



# Croatia Fact Sheet on Social Care & Support Services Sector for Persons with Disabilities

Part of a series of Country Fact Sheets available on the EASPD website

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## SUBSECTORS OF SOCIAL CARE & SUPPORT SERVICES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

According to the Census from 14th March 2017, 511,910 people with disabilities live in Croatia, or 11.9% of the entire population (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2017). Main providers of social care and support services are DPOs and NGOs, and the state has recognised their primarily role. The Social Care Act allows DPOs and NGOs to provide certain SCSS instead of the state.<sup>1</sup> Typically, the state finances the activities of DPOs and NGOs on a project basis. The ministries finance projects of school assistants for children with disabilities, day care centres for people with disabilities, personal assistants for people with the highest degree of disability, sign language translators, and many others. The project-based nature of financing of SCSS means that any interruption of the funding can jeopardise the activities of DPOs and NGOs and consequently the health and safety of people with disabilities (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018).

### Early Childhood Intervention

As of 2017, there are 32,101 children with disabilities in Croatia (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2017). The term 'child with developmental difficulties' is used in Croatia to describe all types of disabilities children might have to express the possible variability and development of the disability over time (Znaor M. et al, 2003). The biggest portion of children registered with disabilities, 46%, are in the age group between 10-14 years (Ibid), suggesting inadequate early intervention and only later discovery of disabilities (UNICEF, 2015). In 2013, Croatia added early childhood intervention to its legal system through the Social Care Act (Social Care Act, 2013). The National Strategy for Rights of Children 2014-2020 established as a strategic goal support for the rights of vulnerable children, including children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2015). According to Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb, doctors determine whether a child needs early childhood intervention, and they direct parents to Centres for Social Care that subsequently give them a referral based on which they can access the needed early childhood intervention services<sup>2</sup>. Centres for Social Care are public institutions with an authority to decide whether to recognise the right to social care to the person who applies for the care (Central Governmental Portal, 2019c). The Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy has a directory for all the social care institutions, including the Centres for Social Care, which allows users to search for the institutions and their addresses, with the Centres for Social Care being available across Croatia in all the counties (Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, 2019).

According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, early intervention services are available from public providers, with some services being provided under the national health insurance<sup>3</sup>. However, the financing model of the services is unsustainable as it is not systematic and it functions on a project basis of DPOs and NGOs, co-financed by the government or the European Union<sup>4</sup>. The main providers of support for early intervention are experts from the fields of education and rehabilitation. These include the Special Hospital for the Protection of Children with Neurodevelopmental and Motor Disorders Goljak<sup>5</sup>, Centre for Rehabilitation Zagreb<sup>6</sup> and Rehabilitation Centre of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation<sup>7</sup>. Several DPOs and NGOs also play a paramount role such as the Croatian Association for Early Childhood Intervention HURID which runs an online information E-Centre for Early Intervention and Referral<sup>8</sup>. The E-centre's site raniKLIK (Early Click) connects parents of children with disabilities with experts and service providers by allowing parents to search for them based on location, type of expertise or type of disability. The RaniKLIK project was co-financed by the Office for Cooperation with NGOs of the Government of the

<sup>1</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>2</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>5</sup>Special Hospital for the Protection of Children with Neurodevelopmental and Motor Disorders Goljak, See <https://www.sbgoljak.hr/>.

<sup>6</sup>Centre for Rehabilitation Zagreb, See <http://www.crzagreb.hr/hr/podruznice/slobostina/patronaza.asp>.

<sup>7</sup>Rehabilitation Centre of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation, See <http://centar.erf.unizg.hr/index.php/hr/>.

<sup>8</sup>Croatian Association for Early Childhood Intervention HURID, See <https://www.ranaintervencija.org/>.

Republic of Croatia and by the European Union<sup>9</sup>. Still, according to the Office of the Ombudsperson, many services remain inaccessible to children in rural and less developed areas<sup>10</sup>. This is seconded by Ana Opačić who says that there are parts of Croatia where the early childhood intervention is practically non-existent<sup>11</sup>. The waiting lists are especially long for public and third-sector services, which are free for all regardless of their income. While the waiting lists are much shorter for private services, parents need to pay to access them<sup>12</sup>.

