

BULGARIA

NATIONAL SOCIAL REHABILITATION CENTRE

The National Social Rehabilitation Centre is the first organisation in Bulgaria working to improve the welfare of disabled people. It offers social services and aims at assuring better working and living conditions and social integration for disabled people.

In the past, in Bulgaria, people with disabilities were placed in isolated 'social care homes' and young people with disabilities were ignored by society. Disabled people were considered as medical cases, as passive recipients of care. The aim of the National Social Rehabilitation Centre (NSRC), an NGO, was to change the excluding attitude towards disabled people and try and establish a new model of care and services. NSRC set out to provide community-based services, build strategies to ensure the replication of good practice, and co-operate with the national government and local authorities to create conditions for equal participation of people with disabilities in public life. Their programme started with the financial support of European Union PHARE LIEN Programme.

In order to achieve their aims, the NSRC set the following priorities: assuring conditions for disabled people to be able to serve themselves; increasing mobility; creation of accessible public spaces for disabled people through reconstruction of old public buildings and removal of architectural barriers; change of public attitude towards disability; and change of legislation for disabled people.

The first stage of NSRC work was to try and meet the day-to-day living requirements of people with disabilities. The first technical appliances arrived in Bulgaria under a bilateral project with the Flemish Federation of Disabled. This supply of wheelchairs and other technical devices became a regular programme. The second phase involved helping people to move out of their homes to experience some wider social interaction through the provision of mini-buses specially adapted for wheel chair use. A model for socially-oriented specialised transport system has been developed which now provides transportation for 10,000 people.



The first day care centre for children with disabilities was established in 1997. The 'Saint Mina' day centre in Sofia receives 26 children a day and another 30 for consultancy. Children who attend the centre have undergone significant progress in their development and some are now attending mainstream school.

The St George youth centre was opened in 1999 with a capacity for 60 people. It is entirely adapted for wheelchair users and people with sensorial problems and has a swimming pool adapted for wheelchair users. Trained and qualified social workers and professionals work in the centre, helping to arrange the leisure time of clients, young people who attend the centre for between 20-40 days.

One of the biggest challenges that NSRC faces is the resistance to any changes to the social security system. The first NSRC regional bureau for social services was established in the city of Bourgas, mainly due to the co-operation of the Bourgas Municipality. After a year of work in Bourgas, other municipal authorities were convinced that it was a successful model for serving people with disabilities. There are now bureaux in the towns of Varna, Pomorie and Stara Zagora. In these bureaux, more than 7,000 people with disabilities receive equipment and the relevant training, information and service, and, in addition, more than 2,000 people yearly receive consultation or intermediation for solving their problems. The NSRC considers its most important long-term asset to be its trained and motivated personnel of over 60 staff. About 70% of the staff are trained in Belgium, financed by the Flemish Government and EU.

The NSRC has demonstrated that disabled people have the right to be independent, to decide for themselves, and that their wishes and needs should be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the initiative has led the way in moving towards social reform in Bulgaria, changing the emphasis from care given in social/medical institutions to integrated community care.



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