

Mobile Services in Bulgaria as Deinstitutionalization (DI) tool and beyond

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The text describes “promising practice” mobile services for children and parents suffering abuse, neglect poverty and disability. The text explains its nature, the history of its development and its effectiveness in: promoting multidisciplinary approach to child care, prevention of institutionalization, achieving empowerment of parents; providing quality service to children at risk

1. The context

Bulgaria as a post-communist country is transforming its services from institutions-based to community-based. This process has resulted in the massive decrease of the number of institutionalized children – from 35000 in 2000 to 7000 in 2016.

2. Mobile services on the map of the community services

Community services that were built to replace institutional care were developed unevenly with a focus on small group homes – residential services for children and young people coming from the closed institutions. Gradually this child-focused service has “expanded” to include her/his family. The realization grew that unless family are supported children will always will be at risk of separation from her/his most natural environment. According to this, many community services were set up to provide mostly consultative help to vulnerable parents. These services did not provide the needed access to the most vulnerable families due to their location, stigma associated with being a client, marginalization of ethnic minorities, poverty.

The process of transforming institutional services to community ones related to gradual shift from the medical model to the social one. One aspect of this change related to professionals’ mindset change – from the hard-to-reach experts to experts who understand their roles as serving children in their natural environment -families and communities. Mentality is hard to change and because of this the mobile services as services that represent this shift chronologically developed later in comparison with the rest of the services in Bulgaria.

Pilot mobile service initiatives and project showed how invaluable outreaching family and children in their communities are. Gradually, by responding to the multiple needs of the most vulnerable families the mobile services have shaped to address problems like – poverty, disability, risk of family breakdown, marginalization.

Below we are presenting 3 Mobile services that serve different needs and political agendas. The study visits can be organized in Plovdiv and in Sofia.

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3. Illustrations of Mobile services

3.1. Mobile service as a tool for restructuring institutions – Plovdiv Municipality & Every Child Foundation

Setting up the service

The Plovdiv mobile service was set within the framework of the "Chance of a happy future" EU scheme that had complementary financing from the "Development of Human Resources" "Regional Development" Operational EU Programs. It had two main components: 1. Restructuring Homes for medical and social care and 2. Setting up innovative integrated services for deinstitutionalization and abandonment prevention of children aged 0 to 3 years. The project duration was 32 months. It was based on collaboration between Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Regional Development, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, State Agency for Child Protection, the Social Assistance Agency and NGOs, working in the field of DI and child protection.

Eight institutions for children aged 0-3 and called Homes for Medical and Social Care for Children (HMSCC) was to be restructured in new Complexes of integrated medico-social services for children, and their families and the Plovdiv mobile service had a significant role in prevention of family breakdown.

Way of operation/modalities of implementation

In Plovdiv region the implementation of the project BG051PO001-5.2.10-0001 "DIRECTION: Family" within the framework of the above-mentioned program was the first attempt to restructure the existing institutional system.

In early November 2013 the State Agency for Child Protection provided information about a group of 63 children and young people from 17 specialized institutions referred to be placed in services of the Municipality of Plovdiv. Each child had individual needs assessment requiring specialized medical care that was not available at the small group homes. There was a need identified of setting up 7 new social and integrated services for these children¹.

The Plovdiv Municipality invited as a partner in the implementation process the For Our Children Foundation. The amount of financial assistance for Plovdiv district was 593 347 BGN and it was administrated by the Municipality of Plovdiv. The target group were **381 children in risk and their families**, and 14 children in the existing institution in Plovdiv. The Plovdiv Municipality invited as a partner in the implementation process the For Our Children Foundation. The project was an initial implementation period of 14 months, but due to not

¹¹ The construction of such medical-social service in Plovdiv for children aged 0-3 and their families was funded by the European Social Fund 2007-2013 /Operational Programme "Development of Human Resources" scheme grant BG051RO001-5.2.15 "Chance of a happy future" within the framework of Component 2. The contracting authority for the project was the Social Assistance Agency and the beneficiary - Municipality of Plovdiv

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meeting the deadline for the reconstruction of the building period is reduced to seven months.

On 01.07.2015, the Mayor of Plovdiv issued an order for setting up of seven new social services supporting communities at risk to prevent abandonment of children and ensuring access to quality and efficient healthcare. The services are as follows:

- Family - Consulting Center (FCC)
- Center for Maternal and Child Health (CMCH)
- Center for Early Intervention and day care center for disabled children 0 to 3 years
- Center for foster care and adoption support
- Specialized residential care for young children with disabilities - two centers for family-type accommodation for children with disabilities
- Mental health center for children from 0 to 3 years old

The Mobile service combined two services – the Family-Consulting Center and the Center for Maternal and Child Health. Both services were community based and their work aimed to reduce the cases of child abandonment. The duration of their intervention was about 4 months (August-November 2015) due to the late start of the whole project.

The selection of staff methodology and their training program were developed and provided by For Our Children Foundation. The selection included CV review, individual interviews and case discussions and the staff were selected on the basis of criteria related to professional knowledge and skills, positive attitude towards minorities, readiness for outreach work, sensitiveness of cultural differences, fast and adequate reaction in difficult situations/cases.