Pre-school programmes such as kindergartens and other institutions are particularly important as part of early intervention support. These are available for children from 6 months of age until they start compulsory school attendance (UNICEF, 2015). The Office of the Ombudsperson highlights that there is no legal regulation regarding the question of assistants in kindergartens and kindergartens struggle to offer adequate support to children with disabilities (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). While children with disabilities always have a priority when enrolling to kindergartens, they might still face obstacles accessing the service as in some parts of Croatia there is not enough kindergartens to include every child and the Office of the Ombudsperson says that there have been instances of discrimination based on disability<sup>13</sup>.

## Education Support

For all children in Croatia aged between 6.5 and 15 years, elementary education is compulsory and can be accessed free of charge. For children with serious disabilities, the education is available until they turn 21 (Central Governmental Portal, 2019a). As of 2017, some 63% of people with disabilities in Croatia have only reached elementary education or they have not finished it. Only 3% of all persons with disabilities in Croatia have finished higher education and 6% of people with disabilities have special education (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2017). Some 21,555 children with disabilities are accessing some form of education (Ibid). The most common form of education of children with disabilities in Croatia is complete educational integration through regular teaching procedures with an individualized approach or with an adjustment (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018; see Figure 1). According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, the number of children with disabilities which are being included into the regular educational system is increasing<sup>14</sup>. This is seconded by Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb, who says that the numbers are increasing across all levels of education, from kindergartens to universities<sup>15</sup>. Office of the Ombudsperson highlights that special enrolment procedure exists for children with disabilities which needs to be started earlier than the regular enrolment so that schools, classes and teachers can prepare themselves for the arrival of children with disabilities<sup>16</sup>. Ana Opačić states that there are also Centres for Upbringing and Education which are institutions that used to function as both a house and a school for children with disabilities. These are at the time of drafting this factsheet in the end of 2019 transforming as part of the deinstitutionalisation efforts and they are decreasing their housing capacities but remain operating as schools or day care centres. These new types of institutions are sometimes called Community Service Centres and they are funded from public resources, with co-financing from local, national and European funds. The number of day care centres at the time of drafting this factsheet at the end of 2019 is increasing, also thanks to funding from the European Union<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>RaniKlik, See <https://raniklik.hr/trazilica>.

<sup>10</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>11</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>12</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>13</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

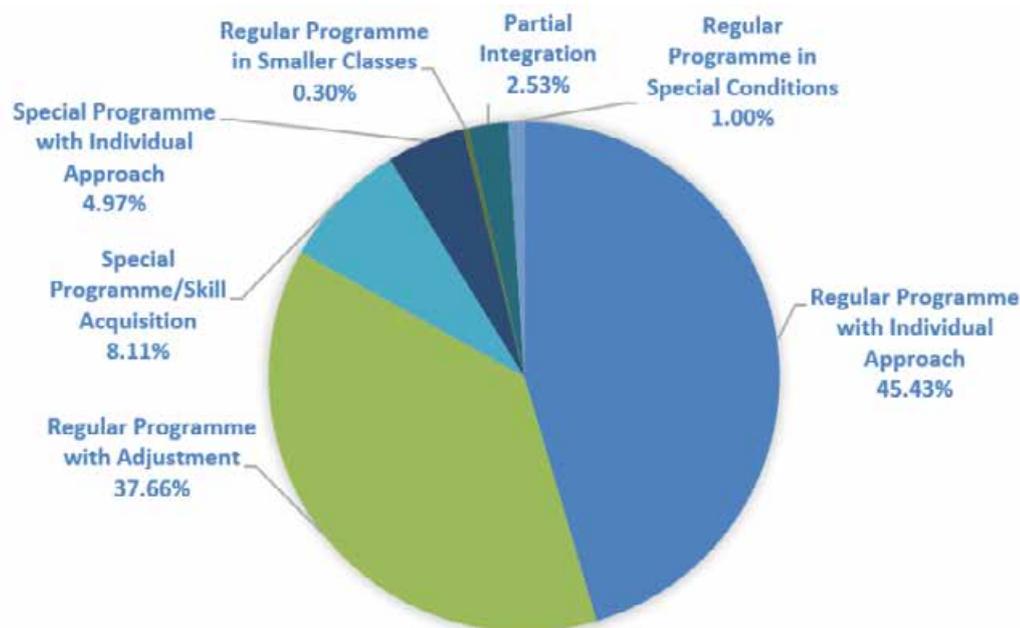
<sup>14</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>15</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>16</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>17</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

