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INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IN ALTERNATIVE CARE: FOSTER CARE AND COVID-19 PANDEMICS[**]

Abstract: *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has generated new challenges in the work of social welfare institutions, particularly in the area of providing support in alternative forms of care, such as foster care. The need for support during the pandemic was very significant and necessary because foster families fall into the category of vulnerable groups, especially because they provide care for children displaced from their primary (biological) family. In addition to insufficient institutional support during the pandemic, communication with primary families was aggravated, which has had a negative impact on foster children and their needs. The Faculty of Law in Osijek is a partner institution in the Project "Zajedno do doma" (Foster Home for Children), funded by the EU and organized by the World Youth Federation Croatia. For the project purposes, a survey on institutional support to foster families was conducted from August to October 2021. The collected data will be presented and analyzed in this paper, in order to identify the needs of foster families, the relevant forms of institutional support,*

and the difficulties that foster families experience in case of insufficient support. This pilot research on the attitudes of experts and foster careers is a quantitative basis for further qualitative research on foster care in direct contact with foster carers. Based on this research, the authors have developed foster care guidelines, with special emphasis on the challenges of providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

***Keywords:** alternative care, foster care, social welfare, institutions, support, Covid-19.*

1. Introduction

The development of the social welfare system in the Republic of Croatia follows the social changes that have taken place in the last few decades. By opening social welfare centres as institutions which will respond to the needs of the deprived population and contribute to improving the living conditions through advocacy, an attempt has been made to improve the quality of life in society (Šućur, 2003; Dobrotić, 2016). The historical development of services in the social welfare system was aimed at organizing services and developing different forms of care for children. One of such services is foster care, which is identified as a form of alternative care. Different authors explain the concept of foster care in very similar ways. Pecora and Maluccio (2000: 142) explain foster care as a form of alternative care for children and adults, which is defined as the temporary placement of an individual in a foster family due to unfavourable life circumstances. Sladović-Franz and Mujkanović (2003: 234) define a foster family as a family unit that is ready to take care of children who do not have the conditions for adequate upbringing in their own family. Foster care is a non-institutional form of care (accommodation) through which the user is provided with support and care in an environment that is stimulating for the user (Štambuk, Penava Šimac, 2021: 125).

The Foster Care Act of the Republic of Croatia (2022)[1] regulates foster care as a form of provision of social housing services, the conditions and method of performing foster care, and the rights and obligations of the participants involved (Article 1 FC Act). The FC Act points out all the support, assistance and incentives shall be in accordance with the beneficiary's individual foster care plan (Article 2 FCA), i.e. changes in his/her life situation and behaviour, based on a comprehensive assessment of all circumstances (Article 9 FCA). Several participants are involved in the foster care process: the beneficiary, the foster parent, the primary (biological) family, and the social welfare centre as the competent

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1 The Foster Care Act of the Republic of Croatia, *Official Journal RC*, no. 115/18, and 18/22; https://www.zakon.hr/z/485/Zakon-o-udomiteljstvu

institution that coordinates, directs and leads the foster care process. The obligations and responsibilities of all participants in this process arise from the rules prescribed in the Foster Care Act. The social welfare centre is the central hub for foster parents and beneficiaries which coordinates and monitors the entire process. It main tasks during the foster care process is to make decisions on placing a beneficiary with a foster family, to monitor the implementation of the individual plan of change and the needs of the beneficiary, and to provide professional assistance and support to the beneficiary, the foster parent and the primary family (Articles 43-44 FCA).

