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## **Analytical Report on the Performance of the Support Network for Young People in Residential Services for Fulfillment of Their Individual Plans for After-care Life**

*"I believe that the support network should be just that – supportive. It needs to provide advice, adequate answers to the questions of young people and not to act for them instead. The support network is about giving courage to the young people that they can make it and about mentoring them along the path of their own choosing."*

*(Specialist from the services)*

*"It worked, I found a job. Such people must come to the small group homes, as they do everything possible to understand us, to speak with us about things we care and fear about."*

*(17-year-old boy)*

This report presents an analysis of the performance of the support network (SN) for young people in residential care in the cities and the districts of Sofia and Plovdiv, as well as Stara Zagora. The support network includes local labor offices, municipal structures, the Career Center in Stara Zagora and interns in Sofia.

The analysis of the support network was conducted on the basis of analytical reports of local institutions from the SN, the joint reflective meetings of the teams, as well as feedback from youngsters and specialists in the services alike.

### **I. Implemented activities**

The work of local SN focused on three key areas of support for young people related to their personal and professional development and preparation for the labor market and life in society after they leave institutional care. The three areas of support include employment, education and social activities, and assistance.

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Diverse activities with the youngsters and the people around them took place in each of these areas in the three regions for building coordinated supportive environment.

## 1. Employment

In the field of employment, the SN effected the following types of support:

- Group consultations on:
  - Promoting personal motivation of youngsters.
  - Activities and services provided by the Labor Office Directorate, more specifically the service ‘Counseling and mentorship after getting a job’.
  - Preparation of job applications, job interviews and meeting with employers. Writing up of curricula vitae and motivation letters.
  - Job habits.
  - Career orientation.
  - Sources for job vacancies when job-seeking – announced vacancies and other job-seeking methods.
  - Information on seasonal employment opportunities.
  - The importance of the labor contract and the snags of working abroad and in Bulgaria with dubious job conditions and in the gray economy.
  - Visits at the Labor Offices and meeting with the heads of the Labor Office Directorate and the specialists working with young people up to 29.
  - Group visits on the job with specific local businesses and services.
  - Working meetings with the municipal structures and businesses for temporary employment for students and young people. Temporary and part-time job vacancies were presented.
  - Job fairs.
- One-to-one counseling on:
  - Writing up of curriculum vitae.
  - Appropriate behavior and most frequently asked questions during a job interview.
  - One-to-one meetings with employers on specific job positions and possible recruitment.

## 2. Education

In the area of education local teams implemented the following:

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- Group and one-to-one counseling on:
  - Education skills and expanding them at school.
  - Information on specialties, professions, and profiled programs the young people pursue in local schools.
    - Obtaining levels 1, 2, and 3 of professional qualification in specialty of a profession (after grades 10, 11, and 12) and the difference between the different levels.
    - The dual education system (training while working) and the relevant local schools and specialties included in such an education system.
    - The distinction between vocational (professional) education and profiled training program.
    - Application procedures for young people raised in specialized institutions - the advantage they have with respect to admission for specialties of professions.
      - Discussions with the young people of their interests, abilities and preferences and specialties and schools that may be suitable for them.
      - Their current education and prospective application to universities.
      - Meeting with class teachers for support for specific students to cope with the lessons and keep them in school until completion of education.
      - Making available materials for career orientation, with information on professions and specialties in higher education.
        - Visit of the 2019 Panorama of Vocational Education and Career Orientation, Stara Zagora, where all vocational high schools in the town advertised to prospective students aspects and materials related to the practical training on specialties and professions.

### 3. Social activities, services and assistance

The support in terms of social services and assistance to youngsters included:

- One-to-one and group counseling on:
  - Interactions with families and extended families.
  - Possibilities for using different social services.
  - Risks of trafficking and violence.
  - Prevention of harmful influences and factors.
  - First encounter with the opposite sex and ways to impress the partner.
  - Ways of proper allocation of personal budgets and of savings from the salary.
  - Skills in the area of consistent behavior and standing by decisions made.
  - Preparation for independent life after leaving the institution.

