



Foundation “International Social Service – Bulgaria”

Supporting children and families in Bulgaria and across borders

Activity report 2014



We are a Bulgarian non-governmental organization established in 2002.

We believe family is the best environment for a child's development.

We support children and families of all political, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

ISS-Bulgaria keeps its focus on the prevention of children's abandonment, violence against children, re-integration in the family, the development of foster care and alternative child care, the effective social inclusion of children with disabilities as well as the support of care leavers.

ISS-Bulgaria continues to provide social and legal support, cooperation and consultations to social services, courts and individuals (children, parents, close and distant relatives, lawyers and other professionals), by offering social and other reports in cases of divorce and separation, parental rights and responsibilities application, re-integration, adoption, trafficking, non-accompanied children abroad, etc., and by acting as a branch member in the network of the International Social Service which headquarters are based in Geneva, Switzerland.

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2014 Message from the Executive Director



Dear colleagues and partners,

For the team of the Foundation "International Social Service - Bulgaria", the year 2014

was oriented by two important anniversaries - the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Convention on the rights of the child and the 90th anniversary of

the International Social Service's network. These events were an occasion to reflect upon the contribution of our organization to the provision of the rights of the child not only in our country, but across border as well.

Since we were established in 2002, we aimed at having the Convention's principles of the best interests of the child and non-discrimination serve as ground rules in our work on the implementation of projects and the development of services in support of children and families. We have trained more than 120 professionals - social workers, psychologists, educators and assistants - working in the 14 services managed by our organization in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo, Targovishte, Smolyan, Sevlievo and Sofia, into recognition and respect for the child's rights and personality. For them the right of the child to live and to grow up in his family of origin is fundamental and is seen as a primary goal in their work.

Building up partnerships with the regional courts in Burgas, Veliko Tarnovo, Zlatograd, Haskovo and Byala Slatina was one of our greatest achievements in 2014. Our priority was the creation of an age-appropriate setting for the hearing of the child who participates in court's proceedings. Three court rooms were adapted accordingly - two in the regional court of Veliko Tarnovo and one in the regional court of Burgas. The regional court of Veliko Tarnovo also provided a room where the child could wait for being invited to the hearings; four rooms for children's hearings were furnished in the palaces of justice in Burgas, Haskovo, Zlatograd and Byala Slatina.

From January to May 2014, within the project "Partnership for effective and accessible services in the prevention of children's institutionalization", funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program, we have developed a framework for the evaluation of the effect of some social services (foster care and prevention of the child's placement outside of his biological family) on children and we carried out our first study on the application of this framework. The obtained results provide orientation as to the

interventions that would suit best the children and their families. They offer the team members a different perspective on the advancement and the successes of the child, the parents and the family. Last but not least, they support the quantitative, outcome-oriented planning of the case, based on the feedback about its results.

Our attention was focused on the members of the teams that work in the services managed by our organization. Continuing improvement of their qualification and the development of new competencies is the most important prerequisite for the provision of highly quality services. In the framework of the project "Partnership for effective and accessible services in the prevention of children's institutionalization", funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program, in which ISS-Bulgaria is a leading organization, a high-impact training in administrative and technical capacity was provided by the experts of the International Social Service - Switzerland, both to the team of the organization and to different professionals. We acquired new knowledge on strategic planning, evaluation of the effects of the services, the foster care, working with children with behavioral problems in residential care and we had a study visit to the canton of Zurich in Switzerland that gave us ideas, directions and impetus to improve the way we work on the provision of specific services.

Finally, we continued our active participation in the NGOs' coalition "Childhood 2025", with respect to the de-institutionalization of the social childcare. We have contributed, through our participation in various working groups, to issues that are important for social services: development of financial standards for the foster care; new conception for a new law on social services; development of a new type of social services in support of children in conflict with law, etc. We have been an effective partner to several NGOs , including UNICEF Bulgaria, the Institute for social activities and practices, Association "Samaritans" in Stara Zagora, Association "Child and Space", National Network for Children.

Dr. Sabina Sabeva, M.D.