Research on the foster parents' experiences in cooperation with the centre for social welfare showed their satisfaction. In addition to financial support, social workers provide moral support to foster parents during the provision of foster care services, but it was also noted that they lacked professional support in terms of working with children who have certain difficulties (Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović, Jelača, 2005: 102). The research did not clearly emphasize the dimension of the individual care plan, how it was implemented, and what the monitoring process involved. Individual planning enables the inclusion of all participants in the foster care process: the child who is the focus of the plan, the foster family who carries out the activities together with the child, the primary family who works to obtain the conditions for the child's return to the family, and the social worker as the case manager who coordinates the whole process (Laklija, Sladović Franz, 2013: 15). Jordan (2012: 8) states that social work, as a profession, is in a subordinate position compared to the other helping professions; social workers have a key role in implementing the social policy services and ensuring the exercise of the participants' rights, but they inadequately responds to the needs of vulnerable groups. In this paper, the authors examine the needs of foster parents as providers of an alternative form of care for children without adequate parental care, and what kind of support they were provided by the Croatian social welfare centres as competent public institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic which has affected the whole world, the competent institutions in Croatia issued instructions, guidelines and recommendation on how to act in the new situation. They mainly advised people to reduce social contacts, to keep physical distance, and to avoid mass events, which was sometimes contradictory. The Croatian social welfare centres, as public institutions that acted according to the instructions of the Croatian Institute of Public Health, adhered to and implemented all the prescribed protection measures, which were often not in accordance with the social work ethics. However, in the circumstances of ongoing restrictions and various measures imposed during the pandemic, social workers generated new knowledge that

came to the fore and showed the importance of social work in modern society. A number of studies at the EU level showed the negative aspects of the epidemic but also the positive results in European countries that provided clear guidelines on how to react in certain emergency situations. In most European countries, the social welfare centres were unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic because there were no examples of good practices in the extraordinary circumstances of the epidemic/pandemic, and contacts with users and service providers was limited. In Slovenia, research in social care centres showed that it was necessary to improve the overall working conditions and the working environment for more efficient action in emergency circumstances; social workers should have greater autonomy (e.g. in choosing a work method) and flexibility in work (e.g. going to the field); communication at all levels should be clear (e.g. instructions from the Institute of Public Health) and the work schedule should be fair (e.g. equal responsibilities for all employees) (Mešl, Leskošek, 2021: 248). In different EU countries, the reactions of social workers to the emerging pandemic conditions produced new knowledge and guidelines for further development of the social work profession. Some proposals include developing innovations in the field of social work, providing support to individuals under stress, protecting vulnerable groups (children, adolescents and the elderly), and ensuring the development of digital skills, which were of great importance during the pandemic (Dominelli, 2021: 11). The research conducted in Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bernedo, Oliver, Urbano-Contreras, Gonzalez-Pasarin, 2022) aimed to examine the family's adaptation to the new situation and to identify socio-demographic variables related to stress in both foster and non-foster families. The research showed that foster families had a more positive perception of confinement and isolation. Experts attributed this to the training that potential foster parents go through (communication skills training, conflict resolution, emotion management, etc.). The recommendation of this research is the need for a greater support from institutions regarding the organization and support of contacts between foster children and the primary family (Bernedo, *et al.,* 2022: 63). From all these sources, it is clear that the COVID-19 epidemic revealed the key aspects of working with all participants in the foster care system, some of which are communication with all participants, efficient support and coordination, autonomy of social workers and flexibility in performing their work with all participants in the process.

In the Republic of Croatia, one of the examples of positive practice is the project *"Zajedno do doma"* (Foster Home for Children), which was implemented from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021.. The goal of this project was to strengthen the foster care system and empower young people without adequate parental care, foster parents and experts with professional interests in these groups. The first

part of the project included a series of activities aimed at young people placed in foster families (education, workshops, excursions, etc.); the second part of the project activities included strengthening the competences of experts working with young people placed in alternative care and, finally, their direct work with foster parents. This paper will present the results of research on the experiences of foster parents who participated in this project and their cooperation with the social welfare centre during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Research strategy, purpose and aims of the survey

This research presented in this paper is the result of activities which were carried out as part of the project "*Zajedno do doma*"(Foster Home for Children), which was carried out by the World Youth Federation Croatia in partnership with the Faculty of Law in Osijek and the NGO Association "I*gra*" (Play).[2] The project was financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) Operational Program "Effective Human Resources 2014-2020",[3] and implemented from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021. The project was aimed at supporting foster parents, strengthening the capacity and training of experts and members of foster families, and establishing a program for the empowerment of experts and foster families, as well as the inclusion of children in the local community placed in foster families. An integral part of the project were the activity of providing direct support to foster families, which were carried out for two months. The goal was to empower foster families and identify areas where additional support is needed. Upon identifying the needs of foster families, the project team prepared guidelines and recommendations for improving the practice of foster care in the social welfare system.

