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The support provided by Polish municipalities in the implementation of family assistance

Abstract

The Act on Family Support and Foster Care System was introduced in Poland 10 years ago. Accordingly, this seems to be the right time for an assessment of the level of organisation and funding of social services in terms of supporting families with a child by the Polish municipalities.

This article aims to depict the development process of family assistance in Polish municipalities. Empirical research focuses on the opinions of family assistants regarding the support provided by borough authorities and the management of organisational units of social assistance where they are employed.

The results of the research showed that family assistance in the form of a supportive and educational activity, with a high organisational level and good working conditions – as outlined by the original concept – is implemented only in some areas. The care and control approach to work, together with functional assistantship based on simple activities meeting the basic needs of families, are increasingly enforced on family assistants by the management. The aspirations of assistants – who form a professional community – to apply the therapeutic dimension of assistantship are being squandered. The Polish municipalities lack sufficient funds to employ adequate numbers of family assistants.

Keywords: social services, family assistant, family support

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Introduction

A social service is assistance provided in an area defined in social policy as the “social sphere” (e.g., family support) of an intangible nature. Such assistance is granted as part of a support relationship by individuals with appropriate qualifications (Janoś-Kresło, 2002). The definition of social services encompasses assistantship, as it is a comprehensive activity of providing assistance while maintaining a professional relationship. The essence of assistantship is finding solutions adapted to the needs of the individual and participating in their implementation within the living environment of the client. The basis of this method is the cooperation between the assistant and the person receiving support, founded on the exchange of ideas and the building of mutual trust. The assistantship method is aimed at providing both psychological and personal support. Family assistants seek the resources necessary to overcome the existing challenges. They demonstrate how to navigate through the intricate maze of various types of procedures, institutions or new ways of responding to everyday situations. They help rebuild social ties and explain how to take advantage of the available cultural goods. Family assistance should be understood as individual assistance targeted primarily at solving the specific problems of family members, inspiring them to believe in their abilities and motivating them to undertake activities which, until then, they considered impossible. The assistant’s role is to help change the attitude of marginalised people (or families that are still providing childcare but which are in crisis) towards their own empowerment, to increase their sense of power over their lives, and to improve their self-esteem (Jacków, 2008; Słowik, 2008; Krasiejko, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2021). The activity of family assistants has been called social and educational work as it comprises activities relating to improving the social and living situation of families, raising children and enhancing the skills of adults. Furthermore, it is centred around the values and goals of upbringing (Krasiejko, 2010, 2013, 2016; Kantowicz, 2013, Ciczkowska-Giedziun, 2020, Głębocka, 2021). The profession of family assistant was introduced by the Act of June 9, 2011 on Family Support and Foster Care System ([Polish] Journal of Laws, no. 149 items 1111 and 924). The recipients of services provided by family assistants are families with children that are in need of support in fulfilling their care and educational functions. Research and practice show that these are most often families experiencing chronic crisis and a high number of interlinked problems, at risk of having their children removed to foster care or those with an offspring already in foster care (Krasiejko, 2013).

In line with its definition, the implementation of family assistance is a considerable task. Family assistants must possess appropriate personal qualities and methodological competencies. Building motivation in service recipients to change the behaviour judged by society as dysfunctional is exceptionally challenging. Moreover, family assistants work in a bureaucratic system, inside a network of various interconnections between institutional representatives with their own rules of operation and expectations of families. The level of service delivery is also dependent on the financial resources of the borough, the organisation of work within the social assistance institution and the level of cooperation between institutions.

Development of family assistance between 1990 and 2012

Polish families facing difficulties in fulfilling their care and educational functions began to receive support in the 1990s. In non-governmental organisations, social assistance centres and powiat family assistance centres, people were being employed or moved within the structure of the institution to positions given such names as family coach, social worker for multi-problem families, or family assistant (Krasiejko, 2010, 2011). Boroughs which set up the first innovative projects in regard to family assistance declared the support of local authorities for their implementation. Appropriate conditions were also created for the functioning of family assistance (Rudnik, 2011; Guć, 2011; Krasiejko, 2010). Family assistance teams comprised employees excelling in their community work. Nonetheless, the management made efforts to recruit specialised staff for the tasks and provide them with training (Krasiejko & Krauze, 2010). Work standards and documentation templates appropriate to local needs were also created. In order to provide in-depth family situation diagnoses and the necessary multi-dimensional support, one family assistant was assigned to 1–10 families. For example, in 2010, the Municipal Social Assistance Centre in Bydgoszcz employed 37 assistants to cover 43 families. On average, one assistant supported one family (only three assistants had two families under their care). The situation in Koszalin was similar (two families) and Częstochowa (two to seven families) (Rudnik, 2011, pp. 31–32). In the case of the Municipal Social Assistance Centre in Częstochowa, family assistants were tasked with providing support only to families with children. It is difficult to say what it was like elsewhere, as family assistants were initially employed to implement systemic projects based on civil-law agreements. Therefore, providing assistance to families could have been their additional employment.

Family assistants were not without support in carrying out their new tasks. This role was performed by the project's coordinator, methodological consultant or the department head at the Municipal Social Assistance Centre. Regular meetings with assistantship team facilitators covered the recruitment and diagnoses of families, planning of actions to be undertaken with families and their implementation. Such meetings were also devoted to solving day-to-day difficulties in the work conducted with the families and motivating parents to cooperate with family assistants. Other topics of consideration included the documentation mandatory for each assistant (Krasiejko, 2010; Rudnik, 2011). This documentation aimed to play an educational and supportive role, although it also featured elements of supervision.

The work of family assistants formed part of the priority activity of urban social policies, in particular, in relation to the equalisation of opportunities for people at risk of being socially excluded and those already socially excluded. Additionally, research carried out at the time (Krasiejko, 2010; Rudnik, 2011) pointed to managers of family support centres as initiators or those who had a favourable attitude towards introducing new models of community work, focusing on ensuring that children were brought up in their natural environments. Those in charge of social assistance centres saw assistantship as an opportunity to undertake effective actions with and for the family and, thus, reduce the number of children placed in foster care. Initially, the main aim of assistantship projects was to reduce the number of children placed

in round-the-clock care every year (Łangowska, 2011, p. 16). Not without significance was also the economic gain resulting from the reduced number of children in childcare and education centres and the deteriorating media image of social assistance as being unable to cope with what was happening in the families or, conversely, as wrongly taking children away from their families (not because of violence but the so-called “poverty”) (Szarfenberg, 2011).

