

A foster family for senior citizens: perspectives from the residents of the Altai region

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Abstract. The article discusses the results of a study of ideas of residents of the Altai Region about providing a foster family for senior citizens as an innovative form of their living arrangement. The main targets and resources for the development of a foster family in the region as a social institution that maximally satisfies social and psychological needs of the elderly are considered in detail.

Keywords: foster family, senior citizens, living arrangement, social services

1. Introduction

In the conditions of a steady trend of population aging, more and more requirements to expand the range of social services for senior citizens are imposed on the state social policy. In the conditions of specialized in-patient facilities, traditional forms of social services do not create conditions for a decent old age. The older people have a psychological fear of worse conditions, a feeling of loneliness, inability to enjoy life. They are also reluctant to make contact and more often think about death [1]. In recent years, a foster family as an innovative form of social services for the elderly has begun to develop. The main tasks of this type of social service are to create a family environment for the citizens, provide psychological rehabilitation, and ensure social services [2]. In this regard, the study of perceptions existing in the population about a foster family for senior citizens seems relevant. The study will reveal the deficiencies, targets, resources, and potentials for the development of this social practice in the Altai region.

2. Materials and Methods

A questionnaire was used as an empirical method, relying on spontaneous sampling. The sample consisted of 335 people, and the survey was conducted in 2018. The study involved people of different ages, marital, and financial status. Respondents aged 20–30 years accounted for the majority (52%). The second largest group is the residents being 31–40 years old (29%). The questions were conventionally divided into three groups: (a) awareness of such a form of living arrangement as “a foster family for senior citizens”, (b) opinions on various psychological aspects of this phenomenon, and (d) the respondents’ readiness to create a foster family.

3. Results

According to the survey, about 60% of all respondents have never heard of such a form of living arrangement as a foster family for an elderly person. The Internet and television have become a source

of information for 39.1% and 34.8%, respectively. 17.4% of respondents have an idea about foster families for seniors from friends or acquaintances. The lowest indicator (4.3%) is “newspapers / magazines.” One person also clarified that “I heard a conversation in the bus.”

Replying to the question of whether it is possible to create a foster family for an elderly person in the Altai region, 65.7% of respondents were inclined to believe that the creation of such a family is possible. Only 5% of respondents answered negatively. Most likely, in this case, a negative answer is a consequence of their own unwillingness to take an elderly person into one's family. The remaining 29.3% found it difficult to answer this question, apparently comparing living conditions in our region with the possibility of taking one more person into the family.

In addition, respondents were asked to choose personal qualities of a person who accepts an elderly person in their family. As we expected, such answers as “tolerance” (25.5%) and “kindness” (22.5%) became the most popular. The remaining answers have approximately equal percentages, from “friendliness” (12.8%) to “good health” (9%). Many respondents chose almost all options. This has an explanation. Caring for an elderly person requires tremendous patience, since this category of the population has their own specific psychological characteristics, often health complications, which negatively affect their emotional background. And tolerance is impossible without kindness and friendliness in such a responsible matter. Such qualities are needed in order to find a common language with an elderly and to solve the arisen misunderstandings diplomatically. Therefore, a greater number of respondents preferred these particular answers.

A similar unity of opinions was also in respondents' answers to the question “Do you agree with the statement that knowledge of psychology of an elderly person is obligatory for members of a foster family?” The majority of respondents (77%) believe that such knowledge is necessary in this situation. 67.6% of respondents believe that knowledge of psychology of an elderly person is mandatory for adoptive family members. However, 32.4% of respondents are convinced that knowledge of psychology of an elderly person is not required. Also, the majority (80%) favored a positive answer to the question about the need to consult a psychologist to a foster family and an elderly person. One respondent indicated that this is individual in each situation. But about courses on the development of skills of communication with older people, opinions are divided: only 45.7% believe that it is mandatory, 34.3% that it is not, and 20% found it difficult to answer this question. Most likely, the negative answers to the previous three questions are explained by the fact that the respondents rely on their life experience and intuition in communicating and solving difficult situations with older people. Also, they believe that any special skills are not required. Most often, it was the respondents of 31-50 years old who gave a negative answer. The result obtained is also paradoxical, since the majority of respondents who noted the need for knowledge of psychology and psychological counseling answered that special skills were not mandatory or found difficult to answer.

The data obtained from the question “Should an elderly person and members of the host family be tested for compatibility?” showed that this kind of compatibility test should be carried out. In particular, 75% of respondents answered positively. The remaining 14% and 11% gave a negative answer or found it difficult to choose.

One of the main issues was the willingness of people to accept an elderly person in their family. More than half of the respondents (63%) were not ready to create a foster family for an elderly person. Only 15% of all respondents chose a positive answer to this question. The remaining 22% abstained from a final answer. People of 31-40 years old with 2 or more children made up the majority of those who answered “yes.” It was this age group that turned out to be ready to take an elderly person to themselves. Presumably, this is because these citizens in creating a foster family see the possibility of solving the problem of raising their own children. In other words, adoptive grandparents can take a part of parental functions in raising children on themselves, making free time for parents to perform some other functions. Perhaps, this has another explanation. As a rule, parents are not so young in families with two or three children. Consequently, as noted above, they already have a different attitude towards elderly citizens, more consciously present their problems and needs. Such an attitude in conjunction with other factors may be decisive in deciding to create a foster family for an elderly

person. 1 respondent from “yes” answers was childless. Here, we should proceed from the opposite. The lack of children prevented the possibility and desire to take care of someone, leading to the readiness to create a foster family for an elderly citizen.

