

“The Experience of Employing Coordinators of Foster Care within the Boarder of Wielopolska’s Voivodeship”

Magdalena Zajac

The current policy of our country clearly focuses on building and developing the system of helping a child and a family in need experiencing a crisis on the basis of getting the potential and sources of a family going. In case, when a child’s welfare is threatened the helping action is directed to children in different forms but always the most similar to a family environment. The most preferred solution is to organise a form of a family foster care. The coordinators of the family foster care are employed by local governments and their aim is to take actions to support a foster home, as well as the family-based assistance houses. The result of employing them is to make the system of foster care as more professional as it can be. In this article the issues of supporting people taking care of foster families and family-based assisted houses will be presented. Moreover, the role and tasks of the cooperators of foster care will be defined according to some law regulations. Additionally, an attempt to precise the specialization of education of the foster care coordinators will be taken up, which enables an optimal performance of their duties. The article is devoted to present experiences connected with employing the family foster care coordinators within the boarder of Wielkopolska’s voivodeship.

Thekey Vocabulary

a family foster care, a biological family, foster care coordinator,

1. FOSTER PARENTHOOD IN POLAND

A foster family can be the most natural environment to which a child deprived of total or partial parental authority is directed to¹. It is created when a marriage or a single person takes on a duty of organizing care for children whose welfare is threatened². A child can be placed in a foster family in case of a court decision or in a state of emergency, at the request of parents or their agreement³. Adopting a child into a foster family should be preceded by a conversation between the workers of the family support center and the foster parents as they have to accept the child and agree to take care of him / her⁴. It is assumed that the foster parents not only adopt a child but also undertake the challenge to work with him / her as well as with his/her family⁵. The relation between the ward and the foster parents should last until the child comes of age. When the ward continues the education he / she is allowed to stay with the family until the age of 25⁶. Foster parenthood does not imply the consequences of adopting a child. The foster family should accept a child and try to make an effort to assure the ward with appropriate, every day care about his / her health, education, rest, free time and respect of a child’s identity, as well as to help him / her to keep the relationship with the natural family. The essence of the foster family’s work need to be providing a child with the feeling of safety, stabilization and improving the relationships connected with becoming a family community⁷.

¹Act of 12 March 2004 amending the Social Assistance Act, Article 72 (1)

²Act of 9 June 2011 amending the Family Support and Foster Family Care Act, Article 41 (1)

³Act of 12 March 2004 amending The Social Assistance, Article 35 (1 and 2)

⁴ Ibid. Article 36

⁵M.Gorynia, The Social Support in a form of a Foster Family Care. The biographical consequences Piorunek M.(red.) Hepl – social support – guidance. From the theory to practice, Publishing House of Adam Marszałek 2010

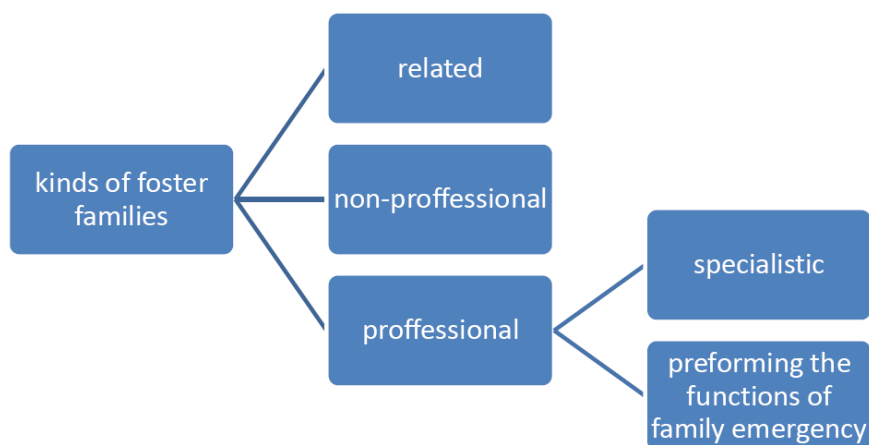
⁶Act of 9 June 2011 amending the Family Support and Foster Family Care Act, Article 37

⁷D. Wosik-Kawala, E. Czerniak, A. Grymuza, A. Kołodziej, [w:] ‘Foster Family’ [w:] Wosik-Kawala D.(red.