The FCC team consisted of 3 social workers, a psychologist and a lawyer. The team leader was Ms. Ivelina Dandovska. The CMCH team consisted of a medical doctor, a midwife and two nurses. The team leader was Ms. Hristina Sotirova (social worker). Both teams were trained in mobile work specificity, outreach approach in Roma communities, needs assessment and mapping, program development. During the project implementation both teams were supported by regular supervision.

During the first two months both teams worked separately but with the same trend – establishing trusting relationships with the targeted communities and identifying children aged 0-3 at risk of abandonment, neglecting, trafficking, maltreatment, malnutrition etc. A mapping of the Roma communities was carried out which resulted in effective targeted interventions. The identified vulnerable individuals and families were reached by regular (everyday) outreach work among vulnerable communities, mostly Roma communities in Plovdiv as well as in the maternity ward in the hospitals. The mobile service provided individual and group consultations for family planning, proper child treatment, provided social, psychological and medical support for young mothers, children 0-3 aged and their families/mothers, organized community campaigns for abandonment prevention as well as prevention work with young mothers in the maternity ward in the hospitals. Several written

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materials – brochures and leaflets with important information – were developed. At the end of the intervention both teams worked together on several cases and during the community campaigns. The services provided were sensitive to the specific themes related to Roma such as addressing taboos on intimacy, sexuality and family matters, provision of in-kind support, medical examination etc.).

The main success factors were:

- effective cooperation between government, local institutions and services, NGOs and communities;
- recognition of DI significance and the preventive work;
- professional needs assessment and mapping;
- commitment and professionalism of the specialists working in the field – the health specialists were well informed, trained and prepared for outreach work.
- trust developed between Bulgarian professionals and Roma and the support received by Roma community;
- support of the program by medical staff working in hospitals.

The main challenge was the limited timeframe. Despite the good political will of the Plovdiv Municipality the financial support of both FCC and CMCH was terminated and they discontinued the program.

Similar to the Plovdiv municipality Mobile service is in operation by the Center for Community Support in Plovdiv, administrated by For Our Children Foundation

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3.2 Mobile service as an tool for closing institutions - Bulgarian government and the Hope and Homes for Children

The process of closing institutions by referring children to the small group homes was insufficient for DI without preventing family breakdowns that result in institutionalization. That is why prevention of family separation has become an important segment of DI that resulted in mobile services development.

Hope and Homes for Children was engaged by the Government to develop an approach to: 1/prevent placement of children in institutions, 2/ reunite institutionalized children with their biological families, and 3/ develop foster care for institutionalized infants when reunification was not possible. The organization developed mobile services to address these 3 tasks. As the result of their work 8 institutions for children were closed.

Hope&Homes for Children have developed an evidence-based model for ACTIVE help whose target group are vulnerable children and their families. Its aspects are:

- The “Prevention of entry to institutional care” approach included: a) immediate response to crisis situations; b) ACTIVE outreach to families which provides a structured approach to identify the needs of families on a broad range of dimensions and supports activities to meet those needs; c) having basic resources to provide fast and timely financial and in-kind support to families; and d) systematic on-going training and supervising staff to change their attitudes for providing ACTIVE family support, e) basic equipment for service providers required to support families including access to transport, mobile phones and office facilities.
- The Reunification approach included the stages of work relevant to the Prevention approach but also implementations of procedures to maintain contact and prepare children and families for future reunification.
- Foster care approach included: a) provision of flexible support, including counselling and in kind support for foster families immediately after the children are placed; b) proper diagnostic procedures for children with special needs; c) recruitment procedures for foster parents willing to provide care for children with special needs or short term care for babies waiting to return to families or adoption.

Some of the main results of this model for ACTIVE help implementation are:

- Institutionalization of 649 children in risk from 13 regions in Bulgaria was prevented;
- 132 from these children are placed in foster care families;
- 517 from these children were supported in their families.

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3.3 Mobile services as a tool for community development movement (Children and Youth Foundation)

Mobile services were developed by Children and Youth Foundation working in the most marginalized Roma communities in Sofia. They address poverty, school drop out, no access to education-health and social services.

These mobile services `profile relate to empowering Roma to reach out for services themselves rather than providing service in the community. The Mobiles service provide early childhood development programs and education to Roma children.

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4. Summary

The mobile services development is framed by the ecological model of child development and whenever they address children’s needs they address the needs of these children’s’ environment - the family and the community.

The needs these services address are related to : poverty, disability, child neglect and abuse all of which are related to institutionalization.

Working within communities provide direct support to people but also expand their access to services, change community attitudes towards the most vulnerable.

The mobile services presented above are developed after identification of specific needs of each community and the people living there. That is why they are context-specific. Still the common principles are similar.

Regarding sustainability it is important to study how termination of funding affects clients and professionals. It is also important to consider whether and how the know-how acquired in the pilot projects is transferred to other services.

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