CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of various important aspects of the work of the social workers in day care centers during the coronavirus pandemic. It explores how the activity of social workers is being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the impact of the use of online platforms for communication on the relationship of assistance. Interviews were conducted with 10 social workers working at 5 day care centers in Cluj-Napoca to explore the challenges they faced in order to prevent school dropout, in pandemic context. It were exemplified the ways in which the responsibilities of social workers are adapted to the context and measures imposed in the pandemic context. A low motivation for learning from students was emphasized as well as socioeconomic difficulties at the family level and the importance of face-to-face communication with beneficiaries was also stressed.

Keywords: social assistance, vulnerable groups, pandemic, day centers, school dropout

Résume

Cet article donne un aperçu de divers aspects importants du travail du travailleur social dans les centres de jour pour les enfants pendant la pandémie de coronavirus. Il explorer comment l'activité des travailleurs sociaux est affecté par la pandémie de Covid-19? Ainsi que l'impact de l'utilisation des médias online sur la relation d'assistance. Ils ont été réalisés des entretiens avec des travailleurs sociaux qui travaille dans des centres de jour pour les enfants à Cluj-Napoca pour explorer les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés pour éviter l'abandon scolaire. Sont exemplifié manière dont les responsabilités des travailleurs sociaux sont adaptées au contexte et aux mesures imposées par la pandémie. Il constate une faible motivation pour apprendre des élèves, identifié les difficultés socio-économiques au niveau de la famille et souligné l'importance de la communication en face à face avec les bénéficiaires.

Mots clés : travaille sociaux, groupes vulnérables, pandémie, centres de jour, l'abandon scolaire.

Abstract

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Prezentul articol oferă o imagine de ansamblu cu privire la diferite aspecte importante din munca asistentului social din cadrul centerlor de zi, pe perioada pandemiei de coronavirus. Se explorează cum este afectată activitatea asistenților sociali de pandemia Covid-19. Precum și ce impact are utilizarea mijloacelor de comunicare online asupra relației de asistare. Au fost realizate interviuri cu asistenții sociali care lucrează la centrele de zi din municipiul Cluj-Napoca pentru a explora provocările cu care s-au confruntat în vederea prevenirii abandonului școlar. Sunt exemplificate modalitățile de adaptare a atribuțiilor asistenților sociali la contextul și măsurile impuse de pandemie. Aceștia au constat o motivație scăzută pentru învățarea din partea elevilor, au identificat dificultăți socio-economice la nivel familial și au subliniat importanța comunicării față în față cu beneficiarii.

Cuvinte cheie: asistența socială, grupuri vulnerabile, pandemie, centre de zi, abandon școlar

Studies on the situation in Romania regarding the pandemic report the following aspects: a number of over 168 thousand cases of COVID-19 is registered and it has led to the death of over 5,600 people. While all segments of the population are affected, the members of the social groups in the most vulnerable situations are even more affected. Currently, the pandemic has infected over 38 million people in over 188 countries / regions in the world and caused over 1 million deaths, has the potential to cover over 70% of the total population of the globe (Chivu & Georgescu, 2020).

Farkas and Romaniuk (2020) define what it means to be vulnerable during a pandemic. They consider vulnerable those people who are at very high risk of infection and have a very low chance of recovery. Specifically, the probability of infection has an increased incidence and the ability to recover or heal has a low incidence.

According to UNICEF (2020), children from disadvantaged families (children whose parents are working abroad, Roma children, children with disabilities, children with special educational needs, etc.), the elderly, single people, people without low-income or low-income people, people with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, etc. are the categories most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the functions of social assistance is to contribute to the diagnosis of social problems and their signaling to public policies. In this sense, social assistance is struggling to bring to the attention of society the problems faced by the vulnerable, in various fields: education, health, justice. During the pandemic, this function of social assistance was important in identifying the categories of the population most severely affected by the effects of the pandemic and the restrictions imposed at national or local level.

The social assistance system is to be considered a resource at national level, a resource that ensures the protection of the vulnerable groups. According to the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020, „in Romania there is a deficit of 11,000 social workers, in rural localities or small

towns, especially those in poorly developed areas where the most social assistance services are poorly professionalized" (MMFPSPV, 2015, p. 68). Social services have substantially reduced their activity or been suspended during the state of emergency. As a result, the access to the social services in helping these vulnerable groups to attain the resources needed in contributing to the poverty reduction was limited.

