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Innovative program of developing skills of social workers in Poland in the field of cyber problems

Abstract: Contemporary digital and technological changes and fulfilling the needs of a human not only in the offline but also online environment require supplementing the skills of social services, and in particular social workers, in the field of cyber problems. That is why a development program for social workers has been developed and implemented in Poland to provide them with knowledge and practical skills in the field in question. The purpose of this article is to present program assumptions and its substantive content.

Keywords: social worker, skills, cyber problems, program

Introduction

Today's world makes the new technologies and virtual world significantly influence the functioning of a society. Living in "liquid modernity"¹ offers a lot of benefits to a human being, but is also a source of numerous threats between the online and offline world. New social pathologies, disorders in human behavior or finally dysfunctions and problems in the family environment emerge. Knowledge of these threats is important first of all among social services which constitute "organized, relatively permanent and specialized teams operating in close relation with or as part of certain institutions and organizations whose task

¹ Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, Kraków 2006, p. 15.

is to support individuals, families and other groups or communities in situations where, for subjective or objective reasons, they are unable to satisfy their needs on a satisfactory level or in a satisfactory form”². These teams diagnose, react and prevent various social problems, e.g. such as: digital exclusion, behavioral addictions or recidivism. That is why, providing these services, in particular social workers, with specific knowledge and practical skills is indispensable so that they actively and appropriately react to contemporary cyber problems. In reply to such a demand, an innovative project has been developed and implemented in Poland known as “Cyberspace threats - new skills of a social worker”, which is co-financed with the European Union funds under the European Social Fund.

Tasks of social workers in Poland

The tasks of a social worker in Poland are regulated by the Act on Social Assistance.³ Art. 119 of the Act mentioned above specifies the following activities:

- “social work;
- analyzing and evaluating phenomena which create the need for social assistance benefits and qualification for such benefits;
- providing information, guidance and assistance in solving personal affairs to such people who thanks to such assistance will be able to solve on their own problems which are the source of their hardship; effective use of the law in performing their tasks;
- assistance in obtaining consultancy services for people in a difficult life situation in the field of the options for solving problems and offering assistance by competent national, local government and non-governmental bodies and support in obtaining assistance;
- providing assistance in line with the rules of professional conduct;
- stimulating social activity and inspiring mutual aid activities in satisfying the necessary needs of individuals, families, groups and social environments;
- cooperating and joint action with other specialists in order to counteract and limit pathologies and negative effects of social phenomena, mitigating the consequences of poverty;

² B. Szatur-Jaworska, *Teoretyczne podstawy pracy socjalnej*, in: *Pedagogika społeczna*, T. Pilch, I. Lepalczyk (ed.), Warszawa 2003, p. 118–119.

³ Act on Social Assistance of 12 March 2004 (consolidated text J.L.2013.0.182).

- initiating new forms of help to individuals and families in hardship and inspiring establishment of institutions providing services aimed at improving the situation of such individuals and families;
- participating in inspiring, working on, implementing and developing regional and local social assistance programs aimed at improving the quality of life⁴.

Taking into account these tasks, it has been noted⁵ that a number of them are or will be soon related to cyber problems. Among these are the following:

- 1) Working with a family where an adult is addicted to digital media.
- 2) Cooperating with parents in the field problematic use of cyber technologies by their children.
- 3) Influencing ex-offenders whose criminal activity was connected e.g. with cybercrimes.
- 4) Preventing digital exclusion mostly of the elderly.
- 5) Diagnosing and prevention of problematic behaviors in a network of social assistance recipients.
- 6) Increasing social awareness on cyber threats.

Implementation stages for project “Cyberspace threats – new skills of a social worker”

The project started in 2012 and is currently at its final stage of implementation. It comprised the following elements:

1. Problem diagnosis

This comprised the analysis of the latest results of research and compilations tackling the subject of cybercrime and its causes plus identification of the skills of the personnel of the institutions which educate and train social service staff in the field of cyber problems.

It was determined that almost 2/3 of the examined personnel training social service workers have only basic knowledge about protection against cyberspace threats. The same number of respondents has never heard about any action aimed at protection against Internet threats in the current system of social

⁴ Act on Social Assistance of 12 March 2004 (consolidated text J.L.2013.0.182).