3. Methodology and procedures

The research was carried out by using a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research. The research instruments were a questionnaire created for the needs of the research topic, titled "Research on the quality of the foster care system from the perspective of experts, foster parents and people with experience of living in foster families", and a diary (journal) kept

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2   See: Pravos /Faculty of Law Osijek, JJ Strossmayer University of Osijek (2022): Studij Socijalni rad: Projekt *Zajedno do doma;* (Socilal Work Department: Project Joint Foster Home Action); https://www.pravos.unios.hr/sveucilisni-prediplomski-studij-socijalni-rad/projekt-zajedno-do-doma

3   See: European Comission (2022): ESF Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources 2014-2020,*Croatia,* https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/2014-2020/croatia/2014hr05m9op001

during the meetings with foster families. The questionnaire included 9 questions: seven questions required narrative answers for the purpose of identifying respondents' attitudes about difficulties, advantages and recommendations for foster care; two questions called for a response to a statement on a Likert-type scale (by opting for: *I disagree, I mostly disagree, I neither agree nor disagree, I mostly agree, I fully agree),* where the respondents expressed their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements on the basis of their attitudes and satisfaction with foster care and the support provided in foster care. The research was conducted in the territory of the Republic of Croatia in the period from August to September 2021. It included the use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (the research questionnaire and the researcher's diary). All the participants were clearly informed about the purpose and the goals of this research, , as well as about the requisite data protection issues and the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any time due to its voluntary nature.

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase included an open call of the project holder, the World Federation of Youth Croatia, to participants in the foster care system to fill out the quantitative questionnaire, which was prepared in Google form and conducted online. The call for participate was published on the social network Facebook and the project holder website. A total of 57 participants signed up and filled out the questionnaire, where all experts, foster parents and people living in foster care were invited to evaluate their foster care experience and list the advantages and difficulties they faced. The second phase referred to the implementation of direct psychosocial support to foster families; this part of the research was conducted in August and September 2021, by working with five foster families who expressed the need for support and volunteered to participate in this part of the research. The psychosocial support was provided to the families once or twice a week for two months, for an average period of two hours per meeting; ultimately, it amounted to a total of 18 meetings for all five foster families that participated in this part of the research. Meetings with foster families were held online via the Zoom application (N=2), by telephone (N=3), and part of the meetings were held face-to-face (by visiting the family's home). During this phase, the researcher kept a meeting diary, where all the experiences and topics personally raised by the foster parents were indiscriminately recorded. After reading the diaries and summarizing the collected records into common themes, the collected data were analyzed thematically, and the research results were described and presented in a narrative form.

The research aimed to address the following research questions: What were the experiences of foster parents during the COVID-19 pandemic? What were

the advantages and disadvantages of the foster care system <u>in the period under observation</u>? What were the needs of foster parents, and what kind of difficulties did they face during the COVID-19 pandemic?

4. Results

The first phase of the research included a total of 57 (total N=57) respondents in the Republic of Croatia who filled out the research questionnaire, including a total of 37 foster parents (N=37), 15 experts (N=15), and 5 people with experience in foster care (N=5). Respondents were from 16 Croatian counties, while the largest number of respondents were from Brod-Posavina County (N=12) and Osijek-Baranja County (N=8).