PROJECTS

Project No 1

Project's name:

Child friendly Justice

The project is funded by the foundation OAK and the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program and is implemented jointly with the "Children's Legal Center – Bulgaria" Foundation.

Timeframe: September 2012 – August 2015

Goals and objectives

The project aims to ensure effective protection of children's rights before, during and after judicial proceedings in civil matters through introduction of minimum standards that guarantee child-friendly justice. Such guarantees will be achieved mainly through the development of training programs for magistrates and social workers, provision of general and specialized inter-disciplinary training of magistrates and other professionals, adaptation of court rooms, setting up of family units/panel of judges within the Courts, tailoring of integrated services that support and help children before, during and after the proceedings as well as drafting and dissemination of information materials for children who take part in judicial proceedings under the Family Code, the Child Protection Act, the Protection against Domestic Violence Act.

Project No 2

Project's name:

"A partnership for effective and accessible services aiming at prevention of children's institutionalisation"

The project is funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program. It is financed with 407521,36 BGL., 89,92% of them or 366 443,21 BGL are Swiss financial contribution.

Timeframe: September 2013 – August 2015

Goals and objectives for 2013

Overall objective: Support for the child care deinstitutionalization in the regions of Targovishte and Stara Zagora through augmentation of the effectiveness of the services that prevent placement of children in specialized institutions. The project will contribute for the achievement of the main objectives of TF CSP, by increasing the capacity of Bulgarian partners to: provide high quality social services; strengthen their ability to network; communicate with citizens; and mobilize civil support.

Project No 3

Project's name:

"Through better care to a successful social inclusion of children and young at risk in the region of Smolyan"

Funding from Medicor Foundation, Liechtenstein, with the amount of 448 500 BGL.

Timeframe: **June 2013 – May 2015**

Goals and objectives

Overall objective: Strengthen the alternative care for children in Smolyan region

Specific objectives:

1. Development and provision of services in Small group home (SGH) for children aged 3-12 with places for emergency placement of small children; 2. Preparation for successful social integration of care leavers placed in the Small group home for youths aged 15-18; 3. Raising public awareness about the meaning and the role of alternative care to support children and families at risk] 4. Create conditions for development of perseverance in adolescents in carrying out an activity through a hobby

ACTIVITY AND IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

The right of the child to live and to grow up in his family of origin is a guideline in the work of our organization.

Over 2,000 children and families received support in the Community Support Centres in Veliko Tarnovo, Targovishte, Smolyan and Sevlievo who worked in total on 900 cases.

The teams consulted parents to improve their knowledge and skills in taking good care of their children, accompanied them to different institutions and advocated for the settlement of their health insurance, choosing a general practitioner, getting an identity card, collecting papers for the child's admission to kindergarten or to school, preparing work-related documents and meeting an employer. Professionals provided also support for the improvement of their living conditions by assisting the recovery of electricity and water supplies, offering hygienic materials, medicines and food, clothes and toys.

We have supported **68 families at risk in order to prevent the placement of their children outside of the family**; in 61 of these cases we carried out a fieldwork, while 7 cases were treated in a "Mother and Baby" Unit.

The "Mother and Baby" Unit in Targovishte sheltered and supported **7 mothers and their 15 children** who have found themselves in a critical situation due to extremely adverse conditions or violence within the family, in order to prevent the placement of the children in specialised institutions. Thanks to the support from the team and our cooperation with the Child Protection Department and other institutions, five of the children admitted in the "Mother and Baby" Unit are now reared in a family environment, two of them are placed in foster families and the other nine children are still in "Mother and Baby" Unit with their mothers (*as by 31 December 2014*).

We worked on **100 cases of reintegration of children from institutions or in a foster care into their families of origin** by supporting children and their families in the periods before, during and after the reintegration.

125 children with behavioral problems, delinquency and at risk of dropping out of school received support in the form of psychological and social counseling and educational support.

We have supported 19 children victims of various forms of violence, and some of the parents, so they could overcome the trauma and prevent the re-abuse.

