CHILDREN IN FOCUS – DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION UP TO NOW

 "You grow up somehow. You get habit to the fact that you don't growing up as other children, that you have to fight for. Uncertainty and constant changes as well as prejudice become your everyday. But never cope with the fact that you are denied love. The basic love, maternal love, parental love. There is nothing to compensate. No residential care educator, no foster parent or relative. Maybe it's the strongest feel, not when you're a kid, but now that you're at the start of independent living. When you need a job, home, security... Then you realize that you're all alone." [1]- Thus said one of thousands of boys and girls who growing up in residential care, and which belongs to 3% of these children who are in higher education.

Findings of the research[2] with children and young people who live in residential care confirmed the assumption that the way children perceive the needs of a very important indication of their specific position and subjective perception of themselves. In the residentional care for children has been observed vary weak dispersion and quality of social contact and interaction. Unidirectional cultural and social participation in the direction of children - community, not the community - children, reinforces the isolation of children and have consequences on their development. Also, in this study a very important observation is that all the children with the experience of family life to the term "missing" responded the same instructions - loved ones, family members, siblings, parents, and friends. None of these children to the mention of "missing" is not saying "what missing", but "who" missing. Children who have been in the residential care since birth, was a problem and discomfort to answer this question and to talk about this. Institutions played a significant role in taking care of these children, providing basic living conditions and catering for different needs that these children failed to satisfy in their biological families. On the other hand, institutions as such (primarily large-scale residential institutions) largely have negative effects on psychological and social condition and development of children, thus

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1 http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/reportaze/aktuelno.293.html:551778-Odrastanje-bez-roditelja-Borimo-se-za-nase-mesto-pod-suncem

2 "A Step towards Community: Trends and Characteristics of Institutional Placements of Children and Youth with Disability 2000-2011", Republic Institute for Social Protection, Belgrade, 2011

indicating that alternative care arrangements must be more widely implemented as soon as possible. [3]

Even though institutions are often established with good intentions, in the belief that this is the best way to look after children, evidence demonstrates that family and community based forms of care are more likely to meet the needs of children. Experience in deinstitutionalisation in a number of countries suggests that this process is beneficial to children, families, communities and governments.

So, do you ever ask yourselves how do children which life's task is not "to play and learn" live, who have to take over the whole care for their existence on their backs? The Government is responsible for care of these children and respect for their rights as well as obliged to provide the most appropriate conditions for their growth.

In the last 15 years in Serbian social protection system efforts are being made to transform social protection system from a model which relies on residential care towards a model based upon community-based services for children and families.

Deinstitutionalization in Serbia is managed as triple action - reducing the pressure on the institutional accommodation, reducing the number of beneficiaries residing in institutions and the development of local services.

Social services are considered as the most important factor in strengthening family capacities and keeping families together. These services involve strengthening family support and encouraging of life of children in a family environment. The aim is prevention of institutional placement and supporting family reunification, so long as this does not place the children at risk of harm or abuse.

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3 Ibid

The main reason for deinstitutionalization is the effect of institutionalization on child health, development and wellbeing. Numerous studies have documented the fact that children growing up in institutions often demonstrate delays in physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. The negative effects of institutionalization on children's health and development are explained through 'attachment theory', one of the most influential theories developed by John Bowlby in 1951.[4]

Children in institution and foster care

During the past decade, the Government of Serbia has undertaken numerous steps towards deinstitutionalization. The number of beneficiaries in residential institutions for children without parental care is constantly decreasing - in comparison to 2000 data, when the reform only just began, the number od children in residential institutions decreased by 31%. Total number of children in residential care in 2014 was 837.[5]

Graph 1. Number of children in residental and foster care[6]

The number of children under the age of 3 placed in residential institutions has also significantly declined. In 2014 the total number of these children was 31. This number decreased by 92% in comparison to 2000, which is the result that was largely contributed by the implementation of

4 Deinstitutionalizing and transforming children's services, EU Commission DAFNE Program, 2007

5 Republički zavod za socijalnu zaštitu, Beograd, *Deca u sistemu socijalne zaštite* 2014, Beograd, 2015.

6 Republički zavod za socijalnu zaštitu, Beograd, Deca u sistemu socijalne zaštite 2014, Beograd, 2015.

legal regulation prohibiting residential care for children of the youngest age (0-3). [7]

Serbia has no a large number of children in resdential care and based on the number of children in institutions ranks among European countries with the lowest rates of institutionalization.

Foster placements have many advantages. In addition to providing family-based care, a trained foster parent can also provide a role model of sensitive and positive parental care to the birth parents leading to the rehabilitation of the family.

