



Located in northern Europe just outside the Arctic Circle, Iceland – population 320,000 – enjoys a surprisingly temperate climate despite its high latitude. Warm North Atlantic currents create rising temperatures along the Icelandic subpolar coastline. The country's annual lows reach about 1.9°C (35.4°F) and summer highs in July and August are in the 13°C (55°F) range.

The Northern Lights provide a shimmering backdrop to Iceland's dramatic landscape shaped by volcanic eruptions and carved by glaciers. Settled by Vikings 1,100 years ago, Iceland retains a Norse heritage visible in 19th Century turf churches in Iceland's capital and largest city, Reykjavik. For more on Iceland, please go to www.visiticeland.com.

Photo L to R: Ingibjörg Thórhallsdóttir, Education Coordinator, VIRK; Vigdis Jónsdóttir, Managing Director, VIRK; and Wolfgang Zimmermann, Executive Director NIDMAR

Iceland Joins the IDMSC



The European island nation of Iceland joins 15 other countries around the world in becoming part of the International Disability Management Standards Council (IDMSC), through its licensing arrangement with the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) for the delivery of the 25-module educational program leading to the designations of Certified Return to Work Coordinator (CRTWC) and Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP). The Icelandic Vocational Rehabilitation Fund (VIRK) signed the license agreement in September 2010 and has begun the three to four-year process of educating its current complement of 23 vocational rehabilitation counsellors to the professional standards of the IDMSC.

At one of the breakout sessions of the International Forum in Disability Management (IFDM) 2010 in September in Los Angeles, VIRK Managing Director Vigdis Jónsdóttir and Education Coordinator Ingibjörg Thórhallsdóttir presented "Breaking the Barriers to Work, the Icelandic Organizational Model of Vocational Rehabilitation," which provided attendees with a comprehensive overview of this dynamic organization. Formed in 2008 to "systematically reduce the likelihood that workers will withdraw from the labour market due to permanent disability," VIRK is unique in that it is founded by parties to the labour market, and funded by operating capital pledged through a tripartite agreement between union pension funds, employers, and the state.

In Iceland, 80 percent of workplaces are unionized. All the principal public and private sector unions, public sector employers, and Confederation of Icelandic Employers participate in VIRK, and broad consensus has been reached on the future development of vocational rehabilitation service delivery in the country.



Currently, the Icelandic Fund's priorities are to manage, monitor, and support the vocational rehabilitation counsellors employed by Iceland's trade unions' "sick-pay" funds, and to assist individuals in need of vocational rehabilitation services. Priority is given to early intervention and vocational rehabilitation measures on a variety of fronts, encompassing everything from medical treatment, physical therapy, and psychological counselling to fitness and nutritional consulting. Services provided by VIRK are free to employees and accessible through their trade unions.

VIRK operates under Iceland's current legislative climate, which does not specifically cover return to work; however, workers are protected by legislation concerning the rights and responsibilities of both employees and employers in a safe and protective working environment. The state has also legislated the rights of people to be in unions, as well as the responsibility for employers to prevent illness in the workplace and promote health. Like many other developed countries around the world, Iceland has experienced a steep increase in disability beneficiaries during the last decade.

A focus on the capacity to work

Addressing this trend, VIRK is making progress on its future vision for vocational rehabilitation in Iceland, with an emphasis on "the capacity to work, not the incapacity." VIRK's consultants also work with Vocational Rehabilitation Centres around Iceland many of which base their services on the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci pilot project "Social Return" and embrace its ideology of empowerment and social inclusion.

The Social Return pilot focuses on "holistic and multidisciplinary rehabilitation...for people with specific needs and those with restricted employment capabilities or possibilities." The pilot is particularly relevant to the northeastern areas of Iceland where isolation is a factor contributing to the 6.6 percent of the local population who are disabled or chronically ill; this compares with a figure of 5.6 percent for the rest of Iceland.

VIRK reports that since it was formed, more than 1,400 people have received assistance from vocational rehabilitation counsellors attached to Iceland's trade unions, with demand for services constantly rising. Good results have already been achieved and trade union members have responded positively to the services they've received. The organization is well-established to take the next step in its development through adoption of the NIDMAR curriculum.

Curriculum provides flexibility

During VIRK's first year of operation, says Jónsdóttir, "We focused on how to develop our policies, work processes, and the role of our counsellors so they could start serving the people in need of their services." She adds that the organization also put a lot of effort into informing its most important stakeholders about its work by publishing brochures and leaflets, speaking at meetings, and writing in newspapers and professional journals.

"We see changing norms and attitudes as a marathon and not as a short sprint. It takes time and we have only started. Our priority now is to change the attitudes of the persons in need of our services: employers, health professionals, and the unions." A major step along the way of achieving that goal is to ensure the quality of services delivered by VIRK's vocational rehabilitation counsellors meets a high international standard.





Jónsdóttir explains that the Fund made the decision to adopt the NIDMAR curriculum, because it was adaptable for use in Iceland and offered educational depth for vocational rehabilitation counsellors beyond their current role. “Although we have a tradition of vocational rehabilitation in Iceland, there has not been a lot of emphasis on return to work. The emphasis has been more on long-term educational interventions. We wanted to change that orientation and help our consultants develop a framework of work-related disability management.”

VIRK now has 23 vocational rehabilitation counsellors, with plans to educate them using the NIDMAR curriculum over the next three or four years. “We want them to be prepared for their complex roles in consultancy. We see the applicability of the NIDMAR modules for providers of vocational rehabilitation, as well as using selected modules to change attitudes amongst health professionals, employers, and others.”

Jónsdóttir notes, however, that educating others is a secondary priority for the moment. “Right now we have our hands full trying to educate and train our own consultants and adapting some of the modules to our work and legislative environment.”

As part of the process of change, Jónsdóttir sees the NIDMAR modules as an avenue to help VIRK vocational rehabilitation counsellors further develop their skills as effective case managers, and to help the Fund achieve its goal of decreasing the probability of employees leaving their jobs due to injury or long-term illness.

VIRK plans to offer the CDMP and CRTWC exams in the future, both for its own consultants and for employees at its cooperating partners, including those at the Vocational Rehabilitation Centres around the country.

For more about the Icelandic Vocational Rehabilitation Fund, please visit: www.virk.is/page/english.