27 children, victims of various forms of violence, sexual exploitation and lack of care, and children whose parents were in crisis, deceased, homeless or mentally ill, received protection at the Center for Emergency Placement at the Community Support Centre in Targovishte. In 2014 the Centre was operating with the support of the Swiss Cooperation Program. These children were provided safety, protected environment and help for facing the trauma; in addition, an intensive support to their families was provided. Thanks to this, one third of the children were re-integrated in their families, five children were placed in foster families, and six children were placed in Centres for family-type accommodation.

FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION

94 professional foster families and about 150 children placed in them received our support through the Community Support Centres in the municipalities of Targovishte, Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo and Smolyan.

This included monthly home visits to the foster families, consultations on issues related to the childcare and children's problems as well as assistance in resolving them; accompaniment to the preliminary meetings between children and foster parents; accompaniment to the meetings between the children and their biological families or prospective adoptive parents. In support of the foster families were carried out:

- 30 meetings of the mutual support groups of foster families
- 24 advanced trainings
- 50 individual and 6 group supervisions of foster families

Foster parents shared:

„It is a pleasure for me to meet with the mutual support group. These meetings are relaxing for me, and I see that my family is part of an even bigger one. The most valuable of what I have received from the group is someone whom to talk to when I face difficulties with the kids – there is always someone who had faced a similar problem”.

„Supervision is of interest to me, as the supervisor is always a step before me and guides me to explanations that I haven't thought of as a possibility”.

Many children placed in a foster care were receiving psychological support in difficult moments of their adaptation to the foster family, and during the preparation for leaving the foster parents due to forthcoming adoption or reintegration. Different activities were organized for foster children - festivities for the holidays (Easter, 24 May, 1 June, Christmas), creative workshops and public performances.

33 candidates for foster families in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo, Targovishte, Smolyan, Omurtag and Antonovo were trained and assessed by the teams of the Community Support Centres in Veliko Tarnovo, Targovishte, Smolyan and Sevlievo.

29 prospective adoptive parents have received training. It is an undisputed success that the relationship of trust and respect between the teams and the adoptive parents they have trained is being preserved later on, and they keep seeking contact and advice for their already adopted children.

A mutual support group for adoptive and prospective adoptive parents, in which participated 18 people, is operating successfully for a second year in Targovishte,

8 children and their adoptive families were supported after the adoption.

SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES

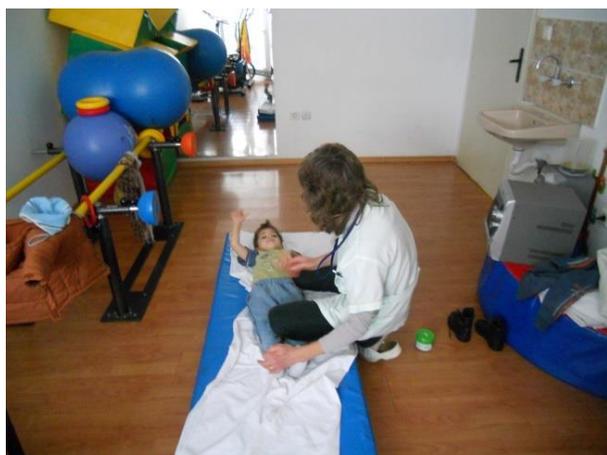
Children with disabilities and their families occupy an important place in our work. We believe they need to live a full and decent life, to be respected in their dignity and encouraged in their independence.

200 children with disabilities and their families received support through our services in the Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo and Targovishte and through the Daycare Centres for children with disabilities in the municipalities of Sofia and Sevlievo.



In 2014 we started to provide services in support of children and youth with disabilities placed in Centres for family-type accommodation that were opened in the framework of the “Childhood for all” project. We believe our work with these children is important for the improvement of their quality of life and no single provider of services should give it up.

The teams invest daily efforts in the care for and stimulation of children's development, bring joy into their everyday life, work for their social inclusion and in this way they assist parents in their work and professional realization.



They were offered more than 13,500 hours of rehabilitation, speech therapy, and educational and psychological support.

