DIFFICULTIES AND RISKS IN THE INTERVENTION OF THE STAFF EMPLOYED WITHIN THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE DEPARTMENTS OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

This article is part of a larger study that intended to diagnose the needs and the resources of social assistance structures within local public authorities. The specific objectives of the study are: The Identification of the social actors involved in the providing of social services and in the providing of social work benefits at local level (communes, cities, municipalities); A Radiography of the situation of social work structures at local level from the perspective of development and efficiency; The Identification of locally signed partnerships from the perspective of development and efficiency; The Elaboration of directions for the development of social work systems at local level considering the research results. This article presents the difficulties and the risks in the intervention of the staff employed within the Social Work Departments of the local public administration, as presented by the employees of these structures. It is a triangulated study made between January and December 2019 and presents the results of the interviews with 20 employees of social work departments. The results are structured in three dimensions: the difficulties related to the performance of the social work departments; the difficulties encountered in setting up or providing social work services/benefits and the mechanisms for overcoming them; the social needs identified at community level.

Keywords: difficulties, social work interventions, employees, social work departments of local authorities

Résumé

L'article fait partie d'une étude plus large qui vise à diagnostiquer les besoins et les ressources des structures d'assistance sociale au sein des autorités publiques locales. Les objectifs spécifiques de l'étude sont: Identification des acteurs sociaux impliqués dans la fourniture de services sociaux et dans la fourniture de prestations d'assistance sociale au niveau local (communes, villes, municipalités); Radiographie de la situation des structures d'assistance sociale au niveau local dans une perspective de développement et d'efficacité; Identification de partenariats signés localement dans une perspective de développement et d'efficacité; Elaboration d'orientations pour le développement des systèmes d'assistance sociale, au niveau local concider des résultats de la recherche. Cet article présente les difficultés et les risques dans l'intervention du personnel employé

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dand les services d'assistance sociale de l'administration publique locale, comme ils sont présenté par les salariés de ces structures. C'est une étude triangulée fait entre janvier et décembre 2019 est présentée et présente les résultats des interviews avec 20 employés des services d'assistance sociale. Les résultats sont structurés en trois dimensions: les difficultés rencontrées dans l'exercice des fonctions des services d'assistance sociale, prévues par la législation en vigueur; les difficultés rencontrées dans la mise en place ou la fourniture de services / prestations d'assistance sociale et les mécanismes pour les surmonter; les besoins sociaux identifiés au niveau communautaire.

Mots-clés: difficultés, l'intervention des travailleurs sociaux, les employés des services locaux d'assistance sociale

Rezumat
Lucrarea face parte dintr-un studiu mai mare ce are ca obiectiv diagnoza nevoilor și resurselor structurilor de asistență socială din cadrul autorităților publice locale. Obiectivele specifice ale studiului sunt: Identificarea actorilor sociali implicați în furnizarea serviciilor sociale și în acordarea beneficiilor de asistență socială de la nivel local (comune, orașe, municipii); Radiografierea situației structurilor de asistență socială de la nivel local din perspectiva dezvoltării și eficienței; Identificarea parteneriatelor semnate la nivel local din perspectiva dezvoltării și eficienței; Elaborarea unor direcții de dezvoltare ale sistemelor de asistență socială, la nivel local având în vedere rezultatele cercetărilor. Această lucrare prezintă dificultățile și riscurile în intervenția personalului angajat în cadrul Compartimentelor de Asistență Socială ale administrației publice locale așa cum sunt ele prezentate de angajații acestor structuri. Este un studiu triangulat realizat în perioada ianuarie-decembrie 2019 și prezintă rezultatele unor interviuri cu 20 angajați ai compartimentelor de asistență socială. Rezultatele sunt structurate pe trei dimensiuni: dificultăți întâmpinate în raport cu îndeplinirea funcțiilor compartimentelor de asistență socială, prevăzute de legislația în vigoare; dificultăți întâmpinate în înființarea sau acordarea serviciilor/ beneficiilor de asistență socială și mecanismele de depășire a acestora; nevoi sociale identificate la nivel comunitar.

Cuvinte cheie: dificultăți, intervenția asistenților sociali, angajați, compartimente de asistență socială

Introduction

The article is part of a larger study that intended to diagnose the needs and the resources of social assistance structures from local public authorities. The study was done during 2019 and has several chapters such as: The human, financial and material resources involved in the social work system; The involvement of local authorities in the development of the social work system; The cooperation of all organizations and social actors in the development of social work.

The specific objectives of the study are: Identification of social actors involved in providing of social services and in providing of social work benefits at local level (communes, cities, municipalities); Radiography to the situation of social work structures at local level from the perspective of development and efficiency; Identification of locally signed partnerships from the perspective of

development and efficiency; Elaboration of directions for the development of social work systems, at local level considering the research results.

