

The concept of readiness of employees of selected residential social services in the context of emergency situations in the Czech Republic

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *The preparedness of workers in residential social services can have an impact on the users of the services in the context of various kinds of emergencies. The users are mostly people with disabilities who need (with regard to individual categories of disability) different levels of support from other people. In emergency situations, service staff often becomes the only competent person who can effectively intervene and prevent the fatal consequences of such a situation. In this context, however, it is necessary to ask whether these workers are prepared for such situations and what, according to the workers, is readiness at all.*

Aim: *To present the results of a pilot study in order to find out how employees of selected residential social services perceive the concept of preparedness in the context of emergency situations.*

Methods: *A qualitative approach with an exploratory-descriptive character was used in the pilot study. An interrogation technique was used to collect data. Content analysis was used for their analysis.*

Results: *In the context of readiness, 3 categories were identified by content analysis of the obtained data – personal, professional and organizational readiness. These were specified in more detail using summary protocols.*

Conclusion: *Even employees of residential services may feel fear and anxiety arising from, for example, their own (un)preparedness when dealing with emergencies. Closely related to this is the concept of self-efficacy, which will be the subject of further research within the main research of the author's dissertation.*

Keywords: *readiness, employees, residential services, social services, emergency, crisis, disability*

1 Introduction

In emergency situations, workers in residential social services are often the only competent persons who can intervene effectively to prevent the fatal consequences of such a situation. In this context, however, it is necessary to ask whether these workers are prepared for these situations and what is preparedness. A similar issue was addressed in a pilot study by Chrastina et al. (2020). The implemented pilot study was not specifically focused on the perception of staff readiness for emergency management. The central theme of the pilot study was the perception of the readiness of these workers to accompany the dying. By interviewing in combination with interviews, it was found that workers in residential social services perceive readiness as personal equipment and experience in the field. According to the participants in the pilot study, education, transfer of experience between colleagues, previous experience with a similar situation, knowledge of the life story of the service user and the specifics of communication with these people play an important role in preparedness. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), readiness is defined as the immediate ability to act or respond to a stimulus. Bartoňková (2010) views the readiness of employees as a set of certain skills, abilities, knowledge, competencies, personality traits and empathy. Vakola (2013) describes the so-called “organizational readiness”. It helps to create flexibility, adaptability, but also to build trust and attitudes among the organization’s employees. Tureckiová (2004) mentions in the context of preparedness the importance of continuous development of employee performance.

Hartl and Hartlová (2010) describe “crisis preparedness” in the context of emergency situations. That is, the individual’s ability to manage or eliminate the consequences of emergencies. It is a set of standardized procedures aimed at managing the crisis. Emergencies are characterized by the fact that they are unexpected, they happen suddenly, so there is not enough time to prepare for them. The readiness of employees is one of the factors influencing the origin, course and management of these situations. In such a case, employees and users of the service may experience feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, inability to act, and distrust of their own abilities. The degree of impact of emergency situations on the affected persons is conditioned primarily by the (in)readiness of the staff of the service to cope with such situations, as well as by the (un)predictability of their occurrence. In practice, in this context, there is a tendency to underestimate possible risks, mere formality and outdated procedures, inability of employees or service users to actively use these procedures (Bednář, 2012).

In order to be able to provide quality care and services to users, workers in residential social services use previously acquired knowledge, skills, abilities, both on a professional and personal level. The question of the readiness of employees is thus related to their professional and personal preconditions. These can be defined in the

context of the readiness of residential services as “competence to perform a certain activity” (Belz, Siegrist, 2015). Kubes et al. (2004) perceive competence as the ability or skill to carry out an activity. The condition for the implementation of the activity is the ability of the worker to perform the activity correctly – ie. have appropriate qualifications (knowledge, skills) in the field of performance. According to the author, competence can be seen as a power granted to us by the authority, or as the ability to perform activities in a qualified manner. This claim is partly agreed with by the American Psychological Association (2020), which describes competence as the ability to control life (the ability to solve problems effectively) and the set of skills (the task-oriented activity).

The readiness of residential staff to deal with emergencies is also related to their personal preconditions (Chrastina et al., 2020). Mátel (2019) among the personal preconditions of a worker includes, for example, the ability of empathy, good communication skills, emotional resilience and stability, determination, creativity, flexibility in action, ability of continuous education in their field, ability of self-reflection, knowledge and maintaining one’s own boundaries and motivation work with the user and more. In the event of an emergency, the worker should be able to assess the imminent danger, ensure safety for themselves and the service user, establish and maintain safe contact with the user, take responsibility for necessary decisions (often under time pressure), knowledge and respect of borders (their and the users), confidence in one’s own abilities, motivation, adequate directives, independence in acting, psychological resilience, cooperation (teamwork), respect, creativity, flexible thinking and acting, self-reflection, etc. (Špatenková et al., 2011).

