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EEG pannelist - on behalf of Supreme State Prosecutor's Office, Slovenia

The House for Children - the Slovenian approach to addressing the vulnerabilities of children and youth in criminal proceedings

The House for Children in the Republic of Slovenia presents a new concept for the treatment of children, victims and witnesses of crime, based on the cooperation of relevant institutions in one place and in a child-friendly way and which prevents their secondary victimization. It is adapted from an Icelandic model called Barnahus, which is also promoted as the most appropriate by the European Commission and the Council of Europe. Unlike other similar models, the Slovenian model of The House for Children also allows the hearing of minors – perpetrators of criminal offences, for whom their potential special needs make it necessary for them to be questioned in a more appropriate place for them. Several state institutions participated in the project, in addition to the Ministry of Justice, notably the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, the Supreme Court, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Ombudsman, the NGO SOS telephone, the police, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The project was financed primarily by the Norwegian Financial Fund (NFM).

The aim of the project was to improve interinstitutional cooperation in the procedures for dealing with children, victims of crime (firstly for sexual offences) and to prevent re-victimization from possible multiple hearings, which in the past also took place in completely inadequate places for children – in the police premises, in court and so on. We have also been bound by European guidelines to ensure child-friendly justice. Cooperation is also planned with the civil courts departments, in particular with regard to the award of children and the preparation of interviews with them, including for the purposes of producing an expert opinion.

For the purposes of the operation of the Institute House for Children, a special *Act on the protection of children in criminal proceedings and their full treatment in the house for children*

was adopted in 2021, which envisages certain concrete measures to eliminate unnecessary secondary victimization of children or minor witnesses, in particular the reduction of the number of hearings in criminal proceedings. The law provides that the full treatment of minor victims and witnesses in (pre-criminal proceedings) is carried out as a public service in a public institution – a house for children whose establishment is provided for in the provisions of the Act, which is why the Government of the Republic of Slovenia has also issued a regulation on the way in which the Public Institution House for Children and other participants cooperate in ensuring full treatment in the house for children.

The key role of the House of Children is to help obtain valid evidence for court proceedings through the child's testimony, which is not taking place in court. The essence of the House for Children is also that it caters for the overall treatment of children. The Children's House allows for a one-stop-centre approach, with cooperation between relevant institutions and agencies such as police, social services, child protection, mental and physical health services and the prosecution, in one, a child-friendly place.

Our selected House for Children in Ljubljana, which in no way deviates from other houses in the surrounding area, is placed in the urban environment, in the immediate vicinity of the city's passenger traffic, in front of the house there are some parking spaces intended only for customers. The feature of the House for Children is that it has two separate entrances, through one entering the parties of the proceedings – the accused, the lawyer, the judge, the public prosecutor and the other, through the other - in Slovenia it is the entrance by elevator – the child and his/her companions. Premises intended for interviewing children shall be completely separate from the premises to which the other parties to the proceedings are referred. They monitor the interview with the child in a special room, which is audio and video connected to the room in which the interview with the child is conducted, an audio connection via electronic devices. The room for interviews with children is equipped with cameras that allow a good view of the entrance to the room and on the child, especially on his face, to distinguish any emotional and other responses to questions, microphones are placed on the lights on the table so that the child does not interfere with the confession.

The task of this project is also to establish a network of trained experts (criminalists, clinical psychologists, prosecutors, doctors, social workers) and multidisciplinary teams, to establish cooperation and to enable the transfer of knowledge and experience of the operation of Barnabus houses for children with partner organisations from abroad, and to raise awareness among competent institutions, target groups and the general public about the issue and accessibility of assistance for children, victims and witnesses of crime.

The House for Children is staffed by the director of this institution, forensic interviews, clinical psychologists as therapists and, if necessary, a pediatrician or youth gynecologist, as the House for Children also has a so-called medical room for the needs of primary examinations of children who are victims of crime.

Currently, the House for Children is training state prosecutors and judges involved in the case, as well as civil judges who rule on child allocation disputes, as the plan also includes extending the operation of the Children's House to the civilian field.



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