Figure 1. Proportion of schoolchildren with disabilities in different types of education



Source: Adopted from The Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities (2018). Report of the Work of Ombudsperson for 2018. Available at: <http://posi.hr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Izvj%C5%A1%C4%87e-o-radu-Pravobranitelja-za-osobe-s-invaliditetom-za-2018.-godinu.pdf> p.128; data from *Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, izvješće o sustavu odgoja i obrazovanja u 2018.*

Teaching assistants<sup>18</sup> play a crucial role in inclusive education as they support children with disabilities at schools. However, teaching assistants are financed on a project basis and there are disparities in access to this kind of service across the country. The Office of the Ombudsperson states that there should be a permanent source of funding and supervision of the qualification of teaching assistants and the project-based approach should be replaced by a systematic solution (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). Currently, the governmental funding of teaching assistants happens through the funding of DPOs and NGOs (Ibid). According to Ana Opačić, DPOs and NGOs or units of local governments file a request for teaching assistants with the Ministry of Science and Education which has a committee determining the legitimacy of the request and directing the funds<sup>19</sup>. In some cases, parents themselves have to finance an assistant if they want their children to have the same access to education which can mean an additional 2,800 HRK (375 EUR) monthly (Coordination of Associations for Children Croatia, 2013). In the beginning of 2019, the Ministry of Science and Education established the regulation of teaching assistants, defining who is understood as a teaching assistant and how this support can be accessed (Ministry of Science and Education, 2019). The question of financing of teaching assistants has also been set with three main sources of funding – from public resources approved by the Ministry of Science and Education, lottery funds<sup>20</sup>, and the European Social Fund.

The Office of the Ombudsperson highlights that teaching assistants are not the only type of education support available in the country. For a child with disability to have equal access to education, a set of different kinds of support is needed. The Social Care Act established support for the integration of children with disabilities into the regular education system in a form of support for teachers and school staff. In terms of the accessibility of school buildings, all new buildings in Croatia must be accessible but older buildings are still commonly inaccessible<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>18</sup>Teaching assistants have their own association which is a key support to them. See <https://www.facebook.com/udrugapunhr/>.

<sup>19</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>20</sup>The Croatian Lottery is obliged to contribute to the state budget every year. See: <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//2016/Sjednice/2018/08%20kolovoz/111%20sjednica/Dokumenti/111%20-%202010.pdf>.

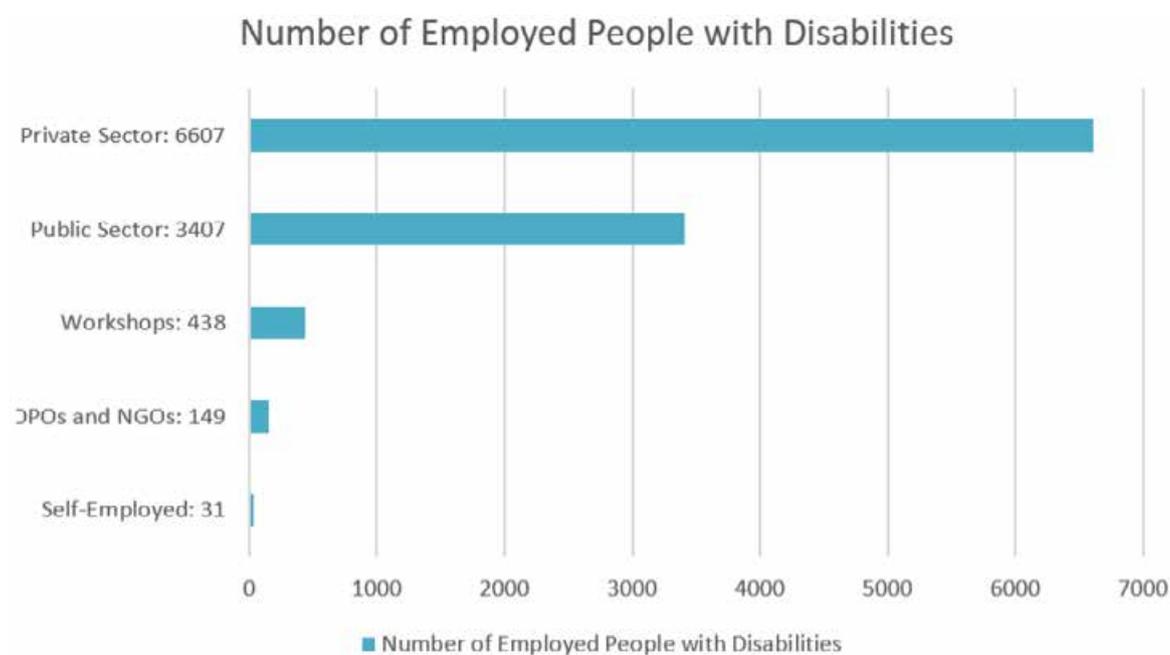
<sup>21</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

