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The impact of the pandemic generated by Coronavirus on employees in social services for seniors from Romania

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Abstract. Since 2020, senior social services staff have been working under new circumstances resulting from the global spread of COVID-19. The pandemic and the restrictions put in place to control it have affected every area of our lives. Thus, this paper aims to analyze the perception of employees on social services for the elderly in Romania and is based on the indicators: the degree of involvement of employees in social services for seniors, the resilience capacity of employees in social services for seniors and the impact of the pandemic on employees in social services for seniors. In order to assess the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on social services for seniors, the employees of the service providers were invited to participate in a quantitative research based on the sociological survey based on the questionnaire with the most honest answers to each question. The design of the questionnaire was based on previous research, and adaptations were made where necessary. According to the centralization of the data obtained, the personnel employed in social assistance institutions providing social services to elderly people in our country confirm that access to protective equipment and risk management recommendations have been improved. .

Keywords. Social services, pandemic, seniors, employees, nursing home.

1. Introduction

In Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the situation of older people, who are already facing a number of social problems.

The studies reveal several problems faced by employees working in institutions providing social services to seniors in Romania, these problems being identified in the period before the COVID 19 pandemic. The main problems concern the lack of human resources and the employment of people without special training in the field, the large workload, the large number of cases and the increase in their complexity, a low level of understanding by heads of institutions and colleagues with other qualifications on priority customer needs, bureaucracy, too many forms to fill in, insufficient material and logistical resources, lack of adequate workspace, difficulties in cooperation between institutions and also, within the same institution, the lack of uniform working methodologies, concerns about personal aspects, personal safety at work, reduced access to vocational training, emotional and mental problems, emotional and mental stress, lack of professional supervision, job insecurity.

Employees note that all these are obstacles to effective intervention. In addition, the unequal distribution of social services in communities increases social inequalities, making certain categories of the population more vulnerable. Any crisis situation highlights weaknesses and brings vulnerabilities and operating instabilities to the surface, to a personal level, but also to a group, community and society level. However, strengths and more positive aspects can also be brought to attention and available resources can be rediscovered.

The activity of employees in social services for seniors has undergone substantial changes due to restrictions imposed to limit the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 virus. All restrictive measures were necessary and beneficial for the safety of professionals and customers. The implementation of social distancing measures has led to limitations on the work of social workers, who usually work directly with socially disadvantaged groups and people who lack many resources. In order to maintain the health and safety of beneficiaries and employees in social services, the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and its subordinated institutions have developed instructions and recommendations such as: Replacing monitoring visits, with monitoring by telephone or digital technology, online (via e-mail), where possible, telephone and online, members of integrated teams, with other local teams of professionals, families of beneficiaries, temporary staff unavailable, authorities, adoption of flexible working hours/setting individualized work schedules, hiring additional staff without competition, suspension of social services, identification of volunteers to support staff, identification, priority, families/relatives who can take over their beneficiaries at home during the state of emergency. The recommendations also stress that, in this context, the need for specific training and supervision is imperative for social services, social service employees, in order to be able to provide psychosocial support to beneficiaries.

The National College of Social workers of Romania (2020) has developed sectoral recommendations which include: Making a more flexible working schedule, working from home, where possible, limiting as much as possible the access of the population to the offices of the institution, limiting the activity on the field and using alternative solutions, Such as phone and video calls, sending documents via email, WhatsApp and so on.

The recommendations of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (2020) also aimed at establishing updated procedures for regulating the access of residents, staff in centers, volunteers and representatives of the authorities, isolation for 14 days at admission to the center, depending on the epidemiological assessment, interruption of access to new beneficiaries during the state of emergency, provision of detailed procedures for various activities (collection of medical information, medical waste, special access and exit routes for staff, purchase of necessary materials, post services, compliance with hygiene rules and control of the spread of diseases, preservation of social distance).

2. General information

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected older people in care homes more than any other category, with between 19% and 72% of all SARS-CoV-2-related deaths occurring among these establishments. The lack of standardized guidelines, discrepancies between the public and private sectors, underfunding and many other irregularities have led to the dramatic result for residents of old-age homes. The hope is that unfortunate events that could have been prevented will lead to a decisive change in policies relating to these units and avoid similar results in the future.

