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**Situation of disabled persons in the local community. Opinions  
of local government representatives**

**Introduction**

Quality of living of a disabled person, which also means his/her development, largely depends on the shape of the living space, in which he/she grows up. The local community is one of significant elements, which make up living space (cf. S.Olszewski)<sup>1</sup>. Efficient functioning of the local community, with openness to problems of particular persons determine positive functioning and development of all its members.

This dependency has been sanctioned by way of shifting major care about disabled person living in the given local community to local governments.

Among the tasks of the local government defined by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (Chapter II, Article 69 and Chapter VII), the following may be listed: providing assistance in securing existence and educating the disabled persons for work and social communication<sup>2</sup>.

Activities for the benefit of disabled persons are executed by local governments, among others, by co-operation with non-governmental organisations in the scope of execution of public tasks and appointing and providing administrative support for the Powiat Social Board for the Disabled.<sup>3</sup>

Funds for execution of these tasks come from:

- The commune budget,
- The State Fund for Rehabilitation of the Disabled,

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<sup>1</sup> Olszewski S., *Postrzeżenie przestrzeni życiowej przez młodzież z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w kontekście zachowań agresywnych*, Kraków 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The Act of 27 August 1997 on vocational and social rehabilitation and employing the disabled (Dz. U. No. 123 Item 776 as amended).

<sup>3</sup> Legal grounds for the functioning of the Council are regulated in: Articles 44b and 44c of the Act of 27 August 1997 on vocational and social rehabilitation and employing the disabled (Dz. U. No. 123 Item 776 as amended); The Regulation of the Minister of Economy, labour and Social Policy of 25 March 2003 on organisation and procedure for activities of voivodship and powiat social councils for the issues of the disabled (Dz. U. No. 62 Item 560).

- Target programs within PFRON, the European Social Fund and contests organised for execution of public tasks for the benefit of the disabled.

Two factors affect the shape of decisions made by local government authorities in reference to disabled persons and the shape of their execution:

- Objective: defined by the possibilities of local government activities in the given area,
- Subjective: related to the persons, who make decisions and implement them. This factor is made up of questions: who makes decisions, what kind of solutions he/she seeks, whether he/she will have active initiative, how motivated he/she is to undertake specific activities. It is affected by the values professed by decision makers, their knowledge and beliefs in reference to disabled persons.

Due to the above, research programme was initiated aimed at answering the question: what is the situation of disabled persons in the options of local government representatives?

The following issues constituted the subject matter of the interest: knowing the “disabled person” term, beliefs related to the possibilities of disabled persons, attitude to disabled persons, awareness of problems of disabled persons in the local community, ideas aimed at improving the situation of disabled persons in the city, the needs related to execution of these ideas, sources of possible difficulties related to execution of the intended activities.

The research has been conducted based on the tool developed on the basis of the Scale of Attitudes to Disabled Persons by Andrzej Sękowski and the “Disabled persons in the community” Questionnaire by K. Parys and S. Olszewski.

The poll covered<sup>4</sup> 14 persons, who were representatives of the City Council and the City Hall from one of medium-size cities in southern Poland. In view of the data obtained during the National Census (2002), the disabled constitute about 11% of this city’s community. Commercial entities employing the disabled operate in the city, workshops of practical therapy are held, units of special education, integration locations and organisations, associations and foundations are active in the work for the benefit of the disabled.

Among the interviewed, 7 people come from the City Council, and 7 are public officers employed in the Department of Social Policy of the City Hall who handle, among others, problems of the disabled. 6 of them are females, 8 are males. All the interviewed persons are in contact with the disabled.

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<sup>4</sup> The research was conducted under supervision of the direction of the author by Ms Katarzyna Willmann.

## Results

Due to the fact that statements by members of the City Council did not significantly differ from the statements of City Hall employees, therefore the interviewed groups have been analysed jointly.

Analysing the obtained replies, one could find out that all the interviewed persons provided definitions of a disabled person. Most of them paid attention to various aspects of disability (genetic, social, assistance). Only one person provided a statement, which seems to be pretty controversial (“A disabled person is one who does not want to think or work. He/she can only take.”)

Majority of the interviewed (except for three persons) listed the following five categories of disability: the deaf, the blind, people with motoric disability, mentally retarded, and people with psychological disorders. It is significant that half of the interviewed listed also elderly and unemployed people.

The panorama of possibilities of the disabled was obtained by asking the interviewed to take an attitude to several statements.

