The aim of this research is to examine the position of the personal assistant system in Finnish disability policy. Since 1988, the Services and Assistance for the Disabled Act has made it possible to have financial support in order to hire the personal assistant. The aim of the support is to add the possibilities of disabled people to live at home. In 2006, 4548 persons were within the range of personal assistant system. The number is less than half of the potential customers, when about 10 000 persons have been estimated to have the need to personal assistant. The research is a qualitative case study research of two decades. The research has three parts: the literary part, the interviews and the results.

In the literary part, I review different models and ideologies of disability. I describe the development of the social model of disability both at the national and the international level. The roots of Independent Living ideology are searched in Finnish social policy. The first time the discussion concerning personal assistants appeared in Finnish disability politics was at the end of the 1970s. I also make comparisons between the Nordic countries: similar Nordic forms of assistant systems cannot be found. In Sweden, the assistant system has been developed on the basis of strong rights, which can be seen in the scope of the recipients and the financial resources.

 Altogether, I interviewed 65 persons in 11 focus groups. Those interviewed were severely physically disabled or mental health service users, social workers and workers with experience of open mental care. The interviews made up 337 written pages. In the analysis I used so called framework method (NatCen). The research questions were specific to the structure of the components of the legislation. The assistant system is based on the consideration of the municipality and its budgetary resources. The legal situation is therefore weak. The request to act as the employer of an assistant is also a structural feature of the Act.

As result of the research can be found that so far in spite of the legislation the personal assistant system is not meeting the needs of disabled people. The physically disabled people demanded to get the assistant system within the range of so-called subjective rights. The opinion means strong rights according to personal needs. The opinion underlines the political model of disability. The opinions of the municipal social workers were reserved. They stated that the assistant system ought to be changed first on the basis of centralized financial state support. One group of mental health service users had good experiences from workers in a day centre. The workers had helped them to relate to their own environment. The physically disabled underlined their role as employer to guarantee their self-determination. The mental health service users ought to have alternatives in the role of employer in order to get similar possibilities for the help they need. Assistant work with them can be compared to the work of a coach. The work together contributes to the rehabilitation ideology. The Independent Living ideology underlines working on those functions that the disabled person cannot do him-or herself. These different ideologies have to be taken into consideration when organizing the assistant system.

Avainsanat-Nyckelord-Keywords
disability research
disability policy
models of disability
personal assistants
mental health services -- users

Muita tietoja-Övriga uppgifter-Additional information