

**STUDYING THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL WORKERS AWARENESS OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THE CONDITIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract**

For a period of about three years (from the beginning of 2020 till the beginning of May 2023, when the WHO canceled the status of pandemic), the COVID-19 pandemic was active in the Republic of Bulgaria. The pandemic had an impact on all spheres of life, including social work for persons with disabilities in our country. The topic of this study is the level of social workers' awareness of the connection between social work for persons with disabilities and the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemics. Some aspects of awareness in the centers, working with disabled people, have been studied.

**Purpose of the study:** To study some aspects of the level of social workers awareness on the connection between social work for people with disabilities and the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Scope and methods:** A survey was conducted among 40 social workers in 5 centers working with persons with disabilities from the city of Sliven regarding their activities under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical processing of the research results was completed.

**Results and discussion:** Social workers want to be informed to a different degree about various topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them (37.5%) would like to have information about work-specific activities under pandemic conditions. For 30% of the social workers it is important to understand what the symptoms of the disease are. Apparently, that same number of social workers (30%) need to know how to react in certain situations of the pandemic. Only a small part of the respondents (7.5%) need practice in a pandemic environment. Unfortunately, about 30% of all social workers refuse to have any information related to the impact of COVID-19 on their work. The total of the answers to this question is greater than 100% since social workers gave more than one answer.

**Key words:** *awareness, social work, persons with disabilities, COVID-19.*

**Introduction**

The purpose of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (2).

The principles of the Convention are: a) respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons; b) non-discrimination; c) full and effective participation and inclusion in society; d) respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity; e) equal opportunities; f) accessibility; g) equality between men and women; h) respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities (2).

States Parties to the Convention shall take all necessary measures to ensure and recognize the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind on the basis of disability. To this end, States Parties undertake: a) To adopt all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention; b) To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute

discrimination against persons with disabilities; c) To take into account the protection and promotion of the human rights of persons with disabilities in all policies and programmes; d) To refrain from engaging in any act or practice that is inconsistent with the present Convention and to ensure that public authorities and institutions act in conformity with the present Convention; e) To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability by any person, organization or private enterprise; f) To undertake or promote research and development of universally designed goods, services, equipment and facilities, as defined in article 2 of the present Convention, which should require the minimum possible adaptation and the least cost to meet the specific needs of a person with disabilities, to promote their availability and use, and to promote universal design in the development of standards and guidelines; g) To undertake or promote research and development of, and to promote the availability and use of new technologies, including information and communications technologies, mobility aids, devices and assistive technologies, suitable for persons with disabilities, giving priority to technologies at an affordable cost; h) To provide accessible information to persons with disabilities about mobility aids, devices and assistive technologies, including new technologies, as well as other forms of assistance, support services and facilities; i) To promote the training of professionals and staff working with persons with disabilities in the rights recognized in the present Convention so as to better provide the assistance and services guaranteed by those rights. (2).

According to Chilikova, training also the relatives in a proper way will definitely improve the quality of life[5]. In addition, access to most recent information on modern tendencies in treatment together with primary and secondary prevention for health care professionals are essential for the quality of care (8).

According to Sabri M., not only clinical knowledge and skills shall be formed in the course of healthcare professionals basic training, but also feelings, attitude and mindset need to be cultivated that will form a holistic approach to the patient (5).

The national action plan for the implementation of the UN Committee Final recommendations to the Republic of Bulgaria on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was developed to implement the Final recommendations of September 21, 2018 to the Republic of Bulgaria issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in connection with the Defense of the initial report of Bulgaria on its efforts to implement the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, that took place on 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> September 3 2018 in the city of Geneva, with reference to the fulfillment of the State Party's obligations related to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The final recommendations to Bulgaria are related to the observance of the rights of persons with disabilities in different areas - education, employment, health care, economic and social support, participation in political and public life, violence, traffic, stereotypes and discriminatory practices, disadvantaged women and girls with disabilities, legal framework for equality, mechanism related to the submission of complaints, marriage and family relations, the guardianship institution, etc. The plan is in addition to the obligations that are within the competence of each institution or organization and related to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The plan comprises all the Committee recommendations, both those already fulfilled as well as the results achieved so far, and those reported as not implemented yet or being implemented. It outlines the measures and activities used to implement some of the recommendations so far, as well as those aimed at improving the national legislation in terms of ensuring the rights of people with disabilities; activities to overcome stereotypes and discriminatory practices; providing more opportunities for labor market participation of persons with disabilities; active participation in political and public life; changes in legislation to guarantee better support services and protection for persons with disabilities who have experienced violence or trafficking; trainings to increase the capacity of magistrates, investigating police officers, pedagogues and social workers; activities to promote the participation of women

and girls with disabilities in different areas of public life; explanatory and information activities, promoting the Convention, etc. The National Action Plan has been designed for implementation of the commitments undertaken by the Republic of Bulgaria pursuant to the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, providing benefits to guarantee better protection and opportunities for active inclusion in public life (4).

According to Sultanova D., providing up-to-date information regularly and raising the level of awareness of both medical and social workers is essential for performing effectively their job duties and responsibilities (6).

### **Purpose of the study**

To study some aspects of the level of social workers awareness on the connection between social work for people with disabilities and the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Scope and methods**

A survey was conducted among 40 social workers in 5 centers working with persons with disabilities from the city of Sliven regarding their activities under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical processing of the research results was completed.

### **Results and discussion**

Social workers want to be informed to a different degree about various topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them (37.5%) would like to have information about work-specific activities under pandemic conditions. For 30% of the social workers it is important to understand what the symptoms of the disease are. Apparently, that same number of social workers (30%) need to know how to react in certain situations of the pandemic. Only a small part of the respondents (7.5%) need practice in a pandemic environment. Unfortunately, about 30% of all social workers refuse to have any information related to the impact of COVID-19 on their work. The total of the answers to this question is greater than 100% since social workers gave more than one answer.

It is interesting who social workers would like to receive information from in relation to their work in the conditions of pandemics. Most of them (55%) require information from a physician-epidemiologist. A great number of the social workers (42.5%) consider their managers a reliable source of information; and 25% will ask their GP for information. 10% of the respondents prefer getting information from the Internet, and 5% will visit a psychologist first. Only one social worker (2.5%) indicated each of the following options as a source of information: family; friend; a friend with COVID-19; obtaining the information from a normative act and from another social worker. Here, too, the sum of the answers to this question is more than 100%, since the social workers gave more than one answer.

According to Alexieva, V., collaboration between different specialists would have much greater success (1).

About 37% of the respondents shared their working experience during the pandemic with other colleagues from similar centers in the town of Sliven or in the country, while the majority - about 63% - did not share their knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

Social services in Bulgaria play an essential role in promoting the social inclusion of persons with disabilities. In line with the policy in this field, targeted interventions will continue to ensure high quality services to people with disabilities. Support through social services helps create a better environment for persons with disabilities, enabling them to participate fully in the community, exercise their rights and live in dignity. Efforts will be made to provide integrated public services for persons with disabilities. The application of innovative approaches in the provision of integrated

services, aiming to prevent and reduce social exclusion, is a key factor when it comes to providing conditions and giving opportunities for disabled people to participate in public life (3).

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