This article presents the difficulties and the risks of the intervention of the staff employed within the Social Work Departments of the local public administration, as presented by the employees of these structures.

It is a triangulated study made between January and December 2019 and presents the results of interviews with 20 employees of social work departments. The interviewees were part of the staff participating at a training course in the field of social work strategic management, organized by a private provider of professional training.

The results are structured in three dimensions: difficulties encountered in relation to the performance of the functions of the social work departments; difficulties encountered in setting up or providing social work services / benefits and the mechanisms for overcoming them; social needs identified at community level.

The difficulties encountered in relation to the performance of the functions of the social work departments

The answers to the question „which you consider to be the main difficulties regarding the functions of Social Work Department", were focused on the following topics: difficulties regarding the staff employed (insufficient number and insufficiently trained, the lack of the specialists); difficulties regarding the responsibilities of local Social Work Department (the social needs diagnosis, the social services development strategy, the annual development plan); financial issues (the insufficient budget for the establishment/ development of social services, high costs of the intervention, the insufficient financial resources) and difficulties regarding the partnership and collaboration with other organizations and institutions with a role in social work.

For problems regarding social assistance staff were given answers like these: „The number of persons employed with counselling and monitoring responsibilities, is insufficient in relation to the number of persons with a degree of disability", „Lack of specialization of employed staff on the issue of the elderly and people with disabilities", „Insufficient number of specialists (social workers, psychologists, educators, doctors, therapists) in rural areas in order to set up/provide social services", „The shortage of staff and the poor professional qualification of the existing human resources at the level of local authorities".

There were identified four main players in the complex organisations: the professional, the manager, the support staff and the leader" (Hughes & Wearing, 2007, p.14). „For social workers to use the resources provided by social welfare systems effectively or to engage in strategies to help change social policies, they need a good knowledge of the nature of the policies, their historical development and the ideological assumptions underpinning them" (O'Conner et al., 2006, p. 15).

Their absence, insufficient number and lack of training determine the dysfunctions of the social assistance system. To overcome these problems, „social workers need to actively engage in change strategics initiated within organisations in order to promote social work values and wider social change" (Hughes & Wearing, 2007, p.77; Șoitu Gârleanu, 2008).

To revitalise the political perspective of social work, practitioners and educators first need to acknowledge that the current construction of practice reflects the social values (Ungureanu, 2015) and political context in which the profession evolved. This may facilitate the recognition that what has been constructed in the past can be reconstructed in the future to respond to the dramatic changes in the practice environment which lie ahead (Reisch & Jani, 2012, p.15).

The issues related to the attributions and responsibilities of the social work departments are presented by the respondents as follows: „in the absence of a community diagnosis, many of the objectives set out in the strategies took into account the existence of certain sources of funding and not the needs of the community", „In the absence of a community diagnosis, many of the objectives set out in the strategies took into account the existence of certain sources of funding and not the needs of the community. In this context, there were situations in which after the completion of the projects their sustainability could not be ensured mainly due to their own financial, material and human resources but also the reduced capacity to ensure the organization of social services at the local level".

This situation describes the image of local authorities that do not comply with all the provisions of the law in this field and the staff and management are unprepared for stressful interventions and requests from vulnerable people.

"Social care organisations are required to constantly respond and adapt to the shifting social, legislative, economic and political influences prevalent at any given time. This inevitably leads to major changes in the way in which social care services are organised and managed" (Hafford – Letchfield, 2009; Irimescu, 2016).

The stress and emotions resulting from the interventions of social workers can determine the intention to change the job (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Fang, 2001; Harrington et al., 2001; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Nissly et al., 2005; Fakunmoju et al., 2010).

Workshops and peer group discussions that focus on how to deal with work stressors and multiple requests from beneficiaries are considered import (Acker, 2010, p. 419).

The relationship of local public authorities with the vulnerable population is very important. „Collaboration between staff, management and service users at all levels in organisations is crucial to successful delivery of services" (Hafford-Letchfield, 2009).

The relations between Social workers and clients are influenced by four sets of factors—policy design, local institutional political economy, organizational responses, and workers' adaptations to conditions of work (Hasenfeld, 2010, p.163). Both clients and social workers should know where they are and where they want to go. If you don't know where you are, you won't even know which way

to go. If you don't know where you're going, you won't know when you've arrived. The drift and lack of purpose in the practice of assistance suggest that many employees in local Social work compartment have not clearly stated their place in working with clients (Howe, 2001, p.11).

Among the answers that highlighted the financial difficulties it also includes: „Lack of budget for the establishment/ development of social services"; „Insufficient financial resources make it impossible to hire more specialists and provide the logistics needed to social services", „Insufficient financial resources make various objectives unattainable, supporting different vulnerable populations".