The respondents replied to the question about the level of satisfaction with the experience of foster care by choosing the degree of agreement/disagreement with the statement on a Likert-type scale. The results show the difference between the attitudes of foster parents, experts and people with experience of living in a foster family. Most foster parents (65% of the respondents) partially agree with the statement, stating that they were partially satisfied with the foster care experience, while 16% of respondents completely disagreed and expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with foster care. The experts' views were similar to those of foster parents: 20% of experts were completely dissatisfied with foster care, while 47% were partially satisfied. As for people who had experience living in foster families, 60% of respondents from this group stated that they were completely dissatisfied with foster care, 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, while only 20% were completely satisfied.

The results of the respondents' answers to the question about their satisfaction with the support provided in the foster care system show that more than half of the respondents partially agree (46%) or completely agree (16%) with the statement and are satisfied with the provided support. A quarter of respondents (27%) partially or completely disagree with the statement and are dissatisfied with the provided support. Experts expressed the highest level of satisfaction with the support: 40% of respondents from this group partially agree, but many experts neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (33%) and were undecided regarding the support provided in the foster care system. The greatest dissatisfaction with the provided support was expressed by people who have experience living in foster families: 60% of them state that they completely disagree with the statement and are dissatisfied with the provided support.

In response to the question about the positive aspects of the current foster care system, about 80% of respondents refer to the well-being of children, the progress seen in work with foster children, the family environment for the child,

the provision of love and help to the child, and the opportunity for a happy and normal childhood. Part of the respondents (about 10%) do not see any advantages of the foster care system, while even a smaller percentage mentions positive cooperation with social care centres and foster care teams. Some respondents also emphasized the advantage of foster care over children's placement in public institutions for children deprived of parental care, which the respondents see as harmful for the child.

When asked what they would change and what they would suggest for improving the foster care system, the respondents' answers were similar, referring to the need for a greater control of foster care, the recognition of foster parents as employed persons, greater rights of foster parents in terms of making everyday life decisions about schooling, trips, taking a picture of a child at school, etc. Foster parents stated that they wanted better cooperation with social workers, more support when they need it, but also support for children placed in a foster family. They see support through greater involvement and availability of social workers, formation of mobile teams just for foster care and adoption, and group work with foster parents. In terms of support, they emphasized the importance of continuous and always available assistance. All of them declared that they wanted a partnership relationship with the competent institutions, as well as a greater connection with the local administration and the community. Almost all respondents noted that education and training were the key elements in the process of preparing for foster care, as well as continuous education of both foster parents and the general public. They also noted that the need for continuous education of the primary family and continuous work with the family to create the conditions for the child's return to the primary family. In particular, foster parents expressed a belief that they were stigmatized in the society, perceived as people who receive monetary compensation for their services from the state, and take the child away from the primary family; therefore, they emphasized that they wanted more participation in the foster care system and greater respect from the institution.

When asked about the potential for developing foster care in their own community or county, about 20% of respondents stated that they did not know what the advantages would be, or that there were none. Most respondents agreed that the tradition of foster care in Croatia constituted an advantage and a potential for its further development, and they also noted the availability of social housing services and human resources in smaller communities. Some respondents stated that the advantages of the community where they live are the availability of all necessary services (such as schools, doctors, experts, etc.) or civil sector associations that provide support for foster parents. The respondents also noted that unemployment, or the unemployment of one spouse, may be the reasons

for their participation in the foster care system, which is perceived as a source of income for foster families.

The second phase of the research was conducted with five families who were provided a systematic and continuous psychosocial support for a period of two months. They voluntarily accepted to participate in this part of the research, and the conversations were recorded in the researcher's diary. The collected results are shown cumulatively under individual topics (below). The first meetings with these foster parent families included getting to know the foster parents, who were given an opportunity to talk about themselves, their foster children, their daily life, the motives for engaging in foster care, and the reasons why the children were placed with them. At the time of the research, a total of 10 children (aged between 1.5 and 18) were placed in five foster families. The foster parents were engaged in the foster care system for a period of 1 to 13 years (7 years on average). Four families lived in a rural area and one family lived in an urban environment. Four foster families adopt younger children, and one foster family fosters only adolescents. The researcher's psychosocial support was provided in the form of conversation with the foster parents, where they personally chose the topics of conversation, asked questions about the topics they were interested in, and talked about their needs, wants and expectations. On the basis of the synthesis and analysis of the collected records, the researcher identified the key common themes for further discussion.

