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Croatian Healthy Cities Network action research into the needs of the single-parent families

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For NPH4 Chapter 3

The percentage of single-parent families in Croatia is increasing over the last twenty years. An international literature review showed structural deficit in single-parent families increases their risk of pauperization, health risks and educational problems with children. Since we did not find similar research nationally, the Croatian Healthy Cities Network (CHCN), initiated similar research into the needs of single-parent families in the six Croatian cities, in 2011.

This applied research was conducted in (and by) the six cities, members of Croatian Healthy Cities Network: Dubrovnik, Poreč, Rijeka, Labin, Vinkovci and Zagreb. While forming the sample, a strategy of purposeful sampling of “information rich” respondents was used. The limit was the age of parents up to 35 years of age who have a child up to 7 years of age. Data were collected through structured interviews with parents, performed by visiting nurses. A total of 79 transcripts of interviews were received. Data analysis was performed by text reduction content analysis.

The vulnerability of single-parent families, identified through literature review, was confirmed with this research. The specific problems faced by these families were unemployment, housing, lack of support, insufficient understanding of legal rights, regulations and organizations that can provide them with the assistance.

Recognized needs were used as the foundation for the development of effective support programs, locally. Interventions were divided into short-term and long-term interventions. One of the short-term interventions jointly agreed by participating cities, launched in 2014, was to establish continuous visiting nurse care for single-parent families that will include needs monitoring, counselling, connecting family with existing services and NGOs, and engaging them in various programs that will improve their quality of life.

The second group of interventions was to compile an information database with all types of immediate assistance and services intended for mothers and children in the local community and distribute it to target audience through on-line directories, print or other media.

The third group of interventions, embedded in local Healthy City projects related to support building to parent self-organization. Fourth group of interventions was to sensitize public and especially institutions and associations for the expansion of programs according to the needs of single-parent families. Result was for example development of free services for children and mothers in the community (sports activities, art workshops, creative leisure time, excursions and socializing) with an emphasis on poorer city neighborhoods. Poreč and Labin have invested special effort in developing a program of organizing free activities for children during the summer as a form of support to parents in the season when they work the most. Parenting skills courses that will support gathering of single-parent families were embedded in the work of existing NGOs or Healthy City project. Special effort was put into improving the availability of preschool programs (nurseries, kindergartens), which includes adjustment of working hours, substitution of costs, inclusion of children of unemployed mothers, programs of working with parents, permanent training of educators, inclusion of children with additional needs. Through this group of activities cities (Poreč, Zagreb) have implemented adjustments to the working hours of kindergartens. Poreč changed the regulations for enrolling children in kindergarten to give priority to unemployed single parents. In 2015 and 2016 mentioned local (above national) standards were implemented.

Selected long-term interventions that would fully respond to the needs of single-parent families and significantly improve their quality of life were related to a) women's education programs; b) self-employment projects; c) projects for the development of flexible working hours; d) other parent involvement programs and e) creating mechanisms for better alimony collection. In 2017 activities have been initiated on the implementation of some of the above-mentioned projects such as the self-employment project of the city of Poreč, women's education programs, Zagreb, involving the second parent, Poreč, etc.

Researching existing resources locally, in the participating cities, we became aware of many powerful instruments for improving the quality of life of single-parent families available at the self-government level. They range from the possibility of helping in the payment of utility bills and rent subsidies, giving relief or exemption from paying nurseries, kindergartens or extended stay in school, financial assistance, family packages and the like. Cities are offering, as well, a variety of services through their (locally established) institutions and NGOs like psychosocial treatment of perpetrators of domestic violence. Changes in the regulations, the introduction of new scoring criteria for enrollment in kindergarten or the allocation of city apartments (single-parent families become priority group by achieving a higher score on waiting lists) significantly improved the quality of life of members of single-parent families in need.

In 2017 and 2018 the mechanism of co-financing initiated a whole range of programs: counseling work in the field of early parent-child interaction, psychoeducation and psychological support, better use of children's leisure time, such as children's summer camp (9-hour program for children throughout the summer) in Poreč, Labin or programs in Zagreb, extracurricular activities that are free or at least affordable and many others.

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