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- Activities and services provided by the Social Assistance Directorate.
- Possibilities for getting an individual place to live after leaving the service: protected home, municipal housing, social housing, and student dormitory. The differences and similarities, advantages and disadvantages. Renting a place at market rates - individually or with roommates.
- Risks associated with looking for and renting a place at market rates.
- Societal attitudes and values, civil society roles.
- Visits to the offices of the Child Protection Department with the Social Assistance Directorate.
- Meetings with the services in municipality for counseling on housing policy and placement in municipal housing.
- Getting to know and visiting other social services, centers and facilities for promoting various skills and talents, free of charge extracurricular activities.
- Meetings at the regional library 'Zaharii Knyazevski' in Stara Zagora. Getting to know the services that are available in the Teen Zone - reading, staying over, use of computer, multimedia, table games, watching movies etc. One young person got free card for the library and was accompanied to select books there.
- Referring young people to community-based social services such as Centers for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, Centers for Social Support, Centers for Work with Street Children in view of specific educational and psychological needs.
- Additional measures such as hiking, athletic activities, exhibitions organized by Sofia Municipality.

The following activities were implemented **for coordination of the work** of all stakeholders involved:

- Initial introductory meetings between the children and their caretakers and the specialists from the SN.
- Diagnostics and analysis of the needs and deficits of each young person.
- Meetings with the personal mentors, caregivers, social services managers and social workers to discuss achieved results and to map new aspects of future work.
- Reflective meetings among the three SN.

## II. Outcomes of the work

### 1. Developments:

#### The perspective of the young people

- During both stages of the work of the SN the young people saw the role of counsels as mentors and agents facilitating job-seeking. The counsels were also perceived as mediators between the young people and the world of adults on the one hand and on the other between the young people in the outside world of the big city (lifestyle, institutions, employers, universities etc.).
- The young people who were older perceived the role of the SN in concrete pragmatic terms - finding a job and a place to live. For the younger children it was meaningful to communicate with people outside the

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small group homes in a setting in which confidentiality was assured. They also valued the opportunity to learn. For them the benefits were beyond immediate and pragmatic gains.

- The young people got satisfaction with the received tangible support (starting a job) but also from the sense that they themselves were able to make it. Alternatively their improved self-confidence served as a basis for a more realistic perception of themselves and the world around them.

In summary, it can be concluded that the expectations of the young people towards specialists that are external to the services evolved over the 10 months of work with the SN. In the first stage the concrete pragmatic expectations prevailed. During this stage counsels and youngsters did not know each other yet and probably the perception was influenced by the paradigm of 'children from institutions' versus 'civil servants.' As the work progressed the parties came to know each other and to cooperate with each other in order to meet the specific needs of the young people, hence the satisfaction with the interaction with people from the world of adults. Overtime the role of these specialists as intermediaries between the young people and the outer world became evident.

### **The perspective of the specialists working in the services and the specialists from the SN**

The SN has several extremely important functions:

- To help young people build trust in state institutions.  
- To support the teams in the services in engaging the young with meaningful activities as well as to convey new attitudes and know-how.

The specialist from the services realized that the work of the SN was a two-way street - on the one hand support was provided to the young people in terms of specific knowledge, skills and labor market mediation while at the same time the institutions themselves developed and honed their skills of interacting with this group.

- During the second stage of the study the young people were more confident in responding and were more detailed in their answers. This indicated that they had developed communication skills, self-esteem and clearer perception of their task in the project.

- The work with the SN had also a positive impact for counsels from the services. The communication of counsels with children made the former more aware of the issues the children felt strongly about, the specifics of their development, behavior etc. Also in the second month of interviews the personal mentors spoke more extensively about the results achieved with the young and demonstrated better knowledge of the available possibilities for support of external specialists.

- All the specialists from the services interviewed throughout both stages of the study assessed the work of the SN as adequate, useful and successful because of tangible outcomes (with an emphasis of finding employment) as well as because of the beneficial emotional impact for the young in terms of strengthening trust and interest towards the world beyond the services.

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All interviewed specialists believed that the sustained and coordinated work of the SN was extremely necessary as the young people without parental care braced up for independent life.