The readiness of workers in social residential services is also linked to their education (Chrastina et al., 2020). The conditions of education of workers in social residential services are specified in more detail in the Act on Social Services No. 108/2006 Coll., as amended (§109–117). Staff training should not be seen only from the point of view of undergraduate study of helping professions. In the field of education of workers, their further education also plays an important role (Mátel, 2019; Kopřiva, 2013; Bartoňková, 2010; Matoušek, 2008). The need for further education of social services workers is also referred to in Annex No. 2 to Decree No. 505/2006 Coll., which implements certain provisions of the Act on Social Services (as amended). In the annex to this decree, the need for further professional development of employees is emphasized within the framework of quality standard No. 10 (“Professional development of employees”). According to these sources, the responsibility for the readiness of these workers is largely on the part of the employer, respectively a service provider (Chrastina et al., 2020). Continuing education in social services is necessary in view of the ever-increasing demands on the knowledge and skills of workers. It could be said that this need for training in the field of helping professions is becoming a systematic part of further professional and personal development of workers.

In social services, education is put under pressure, for example, due to the development of new methods, forms of work and work procedures, increasing the quality and efficiency of work, adaptation to organizational or situational changes (Bednář, 2014). Employees of residential services can use in their professional and personal development, for example, professional training, courses, seminars, lectures, sharing experiences with colleagues, supervision and more. (Mátl, 2019; Kopřiva, 2013; Bartoňková, 2010). According to Chrastina et al. (2020) the support of social workers is an important aspect of increasing their readiness. This may take the form of regular emergency management training, the establishment of a written emergency management procedure, offering assistance and the opportunity to communicate openly about possible concerns about emergency management, eg through interviews, supervision, discussions with a supervisor or a team, etc.

Despite continuous training leading to both professional and personal development, it is necessary to take into account the fact that these workers may be prepared to use their knowledge, skills and abilities to varying degrees (Kubeš et al., 2004). Baštecká et al. (2005) emphasize, first of all, the need to perceive the emergency worker as themselves. Even employees of residential services may feel fear and anxiety arising from, for example, their own (un)preparedness when dealing with emergencies.

2 Aim

To find out how employees of selected residential social services perceive the concept of preparedness in the context of emergency situations.

3 Method

With regard to the nature of the described issues and the goal of the research survey, a quantitative approach with an exploratory-descriptive character was used in the pilot study. Prior to the actual implementation of the research survey, a directory of contacts of large-capacity social residential services of the Czech Republic was created. All residential social services with a capacity of over 40 users were considered these services (MLSA CR, 2007). Subsequently, employees of selected services were approached with a request to participate in the research survey. These workers had to meet the following criteria: job position – helping worker (special pedagogue, social worker); place of business – residential social service with a capacity of more than 40 users; education – depending on the performance of the job position (Act No. 108/2006 Coll., as amended). The willingness of cooperation from the employees of selected organizations was also decisive for participation in the research survey.

The survey technique was used to carry out the pilot study. The employees were contacted electronically – by e-mail. It contained a request to participate in the research with a click on an electronic form guaranteeing the anonymity of their answers to the submitted question. This concerned a subjective view of the concept of “emergency preparedness” in their service (what they imagined and how they perceived it). Data collection took place from September 2021 to January 2022. Twelve employees took part in the research survey.

The obtained data were subjected to content analysis of a descriptive nature. Open coding was used in the analysis. Categories (meaning units) were created from the identified codes. In order to fully understand and clarify the meanings of individual categories/codes, they were specified in the form of specific statements of employees in the form of a summary protocol.

4 Results

Several categories and codes were created by open coding by content analysis. These are shown in the table below (Table 1: Content analysis of the obtained data – categories and codes).

Table 1: *Content analysis of the obtained data – categories and codes*

<i>"When you say 'readiness' in the context of emergency situations on persons with disabilities at your work, what do you imagine?"</i>	
Category	Codes
Personal readiness	abilities
	skills
Professional readiness	knowledge
	awareness
	cooperation
Organizational readiness	structure of the organization
	material provision
	personal resource
	documentation
	prevention

Based on the analysis of the category “personal readiness”, it can be stated that some workers of selected residential social services describe readiness in the context of emergency situations in their service as certain abilities or skills on the part of the worker. These are, for example, the ability to react in an emergency situation, flexibi-

lity, employee empathy, the ability to saturate the individual needs of service users with regard to their specifics. A detailed description of this category can be found in Table 2: Summary protocol – category “personal readiness”.

