

A NEW PROFESSION: ASSISTANT OF THE FAMILY – POLISH EXPERIENCES

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Abstract – The article refers to new experiences of the family assistance in Poland. The act on family support and foster care system in Poland adopted by Polish government on the 9th of June 2011 is here presented. Tasks and detailed activity scope of family assistant are analyzed, too. However the first researches on the family assistance in Poland from the years 2008-2011 are the main part of the article. These studies were conducted by Izabela Krasiejko and Anna Imielinska, Malgorzata Szpunar, Adam Miller, Julita Wirkus-Ostrowska and Sylwiusz Retowski, Aleksandra Debska-Cenian and Alicja Paracka. The researchers show that the family assistance system in Poland should bring measurable benefits.

Key words – family assistance in Poland, social work, care system in Poland, researches on the family assistance

I. INTRODUCTION – THE ESSENCE OF SOCIAL WORK

Difficult situations such as: addiction, poverty, disability, social disadvantage constitute the reason for which social assistance and social work exist. The current Polish Social Assistance Act of the 12th of March 2004, defines the concept of social work in the art. 6 point 12th. According to the law, social assistance is “professional service designed to help individuals and families in strengthening or regaining their ability to function within a society by fulfilling social roles and appropriate conditions conducive to this goal” [13].

The activities in the field of social work are likely to be successful because you can indicate certain well-defined ontological assumptions that give the meaning to the work carried out with people at risk. First of all, it should be noted that by educating the man, by providing relevant patterns (including moral ones) you can create conditions for the improvement of life, and thus – also create social change. It is understood that the man is an active subject in shaping his own destiny, not a passive object, which is determined by the unknown forces or phenomenon. He is expected, therefore, to be actively involved in shaping his own person and his environment, and – if he does not show such aspirations – you should awake in the man the responsibility for his own fate and the sense of duty.

An important assumption is that the individual is at all times, susceptible to the influence of social environment. However, the subjectivity of the person and the ability to creative behavior protects the man from shaping his or her personality in a mechanical way. It is worth noting that it is possible to create standards and patterns of social situations. They are used to determine the purpose which we want to achieve in social work, as well as to evaluate the results of the work. However, in order to help constructively, we should always keep in mind that the man is the highest value and he has the inviolable right to self-determination - that assumption should be the general determinant for all undertaken actions [9].

When analyzing the need to provide social assistance, we should mention the important role of a social worker. He should take the role of a companion, and he ought to make changes easier to obtain, both in individual projects, as well as in the environment of an individual. He should act as an animator and organizer of the community. His job is to give a ward (the man at risk) the possibility to take the initiative, to experience new tasks and to mature [5].

II. THE ACT ON FAMILY SUPPORT AND FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN POLAND

On the 9th of June 2011 Polish Parliament adopted the law on family support and foster care system. This act was created “for the good of the children who need special protection and assistance from adults, family environment, atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, in order to ensure their harmonious development and future independent life, to ensure protection of their rights and liberty; This act was created for the good of the family as a basic unit of society and the natural environment for the development and welfare of all its members and particularly children, in the belief that effective support for families that have difficulties in looking after and educating their children as well as an effective child protection and support for them can be achieved by the cooperation of all persons, institutions and organizations working with children and their parents” [14].

The Act is primarily intended to help families who have educational problems and it introduces changes in the foster care system. The most important changes are: the introduction of the institution of a family assistant and a coordinator of foster family care, working with a natural family, supporting foster families and adoptive families. The main direction of the changes is to support a natural family and to put emphasis on working with that family, in order not to allow to take a child away from his parents, if possible.

Many experts highlight the fact that in the current legal system it is too easily to take the decision connected with taking the child away from the family – often in a situation which is relatively easy to solve, and thus to protect the family against breakage. On the other hand, you often have to deal with the situation when the decision on parental rights deprivation is postponed too long, which dooms the child to stay in a foster care institution.