Dobroniega Głębocka (2020) sees the development of family assistance in 1990–2011 as both a rebellion of “knowledge”, signifying the disagreement of some of those providing social assistance services with feigned action and the social costs of such practices, and a rebellion of “elites” (including therapists, social workers and consultants in social assistance), centred around defending family values and protecting the family ties, as objectives for the support granted to families manifesting care and educational dysfunctions that are present in the discourse but often overlooked in practice. Innovators proceeded to challenge integrated complexes of cultural rules (procedures, institutions and roles) as well as some rules of basic axionormative systems (custom and morality).

A factor favouring the introduction of family assistance was the emergence of opportunities for social assistance institutions to create and implement various systemic projects. Most of the projects in which assistants were employed were of this specific nature (Rudnik, 2011), for example: “Rodzina bliżej siebie” (Eng. Family closer to oneself) in Gdynia, “Krok do przodu” (Eng. One step further) in Bydgoszcz, “Systematycznie do celu” (Eng. Systematically, towards the goal) in Gdańsk, “Od wykluczenia do usamodzielnienia” (Eng. From exclusion to self-reliance) in Elbląg, “Pomoc – aktywizacja – wsparcie” (Eng. Help – mobilisation – support) in Poznań, “Pomocna dłoń plus” (Eng. Helping hand plus) in Koszalin, “Rodzinne ABC” (Eng. Family ABC) in Głucholazy, “Z rodziną mogę więcej” (Eng. With family I can do more) in Warsaw – Praga Północ. Only selected social assistance centres decided to finance the work of family assistants using their own funds from the Municipal Office (e.g., Częstochowa) or funds obtained from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (e.g., Koszalin and Olsztyn). Of considerable importance was also the possibility of financing these projects from the European Social Fund and the European trends towards combating poverty, counteracting social exclusion and active integration, etc. These slogans can be found in the names of the systemic projects under which that assistantship was implemented, for example, “Od wykluczenia do usamodzielnienia” (Municipal Social Assistance Centre in Elbląg), or “Integracja społeczna szansą na lepsze jutro” (Eng. Social integration as a chance for better future; borough Kowale Oleckie). Moreover, the success of one centre in implementing this form of family support was an incentive for other facilities. It can be estimated that even before the introduction of the Act on Family Support and Foster Care System, there have been several hundred assistants already at work.

Family assistances carried out in different towns and institutions differed in terms of their organisation and methodology. This points to the diversity and innovativeness of approaches guided by the same aspect – the need to introduce multi-dimensional and individualised family support that is accommodated to the potential and needs of a particular borough (Krasiejko, 2010; Rudnik, 2011). The project development

process within individual facilities was usually turbulent, as the work piloted had an innovative character. However, the majority of those implementing this service indicated that family assistants should work with families having children differently than the professionals previously appointed to this role. Their work was to focus on the education of parents and the accompaniment of family members in the performance of household and family-related tasks, while the basis of the methodology was to be a relationship based on support and non-directive working methods. The family assistant was often referred to as a “family friend” (Krasiejko, 2010, 2011, 2013; Rudnik, 2011).

The debates on family assistance that were ongoing at the time² focused on the opportunities and threats to the development of the concept. The advancement of family assistance was stimulated by the needs of the environment, or rather the need to respond to social problems resulting from the political and economic changes of the 1990s, the desire to provide genuine assistance to families in crisis and the children in such a family, and the willingness to implement ways of activating the families to make them self-reliant. Employees of social assistance institutions were also disgruntled with the clerical and superficial pattern of working towards quantity rather than quality, being aware of the low efficiency of their work (Łangowska, 2011). The possibility of being granted EU funding to subsidise the activities of social assistance centres was also quite relevant. These additional funds made it possible for the assistants to carry out good quality work with a small number of families. Family assistance also opened up the possibility or a kind of space needed for the implementation of conventional social work activities, which derived from humanitarian and democratic ideas based on the respect for equality and diversity, the dignity of all people and the hope and belief in the possibility of changing every human existence for the better (Józefczyk, 2011; Krasiejko, 2013). Family assistance in itself was a crucial constituent of modifying the family support system by separating social work from cash benefits. It enabled the performance of qualitative, full-scale work with the client by extending working hours and the frequency of client meetings. When properly carried out in terms of methodology, assistantship facilitated the adherence to principles relevant to professions which focus on the provision of assistance, such as respect for human dignity, individualisation of the assistance provided, maximising the client’s self-determination, using the client’s own resources, and bolstering the client (Krasiejko, 2011, 2013). Even if there was no economic gain, i.e., the cost of assistantship would be the same as the cost of looking after children in childcare and education centres as well as in foster care and in paying benefits to families, it would still be socially advantageous to pursue an active solution. It is more beneficial both for the borough as a community and the individual concerned. Caring for a person through benefits at the expense of public institutions usually leads to the individual’s dependence on the social assistance system. Assistantship activities aim at empowerment so that family members can live as full-fledged members of society (Guć, 2011). Michał Guć (2011) noted that effective support could not be restricted only to the bilateral relationship between

² For example, at the Conference “Assistantship – an impulse for self-change” held in December 2009 in Gdynia.

the assistant and the person being mentored. In his opinion, the key to effective impact is surrounding social assistance activities with an environment that supports positive change. It is impossible to successfully remove individuals from the social assistance system without engaging their natural environment, i.e., family, neighbours, NGOs or parishes. Assistantship has to operate within a social context. Only the involvement of the individual's environment in the assistantship activities gives a probability that the impact and the changes achieved will be sustainable. The ideal situation is when the influence of the environment is headed in the same direction and demonstrates a coherent objective with the actions of the individual being mentored that are undertaken in cooperation with the assistant.

Those in charge of implementing assistantship in 2011 were also aware of threats to its development. The first such threat could have been the loss of funding from the European Social Fund and financial effort that is insufficient to implement the provisions of the new act. Family assistance can be at risk of its compulsory, coercive and superficial nature, the lack of understanding of the range of nuances that the concept of assistantship conceals, the lack of preparation of staff or a low level of such preparation. This work can also be undertaken by random individuals and their institutional training inspired solely by financial gain. Factors that reduce the effectiveness of family assistance may include a low level of organisation of the assistantship service, the recruitment of families in need of care rather than activating forms of assistance, or working too long with families unable to benefit from such efforts. Another such aspect is the expectation of rapid results from the assistant's work with the family (Guć, 2011).

