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Østfold County, Norway

Old town in Fredrikstad

General overview

Located in south-eastern Norway between Oslo, the capital, and Sweden, Østfold County has a population of about 293 000 (5.6% of the total of Norway) and a population density of 70/km² (1). It covers an area of approximately 4000 km² (5.6% of the country) and has a total of 18 municipalities (2). The administrative seat of the County is Sarpsborg. With its highways, railways and ports, it is a transport hub in Norway.

Norway is a well-developed welfare state in which overall public health is good. Life expectancy in Østfold County is 79.3 years for men and 83.1 years for women (averages for 2010–2016). This is below the averages for the country, which are 79.6 years and 83.7 years for men and women, respectively. Compared to the other regions in Norway, Østfold County has more public health challenges. Historically, the region was highly industrialized: hence, the overall education level there is lower, fewer people are in paid employment, and there are more health problems than in other regions (3). For many years, the County has prioritized public health work at the political level.

The Norwegian Government is responsible for providing health care to the population in

accordance with its stated goal of equal access to health care regardless of age, race, gender, income, or place of residence. Responsibility for primary health and social care lies with the municipalities, the Ministry of Health and Care Services playing an indirect role through legislation and funding mechanisms. The Ministry plays a direct role in the provision of specialist care through its hospitals and directives to the boards of the regional health care authorities. Responsibility for public dental care lies with the county councils in the country.

As regards publicly financed health care, in 2015, health expenditure represented 9.9% of the gross domestic product, slightly above the 8.9% average for countries participating in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Norway ranks highest among OECD countries in terms of absolute expenditure per capita (NOK 60 000, or US\$ 6122.1, in 2015); public financing (85% of this expenditure), which is covered through national and municipal taxes, is universal and automatic for all residents (4). Social-security contributions finance public retirement funds, sick-leave payment, and, for some patient groups, reimbursement of extra health-care costs.



Strengths

Among the strengths of Østfold County are:

- ✓ the Norwegian statutory foundation for public health at all levels;
- ✓ Norway's labour law, which secures the rights of workers to influence their own working conditions;
- ✓ innovations in the field of health profiling at the international level;
- ✓ a successful public health approach, which has attracted attention at the national level;
- ✓ the County's participation in national pilot schemes to test new methods of health promotion.



Aspirations

The Østfold County is aiming to:

- ✓ increase knowledge about public health work and create innovative solutions relative to this area;
- ✓ participate in networks and joint projects;
- ✓ tackle the social determinants of health and social inequality in environment and health, and to enhance urban health.



Challenges

These include:

- ✓ the small size of the County, which limits its capacity to work internationally;
- ✓ social inequalities in health;
- ✓ the need to invest more in public health at the community level;
- ✓ the lack of tools and authority at the county level to handle regional development;
- ✓ the necessity for people outside the labour market, or with lower incomes, to move from Oslo to areas with lower housing costs, such as Østfold;
- ✓ the lack of jobs in the County for highly educated persons, resulting in the emigration of skilled, well-educated individuals;
- ✓ the decline in the proportion of people with high levels of education and income, resulting in fewer tax payers and high social-welfare costs.

Potential areas of collaboration

Østfold County is interested in:

- ✓ forming public health partnerships aimed at resolving wicked problems;
- ✓ collaborating on finding ways of reducing health inequities at the regional and local levels;
- ✓ setting up statistics-based profiles that provide an overview of health in the region;
- ✓ participating in joint projects, for example, under programmes funded by the European Union (EU).

Working groups

Østfold County is interested in participating in working groups on:

- ✓ participatory approaches/resilience;
- ✓ the all-of-government approach/intersectoral action;
- ✓ the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (5)/ equity.

People active in the Regions for Health Network (RHN)

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