The central public authorities made recommendations to reduce the risk of spreading of COVID-19, these limitations aiming in particular the limitation of movement of persons and avoiding direct contact between persons. With regard to limiting the exposure of employees of the public welfare institutions and their beneficiaries measures such as the following have been proposed for the risk of COVID-19 infection:

➢ using e-mail and teleconferencing to reduce physical contact and business travel;

➢ the suspension of the hearing program and the introduction of alternative measures such as sending requests by phone and e-mail;

➢ diminishing as much as possible the waiting time within the work schedule with the public, by sending, where possible, the requests by e-mail.

➢ in the cases where physical contact between the employees of the public institutions with the citizens can not be avoided the authorities have been required to provide protective equipment (CNASR, 2020).

Due to these rigorous protection measures, the role of the social worker during the pandemic was very limited and provided only to ensure emergency needs. The visits to the beneficiaries' homes, the face-to-face counseling with the beneficiaries or group activities were restricted. Ensuring emergency needs involved providing basic needs for families, food and hygiene products.

Among the first steps to provide social assistance services during the pandemic, according to Rubin (2020), was the recognition of the need for intervention of social workers at community level. Initially, it was believed that only medical services can combat and contribute to the management of the epidemic without the intervention of the social workers. For example, a statement from South Korea told everyone that social workers who worked in vulnerable communities were the first to become infected, so it was decided to close all social services. This has made it impossible for vulnerable people to access services at the community level (Voicu, 2020). In Romania, as in other countries, the National Association of Social Workers lobbied the withdrawal of decisions regarding the suspension of social assistance activities. Since March, in 87 countries that have faced the pandemic, they have begun to adapt the way social services work. Social workers from Romania and not the only ones facing for the first time the crisis caused by COIVD-19. Following the model of Chinese intervention in community the work with the disadvantaged communities was reshaped as such: use of the internet and mobile telephony; the use of telephone calls, online meetings, organized on Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype etc. were the new interventions strategies in working with families and communities. In the pandemic context social workers

had to adapt and learn fast new ways of communicating and networking with the communities. In poor communities, where there was no technology such as the Internet, social workers relied on relationships with community leaders. Community leaders assumed the role of messengers and informed the community about the safety or hygiene rules imposed by the state (Rudin, 2020).

Buzzi and Megele (2020) find it difficult to estimate how welfare relations will be affected by the pandemic. The use of technology-based platforms was just one of the solutions adopted by social workers in all countries, including Romania. This shift in the monitoring of beneficiaries, through the online platforms, has been an urgently adopted method, a method that still needs to be improved and which is still being tested.

Imposing emergency measures and limiting the access of beneficiaries of social assistance services in different institutions with one-on-one interaction with beneficiaries, meant rethinking the face-to-face activities in an online or telephone environment. Social workers have faced challenges in maintaining relationships with beneficiaries, one of the main reasons consisting in the lack of technology in poor communities. Even in the conditions in which the necessary means for remote communication existed, the social workers signaled that their relationship with the beneficiaries could be altered.

For example, social workers cannot assess according to the reality the gravity of the family situation, the quality of relationships between the family members, especially in those families where abusive relationships are suspected. Also, the assessment of real living conditions or the economic conditions of families can be distorted by technology-based assessment methods. Confidentiality, a key aspect in the relationship of trust with customers / beneficiaries, was another problematic issue in communicating with the beneficiaries during the pandemic. Disadvantaged social groups living in overcrowded conditions did not benefit from a space in which, at the time of their discussions with social workers, they could freely express their experiences or feelings. The issue of confidentiality is that online meetings between the social worker and the beneficiary were attended by other people who were in the same room as the beneficiary. It is assumed that those discussions concerning the beneficiary and which are known only by the social worker are confidential, which was not possible at the online meetings (Banks et al., 2020). The most problematic aspect of adapting the social assistance relationship to the online environment, according to Rudin (2020) is the inability of victims of domestic violence to signal in real time the danger and asking for help from specialists or authorities.

In the present context of online communication, empathy is called into question. Empathy helps the social worker to understand the feelings and situations that the beneficiaries encounter. It is considered impossible for the social worker to make the discrepancy between what the client communicates and what he feels, while wearing protective equipment. The discrepancy between what the client said and what he feels is usually analyzed by observing: facial expressions, body language, gestures, eye and mouth language. Wearing protective equipment or

talking on the phone with the beneficiary these aspects cannot be observed (Hepworth & Larsen, 1986).