It has been noted (Józefczyk, 2011; Szpunar, 2011) that family assistance itself may also carry risks through the need for in-depth diagnostics of the situation within the environment, the large amounts of time devoted to assisting, the depth of the relations created between the party in need of support and the assistant, the requirement for the assistant to be both the creator, the initiator of change and its participant, the ambivalence inherent in the professional role, i.e., the insolubility – experiencing dilemmas in various professional situations, dealing with conflicts of interest, confidentiality issues, lack of resources, and many more. These hazards include occupational burnout, the dependence of individuals on a thorough support system, loss of professional distanced judgement, and the blurring of boundaries in relationships. The assistantship implemented half-heartedly – without ironclad methodical consistency, supervision, the dimension of teamwork as well as constant monitoring, and evaluation may lead to negative consequences for families, the person providing assistance and the social assistance system itself (discouragement of service recipients, professional burnout of employees, negative social opinion, and repairing damage through more expensive forms of assistance). It was also pointed out (Żukiewicz, 2011, p. 10) that family assistance is an intervention of state (self-government) institutions into the sphere of human (family) freedom through the introduction of external factors (albeit with the assigned intention of supporting and improving the conditions of the everyday existence of families). For this reason, the changes proposed in Poland required due consideration in regard to their implementation and high substantive and methodological competencies of family assistants, so that “the legal and organisational solutions

created in the name of *supporting families* did not serve to implement the methodology of oppressive actions” (Zukiewicz, 2011, p. 10).

Implementation of family assistance between 2012 and 2020

The appointment of family assistants, pursuant to the Act on Family Support and Foster Care System ([Polish] Journal of Laws, no. 149 item 887) in 2012, was an optional task carried out by boroughs. The employment of family assistants became mandatory from January 1, 2015; however, the number of boroughs employing family assistants amounted to 93% in 2020. The number of family assistants was increasing year on year, from 2,105 in 2012 to 3,934 in 2019, to decrease to 3,824 in 2020 (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej, 2023).

The act has imposed a number of different tasks on the family assistant. These include helping the family to solve its social and psychological problems, taking part in social and professional activation and motivating parents and children to take advantage of various forms of support and integration. Therefore, it is not just education and emotional support but assistance with official matters, monitoring and remedial actions. As mentioned by Głębocka (2021), some functions of social workers, who until then have considered themselves specialists in family support at the local level, were challenged by the legislator. Their roles of diagnosticians, family educators, resource and mental support providers, as well as intermediaries between the school (or other institution) and the family, were questioned. The objective of replacing “ineffective” social workers with potentially “effective” family assistants positioned the two professional groups in a situation of needless confrontation (Głębocka, 2021). These animosities continue to this day. At present, it is the family assistants who envy social workers their allowance for extra holiday, fieldwork and bonuses on the occasion of Social Workers’ Day. They complain about poor cooperation, being bossed around by social workers, being commissioned to carry out other people’s tasks, or insufficient involvement in work performed with families with children.

Apart from several clauses in the act and the regulation on the training of candidates for family assistant, there were no uniform guidelines for the role. The environment was not prepared for the introduction of the service. Work standards and documentation templates were created thanks to bottom-up initiatives. Family assistants working in the same region exchanged their materials and ideas. The manual entitled *Metodyka działania asystenta rodziny* (Eng. Methodology of a family assistant’s activity) (Krasiejko, 2010) was used in staff training. Only in 2016, the Ministry published a manual entitled *Asystentura rodziny – rekomendacje metodyczne i organizacyjne* (Eng. Family assistance – Methodical and Organisational Recommendations) (Krasiejko, 2016) and, following the introduction of the Act on Supporting Pregnant Women and Families, also training materials.

For many years, the Ministry obtained funds from the state budget to subsidise the positions of family assistants (2012–2019). In 2012, a special *Ministry programme for supporting the family and the system of foster care for 2012–2013* was created, followed by the *Family assistant and foster care coordinator programme*. Money was also

provided for this purpose from the Labour Fund. Unfortunately, it was not known how long this financing would be provided for. The Ministry initially mentioned a period of three years. At the end of each year, the managers of social assistance centres which benefited from the programme did not know whether there would be money available to extend contracts with family assistants. In some cases, ministerial programmes were launched around June, and the money came in late. As a result, some boroughs experienced an interval in the provision of family assistance, and those employed in the previous year on a fixed-term contract or on a contract for service had to look for other employment. The results demonstrate a lack of continuity in working with families and changes of assistants attending the same families, which cause the families to show resistance to yet another person accessing their personal affairs. This increases the time spent working with one family.

Article 17.2 of the Act of June 9, 2011 on Family Support and Foster Care System ([Polish] Journal of Laws, no. 149 item 887) provides for two types of flexible forms of employment. The work of a family assistant may be performed within the framework of an employment relationship under a task-oriented work schedule or a service provision contract to which the provisions relating to a contract for services apply. While making the working time of family assistants more flexible seems justified, as they should be able to visit families in the afternoon in order to meet parents who work during the day or children attending school and accompany family members on errands that cannot be done by 3 p.m., employing family assistants under a contract for service has many negative consequences. Above all, the flexibility of the civil-law contract has become a tool for cutting expenditure on the implementation of family assistance. The low costs of employing staff in this manner are more beneficial for both boroughs and employers. However, this is at the expense of employees, as employment under a contract for services means that they cannot take paid holidays, receive any allowances (such as a bonus, 13th salary, allowance for clothing or cleaning products) and take advantage of the Company Social Benefits Fund (which offers holiday subsidies, loans, hardship benefits, Christmas gifts, sports cards and tickets to cultural events). Employment under a contract for services is associated with job insecurity (Krasiejko, 2016).

It can be seen from the table above that, compared to 2020, the year 2021 shows a slight increase in the expenditure of boroughs related to the financing of the employment of family assistants. More than a half of the family assistants initially working in 2013 were employed under a contract for services. This began to change in 2017, when the Ministry decided to give priority under the *Family assistant and foster care coordinator programme* to boroughs employing family assistants exclusively under an employment contract in the process of obtaining funds from the state budget. The employment rate based on this form of employment grew in the subsequent years.

The salary of family assistants, typically oscillating at the level of the minimum wage, is not adequate for the level of education, competencies as well as the multitude of tasks and responsibilities entrusted to family assistants. As a result, there is high staff turnover (currently 40% on a nationwide level), with poor working conditions and professional burnout cited as the most common reasons (Krasiejko, 2022).