2. THE FORMS OF FOSTER FAMILIES

According to the law regulations there are different kinds of foster family care. The below chart shows the criteria of foster families classification:

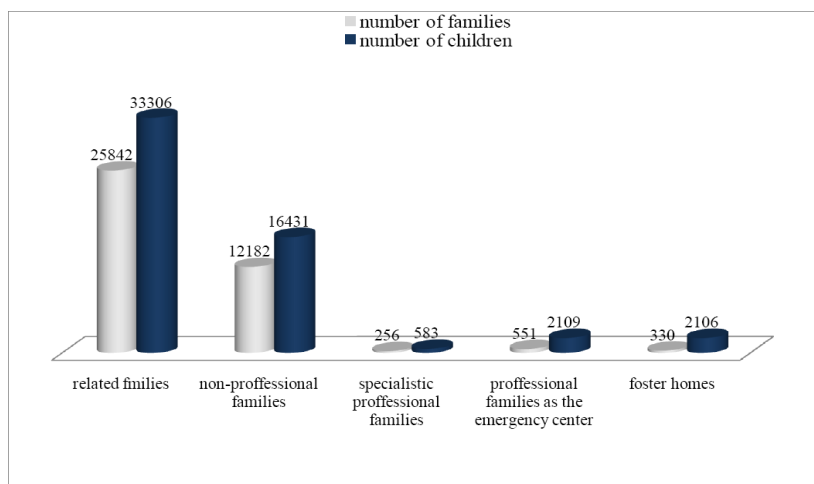
Chart1. The Different Kinds of Foster Family Care



Own analysis according to the Act 9 June 2011 amending the Family Support and the System of Foster Care, Article 39⁸

The statistical data about the foster families and the care and education centers provided by the Ministry of Labour and Foster Policy - The Department of Family Policy defines the number of particular foster families and the number of children under their care. According to the MPiPS statement of performing the aims of supporting families and the system of foster care the following assumptions were worked out on the day of December 13th, 2013 and presented below.

Chart2. The Statistical Data about the Foster Families and the Children Placed under their Care in 2013



Own analysis on the basis of the data by the Department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy⁹

In 2013 in Poland there were 39 161 foster families functioning, where 54 535 children were taken care of. Under the institutional care stayed 19 949 wards¹⁰. However, the introduction of the new law regulations favouring the professionalism and development of supporting a child and his/her family being in a crisis did not determine a significant increase of the number of the foster homes.

Family and the institutional environments of care and education, Lublin, 2011,

⁸Act of 9 June 2011 amending the Family Support and Foster Family Care Act, Article 39

⁹The data of the Department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

¹⁰Ibid.

3. THE AIMS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOSTER PARENTHOOD

Taking care about a child in a difficult life situation and introducing him/ her to the family changes the functioning of the entire family system and requires a lot of new competences of the legal guardians. Nonetheless, the forms of the foster care are the ones which are claimed to be the most effective to compensate the needs of a child deprived of possibility to be brought up in a natural family. Thus, it is necessary to strive for the development of a foster family care.

Children, who due to their difficult life situation cannot stay with their natural families experience a lot of hard emotions. Frequently, they do not accept any kind of actions taken in order to help them. In a foster family care, apart from the difficulties appearing together with passing through different stages of life and the development of a child, a crisis situation connected with the traumatic actions from a child’s experience in the past can appear¹¹. The level of a child’s functioning on different planes implies the coincidence of unfavourable factors in natural families. The process of placing a child in a new family environment does not change his /her personality and beliefs or values. A foster family welcomes a child who can function in a completely different way than could be expected. Modifying the integrated rules can become a long process and requires a lot of work from a child, foster parents and natural parents. The foster family repeatedly needs support and competent, skilled consultation.

A child’s emotional problems might be a consequence of his /her life experiences and they determine educational failures of the guardians. What is often left unrealised or is realised on a lower level is the assumed aim of the guardians. It frequently causes a child and adults’ frustration.

The source of failures in realisation of the foster family’s role could be completely different. Making a rash decision about becoming a foster family by foster parents is very frequent and is a consequence of a campaign which promotes the development of foster parenthood. What can cause difficulties in achieving a satisfactory level of functioning as a parent of a child taken care of is the following the impulses without the analysis of what kind of obligation the family decides to undertake. Moreover, the motivation of admitting a child into a family is also of the key importance as it influences the further fortune of the foster family.

