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**MHE COMMENTS ON MDRI REPORT
“HIDDEN SUFFERING: ROMANIA’S SEGREGATION AND ABUSE
OF INFANTS AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES”**

Brussels, 1 June 2006

Mental Health Europe has read the MDRI report about mistreatment of children in Romanian mental institutions and supports the conclusions and recommendations of the report.

MHE Plea for the protection of Children’s Human Rights

There is strong evidence¹ that the early years of life have a crucial impact on mental health throughout the life cycle. The development of strategies to promote the mental health of young children is therefore of fundamental importance. This involves raising awareness of the significance of the mental well being of children, as well as interventions to support parenting, to facilitate positive relationships between parents and children, to improve child-rearing conditions and **to protect vulnerable children**.

Strategies to promote mental well being not only have a role to play in preventing mental health problems e.g. reducing depression, but also have a wide range of social and physical health benefits e.g. reduced suicide rates, reduced behavioural problems, decreases in teenage pregnancies and **reductions in child abuse**.

Providing additional support for vulnerable children is a crucial factor in preventing problems from persisting into adulthood. Vulnerable children, whose psycho-social development may be blocked or damaged include children who are ill, those with physical or mental disabilities, sensory impairment, those who have been neglected, sexually, physically or emotionally abused, children who have witnessed or experienced extreme trauma and children who are refugees.

Such children **have the right to obtain specific help, treatment or assistance, including social support, psychotherapeutic interventions and counselling (involving the children themselves, their parents and/or families)**.

Therefore there should exist recognised and accessible services and networks of professionals, specific to children and to their families, who are able to detect early mental health problems and offer support and care.

¹ Source « Mental Health Promotion for Children up to 6 Years », available at the MHE website at <http://www.mhe-sme.org/en/projects1.htm>

Key Priorities and Recommendations for Community Living

All services for disabled people must be based on respect for human rights.

There are numerous international and European laws that protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. They provide for protection from arbitrary detention, adequate living conditions, adequate provision of care and treatment, individualised care plans, protection from harm, the right to private and family life, and the right to privacy.

Although human rights are universal, until relatively recently disabled people have not been seen as beneficiaries of such rights. Too little attention has been given to addressing the serious human rights abuses suffered by disabled people.

In the report of the European Research Initiative on Community-based Residential Alternatives for Disabled People "Included in Society"², carried out by Mental Health Europe, Inclusion Europe, Autism Europe and the Open Society Mental Health Initiative, it is stated that the development of high quality community-based services must be founded upon the core values of equal citizenship and social inclusion. Accordingly, five key principles arising from existing human rights instruments are suggested in order to assist and underpin such work. These principles for positive change are: respect, choice, participation, independence, and regional/local responsibility for disabled citizens.

To achieve the goals for community living and the availability of comprehensive and high-quality services for all disabled people across Europe, the "Included in Society" project proposes six policy priorities:

1. develop policies and action plans for the provision of community-based services that respect and promote the human rights of disabled people
2. provide, as a priority, community-based services for disabled people in the new member states and accession countries
3. establish compulsory systems of quality monitoring and assurance as well as accessible complaints mechanisms
4. establish financing arrangements that ensure services are provided on the basis of individual needs
5. commit to stop the building of new large residential institutions in Europe
6. establish the "European Coalition for Community Living" as a European monitoring and action centre for the provision of community-based services in Europe.

Community living and comprehensive, high quality, community-based services require the identification of realistic and effective policy priorities. Such priorities can assist the individuals, organisations and government bodies involved in this work to agree a plan of action for the development and provision of community-based services as alternatives to institutional care.

The following steps should be taken to meet the six key priorities:

1. Develop policies and action plans at local, national, European and international level
 - 1.1. protect and promote the rights of disabled people
 - 1.2. mainstream disability policies at all levels
 - 1.3. establish and implement Action Plans
 - 1.4. launch a European awareness campaign

² The full report "Included in Society – Results and Recommendations of the European Research Initiative on Community-Based Residential Alternatives for Disabled People", supported by the European Commission, can be found at http://www.community-living.info/contentpics/226/Included_in_Society_Summary.pdf

- 1.5. reinforce the UN Standard Rules and develop an appropriate UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities
2. Community-based services in the new member states and accession countries
 - 2.1. local responsibility for disabled citizens
 - 2.2. equal access for NGOs to provide quality community-based services**
 - 2.3. European Union funding for community-based residential services in new member states and accession countries**
3. Establish compulsory systems of quality monitoring and enforcement
 - 3.1. address disability issues in the framework of consumer protection policy
 - 3.2. establish systems of quality monitoring oriented to the quality-of-life of the user
 - 3.3. connect financial and administrative consequences to quality monitoring
4. Establish financing systems based on individual needs
 - 4.1. promote the principle of needs-based financing
 - 4.2. establish systems of personal budget
 - 4.3. create independent systems for user support
5. A commitment to stop the building of new large residential institutions in Europe
6. The European Coalition for Community Living.

Based on these policy recommendations, Mental Health Europe calls upon the Romanian Government and the European Commission to put a stop to the abuses in Romania. The inhumane and degrading treatment that the most vulnerable Romanian citizens are forced to endure is intolerable and violates international human rights law.