As the number of family assistants increases, so does the total of families using their services – from 18,947 in 2012 to 41,096 in 2020. The average number of families per

Table 1. Quantitative data on the introduction of family assistantship

Assistants and families in 2012–2020	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of family assistants	2,105	3,012	3,393	3,816	3,905	3,976	3,920	3,934	3,824 ¹	3,786
Percentage of boroughs where family assistants are employed	46.5%	69%	79%	93%	94%	94%	93%	93%	92%	91%
Amount of state budget resources (targeted subsidy and from the Labour Fund)	PLN 17,300	PLN 30,000 ²	PLN 57,900	PLN 52,400	PLN 52,400	PLN 62,700 ³	PLN 52,500	PLN 49,100	PLN 4,400 ⁴	PLN 5,600 ⁵
Amount of borough's own resources allocated to employ a family assistant	PLN 14,12 ⁶	PLN 24,284 ⁷	PLN 29,863 ⁸	PLN 59,690 ⁹	PLN 66,826 ¹⁰	PLN 87,107 ¹¹	PLN 86,593 ¹²	PLN 98,035 ¹³	PLN 153,832 ¹⁴	PLN 169,969 ¹⁵
Resources from other sources (including the European Social Fund)	6,959	7,096	5,095	no data	4,761	386 thousand	1,909	5,241	11,757	11,153
Percentage of assistants under employment contracts (with the rest employed under civil-law contracts)	1,068 (approx. 50.7%)	1,584 (53%)	1,955 (58%)	2,548 (67%)	2,913 (75%)	3 251 (82%)	3,327 (85%)	3 379 (86%)	3 318 (87%)	3,291 (87%)
Number of families receiving support from family assistants	18,947	31,503	37,876	41,739	43,390	44,748	45,483	44,324	41,096	43,188
Number and percentage of families obliged by the court to cooperate with an assistant	693 (3.6%)	1,521 (4.8%)	2,368 (6.2%)	3,477 (8.3%)	4,568 (10.5%)	5,469 (12.2%)	5,464 (12.0%)	6,956 (15.7%)	7,932 (18.09%)	9,167 (21.2%)

¹ 2.8% less than in the previous year; ² an increase of over 110% on the previous year, more than 66% of assistant posts were financed from the state budget; ³ including from the Labour Fund for the implementation of assistantship under the *For life* Act; ⁴ only an allowance in the form of a bonus for working in pandemic conditions; ⁵ only a one-off allowance; ⁶ 36.8% of total expenditure; ⁷ 35.51% of total expenditure – an increase by 72% on 2012; ⁸ 32.16% of total expenditure; ⁹ 54.1% of total expenditure; ¹⁰ 53.8% of total expenditure; ¹¹ 59.2% of total expenditure; ¹² 59.3% of total expenditure; ¹³ 64% of total expenditure; ¹⁴ 93.2% of total expenditure; ¹⁵ 93% of total expenditure.

Source: own compilation based on Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej (2023)

family assistant amounts to eight in practice (according to the provisions of the Act, the maximum is 15). Families use the services of the family assistant for more than a year, sometimes as long as 10 years. This is due to a large number of long-term, interconnected family difficulties, including those linked to parental disability. There is still a limited number of women with pregnancies at risk and families with a child with a disability who, according to the provision of the Act on Supporting Pregnant Women and Families *For life*, which has been in force since 2017, would make the assistant a coordinator of the services to which they are entitled.

The visions of the early implementers of the service have come to fruition. In many parts of the country, family assistance has taken on a role that is caring, controlling and interfering in the lives of families. Often, it is not so much a service aimed at parents or the family as a whole but an action to protect children (Krasiejko, 2022; Kamińska-Jatczak, 2021; Ciczkowska-Giedziun, 2020). On some occasions, this takes place under the banner of providing support (Krasiejko & Świtek, 2015). Assistantship was originally intended to be a voluntary form of granting assistance at the request of the family. However, there is a noticeable increase in the number of individuals referred to family assistants by courts: in 2012, it was 6%, and in 2020 – more than 18% of all families with whom the assistant worked. The rate of this increase is influenced, among others, by the introduction, based on the Act of March 18, 2016 to amend the Family and Guardianship Code ([Polish] Journal of Laws 1964, vol. 9, pp. 77–85), of a guarantee that a child would not be placed in care solely because of the poverty of the parents. This measure is applied only after all family support tools have been exhausted, i.e., also, after making use of the work carried out by the family assistant.

Data collected by the Ministry show that in about 45% of families, cooperation is terminated due to the results achieved. However, about 30% of parents decide to discontinue working with the family assistant. This is most often caused by the reluctance of the parents to an institutional representative interfering in the family's affairs. Families end the cooperation when they feel that the family assistant requires them to do things that they are not ready for at that particular moment, things they do not need, or things whose meaning they do not fully understand.

Support for the implementation of family assistants' services by borough authorities and institutional managers – perspective of the family assistants

In the last quarter of 2021, I conducted a study of the opinions of family assistants on the current state of family assistance and the calls for changes to the Family Support Act (Krasiejko, 2022). One of the study's objectives was to collect, analyse and describe the opinions of family assistants on the activities of borough authorities and the management of social assistance centres in regard to family assistance. The subject of the research were the opinions and declarations of family assistants on the conditions of their work created by the management and local authorities. My research was conducted by means of a diagnostic survey method, with the use of an online questionnaire. A total of 1,546 family assistants took part in the study, representing 40.3% of all family assistants employed in Poland. The study comprised 43.4% of family assistants with working

Support from borough's authorities

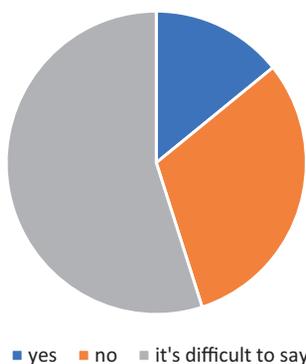


Diagram 1. Percentage distribution of answers to the question on whether borough authorities support the development of family assistance

experience of 1–5 years and 42.7% with working experience of 5–10 years. As many as 9.9% of those surveyed were new employees, and 4% were assistants with the longest work experience of over 10 years. The family assistants taking part in the study performed their work: in an urban setting – 42.6% of respondents, in a rural setting – 32.3% of respondents and in an urban-rural setting – 25.1% of respondents. Those participating in the study represented both large and single-person assistant teams. The largest group of respondents – 41.1%, carried out the responsibilities of a family assistant single-handedly in the borough. Small teams of 2–5 people made up 38.4% of those surveyed. Large teams were not as frequent, with those of 6–10 people accounting for 11.7% of respondents and those of more than 10 people accounting for 8.8%.