A significant issue in forming a foster family care is the relation to the natural situation of children by the foster guardians. Focusing on the matters of children taken under care very often results in alarming reactions of own children. The natural offspring feel loneliness, lack of understanding or appreciation. The coincidence of some of the mentioned factors intensifies the difficulties of foster parents¹².

4. CRISIS OF A FOSTER FAMILY AS A RESULT OF EDUCATIONAL FAILURES

A foster family undertakes the role of welcoming and upbringing a child of its own free will. However, the changes that happen in the life of the family members bear stamps of a critical incident.

The critical moments in life are:

- significant emotional events in everyday life, for example: a child’s birth, the death of a relative;
- events which force a change in functioning of a family member in his/her social life, approach to the world and him/herself, for example: retirement of a person who was always very active at work, for whom the work was the highest value and it caused a crisis and a need to change the daily routines;
- the events can have both the positive (wedding) as well as the negative (marital infidelity) emotional colouring.

The burden for an individual person is connected with critical experiences. The more serious the event that happened the most appreciated values it concerns. The difference of their sense either as difficulties, obstacles or as unexpected gains depends on a subjective interpretation of an individual, who was affected by them. The most characteristic is the particular double value which results from

¹¹D. Wosik-Kawala, E. Czerniak, A. Grymuza, A. Kołodziej, [w:] ‘Fosterfamily’ [w:] Wosik-Kawala D.(red. Family and the institutional environments of care and education, Lublin, 2011,

¹² J. Makowska, ‘Without happy end’ [w:] care and educational problems , February 2011,

an individual interpretation of facts. The positive or negative interpretation of facts consists in the dynamics, which depends on the effectiveness of attempts made in order to deal with critical events.

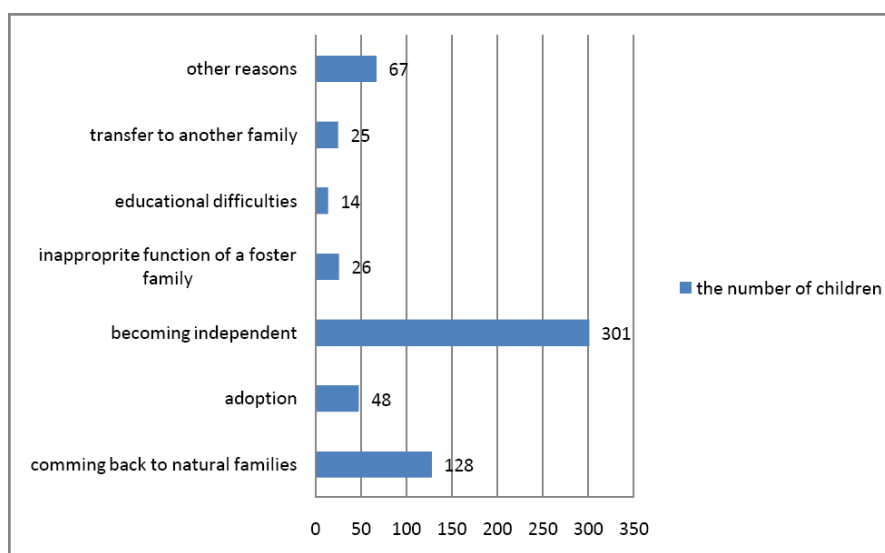
A foster family deciding about the fact of adopting a child changes its own structure, which is in some way a critical moment for it. The positive effects of solving the situation can result in achieving a new quality and a higher level of existence. The main task for the foster family is to deal with the situation in such a way to achieve closer or further effects of the critical moments which are to favour human's development and increasing of his / her resistance and competences¹³.

Educational failures and inability to solve them can be a reason of all family members' suffering. As a result of the educational failures the foster family can experience a lot of critical events. What decides about the high level of a risk in the occurrence of disorders and the family crisis is a large amount of the critical events and the frequency of their occurrence in a time together with their estimation as a threat, a lost and the feeling of hopelessness¹⁴.

The members of a foster family are highly exposed to difficulties, failures, stress which is a demotivating factor on their way of making attempts to remain a foster family. A crisis which is a result of educational failures can reduce the quality of a family's life and as a consequence cause dissolving of the foster home.