The very high share of COVID-19 deaths in individualistic cases countries such as the US, Canada and many Western European countries took place in elderly homes and long-

term care centers, whose residents, usually elderly, are living in the country. They are much more vulnerable than younger people to develop serious diseases if they are infected with COVID-19. When coronavirus is inadvertently introduced into these densely populated facilities, the elderly population is devastated by COVID-19. This has not happened in collectivist countries, because even very fragile elderly people tend to live in homes next to the extended family. Since the overwhelming trend in collectivist countries is that older people are cared for by their families rather than living in densely populated retirement homes, they are less likely to be exposed to coronavirus, contract COVID-19 and die; collectivist cultures do not throw their elders in the trash. Worldwide, the trend is to keep seniors in their own home by providing specialized care at home, being admitted to a specialized institution being the last solution, but in our country the saving solution is to intern the elderly in various care centers ensuring them the need for accommodation, food and safety.

SARS-CoV-2 has caused a high mortality in institutionalized people. There are very few studies on the real involvement and impact of COVID-19 in elderly homes. Adequate management of staff in care homes and attention to infection control measures, especially for people with higher dependence, are key to successfully managing future pandemic situations.

Especially during the COVID-19 process, staff working in retirement homes had to work in the institution for 14 days, which could have caused this staff to face psychosocial problems. These problems could have caused other problems in both the personal and professional lives of people working in the field of care for the elderly.

Social services are mainly aimed at people who are in an unfavorable social situation and who cannot have a basic basis for their lives or who urgently need help for other serious reasons. The issue of management in social services has become topical and its importance is underscored by the fact that it is a fundamental condition for the professional performance of providing these social services to people, groups and communities in a difficult social situation. Social services are a dynamic field of activity with considerable heterogeneity of their target groups, which increases the difficulty of social management at different levels of management (national, regional, local) throughout the system of practical implementation.

Social service experts confess that social management is not yet sufficiently developed and, in order to practice their performance, new management approaches are needed to promote the sustainability of the effectiveness of the professional and service activities that define social activities. The balance between economic, social and psychological factors in social services was supported by Vaverčáková, Hromková [1], which emphasizes that when studying management, it is important to realize that the concept of management can be understood and interpreted in four senses (process, profession, scientific discipline and art). In the study, social management is defined as a dynamic and repetitive process, which is characterized by the authors mentioned above as an approximation of the practical work of the manager, which consists of a set of activities to achieve a goal, including their implementation and evaluation.

In the provision of social services, the professionalism of the staff and the interest in the overall professionalization of social services, including through the development of social management, are important. "The central identified elements of interest in social management are social knowledge, social skills and social contacts; they form the basis of the social management scheme and provide the necessary systematization unit for the overall understanding of management processes in social work" [2]. It is also necessary for managers to be able to present their goals correctly.

The management of social services institutions is one of the important links in the mechanism of implementation of the state social policy. Therefore, it is important for a head of institution to have certain qualities, knowledge and skills [3].

It is now stated that the management of the social services institution depends on the level of development and the competence of its staff in many respects. Therefore, the staff becomes a strategic factor that determines the future development of the institution. This transforms the staff of a modern social services institution into human resources - a set of personalities; the implementation of the institution's goals and objectives depends on their professional competence, civic spirit and culture [4]. Thus, the management of the staff of the social services institution becomes the most important field of activity of its leader. The head of the social services institution must implement certain functions and roles on the basis of the professional standard [5].

3. Design of research

The purpose of the study is to analyze the perception of employees on social services for the elderly in Romania and is based on the indicators: the degree of involvement of employees in social services for seniors, the resilience capacity of employees in social services for seniors and the impact of the pandemic on employees in social services for seniors.

Based on the studies that reveal, the psychological impact of the pandemic on frontline staff manifested by increased anxiety and stress, which led to a poor performance of work tasks, we formulate the hypothesis of the study for employees working with the elderly, as follows: The longer the crisis and alert state generated by the COVID pandemic has spread and imposed more interrelationship restrictions, influencing the way of prevention and social intervention, the lower the motivation and job satisfaction of the staff employed, and the work performance in social services has diminished, with the staff employed not performing their tasks properly.

In order to assess the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on social services for seniors, the employees of the service providers were also invited to participate in this research with the most sincere answers to each question. Participation in the study was voluntary and the responses were confidential and used exclusively for scientific purposes.

The tool used is adapted according to the model of the employment scale, the short resilience scale and the model of the questionnaire applied by the British Social work Association [6] in the study "Social assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic: Initial findings" of 2020.

Since 2020, senior social services staff have been working under new circumstances resulting from the global spread of COVID-19. The pandemic and the restrictions put in place to control it have affected every area of our lives. As part of its response, the British Social work Association applied questionnaires that explored the impact of work during the pandemic for social workers. It examined whether the staff situation improved during the year by highlighting the challenges they faced during that period. Thus, the analysis of the results of this questionnaire applied in Romania will analyze the experiences in different areas of practice for issues such as access to care settings and increasing reference rates and/or cases. The findings are also used to identify key areas that require further investigation. Respondents received no incentive to complete this survey. Respondents are a self-selected sample, being those employees who felt motivated to respond.

