ELRUM – a facility for rehabilitating people with electrohypersensitivity

The ELRUM facility operated for three years in Sweden. It let people with electrical sensitivities try various low-EMF measures to determine how to accommodate them in the workplace and at home.

Keywords: *electrical sensitivity, electrical hypersensitivity, ELRUM, workplace, accommodation, rehabilitation*

Accommodating people with electrical hypersensitivity (EHS) in the workplace can be difficult. One problem is that the sensitivities vary with the person and they often don't actually know what they need done to be comfortable in their home and workplace.

ELRUM was created to determine what each disabled person would actually need. That way a workplace would know in advance what the cost of accommodations would be and whether it was even feasible and reasonable to do.

The ELRUM facility was located in the town of Skelleftea in northern Sweden. It could house up to four or five people with EHS at a time. A typical stay lasted two weeks.

Gathering support

Martin Larsson worked for the government labor agency Arbetslivstjanster in Skelleftea. He was aware of several people with EHS who had trouble staying in the workforce.

In about 1998 he went on a field trip together with a couple of people with EHS to visit a private home that had been thoroughly renovated to be low EMF.

Seeing with his own eyes what was possible inspired Martin to come up with the ELRUM project. He then worked to bring in the support he needed. This included the two universities in Skelleftea and Lulea, the city of Skelleftea and a developer of apartment buildings (SKEBO). He was also able to get start-up funding, especially from the union SIF (which organized office workers).

The building

They used a regular two-story apartment building, which was located on the outskirts of town. The building was within view of both fields and forests. There weren't many cell towers back then, and smartphones, WiFi, etc. wasn't invented yet.

Upstairs were four or five apartments, while downstair were a set of rooms with different equipment.

Some rooms and apartments were highly modified and some were less modified. That way the people staying there could find out how much modification they needed.

The electric baseboard heaters were removed and replaced with hot-water radiators. The boiler was placed in a utility closet that was built next to the building. The electrical feed to the building came through this closet, where it passed through a shielded isolation transformer that blocked ground currents and dirty electricity.

Some of the apartments had a propane refrigerator and propane stove, as well as shielded electrical wiring in the walls. Some also had a relay that automatically disconnected electricity for the circuits that were not needed (and back on again when it sensed a lamp or such was turned on).

The staff

ELRUM had several specialists who worked with the EHS people. That included a physician, a psychologist, and technical specialists from the two universities.

The project was managed by the Arbetslivstjanster agency in Skelleftea.

Staying at ELRUM

Before any paying customers came, four people with EHS stayed in the apartments to test them out. One problem discovered was that some of them didn't tolerate the new furniture. The overlap with chemical sensitivities was not common knowledge back then.

People came from all over Sweden to stay at ELRUM. During the three years, 120 "guests" stayed there, of which 90% were women, according to one source (another estimates half that number). A typical stay lasted two weeks, but three weeks were common.

The guests lived in the upstairs apartments, where they could see how such modified places worked for them. During the day they met with the staff who helped them with advice and to set them up experimenting with the office equipment in the downstairs rooms.

The rooms downstairs simulated various office settings with IT equipment that was more or less shielded.

At the end of the stay, the staff wrote a report for each guest, detailing how they would need to modify their homes and workplaces.

Financing

The project had to finance itself through fees. The only subsidies were for the renovations at the start. Much of that came from the SIF union, which contributed half a million Swedish Kronar (about $80,000).

The cost of a two-week stay was 43,000 Swedish Kronar (about $6000). It was mostly paid by the unemployment insurance, but some employers paid in the hope they could keep an employee.

Closing ELRUM

ELRUM operated for three full years, from 1999 to 2002. Each year it ran a deficit. Not enough people came to stay. Perhaps the cost of a stay was too high, but it could not be reduced. So ELRUM was closed again.

Sources

Personal communication with Ulla E., who stayed at ELRUM.

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The *KOLLEGA* magazine was published by the SIF union.

More information

More articles about the history of electrical sensitivities at www.eiwellspring.org/ehshistory.html.