⁵ M. Grewiński, *Dekalog dylematów i wyzwań w polityce pomocy społecznej w Polsce*, in: *Współczesne tendencje w pomocy społecznej i pracy socjalnej*, M. Grewiński, J. Krzyszkowski (ed.), Warszawa 2011, p.133.

assistance in Poland. 8 out of 10 respondents do not know any textbooks tackling the subject of threats in the cyberspace. At the same time, 96% of the survey participants point to the significance of knowledge about threats appearing in the virtual world in the activities undertaken by social service workers⁶.

2. Establishment of a supranational partnership

The author of the project, i.e. Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw started cooperation with Rezekne Higher Education Institution from Latvia, which was focused on developing a strategy for the implementation of an innovative project testing the need of tackling the subject of cyber problems among representatives of the social service in Poland. In addition, the cooperation was aimed at defining the draft version of a relevant training program addressed e.g. to social workers.

3. Development of the draft version of the product and the project implementation strategy

As part of this stage, a planned description of a textbook for social service workers was prepared, engaging the same in the process of developing the final project deliverable. The recipients testing the program were allowed at any time to report their remarks to the content directly during training sessions or by completing a relevant form available on the project's website.

4. Testing of the product, i.e. innovative development program for social service workers

This stage covered verification of the product operation in a real-life situation, which consisted of providing the recipients and users with the draft version of the textbook. The following took place:

- training in: threats to mental and physical health, social and educational threats, infoholism and computer games and cybercrime,
- meetings of the testing phase participants with the experts being members of the project team,
- monitoring of the product testing by the experts,

⁶ M. Józko, *Raport z badań ilościowych: Diagnoza i analiza pracowników instytucji kształcących i szkolących kadry służb społecznych w tym pracowników socjalnych*, Warszawa 2013, <http://cyber-przestrzen.wspkorczak.eu/pl/dokumenty> (access: 20.12.2014).

5. Analysis of current effects of the tested program

This stage was focused on the analysis and evaluation of collected data, information and remarks of social service workers being test participants, the project team and experts on the product. Implemented efforts were also subject to an external evaluation.

6. Development of the final version of the program.

The final project deliverable was a development program for social service workers in the form of a textbook comprising:

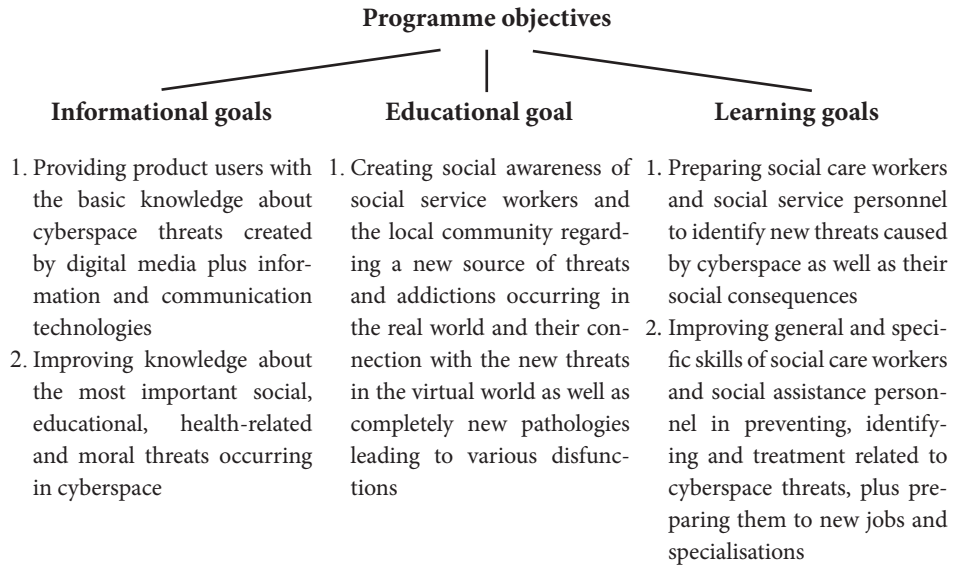
- identification of the problem and basic threats in cyberspace
- educational instructions regarding threats in cyberspace
- methodology of working with people exposed to cyberspace threats
- strategy of implementation of development program.