The adopted law stresses cooperation between the institutions, which are in contact with the child, as well as that preventive measures are to be strengthened. Every municipality is required to develop local programs to support families and to solve social problems. These programs should include the possibility to contact with specialists at home. The programs should be based on voluntary participation, they mainly have to rely on accompanying the family in decision making. Families in crisis are to be constantly monitored by social workers, school educators, medical personnel and other professionals prepared to work with the family, including – if necessary – the police and court guardians. A family assistant also plays an important part in the project of family support. An assistant is to help the family not only with educational problems, but also in everyday life problems.

III. THE FAMILY ASSISTANT' TASKS

When presenting the work of a family assistant, it is essential to refer to the Act of Ministry of Labour and Social Policy from the 9th of June 2011, in particular Article 15, which enumerates precisely the tasks of a person working in this position. The content of the Act is shown by a carefully designed presentation prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which states that a family assistant's responsibility is to:

- help families that raise children up to the age of 18 in solving care and educational problems;
- support a family in solving various problems associated with raising a child, such as infant care, nutrition of children of all ages, taking care of the child's development, fulfillment of parental duties towards the school, parental responsibilities, etc;
- use a variety of methods to leave a child with his or her natural family as long as it is possible;
- work not only with adult family members, but also directly with a child;

- constantly monitor the situation of children in a family (among others. whether the attitude of the parents do not endanger the safety of a child);
- work with a family in terms of raising a child even if a child has been temporarily taken away from a family;
- take part in decisions about the future of a child until he or she comes of age or is adopted by another family;
- deal with a family that has care and educational problems regardless of the income of that family [16] [4].

A family assistant is responsible for the work with educationally inefficient families, especially endangered with placing the child in a care institution. A specialist should work with up to 20 families. Family assistants have a guaranteed autonomy of action. They are not subject to social welfare centers [12]. The specialists, by following the steps in the course of their duties, shall enjoy the protection provided for public officers.

A graduate of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, family sciences or social work, or a graduate of higher education in any field of study, supplemented by training in working with children or a family who can document at least one year work experience with children or a family can be a family assistant. He or she can also be a secondary school graduate who has passed appropriate training in working with children and family and he has documented at least 3 years of experience working with children or a family. At the same time a family assistant candidate can not be (currently or in the past) deprived of parental authority and his parental authority is not suspended or limited. That person should fulfill the maintenance obligation - if such a duty has been imposed on him or her by the court. An assistant of a family can not be convicted for an intentional crime or intentional fiscal offense. Thus, the requirements for this category of professionals are high and apply to all education, professional practice, and certain moral qualifications.

IV. THE DETAILED ACTIVITY SCOPE OF A FAMILY ASSISTANT

A family assistant's main tasks are to: reach individually the people in difficulty, assist them in solving their problems and help them in meeting the identified needs by themselves. The individual support serves primarily to solve specific problems of wards, as well as to wake up the faith in their abilities and to motivate them to take action considered by them to be impossible. An assistant aims to help in changing attitudes of marginalized people to their efficiency. He aims to increase their sense of impact on their lives and to improve their self-esteem. The main method of a family assistant is to follow a ward, to build on his ward's resources (so called “work on resources”) and to selectively support real ambitions of a ward.

A family assistant works with the whole family, which constitutes a specific environment. Every family is different and needs a different procedure. An assistant begin his or her work with the help in solving the most urgent material and psychological problems, which often directly affect a family situation and preclude any perspective action. At this stage of

support an assistant does not set any specific conditions of his assistance. He takes care about solving family problems with family members but he does not replace a family in this action. His task is to understand the situation of a family from family members point of view and yet he tries to avoid arbitrariness, evaluation and edify. The help for children at this time may consist, for example, of directing them to community centers or a school pedagogue where they can get help in the form of lunch and in the form of educational support such as doing homework. When the most urgent material and organizational family problems have been solved, when an assistant has good contact and trust of the family, it is possible to identify further needs and to make a contract as for the realization of those needs on their meeting.

Existing family conflicts often come to the fore after dealing with the current material needs. It is difficult to eliminate the problem of addiction, violence and child negligence without a satisfactory solution of family conflicts. So, at this stage, an assistant should help in understanding and solving psychological problems of a family. At the beginning he should meet each of family members individually, analyzing the needs, the problems and possibilities of change in relation to others. Family meetings are dedicated to restore the mutual relationship, mutual understanding and to make expectations come true.