High school education is not mandatory in Croatia and it can last between one and four years (UNICEF, 2015). According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, parents of children with disabilities have continuously complained about the insufficient support to their children when applying for high schools, such as lack of adjustments during exam writing, e.g. extension of writing time, assistant support or use of assistive technology (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). Teaching assistants are also ensured during high school studies unless the child has become so independent that they do not require an assistant anymore. Support for students with all kinds of disabilities is ensured at universities as well since all faculties have coordinators, typically younger professors, who act as a point of contact between the faculty administration and the students with disabilities<sup>22</sup>. The Ministry of Science and Education offers funding of 1,500 HRK (200 EUR) for transportation for students with disabilities and organised transportation is available in Zagreb and Rijeka (Central Governmental Portal, 2019d). There is a number of scholarships available for students with disabilities, from universities themselves, but also from the Ministry of Science and Education, as well as from private entities and third sector organisations<sup>23</sup>.

## Employment Support

As of 2017, some 48%, the largest portion of Croats with disabilities, are in their active working age – between 19 and 64 years (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2017). As of 31st December 2018, there were 10,836 people with disabilities employed in Croatia, or around 2% of the total population of people with disabilities. The biggest portion of employed people with disabilities in Croatia works in the private sector and the smallest portion is self-employed (see Figure 2). However, in December 2018, some 5,843 people with disabilities were recorded in the Croatian Employment Service, or 3.9% of all unemployed people in Croatia (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). Thus, the vast majority of people with disabilities in their active working age in Croatia are not considered to be participating in the labour force.

Figure 2. Number of employed people with disabilities across the sectors



Source: Adapted from *The Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities (2018). Report of the Work of Ombudsperson for 2018.* Available at: <http://posi.hr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Izve%C5%A1%C4%87e-o-radu-Pravobranitelja-za-osobe-s-invaliditetom-za-2018.-godinu.pdf> p.271.

<sup>22</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>23</sup>See <https://www.ssc.uniri.hr/hr/ured-za-studente-s-invaliditetom.html>.

In May 2018, the long-awaited Act on Changes and Amendments to the Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities entered into force<sup>24</sup>. It sought to improve the existing legislative and institutional framework of support available to persons with disabilities and employers in the preparation for employment and during the working life (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). One of the adopted amendments that the Office of the Ombudsperson advocated for was for both public and private employers to ensure reasonable adjustments in testing and interviewing of a disabled person as a suitable employee. Moreover, persons with disabilities have a priority when seeking employment in public institutions in cases when they have the same qualifications as the other best candidate. This, however, does not apply in the case of private employers. For persons registered as unemployed in the Croatian Employment Office, each regional office has a designated officer responsible for the employment of people with disabilities and supporting them with finding a suitable job<sup>25</sup>.