The Ministry has for many years (from 2012 to 2019) obtained funds from the state budget to subsidise the positions of family assistants. The intention was to demonstrate to borough authorities that spending money on employing family assistants was a worthwhile cause, as their work brought tangible results – fewer children are being taken into foster care, which generates savings in financial resources and social costs. Diagram 1 demonstrates how the boroughs' involvement in the development of family assistance is assessed by those who implement it.

Only 14.9% of the family assistants surveyed³ are of the opinion that borough authorities care about family assistance. As arguments supporting the efforts made by borough authorities, the study participants cited retaining the position of family assistants and finding financial means when subsidies from the state budget for salaries and in-service training for employees were discontinued. Examples of the respondents' statements:

³ Please note over 1,400 respondents participated in the survey carried out in 2021. The quotes provided below include the selection of the most appealing answers.

Financial means guaranteed in the budget for the performance of a family support task and the implementation of a borough family assistance programme.

Funds are secured in the borough budget for the remuneration of assistants, as well as for training to raise professional qualifications.

Respondents positively assess the adjustment of the number of family assistants to the existing needs. In order for the family assistants to apply the principle of individualisation of work, the number of families they work with should be between 5 and 10, not the statutory 15. Some boroughs succeed in maintaining the original work organisation standards, as demonstrated by the following statements:

They ensure an appropriate number of assistants.

They hired another assistant.

Employment of three assistants, reduction in the number of families to approx. 10.

Any family requesting the support of a family assistant will receive it. Six people are employed in the role; when someone leaves or goes on maternity leave, another person is sought.

The borough provides employment for a larger number of family assistants in social assistance centres so that these assistants are not burdened by the excessive number of families in need of help.

The family assistants surveyed are also positive about the allocation of funds by boroughs for their participation in training, supervision, conferences, bonuses as well as workplace equipment. Examples of the respondents' statements:

Family assistants' working conditions are similar to those of social workers (except for additional leave and allowance for fieldwork) – they receive bonuses, use a company car, and have their own workstation at the social assistance centre.

Employment contracts, fairly good pay, lots of full-time positions, training, conferences, and supervisions.

Respondents also point to various support measures on the part of borough authorities available in their daily work with families, as well as those leading to the expansion of infrastructure targeted at delivering social services. Here are some examples of statements made by the respondents:

I can count on support in terms of transporting the material goods acquired with the family and on the assistance of a lawyer employed by the Borough Office.

We have the opportunity to run a Family Club, which helps families to develop socially. This is funded from the borough budget.

They provide additional accommodation facilities.

Among other things, municipal authorities help to expedite the allocation of temporary accommodation for those in need and provide assistance in the search for solutions to problems.

As many as 32.4% of the respondents believe that the borough in which they work does not favour the development of family assistance. The main arguments quoted were the elimination of posts due to a reduction in financial resources available and the low funding allocated for the remuneration of family assistants. Examples of the respondents' statements:

One family assistant for 5,000 residents. So many needs and work is not taken seriously.

There is only one assistant for the entire urban and rural borough. I use my own car, and I don't get an allowance for fieldwork.

The number of families who need the support of an assistant is increasing, while the municipal authorities wanted to find savings by making one assistant redundant.

Only one assistant is employed for the entire borough, although there are so many necessities. Sometimes we have to compel the families to stay together so that the borough does not have to cover the cost of keeping a child in a children's home. The borough does not increase the funds designated for the salary of the family assistant.

I use my own car; the flat rate I receive is low. Despite my higher education, the salary is the lowest in the borough.

I have been working as a family assistant for three years and have had my contract renewed every two to three months for the past three years, sometimes with a gap of a month or three months as a result of insufficient funding.

Low salaries, lack of people willing to work, the people who work with families constantly changing, treating the family assistant as an inferior employee – with fewer skills, no privileges and additional tasks of a social worker.

Part-time work, excessive duties, fuel allowance calculated per mileage instead of a fixed sum for fuel, lack of support – all carried out as a sole entrepreneur. I'm under the impression that the borough considers the family assistant a bit of an unnecessary expense that they would be happy to dispense with.

I've been working since 2016, and I still have a part-time position because they still raise the argument that an assistant is not needed full-time.

No appropriate remuneration or bonuses. The allowance from the Ministry for the assistant in 2020 was treated as a bonus.

Family assistants also highlight the lack of or limited resources for the work carried out in the field. Examples of the respondents' statements:

Lack of funds for commuting to families.

There are no resources allowing an assistant to travel with a mother and her disabled child to the town to see a doctor for a diagnosis.

There is also a lack of resources for professional training, which would include training courses and supervisions. Some of the respondents' statements:

Giving an explanation that there are insufficient funds for training, overlooking the fact the borough has a family assistant.

We often exceed the limit of families, and no one verifies this; there is no psychological support, no supervision, and no one from the local authorities "notices" the profession.

There is a lack of opportunities for development or taking advantage of advisory services.

The respondents also complain about the low level of or lack of multi-professional cooperation and a small number of institutions and services supporting families with children in the borough. Moreover, the role of the family assistant is misunderstood, i.e., considered a profession with a care and control function rather than a supportive and educational function. The assistants complain about the low prestige of their profession. Examples of their statements:

There are no institutions or entities that provide assistants with support.

Poor facilities or, in fact, no facilities at the local level.

(...) as soon as the possibility of collaborating with another institution arises, support in the matter is denied. The authorities do not know what assistantship is. For them, it's an unnecessary employee that they have to maintain.

I believe that we are not appreciated and supported by the borough. Courts treat us as probation officers appointed to supervise families, and there are more and more court orders issued which state: limiting of parental authority by working with a family assistant.

Very poor cooperation with school, police, courts; most institutions do not know about the existence of the family assistant. Very often, they have their own vision of my work and responsibilities.

If things happen in the family, it is the assistant who is to blame; we have no way of defending ourselves.

The local government and the management of the Municipal Social Assistance Centre worry most about tables, figures, statistics and that nothing bad (that could be of interest to the media) happens. A person – an employee – doesn't count.

To sum up, it is worrying that the majority of family assistants feel that the community authorities do not make efforts to develop support for families in their local environment.

The diagram below shows the opinions of family assistants regarding the support for the development of family assistance by the management of social assistance centres, NGOs, day care centres, family support centres, and social service centres, i.e., places where family assistants are employed.