4.1. Foster carers' needs and available support

In conversations with foster parents, it was observed that all of them have a hard time dealing with the emotions related to the foster child, misunderstanding by their immediate environment, or lack of support. After several meetings, foster parents opened up more easily and talked about their feelings and experiences. Part of the foster parents stated that it was difficult for them to cope with the knowledge that the primary family does not take care of their children and to understand the children's parents and their attitude towards the children. All foster parents also had their own biological children, which contributed to the difficulty of understanding the biological parents who do not take care of their children, and which caused anger and sadness in foster parents. All foster parents stated that they tried to connect and maintain the relationship with the primary family because all foster children showed affection towards their biological parents, and because they considered that it was important for children to have contact with their biological parents. Foster parents state that it was important for them to get to know the primary family in order to better understand the child and his/her needs. On the other hand, they stated that it

was the most difficult part of their foster care engagement because they were left to their own resourcefulness in making and keeping these contacts.

Foster parents largely considered that there was a lack of system support. Foster parents reported the feeling of pressure and stress because they sometimes feel that they are alone in the whole process, that nobody is interested in their problems, that they do not receive sufficient support, and that nobody really appreciates and values what they do. The foster parents' emotions were also affected by children's statements which hurt foster parents' feelings, and they do not know how to deal with such statements. All foster parents stated that they sometimes wanted some time and space for themselves, and had the need to be understood and respected. A frequent dilemma of foster parents was related to summer/winter holidays; they stated that they wanted to take the foster children with them but that they often did not have the resources for this. Above all, foster parents reported experiencing the greatest stress at the time when a child arrives in the family, and during the period of the child's adjustment to the foster parent and daily routine in the foster family. At this point, foster parents do not have all the information about the child, nor about the difficulties the child has, and it takes months for the foster parents to get to know the child's condition. The foster parents considered they were partners of the competent public institution and, as such, they expected to receive all relevant information from competent institutions in order to be able to help the child as quickly and adequately as possible. They also observed a wide range of difficulties which children demonstrate on arrival to a foster family, such as: intellectual difficulties, reduced attention and concentration, speech problems or irregular speech, various developed fears, hygienic negligence, or a tendency to promiscuous behaviour. To provide support to children, foster parents expressed the need for e professionals and specialists support f in certain areas, and reported that the social workers or psychologists support in social welfare centres was most often insufficient or completely non-existent. Foster parents reported receiving the greatest support from their own family, neighbours and friends, and from the school professional services.

4.2. Difficulties encountered in foster care during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, foster parents additionally encountered a series of difficulties related to foster children, institutional support, and cooperation with social welfare centres. All foster parents stated that it was much more difficult to work with children during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of their inclusion in the community and socialization. In the period under observation, the entire educational process was conducted online, which was a problem for some children in following classes and completing assignments

due to the lack of computer literacy. Due to imposed preventive measures and restrictions, this period was also marked by the lack of leisure activities, which are an important part of children's life (including foster children) because they help children integrate into society and create new friendships. Foster children's contact with the primary family was also noted as a huge problem because foster parents received instructions from the social welfare centres to maintain contact by using alternative remote communication methods, by phone or online via communication or video conferencing applications. It was difficult for foster children, especially for the smaller children who did not understand why they could not see their parents. Furthermore, the foster parents emphasized that support from experts during the COVID-19 pandemic was limited; there were no opportunities for live contacts, and the overloaded system was difficult to reach either by phone or by email. At the same time, there were no informal meetings of individual foster parents who had previously organized themselves to occasionally meet and exchange experiences. While public institutions were exclusively focused on health protection, the isolation of the family made it even more difficult to work with foster children. Foster parents received recommendations, most often about hygiene rules or contact restrictions, which they had to abide by in relations with others and the foster children.

