**CONCORDIA’S MODEL FOR STRENGTHENING FAMILIES AND PREVENTING SEPARATION OF CHILDREN FROM FAMILIES**

CONCORDIA is an international NGO, dedicated to helping children of all ages, vulnerable youth senior citizens and families. The organization started in 1991, and while helping those who were in need and facing poverty, it has gained experience in offering the necessary support to those who mostly need it. During the years of activity there have been identified a number of major problems which are affecting all the countries where CONCORDIA is present. These are: poverty, unemployment and migration. They are leading to consequences which are hard to manage afterwards, such as: child abandonment, school abandonment, extreme poverty, alcoholism, delinquency, suicides, the massive migration of the young people abroad, the ageing population etc.

In Romania, CONCORDIA’s projects take place in Bucharest, Ploiesti, Ariceștii Rahtivani, Prahova County and Odobești, Dâmbovița County and address a number of over 2,000 people annually. The main services of CONCORDIA ensure the fulfilment of its mission: care and education for children and young people in family homes, vocational education and vocational training, counselling and vocational guidance, sheltered housing, workshops for learning the skills of independent living, day centres for children and community services.

This paper aims to offer a general view on CONCORDIA’s model of services for strengthening families and preventing separation of children from families, provided through its three Day Care Centres for Children and Family. These services are based on the organisation’s experience and on a thorough analysis of the national and local context. At national level, according to the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights, but also to the Government's Strategy for the inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to Roma minorities 2015-2020, it appears that belonging to the Roma ethnic group increases by 37% the risk of a child being poor. Studies also show that about 40% of Roma children benefit from insufficient food, and about 28% of children / young people between 15 and 19 years old are married, a situation with a negative impact on school participation, access to the labor market of young families and the chances of the next generations of children. At the same time, a number of gaps between these children and non-Roma appear in terms of access to school and school performance, so that the participation of Roma children in pre-school education is almost twice as low as that of other children (37 % compared to 63%), a higher rate, over 50%, being registered in children aged 6 years. Moreover, the situation of families living in poor material and social conditions severely affects the ability of parents to find solutions and support their children in further education. Large proportions of children drop out of school and are excluded from the formal educational institutions. Social services, such as day centers but also direct services in poor communities are extremely limited all over the country and thus, children, young people and families are spinning in a vicious circle from which few manage to find their way out.

In this context, knowing that the prevention of family separation and school dropout is one of the best solutions to combat poverty and social exclusion, in 2013, CONCORDIA began implementing day center type projects aimed at the population in severe poverty by ensuring access to social services and therapeutic help for children in need. The first day care centre established by CONCORDIA was Casa Cristina, in Ploiești. The decision was taken based on the high number of abandoned children in the region, as well as on the difficult local context in general. The city of Ploiești, the residence of Prahova County, has a population of 227,614 inhabitants, being the ninth largest city in Romania. About 20% of the city's population lives in disadvantaged areas (3147 in the marginalized urban area, 38407 inhabitants in the urban area around these poverty bags). From them, 6% are in disadvantaged areas in terms of housing, 3% in disadvantaged areas in terms of employment, 7% in disadvantaged areas in terms of human capital and 2% in marginalized areas. Most of the centers’ beneficiaries come from the Mimiu neighborhood (1098 inhabitants in 235 households, about 60% are Roma), but also from other disadvantaged areas such as Bariera Bucharest, Eroilor, Bereasca, Boldescu Lăutari, Radu de la Afumați or a smaller are in Ploiești Nord.

Casa Cristina was initially seen as a service aimed at children, but soon became clear that it needs to address also families and communities in order to help the increase in the quality of life of minors. As a result, the Day Centre has changed its tools and diversified its portfolio of services, explicitly targeting parents, for example through job training programs, but also through a participatory approach based mainly on the development of small programs, involving both, adults and children at risk, together with CONCORDIA staff and volunteers. The second Day Care Centre, Casa Alexandra, was also established in Ploiesti 2015. The two Day Care Centres applied a flexible approach in which the tools that are used to help children at risk are constantly being improved and adapted as per the current needs and under perpetual control and diversification. Using a combination of on-site services and mobile teams, CONCORDIA has developed the ability to quickly observe changes in the needs of potential beneficiaries, to acquire and update knowledge on how the local population is developing and to be proactive in its interventions.

Alongside this background, having already in mind the experience and best practices of the other two centres, a third Day Care Centre was established in 2020 in Odobești, Dâmbovița County through a public-private partnership with the local authorities and financed by and EU funds project. The decision of choosing Odobești commune, Dâmboviţa for the third Day Care Centre was based on one hand on the analysis of vulnerabilities in the community, and on the other hand on the availability of local authorities to be actively involved with all resources in project implementation. Thus, at the level of Odobești commune from a number of approx. 5200 people, organized in 1811 households, about 10% are Roma people. According to the social studies carried out locally, 500 people were identified with an increased risk of social exclusion having the following characteristics: lack of secondary education or professional qualifications, families at risk with one or more members who had left the country and were facing the risk of family separation, children affected by domestic violence and at high risk of dropping out of school. Thus, in this context, the definite need for community intervention was identified in the sense of providing services whose role is to develop programs for identifying and monitoring children at risk of family separation and accompanying them and their families in order to ensure the child's right to identity, health and education.

The general objective of the project is to increase the quality of life of families in both communes of Odobești, Dâmboviţa and Ploiești, Prahova who face risk of social exclusion associated with the risk of child separation. We support vulnerable children in their (re) integration in the civic society, in the biological, family and in school, working parallel with their families, towards independent and autonomous life. This is achieved via development and implementation of integrated services that lead to a sustainable and inclusive development of communities as a whole. Thus, the development and effective provision of integrated services is pursued, as well as the sustainable development of the community and the development of the capacity of the local public authorities, so that the sustainability of the activities can be ensured.