Between the term of December 31st, 2006 and June 30th, 2008 there were almost 676 foster families dissolved and at the same time 581 new units were formed. Some reasons of creating new foster homes are presented in the below chart.

Chart1. Reasons for Dissolving Foster Families



Own analysis on the basis of Information about the results of an inspection as regards of realisation of some tasks of social assistance for children in chosen voivodeship local government of administration, page 23¹⁵

Educational difficulties cause the low level of percentage among reasons of dissolving foster families. However, from all the mentioned reasons of dissolving foster homes only three could be defined as positive ones: coming back the biological families, adoption and becoming independent. The highest percentage in the above presented chart makes the unwanted phenomena (placing a child in a different family, inappropriate functions of foster families) or unspecified (other reasons). Frequently, they result in dissolving of a foster family despite the fact that a child needs further help and he / she stays under the foster care.

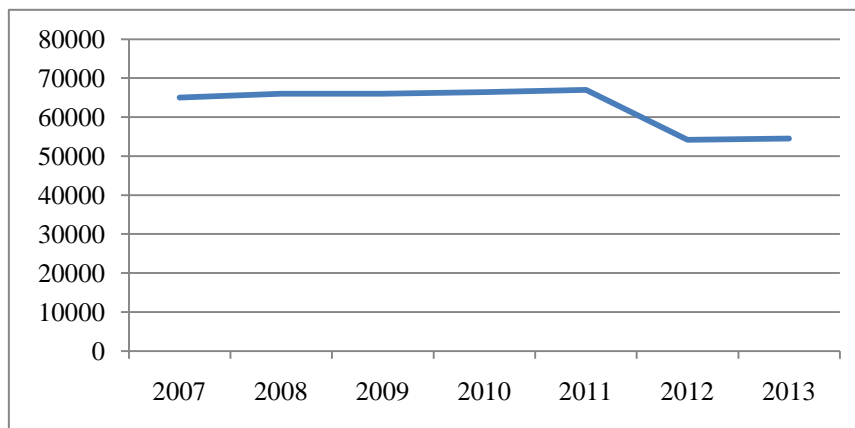
The number of families and children under their care during the last few years the below charts present.

¹³H. Sęk (red.) Social and clinical psychology, Warszawa 1998

¹⁴W. Badura-Madej (red.), Selected issues of critical intervention, Katowice 1999,

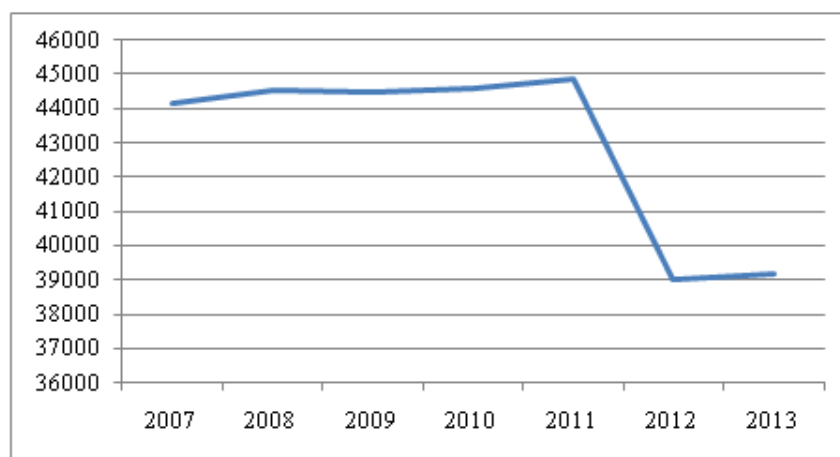
¹⁵Information about the results of an inspection as regards of realisation of some tasks of social assistance for children in chosen voivodeship local government of administration, page 23

Chart2. Number of Children Staying in Foster Families in 2006 – 2013



Own analysis according to the data of The Department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy¹⁶

Chart3. The Number of Foster Care Families in 2006 – 2013



Own analysis according to the data of The Department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy¹⁷

It is essential to consider the reason why despite the increase of the benefits given to foster parents for one child, support granted in order to aid the coordinators of foster care the number of active foster families is not growing. The number of children in foster homes in relation to the number of children in institutional foster care in last few years is presented below:

Chart2. The Percentage of Children in Foster Family Care

Year	The percentage of children staying in foster families from all children under foster care
2006	65,70%
2007	67,20%
2008	68,90%
2009	68,90%
2010	69,80%
2011	70,40%
2012	72,50%
2013	73,21%

Own analysis according to the data of The Department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy¹⁸

¹⁶The data according to the department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

¹⁷The data according to the department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

¹⁸The data according to the department of Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

The above data shows that despite the lower amount of children placed under foster care a significant change in the proportion of children staying in foster families is not observed in relation to number of children staying under the institutional foster care. The result is definitely not optimistic and it displays that a lot of effort should be made to develop and improve the foster family care. They are the foster family care coordinators who should be the most important in the process of building and affecting the professional foster parenthood.

5. THE TASKS FOR FOSTER FAMILY CARE COORDINATORS

The job of a foster family care coordinator is a new profession. Its main tasks are regulated by law. 'A foster family care coordinator is appointed by an organiser of foster family care with the consent of a particular foster family or a director of an orphanage. The role of a foster family care coordinator is especially to:

- help the foster parents or the manager of a children's home to fulfill their tasks following their duties of foster care,
- prepare a plan of helping a child in cooperation with a family's assistant and a foster family or the manager of an orphanage,
- help foster families and people who are responsible for children's homes to establish cooperation with each other,
- provide the foster families or the managers of children's homes with professional help for children especially the psychological, reeducational and rehabilitation one,
- report to an adoption center information about children with regulated law situation in order to find for them an adopting family,
- providesupport for adult wards from foster family care,
- present an annual report showing the effects of foster family care organisers' work ¹⁹.

The range of the tasks of a foster family care coordinator is very extensive. The complexity of duties imposed on this specialist is justified. It is he/ she who should have an effect on the correct performance of a foster family or a foster family home. Foster parents carrying about accepted children need to be provided with support in fulfilling their everyday duties, arranging formal issues connected with organisation of professional support or controlling the law situation of their wards. In the same situation are the wards leaving their foster families or foster homes due to becoming independent. They also need additional support, sometimes even help in understanding with their new guardians, skilled and professional advice especially during the process of coming of age.

According to the information about the results of realisation of some tasks in respect to social support for children by chosen units of local administrative district governments in the area of reasons of dissolving foster families determine a low percentage of educational problems and difficulties. However, from all stated reasons of ending a foster family role only three can be defined as positive ones: coming back to the biological family, adoption and becoming independent. The high percentage of the above presented chart constitutes the unwanted phenomenon (putting children in other families, inappropriate fulfillment of the role of a foster family) or unspecified (other reasons) finally resulting in ceasing the role of a foster family despite the fact that a child needs further help and has to stay under the system of foster care. Staying with a child in such a particular life situation is extremely important. Thus, the foster family coordinator is of crucial importance in the system of building help and support for a child and his /her family.

6. THE PROFESSIONAL WORK OF A FOSTER FAMILY COORDINATORS

The organiser of foster family care employs a coordinator of foster families provided that the candidate meets law regulated criteria. The basic condition is to have a university degree of education, special education, psychology, sociology, social work or family studies. If a candidate does not graduated the listed studies, he/she can supplement his/her qualification by graduating postgraduate studies of psychology, education, family studies or resocialization.

¹⁹Act of 9 June 2011 amending the Family Support and Foster Family Care Act, Article 77 paragraph 2 and 3

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A completely different option can be making a qualification course in the field of care and education studies. Such a solution is acceptable only for people who have at least yearly experience in working with children and families, as a foster family or a manager of an orphanage. A person who undertakes the role of a coordinator should live up to such expectations:

- have one’s own parental authority,
- fulfill an obligation to provide child support if such is imposed on him /her,
- lack of legal sentences for an intentional tax crime.

If the above presented criteria are achieved by an individual, he / she can apply for a job of a coordinator of a foster family care ²⁰.