### **The perspective of the specialists from the SN**

- The young people really participated in the work on their own individual plan for development by suggesting topics they felt strongly about for the group discussions and the one-to-one counseling session with the specialists from the SN. This topic were primarily related to interactions with the family and peers and budget planning. This indicated that they felt included, their voice heard by adults, and empowered to assert themselves.
- The operation of the SN took place in a calm and protected environment of sharing and discussion, where questions were asked and personal stories and problems were analyzed. Such an atmosphere of friendliness, interest and desire to support on the part of specialists allowed the young people to acquire more knowledge and skills from the three areas of support.
- In the course of the work the young people became more and more self-confident due to the personal interest counsels expressed towards them as well as the fact of they cared about the future of every single young person.
- Among the most important achievement, according to the specialists, were the motivation to work on the part of young people along with the knowledge they acquired about the different ways to seek employment.
- Some of the deficits in the knowledge of the young people were mitigated, most of those being in the area of job-seeking, discipline and conduct at the workplace. The strengths and skills of young people made them more competitive on the labor market.
- Interaction among specialists from different institutions was evaluated as positive. Cooperation exists and it is driven by i) the motivation of each person involved to contribute according to his/her sphere of competence, ii) the respect for the valuable resources of counterparts in the network and iii) the realization that team work is more productive.
- Some of the young people got jobs.
- The one-to-one meetings with the young people revealed that their dreams and views were dynamic and tended to change quickly. Therefore the specialists focused on the overarching idea that success on the labor market was required for independent life and they nurtured motivation on that.
- After the close of the project the young people were bolder in their dreams, they had a broader horizon of their future, they were more articulate in expressing their wishes and more confident and open in voicing their opinions and putting forward argumentation.  
They have learned to build better relations of trust.
- They realized more clearly than before the importance of education as a goal in their lives.
- The work with the SN helped the young people have more trust in institutions and made them more competent in making use of their resources.

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- The visits to the SN had a positive impact on the management and staff of services alike. Professionals in the services in which the young people resided said that in everyday work they tended to overlook some topics that were important for the children and necessary for their lives outside the institution and that they would correct this.
- According to the members of the SN the benefit of the latter is providing an alternative model of relations both among the staff involved in different services and in the intra-service team itself.
- The young people are not well familiar with legislation and administrative procedures for a given socializing measure when they need to engage in one. When provided with a representative to accompany them in visiting various authorities, they felt more confident and managed better and subsequently would be able to navigate the system on their own. One of the young people (Yanko) is a telling example. Yanko started analyzing the different post-service housing options and the situation after a series of group and one-to-one counseling sessions.

## 2. Challenges:

### **The perspective of the young people**

- Some of the young people expressed dissatisfaction due to the failure to get immediate pragmatic benefits that they valued as important. Oftentimes these are young people below 16 whose recruitment is associated with a lot of legislative complexities for employers. In other words dissatisfaction came from not knowing the legislation which made it difficult for those young people to achieve their goals.

### **The perspective of the specialists from the services**

- The families were unaware what their children could achieve and hence they tended to pull them back. Parents did not have an opinion and strategy for the development of their children which was an obstacle for the work of the service teams and impacted the interaction with the SN.

### **The perspective of the specialists from the SN**

- In Stara Zagora one boy got employment through the SN yet he found it difficult to reconcile school and work.
- In Plovdiv one girl tended to run away often and was not easy to get motivated. Therefore the effort focused primarily on promoting her motivation and building mechanisms for coping with the negative emotions.
- Initially the young people were cautious and distrustful about the SN. They assumed that yet again some people came to them without any benefit whatsoever. However as the sessions progressed youngsters became more and more confident and more and more willing to think and engage.
- In the course of counseling of the youngsters it transpired that they felt 'threatened' with the prospect of living by themselves, they felt they were to be left to their own devices and to overcome crises in their lives

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alone, that they did not trust either the society or institutions. Therefore the focus of the work with them was building trust with each one young person and putting together a sustainable SN to provide them security and promote their development.

- No progress was achieved with several young people from Sofia under the project. In some cases they would firmly refuse to participate or to have individual meetings or would reject any assistance or support from specialists from the social services.

### 3. Recommendations:

- The SN (especially defined as coordinated network of specialists from a broad range of institutions and services) is an important part of the process of providing community-based services. In order to definitively stop the new services operate as 'closed-type institutions' it is necessary to strengthen their support for coordinated activities with external specialists, state services and institutions. In this stage predominantly NGOs provide activities that proactively promote the development of children and the work of the staff in small group homes (for example different hobby courses, assistance for preparedness for school etc.). Some of the negative attitude of staff from small group homes towards external projects can be attributed to the temporary and sporadic nature of the latter. The establishment of a permanent SN by state institutions that would operate according to clearly defined rules and structured program in coordination with the small group homes would promote stronger trust, satisfaction and certainty both for the young people regarding their future and for the staff of small group homes who would feel that they have partners in their work with the young.