Table 2: *Summary protocol – category “personal readiness”*

Category – Personal readiness	
Codes	Workers' statements
abilities	<i>“...the worker's ability to respond to any situation that may arise in the social service in relation to clients.”</i>
	<i>“Under the term ‘readiness’ I imagine that the worker must be very flexible. Being equipped with the abilities and skills that allow them to respond to any emergencies with our users.”</i>
skills	<i>“...be able to respond to user needs that may arise during the service.”</i>
	<i>“Everything is based on the fact that within their expertise, extraordinary empathy, acquired experience they must know the individual specifics of a particular user.”</i>

In the analysis of the obtained data, the category “professional readiness” was created. The given category contains knowledge, information and cooperation within selected organizations. The staff describes the readiness, for example, as knowledge of methodologies and work procedures, possible measures, techniques and methods of working with users in emergency situations. The readiness is related not only to the ongoing updating of the mentioned methodologies and procedures with an emphasis on mapping the situation (individual needs, specific) of users, but also to informing employees about possible updates or sudden changes in the situation in the organization. Employees see cooperation as an important part of preparedness in the context of emergencies. It can take many forms. According to the staff, this is a collaboration between colleagues, users and their families, the service provider and other services (eg firefighters, paramedics). According to the employees, constant communication, mutual support and transfer of experience (eg in regular meetings) between employees can be considered as the basis of good cooperation. The content of the category is described in more detail in Table 3: Summary protocol – category “professional readiness”.

Table 3: Summary protocol – category “professional readiness”

Category – Professional readiness	
Codes	Workers' statements
knowledge	<i>“...to know the methodology of the workplace and work procedures.”</i>
	<i>“...the knowledg of actual measures, including getting of these measures, unification of the measures, not to change the measures from one day to another.”</i>
	<i>“They must be such a professional to be able to react correctly to an arisen emergency situation and to be able to handle the situation best.”</i>
	<i>“They must know which techniques and methods to use in the situation, whether they should always choose techniques for calming of the situation, distraction, or on the contrary, they work with the user, where it is necessary to use authority and sometimes increased voice and repeated emphasis.”</i>
	<i>“...readiness in the context means for me that the personnel in duty know what to do if this situation appears.”</i>
awareness	<i>“...mapping the client's situation – what extraordinary situations can occur (aggression, seizures, escapes, etc.), how such situations took place in the past, what worked and what did not.”</i>
	<i>“...we update the methodologies frequently and inform employees about their content.”</i>
	<i>“...the most important is to inform all staff about the upcoming situation in time...”</i>
cooperation	<i>“It is important to know the personality of the user as much as possible within the observations, experiences, meetings within the whole team, then we can responsibly anticipate and be able to respond to the given emergencies..”</i>
	<i>“The support and functioning of the entire work team is important, as such tense situations may arise when it is necessary to call for help from a colleague and resolve the situation in a different than usual way.”</i>
	<i>“If a worker can establish a real relationship with the user, the emergency can be handled.”</i>
	<i>“Engage in cooperation with the founder and other departments (fire brigade, hospitals, emergency services).”</i>
	<i>“It is necessary to add that when dealing with such emergencies, there may be times when users' rights are narrowed and their quality of life is reduced. It is good to remember this risk and constantly communicate with all the people affected. I think this should be the basis for successfully managing such a crisis, and if this can be done, I think we can talk about readiness.”</i>

The content analysis also identified the category of “organizational readiness”. Employees state that they would include the structure of the organization under the term readiness. Thus, the division of the organization into smaller departments, households, rooms, etc. can contribute to the readiness. The readiness can also take the form of material provision by the organization, eg in the form of protective, evacuation aids. Readiness is also related to sufficient staffing of the service, eg in terms of sufficient capacity and pre-arranged volunteers or strengthening the work team in the event of an emergency. Workers also say that preparedness is related to sufficient information, access and transferability. It is not “only” about ensuring the way the information is passed on, but also about its timeliness, comprehensibility

and knowledge. The employee should thus be prepared to pass information not only between colleagues, but also towards the users of the service, their family members or guardians.

As readiness, employees also describe the creation of documentation related to emergency situations in the organization. The employee can be helped to be prepared in the context of emergency situations, for example, by creating a detailed crisis plan for each user for individual situations, procedures for dealing with these situations, etc. Employees describe preparedness in the form of prevention as important. These include various model situations, emergency response exercises together with service users, activation activities, practical training of staff (eg the correct use of evacuation aids and procedures) or the setting up of a “crisis staff”. A more detailed specification of this category is shown in Table 4: Summary protocol – category “organizational readiness”.