All employers who employ more than 20 people are subject to quotas for the employment of persons with disabilities, calculated at the rate of 3% of the total number of employees (Central Governmental Portal, 2019b). According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, the employer can also regulate this obligation by using a replacement quota, e.g. to provide scholarship to students with disabilities, to enter into a business cooperation agreement with a person with a disability who is self-employed, or with a sheltered or integrative workshop. However, both the Office of the Ombudsperson and Ana Opačić say that many employers use replacement quotas rather than employ people with disabilities<sup>26,27</sup>. If they do not comply with the quotas, the employer is obliged to pay a charge of 30% of minimum wage for every person with disability they should but do not employ, which is approximately 1,000 HRK (130 EUR) (ZOSI, 2019).

The Office for Expertise, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (ZOSI) is a public institution established by the Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities<sup>28</sup>. ZOSI operates at the national level by supporting both people with disabilities and their employers in a number of ways such as providing wage subsidies, subsidies for worksite adjustment costs or special funds for the development of new technologies and business processes aimed at hiring and maintaining employment of persons with disabilities (Central Governmental Portal, 2019b). According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, the state provides incentives for employers to employ people with disabilities, the biggest and most significant incentive being a wage subsidy that can amount from 10 to 70% of the minimum wage. The precise percentage is established by a local Centre for Vocational Rehabilitation and paid by ZOSI. All workplace adjustments or special equipment needed can be financed by ZOSI up to the amount of 140,000 HRK (18,700 EUR)<sup>29</sup>. ZOSI has also published the Handbook with Recommendations for Workplace Adjustment, highlighting that even simple changes can make a big difference for a person with disability (ZOSI, 2018). Apart from nationally funded initiatives, the European Union also plays an important role in providing funding. Another guide for employers about employing a person with disability was created by the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Croatia in cooperation with the Croatian Employment Service<sup>30</sup>. While a work assistant is not ensured for people with disabilities, according to the Office of the Ombudsperson, ZOSI can provide a payment for up to 12 months for a person who would support a person with disability in the working environment, e.g. for an employee who would support their co-worker with disability<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup>Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Zakon o profesionalnoj rehabilitaciji i zapošljavanju osoba sa invaliditetom, Official Gazette 157/2013 and 152/2014. Available at: <http://propisi.hr/print.php?id=7695>.

<sup>25</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>26</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>27</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>28</sup>Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Zakon o profesionalnoj rehabilitaciji i zapošljavanju osoba sa invaliditetom, Official Gazette 157/2013 and 152/2014. Available at: <http://propisi.hr/print.php?id=7695>.

<sup>29</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>30</sup>Programme IPA IV Development of Human Resources (2018) How to Employ a Person with Disability. Available at: [http://www.hzz.hr/UserDocslmages/Kako\\_zaposliti\\_OI.pdf](http://www.hzz.hr/UserDocslmages/Kako_zaposliti_OI.pdf).

<sup>31</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

In Croatia, integrative workshops are organisations established for the employment of persons with disabilities who cannot be employed on the open labour market and which fulfils the conditions prescribed by the Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, including that it must employ at least 40% of persons with disabilities relative to the total number of employees<sup>32</sup>. In 2018, there were three integrative workshops, all of which were in Zagreb or in towns close to it (Office of the Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). Sheltered workshops are organisations established for the employment of persons with disabilities who cannot be employed in an integrative workshop. Sheltered workshops must employ at least 51% of people with disabilities compared to the total number of employees. In 2018, there were eight sheltered workshops registered in Croatia, mostly concentrated in the northern part of the country, with an exception of one sheltered workshop in Split (Ibid). Whether a person with a disability is eligible to be employed in an integrative or a sheltered workshop is decided by a local Centre for Vocational Rehabilitation. ZOSI organises training for vocational employees of integrative and sheltered workshops to educate them on supporting employment of people with disabilities in their organizations (Ibid). Public funding plays an important part in the functioning of the workshops. After conducting a public tender in 2016 and with the approval of the Governing Board of ZOSI, seven sheltered workshops were awarded 34 million HRK (almost 4.6 million EUR) from state funds (Dokler, B., 2017). Nevertheless, the Office of the Ombudsperson states that their priority is for people with disabilities to be able to find employment in the open labour market which is why they organise workshops and seminars to motivate employers to employ people with disabilities<sup>33</sup>.