Over 800 hours of group work were carried out on various topics as self-service skills, exploring community life - visiting different shops, the library, going to cinema or at a restaurant, and also cooking workshops and art therapy.



SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF CHILDREN

DEPRIVED OF PARENTAL CARE AND YOUNG PEOPLE AIMED AT THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE SKILLS ON THE PATH TO INDEPENDENCE

We were taking care of 15 children and young people aged 15 to 18 years at the Centre for family-type accommodation in Smolyan and of 17 children aged 0 to 12 years in a new Centre for family-type accommodation that was opened in the beginning of the year in the framework of the project “Through better care to a successful social inclusion of children and young at risk in the region of Smolyan”.

We provided them a life in a small group in a family – like environment, good health care and education, and opportunities to maintain contact with their relatives, to expand their social network and develop skills for independent living.



40 children and young people aged 11 to 18 years, who have been placed in different residential care services - Centres for family-type accommodation in Smolyan, Popovo, Veliko Tarnovo and the Home for children deprived of parental care in Veliko Tarnovo - participated in life skills trainings in preparation for leaving these services. 40 training sessions were held

last year, covering a variety of topics as teamwork skills, conflict prevention, acquisition of daily living skills - nutrition, hygiene, health care, and more.

The traditional camps for the children from the Centres for family-type accommodation in Popovo and Smolyan, dedicated to the acquisition of practical skills for independent life in society, were carried out too. They were focused on teamwork and management of aggression and emotions.

19 young people over 18 years were admitted to the Monitored Housing in Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo and Smolyan.

The teams of the services provided support, assistance and accompaniment to the youth in their search for employment, expansion of the social network, solving personal problems (developing adequate self-esteem, coping with emotions connected to the biological family, assuming responsibility), acquiring skills for independent living - dealing with anger, introducing yourself to an employer, budgeting, and more.

By the end of the year 8 young people left the service: five of them have successful integration (had signed work contracts and rented housing), and three others were relocated in a Protected Living Space or a Monitored Housing.

WHAT WAS DIFFERENT THIS YEAR?

Within the project “The justice – a child's friend” we have directed our efforts to important issues related to child’s participation in the court proceedings under the civil law that concern his rights and interests.

These are the right of the child to a hearing, the right of the child and his parents to information, support to the child and his family before, during and after the court proceedings as well as the multi-disciplinary and inter-institutional approach in working with children and parents subjected to court proceedings.

Our priority was the creation of an age-appropriate setting for the hearing of the child who participates in court’s proceedings. One of our most significant achievements is that three court rooms were adapted accordingly – two in the regional court of Veliko Tarnovo and one in the regional court of Burgas); a room was provided where the child could wait for being invited to



the hearings (at the regional court of Veliko Tarnovo), and four rooms for children’s hearings were furnished in the palaces of justice in Burgas, Haskovo, Zlatograd and Byala Slatina.



We raised the issue of the social report that the Directorate “Social Assistance” presents in the civil court proceedings involving children. Upon our initiative, the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance hosted a workshop where, in the presence of the Ombudsman and the representatives of the Ministries, the Agency for Social Assistance, and the State Agency for Child Protection, judges from the regional courts in Veliko Tarnovo, Burgas, Blagoevgrad, Razgrad and Haskovo expressed their views. Judges were united around the suggestion to create standards for the structure, content and authorship of the social report. The ISS – Bulgaria experts, in cooperation with judges and social workers who have been trained within this project, already work on the development of such standards.

This year, for the first time in Bulgaria, were piloted two new services that support the child and his parents before, during and after the court proceedings: Information program for parents in the process of separation or divorce and Contact center for children and parents.

The Information program allows the parents in process of separating to get acquainted with the consequences and traumas experienced by children, in order to encourage them to reach agreement on their future after the separation or divorce. The Contact centre provides a space

where children and their parents could meet after the divorce or separation, and the contact can be monitored and supervised; or a place where parents can take and bring their children back thus avoiding encounters with the other parent. These services are provided by the Community Support Centres in Veliko Tarnovo and Burgas. Referrals to them are made by the judges who decide upon the court proceedings or have prescribed a monitored contact. Referrals can be also made by the Directorates “Social Assistance”, lawyers’ associations, and other institutions and professionals who work with the child and his family.