Support received from the management

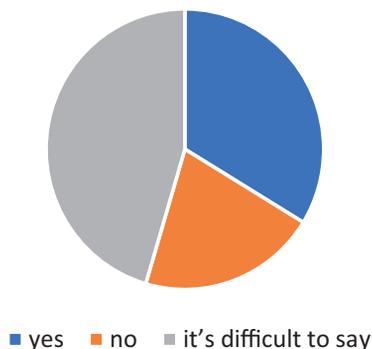


Diagram 2. Percentage distribution of answers to the question of whether the management of the institution employing the family assistant supports the development of family assistance

As many as 33.5% of the family assistants surveyed are of the opinion that the management supports their professional development and cares about their working conditions. Among the activities strengthening family assistance in the institution, the family assistants mentioned: the ability to participate in training and supervisions, substantive and emotional support in difficult situations with families and appropriate organisation of the family assistant's work. Examples of the respondents' statements:

We have a team created, a manager of our own. The management tries to make sure that we have similar working conditions to the social workers; our posts are stable.

The manager of the social assistance centre is always standing by to support and help the assistant and is always there to offer advice. The manager also ensures that the assistant attends training courses.

The head of the day care centre is well-versed in family aspects, remains in regular contact with the assistants, organises bi-weekly meetings, supervisions and training courses, and motivates upskilling in the form of postgraduate studies and external training. Our head was the initiator of a support group for the day care centre staff, which is still active today. The group provides us with advice related to our work. It gives us support.

The work with families is carried out in close cooperation with the units working with families, as well as our own through cooperation with the centre's staff and extensive support given by the management. It is then possible to ensure such support measures, which are designed to provide a comprehensive range of assistance to families in difficulty.

The manager is always interested in my work. I asked her several times to accompany me on a visit to a family, and she never refused.

They offer advice; I am treated very well. For example, just like other employees, I receive a uniform allowance, cleaning products, and a bonus on the occasion of Social Worker's Day.

We undergo training; we are supported by our boss who we can consult on difficult cases; our boss corrects the attitudes of social workers so that the assistant deals mainly with care and upbringing issues instead of everything and alone.

Provision of training courses, materials needed for the work, support in problem-solving.

Training workshops, interdisciplinary meetings, salary supplements equivalent to those of social workers, supervisions and the option of receiving individual support from a psychotherapist.

Providing the ability to participate in training, reimbursement of travel expenses to get to families, provision of business equipment (phone, laptop).

We receive a salary supplement – the same one that social workers get. We are sent on training courses – and it is the workplace that covers the costs. We work under an employment contract based on a task-oriented work schedule – in line with the Labour Code.

The opportunity to participate in training both to improve professional competencies and to update our knowledge with regard to the upcoming changes.

The opportunity to consult on actions taken and to discuss the more difficult cases with management. Encouraging and enabling participation in training, opportunities for supervision.

One respondent appreciated the opportunity to implement innovative projects and group activities. This is evidenced by the following statement:

The advancement of family assistance is supported through the introduction of innovations, additional activities for families and the work of assistants on the basis of a solution-focused method.

From the above statements, it is evident that family assistants appreciate the actions of their superiors regarding the care taken of their working conditions and work organisation as well as the emotional support given and advice on how to help families. It is also important for them to build cooperation between institutions and observe a clear division of tasks between the family assistant and the social worker.

The questionnaires included statements by 20.9% of those surveyed stating a lack of support from their immediate superiors in carrying out their professional tasks. Poor working conditions and excessive bureaucracy were most often cited as supporting arguments. The respondents pointed to the lack of funds to cover the commute to families and auxiliary educational resources as well as the lack of office space. Some examples of the statements provided:

The management does not care about the employees. They do not seek to improve working conditions. The management is actually adding to my responsibilities. I have completed family therapy and the first degree in Solution Focused Therapy – how about support groups? However, that would be on the same terms as before, i.e., part-time and with the same salary of PLN 1,080. More training bought with your own money means more responsibilities from the management. No appreciation, no respect for the dignity of the profession.

Great emphasis is placed on the accuracy of the documents. We have this saying: if you have to choose between contact with a client and taking care of documents, choose paperwork.

No allowances for fieldwork, no special allowances. No additional leave, no adequate fuel reimbursement. Lack of training. There is more and more paperwork to fill in, and people forget that our job is to support and help the family rather than prepare endless documentation.

Looking at my salary, i.e., the national minimum wage, it is safe to say that the authorities are doing nothing for the family assistant. Nor does anyone mind that employee rotation is very high when it comes to family assistants.

The manager of the social assistance centre does not want to employ the assistant under a contract of employment, but only based on a contract for service; the manager also does not want to agree to the assistant's participation in training.

The family assistant is left out of meetings, important events, supervisions, and treated as the lowest in the hierarchy of the social assistance centre.

For a long time, I didn't have my own workstation, desk, or computer, and during the pandemic, I had to work from home because I was afraid I would infect staff with something I picked up from the field. I earn PLN 2,400 per month, which I consider an insufficient salary for taking responsibility for 14 multi-problem families.

Assistants also complained about excessive control:

The management does not take us seriously; they expect us to account for our working time, they call our clients and check how much time we spend there and what we talk about. They permanently give us additional duties from other departments. They treat us as if we didn't do anything, making us guard the front door and serve petitioners during the pandemic.

The centre is busy adding the necessary documentation in order to wield control over the assistants and maintain its sense of security. The authorities of the Municipal Social Assistance Centre have no idea about our work. The result is a shortage of people working in our profession (pitiful salaries, high demands and very demanding responsibilities).

The respondents pointed out organisational shortcomings, e.g., in the division of tasks between family assistants and social workers. They also indicated the management's lack of knowledge or understanding of the specifics of the family assistant's methodological activities. Here is a selection of statements:

Too many families and inability to devote enough time to them – due to lack of time. The lowest possible salary and the lack of allowance for fieldwork are an insufficient reward for the enormous amount of work performed by the assistant, also often on behalf of other services. Lack of economic motivation due to lack of career advancement prospects, lack of development and supervision opportunities.

The family assistant is expected to be the caregiver, the policeman of the family. Instead of real family support, we are expected to exert control. The manager and social workers say to the assistants how to work, expecting immediate results. Assistantship is about working with people; it takes time and patience.

The management of my social assistance centre treated the assistant as an informant and told the assistant to supervise, control the families and report every stumble.

As part of their work at the centre, assistants are expected to perform the duties of a social worker. The family assistant works alone in the community. I receive no support from the social worker; I perform the social worker's duties. This situation has not changed for many years, even though working with families over the years has become harder.

They treat you like a spy.

The authorities are actually restricting our ideas in our work with the families and try to persuade us to adopt a more official attitude towards the families and their needs, which I disagree with.

Too much office work and documentation to fill in leaves little time for genuine work with the family.

Stop treating the family assistant as the person responsible for every failure in the family. Equal treatment – also financial – with social workers. Treating the assistant as a person who is to teach families something, to educate them, to have time to organise workshops for families and children, and not just to focus on the constant creation of notes, for which there is never enough time.

