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Process of deinstitutionalization of children at risk in Bulgaria

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Abstract

In recent years in Bulgaria the type of institutional care for children at risk is changing giving priority to family and close to family environment. The will to implement this process of all involved responsible agencies, institutions and non-governmental organizations has found expression in a number of regulations, strategic and program documents, as well as innovative and successful practices. Economic, political and social changes that accompany the transition has led to new problems and exacerbated existing problems. Current study makes analyses of the national strategy for deinstitutionalization of children and concludes on important recommendations concerning national policy development. The policy should be based on the respect of child rights, norms, standards and principles of universality, indivisibility and nondiscrimination, while characterized by high sensitivity, flexibility and preparedness to meet the challenges. It is important and necessary to develop a policy that will not only offer appropriate care for children at risk in the short term, but will prevent similar problems in the future.

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1. Introduction

Deinstitutionalization is the process of replacing institutional care for children with care in a family or family-like environment in the community, not limited to the children leaving institutions. This is the process of preventing the placement of children in institutions, creating new opportunities for children and families to receive support in the community. It takes place on many levels [1]: working with families and professionals from social and close to it fields on prevention of abandonment and institutionalization of children with a view to the

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limiting and gradually cease of placing children in institutions and to support the reintegration of children in their native families; reform and work in the social welfare system for the implementation of programs for social support and protection to support the native and the extended family for the prevention of abandonment and encouragement of growing children in a family environment; provision of alternative forms of services and care in order to create opportunities for children to leave institutions or prevent their accommodation; promotion and development of adoption fostering care with a focus on development of services for children 0-3 years; engaging the public in the support to children leaving institutions and their social inclusion; putting children and families at the center of the work of all working with children.

The main principles as accepted by the National strategy "Vision for deinstitutionalization of children in Bulgaria"[1] are the following: actions to protect the interests of the child according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the guiding principle that the interests of the child should be placed above the interests of all others, including parents, potential adoptive parents, foster parents or staff of the institution; the family is the best environment for child development - all working in the field of de-institutionalization should have a common understanding about the negative impact that institutional care has on children and how important is child to grow in a family environment; social inclusion of children is paramount - it must be achieved by providing opportunities for all children to participate in all aspects of community life, incl. attending local kindergartens and schools and use local health, transport and other public services.

Some of the key factors that influence the institutionalization are: insufficient number of services for children and families that meet complex needs and uneven distribution throughout the country; lack of financial resources, which often resulted in the exclusion of families and placement of children in institutions; lack of developed system of alternatives to institutional care community-based; prevailing medical model to child's disabilities, according which the institution offer the best care for children; lack of inclusive social and architectural environment; changed patterns of family behavior that lead to an increase in illegitimate births and parents who provide care for children by their own.

The process of deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria enters its most important phase in 2014. It is the most important stage - the actual change for children from the specialized agencies and placing them in new services, supported by the implementation of projects that are working to implement the National strategy for deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria [1] and the action plan to it [2]. They are funded by European structural funds through operational programs and carried out by the State agency for protection of children, Social Assistance Agency at the Ministry of labor and social policy and Ministry of health. Despite investment, life of children in residential care is not getting better, neither quality services get better. Institutional organization of life can not meet the basic needs of children, and has a negative impact on their development and behavior. This, in turn, leads to further economic and social cost to society.

2. Peculiarities of the process of deinstitutionalization in Bulgaria: problems and perspectives

2.1. Background of the problem

Institutions for children are part of the legacy left by the totalitarian state, which established the policy based on the idea that the state is able to better care for children than their families. This policy continued for more than 40 years and left lasting traces on public attitudes and mentality of people in the country. Twenty years after the political changes, the institutionalization of child care in Bulgaria continues to be an unresolved issue that can not be explained only with the totalitarian past. The lack of clear political will to close the homes lead to their "reform" and "restructuring", which are often has been perceived as repairs of the buildings and did not lead to a significant change in the way of care and children's lives.

Not all establishments that provide care and shelter for children are defined as an institution. As institutions are identified those imposing strict life that do not provide necessary attention and individual care, vital for the

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