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**24-HOURS HOTLINE SERVICE
AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE
(RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE
OF THE INCEST TRAUMA CENTER - BELGRADE)**

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Introduction

Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade is a women's NGO that provides specialized services for addressing sexual violence issues; officially registered in 1994, Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade is the oldest such institution in the Republic of Serbia. Since then its professional staff has been providing psychological assistance for an average number of 9 reported cases of sexual violence per week. *Except police and its operational scope, so far there has been no other service in the country with round-the-clock working hours, from midnight 0:00-24:00, at least in a certain period, which has readily responded to reported cases of sexual violence.* Psychological assistance to a child and/or adult, who has suffered sexual violence, has been provided by our team primarily through personal contact; our team consists of women of different professions in the (mental) health field. Assistance has also been provided to persons invited by the identified client as persons recognized to be or expected to be an ally, i.e. support. Activities of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade, since its founding in 1994, have been supervised by Dutch professional support. Aspects of everyday assistance are as follows: A) primarily personal contacts through individual sessions and self-help or support groups, and B) crisis hotline service (round-the-clock, 0:00-24:00, in the period

November 2004 - September 2006; otherwise, since 1994, services have been available 4 to 8 hours a day from Monday to Friday). Team of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade provides team professional opinion for criminal procedures - at request of courts and other public institutions - and our Deputy Director, who leads our Team for counseling children and women survivors of sexual violence, appears in court to represent professional opinion of the Team as an expert witness. Except on the courts explicit request, the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade participates in civil procedures.

Bearing in mind social circumstances, identity of the Crisis Center (Center for Crisis Intervention) has been determined as primary since its establishment and within this framework the identity of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade as the Training Center has grown. It has been proved to be essential to transfer knowledge and daily practice related to the topic of sexual violence to all social actors that are responsible to act in the interest of a child or woman exposed to violence. Thus, in almost 16 years of our service, 5,828 employees from 431 institutions/organizations have completed specialists' training of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade, basic or advance, adapted to profiles included by training. Basic level means minimum 14 and maximum 42 effective working hours. Advance level of specialists' training related to different topics means 14 or 21 effective working hours. Certificates of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade, as confirmation of professional improvement may be found in the personal files of the employees in the Republic Ministry of Interior (from uniformed police and inspectors of departments specialized in sexual offences and delinquency of minors, to teachers in police officer schooling), professional personnel in penitentiary or correctional facilities for women and minors-perpetrators of criminal offences, etc.

Strategic focus of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade for the period 2009-2013 is the sexual violence prevention. Basic aim of our service is proper comprehension of sexual trauma by citizens, and thus respect for children and adults who have history of sexual violence. Part of the future prevention activities is most certainly further growth of the Training Center, while, when identity of the Crisis Center is in question, we reserve the right, at our sole discretion, to admission of a certain number of survivors of sexual violence with the purpose of providing psychological assistance.

It is to be expected, like in countries governed by the rule of law, where in compliance with the basic responsibility of the state it is normal that the local institutions of social and health care establish in time functional crisis hotline services against violence working round-the-clock - that such services will be established in our country as well (thus, it will not be necessary for non-governmental organizations to provide services for which civil servants are already

being paid for). To this aim, the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade, with this article, transfers the description of the part of its long-term experience to future services that will work within the state in the best interest of the child and adult survivors. Preparatory phase in establishing a crisis telephone service is particularly emphasized.

Recommendations for establishing, functioning and professional growth of a 24-hour crisis hotline for cases of gender-based violence

The motive for establishing a 24-hour crisis hotline service against sexual violence, started up in the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade on November 19, 2009, on the World Day for Prevention of Child Abuse, was, in our opinion, the fact that in each metropolis a round-the-clock service of such type is highly necessary. As opposed to metropolises in regulated countries with long tradition of respect for human rights and women exposed to violence, City of Belgrade and Republic of Serbia, so far, have not been able to carry such responsibility. Particularly in the period from 2004 till today. And particularly when the service against sexual violence is in question! In particular, 5 years ago! Because, in Serbia, certain improvement in the system for protection of women and children exposed to emotional and physical violence in family has been noticed; however, sexual abuse as a topic still does not get enough attention nor are necessary funds provided for victim assistance.

It is important to know that round-the-clock availability and correct intervention incite growth of the number of reported cases and we must be prepared for it. We would like to point out that from opening of the round-the-clock crisis telephone service till today, a 29 per cent growth of reported cases has been recorded. One cannot say that sexual violence cases occur more often than before, this only proves that when there are services which have earned the confidence of citizens - all citizens who happen to find themselves in abuse situation stop treating these crimes as a taboo subject and start reporting them. We made the social problem of sexual violence more visible and nearly two years later, when we returned to the 8-hour work day, we started a campaign in the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade, "The Me Nobody Knows", and the number of reported cases has remained the same.