Human resources development within local public authorities depends on „the way an organisation is arranged and how management handles such important matters as leadership and management, change, ethics, diversity, information, budgets, health and safety, new technologies, employees, relationships with other organisations and, importantly, relationships with service-users and carers" (Aldgate et al., 2007; Seden, 2008).

A solution mentioned by the interviewees to overcome the difficulties was the partnership and collaboration with other agencies, with NGOs and with organizations of the beneficiaries. Martin (2007: 281) has argued that the development of inter-agency services brings particular challenges to managers and service providers to develop partnerships, share philosophies and strategies (Seden, 2008, p.182).

Among the problems in the field of inter-institutional collaboration but also with clients/ beneficiaries were mentioned: „poor communication with other agencies", „lack of collaboration with organizations and volunteers", „difficulties in communicating with certain groups of beneficiaries".

The involvement of beneficiaries in community development is essential. Involving beneficiaries and their representatives in community development decisions can facilitate change: „In an empowerment model, clinicians and clients can serve on agency boards to drive needed change" (Blosser et al., 2010, p.175) and „the institutional response to this point should be learning and empowerment" (Medeleanu, 2013, p. 46). Cooperation with social assistance beneficiaries can contribute to the development of social services. „Advocacy with management— getting them interested in professional development issues—can begin with data regarding outcomes, retention, cost, and opportunity to improve service delivery" (Blosser et. al., 2010, p.175).

The difficulties encountered in setting up or providing social work services/ benefits and the mechanisms for overcoming them; The social needs identified at community level.

The inventory of difficulties faced by respondents in providing social worker services and benefits included the following elements:

- lack of spaces/infrastructure necessary for the functioning of social services ("the costs of rehabilitating building infrastructure", „technical infrastructure projects", „inadequate spaces");

- lack of specialists/insufficient qualified staff ("doctor comes once a week and social worker and psychologist never existed", „specialists are missing from the Social Work Department in rural communities", „The Social Work Department do not have a budget allocated for the training of social assistance staff");

- poor information on social services ("the population has no information about social services", „the information is not accessible to all categories of the population", „the information messages of the population are not clear");

- insufficient financial and material resources ("no financial resources are allocated for the development of social services" „the money is allocated to other budget chapters, not to social work", „social work consumes budget and therefore, the money is directed to other sectors: tourism, agriculture, industry";

- procedures for accrediting social service providers and licensing social services („many social service providers does not respect the minimum standards in social services", „the purpose of private social services is more economic than social"),

- insufficient community involvement and lack of functional partnerships ("Social services do not play a key role in Community policy", „institutional partnerships are not functional", „cooperation with NGOs and other social partners is at a very low level")

Responses to the request to list social needs at the community level were grouped according to the potential beneficiaries belonging to a vulnerable group category:

- people with disabilities (adults, young people and children) - „Development of a protection system for young people with disabilities who leave the social protection system"; „respite center"; „residential centers for adults with disabilities", „permanent monitoring of people with disabilities";

- old people – „Development of the home care network for the elderly", „Expanding social services for the elderly", „Home care services for the elderly", „Residential centers for the elderly";

- children and families at social risk – „Establishment of a day center for children with parents working abroad", „Day social services for children and young people", „Child and parent counselling services", „Education for members of vulnerable groups", „reintegration into the community of young people leaving the Children's Centers", „day care services for children belonging to families with limited or modest material and financial resources", „Support and counselling for families with children at risk", „Day services for children from families at risk (day centers with various activities, after-school)";

- victims of domestic violence – „Collaboration agreements with agencies specialized in preventing and combating domestic violence", „Residential center for victims of domestic violence where to have accommodation, psychological,

social and legal counselling for a specified period", „Houses for victims of domestic violence", „Supporting families at risk of domestic violence";

- homeless and at risk of poverty – „A mobile team to provide food, hot drinks, blankets, clothing and footwear to homeless people", „The need for services and social work for homeless people during the winter season, regardless of the area of the locality where they live", „Social canteens for poor people".

Other needs described by the interviewees are focused on dimensions such as information, training, education, cooperation and partnerships and facilitating access to social services.

Conclusions

In setting up and developing social work, the perspective of Social Work Department employees is very important. They have professional experience and have access to essential information that can be used in social policies in the social field. The needs and difficulties inventoried and described by them reflect the stage of development of social services.

The needs and difficulties inventoried and described by them reflect the stage of development of social services and the local community. Their ideas can be starting points in the reconstruction of the social work system.

Any reform of the social work system should also contain the perspective of the employees in the system and their recommendations should be the managerial axis in social services.

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