

SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES LATVIA YOUTH PROGRAMMES

SECTOR
Support services for young people leaving care

COUNTRY
Latvia

LEAD ORGANISATION
SOS Children's Villages Latvia is a member of of SOS Children's Villages International, member of Eurochild, the network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people

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DESCRIPTION

The youth programmes of SOS Children's Villages Latvia were introduced to respond to a situation where young people leaving care were not prepared or supported enough to lead an independent life.

The main aim of the youth programmes is to equip young people leaving care with the tools they need to live an independent life and ensure that they are fully integrated in society. A study carried out in Latvia in 2014 showed that this was far from being the case; a substantial number of young people who have left care neither work nor study, they often do not have sufficient income, which can lead to poverty and social exclusion, and some experience anxiety, insecurity, and depression.

Through the provision of support in an integrated way during this crucial transition phase from youth to adulthood, SOS Children's Villages Latvia aims to make sure that they have a good start in their adult life and have equal opportunities to finish education, find decent employment and housing, and have access to quality health and well-being support services.

In this regard, SOS Children's Villages Latvia provides professional foster care to children and young people. Starting from the age of 15, young people receive support with the objective of acquiring the necessary skills for daily life, including education, social skills, career planning and independent living. Step by step, they learn how to live more independently. These services are provided in foster families or in SOS Children's Villages' youth

facilities, depending on the needs of each individual. In the next phase, young people have the possibility to live semi-independently in apartments that are provided by municipalities. SOS Children's Villages Latvia provides financial, psycho-emotional and practical support until the age of 24.

The organisation introduced a youth facility in Jelgava in 2006, and also manages semi-independent living programmes in Riga. The organisation has developed close cooperation with Mentor.lv, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that provides the support of a mentor to care leavers transitioning to independent life, and also collaborates with employers, entrepreneurs and education institutions. The costs of the services are covered by local government funding, local fundraising and subsidies from SOS Children's Villages International.

A SOCIAL INVESTMENT APPROACH

Through an integrated approach that connects different sectors such as education, employment, housing, health and well-being, the youth programmes aim to ensure that young people leaving care are well prepared for their future independent life. In the long-term, this is an investment in the human capital of the country, since one of the most underprivileged groups in society is supported and has better future prospects. It also helps to break the cycle of disadvantage, as it prevents the future children of these young people from growing up to experience poverty or social exclusion.

To make the approach truly empowering, youth participation is a core element of the services offered by the organisation. An individual development plan that covers all aspects of transition to independent living is drafted and implemented for each young person leaving care, and they are able to take part in the planning process according to their level of maturity.

Given these elements, it is clear that the youth programmes reflect all three pillars of the European Commission's Recommendation on Investing in Children, namely access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services, and children's right to participate.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Although SOS Children's Villages Latvia has not yet conducted a systematic analysis of its youth programmes, contact with former users of the service shows that they perform better on average than other young people formerly in care, particularly in terms of finishing education and finding decent employment. SOS Children's Villages Latvia organises self-assessments in accordance with the International Safeguarding Standards of Keeping Children Safe.

Some concrete initiatives led by SOS Children's Villages Latvia that have had a tangible impact can also be cited as important achievements. For example, young people leaving care have been encouraged to develop a peer-support home page that provides information and advice for other young people in similar situations. This participative toolkit is available online. In 2011, SOS Children's Villages Latvia and seven other NGOs providing services to children and young people launched the Alternative Child Care Alliance. This Alliance has advocated for better protection of the rights of children in alternative care and young people transitioning to adulthood. It has elaborated its advocacy messages in consultation with young people with an alternative care experience.

As a result of their joint work, a more robust legislative and policy framework has been developed in Latvia in recent years. This framework includes: the State Family Policy 2011-2017, which states that young people who have left care should receive special support from their municipality until two years after having left care; the Social Service Development Strategy 2014-2020 that foresees the development of 35 youth homes across Latvia using EU structural funds; the Action Plan for the Implementation of a De-institutionalisation strategy for 2015-2020; and the 2012 Requirements for Social Service Providers that increased the maximum age at which young people can receive support in youth homes to the age of 24.

LOOKING FORWARD

Even with these encouraging political decisions, at the moment the costs of the care and support services provided to young people leaving care until the age of 18

years are only partially covered by local authorities. Moreover, in many municipalities the costs of services provided to care leavers aged 18 years and older are not covered at all by local governments. To make the services financially sustainable, local governments must allocate sufficient funding. SOS Children's Villages Latvia still has a lot of advocacy work to do on this issue.



The project could also be scaled-up to other countries. According to research, adequate services to support young people leaving care in their transition to independent life are missing in many countries across Europe. SOS Children's Villages runs programmes in many of these countries. All programmes have in common that they apply an integrated and rights-based approach to support young people leaving care, and are adapted to local needs.