

Streetwork In Chat – the project description

1. Novelty in the solution

The presented project is based on the real situation of the changing behavior of young people in the online environment. The virtual world is becoming a natural part of our everyday life across generations in our society. The youngest people don't know the world without the Internet, and in many ways this reflects on their way of communication and the way they establish relationships. Internet possibilities make it easier and faster for people to get information, get to know new people and establish new contacts. At the same time, however, the Internet brings information burden and congestion with often contradictory or misleading information, internet relationships are often superficial and the number of social networking friends often conceals the loneliness of the real world. The Internet environment gives people a room for more openness, anonymous ability to share and entrust themselves, find answers to their questions, but at the same time the same anonymity allows many forms of aggression, manipulation and unlawful behavior.

All this is part of the 21st century life in the Czech Republic, Central Europe and all the developed countries of the world where the Internet is used in its full breadth. The politicians, businessmen, but also people in helping professions have to react to this. This is also a challenge for the social sphere.

The Streetwork In Chat project is a pilot activity in this field. Our goal is not only to implement individual project activities towards a target group of children and young people (both preventive and interventional), but we also aim to develop a professional level of discussion and search for ways to help and support in the Internet environment. Relatively common in the Czech Republic is the option of online work in the form of online counseling or a virtual low-threshold club. However, all these forms work with the fact that the client reaches out to the service himself – writes an email, enters a chat room or virtual club etc. It also means that he is aware of having a problem and knows that he can ask for help. Compared to that our practice is the opposite and similar to the field social work. We are looking for our potential clients and we offer them the possibility of professional support and help. In the Czech Republic, this method is a novelty, but it is based on methods that are proven abroad, mostly in the Nordic countries.

2. New access to the target group and its involvement

The target group of our project is children and young people under 26 years of age. There are different forms of help and support for this target group, but to find help and ask for it is difficult even for adults, let alone for children and teenagers. At the same time, it is our goal to look for those who can not yet name their worries or lack a preview of their life situation and its possible consequences, but also for those who

live in localities where the needed kind of help is not available at all. By the chosen form of work we strive to remove these barriers and increase the availability of support for as many children and young people as possible.

The target group is not just a passive recipient of support, because one of the goals is its active engagement through public debate on individual statuses on the social network, as well as through the peer support within a closed "Teenagers' Problems" Facebook group. Both main lines of work enable the fulfilment of the project goals and extend the scope of support to more recipients. Anyone who, for example, learns the principles of appropriate discussion and cultivated communication, can influence the others with every online post on social networking sites. Many of those who were the recipients of support themselves will be able to pass it on to someone else.

Adult tendency is rather to highlight risks and discourage young people from the online world, which usually leads to the opposite effect. We have therefore chosen a different way - to increase the skills of the Internet users so that they can use its positive aspects and at the same time be able to prevent risks or even avoid abuse.

3. Novelty of realization – efficiency

The pilot phase of the project started in mid-2017, initially thanks to the volunteer work of three team members, and thanks to the first financial support from endowment funds, both in 2017 and 2018. For 2019, we are again looking for resources in the foundation sector, endowment funds, private donors, etc. Providing low-threshold services for children and youth online is still not established in the legislation. The Social Services Act has so far supported only ambulant and field-based forms, so the public resources can not be used.

The main activity of the project is to provide interventions in the virtual space, specifically on social network sites (currently Facebook especially). Interventions are provided by professionally trained staff in three different ways - public statuses and comments, private direct conversations, and the work in a closed Facebook group "Teenagers' Problems". Unfortunately, the financial support from the foundations is not continuous, in times of no financial support, the project works on a voluntary basis, because the continuity of the project is crucial for its future and development. Despite these complications, more than 750 interventions were provided during the realization of the project, but the number of affected people was much larger due to the nature of the Facebook social network. There is currently almost 400 members in the closed group "Teenagers' Problems", of which over 200 are active. All of this happened with 800 hours of officially paid work in the past 1,5 years of realization. The volunteer hours may reach approximately the same amount.

The secondary effect of this project is also the way of the realization staffing. Workers of the project were originally employees of our ambulant low-threshold clubs, where they gained a lot of experience working with children and youth. After leaving for maternity and parental leave, they are involved in this project, which is the kind of work they are able to match with taking care of their own children, while actively maintaining professional skills and creating new methods of work for the next use at

least at the level of low-threshold clubs of Diakonie Zápád, but ideally at the national level. The guarantor of the project is the Child and Youth Service Leader, who connects the teams of our 4 ambulant, 2 field work low-threshold clubs and the Streetwork In Chat project.

4. Outward action - innovation as an example

An integral part of the project is, in addition to providing support to the primary target group of children and young people, to promote the idea of actively seeking potential clients of the service and offering them support in an environment that is natural to them, which a virtual world is. Our ambition is to increase the awareness not only of the general but also the professional public in order to create the basis for establishing this form of work as official and legally recognized. That would enable the possibility for this form of service to apply for funding from the official resources intended for the social services in the Czech Republic.

To achieve this ambition we use various tools - the project and its outputs were presented at the annual congress of the Association of Social Service Providers of the Czech Republic (October 2018), also included in an article in the Social Services Magazine (2017), which focused on the forms of the low-threshold services for children and youth. We also repeatedly bring this topic to the working groups focusing on social services for children and youth (eg community planning of social services, working group of low-threshold services of the Pilsen and Karlovy Vary Region, ...). There is also a conference being prepared that will focus on the issue of online communication in the preventive services.