

First recommendations of the International Steering Committee for the Process of Deinstitutionalization in Slovenia as part of the Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia for Deinstitutionalization in Social Protection for the period 2024-2034 (StaDI 2024–2034)

Introduction

In accordance with the Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia for Deinstitutionalization in Social Care for the period 2024-2034 (StaDI 2024-2034), the task of the International Steering Committee (from here on ISC) is to monitor the implementation of the strategy and ensure the efficient use of funds for deinstitutionalization. The members of the ISC are responsible for advising and guiding the transformation of institutional care into community-based care, with the aim of improving the quality of life for users and respecting their human rights.

The ISC consists of Slovenian and international experts. The committee's purpose is to support the deinstitutionalization process, participate in various committees, comment on documents and outputs created during the deinstitutionalization process, and provide consultations to key stakeholders in the process.

The ISC includes six experts, among whom are:

- **Jan Pfeiffer**, one of the leading experts and advocates of mental health reform and deinstitutionalization in the Czech Republic and across Europe. Dr. Pfeiffer has been involved in projects transforming care for people with disabilities in many European countries. He is also the founder of the European Expert Group on Deinstitutionalization and one of the authors of the European Guidelines on Deinstitutionalization. He has been a member of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman

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or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Committee against Torture and Ill-Treatment of the Council of Europe.

- **Nic Crosby**, currently leading the development of intensive, personalized support for people in the most complex life situations in the United Kingdom. He has years of experience providing user-centered support based on personal planning and individual financing. He has practical experience both in working with adults in complex life situations and in the early intervention of children and young people.
- **Dragica Fojan** has over 26 years of experience in social welfare, including 20 years in leadership positions. She has worked in both the non-governmental and public sectors as the director of VDC Koper, coordinator of the regional service for domestic violence cases, and as president of the council during the pilot deinstitutionalization project at the Kras Home. She has extensive experience in multidisciplinary cooperation, planning and implementing community programs, and introducing new working methods. She is well-versed in social welfare legislation, program networks, and public institution management.
- **Assist. Matej Vinko, MD**, specialist in public health, focuses on mental health epidemiology. He is the head of the Mental Health Center at the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ), head of the National Mental Health Program 2018-2028, and an assistant professor at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ljubljana. He is a specialist in public mental health and has extensive experience in management, organization, and planning of mental health prevention. He is the editor-in-chief of the Public Health journal, participates in the establishment and monitoring of mental health centers across Slovenia, and leads various awareness campaigns in the field of mental health.
- **Emir Okanović** is the President of the Sonček Federation, the first president with a disability, with advocacy experience for an inclusive society. He is also a member of the Council for People with Disabilities of the Republic of Slovenia. He participates in training external collaborators and partially covers international activities. In his career, he has been active in various projects, trainings, and conferences. As a user, he has significant experience with life in institutions and outside them. He actively contributes to shaping policies and strategies for people with disabilities through the Council for People with Disabilities of Slovenia. He works in the disability enterprise Skrbovin'ca, where he is employed as a promoter-informer and unit leader.
- **Sam Smith** is the founder and executive director of the non-profit organization C-Change Scotland, which supports people with disabilities in living independently and integrating into the community. In Scotland, she played a key role in closing large institutions such as Lennox Castle Hospital, one of the largest institutions for people with learning difficulties in the UK. Her work focused on transitioning users from institutional care to community-based services, advocating for tailored services that respect autonomy and individual rights. She has made a significant contribution to the development of policies supporting independent living and social justice for people with disabilities.

Framework for Preparing the 1st Recommendations

The members of the ISC carried out their first study visit to Slovenia from March 24 to March 28, 2025. In accordance with their tasks, the committee provided on-the-ground support to stakeholders of deinstitutionalization and monitored the implementation of StaDI 2024-34 in order to prepare recommendations and observations on the deinstitutionalization process in Slovenia. During the first visit, the committee initially met with service providers in the field of disability (Social Care Institution Hrastovec and non-governmental organizations operating in the field of disability). Subsequently, the committee met with the Ministry for Solidarity-Based Future (from here on Ministry) and the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (from here on Institute).

