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CHILD PROTECTION GUIDELINES – GDCK ČAKOVEC BENEFICIARIES

CROATIAN RED CROSS
CITY SOCIETY OF THE RED CROSS ČAKOVEC

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Croatian Red Cross (CRC) - City Society of the Red Cross Čakovec" (hereinafter: GDCK Čakovec) is a non-profit humanitarian organization established under the Croatian Red Cross Act (OG 71/10, 136/20). In accordance with the Act, the Regulation on the Methods and Deadlines for Payment of Funds from Local and Regional Government Units for the Operation of Croatian Red Cross Organizational Forms (OG 81/11), the Statute of GDCK Čakovec, decisions of the Assembly and the Committee of GDCK Čakovec, decisions of CRC, the principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as the needs of the local community and approved financial resources, GDCK Čakovec operates in the following areas: tracing service, health and educational programs, youth Red Cross programs, social-humanitarian programs, implementation of joint CRC actions, and public relations. GDCK Čakovec operates across the entire Međimurje County.

Within its social-humanitarian programs, GDCK Čakovec contributes to the social inclusion of the most vulnerable members of the community, including children. GDCK Čakovec employees and volunteers are in frequent contact with this group through regular, project-based, and programm activities aimed at providing in-home support, educational support, workshops, psychosocial support, counseling and assistance, information dissemination, and more.

GDCK Čakovec recognizes its responsibility towards every child it comes into contact with through its programs and activities and is committed to protecting and promoting children's well-being (a child being any person under 18 years of age), in accordance with Croatian national law and international child protection standards. These guidelines serve as a tool to ensure a safe and stimulating environment for children in the development and implementation of GDCK Čakovec programs.

II. CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND PROTECTION PRINCIPLES

GDCK Čakovec is committed to respecting and protecting the rights of every child in accordance with national and international laws. In all activities, the best interests of the child must be prioritized, with full respect for their rights.

Child Protection Principles

1. Zero tolerance for violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect of children

All children have the right to life, development, and protection from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect. GDCK Čakovec does not tolerate any form of violation of these rights. If such acts occur, they will result in criminal, civil, and/or disciplinary sanctions.

GDCK Čakovec will not knowingly engage persons who pose a risk to the safety and well-being of children and will conduct checks to minimize the risk of violence, abuse, and neglect within its programs and activities. All participants, including employees, volunteers, partners, external collaborators, and others, are aware of their responsibilities in preventing violence and abuse and are encouraged to adhere to the guidelines.

2. Best interests of the child

In all activities involving children, priority is given to the best interests of the child.

3. Child participation in decision-making processes

GDCK Čakovec strives to include children in decisions affecting them. Where possible and appropriate, children will be informed, consulted, and given the opportunity to express their views, promoting their role in shaping and improving programs.

4. Risk assessment and child protection impact management

GDCK Čakovec takes all reasonable measures to identify, reduce, and manage risks to which children may be exposed. This includes regular risk assessments, developing tools, implementing safety measures, providing technical support, and monitoring program effectiveness to ensure a safe environment for children.

5. Shared responsibility for child protection

For effective child protection, all employees, volunteers, partners, and collaborators of GDCK Čakovec take responsibility for the safety and protection of children within their activities. All participants, including partner organizations and external collaborators, are expected to actively cooperate and comply with child protection guidelines to ensure a safe environment.

6. Fair and transparent conduct

All allegations of breaches of child protection guidelines within GDCK Čakovec will be promptly investigated and thoroughly assessed. If a reasonable suspicion is established, appropriate procedures will be initiated in accordance with the law. Throughout the process, emphasis is placed on protecting the child's interests, applying principles of confidentiality, safety, non-discrimination, and respect for the child's rights.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND COMMONLY ACCEPTED DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENCE

Protection from violence in the Republic of Croatia is regulated by numerous legal acts at the constitutional, international, and statutory levels, including: *the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Act on Protection against Domestic Violence, the Criminal Code, the Family Act, the Criminal Procedure Act, the Gender Equality Act, and the Anti-Discrimination Act*.