The lack of support from managers results in feelings of loneliness and the fear of making a mistake, which can lead to professional burnout. Examples of the respondents' statements:

I'm left to fend for myself; no one is interested in my work; they just make demands. I often feel that I am expected to be all-knowing in my work.

My superiors, despite verbal and official written reports, have no idea what I face in the field and how difficult these people really are.

The lack of support, opportunities for development, and motivation to work, the enormity of tasks, too many families, being told to stop working with the family because there are other families in need.

Nobody is interested in me, in what I do, when I do it, and where I am. I work full-time, and I am left out of all the events at the social assistance centre, training courses, etc. They only like to listen to me when there are some happenings going on in my area. I didn't have a desk and or a computer for five years.

The lack of understanding, lack of help, adding obstacles to our work, low pay, having to use our personal cars, dumping nonsensical tasks on the assistant, regulating the assistant's work according to their own needs, billing work time according to what other employees are bothered by, making lots of phone calls to the assistant during home visits and a whole lot more.

The social assistance centre authorities have excessive expectations in terms of the results of the assistant's work.

The assistant seems to be only responsible for the family. You have no support, and instead you always obtain information that you are working badly, the method of working

with the family changes constantly, most often by the previous arrangements made with the management being negated; the assistant is even blamed for child protection measures.

Despite more than 10 years of providing family assistance, some of the family assistants interviewed admitted that their managers did not understand what assistantship should be and expected rapid changes in the functioning of people with low cognitive skills and suffering from post-traumatic disorders and those who had no social support or role models in looking after children on a daily basis.

The statements of the respondents point to a recurring error regarding the organisation of work, causing quantity to translate into quality of action, which gives mediocre results. Here is one such statement:

The excessive number of families with multiple problems (15 families) means that there is not enough time to support everyone in solving their problems.

To sum up, most family assistants complain about the conditions of their work in the social welfare centre and the lack of understanding of their role by the management staff. Family assistants were also asked about the turnover of assistants in the institutions where they work. The results of this part of the study are unsettling. Staff changes not only have a financial cost in terms of having to train another employee but also a social cost, such as the breaking of assistant relationships with families or the lack of continuity of support for families with children.

In more than half of the institutions there are family assistants resign from their posts. According to the respondents, the most common reason are poor working conditions. In addition, there is also a sense of professional burnout. Factors associated

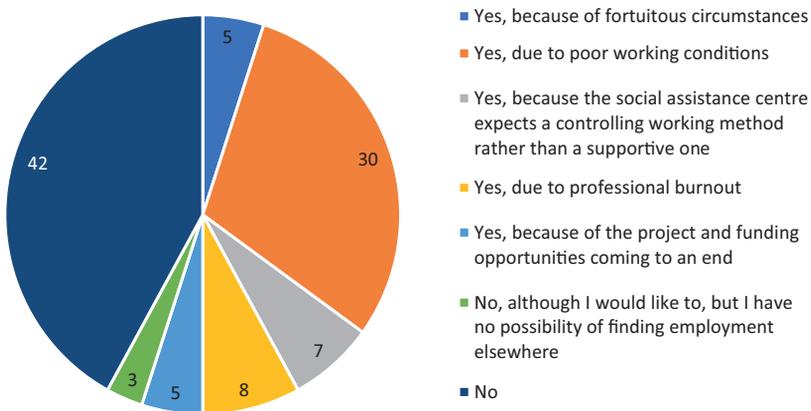


Diagram 3. Staff changes in regards to family assistance in the institutions employing family assistants – answer to the question: “Is there a high staff turnover in the institution where you work, i.e., do assistants quit their job often?”

with family assistants leaving their positions include not being able to fulfil the mission of supporting families and the closure of the position.

Family assistants also complain about the low prestige of the profession, the lack of understanding of their role and the lack of opportunities for advancement. Examples of the respondents' statements:

The director does not care about increasing our wages; more and more people are getting laid off, there are a lot of vacancies, so the limit of assisted families is increasing once you add the stand-ins.

A profession that is needed and with potential, but with this attitude of governmental and local authorities towards assistants, this profession is doomed to extinction as there are not enough people willing to practice it. Assistants are the most undervalued profession there is.

I think we are the least appreciated group of employees at social assistance centres. The responsibilities of social workers and probation officers are shifted to us.

It's an underestimated profession. Thanks to our efforts, children have the chance to stay with their biological family, which saves money for the boroughs because they do not have to subsidise foster care.

In the town where I work, the family assistant is also seen as a supervisory and controlling body of the family, which is not compatible with my vision of assistantship. Our work is just as hard and important as that of other people working with families, yet it is still not appreciated. Many people working with assistants still do not know what family assistance is and what tasks the family assistant should perform. Another important fact is the salary. I, as a family assistant in a large voivodeship town, earn the national minimum wage, while the path to promotion is very short and involves very little profit. It may be worth leaning towards standardising the salaries of assistants.

Sometimes I have the feeling that the assistant is treated like a cure for all evil, a miracle worker. Texts such as: after all, there was the family assistant, when something bad happens, they make a person feel like they can't go on any longer.

We are treated like a cure for all evil, we are tasked with the dirty work, and our wages are at the lowest possible level. Family assistants enjoy low professional prestige; we are often treated like cleaning ladies and babysitters, while we often have higher education degrees and a lot of professional experience.

Many of the professionals I work with are completely clueless about what I should really be doing. More often than not, the assistant is assigned the role of controlling the family rather than supporting it.

Family assistance is one of the most underrated professions. Nothing positive is said about assistants in the public sphere. We are only mentioned when something bad happens in the family. The public perceives us in a negative manner. A family assistant is supposed to work with a family for three years; unfortunately our work sometimes goes on for eight years!

It's a beautiful idea, but the low salaries, the lack of commitment of social workers to work together, the burden of responsibility for things beyond your control – it all clips your wings.