During the first visit, the committee gathered information on the deinstitutionalization process in Slovenia and provided support to stakeholders for further deinstitutionalization efforts. The following comments and recommendations were developed based on the observations during the visit in March 2025, and the input from all the above-mentioned organizations during the visit.

Recommendations

The following are our recommendations made after our first week with the team at Institute, visiting Hrastovec, meeting with NGO's and a day spent with members of the Ministry team.

1. Ensure all appropriate Ministries, working groups and national representative groups are involved

Over the week it became very clear that there is much cross-over with the work of other strategies and development groups working at a national scale, often co-ordinated and hosted by one Ministry or another. Our first recommendation is to the whole community of ministries, advocates, ombudsmen and others to ensure that there is strong cross-system involvement and to work together to forward deinstitutionalization in Slovenia.

We recommend:

- *To actively include the topic of deinstitutionalization in existing working groups that address areas relevant to deinstitutionalization. Stakeholders should avoid duplicating work, time, and effort and, as much as possible, use existing working groups for planning, managing, and monitoring the deinstitutionalization process.*
- *Representatives from the Ministry for Social care, the Ministry for Justice and the Ministry for Health are involved in discussions about the delivery of the strategy as there will be times when their support will be essential. Particular attention should be paid to proactively engaging and securing alignment with all relevant ministries, including addressing potential legislative or procedural friction points given the interconnected nature of changes required.*

2. Recommendation to All Key Stakeholders in Deinstitutionalization – Involving Family Members

Based on our visit, ISC observes that family members of people placed in institutions are not currently actively involved in the deinstitutionalization process. It is crucial to support them so they can be equal partners in the process and participate in determining what community-based services are possible, both for the users and the support of family members. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *The family members of people with disabilities placed in institutions and those transitioning to the community in the deinstitutionalization process are actively involved by all key stakeholders in deinstitutionalization.*
- *In addition, support is provided to develop parent/carer forums (local or national) that include families/carers of disabled adults living in the community and the families of young disabled children. The focus of the forums would be to support the ongoing development of rights compliant community-based supports that meet the needs of individuals and families, now and in the future and obviate the need for institutional care.*

3. Recommendation to the Ministry – Clear commitment to deinstitutionalization

Current stakeholders in Slovenia are not sufficiently aware that, under StaDI 24-34, institutions will be transformed, and people currently living in institutions will be living in the community. It is unclear what role different stakeholders will play in the deinstitutionalization process, who manages these processes, and what it practically means to implement Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (from here on Convention). Resistance to deinstitutionalisation is likely to continue without a clear concise vision of what all this work will mean for people, their families and for the workforce, i.e. what the 10-year strategy will achieve. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *The Ministry makes a clear public commitment to the transformation of institutions for people with disabilities into community services.*
- *The Ministry clearly presents to all stakeholders the vision of how the transformation of institutions will be carried out, how community services will be established, and what the final system of community-based support will look like to prevent institutionalization.*
- *The Ministry immediately aligns all its policies, guidelines, and legal proposals with the needs of deinstitutionalization.*
- *The Ministry revises the job descriptions of directors and professional leaders of institutions to explicitly define responsibilities related to the implementation of*

deinstitutionalization and the provision of conditions for independent living in the community for residents.

- *The Ministry develops a 'Theory of Change' that supports the delivery of the vision over ten years and explains the work that will need to be undertaken to successfully transform institutions for people across Slovenia into community-based support.*
- *The Ministry with the Institute develops a set of outcomes measures that support the Theory of Change (see recommendation 2).*
- *The Ministry should prioritize development and »vignetting« of Slovenian good practices so that they can be used as a practical example of what the vision is (ie. »We wish for every person with a disability to receive **this** type of model of care«)*

4. Recommendation to the Ministry and the Institute - Inclusion of Key Stakeholders in the Process of Deinstitutionalization

Continuous dialogue and co-creation of the deinstitutionalization process with key stakeholders (including those placed in institutions and their families, persons with disabilities currently placed in institutions and those with lived experience who now live within the community and their family members and family members of young disabled children), and inclusive decision-making regarding deinstitutionalization will be an essential factor in success. Decisions made must be based on respect for human rights (especially Article 19 of the Convention) and in the direction of seeking the best possible solutions and improving the standard of service quality. Therefore, we propose to the Ministry:

