

Child Protection in Iceland and the role of the Government Agency for Child Protection

Introduction:

According to the Icelandic Child Protection Act, the main objective of child protection is to ensure that children (defined as individuals under the age of 18) are raised in satisfactory conditions. This is to be accomplished by strengthening the nurturing role of the family and by applying remedies to protect individual children when appropriate. The guiding principle of all child protection work should be to follow a course of action which can be expected to prove to result in the „best interests of the child“.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is the ultimate authority in matters of child protection. On behalf of the Ministry, the Government Agency for Child Protection is in charge of day-to-day administration of child protection services. The basic unit for child protection in Iceland is the Child Protection Committee which is responsible for child protection services at the local level. In Iceland there exists a mandatory reporting system in which the public and professionals alike are obliged to notify the local Child Protection Committee if child's welfare is in any way compromised.

Child Protection Services on the Local Level

According to the law, each local authority is required to maintain a Child Protection Committee (CPA) composed of five members. However, the Child Protection Act encourages cooperation between local authorities and joint election of CPA, especially in smaller communities. In December 2008 there are 78 local authorities in Iceland and the number of CPAs is 31. All of the CPAs have professional staffs that are mandated to provide the services and carry out the functions that the Child Protection Act stipulates on a day to day basis.

The CPAs primary functions are to be supportive to the family in accordance with the main objectives of the Child Protection Act. Thus, the Act stipulates comprehensive supportive provisions and measures that children and families are entitled to in order to further the aim of the Act. In cases where it is necessary to remove the child from the home for longer than two months the case is brought to the District Courts with avenues of appeal to the Supreme Court.

In an overwhelming majority of cases, cooperation between the CPA and parents is established for the benefit of the child. There are, however, cases that are not easily resolved. An average of 10- 15 cases annually result in coercive termination of parental rights. Decisions made by CPA that are of a coercive nature can be referred to the Child Protection Appeals Board or the relevant District Court depending on the nature and seriousness of the decisions.

CPA deals with more than 8000 referrals each year. At the risk of oversimplification, these cases can be classified into two groups. On one hand are cases of child abuse and neglect by parents who typically suffer from psychiatric and emotional problems and/or

substance abuse On the other hand are cases where the child her/himself, normally an adolescent, is threatening his/her own well being with self-destructive behaviour, such as alcohol and drug abuse and delinquency.

The Government Agency for Child Protection

The primary role of the Government Agency for Child Protection is to co-ordinate and to enhance child protection work at the local level and nationally. This includes the following:

- a) to provide counselling and support to Child Protection Committees at the local level with regard to family welfare and the management of child protection cases,
- b) to monitor the work of Child Protection Committees, e.g. by collecting and analysing annual reports of the local CPA and by other means to be determined,
- c) to provide specialised services that the Child Protection Committees may need to ensure that children's needs are accommodated
- d) to supervise and monitor institutions and homes operated or supported by the government for children and youth, including a gate-keeping role with regard to out-of-home placement
- e) to assume the responsibility for recruiting and training prospective foster parents and provide counselling with regard to placement in foster care
- f) To support research and development work in the area of child protection,
- g) provide education, training and instruction concerning child protection in general and work procedures in particular

The Government Agency for Child Protection is responsible for the operation of specialized services in child protection. There are two principal categories of services in operation: a child-friendly and interagency centre for investigation of child sexual abuse cases, the Children's House, and treatment services for children and youth, both community based and in specialized facilities.

The Children's House: A Child-Friendly Centre for Child Sexual Abuse

The Children's House is a child friendly, interdisciplinary and multiagency centre whereby different professionals work under one roof in the investigation of child sexual abuse cases.

The basic concept behind the Children's House is to prevent subjecting the child to repeated interviews by many agencies in different locations. Research has shown that when this happens it can be very traumatic for the child and may result in "re-victimization", or the amplification harmful consequences that can be more severe than the abuse itself.

In the Children's House the child is interviewed in a special room by a trained investigative interviewer. The interview is observed in a another room by a judge, who is formally in charge of the procedure, a social worker from the child protection authorities, the police, the prosecution, defence attorneys and the child's advocate. The interview is videotaped and can be used in court at the main proceedings. This arrangement makes it

possible in most cases only to conduct only one interview with the child.

After the interview the child can be provided with medical examination in the on-side medical clinic. The findings are documented by paediatricians through the use of a video-colposcope, state-of-the-art equipment that records the examination on videotape.

The Children's House also provides treatment services for child victims of sexual abuse and their families. A diagnosis is made of the child for therapeutic purposes. Then an individual treatment plan is created.

Treatment facilities for children and youth

The Agency is responsible for five institutions and treatment homes for children with behavioural and emotional problems, delinquency (acting out, criminality) and substance abuse. One of these facilities is the State Diagnostic Centre for Adolescents, which provides diagnosis and short term treatment for youth. On the basis of the diagnosis, a decision is made as to whether the youth can return to his/her family, post-care services to be provided or if the child needs continued out-of-home placement in a long term treatment facility.

The remaining four facilities provide long-term treatment. Typically they are in household settings where professionals live with no more than six children. These facilities are to a certain degree specialized to serve the needs of different types of problems that the children are facing. There is one facility that specializes in substance abuse treatment, one in criminality cases and so forth.

Long term treatment facilities are for the most part in pleasant rural surroundings and some are situated on farms. Besides individual as well as group therapy, a major responsibility is providing education and/or vocational training. Other areas of emphasis are healthy leisure activities such as horseback riding and fishing, as well as participating in farming work or taking on other responsibilities.