Some recommendations on what must be done before the opening of the Crisis Hotline Service:

- **In-depth** training of professional staff to work in the Round-the-Clock Crisis Hotline Service:
 - a) Selection of **team members of proven quality known for their sincere approach in direct service provision to people**; considerably high salaries for team

members from permanent, guaranteed funds; sufficient number of team members should be provided (for round-the-clock service minimum 14); team members should be trained for providing specific assistance; active cooperation with previously developed ally services that help in fight against violence over children and women; mandatory supervision to rely on to. If these *conditions* are not fulfilled, it is recommended not to start the crisis hotline service at all. To work under conditions that do not fulfill the mentioned criteria causes continuing frustration, because it is impossible to meet the requirements of the job, which causes ever more inadequate assistance, hiding of mistakes, self-isolation of helpers who bring their clients also into it.

b) The training process is **primarily a process of reviewing personal attitudes** toward violence and women, it is a process of understanding the child's position as well as system of oppression and discrimination tools. Only the next step includes acquiring of necessary knowledge and skills in the context of violence against children and women, and this, the most concretely educative part - is the easiest to upgrade. The third component of the training process relates to testing of the previous culture of communication as well as former culture and habits in cooperation. This segment in the practice of helpers frequently obstructs establishing trust relationship with the client, but also healthy team relations.

c) **Training by practitioners** (employed in government and non-government services that have experience of direct long-term work with child and adult survivors). This is also the last opportunity of critical thinking whether the helpers of the future crisis hotline service feel at ease in their position. The inner process includes a definitive decision which marks personal understanding that it is about work where adequate attitude toward violence - in the interest of the survivor - changes the former way of life of the helpers who have decided to engage themselves in this field.

d) The training, *inter alia*, accurately points out that working in a crisis hotline service is a specific type of job and **demands special training**, that a valuable, in-depth service for the client is in question, it is more than just "listening and referring for further help" (there is a frequent risk involved when possibilities of the crisis hotline service are inaccurately comprehended and employees act more like 'operators', who merely 'transfer cases' to other services included by the overall protection system, and not like diligent helpers who exhaust all possibilities of their own repertoire till the end. It is important to learn that this job requires the knowledge of recognizing, assessing and implementing priorities opposite to support the victim of violence in terms of social profiling or out of charity (for example, to learn to select clients with a corresponding level of existential threat that needs to be assisted by in-take at the shelter). It is equally important to understand that the shelter is not the solution of domestic violence situation but e.g. through implementation of the Family Law measures such as Protection From Abuse order (PFA), and eviction of the offender from the house regardless of the

right of property or lease of immovable. There are many critical points which test the in-depth understanding of the context of the gender-based violence, and the mentioned may be overcome by training, but also long-term work experience through which the system dynamics is being learned and understood.

- **Establishing of a clear organizational structure of the crisis service:**

a) **Procedures, Protocols:** To learn to abide by the Protocols adopted by related ministries and implement them daily (read: Consistent implementation of the Protocol represents also the helper's attitude toward the violence. To learn precisely one's own place in the system of support to the client; bringing internal procedures characteristic and mandatory for services against violence regarding the regular procedure in the case of abuse of the helper-client relationship (such an example is the Child Protection Policy of the Save the Children, UK). To lead an active policy as follows: 1. Implementing the mandatory reporting of criminal offences related to gender-based violence (instead of no taking action at all, irresponsible keeping "bad" secret of ongoing abuse or hiding behind the confidentiality rule when ongoing crime is in question); 2. Consistent reporting of the abuse by helpers in institutions (for example, abuse of position by the personnel in institutions as permanent living settings for women with disability, cases of abuse of children without parental care, etc.) as well as reporting of domestic violence; 3. Active implementation of the Family Law provision ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 18/059"), **Failure to Report Criminal Offence or Offender (Article 332)**, which specifies sanctions for helpers who fail to report a criminal offence.

b) Providing **supervision to rely on** as professional support to personnel working in the crisis hotline service (the same note as for the trainers: it is necessary that consulting, advising and/or supervision tasks are **performed by practitioners**. For instance, professional staff of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade performed these tasks in the former period under the Contract with the state shelter for abused children within the Center for children without parental Care "Jovan Jovanović - Zmaj" and it is officially called: Department for urgent protection of abused children.

- Call to the Crisis Service **for citizens is free of charge** (for example, line 0800 and similar).
- Providing a **rich directory / database of experienced associate institutions and organizations**, in which practitioners, with their first and last names, publicly, in the long term, distinguish themselves by positive assistance which they have provided in fighting violence against children and women (a good example is Network of Trust to Fight Gender-Based Violence,

which is an intervention team of practitioners from 15 GOs and NGOs, which was founded by the ITC in 2001, and we have been coordinating it to this day). The term "experienced associate institutions and organizations" in this context means that quality of services is confirmed by the clients' feedback.

- Developing a **clear and precise strategy** of communication and public relations strategy.
- **Announcing the opening** of a crisis hotline service. **Continuous public informing on the work, results and needs of the Crisis Hotline Service.**

Conclusion

Experience of the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade shows that preparatory phase of organizing a 24-hour crisis hotline service is of utmost importance. Preparations for work in the terms of defining the policy, organizational structure, teamwork rules as well as long-term professional and financial support at each level - determines the service quality and sustainability. The basic responsibility of public institutions is to make such services in their competence highly functional and answer their demanding complex nature and responsibilities they include. To this aim, for obtaining quality service of this type, Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade is ready to contribute.