Currently, the project authors are trying to disseminate information about the program and encourage universities and training providers that train and improve the skills of social service workers to implement the program as a compulsory or optional element by ensuring free use of the developed program based on an agreement concluded with Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw. Following this, the project author guarantees to the institution implementing the program support of experts, textbooks, project promotion plus organization of a seminar for the staff.

Development program for social workers in Poland in the field of cyber problems

The program entitled “Cyberspace threats - new skills of a social worker” has been developed as a textbook. It has a module-based structure which enables adaptation to the needs of the possible users such as students, social service workers, and in particular social care workers.

The main purpose of the program is to prepare social service workers, including social welfare workers to work with the families and individuals who need social assistance in the field of cyber threats. Detailed goals have been presented in Fig. 1.

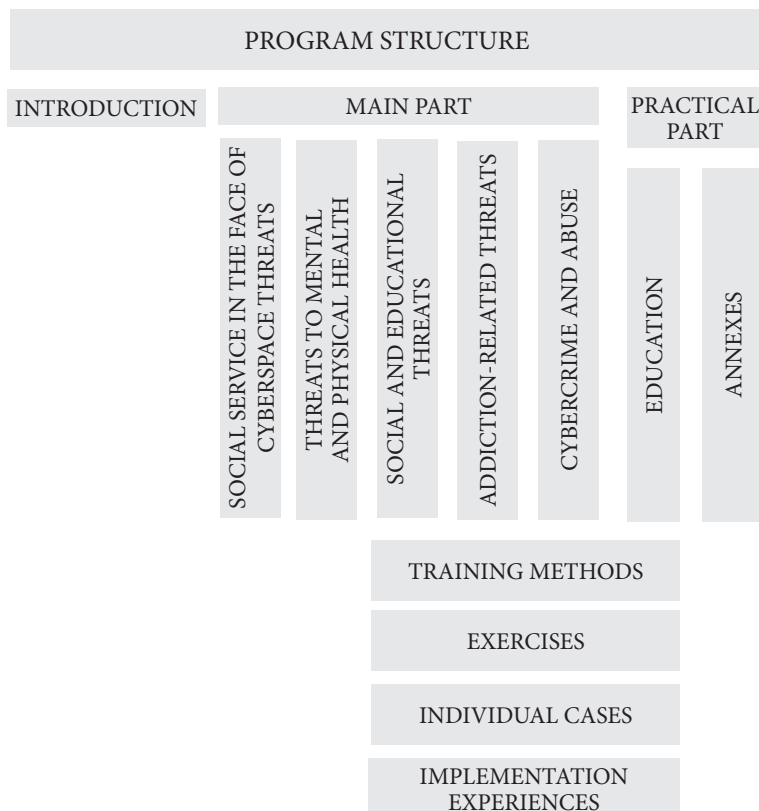
Figure 1. Goals of the program entitled “Cyberspace threats – new skills of a social worker”

Source: website of the project “Cyberspace threats-new skills of a social worker” <http://cyber-przestrzen.wspkorczak.eu/pl/o-projekcie>(access: 20.12.2014).

Such a formulation of goals had impact on the textbook layout, which correlates 4 areas:

- description of the phenomenon, i.e. presenting threats to mental and physical health;
- identification of the problem, i.e. identification of social and educational threats;
- diagnosing addiction-related threats;
- using best practice in the fields of cybercrime and Internet abuse.

In addition, there is a chapter which describes the specificity of social service work in Poland in the Internet age. The textbook also includes materials useful in implementing the program, including examples and exercises to be used by lecturers, plus a list of legal acts and institutions in Poland offering help with cyber problems. The textbook structure has been presented in Fig. 2.

Figure 2. Structure of the textbook entitled “Threats of cyberspace”

Source: website of the program “Threats of cyberspace”: *Zagrożenia cyberprzestrzeni Kompleksowy program dla pracowników służb społecznych*, J. Lizut (ed.), http://cyberprzestrzen.wspkorczak.eu/download/dokumenty/produkt_prezentacja.pdf, Warszawa 2014, pp. 4–7 (access: 20.12.2014).