Table 4: *Summary protocol – category “organizational readiness”*

Category – Organizational readiness	
Codes	Workers' statements
Structure of the organization	<i>"It is good to divide users into smaller groups. (by department, by household or by room)."</i>
material provision	<i>"...have emergency and evacuation equipment ready for an emergency situation"</i>
	<i>"...have a reserve stock of protective equipment and disinfectants ready for the service (expiration must be checked)"</i>
personal resources	<i>"...sufficient capacity is needed in wards..."</i>
	<i>"...it is advisable to have pre-arranged volunteers or contractors who could assist in the event of a failure of the regular staff."</i>
information transfer	<i>"The staff has sufficient information, which the organization presents to them in writing and updates according to the development of the crisis situation and the conditions of the organization. People know them and apply them in practice. They are checked to ensure that they are complied with."</i>
	<i>"Social service users and their relatives are provided with up-to-date information, which they understand so that the cooperation can take place without worries and stress."</i>
	<i>"All information should be in writing. We should introduce them to other employees who come into contact with the clients."</i>
	<i>"...Family members and carers need to be informed."</i>

Codes	Workers' statements
documentation	<i>"...creating a contingency plan for each client for a given situation (what are the causes, triggers, manifestations, what, who, when, what will be the sources of help, aftercare, etc.)"</i>
	<i>"...preparation of a crisis plan for specific situations with specific clients at our Center..."</i>
	<i>"Selection of clients with risky behavior towards themselves or others. Description of the situation and specific, clear points, how to proceed in such a case, who to contact, how to 'pacify' the client, where to place them separately, which persons to contact in this case. Which situation is so serious that a doctor and an ambulance have to be called."</i>
	<i>"...elaborated crisis situation procedure based on individual needs and abilities and possibilities of the client. As part of individual planning, each client has a risk situation prepared. This procedure helps the social worker to know how to proceed in a given crisis situation, so that the situation does not surprise them and that they are able to handle any crisis situation."</i>
	<i>"We anticipate crisis situations and have developed methodologies. For each client separately, we have described how to prevent crisis situations and, if they do occur, how to deal with them."</i>
	<i>"...Have a contingency plan in place, for example, for a situation of staff shortages, etc."</i>
prevention	<i>"We practically practise some situations with staff and users. We monitor the occurrence of emergencies in the social service and respond to some preventively – by preparing risk plans."</i>
	<i>"In my opinion, people with disabilities should know what is going on around them, what can happen and what they can meet. If they know, it is possible to prepare them for some situations. How to keep what to do. It all depends on the type of disability and the seriousness of it. As part of activations, it is possible to focus on individual cases of crisis situations, to analyze them together with the disabled. It is a matter of preventing these situations."</i>
	<i>"...staff training – in general (eg working with aggression, first aid, etc.), in a specific level (my role in the client's crisis plan, and in the level of teamwork)."</i>
	<i>"...Have a work team trained in crisis procedures..."</i>
	<i>"...you must have well-trained staff to work in a high-risk environment... (CORRECT use of protective equipment, disinfectants and all necessary procedures in general)."</i>
	<i>"...it is appropriate to establish a so-called crisis staff, which solves current events and developments with a capable coordinator for the service."</i>

5 Discussion and conclusion

Emergencies are characterized by their unpredictability. They are unexpected, undesirable and associated with negative experiences and the necessity/possibility of change (Špatenková et al. 2011). This is an area that is often overlooked in the provision of social services in the Czech Republic. This can be problematic especially

in the provision of residential high-capacity social services, where emergencies can have a significant impact on users and workers. With regard to the limitations and individual needs of users (in the context of individual categories of disability), it is the workers who can act effectively and without delay in an emergency. However, it is necessary to realize that even in emergency situations, employees may feel fear and anxiety stemming, for example, from their own (un)preparedness (Baštecká et al., 2005). Based on this finding, a pilot survey was conducted to find out how employees of selected residential social services perceive the concept of preparedness in the context of emergency situations. In the context of readiness, 3 categories were identified by content analysis of the obtained data – personal, professional and organizational readiness.

