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A social worker's story, Ukraine



Hope and Homes for Children Social Worker, Lesya Belenok.

Photo by Iryna Andreytsiv

Lesya is one of a team of social workers, trained by Hope and Homes for Children to work in Makariv, a district in the Kyiv region of Ukraine. She works in a village with a population of 1,600 and her job is to support families in order to stop children being placed in institutions. Here, she shares the first of three stories from her working life.

Part 1. Do not let a family fall

One morning on a cold, winter's day, I received a phone call from one of the local teachers. She told me she had a problem. Two of her pupils, brothers in the 7th and 11th grade, had not been coming into school. Could I help?

I went with the teacher to visit the two brothers in their home. Together we gathered in the family's small, freezing kitchen. The teacher and I kept our coats on, but the boys wore just sweaters. I was wearing thick winter boots but my feet were freezing.

What can you expect from a child if the house is cold and mould is spreading on the walls? Are they going to care about going to school? No way! How can they go to school if their clothes are all damp?

The mother was upset and crying that her sons did not listen to her. I felt we weren't getting anywhere. I decided to change the subject and asked the mother to show me how she heated the house and where the children slept.

I then helped the mother get hold of some firewood so she could heat the house. We sat down together and made a daily schedule for her and the children. The boys were to start to take responsibility for cleaning up after themselves and getting to school. I gently teased them and told them if they didn't go to school I would be around in the morning to wake them up!

I have visited many families in this type of situation and I believe that early detection of these kinds of domestic problems is the most important part of my work. A family must get help as soon as possible or it could simply be too late. The most important thing is to detect the problem early and not let a family fall.

Over the last five years I have established an excellent relationship with the village council, school and local clinic. At first, I had to work hard to build up trust but now we all work together as a good team. I have

distributed my contact information everywhere in the village so that even apathetic residents know where to go if they or their neighbours are having a difficult time at home. I also encourage local businesses to lend a hand to struggling families until they get back on their feet.

I have a wide range of techniques and methods that I use to support families and have regular conversations with the school to try and identify any children who are struggling. I then try to find out why it is happening and how to help. I know immediately whether it is necessary to work with just the child or the whole family.

It all gets better when a woman knows that tomorrow she will have food on the table and her house will be warm. That's how my work can make a difference.

Based on an original article by Iryna Andreytsiv for *Ukrainska Pravda*

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