The study by Banks et al. (2020) the experiences of the social workers from different countries who were forced during the state of emergency to adopt different means of online communication are presented. This study recounts the difficulties and ethical dilemmas faced by social workers. This study specified that the discussions between them and the beneficiaries took place in inappropriate conditions, in the absence of an intimate and personal space. The topics approached in these conditions were generic and did not touch on personal aspects of the beneficiaries' lives such as their feelings or their emotions. A relevant example was that of a social worker in the Netherlands who reports: ,,The dilemma I experience in four families is that I don`t have a good view on the level of tension and-possibly-domestic violence. Video call conversations have far too little depth, take less time than a home visit,, (Banks et al., 2020, p. 8).

In Romania, the necessity for the employees to work from home was recently signaled. With the establishment of the state of emergency many companies from the private as well as the public domain have decided that their employees should work from home. The field of social assistance has never faced the need for online work before. The role of the social worker is to monitor, through home visits and regular meetings the beneficiaries, and their ability to adapt to society. The sudden changes in social status, quarantine, lack of jobs, were difficulties that social workers managed for the first time in the online environment (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020).

Research Methodology

Starting from the challenges of social workers, in terms of maintaining their relationship with the beneficiaries in the online environment, the present study aims to explore and analyzes the challenges faced by social workers in Cluj-Napoca. The target group consists in the social workers who work in day care centers from Cluj-Napoca and who had to adapt their online. Thoes day care centers from Cluj are dealing with children at risk of dropping out of school, coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The research period was 30 days and took place in October 2020.

In Cluj-Napoca there are several day care centers with educational specifics which aim to prevent school dropout among children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The 10 social workers interviewed are working at five of these centers. All the interviews, took place on the online platforms. The mission of the day care centers is to combat early school leaving which prevails in low-income families with a large number of low-educated family members who are living in precarious conditions. The services offered by the day care centers aim to support the children and their families throughout the school route by offering meditations, social and educational counseling and personal development activities, for children as well as for their parents.

The purpose of the research was to explore how the activity of social workers is being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the impact of the use of online platforms on the relationship of assistance. Hence the difficulties faced by the social workers who work in day care centers dealing with prevention of school dropout among children from disadvantaged socio-economic background, during the Coronavirus pandemic were explored as well as the professional dilemmas they faced due to changes following the adoption of safety measures.

Research results

Adopting the measures imposed by the pandemic in day care centers

During the state of emergency the activity of the day care centers has undergone major changes and technology was used as the main channel of communication with the beneficiaries. Hence, moving the activities which were held in physical environment in the online could be considered not only the first but the most important change in intervention process; meditations, personal development groups and counseling conducted by social workers were moved on the online platforms available to beneficiaries.

Ana-Maria (social worker, 30 years old) „*it was very difficult at the beginning, most of them used mobile phones because they did not have a tablet or laptop; because of this we tried to explain to them how to install their zoom platform, they failed and we had to create small Facebook groups. The activities were hel using Facebook.*" At the same time, other educational activities were carried out under the guidance of specialists on zoom platform and whats-up. Some of the students received tablets from the NGOs and they were meditated in small groups (3-5 children) on zoom platform. In case of the students who did not benefit from tablets, laptops and other devices, teachers called the children on their parents' phones and helped them punctually with the educational problems they faced.

With the help of the existing educational programs, for students at risk of failure or school dropout in Cluj-Napoca, the children were provided with the technological means necessary for educational progress. Every NGO provided the children with the necessarily tablets or laptops as soon as it was possible. Those with a small number of beneficiaries were able to respond more prompt to this need. For others it took a longer time due to the large number of beneficiaries and the very high demand. At the end of June, beginning of August, all the social workers participating in the research stated that they managed to distribute tablets or laptops to all the beneficiaries. Until the time being, they had to adapt their work strategies with the children or their parents according to the devices they owned. Marius (social worker, 37 years old): „*Either we talked on the phone or we saw each other on whats-up, usually the children used their own or their parents' phones. The problem was with those who didn't have a phone and they used their parents, because, 1. we had to wait until the parents came back from work to*

contact them, 2. they were never alone, the parent was always by their side and hear everything we were talking with the child".

In this sense, food aid was also distributed, consisting of food for helping the family during the quarantine period, to maintain the minimum of survival conditions. Ionuț (social worker, 27 years old): „*I say that I even offered them consistent packages with food products but also hygiene products, masks, cleaning and disinfecting products, soap, etc. The food package was consistent and for the parents who signaled that they have lost their jobs, I can say that it was very important*".