- *The Ministry seeks ways to involve all stakeholders in the delivery of the Strategy, understanding it is modelling what is expected to be delivered by institutions as part of their transformation plan.*
- *The Ministry's strategy group ensures active participation of people with lived experience with appropriate advocacy support.*
- *The Ministry's work on quality measurement of life in the community ensures active participation of people with lived experience and family members.*

5. Recommendation to the Ministry - Management of the Transformation Process of Institutions

Institutions are facing a significant challenge in the deinstitutionalization process; the process requires them to develop non-institutional support solutions that are different from how they have been operating for decades. In short, research and international practice examples show that institutions will develop institutional solutions. Deinstitutionalization should not depend

solely on the institutions and should not become the sole and or primary responsibility of the institution's management. Therefore, we recommend to the Ministry:

- *The Ministry should ensure external management of the transformation process of individual institutions, with clear definition and division of tasks and responsibilities among all involved stakeholders.*
- *The external management of the transformation will include people with lived experience, family representatives, representatives of community-based services and representatives from the local community.*

6. Recommendation to the Ministry – Locked wards

The research “Transformation of Locked Wards Units into Community-Based Forms of Care for Adults and Children with Disabilities” was launched during our visit, Jan Pffiefer, an ISC member participated in the roundtable discussion following the report's presentation

We would like to emphasize that we consider the Slovenian social welfare system, which allows locked wards in social care institutions to be an anomaly, a gross violation of human rights. In the very space that should provide care for people with disabilities, locked wards are out of place and out-of-date.

This practice persists whilst there are many examples of good community-based support for those with the most complicated of lives and support needs; members of the ISC have specific experience and expertise to share.

We also learned about the pilot project for specialized units for children and young people with disabilities, where the use of coercive measures is allowed. From the perspective of children's rights and the rights of people with disabilities, this again is a breach in the rights of a child (reference the UN Rights of the Child). Various studies show that this approach leads to the re-victimization and re-traumatization of children and causes psychological, physical, and social harm to children and adolescents, which never leads to recovery. Therefore, we recommend to the Ministry:

- *The Ministry should immediately prohibit the use of coercive protective measures in specialized units for children and adolescents and ensure intensive support for children and young people with disabilities in the community. We propose that the Social Protection Act be appropriately amended to enable community support for these children and young people (either in the primary family, foster family, or in individual housing with family-like upbringing, or in smaller community-based support forms).*
- *We propose that the Ministry prepares a proposal for the transformation of locked wards in social care institutions and the cessation of establishing new locked wards for adults in social welfare institutions. Based on the prepared proposal, a pilot project for transforming one locked ward for adults should be commissioned. This proposal must integrate the development of robust community-based crisis intervention services and*

intensive support alternatives, acknowledging that pressure for locked wards often stems from the lack of such alternatives. This will enable the Ministry to gradually phase out the locked wards as they exist today.

We, as ISC members, are willing to cooperate in preparing proposals for better support options for people (adults and children) currently placed in locked wards, organizing professional study visits to observe good practices, and consulting with the Ministry and the service providers managing locked wards.

7. Recommendation to the Ministry – Ensuring a Legal Framework for Deinstitutionalization

Several representatives of NGO's and institution management pointed out that deinstitutionalization cannot be implemented within the existing system. At the same time, there are already good practices of community services in Slovenia, these all function within the existing law.

We also recommend a comprehensive review and identification of obstacles in the legislation for the implementation of deinstitutionalization, so that the process can proceed as smoothly as possible over the next 10 years and so that people with disabilities will have access to the rights guaranteed by the Convention. During our visit, the right to work and the right to access regular educational programs were particularly highlighted. The Ministry also presented a proposal for amendments to the Social Protection Act to facilitate the transition to the community.