The interviewed declare the most positive opinion for the statements like “A disabled person may draw satisfaction from his/her job” and “disabled persons should participate in social life on equal level with those fully able.”

The interviewed have some doubts when it comes to beliefs on true nature of the following opinions: “A disabled person should be evaluated by the same measure as those fully able,” “a disabled person may earn his/her living,” “disabled people may have achievements in various fields: sport, art.”

The interviewed present positive attitude to the disabled, though it has to be emphasised that the more generalised statements to which the interviewed were to provide their opinions, the higher unanimity: the positive attitude.

The representatives of the local government were also asked to attempt and specify problems, which the disabled face in the area of the city.

All respondents regard their city as friendly for the disabled. To prove it, they quote the City Programme of Activities for the benefit of the Disabled and undertaking specific activities by city authorities for the benefit of the disabled, these activities being broken down into four groups:

1. Removing architectural barriers (modernisation of traffic lights, lowering curbs, building lifts),

2. Educating the disabled children and youth (running a community centre for children with mental disabilities, repairs of special-purpose locations),
3. Breaking traffic barriers for the disabled (transporting the disabled to education and rehabilitation centres),
4. Social and vocational rehabilitation (additional financing for rehabilitation tours, sport, culture, tourism for the disabled, supplying rehabilitation equipment, financing costs of developing workshops of practical therapy, granting loans for the disabled for starting commercial or agricultural activities, training for the unemployed disabled, refunding costs of salary and social insurance premiums within the programme for adjusting work places for the needs of the disabled).

The interviewed also indicate the fact of publishing “The Information Guidebook for the Disabled” by the City Hall, the publication offering the most important information to make city life easier for the disabled. The guidebook has a list of institutions acting for the benefit of the disabled. This publication includes also the necessary information, which every disabled person and his/her family and guardians should have, related to all kinds of allowances due for the disabled, e.g. in public transport, in taxation, museum tickets, benefits, pension payments, etc. PFRON programmes addressed to the disabled are listed in final pages.

The interviewed representatives of the local government could also indicate examples of organisations and associations acting for the benefit of the disabled or give information, where such a list may be found.

Although the interviewed provided many examples of activities on part of local authorities for the benefit of the disabled, majority of them perceives still unmet needs in this scope and is able to indicate activities, which should be undertaken or continued to improve the situation of the disabled in the city.

The problems, which, according to the interviewed, relate to the disabled in the highest degree, are: problems with finding job, persisting architectural barriers and transport difficulties, residential problems, insufficient financing for organisations focused on the disabled. According to the interviewed, remedies include enhancement of education and vocational qualifications of the disabled (among others, by way of free Internet access), breaking stereotypes related to the disabled in the labour market, creating and co-financing new work places for the disabled and activating the disabled so that they merge with various

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initiatives on one hand, and extending care over special-purpose services, whose task would be to support the “misfit” disabled, on the other hand.

What is an obstacle to make these plans come true, what difficulties should be overcome, according to the interviewed to meet the objectives listed above?

Almost unanimously, insufficient finances are indicated, and some of the interviewed suggest increasing expenditures provisioned in the city budget, while other emphasise obtaining additional financing from external funds.

Another group of difficulties listed by the interviewed includes factors related to attitudes shown by both the disabled and those fully able, especially those, whose decisions may significantly affect the situation of the disabled inhabitants of the city. Some of the interviewed indicate that a disabled person often presents claiming attitudes, passivity related to it and lack of sufficient motivation to change his/her situation.

There is also no lack of motivation on part of the milieu of the disabled, lack of understanding on part of city authorities, apathy of officers executing public programmes and insufficient legal regulations, all these being listed by the interviewed among the causes of the difficulties the disabled face.

Providing proposals aimed at correcting this state of affairs, the interviewed most often limit their opinions to relatively generalised statements (“the disabled should be motivated to being active, changing the claiming attitudes, developing voluntary work, increasing expenditures”). Some of the interviewed indicate that the solutions may come through increasing awareness of local authorities, making them acquainted with problems of the disabled, employing specialists to develop creativity with the disabled, helping the disabled to “strengthen their inner power” and publicising problems of the disabled inhabitants of the city.

### **Final conclusion**

Local authorities, affecting allocation of funds, controlling execution of activities, creating the impulse for undertaking various initiatives and joining them, undoubtedly can significantly co-shape the situation of the disabled in the local community. The conducted research shows that the interviewed representatives of the local government have certain knowledge on the disabled and problems related to their functioning in the community. The closer contacts with the disabled, the more proposals, and the more detailed, are given by the interviewed members of the local government, which is characteristic and at the same time seems to be obvious.