Professional and reliable ability to deal with undertaken tasks by a coordinator is to guarantee an additional obligation to systematically raise his/her professional qualification in the field of working with children or a family especially by taking part in different trainings and self-education. Moreover, a coordinator of foster family care has the right to use the vocational guidance, which is to keep and strengthen his /her competences and to counteract the phenomena of a job burnout. A foster family care coordinator cannot have more than 15 foster families or 15 family-based assisted houses²¹. Reducing the number of families under care of one coordinator from 30 to 15 is to influence the higher quality of undertaken actions.²²

7. LOCAL GOVERNMENT’S SUPPORT IN EMPLOYING FOSTER FAMILY CARE COORDINATORS

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy – The Department of Family Policy takes actions to stimulate the local governments on the county level to activeness which is to support foster families and family-based assistance houses through the process of developing the network of foster family care coordinators. On July 28th 2014 The Minister of Labour and Social Policy announced ‘The Department Programme Supporting Foster Family Care for the Year 2014’. The basic principle for the Programme is Article 247 from June 9th 2011 concerning the support of a family and a foster family care system. As part of achieving the objectives of the programme the local governments can apply for refinancing the expenses of employing foster family care coordinators from January 1st2014 and additional financing the expenses of employing them until the end of 2014. For the Programme the amount of 760 872,00 Polish zlotych was allotted what enabled to perform the contest proceedings of employing 916 coordinators. On March 31st 2014 The Minister of Labour and Social Policy settled the Programme of a family assistant and a coordinator of foster family care for 2014.²³In Wielkopolska’s region 26 local governments took advantage of the funds from the Programme.

8. WIELKOPOLSKA’S EXPERIENCES IN EMPLOYING FOSTER FAMILY CARE COORDINATORS

Wielkopolska’s voivodeship consists of 31 counties and 4 towns with the rights of a county: Kalisz, Poznan, Konin, Leszno. Getting a permission to have a look at the information about employment of foster family care coordinators by local governments was possible thanks to giving an answer to 8 questions directed by telephone to workers of The County Family Support Centre and The Municipal Family Support Centre. All the counties in Wielkopolska were asked by telephone to take part in the research. At the same time, the data provided by The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy about the foster family care available on its website were analysed. Twenty-one out of thirty-five Wielkopolska’s institutions supporting a family at a county level agreed to give some information about experiences connected with employment of foster family care coordinators within their unit.

As a result of the carried out research the data about the number of employed coordinators as well as the time of their weekly work time were gained. The participants of the research specified the contract, time of the work and its type. During the research the means which the governments used to

²⁰Act of 9 June 2011 amending the Family Support and Foster Family Care Act, Article 77 paragraph 4, 5 and 6

²¹ Ibid. Article

²²Ibid. Article 77 paragraph 4,5 and 6

²³Programme concerning a family’s assistants and foster family care coordinators for 2014

employment coordinators were stated. The number of the families with which the coordinators collaborate were also determined. Within the area of interest the level of education was indicated too as well as the amount of salary. The results are presented below.

The number of employed coordinators in the investigated institutions:

- each out of 9 counties employ 1 coordinator,
- each out of 6 counties employ 2 coordinators,
- each out of 4 counties employ 3 coordinators,
- 1 county employs 4 coordinators,
- 1 county employs 6 coordinators.

Twenty – one counties employed 43 people altogether. 7 of them were employed part – time that means that they worked less than 40 hours a week (for example: 5/8 of full – time work, ½ of full – time work, ¼ of full- time work). 36 people were employed full –time of a weekly time of work. With 43 a full – time work contract was signed and with 10 a contract of mandate. The time of employment according to the type of a contract presented as follows. There were 2 people working who signed a contract of mandate but for some part of a year. For the time of a year, there were 8 people with a contract of mandate and 33 people with a contract of full –time job, out of which 17 had a contract for an indefinite period. Employing these specialists only for a part of a year or giving them a part – time position can be the reason why foster families or family-based houses do not receive support all the time or in not sufficient dimension which is very unfavourable. During the process of own analyses it was noticed that a positive phenomenon is employing continuity of 17 coordinators which is guaranteed by the full –time job contracts.

According to the data included in the questionnaire the process of employing coordinators was financed in 9 cases from the county's resources, in 22 cases from funds of The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, in 4 cases from funds of The European Social Fund, in 4 cases from a governor's resources, in 3 cases from The European Social Fund and a county's means, in 1 case the resources of financing were not stated. After the analysis of the results of the research and confronting them with the information presented on the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy's website, one conclusion can be stated that the selected respondents did not have reliable information about the means of financing the employment of foster family care coordinators in their county. The units which did not indicate the financing resources of employing coordinators by the Ministry were included on a list of counties selected to be financed within the framework of The Programme – a Family Assistant and a Foster Family Care Coordinator for 2014.²⁴ Such a disorientation among the county's workers is very alarming.