Difficulties faced by social workers

The role of the social worker in these day care centers is to monitor the school situation of the children enrolled in the center but more than that, they monitor the socio-economic situation of the family in order to prevent school failure due to poor social conditions. For all social workers interviewed, counseling with beneficiaries took place over the phone, or at most on the facetime platform, but in inappropriate conditions, which do not respect the ethical and confidential principles that should be provided in a counseling session. At the individual conversations between the social workers and their beneficiaries, the other family members were also present, because the living space does not allow them an intimate and personal place where the beneficiaries could feel safe to discuss the problems they face or their feelings regarding their family situation. Doina (social worker, 42 years old)*, „ every time we talked to the child the parents were also present, who were not attentive to what we were talking about, but the child did not feel at ease and in no case could I approach issues related to inter-family relationships because all family members were present*".

The visits to the beneficiaries homes stopped during the state of emergency. The monitoring of the living conditions as well as the socio-economic conditions of the family was conducted by telephone conversations with the family members. In assessing the basic needs the social workers failed to identify the problems of the beneficiaries, they proposed intervention plans, based on beneficiaries` reports. The social workers signaled the need to meet face-to-face with the beneficiaries. They consider the use of the telephone or other online platforms as restricting the communication. A face-to-face interaction with the beneficiary, taking the appropriate measures of protection, is considered more effective than an online meeting (Egan, 1998). Ionuț (social worker, 27 years old): „*I will also give you an example, I had a family in which one of the children faced a problem that she was not emotionally ready to discuss. They never signaled anything to me on the phone. When I met the mother of the child I realized that something was bothering her. When I insisted a little more I managed to find out problems that were severely affecting them but they could not tell me. Because it was just me and the mother, even if we were on the street and people were passing by, she eventually told me what had happened.*"

The ability of the social workers to observe the non-verbal messages transmitted by the beneficiaries, is limited when the beneficiaries family visiting is prohibited. Regardless of the topics addressed and the gravity of the issues addressed in counseling social workers consider as the best practice the face-to-face interaction. For these meetings, they make sure that themselves and the families are protected: respecting the distance measures, wearing protection mask, the meeting takes place either in the yard or outside the house or in an airy room where are not allowed more than two persons, the social worker and the beneficiary.

Social workers mentioned as a real challenge keeping interest in school for the children, given that there were difficulties due to the lack of technology. Ana-Maria (social worker, 30 years old)*, Most of the children use the parents phone for the oline classes and if the parent is at work the children don't have access to internet, or there are more siblings and each has a different school program and they all use one phone for the online courses"*. There are difficulties in adapting school curriculum to the online environment, it is more difficult for the children to focus and stay focus, there is a difficulty in understanding the information. All this lead to a low motivation and learning problems. The risk of drop out, which already exists in all assisted families, has increased and the educational gaps have multiplied. Ionuț *„In the last month of school, I ended up not wanting to insist calling the beneficiaries, to convince the children to come to class so that they could pass the grade „,* Corina: *„ they saw that it doesn't make sense to come to the day care center because there are no school activities anyway and then the children don't come to the center if they don't have homework. We'll pass the class anyway! they say"*.

In addition to the educational factors that have led to an increased risk of dropping out of school, there are also socio-economic changes that have occurred in the children's families such as: job losses, unemployment, cessation of informal work, undeclared work; this leads to serious financial problems and increases the tensions in inter-family relationship increasing the risk of domestic violence and thus perpetuating the risk of school failure (Save the Children International, 2020).

In the conditions, in which every change in the families' environment and educational evaluation methods could lead to an increased school dropout, the role of the social worker become very important. This new challenges have emerged in the context of COVID-19 and fast adaptation is required in performing a qualitative crisis intervention.

Conclusions

The challenges that social workers encountered with the emergence of the pandemic were especially difficulties of relating with the beneficiaries. Among the aspects reported as problematic is the restriction of visiting the beneficiaries' homes during the state of emergency. This measure was adopted in Romania and

not only. It resulted in an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence that could not be not be reported in time.

Regarding the counseling meetings provided by social workers during the pandemic, they consider the most effective counseling to be carried out face-to-face with the beneficiaries and not on online platforms. Being counseled over the phone and using online platforms led to a decrease in importance and depth of the issues discussed with the beneficiaries. The intervention of social workers in the poor communities has been of paramount importance to the beneficiaries since the beginning of the pandemic. This intervention involved ensuring emergency needs (food, internet, necessary devices, hygiene products) but also ensuring emotional needs (counseling, venting feelings, identifying problems at the community level).

For children who are at risk of failure and dropping out of school, even if they have been provided with the basic needs and resources to get involved in education, the risk of dropping out of school it is maintaining and the educational gaps are rising. Social workers report a lower motivation which is mainly due to the online education system but also to the inappropriate living conditions in which the children live.

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