The questionnaire was applied to potential respondents via email and social media platforms such as Facebook. The objective of the study was specified and voluntary participation of respondents was requested, with the promise to keep their responses anonymous. The design of the questionnaire was based on previous research, and adaptations were made where necessary. A total of 127 responses were collected. The survey consists of four parts, including demographic data, nine elements of the scale of measurement for work engagement, eleven elements on the impact of the pandemic on older people, six elements of the scale of measurement for resilience [7].

4. Results

The questionnaire addressed to the employees of the social services for the elderly was sent through modern means of communication to all 300 social services institutions to which we identified the contact details and requested the largest possible participation of the employees in this study. The selection criteria were the following: The person to be employed in an institution providing social services and to have worked in the institution during the coronavirus pandemic. Were expected to be received 150 questionnaires were expected to be received, but 148 were received and 127 questionnaires were considered valid based on the selection criteria.

The employees participating in this research 6.3% of them work in a day care center for seniors, 34.6% of them in home care facilities and the remaining 59.1% in residential centers with accommodation.

From the day center participated in the study the head of the center and the psychologist, from the home care units most of the employees participating in the study are the home carers and social and medical assistants, and from the residential centers most of the study participants are nurses, nurses and social workers. In research, most employees work in public institutions 80.3%. Just over half of the respondents to the survey work in the urban environment, in terms of the job occupied by study participants, almost a quarter of them are carers (22%), then nurses (19.7%), social workers (15%), nurses (12.6%), cooks (7.1%), center heads and educators (4.7%), accountants (3.9%), referees, inspectors (3.1%) and administrators (1.6%).

The age of the employees participating in the research varies between 22 and 66 years, most of the values from a statistical point of view are around 46.3, most employees aged 51-56 years, which illustrates that employees are old and need to renew the workforce in the near future. The gender of the employees participating in the research is 87.4% women and half of the research employees have higher education and the other middle education. The experience at the current job of the majority of respondents (72.4%) is over five years, which shows that employees know very well their own job and the duties and responsibilities imposed by the job.

The survey participants fully endorse the first statement of the questionnaire: "My job inspires me", so 60.6% of employees agree fully with this statement. As for the statement: "I am immersed in my work," 51.2% of employees of the institutions providing social services to seniors agree with this as well. "I let go of the wave when I work" is the statement approved by more than half of the employees participating in this research. 63% of employees agree with the statement: "I'm excited about my work," and three-quarters of employees feel like doing their work, 80% of employees feel energized and happy at work, and 90% of those surveyed are proud of the work they do. More than half of the participants in this research agree with the statement: "Based on my experience of working in conditions of restriction and

isolation, my concerns about the ability to work with beneficiaries increased during the pandemic.”

Analyzing the data obtained from the application of the questionnaire, it is noted that out of the 127 participants in the research, 89 of them were able to perform their tasks properly during the pandemic, as a top position are home-care, nurses and nurses, that is, the front line staff, these results obtained in the present research lead to the denial of the hypothesis of the present research.

According to the centralization of the data obtained, the staff employed in social assistance institutions providing social services to elderly people in our country confirms that access to protective equipment and advice on risk management has been improved. In addition to advice and equipment, employers have taken concrete measures to protect employees so that they can work safely.

Nurses, caregivers, nurses, psychologists say they did not have any difficulty communicating with the elderly compared to the period before the pandemic.

The last analysis unit of the questionnaire is dedicated to the resilience of the employees, so the staff participating in this research agrees with the following statements: “I tend to recover quickly after difficult times,” and “it doesn’t take me long to recover from a stressful event,” and I disagree with the following statements: “I find it hard to get through stressful events.” “I find it hard to get back to normal quickly when something bad happens.” “I am barely getting over the difficult moments” and “I tend to need a lot of time to overcome the obstacles in my life”, which demonstrates a high degree of resilience of employees in institutions providing social services to elderly people in Romania.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the employees’ perception of social services for the elderly in Romania was carried out through a questionnaire-based survey. 150 questionnaires were expected to be received, but 148 were received and 127 questionnaires were considered valid based on the selection criteria. According to the centralization of the data obtained, the personnel employed in social assistance institutions providing social services to elderly people in our country confirm that access to protective equipment and risk management recommendations have been improved. The COVID-19 pandemic has called into question the management of addiction care in old-age homes, and measures aimed at reducing the risk of infections will need to be considered to improve care for dependent people. The risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection in people living in elderly homes was linked to the infection rate among staff of these homes, and the risk of SARS-CoV-2 mortality was linked to sex and dependence.

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