In October 2014 we carried out a specialized multi-disciplinary training for a total of 50 judges, social workers and psychologists that allowed them to increase their knowledge and gain additional skills in areas that they themselves selected: the capacity of the child to comprehend the separation of the parents; disturbances in mother’s and father’s functions during separation or divorce; innovative approaches in setting up the living arrangement; exercise of parents’ rights and contacts with the

child; working with children victims of family violence and the placement of the child outside of his family of origin.

In 2014, as part of the continuing improvement of the quality of the services, we aimed at assessing the effect of the provided services upon the children and their families.

Within the project “A partnership for effective and accessible services in the prevention of children’s institutionalisation”, we organized in–depth discussion with the participation of key experts from the organization and the teams of our services, as well as representatives of other NGOs. They developed frameworks for the evaluation of the services foster care and prevention of the child’s placement outside of the biological family. The frameworks are based on the logical model that links resources – activities – results – intermediate effects – final effects.

In the evaluation of the foster care effects were assessed the well-being and security of the child through indicators of health, physical development, cognitive and educational development, emotional state and behavior, as well as the certainty of the placement. Data were gathered from the school and health records, in conversations with child’s general practitioner and teachers, in



interviews with the foster families and through observations and psychological studies.

The study involved 71 children aged 2 – 17 years who were raised in foster families at least for one year. Its results indicated that child’s physical development is normal (though in the lower range), 86% of the children are in good health and the other 14 % with chronic illnesses receive adequate

medical care. Intellectual and educational troubles have been diagnosed in 13% of the children, and one third of the children have special educational needs. Emotional and behavioral problems were diagnosed in 9 % of the children, while the screening test that has been used “Strengths and difficulties” indicates that more than one fourth of the children are at risk of psychiatric problems. During the one-year period that was evaluated there were no registered accidents or cases of violence against the foster children, neither replacement of a child from one to another foster family or in resident care.

The conclusion that can be made is that foster families take a good care of the children who were placed in them.

The framework for the evaluation of the prevention of abandon comprises indicators in the following areas: safe and secure environment, child’s health, education and encouragement of the child; well-being of the family; context of life.

The study that was carried out involved seven families, and six months after the work with them has been completed, achieved results were preserved – children continued to be raised in their families, there was no risk of neglect or indifference, improvements made in the living conditions were maintained, and parents were taking adequate care for child’s health and development.

The study also showed that the framework for the evaluation of the services effects and the indicators chosen for their assessment are valid – they do measure the effect we are interested in; reliable – we can count on them in time; precise and applicable – the required information can be found easily; and such a price for a study is affordable for every provider (it was done within the funding of CSC).

HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: ISS BULGARIA - A LIFELONG LEARNING ORGANISATION!

ISS - Bulgaria, in its capacity of social services' provider, believes that the high competence of its professionals is a prerequisite for the achievement of high quality services and goals in the work with every child and his family! That is why the continuing improvement of the personnel's qualification is an important task for us.

In the past year all the teams running services that are managed by ISS-Bulgaria were provided with at least 15 days of training.



The total number of trainings, exchange meetings and other professional activities in which our professionals have participated is about 190 days, and the majority of them were supported by additional funding coming from the projects run by ISS - Bulgaria.

The teams of all our services had monthly managerial supervision and were consulted methodologically. ISS-Bulgaria also provided external experts who conducted group supervision three to four times during the year and individual supervision (two per professional)

for the members of the different teams.

In December 2014 the teams of all the services managed by ISS- Bulgaria participated in a team building. The meeting took place in the city of Kazanlak and contributed to the networking between professionals, its development and sustenance. Good practices were exchanged as well as successes and failures that teams experienced in their work with the target groups.