In the course of the study, we also establish under which conditions respondents are ready to accept an elderly person in a family. Among the suggested answers, the following choices were more often chosen: “with improved housing conditions” (35%), “only with high wages” (15%), and with “approval and various incentives from the authorities” (9%). Moreover, more than half of the respondents, namely 53% of those being surveyed, who previously responded with disagreement to take an elderly person to themselves, agreed under these conditions. First of all, this suggests that material values come to the fore. But this is not a negative point. Since it is truly believed that the successful functioning of adoptive families for the elderly is possible when both parties have advantages for themselves in this coexistence: elderly people find support and care for themselves, and the receiving family has comfortable financial conditions.

The answer “you will be enrolled in the staff of the Center for Social Services” did not interest anyone. This is probably due to the fact that people are afraid of excessive control and additional responsibility. So, one respondent commented on her answer: “This will create additional paperwork. They will be forced to provide various reports and tortured with frequent checks.” In individual cases, respondents also offered their own answers: “[I am ready] if the number of family members living with me decreases” (the respondent had 3 children). Or they argued their final failure to readiness to create a foster family by the fact that they already had elderly loved ones who needed to be taken care of.

Among the questions asked, there was a question specifying the amount of payment in the case of creating a foster family for an elderly person. The question was open, the answers received were very interesting. The sum of 10 thousand rubles was the lowest bar. Several people answered that they would like to receive 15-20 thousand rubles for their work (1 respondent indicated a “two-time minimum wage”). There were also answers in which the amount was even indicated was higher than the average salary in the region, from 30 to 40 thousand rubles. Similar answers confirm that the respondents’ willingness to create a foster family for an elderly person depends on the condition of their own material benefit, and the fact that caring for someone else’s elderly person is not easy work. Therefore, this work must be paid very well.

In this study, each participant could express his opinion regarding those people who have already accepted a single elderly person in their family. Almost 100% of respondents expressed their admiration for these people in such characteristics as: noble and kind, worthy of respect, with a huge kind heart, heroes, strong and courageous, wealthy and with a pure soul, compassionate the weak and lonely, tolerant, doing great work, excellent people, and just great. In some answers, such an option was met that such people cause pride, if not mercenary motives are in the first place among them. Two respondents also indicated that “they probably have no one else to care for, they are alone.”

And the last question was how to control the quality of services provided to an elderly person in a foster family. Most respondents suggested that social workers should do this in the form of visiting foster families. They called various terms: once a week, once a month, every six months. Some respondents added visits of medical staff to foster families. It was also proposed to hold meetings and conversations, both with the elderly themselves, individually, and with all family members. Several answers suggested a survey or regular calls to an elderly person, the creation of a special commission for regular inspections. In addition, there were some rather unusual answers. For example, there were answers suggesting a detailed photo or video report from foster families, which should be provided to the social security authorities on a monthly basis. One of the answers was to receive notifications from a special device, issued to an elderly citizen.

4. Discussion

For the development of foster families for senior citizens, the following aspects can be suggested as issues for discussion:

- What tools can develop the motivational activity of citizens to create a foster family for senior citizens? Is it possible to single out material interest as a leading axiom? Which psychological, emotional, and social “benefits” does the institution of the foster family of senior citizens have for the rest of the family members? [3].
- How can the rights of an elderly person living in a foster family be protected? What regulations, protocols governing the procedure and rules for the creation and functioning of a foster family need to be approved? How should the preparation and maintenance of a foster family for senior citizens be organized?

5. Conclusion

A foster family for senior citizens significantly improves their quality of life, helps to overcome loneliness, maintain a sense of usefulness for others, strengthens the bond between generations [4]. In addition, this form of living arrangement significantly relieves the burden on the budget in the social sphere, since it is much less expensive compared to the stationary and semi-stationary forms of social services [5].

According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Altai Region, there were 82,417 pensioners living alone in the region by January 1, 2018. 25,768 of them are registered in the social security bodies. According to the Ministry of Altai Region for Labor and Social Protection, only 167 elderly people were arranged in foster families for 2017.

Based on the results of a sociological study conducted in 2018 among the residents of the Altai region, we can argue that work to promote a foster family for senior citizens is poorly placed in the region. The low level of awareness about this form of living arrangement hinders the development of a foster family for senior citizens. In this regard, the formation of purposeful ongoing information work among the population using various communication channels in order to create a positive image of foster families for senior citizens seems to be relevant. In addition, vocational training and support for the foster family of senior citizens should be organized. This will create conditions for creating civil initiatives for the development of foster families of senior citizens among the population of the Altai Region.

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