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## **Sapport: advocating independent living for disabled people**

A major concern faced by parents of disabled persons is the uncertainty of what will happen to their children when they are no longer there for them.

Back in August 2001, the Supported Living Division was set up within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services of the Social Policy Ministry with the aim of establishing principles, values and strategies to be adopted in providing services to disabled persons and their families, mainly by addressing this major concern. The division was assigned with the responsibility to specifically address disabled persons with severe challenging behaviour, disabled people at risk of institutionalisation, young disabled already living in institutions due to lack of alternative accommodation, and those in great need.

The main strategy adopted was to provide disabled people with support rather than care, so that they would be able to achieve independence to the best of their ability, continue living within the community and receive support as and when required.

Therefore when the division became an agency in February 2003, it was only natural that it should be called Sapport.

In the words of Sapport's chief operations officer Marcel Pisani, the first 18 months were very dynamic, exciting and stressful for all concerned. "Not only did we have to visualise and set up a structure for the agency, draft service strategies, embark on a recruitment exercise, draft policies and procedures; we also had to implement all that was put on paper into action."

At its best, independent living - a concept which Sapport strives to put into practice - calls for the development of personalised support in the form of personal assistance services, based on need and provided in settings of one's choice.

The residential service became Sapport's core service, and with the ultimate aim of independent living in mind, the agency set out to identify residences based within the community and possibly housing just a few persons within each unit.

The housing models adopted were based on anticipated client needs and the available resources. These presently include a Housing Authority apartment in the Fgura housing estate housing three clients, a Housing Authority apartment in the Kirkop housing estate housing four clients, a purposely-built (government-owned) bungalow in Mtarfa housing six clients and Residenza Vajrita in Marsascala. The latter, a government owned former holiday complex, had to be restructured into 12 flatlets and houses 28 clients. The agency also administers an agreement between the Social Solidarity Ministry, the Gozo Ministry and the Arka Foundation which provides six clients with a residence at Dar I-Arka in Gozo.

A lot of hard work had to be put into all the units before introducing clients to their new homes. The Housing Authority units had to have bathrooms/showers installed and furniture and furnishings put in. The Mtarfa bungalow had to be completely rebuilt and the Residenza Vajrita restructured from the original 30-bedroom holiday complex to 12 flatlets. All this work was carried out in a relatively short period of time and as they were completed the units started accepting the first clients. The first residents moved into the Fgura apartment in November 2002 and by December 2003 all units had been converted and were being lived in.

While structural and furnishing works were being carried out in the residences, the clients who were to move in were going through person-centred planning in order to identify needs and devise individualised plans, establish their compatibility with the persons identified to share the units with them, and to determine the length of transition required from their previous abode. This assessment depended largely on their acquired skills, their disability and their behaviour.

Most residents required transitional programmes of between two to six weeks; others, due to the challenge their situation presented, took up to one year in transition. Today there are 40 clients in all living in Sapport residences and another four clients residing at Dar I-Arka.

The support set-up for the residences is composed of one residential supervisor per residence together with a number of support workers who work on shift basis 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Staffing ratio varies and depends on the individual needs of the clients residing in the particular residence. All clients are classified for support services as requiring either basic support, or intermediate support or intensive support for those clients who require one-to-one attention.

SUPPORT's residential clients are also supported through its Resource Team, a team of professionals with a degree related to the disability field, consisting of supervisors and professional support workers. The supervisors ensure that the services are running in line with the agency's mission statement. They therefore ensure that the rights of the clients are being respected, their quality of life is enhanced, and provide members of staff with training, supervision and direction.

The professional support workers assist the residential supervisors in tasks such as staff scheduling and staff meetings, relate directly with clients on their daily programmes and accompany clients for professional appointments when required. The Resource Team also provides an invaluable support to Agency Services through a 24-hour daily seven-days a week on-call system.

The residential clients are also supported by the Agency Social Work Team who advocate for clients when so required and support them also in their social requirements, such as difficulties with their disability pensions or placement in an Adult Training Centre.

The residential service has helped to improve clients' quality of life. However it is neither realistic nor recommended to offer such a service to all disabled people. As explained earlier, the maxim is to offer the possibility of independent living without removing the disabled person from the residential setting of one's choice. This is especially recommended if the disabled person has the opportunity to keep on living within the natural family. Thus SUPPORT, ever conscious of this need, embarked on the provision of Community Services.

This strategy was intended to support the disabled person in the family environment and in the community to which s/he is used to, while at the same time giving all available support and consultancy to the family as a whole in a bid to ensure that the disabled person will continue living within his/her natural family for as long as possible. Such a strategy ensures that the less recommended residential placement will only be sought when all else fails.

SUPPORT provides two types of community support: namely personal assistance and intervention. Personal assistance provides direct support to help disabled persons with activities of daily living at their home, workplace or in the community, where and when needed. The agency is presently supporting 26 clients through personal assistance, totalling 199 hours of support per week.

Intervention, on the other hand, provides skills teaching and training to help disabled persons develop skills related to activities of daily living and communication both at home and in the community. The agency is presently supporting 32 clients through intervention, totalling 184 hours of support per week.

These services are provided by a team of support workers aided by SUPPORT's Resource Service and directed by a community supervisor.

Apart from supporting residential clients, SUPPORT's Social Work Team also works with the agency's community clients. Support and consultancy is also offered to all other disabled persons and their families who do not necessarily need the residential or community services of the agency. The principal aim behind the Social Work Service is to help disabled individuals acknowledge and gain their rights as citizens and exercise them fully. The Social Work Service believes that society will enrich itself even more through the participation and contribution of disabled individuals, and therefore strives hard so that such participation occurs.