Discussion

From the total of 57 participants in this survey, the largest number of respondents came from the Brod-Posavina County; according to the data from the "Regional Availability of Social Services in Croatia" analysis (The World Bank, 2019), the total number of foster carers for children in this region is 49, followed by the Osijek-Baranja County, where the total number of foster parents for children is 119. The territorial distribution of foster parents in Croatia is uneven across counties (The World Bank, 2019) but the research showed that the counties where foster care is more developed demonstrated a greater interest in participating in the survey.

A total of 65% of foster parent respondents were partially satisfied with their foster care experience, which is in line with the previously conducted research (Žižak, Koller-Trbović, Jeđud Borić, Maurović, Mirosavljević, Ratkajec Gašević, 2012). The results also showed that 59% of foster parents declared themselves satisfied with foster care and, thus, wanted to continue fostering and would recommend foster care to others. As for the experts' satisfaction, 20% of expert respondents were completely dissatisfied with foster care and 47% of them were partially satisfied with foster care of children in Croatia, which is in line with the results of previous research (Žižak, *et al.,* 2008). One of the reasons for the

dissatisfaction of experts with foster care is the uneven regional distribution of the number of foster parents by county, which makes it difficult for experts to work in the foster care system (Sabolić, Vejmelka, 2015: 30). A high degree of dissatisfaction (60% of the respondents) was demonstrated by people who have experience living in foster families. By contrast, some previous research (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor, Pithouse, Sellick, 2004) showed that children had positive experiences and were satisfied with life in foster families, but also that satisfaction depends on meeting the needs of the foster family, maintaining the child's relationship with the primary family, cooperation between the foster family and the primary family, and the reasons for being placed in foster care (Wilson, *et al.* 2004: 47). Similar results were obtained by Chapman, Wall and Barth (2004) who described the positive attitude of children towards foster care. Johnson, Yoken and Voss (1995) found that children's satisfaction with the foster care system is lower depending on the type of placement and later contacts with the primary family (Johnson, *et al.*, 1995: 967).

In the present research, the results show that more than half of the foster parents (59%) are satisfied with the support in the foster care system, but in further results they state certain difficulties and the need for more intensive continuous support from social workers. Furthermore, the results show that informal support is important for foster parents, considering that all respondents often rely on neighbours, family, or other foster parents. Similar results were shown in a study conducted in Croatia by Sabolić and Vejmelka (2015), where foster parents stated the importance of an informal support network and civil associations, while opinions about support from experts were divided (Sabolić, Vejmelka, 2015: 19). Prior research indicates that the duration of foster care and the foster parents' experience associated with a well-developed informal support network generate less need for support from institutions (Maclay, Bunce, Purves, 2006: 33).

The research results further show that less than half of the expert respondents (47%) are partially satisfied with the support provided, but the same percentage of experts state that they neither agree nor disagree. Experts report that there is a lack of social workers in the social welfare system, especially social workers who would deal only with foster care, which is currently not present in practice. Foster parents state that social workers are often unavailable, but they also noted that they are aware of the social workers' workload. Research by Sabolić and Vejmelka (2015) shows similar results, where the attitudes of foster parents and social workers were uniform regarding insufficient support provided to foster parents. Their research results show that certain foster parents' needs are not met or are partially met, such as: emotional support, conversation, the need to share experiences, advice in crisis situations, a sense of belonging,