Conclusions and recommendations

Supporting families through assistantship is considered by its practitioners as a worthwhile idea, and it can contribute to improving parents' child-rearing skills and their household management skills, strengthening the bonds between family members. An additional expected success is the integration of individuals and families into social life by enabling them to regain control over their own lives (Krasiejko & Imielińska, 2011; Miller, 2011). However, if family assistance is organised inappropriately and implemented at the lowest possible cost, then this noble idea becomes a pipe dream. Assistants feel overworked, depleted and undervalued, as was demonstrated in the statements of those interviewed. Highly competent people decide to leave their jobs or retrain. They apply for positions of social workers or specialists (educators, psychotherapists). The presented results of the research conducted on a large sample of family assistants were previously confirmed by other studies (Krasiejko, 2013, 2016; Zborowska, 2017, Ciczowska-Giedziun, 2020; Kamińska-Jatczak, 2021). Family assistance in the form of a supportive and educational activity, with a high organisational level and good working conditions – as outlined by the original concept – is implemented only in isolated areas. The care and control approach to work, together with functional assistantship based on simple activities meeting the basic needs of families, are increasingly enforced on family assistants. It is a pity that the aspirations of assistants – who form a professional community – to apply the therapeutic dimension of assistantship are being squandered (Raław & Trawkowska, 2021). Genuine, long-term cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes in family members can be implemented by an individual with a high level of substantive and methodological competencies, with access to training in transgenerational trauma, the rebuilding of family bonds, and providing motivation based on a non-directive approach. Working conditions and remuneration should be appropriate to the employee's competencies and the specific nature of the work performed. Family assistants carry out their activities in the families' living environment and assist them during visits made to institutions. There should be money available to cover such activities. The money earmarked for the family assistant's post should not be limited to the national minimum wage. These funds should include money to cover travel to families and institutions, materials dedicated to parental education or activities aimed at children or family groups, as well as office supplies. Family assistants should receive financing for their participation

in training courses and supervisions. They should not work with more than 10 families. Only then is it possible to carry out a series of visits to the community, aimed at overcoming the initial resistance of families, establishing cooperation and the involvement of families during the diagnosis, planning and assessment of the situation. With a large number of families, genuine assistantship is not possible, one that would include, e.g., accompanying the family in diverse daily activities, training in parenting skills and household management, handling official matters, overcoming crises, and working with relapses into old habits or dysfunctional behaviour.

Changes in families are also possible if these families have access to other providers of healthcare, educational, therapy, sports and recreation services in the vicinity, while their representatives know how to cooperate with each other. The family assistant should be familiar with the local services that are available for families. The activities of the assistance and intervention professions should be coordinated. Another matter raised is the need to identify and properly separate the areas of activities and tasks of the family assistant and the social worker (Krasiejko, 2013, 2019; Raclaw & Trawkowska, 2021).

Boroughs are obliged to draw up their own family support programmes applicable for a period of four years. According to the research conducted, in many areas the implementation of these programmes is simulated due to a lack of finances. Boroughs are obliged to create opportunities for families to receive family counselling, mediation, family therapy and for children to participate in day care centres. Each borough should employ an assistant who can support a maximum of 15 families with children. The assistant should be able to participate in training. For the time being, there is no provision in the law to provide family assistants with supervision, although it is known that this form of support is essential in this work. Attention is also drawn to the poor cooperation between the borough and the powiat in working with families whose children are in foster care. Another worrying aspect is the poor level of cooperation between social assistance and health care institutions. The assistants also complain about the tardiness of the courts, not taking into account the fact whether the child is supposed to be raised by the parents and disregarding the family's situation when decisions are made by the social assistance centre. Borough authorities should take care of interdepartmental coordination and foster the development of the third sector. There are a number of good practices in this area. Not so long ago, co-operative models were put to the test, both in urban, rural and urban-rural settings⁴.

Social service centres can be found in several dozen locations in Poland. This is a major step by the authorities in these boroughs towards deinstitutionalisation. The advantage of the social service centre is that it has been designed as a one-stop institution. Families can agree on individual social service plans with the centre employees and, within the framework of the agreed plans, for a period of 3–12 months, take advantage of the various forms of support that will be granted by local service providers. Importantly, there is no need to book individual appointments with each of these providers, attend additional initial visits or collect documentation. The services

⁴ See: *Modele kooperacji. Księga rekomendacyjna* (2021). Regional Centre of Social Policy in Rzeszów.

currently provided at the borough level become integrated but in a dispersed way. In consequence, the assistant can, in consultation with the coordinator of the individual social service plan, offer the family a whole package of services so that it receives comprehensive assistance adapted to its needs and rhythm of life – arranged in a monthly schedule.

A novel idea in many places in Poland may be to invite the family to meetings with staff in order to co-determine which services the family wants to use and at what time. Moreover, social service centres enable the placement of family assistance outside the social assistance centre, in a place designed for the general public. It could change the image of assistantship as dedicated only to dysfunctional families at risk of having their children taken away. In addition, family assistants will be able to use local community organisers to help the families they are supporting to take advantage of the resources available in the community, such as neighbourhood support, voluntary work, and support groups (Krasiejko, 2021).

The centres are intended to bring together and integrate the various assistance professions, both those employed in the centre itself and those providing social services in entities cooperating with the centre. Each professional should perform work according to their role and assigned tasks. In addition to the family assistant, there are many representatives of different entities who work with families, especially those who are unable to meet their children's needs on their own, namely: social workers, school teachers, school and kindergarten teachers, psychologists, psychotherapists, primary care nurses, family doctors, day care centre employees, therapists and physiotherapists, sports coaches, vocational counsellors, probation officers and even neighbourhood police officers. Representatives of the foster care system also work with families on their reintegration: foster families, family foster care coordinators and employees of children's care and education centres. The multiplication of activities and sometimes even the lack of conformity to expectations do not guarantee effectiveness. Co-ordination of activities makes them more uniform and reduces their number. In this way, there is a greater chance of achieving a common goal, as well as the combination and attainment of the family's objectives and those imposed by prescriptive institutions, such as the court. This happens through joint arrangements and the division of tasks between family members and individuals representing different areas of assistance (Krasiejko, 2021).

It would be, therefore, worthwhile reconsidering the working conditions of the family assistant at the central and local government levels. Borough authorities and the management of social assistance centres or NGOs should make efforts to ensure that family assistants provide a high standard of service in their local family support systems. It is worth following the example of boroughs where the implementation of family assistance is carried out at a high level.

The community of family assistants, as pointed out by Głębocka (2021), participates in the negotiation of objectives and working conditions, revealing threats to the fulfilment of the professional role, including those related to the way the role is conceived and the working conditions. This community creates its own space in the form of the past 10 Family Assistants Rallies, during which various issues were discussed and publicised. The collective of family assistants talks to the Ministry

and local authorities about the difficulties of the role, opportunities for the profession to perform well, standards of the assistants' practice, and their working conditions. The National Association of Family Assistants (Pol. Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Asystentów Rodziny) has already submitted its requests for changes to the Act on Family Support and Foster Care System to the Ministry of Family and Social Policy on several occasions. It is imperative that this voice is heard.

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