The “personal readiness” category enables the area of readiness of employees of selected residential social services to be viewed in terms of abilities and skills of the worker (eg ability to respond in an emergency, flexibility, empathy, ability to saturate individual needs of service users with regard to their needs and specifics). Mátel (2019) describes the readiness in a similar way. According to the author, however, it is possible to describe, for example, empathy and flexibility in action together with communication skills, emotional resilience, stability, determination, creativity, self-reflection, knowledge and retention and motivation when working with the user, as certain personal preconditions of the employee. Chrastina et al. (2020) or Spatenkova et al. (2011) mentioned these as well. According to the authors, the employee should be able to assess the imminent danger, ensure safety for themselves and users of the service, establish and maintain safe contact with users, take responsibility for their decisions, trust in their abilities, autonomy of action, cooperation, respect, self-reflection, etc. and skills can be according to the authors Belz, Siegrist (2015) and Kubeše et al. (2004) as a competence to perform an activity. Thus, the ability to deal effectively with the situation and the skill to meet the goal/task (American Psychological Association, 2020).

The “professional readiness” category enables the area of readiness of employees of selected residential social services to be viewed in terms of knowledge and information of employees and also in terms of cooperation within selected organizations. The staff describes the readiness, for example, as knowledge of methodologies and work procedures, possible measures, techniques and methods of working with users in emergency situations. The readiness is related not only to the continuous updating of the mentioned methodologies and procedures with an emphasis on mapping the situation (individual needs, specific) of users, but also on informing employees about possible updates or sudden changes in the situation in the organization. Employees see cooperation as an important part of preparedness in the context of emergencies. It can take many forms. According to the staff, this is a collaboration between colleagues, users and their families, the service provider and other services (eg firefighters,

paramedics). According to the employees, constant communication, mutual support and transfer of experience (eg in regular meetings) between employees can be considered as the basis of good cooperation. Alexander (2015) and Suttell (2003) also agree. The authors consider detailed planning, preparation of methodologies, procedures and strategies for managing emergencies, as well as the transmission of information about these facts in the context of emergencies to be crucial. Employees can develop professional readiness not only by sharing experience and working with colleagues, but also through further education. However, the possibility and availability of further education depends not only on the workers, but also on the employer (the organization in which they are employed) (Chrastina et al., 2020). Continuing education in social services is necessary with regard to the ever-increasing requirements for knowledge and skills of employees (Bednář, 2014). These are, for example, professional trainings, courses, seminars, lectures, sharing experiences with colleagues, supervision, teamwork and others (Mátel, 2019; Kopřiva, 2013; Bartoňková, 2010).

The third category identified is “organizational readiness”. According to this category, it is possible to include the structure of the organization under the concept of readiness – the division of the organization into smaller departments, households, rooms, etc. Furthermore, material provision by the organization, eg in the form of protective, evacuation aids (Boyce, 2017; Butler, 2017; Koo et al., 2012). Readiness is also related to sufficient staffing of the service, eg in terms of sufficient capacity and pre-arranged volunteers or strengthening the work team in the event of an emergency. Workers also say that preparedness is related to sufficient information, access and transferability. It is not only “about” ensuring the way the information is passed on, but also about its timeliness, comprehensibility and knowledge. The employee should thus be prepared to pass information not only between colleagues, but also towards service users, their family members or guardians (Chrastina et al., 2020). As readiness, employees also describe the creation of documentation related to emergency situations in the organization. The employee can be helped to be prepared in the context of emergency situations, for example, by creating a detailed crisis plan for each user for individual situations, procedures for dealing with these situations, etc. Employees describe preparedness in the form of prevention as important. These are various model situations, emergency management exercises together with service users, activation activities, practical staff training (Chrastina, 2020; Hashemi 2018; Bednář, 2014; Snider et al., 2011; Baštecká et al., 2005). Despite all the above facts, in the practice of workers of residential social services, there may be situations where workers are ready to use their knowledge, abilities and skills to varying degrees (Kubeš et al., 2004). In other words, they may not fully believe in their own readiness. Even employees of residential services may feel fear and anxiety arising from their feelings of (un) preparedness when dealing with emergencies (Baštecká et al., 2005). Closely related to this is the concept of self-efficacy. It takes the form of a belief

in one's own abilities and skills aimed at effectively (successfully) mastering the set goal (Bandura, 1997). It is an individual assessment of a person's ability to take action (under certain circumstances) to achieve a successful outcome. Expectations of personal effectiveness differ from expectations of outcome because individuals may believe that their actions will lead to a result, but if they do not believe in their abilities in such a situation, they are unlikely to dare to realize such an activity (Zimmerman, Cleary, 2006; Bong, Skaalvik, 2003).

Determining the degree of self-efficacy in workers of selected residential social services will be the subject of further research in the main research of the author's dissertation and entitled "Analysis of the readiness of workers to provide first psychosocial assistance to people with disabilities in residential services".

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