The next natural step in working with a family is to analyze relationships and educational problems with children. At the beginning, there appears an analysis of relationships and problems with children, their behavior, as well as analysis of skills and deficits. Gradually an assistant draws a ward's attention to emotional relationships with children, mutual feelings and expectations. He helps parents to adopt the perspective of a child as for getting to know and understanding his or her needs and problems. This enables parents to identify themselves better with children whose lives often recall parents' own history. The assistant avoids giving advice, but rather asks questions and encourages to seek their own solutions in dealing with children.

Relative peace and stability in the emotional relationship of a family is reached only after solving the problems with mutual relations. Only in that situation there appears faith in their own ability and energy to complement education, to develop skills, as well as to take up and maintain permanent employment. This is often connected with the willingness to acquire a number of specific skills (which increase the chances of success in taking up work and in increasing social activity). This requires the formulation of the next contract, on both – the scope and forms of support by an assistant, as well as the willingness to take specific action by wards. An assistant helps to find opportunities to improve ward's skills and his or her motivation to search for work actively and at the same time, he helps to make the expectations real. However, he also helps a ward in overcoming difficulties and he supports him or her in crises and fluctuations of self-confidence. A family that receives such assistance may run its own mechanisms of self-

regulation, which ultimately contributes to proper and independent functioning.

V. THE FIRST RESEARCH ON THE FAMILY ASSISTANCE IN POLAND

The family assisting system – known and used for decades in Western Europe and the United States – was transplanted into Poland and creatively adapted to Polish conditions [2] [11]. The act on family support and foster care system requires of local governments to introduce a family assistance to the social assistance system. However, a few years before the introduction of this law in Poland a number of activities were undertaken to test and promote the profession of a family assistant and his system of work. The first programs of social work, which are based on family assistants work were carried out in several centers in Poland from the years 2005, 2006 and 2008. These programs were conducted by social assistance centers and family support centers in Bydgoszcz, Gdansk, Sopot, Elblag, Gdynia, Poznan and Czestochowa [8] [3]. From 2008 and 2009 – after about two years of the project – the research on the process and the effectiveness of those programs implementing an assistance of the family was initiated. These were the first researches on the family assistants carried out in Poland. These studies were conducted by Izabela Krasiejko and Anna Imielinska, Małgorzata Szpunar, Adam Miller, Julita Wirkus-Ostrowska and Sylwiusz Retowski, Aleksandra Debska-Cenian and Alicja Paracka [10].

In Gdynia and Sopot a team of specialists – S. Retowski, A. Debska-Cenian and A. Paracka conducted research on social assistance clients participating in the program “Family closer together” which was conducted in 2008-2011. The study was conducted in 2011 in order to identify and describe groups of recipients of social assistance and in order to differentiate and improve the work with those groups. A questionnaire consisting of a psychological part and a social work part were used. A group of social work clients and family assistant clients were distinguished. The results showed the differences between the various groups of assistance recipients and allowed to understand their needs, expectations and abilities better [7].

The other mentioned authors conducted research focusing on various aspects of the effectiveness of a family assistant. In 2010 Małgorzata Szpunar conducted a study at the Municipal Social Assistance Centre in Gdynia. 30 families who participated in the project “Family closer together” from 2008 and were taken into the family assistants care were selected for the study. The study used a method of individual cases, which is based on deep interviews with family members, analysis of their documents and interviews with the assistants of surveyed families. The research questions were related to the effectiveness of participation in the project, in the opinion of families and their assistants. The following aspects were taken into account: the evaluation of participation in the project, changes in family life, the stability of the changes, the ability to deal with everyday situations (e.g., child care), the ability to deal with difficult situations (e.g., outgoing from addiction),

the assessment of cooperation between family and its assistant. Most families are long-term clients of social assistance and at the same time they are families with many problems (e.g. the problem of unemployment, alcoholism, poverty, life resourcelessness, problems with raising their children). The families were threatened with taking their children away and placing them in care institutions.