The interviewed declare good will, and there are funds ready for execution of the intents. For the activities to be organised in the most rational way, co-operation is necessary of particular entities: representatives of the disabled, local authorities and non-governmental organisations. Thus, the pursuit to make local authorities acquainted with the issue of disability (seminars, discussions, conferences) seems to be justified, with personal contacts of the representatives of the local government with the disabled possibly playing a special role, as well as learning their opinions and proposals. Obviously enough, it requires developing the beliefs among the disabled that they can affect both the shape and functioning of the local government. Activating this group of inhabitants may in turn make their voice become listened to more closely.

Another direction of activity, significant for the community, is made up of the activities focused on fully able inhabitants, shared activities of the inhabitants in the city, both the able ones and the disabled, presentation of achievements of the disabled, presenting the values, which these disabled people may give in the local community.

The listed activities may also be useful in promoting the local community as friendly to the disabled.

The research conducted shows a rather monotonous image. Thus, it seems important to expand the scope of the research by examining, for example, social perception of activities by the local authorities, by the disabled, their representatives and other members of the local community.

Only then, searching the answer will become reasonable for the question about the role, which the disabled may / should have in the local community. Only then, creating living space conducive for development of every citizen, including the disabled, will become possible.

#### **References**

1. Olszewski S., *Postrzeganie przestrzeni życiowej przez młodzież z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w kontekście zachowań agresywnych*, Kraków 2005
2. The Act of 27 August 1997 on vocational and social rehabilitation and employing the disabled (Dz. U. No. 123 Item 776 as amended)
3. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997, Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa 2005
4. The Regulation of the Minister of Economy, labour and Social Policy of 25 March 2003 on organisation and procedure for activities of voivodship and powiat social councils for the issues of the disabled (Dz. U. No. 62 Item 560).

## **Abstract**

With care about living of disabled persons in the given community being shifted to the local governments, decisions made by local government authorities have become an important factor affecting quality of life of the disabled.

This paper reports the research in opinions of representatives of the local government on the situation of the disabled in the local community. The following aspects have been analysed: knowing the “disabled” term, beliefs related to possibilities of the disabled, attitude to the disabled, awareness of problems of the disabled in the local community, ideas aimed at improving the situation of the disabled in the city, the needs related to execution of these ideas, sources of possible difficulties related to execution of the intentions.

The research has been conducted based on the tool developed on the basis of the Scale of Attitudes to the Disabled by Andrzej Sękowski and the “The disabled in the community” Questionnaire by K. Parys and S. Olszewski.

The text ends with a statement on direction of activities, which could improve effectiveness of the enterprises aimed at creating the most optimum conditions for functioning of the disabled.

## **Sytuacja osób niepełnosprawnych w społeczności lokalnej. Opinie przedstawicieli samorządu terytorialnego**

### **Streszczenie**

Z chwilą przerwania na samorządy terytorialne troski o żyjące w danej społeczności osoby niepełnosprawne ważnym czynnikiem wpływającym na jakość życia osób niepełnosprawnych stają się decyzje podejmowane przez władze samorządowe.

Artykuł zawiera relację z badań opinii przedstawicieli samorządu terytorialnego na temat sytuacji osób niepełnosprawnych w społeczności lokalnej. Poddane analizie zostały następujące kwestie: znajomość pojęcia „osoba niepełnosprawna”, przekonania dotyczące możliwości osób niepełnosprawnych, nastawienie wobec osób niepełnosprawnych, znajomość problemów osób niepełnosprawnych w społeczności lokalnej, pomysły zmierzające do polepszenia sytuacji osób niepełnosprawnych w mieście, potrzeby związane z realizacją tych pomysłów, źródła ewentualnych trudności związanych z realizacją zamierzeń.

Badania zostały przeprowadzone w oparciu o narzędzie skonstruowane na podstawie Skali Postaw wobec Osób Niepełnosprawnych Andrzeja Sękowskiego oraz Kwestionariusza „Osoby niepełnosprawne w społeczeństwie” autorstwa K.Parys i S.Olszewskiego.

Tekst kończy refleksja dotycząca kierunków działań mogących poprawić skuteczność przedsięwzięć mających na celu stworzenie osobom niepełnosprawnym jak najbardziej optymalnych warunków do funkcjonowania.