

Helping parents to escape the welfare trap

A very special target group that faces overpowering problems

In Poland, 3% of all children are born with a disability and unfortunately, statistics show that it is almost impossible for parents to care for a child with special needs whilst at the same time trying to get or hold on to a job. Usually in a family that has a child with a disability, one of the parents has to leave work and over time that parent can forfeit the opportunity of returning to gainful employment. In fact, 69% of parents with disabled children up to the age of 10 years do not work and 96% of these parents are women. This is due to a number of barriers, including the difficulty of ensuring reliable, good quality rehabilitation and care for their children. However, for parents who have spent some time out of the labour market, there is also the need to up-date professional qualifications that may no longer be in demand and to face the challenge of holding down a job when you have been more and more accustomed to inactivity and living on social benefits.



The Development Partnership (DP) "Pełnia Życia - wsparcie rodziców dzieci niepełnosprawnych" whose name might be translated as "Having a Full Life – supporting parents of disabled children" aims to help these parents who need all-day care for their children up to the age limit of 10, when school attendance for children with disabilities becomes compulsory. The idea of the project is to support parents by limiting the impact that having a child with disabilities has on their chances of finding a job.

Developing an integrated support system

This DP is coordinated by the Polish Association for Persons with Mental Handicap (PAPMH), which is an NGO involving

people with learning disabilities, their parents and friends and the professionals who work with them. The other members of the partnership are a training organisation and the Ministry of Social Affairs, which is attempting to develop a model of an integrated support system that would benefit both parents and their children. Currently, in Poland, there are no NGOs or state institutions that offer this kind of comprehensive support. PAPMH is in a unique position to take the lead in this new initiative. It was founded in 1963, has 130 Local Branches and 28 000 Members and runs 300 different centres that support children and adults with learning disabilities in leading an active, independent life.

The main objectives of the DP are to find solutions to the parents' dilemma of reconciling family and working life, to improve the quality of care for their children and to develop new opportunities for their children. To these ends the project has launched a three-pronged approach:

- **Developing mechanisms that link care and rehabilitation for the children with disabilities and psychological support for their parents.**

This support includes individualised counselling and guidance, innovative forms of flexible part-time work and/or self-employment. "Within our DP we have organised a Care and Rehabilitation Centre for children with disabilities and a Career Counselling and Employment Agency, as well as Law Counselling Point," reports Jaroslaw Kaminski, the Project Director. "Through our activities we are preparing individual work profiles for the parents of children with disabilities. Based on these profiles, parents will receive appropriate training that will help them find a job. The parents are able to attend the training because we provide the rehabilitation and care for their children. These activities are performed by professionals in that field."

- **Building a system of activating and accompanying measures for parents and children**

Both Polish and international research on the psychological situation of families that include children with disabilities indicates that the long-term stress caused by the care and education of the child induces depression and helplessness in many parents. To tailor its support system to the needs of both groups the DP embarked on a consultation process with representatives of these final beneficiaries and with the professionals that are active in this field. Eventually, the project's activities were determined during this process. Some 89% of the parents who were unemployed or inactive because of their care obligations declared that they wish to return to work, but required more flexible work organisation. Therefore, creating conditions and working time arrangements that take account of their needs are at the heart of the DP's efforts.

- **Disseminating the idea of flexible employment conditions amongst employers** through a series of seminars which promote relevant good practices.

"Our Partnership is testing all the possibilities of improved mechanisms for better cooperation between care and rehabilitation, and for the coordination of existing services that support parents and children. We cannot concentrate only on job finding," says Jaroslaw Kaminski and he also points out that "while the project is going to last, we are working with the parents, starting to activate them through the assurance that care and rehabilitation of their

children will be provided, once the job is found and the parent is working. The Partnership is also going to support the families in emergency situations."

Through its active participation in the EQUAL National Thematic Networks, the DP expects to influence relevant policy makers and it is also pushing to change the legislation in terms of incorporating this comprehensive approach. With the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy as one of the partners, the project stands a better than fair chance of achieving its ambitious objectives.

Total cost of DP: 3.456.000 PLN (886.150 euro)

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