The results of Szpunar's research indicate that all respondents have a positive attitude to their participation in the program "Family closer together". The respondents positively assessed working with family assistants, however assistants and family members sometimes had to go through a difficult period of initial mistrust or even the partner of the collaboration (another assistant for the family) had to be chosen. The respondents – under the influence of family assistants – initiated long-term changes in their lives. These changes concerned family relations, professional life (taking up a vocational training, and then taking up employment), as well as the health of the respondents (visiting the doctor, treatment for alcoholism, abstinence). Social contacts and the social image of respondents were changed as well as the situation of children in those families. The children of those families have been subject to proper parental care in the field of family communication, health, hygiene, nutrition, and education. These changes last from several months to several years. It can be assumed that they will be permanent [10].

This qualitative research conducted by M. Szpunar on the "soft" and "hard" effects of the project "Family closer together" was supplemented by the study of Adam Miller in 2011. His research (of a quantitative character) focused on the "hard" effects of the above-mentioned project, namely: taking up a job, leaving a circle of social assistance clients and leaving children in the family. A. Miller studied 187 participants of the project (citizens of Gdynia). Among them over 65% successfully completed the social contracts. In this 41% are no longer recipients of social assistance, up to 30% increased the level of employment (from 14% at the time of joining the project to 44% at the output of the project), and additionally about 30% of the participants of the project are employed illegally – they did not take up work in a legal way because they have bailiff debt. Only 6.5% of children from families under the program (and that were at risk of having their children taken away) went to childcare centers [6].

Julita Wirkus-Ostrowska shows in detail the process of "healing" of a family. She conducted her research in 2011, using a case study of a family cooperating with an assistant for about two years. There were many problems in the researched family at the same time: parents alcoholism, violence, father's disability, parents unemployment, poverty, a significant weakening of family ties, child neglect, risk of taking a child away and putting him in an institution and others. J. Wirkus-Ostrowska describes the process of gradual change based on the family resources and on the constant support of the assistant. At the end of the project, the parents started the alcoholism treatment and kept abstinence, they had completed vocational courses, found a job and repaid debt. Thanks to the

school for parents and therapy, they rebuilt family ties, they take care about the child, about his education, about spending leisure time together in a cultural way, they take care about home, health, hygiene and appearance, they take part in social life (avoiding contact with friends who drink alcohol). But the family still faces the problems of financial shortages because of low pay – however they economically manage the money they have, and they occasionally use social help. The case described by J. Wirkus-Ostrowska shows how the family came out of the deep crisis, with the intensive and professional assistant's help, and slowly is returning to normal functioning [15].

Similar studies were conducted in 2011 by Izabela Krasiejko and Anna Imielińska in Czestochowa [3]. The research was related to the effectiveness of the program "Family assistant" carried out from 2009 by Center of Social Assistance in Czestochowa. The study was conducted with qualitative and quantitative methods, by the use of: an interview, observation, group discussion, analysis of documents, scaling and statistical techniques. The attention was brought to both the so-called "soft" effects of the project (e.g. raising the level of social skills of family members), as well as the "hard" effects of the project (e.g., the number of people who took up employment, the number of children who were left in the family). The research shows that all respondents and family assistants noticed a major change in the life skills of the respondents (in running the house, in taking care of children, in dealing with administrative matters, in maintaining positive relationships), as well as in the control over their lives and in the sense of perpetration. In addition, the summary of the "hard" effects of the project has been conducted: maintaining abstinence or occasional drinking (no alcohol abuse) – about 60% of the respondents; about 30% of the respondents are still occasional relapses to drinking; 30% of families are completely independent; only 13% of families resigned from the participation in the project; in 50% of the families, at least one person has a job; the children were not taken away from their parents in 96% of families; the majority of people who know the family (the assistant, the school teacher, the child's tutor at school) state a clear improvement in the functioning of the children.

VI. SUMMARY

Quoted studies show that a family assistant's work significantly contributes to the improvement of family functioning and prevents the breakdown of the family and from taking children away from the family. The main method of an assistant's action is the work based on family resources. It results in taking over the responsibility for their lives by wards and the gradual getting over complex and long-term problems of the family. Working with the family takes on average about two years and during this time brings results that appear to be permanent. So you can state that a statutory obligation to introduce the profession of a family assistant in Poland will bring measurable, varied social benefits [1].

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