room, which is open to the public in the mornings and is rented out for community sports activities available to all residents in the House and community.

Designing care. The House maintains rules for keeping a respectful, safe and harmonious

living environment for all residents. Protocols and guidelines for providers remain under the regulatory direction of the regional government.

Organizing providers. Previously dispersed health and social service providers have been co-located in the House of Generations, including general practitioners and social workers. Each have offices on the premises and are connected to the House via service contracts. Co-location has improved communication, collaboration and coordination between groups. The manager for the House of Generations assists in the coordination of house services and activities by serving as a contact for both providers and residents. The House manager also motivates and mobilizes residents to participate in organized House activities, thus ensuring they are engaged with the services provided.

Managing services. Resources within the House of Generations include 19 assisted-living apartments, eight apartments for families and several communal facilities such as the day-care centre, senior centre, village shop, conference spaces and providers’ offices. Working on a nonprofit principle, all financial gains are reinvested back into the House. The House is managed by a steering committee led by the Municipality of Schwaz and the Regional Government of Tyrol. Annual reports and regular meetings with all providers and municipal partners help ensure services continue to operate smoothly.

Improving performance. The initiative is monitored through an annual municipal report delivered to the steering committee and regular feedback surveys submitted to House residents. Information from these sources inform changes the following year. Residents are also free to contact the House manager with concerns, questions or requests as they arise.

Table 1

What were the chronological milestones for the initiative?

2006	Idea for House of Generations developed between Municipality of Schwaz and Caritas Tyrol in response to changing demographic pressures.
2007	Construction of the House of Generations begins.
2009	House of Generations officially opens and first tenants move in.
2010–present	Amenities available at the House of Generations gradually expanded.

Table 2

How was the delivery of health services transformed through the initiative?

Before	After
Selecting services	
House of Generations not in operation.	House of Generations offers a wide range of services including assisted living, affordable housing, day-care facilities, a senior centre, education sessions and social events.
Designing care	
House of Generations not in operation.	House rules require residents to maintain a respectful, safe and harmonious living environment.
Organizing providers	
Multiple actors providing health and social services through separate municipal agencies and NGOs; disconnect between providers due to separate offices and service contracts, limiting communication.	Co-location of providers at the House has increased coordination and communication; residents have easy access to onsite providers and some mobile services available; House manager helps link residents to providers as needed.
Managing services	
House of Generations not in operation.	House facilities include 19 assisted-living apartments, eight apartments for families and several communal facilities; steering committee led by the municipality manages the House, with day-to-day running overseen by the House manager; annual reports and regular meetings help ensure services operate smoothly.
Improving performance	
House of Generations not in operation.	Resident feedback surveys and annual municipal reports help improve service provision.

Engaging and empowering people, families and communities

The House of Generations’ aims to develop a new, integrated home that spans generations, incomes and individual capabilities. In its very design, the House of Generations not only engages and empowers families and communities, but also sees them as the cornerstone of all activities. By accommodating its various residents under one roof, the House works to simulate an extended family within a constructed village-like environment. Through daily encounters, residents can learn from and support one another in day-to-day living. Through the creation of a friendly neighbourhood setting, the House promotes tolerance and understanding between generations

and helps counteract social isolation and loneliness. Similar to a village, the House also engages with outside communities. Non-residents are able to benefit from services such as the municipal afterschool day-care centre, senior centre and village shop, as well as attend special events.

Health system enabling factors

The Austrian health system operates with a high degree of delegation to regional bodies, each of which is responsible for the overall planning, governance and financing of health and social services. The structure of regional funds give equal representation to health and

social services, which is intended to increase cooperation between these sectors.² Municipalities in Austria are responsible for offering services such as care for children and seniors. As the House of Generations operates as a standalone service, formal policy changes outside the Municipality of Schwaz have not yet been required to support this new model of services delivery. However, municipal leadership for the initiative has been met with support and guidance from the Regional Government of Tyrol.

Outcomes

The House of Generations has become a vital meeting point and social interaction space for the

whole municipality. House residents and the wider community report satisfaction with services provided and a high quality of life. However, no official evaluation of the initiative has taken place to date.

Change management

Key actors

The open-mindedness of the mayor to take a new approach for the delivery of health and social services in Schwaz was a key driver of the initiative. Together with the NGO Caritas Tyrol, the municipal government defined the concept for the House of Generations and took action to realize its development (Box 2). Management of the House of Generations is overseen by a steering committee led by the Municipality of Schwaz, with strong support from the mayor and the Regional Government of Tyrol. Day-to-day running of the House is the responsibility of the House manager who acts as a point of contact for both providers and residents, helps develop a sense of community within the House and facilitates responsive services provision for House residents. Importantly, residents are also key actors in the initiative as the House relies heavily on their participation and involvement to function to its full potential.

Box 2

Who were the key actors and what were their defining roles?

- **Mayor and Municipal Government of Schwaz.** Led the push to restructure health and social services; co-financed the initiative along

with regional government funds and private donations; continues to oversee running of the initiative through a steering committee for the House.

- **Caritas Tyrol.** Nongovernmental organization providing social services in the region; assisted in the initiative's design; provides health and social services within the House of Generations.
- **House of Generations manager.** Oversees day-to-day running of the House and resident services; focal contact for House residents and providers.

Initiating change

The necessity to reduce fragmentation of services, coupled with a need to update infrastructure for the afterschool day-care centre, led to a municipal-level meeting to discuss these issues. The idea for the House of Generations emerged from this meeting. Clear aims for the initiative were laid out and the adoption of a long-term approach at the local-government level enabled sustainable planning for proposed changes and created a clear framework for the initiative's design and management.

Implementation

The House of Generations was newly built, partly using an existing facility but making necessary architectural adaptations to fit the needs of the service. Successful running of the House relies largely on the cooperation and goodwill between

House residents, supported by the House manager. Volunteers assist in providing certain services to residents.

Moving Forward

The House of Generations continues to foster a sense of community among its residents and work to provide them with services to support their overall health and wellbeing. The concept has also inspired other municipalities in Austria, Slovenia, Bavaria and Southern Tyrol to develop similar models.

Highlights

- Co-location of services increased coordination and improved access for vulnerable groups.
- Having a leader who was able to partner effectively with municipal and regional politicians and clearly communicate the idea behind the initiative was key to its successful development.
- Creating a sense of community through a shared living space, group activities and cooperative initiatives fostered a supportive and inclusive environment for vulnerable groups.
- Involvement from the community, both from House residents and the broader public, was necessary for the initiative to become a new hub for community services.

1 World Health Organization. (2015). *European health for all database*. Retrieved from <http://data.euro.who.int/hfad/b/>

2 Hofmarcher, M., & Quentin, W. (2013). Austria: Health system review. *Health systems in transition*. 15(7): 1-291. Retrieved from http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/233414/HiT-Austria.pdf?ua=1