The definition of domestic violence and peer violence is taken from *the Act on Protection against Domestic Violence* (OG 70/17, 126/19, 84/21, 114/22, 36/24) and *the Protocol on Peer Violence adopted by the Government of the Republic of Croatia*.

According to Article 10 of *the Act on Protection against Domestic Violence*, **domestic violence** includes:

a) the use of physical force without resulting bodily injury;
b) corporal punishment or other degrading treatment of children;
c) psychological violence causing harm to the victim's dignity or resulting in distress;
d) economic violence, such as prohibiting or preventing the use of joint or personal property, managing personal income or inherited assets, preventing employment, or denying resources for household maintenance and child care;
e) neglecting the needs of a person with disabilities or elderly person, causing them distress or violating their dignity, resulting in physical or emotional suffering.

Peer violence among children and youth refers to any intentional physical or psychological violent behavior aimed at children and youth by their peers, with the intention of causing harm. Regardless of where it occurs, it can vary in form, severity, intensity, and duration, often involving repeated patterns and an unequal power dynamic (stronger against weaker or a group against an individual).

Violence involves six key components:

a) intent to cause harm or injury;
b) intensity and duration (repetition of violent behavior);
c) power imbalance (differences in age, strength, numerical advantage);
d) vulnerability and helplessness of the victim;
e) lack of support;
f) consequences.

IV. FORMS OF CHILD RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Within the guidelines of GDCK Čakovec for child protection, various forms of child rights violations and threats to their safety, well-being, and development are defined, to ensure clarity in identification and prompt response. These violations encompass a wide range of actions that can seriously impact a child's physical, emotional, and social health.

1. Child Abuse

Child abuse refers to intentional acts that have an actual or potential negative effect on a child's safety, well-being, dignity, and development. Such behavior occurs within a relationship of trust, responsibility, and/or power, and may include:

• Emotional or psychological abuse – behaviors that harm a child's emotional health, such as restriction of movement, mocking, threats, intimidation, discrimination, or rejection. These actions can severely impair emotional and social development, leading to long-term psychological consequences.

• Physical abuse – the use of physical force against a child that causes or may cause injury or physical suffering. This includes hitting, corporal punishment, and any action that harms the child's physical health.

• Sexual abuse – occurs when an adult involves a child in sexual activities that the child cannot understand or consent to, or that are inappropriate for their development. These acts violate laws and social norms and include forced participation in pornography or other forms of sexual exploitation.

2. Exploitation of Children

Child exploitation refers to situations where a person in a position of power or trust takes advantage of a child for personal gain, pleasure, or profit. Such exploitation may include:

• Economic exploitation – including child labor that amounts to modern slavery or forced labor, as well as work that puts children in dangerous situations.

• Hazardous or harmful work – any work that, by its nature or demands, may threaten a child's physical, mental, moral, or social development. This includes involvement in illegal activities such as drug trafficking or participation in armed conflicts.

• Sexual exploitation – including child prostitution, trafficking for sexual abuse, child pornography, and other forms of sexual exploitation, including digital grooming and manipulation.

3. Child Neglect

Neglect is a serious form of abuse referring to the inability or unwillingness of caregivers to provide for a child's basic needs such as food, clothing, medical care, education, or emotional support. Neglect can result from ignorance, indifference, or deliberate action and occurs when:

• The caregiver has the means, ability, and knowledge to meet the child's needs but consciously or unconsciously fails to do so;

• The caregiver lacks the resources but does not take the necessary steps to seek help and protect the child.

Such actions can seriously endanger the health and development of the child and require immediate intervention by competent authorities.

V. OBLIGATIONS, SAFETY MEASURES, AND SCREENING OF EMPLOYEES/VOLUNTEERS/EXTERNAL ASSOCIATE

All employees, volunteers, and external associates of GDCK Čakovec are responsible for preventing and reporting child abuse and are required to:

• Ensure a safe environment for children: All activities and spaces involving children must be safe, supervised, and compliant with regulations.