The Social Work Service responds to all the service requests within 24 hours and through assessment, short-term and/or long-term interventions works to meet the desired objectives of the client and his/her family/carer. The active situations being addressed by the Social Work Service is constant, dealing with an average of 228 situations per month.

One of the problems that was addressed at an early stage was the method by which people could be referred for the agency's services and how clients would be prioritised to receive services. For this

purpose a Service Allocation Committee (SAC) was set up in February 2003. The aim of Sapport's SAC is to ensure a non-discriminatory and non-preferential procedure in the allocation of services through a semi-independent committee.

Sapport acknowledges the work that each of its employees is contributing towards rendering professional services, and appreciates the fact that many employees have owned with great responsibility its vision and committed themselves to enhancing the quality of life of agency clients.

In line with the Foundation for Social Welfare Services' commitment to provide professional services and ongoing development opportunities for the staff within all three agencies, Sapport acknowledges that in order to expand, develop and succeed in providing high quality services, it has to ensure that its entire workforce is committed, competent and motivated.

In order to enhance the competence and commitment of employees, it provides them with the opportunity to participate in training programmes, seminars and conferences that promote individual and team skills development thereby ensuring that the performance of the agency's employees is of the highest standard. Furthermore, in order to sustain the motivation of its employees, Sapport puts in practice policies and procedures that acknowledge their work and their achievements including the upgrading of their skills and competences.

Staff within Sapport's Community, Residential and Resource Services are presently all undergoing a training programme whereby, through the professional input of a competent and qualified psychologist, they are helped to process case studies of situations they encounter on a daily basis in residential and/or community services and as a team devise new strategies on how to deal with similar situations.

Moreover, to ensure that employees within Sapport adopt an approach based on agency values in line with policies and procedures, Sapport provides regular policy training to its employees.

Sapport employees also participate actively in training and seminars organised by other entities and by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services

Finally, Sapport, ever conscious of its significant role in the day-to-day life of its clients, has set up the Sapport Abuse Review Team in order to guarantee that clients' needs are being sufficiently and suitably addressed and that clients' rights are protected at all times. Such a formal structure, at such an early stage in the agency's development, puts clients at the very centre of Sapport's remit ensuring quality service and client accountability at all times.

Sapport: putting across the concerns of disabled people and their carers

Mr Pisani explained how in a bid to be effective in its field Sapport keeps abreast with the prevailing disability issues and the needs of disabled persons in today's society. "If we were to look at the concerns of parents and carers, foremost on their list would be the uncertainty surrounding the future of their children once they are no longer there for them," he said. "This potentially serious situation can be aggravated by over-protection towards the disabled siblings. Such a situation inhibits the disabled persons from developing skills rendering them less independent than they could actually be with the consequence that they will carry their acquired limitations throughout their life."

Another concern for Sapport is the attitude and mentality of society at large. Although there is no doubt that things have improved drastically over the last 20 years or so, the stigma and lack of knowledge and confidence in the capability of the disabled is still a major stumbling block for the disabled to find their rightful place in society. This can be seen clearly when disabled persons attempt to seek employment. Generally they find it very difficult to obtain jobs and when these are made available they seldom take into account the full potential of the person.

Accessibility is another issue which denies this minority group its proper dignity. Physical accessibility is at times inexistent and when this is taken into account measures are taken half-heartedly and at times do not meet minimum standards or requirements. To mention but a few examples: ramps are often too steep, disability access doors are kept locked and primary access to lifts is sometimes inaccessible.

"Within the framework of society's attitude and mentality one can say that there is still lots of work to be done for the disabled and some of their behaviours (especially those of the intellectually disabled) to gain social acceptance," Mr Pisani said. "Society needs to be judged in this respect with how much effort is being put into trying to open up ourselves to the disabled, giving them the opportunity to grow as persons and full members of society."

"We can only do this if we look at their potential rather than their impairments; protect them from discrimination, injustices and abuse; giving them the privacy and space that they deserve; respecting their dignity and above all permitting them community presence and participation that is so essential for the wellbeing of any individual," he concluded.

"No one wants to live in institutions away from family, friends and the culture that one would have known. It is the right of disabled persons to live and participate in the community," said Foundation for Social Welfare Services CEO Joe Gerada. "The Equal Opportunities Act reinforces the equal rights of disabled persons and therefore society has a legal obligation to ensure that this happens in practice. The responsibility does not rest with government alone, although government should continue addressing the expressed needs of disabled persons who should be encouraged to be the prime movers and who are undoubtedly the main stakeholders. We are all responsible to support disabled people in securing their rights, and this includes the families, the education authorities, the housing authorities, the social welfare authorities, local authorities and most importantly civil society at large which can be a motivating factor at local level to assert the rights of disabled people in the local communities, he said. "Sapport," said Mr Gerada, "works collaboratively with both the other agencies within FSWS, namely Appogg and Sedqa, and other entities outside the Foundation to fight existing barriers and adequately address the rights of disabled persons as full members of the Maltese society."

Sapport strives hard to provide support for disabled people who want to achieve independent living; to support their families and other persons who have the life of a disabled person at heart in order for them to be in a better position to support him/her; and finally to advocate on behalf of the disabled in a bid to provide support to the rest of the Maltese population which still needs to strive to provide a supportive community for those among us who have a disability to feel at par with everybody else - as is only to be expected in the 21st century. On the first two points the agency has been more than successful, achieving so much in such a short time. For its third remit, a commitment by one and all is required. Are you ready to accept Sapport's support?

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