CONCORDIA’s Day Centers address a target group of over 230 children at risk of family separation, aged between 3 and 16, of which at least 60 Roma, both in rural and urban areas. They generally come from families in situations of poverty or affected by other social vulnerabilities (e.g. single-parent families, families affected by domestic violence, parents abroad, etc.). In most situations, all these children also face major difficulties in the process of acquiring school notions, they cannot work independently, and they have few developed skills, poor memory, and poor ability to understand the school material and reduced synthesis capacity. All children are at risk of separation from the biological family, forced by numerous factors, such as lack of adequate living conditions and a stable income, poor parental supervision and support and children with poor parental models or whose parents are away and are raised by their grandparents or relatives with limited or no access to educational support activities and social integration.

Regarding activities, CONCORDIA Day Centers offer integrated social and community services in order to prevent family and school dropout and to avoid the institutionalization of children. Social services include social and psychological assistance and child and family counseling.; homework support and / or guidance; development of life skills, leisure services, food, supplies or other material aids; civic involvement for children through visits to various institutions; medical assistance and guidance for regular health assessment; counseling for accessing public health services, sanitation and maintenance cleanliness in the living space, in order to adopt a healthy lifestyle for both children and parents; support for community reintegration. The services are provided by a multidisciplinary team both in the Centers and directly in the communities affected by poverty. All activities focus on developing a range of services that meet the requirements of each category of beneficiaries.

After the admission in the Day Center, each child and their family are individually evaluated by the pedagogue and psychologist, and specific intervention objectives are established together with a detailed guidance on how to achieve them together within the intervention period and the responsible persons. This identifies the child's needs, the internal and external resources available to him/her, as well as the direction in which the intervention must be oriented through objectives, the level that is desired and can be reached. The child is explained the role that each person has in carrying out the intervention and the responsibilities are established by mutual agreement together with a detailed guidance on fulfilling them. In addition, within the Day Center, psychological, speech therapy, school and professional guidance services are offered to those children who are identified by the multidisciplinary team that specialized intervention is necessary. In order to fill the financial and material deficit of children and their families, the Children's Day Centers will provide them with the necessary materials to integrate and attend regularly the educational unit in which they are enrolled.

Moreover, the Children's Day Center offers the children the opportunity to participate in recreational and social activities and achieve balance between learning activities and relaxation and free play. The educational-recreational activities are diverse and offer museums visiting, as well as joint activities with local schools or other services of the organization, where the children have the opportunity to learn, present or attend various artistic moments (skits, dances, carols and customs). These activities also help the development of the children on a social level. In the educational and recreational cultural program, children have access to theater scenes, watch educational movies or cartoons. The Centers also encourage and support children's participation in extracurricular activities, whether organized by the school or organized by the Day Center.

In addition to services for children, the whole family is supported by offering the opportunity to participate in psychological, social, medical and educational counseling as an early intervention aimed at preventing school dropout and family separation supporting the development and strengthening a good child-parent relationship. All the above mentioned interventions are offered both at the center and in the community according to a well-established program with each person depending on the motivation, interest but also on the capacity to get involved. Parents of children who come to the center are informed about the progress made by their children and learn new ways to get involved in children's development.

Among the most important results registered so far in the activity of Day Centers we enumerate: 1) the consolidation of the family relations between children and parents in the direction of preventing family separation; 2) improving the presence and school performance of children, being supported in completing homework and overcoming social problems that affect their participation in school; 3) parents and other legal partners benefit from social counseling in order to reduce social problems, prevent family separation and obtain work orientation; 4) children and adults have complete identity documents or those needed to access education or health services and 5) some of the parents or relatives get jobs.

Regarding the program’s impact, the following elements define its efficiency: prevention and reduction of family separation risk factors at the level of the communities in which it operates; the extension and consolidation of the individual basic competences (especially: reading, writing, the competence to count and learn) of the children who participate in the activities of the center; tackling learning obstacles (insufficient access to food, clothes, supplies and support and a place to do homework), motivation to attend school regularly and developing a school perspective; supporting personal interests and abilities and capitalizing on cultural resources (ethnic identity, language, traditions and history) through extracurricular activities; supporting children and parents in accessing health services; involvement of parents and expanding the possibilities of participation in the development of their children; strengthening parental resources to overcome problems by advising parents and therapeutic offers, and preventing the separation of children from their parents; developing professional perspectives with parents and young adults in employment services; reduction of absenteeism of participating children.

Based on the rich experiences of CONCORDIA being one of the biggest providers of social services in the country, several conclusions and recommendations can be made in the matter of strengthening families and preventing separation of children from families. First, in the future, emphasis needs to be placed on strengthening the capacity of public and private providers to provide quality services, ensuring the transition from the institutional model to social services provided at the community level, including the development of day care center-type infrastructure. Particular attention is preferably to be paid to improving the skills of specialists in the field of social work, as well as to the development of the monitoring, evaluation and data collection systems.

At local level, there is need of developing integrated community intervention teams for the provision of social services for education, employment, health and social intermediation and facilitation programs at community level, especially in poor and marginalized areas, rural and urban, Roma and non-Roma, by developing clear methodologies and working procedures for social workers at the community level. Some very effective solutions could be the development of multi-functional community centers in marginalized areas for the provision of integrated services to (but not exclusively) families in extreme poverty or the reduction of concentrated zonal and persistent poverty in marginalized communities by implementing ‘packages’ of integrated social services (integrated community intervention teams and multi-functional community centers).