The additional advantage of the textbook is a detailed training program for each individual field in the main part of the textbook⁷. Each module is covered in 8 training hours.

As regards section: “*Threats to physical and mental health*”, the author of the program of training in the form of a workshop is A. Andrzejewska. The program includes the following content:

⁷ *Zagrożenia cyberprzestrzeni. Kompleksowy program dla pracowników służb społecznych*, J. Lizut (ed.), Warszawa 2014, p. 4–7.

- 1) Vision problems, RSI condition, Problems with the osteoarticular system, Internet Addiction Disorder. Definitions of basic terms discussed in class will be provided. In addition, the scale of phenomena related to threats to the brain, their diagnosing and symptoms as well as the Best Practice in diagnosing and intervention of problems generated directly or indirectly by cyber world will be discussed.
- 2) Cyberbullying, the essence and characteristics of this phenomenon, its identification, scale and extent and symptoms of actual cyberbullying. In addition, characteristics of a victim and originator of cyberbullying plus the risk of suicide among young people will be discussed.

The effects of covering this module will be:

- acquiring knowledge by the trainee about threats to mental and physical health and cyberbullying;
- acquiring the ability to diagnose the causes, course, symptoms, effects of threats to mental and physical health and cyberbullying; take preventive measures and improve social and educational skills in this field.

Under module “social and educational threats” developed by A. Andrzejewska and covered in a series of lectures and workshops, the following content will be discussed:

- 1) Sects (types of sects, characteristics of the most dangerous sects, phases of recruitment, characteristics of a victim).
- 2) Pedophilia (description of the phenomenon, characteristics of a victim and a perpetrator, work with an abused child and their family).
- 3) Child pornography (description of the phenomenon, impact on a child’s psyche, characteristics of a victim and a perpetrator, discussing the possibilities of limiting access to websites with pornographic content, discussing basic rules of security in using the Internet).
- 4) Sexting (discussing the phenomenon, characteristics of sexting victims, discussing the influence of this phenomenon on children’s psyche).

This module assumes that a trainee:

- is familiar with such terms as sexting video chat,
- is able to diagnose threats related to the use of websites devoted to sects, pornography, pedophilia, sexting,
- is able to provide support to people using websites devoted to sects, pornography, pedophilia, sexting.

The next training module, i.e. “Threats and addictions” by Józef Bednarek presents the problem of being addicted to new digital technologies, causes and

effects of such addictions and their course. In addition, it presents the best prevention practice and points to new social and educational skills of a social worker in the field of addictions.

As part of this series of sessions, a trainee will get to know:

- theoretical fundamentals of addictions and playing computer games,
- determinants, regularities and mechanisms of addictions,
- scale of the phenomenon and related threats.

In addition, a trainee will be able to diagnose addictions in question and counteract the same, e.g. by improving their social and educational skills.

The last module “Cybercrime and abuse” prepared by Łukasz Tomczyk covers the content devoted to:

- Internet shopping and payments,
- the possibilities of using a computer and its operation,
- protecting privacy on the Internet,
- copyrights and legal regulations on Internet activities.

After completing this module, a trainee should be able to distinguish between legal and illegal software, know the rules of secure use of the Internet in terms of: shopping, social networking sites or various applications, or protect a computer as part of “parental control” or installing antivirus or antispyware programs.

Conclusion

To sum up, the purpose of the presented project is to provide social service workers with the knowledge and skills regarding cyber problems in an innovative way, so that they are able either to fill the gaps or improve their work techniques and professional skills. It is the first program in Poland which provides a comprehensive solution to the issue of compatibility of professional skills of the analyzed group of workers with the problems of the virtual world. The formula which enables free implementation of the program by universities for social service workers and educating institutions is a guarantee of its smooth dissemination both among the current and future social workers.

In Poland, cybercrime, technological addictions or infoholism are considered to be serious problems which require social reaction both at the stage of diagnosing, rehabilitation and prevention. Hence, an urgent need to strengthen professional skills of social service workers who are frequently on the “first front line” in solving cyber problems.

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