

STATEMENT
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Delivered by: SOS Children's Villages Finland

Child and youth participation in decision making in the health and social services reform as well as in services provided and timely and appropriate kind of help for young people

Honorable representatives of the Permanent Missions, it is a pleasure for me to address this assembly to present issues on children's rights in Finland. I am here to share information on behalf of Finnish children and young people, especially those in vulnerable situations. I come from a non-governmental organization SOS Children's Villages Finland and its Youth Development Team, which is a group of young people who all have experience in child protection services.

Our statement addresses two issues: (1) Child and youth participation in decision making in the health and social services reform and in child protection services provided in Finland and (2) Timely and appropriate kind of help for young people.

The first one addresses child and youth participation in decision making, especially in foster care services and the importance of informing young people of their rights about social services when in foster care. This is crucial, because these decisions can define their whole future. It was pointed out during the previous review, that Finland should ensure that children are heard in the judicial and administrative procedures concerning them, in accordance with procedures adapted to their maturity.

Since the previous review, the Finnish National Child Strategy has been prepared. Hearing young peoples and children's voices as well as strengthening youth participation has been largely talked about during the preparation process, and it has also received more attention generally in society. In practice though, participation of young people is not very strong in decision making within health and social services. Aims of the new social and health care services reform are good, but there are many possible stumbling blocks: it might increase bureaucracy and the families in the most complicated situations might struggle even more in between different service providers.

Recommendations

We encourage Member States to recommend that the Government of Finland:

- *Take measures to ensure that children's rights and child-friendly policies are also at the center of health and social services reform, so that children and families in*

vulnerable situations are not excluded and benefit from high-quality services.

- *Ensure active and meaningful participation of children and young people, especially vulnerable groups, in the implementation of health and social services reform by involving them in the planning and provision of services. In this regard, collaborate with and support civil society organizations working with and for children in vulnerable situations, such as children in alternative care.*
- *Take concrete steps to make legal protection practices for children and young people clearer, more accessible and more effective as part of the health and social services reform, to ensure that children, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have easy access to legal protection services and are adequately informed about them as well as their rights within social services provided.*

The second issue is the lack of mental health care services in Finland for young people. The society is unable to provide enough accessible help for mental care issues and instead many young people who need mental care services are taken into foster care.

During the previous review it was also pointed out, that Finland should develop and introduce specific measures directed at improving professional training for the staff of children's institutions and improve the legislation and practice in the provision of psychiatric treatment. Finland has not been able to answer these needs. In children's institutions more trauma and mental health training for the personnel would be needed. Also, in psychiatric treatment there is a lot to improve. For example, more knowledge about gender diversity should be provided to professionals in child protection and welfare services as well as in mental health services.

Young people also feel that some of the mental health issues stems from pressures placed on young people in schools and overall in society. The pressure is to "always do your best". Resources for dealing with failure and not having to achieve everything to be accepted and valued are very limited.

Recommendations

Regarding the second issue we encourage Member States to recommend that the Government of Finland

- *Focus resources on accessible and available services and protects vulnerable groups, such as children in alternative care and children in families with challenging situations, during the implementation process of the health and social services reform.*
- *Provide high-quality social services and mental health services as well as use quality indicators and impact assessment criteria in policy development and decision-making*

when making procurement decisions regarding child protection and wellbeing services.