On the basis of the carried research the number of foster families and the number of family-based assistance houses under the care of 1 coordinator was defined between 10 to 36. The majority oscillated around 30. According to the law regulations in 2014 only 1 coordinator could take care of 30 families. In 2015 the number of the families under the care of 1 coordinator was reduced to 15. The change will influence the need to employ more such specialists²⁵. It can be very advantageous for the optimal effects of the coordinators' work with families. However, for the counties it causes the raise in the resources devoted to this aim. It is intriguing how the counties are going to implement the described change as at the time of the research the number of coordinators did not respond to the needs of the counties. That is, it was not adequate to the number of foster families in the counties. The level of the coordinators' salaries was defined between 1000 Polish zlotych to 2650 zlotych and the level of education in all the cases was identified as of a university degree, which is in accordance with the requirements of the act. What has a significant impact on the level of motivation of the foster family care coordinators to fulfil their roles is the optimal level of their salaries, the salaries of well educated people. The information was gathered on the basis of the statements of The County Family Support Centre's workers taking part in the research.

²⁴The list of the units which were finance within the Framework of the Programme – A Family Assistant and A Foster Family Care Coordinator for 2014 available on the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy's website

²⁵Act of June 9th 2011 amending The System of a Family and Foster Care Support Article 77 paragraph 4

9. CONCLUSION

A foster family voluntarily undertakes a duty to welcome and educate a child. However, the changes which appear in the lives of the family members cause many burdens for all of them. The potential of foster families, involvement and the will to ensure care for children who are deprived of being brought up in biological families is not sufficient and they need support. They are the foster family care coordinators who have the basic role in forming a professional foster care in Poland.

The subject of support provided by foster family care coordinators are foster parents, their natural children, children taken under care and their natural families. This is the essence of appointing the coordinators to such a role which aim is to enable the foster families to be prepared to take care of a child, educate him/ her in a professional way, have a better access to a specialised support. The coordinator has to create the best cooperation of new guardians with a natural family. Dealing with expectations of both sides requires sensitivity, empathy, abilities of a good interpersonal communication and often enough mediation.

If the attentiveness about perceiving and satisfying foster families’ needs, will not be preserved, their quality and consistence will be low. The foster family’s members are highly exposed to difficulties, failures, stress which can be discouraging to take an effort of remaining foster families. Thus, the coordinator is the person who professionally should care about foster families.

On the basis of the carried out research in Wielkopolska’s region it can be stated that the local governments, which agreed to take part in the research, raise the number of employed foster families’ coordinators. The number of the specialists in relation to the number of foster families in this region is not sufficient. However, the level of education of the coordinators is satisfying. A significant issue for the coordinators’ effective work is the way of their employing and the level of their salaries. For the optimal effectiveness of their work, their invariability is a key issue. Working with foster parents is based on building relations between foster parents and natural parents of a child. What is a long process is forming the feeling of trust, safety and satisfying interpersonal relations between all members of interaction. Changing the coordinator makes it impossible. The positive phenomenon is the continuity of employing some of the coordinators guaranteed by contracts for a specified term. Local governments indicated also different financial resources of the coordinators work for example, MPiPS funds or EFS. It means that the support of the outside resources for the governments is possible.

In the course of the analysis of the information gathered from the interviews and the data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy’s website it can be stated that not all the statements of the local government’s workers were reliable. The units which did not specify the resources of employing coordinators as of the Ministry’s were put on a list selected to co-finance within the framework of The Programme – A Family’s Assistant and Coordinator of Foster Family Care for 2014. It inclines a reflection that the research should be deepened and extended with more detailed information. The researched area, which is a foster family care, because of its specific character needs very careful actions. However, what is needed is the recognition of difficulties and the indication of dealing with them. A foster family in a crisis does not fulfill its functions in an appropriate way what can cause a consequence of dissolving the family. It is a total defeat and a psychical suffering for the foster parents, their natural children as well as the accepted child when the foster family terminates its function because of educational failures. Therefore, it is worth to take actions to develop the system of supporting foster families in which a foster family care coordinator has a significant role.

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