• Respect the rights and dignity of the child: In all interactions with children, employees and volunteers must act respectfully and attentively, honoring the child's needs and boundaries.

• Report suspicions of violence: Every employee, volunteer, or external associate is obligated to report any suspicion of abuse, exploitation, or neglect of a child to the competent authorities and responsible persons within GDCK Čakovec, in accordance with national law and internal procedures (Safety and Protection Measures and GDCK Čakovec Protocol). Employees are also required to report any offenses or crimes related to child exploitation they have committed, whether before or during their engagement with GDCK Čakovec.

• Complete training: Employees and volunteers must participate in regular training on child protection, recognizing abuse, and proper procedures in cases of suspected abuse.

To ensure maximum child protection, GDCK Čakovec implements the following safety measures:

• Candidate screening: All candidates applying for employment or volunteer positions involving direct contact with children are subject to criminal record checks.

• Regular monitoring and evaluation: GDCK Čakovec conducts regular oversight and evaluation of employees and volunteers working with children to ensure quality and safety of services provided.

• Education and training: Mandatory child protection training for all new employees and volunteers working with children. Refresher workshops and trainings are held regularly.

VI. STANDARDS OF ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR TOWARDS CHILDREN

These guidelines define standards of acceptable and unacceptable behavior toward children within the activities and programs of GDCK Čakovec. All employees, volunteers, external associates, and others are required to adhere to these standards to ensure child protection and promote their well-being.

General Rules of Conduct

All activities involving children must be supervised by GDCK Čakovec employees. Where possible, staff of the same gender as the child should be present for additional protection.

There must always be more than one adult present near children, except in exceptional, clearly justified circumstances.

Working with children without supervision or in isolated areas where they cannot be observed is strictly prohibited. If necessary, the space should have visible panels or windows.

Employees and volunteers must not bring children to their private residences, except in situations where the child is in immediate danger. In such cases, supervisors must be informed immediately.

Sleeping in the same room or bed with a child is not allowed unless absolutely necessary and approved in advance by supervisors and the child’s parents/guardians.

Photographing or filming children is only allowed with prior consent from parents or guardians and the child, and all media must portray children respectfully and appropriately.

Prohibited Behaviors

Sexual activity with persons under 18 is strictly prohibited, regardless of local laws or customs. Misjudging the child's age is not a valid excuse.

Marriage or cohabitation with a person under 18 is not permitted, regardless of local marriage laws.

Participation in any ceremonies or customs involving genital mutilation, virginity testing, or any form of physical harm to children is forbidden.

Physical punishment or hitting children is never allowed.

Psychological abuse such as humiliation, shaming, belittling, or degrading a child is strictly prohibited.

Discrimination based on gender, disability, sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity is not tolerated.

It is forbidden to form relationships with children that could be considered abusive, exploitative, or inappropriate.

Providing alcohol or any psychoactive substances to children is strictly prohibited.

Privacy and Technology Rules

Employees, volunteers, and external associates may not use computers, phones, cameras, or social media in ways that could harm a child, including accessing child pornography or exploitative content.

Improper use of social networks or other media to harass or exploit children is prohibited.

Before using images of children in public materials, consent must be obtained from the child and their parents/guardians, and the images must portray children in a respectful manner.

VII. COOPERATION WITH COMPETENT AUTHORITIES AND PARTNERS

GDCK Čakovec maintains close cooperation with competent authorities such as the Social Welfare Centre, the Community Service Centre, the Ministry of the Interior – Police Department, educational institutions, and other child protection organizations, in order to ensure timely and effective protection of children. GDCK Čakovec also collaborates with other non-governmental organizations working in the field of child protection, with the aim of strengthening capacities and ensuring better coordination.

VIII. MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF GUIDELINE IMPLEMENTATION

GDCK Čakovec will regularly monitor the implementation of these guidelines through:

• Annual evaluations: Regular evaluations will be conducted to assess the implementation of child protection measures, including a review of reported cases and actions taken.

• Guideline revision: The guidelines will be revised every few years or as needed to remain aligned with legislative changes and best practices in child protection.