

Small Grants Scheme 2011: helping Young Offenders

Project reports

‘We are Together’ youth network reaches out to young people in detention

Grantee: Regional Public Organisation Community to Children, Moscow

Project: To assist young people starting independent life after institutional care, including young people leaving youth detention centers, via peer support networks, information, advice and advocacy work.

“I thought I would have to live on the street again,” says Misha (name altered). Misha is an orphan. He was sentenced to a juvenile detention centre for committing theft. As a ward of the state he is entitled to state housing upon coming of age and release from detention. However, Misha’s application for an apartment was unsuccessful due to mistakes in his paperwork. Youth volunteers (former residents of children’s homes) met Misha when they visited Mozhaik youth detention centre. They listened to young people’s concerns and gave them advice on how to get help when they are released, including what to do if they find themselves without shelter or money. On returning to Moscow the volunteers appealed to the Moscow authorities to review several cases where young people’s rights had been violated. Misha will now receive an apartment and support from social welfare services thanks to the project funded by BEARR.

Approximately 500 young people leave Moscow care institutions and foster families each year. Moscow city provides services for those leaving institutions. However, research by Community to Children has shown that young people often do not go to professionals for help when they need it. They rely on their peer networks. Community to Children began the We are Together Project to build the capacity of these informal youth networks to support young people leaving institutions and help them access wider community resources for advice, information, and practical assistance. An annual youth projects competition is held and young people receive training and mini grants to implement local community activities for their peers. Activities include peer education and mentoring. Youth webpages and an online forum (www.com-children.ru) link together active young people from different parts of the metropolis to share advice and information. The We are Together project is implemented in partnership with an advisory youth council to Moscow government which represents young people from care institutions and foster families, government-run social welfare centers, and other NGOs, with finance from the World Childhood Foundation and EMpower-the Emerging Markets Foundation

The activities funded by BEARR trust expanded the scope of the We are Together project to reach out to young people in detention centres. Approximately 50 former residents of children’s care institutions return to Moscow each year from detention centres in Mozhaik and Ryazan. With no families to turn to when they leave detention these young people are extremely vulnerable. Youth volunteers participating in the project contacted former residents of children’s institutions who have served sentences in juvenile detention. Many of these young people were reluctant to talk or to participate in focus group meetings, but eventually with the help of local peer networks, a small group agreed to meet volunteers and representatives of the Department of Social Welfare to discuss the problems they face and help to create content for a youth guide to Moscow. The new guide targets young people in care and gives specific information about the rights of young people in detention and how they can access practical assistance and support upon release.

A delegation of youth volunteers (former residents of children's institutions, member of the Youth Council), representatives of Moscow Department of Social Welfare, and Community to Children representatives visited the Mozhaisk juvenile detention centre. 113 young people are detained at the centre, 37 of them originally from Moscow. The youth volunteers brought supplies for the new school year, a computer and the new youth guide.

Since the visit and further meetings between youth activists and government officials, Moscow government has issued instructions to children's institutions to make monthly visits to any children who have been moved from care institutions to detention centres. Delegation participant T.A. Potyaeva, Department of Social Welfare, noted the cases of young people who have been detained without personal documents and promised to find a solution to this problem. Without documents they will be unable to obtain assistance, housing, or employment. The delegation was also concerned about the fate of children at the Mozhaisk detention centre from other regions. Community to Children and the Youth Council wrote to the child welfare agencies of Kostrama drawing attention to cases of negligence on the part of child welfare agencies and children's homes.

Government agencies often fail to protect the rights of young people in institutions and especially those in detention centres. The We are Together Project brings together active young people, who are amongst the best advocates for their peers, and gives young people support from peers they can talk to easily. The project helps bridge the gap between traditional child welfare agencies and young people who need help.

Contact:

Jenny Chambers

Director of Fundraising

Community to Children

info@com-children.ru

www.com-children.ru