

Social Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Georgia

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Social Impact of the Pandemic

- COVID-19 pandemic poses not only health, but also social, economic and other challenges to the societies
- Evidence indicates that the impact of the pandemic is disproportionately high on at-risk groups, including older persons, persons with disabilities , children deprived of parental care
- Provision of quality, context specific social services in one of the principle ways to address challenges posed by the Pandemic

Impact on Older Persons and Caregivers in Georgia

- During the “first wave” of the pandemic, Georgia managed to control the situation with a relatively low infection rate, but was not able to sustain this achievement
- The Covid-19 response has been led by the State Interagency Coordination Council chaired by the Prime Minister of Georgia
- A large proportion of older people received additional financial and in-kind support, from the national and local governments, NGOs and international organizations
- This included temporary governmental subsidies to cover utility bills, financial incentives to increase vaccination rates, etc.
- **The Pandemic further deteriorated unmet needs of older persons and their caregivers**

Impact of Covid-19 on Older Persons and Caregivers in Georgia

- *Income and expenses:* ability of older persons to cover basic expenses has decreased despite the uninterrupted provision of the retirement pension and social allowances
- *Health:* deteriorated as a secondary effect of COVID-19 on physical and mental health. Access to health care services became more limited due the lock-down and a shift in focus of health care facilities
- *Social wellbeing and community based services:* Limited provision of social services (e.g. day centers) and weakened social support networks affected older people's social and emotional state, especially in urban areas
- *Access to public services and infrastructure:* limited, often due to the existing digital divide between the young and older generations
- *Ageism and physical and financial violence:* present in all three countries of the region (taboo topic)
- *Residential care:* risks related to higher infection rates and mortality; increased physical and social isolation due to changes in the working regime
- *Home care:* highly aggravated pressures faced by informal caregivers of older persons, the majority of whom are women, posing risks to their physical and mental health and wellbeing

Social Services and Social Service Workforce (SSW)

- A well-supported, appropriately equipped, empowered, and protected social service workforce is essential to mitigating the damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic
- SSW responding to COVID-19 includes government and non-government professionals and paraprofessionals, including community workers, who are carrying out a range of essential promotive, preventive, and responsive roles

Essential Roles of the SSW during Covid-19

PROMOTIVE FUNCTIONS	PREVENTIVE FUNCTIONS	RESPONSIVE FUNCTIONS
Advocating for the social service workforce to be an essential workforce during the COVID-19 response.	Identifying vulnerable individuals and households at high risk from COVID-19; ensure they receive support to help prevent illness, community food assistance and psychosocial support.	Providing protection and support for individuals and families affected by gender-based violence, violence against children or other forms of violence.
Coordinating work in inter-agency and interdisciplinary networks to establish and promote social service practice and service standards.	Working with community leaders to identify community needs.	Identifying family-based alternative care options for children who are abused, separated, orphaned, or when required to leave residential care or detention centres.
Educating: creating and running information campaigns to keep communities safe and reduce stigma.	Providing remote psychosocial support , via phone/online, for at-risk individuals and families.	Carrying out case management processes of assessment, planning, service delivery and coordination of referrals.
Training: providing remote training and mentoring to the social service workforce on practice adaptations.	Reinforcing gatekeeping mechanisms to support effective and exclusive targeting of services to specific end users.	Providing psychosocial support in cases of acute emotional distress.
Managing: ensuring supportive supervision is provided and services are adapted.	Identifying and responding to those at higher risk of violence (such as children, elderly, persons with disabilities and others) via hotlines.	Providing material support, food and medicines to impacted households and vulnerable individuals.
Monitoring and staying up to date on the pandemic and protocols to keep staff and communities safe.	Carrying out contact tracing to identify individuals at risk of COVID-19.	Arranging alternative care for children who have lost family care.
		Enabling access to cash transfers , both existing and emergency, for families in need.
		Providing bereavement counselling and enabling COVID-19-safe alternatives to traditional funerals.

Source: Global Social Service Workforce Alliance

Essential Roles of the SSW during Covid-19

- Providing direct assistance and psychosocial support to individuals, families and communities
 - Enabling access to services and advocating for the most marginalized and vulnerable
 - Supporting individuals and families, protecting children, especially during school closures
 - Building resilience of individuals, families and communities
 - Providing public information and raising awareness
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- The qualified social workers and paraprofessional social service workforce has faced an increased workload and more complex cases (physical & mental health crisis, surge in family violence, loss support networks, and loss of family members)

Recommendations of the State of the SSW

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:

- **Recognize the workforce as essential** and prioritize access to PPE/vaccinations.
- **Recognize, support, and develop policies** to enable integration between the full range of social services that the workforce provides.
- **Earmark funding and resources** for capacity building of workforce in readiness for future emergencies.
- **Develop and provide technological infrastructure** and cover costs.

ORGANISATIONS & ASSOCIATIONS SHOULD:

- **Develop guidelines/tools** for safe, ethical service delivery during COVID
- **Provide trainings** on the covid-specific emergency response, use of new technologies, self-care...
- **Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration**, networks, and partnerships.
- **Monitor the well-being of workforce and volunteers**, offer ongoing psychosocial support, and limit individual caseloads to manageable levels.
- **Leverage and build on existing technology.**
- **Prepare for rapid surge** in emergency response when needed (training, stipends, supervision, skill development).
- **Document and disseminate** experiences.

Examples from Georgia on Supporting the State Social Workers during the Pandemic

- Special pass during the curfew
- Prioritized access to PPE/vaccination, free of charge PCR testing
- New guidelines and tools for the emergency response
- On-line training for all statutory social workers on social work in emergencies and during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Support on the use of the new technologies for teleworking
- Attempts to strengthen on-line professional supervision and staff support
- Ongoing strengthening of case management system
- Guidance on guidance note on the roles and responsibilities of social workers in responding to the life-threatening infection and self care tips
- Rapid assessment of the challenges and needs of social workers
- Online information hub (Georgian Association of Social Workers)
- Monitoring on the implementation of the Law of Social Work, 2019

References

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