- The SN must engage a larger number and more diverse services from those available in the community, such as Centers for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, Centers for Social Support, Centers for Work with Street Children, various youth clubs and initiatives, so that the young people can make full use of all available resources in the community for their training and development.

- Specialists recommend to continue to work with the young people on strengthening their motivation for employment and the skills required for proper performance at the job. Acquiring useful qualities such as discipline, observance of deadlines, teamwork, prioritization of tasks, adopting appropriate behavior etc. are all processes that take time to master.

- It would be good to continue the work of the SN even after young people leave the institution so that they feel confident that they can rely on the former.

- The specialists from the SN believe that when a young person refuses to engage in work on his/her individual plans for life, an alternative approach needs to be adopted for communication, with different instruments for support and inclusion.

- All the players believed that the SN needed to be expanded:

- In terms of the scope of stakeholders that are important for the successful emancipation of young people from the services and for integration in society: with all types of specialists/institutions such as employers, teachers, police, juvenile delinquency inspectors, health and mental health professionals, etc. 'Specialists that

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would facilitate administrative aspects of the different issues related to personal life and relations, social and health issues etc. can be engaged in this kind of support, as the adaptation after leaving the social service has many dimensions and the skills of young people to cope may be ridden with deficits well beyond turning 18-20 and finishing school.'

- In terms of scope of target groups, i.e. systematic work with parents/family members of the young people where possible: 'There should be a special social service for parents too. Working with parents has its challenges; in the beginning they may often lie and harm their children. For sure it is better to include family members in the SN – that is members of the extended family as the children who are here have parents that have failed as such. Relatives that want a better future for the child have to be engaged. Parents tend to be ashamed with the fact that the child is placed in an institution. The Child Protection Department indeed has a horrendous approach to parents. The young person and his/her mentor from the service should be indispensable members of the SN/counselling network.'

- In terms of age range of young people deprived of parental care: The targeted preparation for leaving the service is good to start early, when the youngsters are 14 years of age and it should continue several years after they leave the institution: '... it would be feasible to sustain the role of the SN, since the children who have grown up with no families quite often fail to acquire the necessary legal, administrative and social aptitude for communication, especially once they leave the service in which the young people participating in the project currently reside. The young people are not well familiar with the regulations and administrative procedures relating to a given socializing measure they need to engage in. When they are provided with someone to represent them and accompany them when visiting different agencies, they feel more assured and are able to manage on their own subsequently.'

- Specialist propose the following to ensure coordinated and sustained operation of the SN:

- On the part of small group homes there needs to be a dedicated specialist working primarily on preparing young people for independent life and on the coordination of the work with/of the SN, with a clear vision how the SN can support both the young people and the staff of the services. In small group homes where the director or any other member of staff actively coordinated the activities among personal mentors, both the young people and other participants in the SN had higher satisfaction with the latter and the benefits for the young were stronger.

- At the end of institutions (for example the Employment Agency, municipalities, education institutions etc.) there should all also be a team of dedicated specialists who work with young people leaving services. They should work according to a structured program for interactions with the young that includes the relevant topics as well sessions allowing the children to discuss topics from their everyday lives for the purpose of obtaining social skills and competencies. There should also be opportunities for regular meetings with people and organizations with direct role with respect to the future of the young people (e.g. employers, employer organizations, representatives of the legislature, etc.).

- The operation of this type of SN should be regulated in primary or secondary legislation and mainstreamed in the practice of all institutions and services.

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- The support for care leavers can be supplemented by various means set forth in a relevant law, program or project, namely care leavers to be entitled to an advantage (for an extended period of time - 2-3 to 5 years) when applying for social housing, local tax and fee relief if they purchase a home, some kinds of legal support promoting their confidence and self-esteem for independent life.

- Specialists can be involved in this type of support to assist them in the administrative aspects of various personal, social, health and other matters, as adaptation beyond the social service is multidimensional, and those young people may have suboptimal skills for handling such issues long after they turn 18-20 and finish their education.

- In the future this type of service through the SN needs to get sustainable funding.
- Working with families to join the SN is required.
- The school also must join the SN.

**The general conclusion** regarding the performance of the SN is that the established good interaction between specialists and children, as well as among specialists, creates a positive environment for the youngsters that promotes their confidence and certainty that they will be able to successfully tackle the challenges of life.

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