## Day Care

According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, there are both public and private service providers of day care. They provide social skills and knowledge, most commonly after the education of people with disabilities is finished. For instance, if a child with disability does not continue with schooling, they can join day care centres which have proven to be of great help to parents<sup>34</sup>. Day and half-day care centres for adults are typically available for people with intellectual disability. Geographically, day and half-day care centres are concentrated in the northern part of the country. The activities of day and half-day care centres include creative and social games, educational workshops, rehabilitation and physical activities, skills for employment, and the centres function as a meeting and socialising point for people with disabilities<sup>35</sup>. Day and half-day care centres are funded through public resources if the DPOs or NGOs sign an agreement with the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy which in turn outlines criteria that the service providers must meet in order to be eligible for the funding<sup>36</sup>.

## Living Support

As of 2017, the biggest portion of Croats with disabilities, 80%, live with their families. Some 17% live alone, around 0.5% have a carer or a guardian and around 0.6% live in an institutional establishment. Some 14% live in unsatisfactory housing conditions (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2017). According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, personal assistant services are meant for people with a high degree of disability and 1,700 people in Croatia use this service on a basis of 4 hours per day/80 hours per month. Since the beginning of 2019, this service has been extended to up to 8 hours per day for people with the highest degree of disability and 167 people in Croatia use this service. Personal assistant services are funded on a project basis with DPOs and NGOs applying for tenders published by the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy. The biggest portion of the funding is provided from the European Social Fund, lottery funds, and partly from public resources.

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<sup>32</sup>Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Zakon o profesionalnoj rehabilitaciji i zapošljavanju osoba sa invaliditetom, Official Gazette 157/2013 and 152/2014. Available at: <http://propisi.hr/print.php?id=7695>.

<sup>33</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>34</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>35</sup>See <https://mdomsp.gov.hr/userdocimages/arhiva/files/77680/Privremena%20lista%20za%20web.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

Project-based funding is problematic as personal assistants cannot be ensured at the moment when a disability is formed, e.g. if a person becomes physically disabled after an accident, unless it is at that moment when the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy publishes a tender. Moreover, if a DPO or an NGO which acts as the service provider ceases to exist, the person with disability automatically loses their assistant. Still, at the time of drafting this factsheet at the end of 2019, NGOs and DPOs are the exclusive service providers with very little private service providers<sup>37</sup>.

In terms of assistive technology, people with disabilities are entitled to basic, orthopaedic appliances and aids listed and provided by the Croatian Health Insurance Fund which is a public institution. The list is updated every year, but it does not contain modern assistive technologies as the Croatian Health Insurance Fund insures certain basic technologies. Access to modern assistive technologies which are not insured depends purely on the private initiative of a person with disability and their financial possibilities.

## Long-term Institutional Care and Respite Care

As of 2017, some 45% of people with disabilities in Croatia are older than 65 years, meaning that a large portion of people with disabilities might not be able to rely on their parents, but rather on a long-term institutional and respite care (Croatian Institute for Public Health, 2017). Croatia has started its efforts to deinstitutionalise accommodation and care, adopting the 'Plan for deinstitutionalization and transformation of social care homes and other legal entities performing social care activities in the Republic of Croatia 2011 – 2016' (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, 2010). According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, the process of deinstitutionalization is going very slowly and there is still a large number of people with disabilities living in long-term institutional care only because support that would allow them to stay in their homes and live independently has not been developed<sup>38</sup>. According to Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb, while the total number of people living in long-term institutional care might not be falling, what is dramatically decreasing is the number of decisions about institutionalisation. People with disabilities who have been in long-term institutional care for decades are likely to stay there for the rest of their lives, which is why the number of people in long-term institutional care is not changing dramatically. However, the number of people using alternative services such as day care centres and foster care is increasing, suggesting that the long-term institutional care will see a decrease in its number of users over time and many young people with disabilities who would in the past end up living in the long-term institutional care today have more alternatives<sup>39</sup>.

Long-term institutional care homes can be both public (having signed an agreement with the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy) or private, but these are typically intended for older people. There are very long waiting lists for public care homes as these are significantly cheaper than the private care homes because they are funded by the local governments and subsidised by the state. The Office of the Ombudsperson highlights that the issue is in cases when a young or adult person with disability loses their family support, they are then placed in homes for the elderly. This is because placing them in homes for the elderly is the first 'provisional' solution. Yet in practice, they are often unable to choose in which home they will be placed, possibly having to move to another part of Croatia as the capacities of public care homes are rather small, and they often stay in these homes for a very long time<sup>40</sup>.