and the feeling that they are part of the institution of the social care centre (Sabolić. Vejmelka, 2015: 23). Emotional and moral support for foster parents is extremely important (Laklija, 2011) because people who are satisfied with their own lives and emotionally stable have a greater willingness to help others (Brajša-Žganec, Kaliterna Lipovčan, 2006: 724). Many foster parents note that the feeling of incompetence or insecurity in working with children is significant because it affects the level of stress and their emotional state. MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, Leschied (2006) state that foster parents' feelings of incompetence can be influenced by sources of support such as neighbours or involvement in foster care groups that support each other, which explains the need for foster parents to connect and share experiences (MacGregor, *et al.* , 2006: 365). Similar results were shown in the research conducted with foster parents (Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović, Jelača, 2005), which states that foster parents are satisfied with their relationship with children and coexistence, while they are less satisfied with cooperation with institutions such as the social welfare centre. They show the greatest need for support in creating a relationship with the child's primary family, protection by institutions and recognition of rights, and higher fees for foster care (Družić Ljubotina, *et al.*, 2005: 104). All respondents in the present research noted that foster parents need to be informed about the child and its needs. Foster parents face several child-related difficulties and often do not know how to react or act in certain situations. Herenčić and Mihanović (2006) obtained the same results in their research conducted with foster parents, which indicate insufficient information on the part of the foster parents about the child's difficulties, the child's needs, or the child's potential (Herenčić, Mihanović, 2006: 95). The result of our research show that all foster parents state that they want more frequent visits by social workers and control of foster families. The same results were presented in the research by Žižak (2008), which includes a list of foster parents' suggestions aimed at improving cooperation with social welfare centres.

The needs of foster parents identified in the research results were further neglected during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the social protection system, faced with a health crisis, had a hard time finding ways to make the system functional. The response of the social protection system to the citizens' needs shows that the system was not prepared for a crisis situation of this scale, which was manifested by a decrease in access to social protection services and social care for the most vulnerable groups in the society, such as children, the poor, families and children placed in foster care (Better Care Network, 2020). The results of our research show that it was difficult for foster parents to access social workers and the necessary support, and contacts were possible only by telephone or e-mail. Given the low level of support during the COVID-19 pandemic, foster

parents were even more isolated and felt abandoned by the system. Due to imposed pandemic measures, they could not access the informal support that foster parents developed by networking foster families and occasional meetings. Metcalfe and Humphreys (2002) note that it is important for foster parents to establish contacts with other foster families because in this way they get the necessary information, exchange experiences, and expand their network of social support (Metcalfe, Humphreys, 2002: 442). Furthermore, the support of civil society is important for foster parents, which was weakened during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of resources for work, unavailable users, lack of personnel, and layoffs of employees (Bežovan, Bratoš, Mrdeža Bajs, Baturina, Matančević, Pandžić, 2021: 34). For foster parents, a special challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic was the school attendance of children placed in foster families. In our research, the foster parents state that some children did not have the necessary IT equipment and sufficiently developed IT skills to keep up with the material covered in class and complete the assignments from home. At the outset of the pandemic, the lockdown and complete closure of schools were some of the numerous measures that were instituted for the purpose of preventing the spread of infection. While students attended school online, the greatest difficulties were encountered by already vulnerable social groups, which further increased both educational and social inequalities (Brajša-Žganec, Kaliterna Lipovčan, 2006: 17). Isolation and weaker socialization of children in foster care also posed a problem for foster parents in their work with children, who find it difficult to adapt to a new environment and integrate into the society even in regular social circumstances. Foster families experienced the greatest difficulties in establishing contact between children and primary families, which was prevented and reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contacts were made by phone or via online video platforms. The involvement of the primary family in the life of the foster child is important for the proper growth and development of the child (Thoburn, 2009: 21), while the lack of contact, the rejection of the child by the primary family or a bad relationship with the child negatively affects the foster child (Morgan, Baron, 2011: 29). Furthermore, it is crucial for the child's progress, growth and development to maintain the ties between the child and his/her primary family (Laklija, 2011: 299), and it is necessary to encourage and create conditions for maintaining this relationship. Prior research shows that the risk of failure to foster a child is increased in children who do not contact their primary family (Laklija, 2011: 299). Barber and Delfabbro (2004) confirm in their research that the return of the child to the primary family is associated with making contact while the child is still in foster care (Barber, Delfabbro, 2004: 124).