We have initiated and realized three professional meetings that have already become a tradition:

- the Vth Inter-regional Meeting of the Community Support Centres in Veliko Tarnovo, attended by 22 centres from the regions of Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Russe, Targovishte,



Shumen, Plovdiv, Haskovo, Stara Zagora, Smolyan and Sofia, where participants discussed the management of services and activities for children placed in residential care or in foster families;



- the IInd Regional Meeting of the Community Support Centres from the region of Gabrovo;

- the IInd Inter-regional Meeting of the Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration in Veliko Tarnovo, which was attended by the members of the centres in

Veliko Tarnovo, Razgrad, Targovishte, Pleven and Lovech, and where good practices were shared and current problems and difficulties were discussed.

ISS - BULGARIA'S ACTIVITY AS A BRANCH MEMBER IN THE NETWORK OF ISS

In 2014 ISS-Bulgaria worked on 69 new cases with an international element.

Compared to 2013, when ISS – Bulgaria most often worked on cases related to the welfare of the child and on cases of children at risk in particular, in 2014 the organization assisted cases concerning the relationships between the children and their parents – **30 cases**. These cases are related with court proceedings – divorce, separation, partial or full withdrawal of parental rights – where a decision has to be made as to the child's place of living, the exercise of parental rights, personal relationships with the parent whom the child does not live with and the maintenance of the child / children.

The second large group of cases that ISS – Bulgaria worked on required that we study the situation of children who live abroad or have moved to Bulgaria and for whom there is evidence that they are at risk because of a risk of abandonment, suspected various forms of violence, health problems, placement outside the biological family, etc. – **13 cases**.

ISS – Bulgaria also worked on **8 cases** related to child's adoption. Its assistance was sought after mostly for the provision of social reports by the competent social services in Bulgaria on women who are Bulgarian citizens, gave birth to a child in Greece and let it be adopted by a particular Greek family. Information on the conditions, procedures and documents concerning the international adoption was also requested.

Next come two groups of cases dealing with the *child's reintegration* and the *monitoring of a protection's measure application* – **8 cases**.

ISS - Bulgaria provides information and consultations to individuals or public bodies on different issues concerning children and families in cross-border situation. For example, the opportunities to take a case to the trial in a third country; the procedures to be followed in a given situation; referral to competent authorities and bodies; getting assistance from the ISS for the establishment of contact between the child and his grandparents; providing social assistance; searching for a biological parent; supplying documents to a foster family of foreigners who wish to care for a child in Bulgaria, etc. – **5 consultations**.

In the past year the organization has facilitated the courts in disputes related to child's maintenance, replacement agreement for issuing a passport and identification of origin – **3 cases**. In addition, we have mediated **2 cases** related to issuing a birth certificate to a born abroad child who is Bulgarian, and searching for a biological parent.

Of all the 69 requests for assistance that were addressed to ISS –Bulgaria in 2014, 37 % (26) came from abroad through the ISSS network , and 63 % (43) came from Bulgaria. The latter are distributed as follows:

- ✓ 38 % or 26 requests for social reports from abroad came from Bulgarian courts (regional and municipal courts)
- ✓ 20 % or 14 requests for assistance came from the system of child protection (Regional Directorates "Social Assistance", Directorate "Social Assistance", and Child Protection Departments).
- ✓ 4 % of the requests came from individuals – parents, relatives, including lowers and providers of social services to children and families.
- ✓ 1% of the requests for assistance came from the Ministry of Interior, in particular from the Sofia Directorate of Internal Affairs.

SOURCES OF FUNDING AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION FOR 2014

In 2014, for all activities performed by ISS-Bulgaria, we have received funding in the amount of 1 488 043, 93 BGL. The major share of this funding comes from state-mandated activities - 1 228 289,20 BGL (or 82,5%), through the management of social services. Next is the funding of projects aimed at achieving specific goals - 225 954, 30 BGL (15,2%). The yearly donations (22 811,65 BGL), the proceeds from working on international cases (6 116, 44 BGL) and invoices for trainings and supervision provided by the Foundation (4872,34 BGL) constitute 2,3% of all funding.

Figure 1. Source of funding in 2014