One of the goals of the Plan was to reduce the number of adults with disabilities who do not require intensive care in institutions by 30% through increasing the number of disabled people living in foster care families and foster care homes (Buljevac, M., et al, 2016). Foster care is primarily meant for children with disabilities and for people with disabilities who do not require intensive physical care. According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, foster care is publicly financed<sup>41</sup>. According to Ana Opačić, two

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<sup>37</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>38</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>39</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>40</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>41</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

biggest institutions which went through the most significant process of deinstitutionalisation are Centre for Rehabilitation Stančić<sup>42</sup> and Centre for Rehabilitation Zagreb<sup>43</sup>. While there are not many such institutions, there are several that are very large and centralised, mainly for people with intellectual disabilities. The big institutions closed down some of their accommodation spaces and instead rented out smaller houses or flats to which they moved their residents. Ana Opačić says that while the employees are still seeing and supporting the residents, they are now living practically independently<sup>44</sup>.

Similarly, the Croatian NGO Association for Promoting Inclusion supports persons with intellectual disabilities in living in the community (persons who are deinstitutionalized and those whose institutionalization is to be prevented) by providing an organised housing service. The organised housing service is carried out in flats rented by the Association for Promoting Inclusion or in flats owned by the people with disabilities who are being supported by the Association for Promoting Inclusion. Association for Promoting Inclusion provides living support to one to five people living together in flats in cities throughout Croatia and organised housing service is part of the Croatian social care system, financed by the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy. The support provided by the Association for Promoting Inclusion depends on the individual needs and interests of every person with disability, and it can range from household activities, community activities, healthcare and safety, free time, to labour and lifelong learning activities (Association for Promoting Inclusion, 2019). Centre for Rehabilitation Zagreb offers organised housing too as part of its deinstitutionalisation efforts, with 72 people using the service. In 2014, 8 people applied for organised housing service, out of which 4 were rejected, 3 were put on a waiting list, and 1 application was successful (Centre for Rehabilitation Zagreb, 2015).

## Leisure and Social-Life Support

According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, leisure and social-life support is most typically provided by DPOs and NGOs that operate on a local level in cities and municipalities. These are financed on a project basis from the budgets of local governments. This means that the funding and consequently the activities of providers are greatly dependent on the will of local governments and so for instance if a mayor cares about people with disabilities, they will support these providers, and equally, if they do not, the service providers might struggle to find sufficient funding. With Croatia joining the EU, there has been a positive change as it means that the providers can now apply to other funds, more specifically concerned with social life, sport, recreation and similar. However, as the DPOs, NGOs and other third sector organisations act as a primary provider for more acute social services, they have less time to be concerned with leisure and social-life support which are not funded as well, even though they are still the main providers of this kind of support. The DPOs and NGOs often complain to the Office of the Ombudsperson that they lack capacities, both professional and administrative, to provide all the support necessary for the people with disabilities<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup>Centre for Rehabilitation Stančić. See at: <http://centar-stancic.hr/>.

<sup>43</sup>Centre for Rehabilitation Zagreb. See at: <http://www.crzagreb.hr/hr/>.

<sup>44</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>45</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