5.1. Research limitations

The qualitative part of the research was conducted with a small number of participants (N=57). In order to obtain relevant results and interpretation, a larger number of participants is needed so that the results can be generalized, which particularly refers to the people who have experience living in a foster family, and who are the least represented in the research sample. In the qualitative part of research, the convenience sample (five foster families) includes a small number of respondents, which also makes it impossible to generalize the results to the population of foster parents and draw final conclusions. The convenience sample ensured highly motivated participants who voluntarily applied to participate in the research, which reduces the heterogeneity of the sample and the diversification of the results. Yet, the qualitative research contributed to obtaining individual attitudes and opinions of the participants and enabled a deeper analysis, which may ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the researched subject matter. The qualitative research methodology, including unstructured conversations and keeping a diary, made it impossible to focus on the research topic but allowed the participants to create research topics and content, which can ultimately lead to deviations from the research topic. The ethical aspects of the conducted research were satisfied; even though the researcher participated in a qualitative research face-to-face with the respondents, the longer research period (conducted over the period of two months) provided an opportunity to the respondents to gain trust in the researcher and give honest answers.

6. Conclusion

This research has indicated the advantages and disadvantages of the foster care system in Croatia, as an alternative form of care for children without adequate parental care, but it has also pointed out to the potential that should be further developed through this service. The respondents' satisfaction with foster care leaves room for improvement of this system. The most positive emotions are related to foster parents' direct work and assistance to a child who finds himself in a difficult life situation. In that regard, foster parents primarily identify the feeling of benefit and well-being of the child, but they also report on children's notable progress. The time of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore several topics that foster parents often talk about. Some of them are a lack of support from institutions, a lack of contact with the primary family, a lack of knowledge about children who have certain difficulties, a lack of communication with institutions, and a feeling of lesser value in what they perceive as a partnership relationship with the social care system. Most of the these problems that became obvious during the pandemic were almost inconspicuous before the pandemic.

The research also revealed other shortcomings in the foster care system: a lack of communication and contact between the participants in the foster care process, a lack of necessary knowledge about working with children, and certainly a lack of support as the fundamental factor in providing this service. The conducted research opened new questions and space for future research. Some of the emerging questions are: how to ensure the normal functioning of foster care in extraordinary circumstances, and what can be done in terms of ensuring better communication between all participants in this research? The research focused on revealing the shortcomings in the Croatian foster care systems which does not clearly define the financing, coordination and management methods, thus leaving most of the work to be borne by foster parents.

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INSTITUCIONALNA PODRŠKA U OBLICIMA ALTERNATIVNE SKRBI – UDOMITELJSTVO I COVID 19 PANDEMIJA

Rezime

Utjecaj pandemije COVID 19 doprinijelo je novim izazovima u radu institucija soci-jalne skrbi, a naročito u području pružanja podrške u alternativnim oblicima skrbi, posebno za djecu u udomiteljstvu. Potreba za podrškom za vrijeme pandemije bila je itekako značajna i potrebna jer su udomiteljske obitelji u kategoriji osjetljivih skupina, posebice jer brinu i skrbe o djeci izmještenoj iz primarne obitelji. Osim podrške od strane institucija, otežana je bila i komunikacija s primarnim obiteljima što ostavlja posljedice na dijete i njegove potrebe. U sklopu projekta „Zajedno do doma“, u kojem je Pravni fakultet Osijek partner, provedeno je istraživanje o pru-žanju podrške udomiteljskim obiteljima u trajanju od kolovoza do listopada 2021. Analiza prikupljenih podataka obradit će se i prikazati u radu s ciljem identifikacije potreba udomiteljskih obitelji od strane institucija kao i poteškoće prilikom izo-stanka istih. Pilot istraživanje o stavovima stručnjaka i udomitelja o udomiteljstvu kvantitativna je podloga za daljnje kvalitativno istraživanje u direktnom radu s udomiteljima. Na temelju istraživanja izrađene su smjernice za udomiteljstvo s naglaskom na izazove pružanja podrške za vrijeme COVID 19 pandemije.

Ključne reči: *alternativna skrb, udomiteljstvo, socijalni rad, institucije, podrška, COVID-19.*