Foster care is provided for children and youth up to the completion of the regular education or up to the age of 26, thereby providing care, protection and conditions for optimal development in a family environment. Total number of children in foster care in 2014 was 5205, which is 34% higher in comparison to 2000.[8]

New approach to family support - Family Support Worker

Family support services are community-based services that assist and support parents in their role as caregivers. Main goal of these services is to help parents enhance skills and resolve problems to promote optimal child development. Many different forms of support depend on the strengths and needs of the family. Family support programs may address the general population or target vulnerable groups. They can be comprehensive or focused on a specific goal.

During 2013, through the cooperation of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, UNICEF and Novak Djokovic Foundation, a pilot project was initiated in order to design and pilot the service of Family Support Worker as a service of intensive support to family. The service is being developed jointly by the partnership of five social care institutions: Republic Institute for Social Protection as the coordinator of the process of the designing and piloting, as well as the institutions for placement of children and youth.[9]

The purpose of the service is the development of family capacities to provide

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7 Source: Republic Institute for Social Protection, 2015

8 Ibid

for the safety of the child, as well as the conditions for his/her healthy development within the family. The aims of the service are:

- Prevention of the child's removal from his/her biological family;

- support to the child's return to his/her family;

- Prevention of child abuse and neglect;

- Development of the parents' capacities through acquiring new knowledge and skills in the fields of parenting, living skills, partnership and other relations.

This service helps families in creating safe and stimulating environment for the child's development and contributes to lowering the risk of family separation.

The service is designed to primarily address the needs of the families with moderate risk of neglect/violence/removal of a child, or those demonstrating realistic danger or the increased risk to the child's safety. The main method of work is based on the in-depth assessment of the family, by which family support worker designs the plan of working with the family.

The assessment used to be performed for the four critical areas:

- Living circumstances of the family *(housing, income, employment)*
- Basic needs – characteristics of the child/young person
- Characteristics, needs and specific behavioural patterns of the adults in the family
- Relations

Based on the fulfilment of the initial aims of the service provision, we are able to conclude that the rate of the service's success ranged from 62% in the field of promoting health, hygiene and nutrition, to 85% in the field of realising rights and obtaining documents necessary for their realisation. [10]

9S. Jović, S. Miloradović, Lj. Popović, *Analysis of the initial results for the family support worker service*, Republic Institute for Social Protection. Belgrade, 2015.

The fact that the service is really helpful to the beneficiaries is also recognised by the professionals employed in different community institutions: doctors, case managers, school psychologists.

The beneficiaries expressed their positive attitude towards the way of operation of family support workers. Major change inducing factors included the relationships created between family support workers and family members, as well as family support workers' expertise.

The relationship established with family support workers was described by the parents as full of respect, recognition and care. Thereby family support workers gained the trust of the families they worked with. As significant factors which stimulated changes in their families, parents also quoted accessibility, frequency of contact and persistence in the provision of the service.

Parents also found it highly important that the service was able to address their multiple needs, contributing to the achievement of sustainable changes. [11]

Family support worker can help also the families in which the relationships between the parents and children are disturbed. Result of these efforts included gradual establishment of the relationship between children and parents based on mutual respect and understanding, leading to a decrease in the risk of violence against, abuse and neglect of children. Working on familial relationships and development of parental skills, as well as mutual relationships, represents the most complex task of family support worker. Focus of work in this field was on family communication, its improvement, mutual understanding and acceptance of family members. The other important focus of the intervention was working on family roles.

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10 S. Jović, S. Miloradović, Lj. Popović, Analysis of the initial results for the family support worker service, Republic Institute for Social Protection. Belgrade, 2015.

11 ibid

When considering the service of Family Support Worker in the context of realising the child's right to live in the family, it can be concluded that this service leads to the decrease of the risk of family separation in cases when this risk is moderate or high. The service of Family Support Worker is certainly among the important services of intensive support to families and belongs to the range of necessary services intended for families. Thus it might prove to be a mode of support which is much cheaper for the state, yet more effective for families than the option of family separation.

Instead of Conclusion

Priority for the entire process of social welfare reform is to develop and improve the quality of services in local communities. Residential institutions, as the main stakeholders in the process of deinstitutionalization, are undergoing the process of transformation, and there are more and more of them focusing on the provision of services. Providing support for families with children is of great importance for ensuring children remain in the family.

Wider education, training and awareness raising initiatives are needed, targeting in particular centres for social welfare, local authorities, but also the media and the general public, in order to improve understanding about different forms of community-based services and what the process of de-institutionalisation entails. Related to this, a change of attitudes – from paternalism to partnership – is considered as key to making the process a success.[12]

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12 International Seminar on the Transition from Institutional Care to Community-based Services (Belgrade, 8 December 2014)