## FUTURE TRENDS

In Croatia, the state has acknowledged non-governmental organisations as primary service providers and the Social Care Act allows DPOs and NGOs to provide the services instead of the state, while funding their activities. The Office of the Ombudsperson understands this to be an issue as DPOs and NGOs are often primarily focused on providing services but in doing so are losing their advocacy role which is so needed in the civil society<sup>46</sup>. The most significant issue identified through the interviews and desk research is that several crucial services for people with disabilities are funded on a project basis rather than in a systematic manner. According to the Office of the Ombudsperson, there are promises from the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy that it would bring a legislation which would transform the funding of some SCSS into a systematic arrangement as there is a number of issues with the project-based funding. The issue might be the most visible in the case of early childhood intervention, where early response and coordination between services is essential. The Office of the Ombudsperson advocates for a single legal body to be appointed (Commission for Early Intervention) which would be responsible for early intervention in Croatia. They say it is the state that must stand behind the system of early intervention and make strategic decisions to create an integrated system of services, regardless if they are part of the healthcare, education or social welfare systems. The Office of the Ombudsperson also highlights that Croatia has enough resources to provide early intervention but what is necessary is connecting already existing services in an intersectoral cooperation and providing support to every child that needs it<sup>47</sup>. In addition to that, many services depend on a goodwill of local governments and functioning of DPOs and NGOs. There are also large disparities between individual parts of Croatia, with some services being practically non-existent in rural parts. Yet, according to Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb, there are positive trends of change in all subsectors of SCSS providers, such as that employers are employing more people with disabilities rather than to pay the charge, that there are more technological innovations available to people with disabilities, and most importantly that the social attitude towards people with disabilities is changing and becoming more acceptable<sup>48</sup>.

## EXPERT COMMENTARY

### Early Childhood Intervention

According to a UNICEF report (UNICEF, 2015), there is a lack of systematic coordination and cooperation between service providers from different activity sectors in early childhood intervention, resulting in the fact that there is no precise measure of early intervention service availability across different regions. There are few early intervention services run by public institutions, and most early childhood intervention support programmes are run by DPOs and NGOs. Moreover, there are no programs for evaluating and monitoring the work of early childhood intervention service providers (Ibid). According to some parents of children with disabilities, the biggest problem is a lack of coherence and connectivity of individual providers of early intervention resulting in considerable time spent searching for appropriate early childhood intervention services, long waiting lists and a lack of specialised expert support (Ljubešić, M., 2012).

<sup>46</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>47</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

<sup>48</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

## Education Support

The Office of the Ombudsperson has registered some complaints of parents from rural parts of Croatia as they struggle to find appropriate persons who would want to be teaching assistants since the regulation has established that a teaching assistant must have completed at least four years of high school or apprenticeship. However, according to the Office of the Ombudsperson, very few children with disabilities have been left without a teaching assistant at the beginning of the school year and there are no waiting lists.

## Employment Support

The fact that the vast majority of people with disabilities in their active working age in Croatia are not considered to be participating in the labour force is highlighted as a major issue by Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb. She says that many people with disabilities are prematurely retired which means they cannot be legally employed. She says that the state rather uses the pension retirement scheme to deal with adult people with disabilities than to support them in finding employment or acknowledge them as unemployed<sup>49</sup>. According to the Croatian Association of Societies of Disabled Workers, a disability has been for years a reason for premature retirement of people who could be working if they were adequately supported<sup>50</sup>.

In terms of career support, Ana Opačić says that there are still many special education programmes for young people with disabilities that do not reflect the contemporary labour market and so there is a mismatch between what people with disabilities are trained to do and the desirable skills by the employers<sup>51</sup>.

## Long-term Institutional Care and Respite Care

According to Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb foster care of people with disabilities is not deep-rooted in Croatia, and especially not on the coast where people would rather give their homes to tourism than to foster care<sup>52</sup>.

The Office of the Ombudsperson does not consider foster care as a form of deinstitutionalization because in practice the people with disabilities are only moved from a larger institution into a smaller one, but they still reside in some form of an organised accommodation. The Office of the Ombudsperson has found instances where the basic human rights of the people with disabilities in foster care, such as right to privacy, right to choose, or right to independent decisions, have not been respected<sup>53</sup>.

## CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS

- Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities, October 2019
- Ana Opačić, Associate Professor, Department of Theory and Methods of Social Work, Study Centre for Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, October 2019

<sup>49</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>50</sup>See <https://www.in-portal.hr/in-portal-news/in-mreza/15464/hrvatski-savez-udruga-invalida-rada-nacionalnakampanjatjedan-dana-s-invalidima-rada>

<sup>51</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>52</sup>Personal interview with Ana Opačić, Associate Professor of the Study Centre for Social Work, University of Zagreb on the 24th October 2019.

<sup>53</sup>Personal interview with Darijo Jurišić and Mira Pekeč Knežević, Deputy Ombudspersons for People with Disabilities, The Office of the Ombudsperson for People with Disabilities on the 21st October 2019.

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