Therefore, we recommend to the Ministry:

- *The Ministry should ensure an appropriate legal framework that allows deinstitutionalization and provides a clear interpretation of the existing legislation.*
- *The Ministry reviews current legislation and identifies a timeline of amendment and change to existing law permitting ever greater community living for people with disabilities.*
- *The Ministry seeks ways of providing independent legal advice and/or training to NGO's and others informing them of the law and tackling misunderstandings.*
- *The Ministry quickly initiates procedures for amending the Social Protection Act to allow the establishment of community support and ensure the legal basis for the functioning of multidisciplinary teams aimed at relocating people from institutions and preventing institutionalization.*
- *The Ministry initiated revising guardianship laws to actively promote supported decision-making and mitigate provider liability concerns.*
- *The Ministry seeks ways of expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities beyond sheltered workshops and removing legislative obstacles for*

employment of people with disabilities (e.g. disability pensions and social benefits for payment of social services conflict with participation in the labor market).

- *We also recommend that, as a high priority, legislative adjustments for expanding employment opportunities and access to regular educational programs for people with disabilities be addressed.*

8. Recommendation to the Ministry – Housing

Stakeholders informed us that there is a shortage of social housing in Slovenia, and no housing is specifically allocated for people with disabilities transitioning from institutions.

European guidelines (2012) emphasize the importance for people with disabilities to have access to affordable and physically accessible housing, which is not segregated from the community and is safe. Policies should be designed and adopted to ensure the availability of social housing and increase the number of universally designed homes and apartments within the community. For the successful process of deinstitutionalization, ensuring dedicated housing for people transitioning from institutions is crucial. We conclude that at least 4,000 homes should be provided within the 10-year period of StaDI21-34. Therefore, we recommend:

- *The Ministry with ministerial partners allocates 20% of social housing for people with disabilities transitioning from institutions and sets out a legal framework to support this in conjunction with wider ongoing investment in social housing.*

9. Recommendation to the Ministry – Addressing the Issue of Buildings in Transformation of Institutions

The leadership of Hrastovec raised the issue of what will happen to the institution's buildings (e.g., the castle), once they are vacated by the residents. We are aware that a similar issue is being addressed by the Dom na Krasu institution, which has already transitioned most of its residents to the community. According to StaDI 2024-2034, many more institutions will soon face the same question. Therefore, we recommend:

- *The Ministry prepares guidelines for the closure and repurpose of buildings once institutions are vacated, with a commitment that these vacant spaces will not be used again for institutional care.*

10. Recommendation to the Ministry and the Social Care Institution Hrastovec – Transformation Plan

Despite the Ministry's directive, Hrastovec has not started preparing a transformation plan. For a systematic and sustainable transition to the community, it is essential that Hrastovec prepares

this plan. It is important that the institution (management and the supervisory board) receives clear guidance for developing the transformation plan and that all key stakeholders – residents, employees, management, the supervisory board, the Ministry for Solidarity, and others – are included in its preparation. Therefore, based on our visit, we recommend the following:

- *The Ministry for Solidarity should instruct the institution’s supervisory board and management of Hrastovec to prepare a transformation plan. If the institution needs support in preparing the plan, it should be provided by the Ministry (e.g., within the CUDI project). Furthermore, the Ministry should establish regular communication with Hrastovec to report on the progress in achieving the goals outlined in the transformation plan.*

11. Recommendation to Social Care Institution Hrastovec – Involving All Stakeholders in the Transformation of the Institution

It is crucial to involve all staff (not just the leadership and professional staff) and the residents in the deinstitutionalization process. All stakeholders, including representatives of the various groups in the institution, must participate in planning the transformation, meetings, discussions about the institution’s future, training for deinstitutionalization, and the creation of community-based services. Therefore, we recommend:

- *The leadership of Hrastovec ensures that all employees and residents are given opportunities to participate in discussions, meetings, and the planning process, and provide appropriate training for both staff and residents to work and live in the community. It is important to present to staff, unions, and other representative bodies how the transformation will unfold, what new working assignments will be, what career options will be possible in relation to the transformation, and how work and life in the community will look.*

12. Recommendation to the Ministry and the Institute – Measuring the Progress of Deinstitutionalization

During our visit, we observed that, as in other countries, the understanding of what constitutes a good deinstitutionalization process is very diverse in Slovenia. Therefore, it is sensible to measure the success of the process using one of the existing measurement tools for deinstitutionalisation that are based on Article 19 of the Convention. Both the Convention and the comments from the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to the Convention establish standards for community-based services that respect the rights of people with disabilities. In this way, we can measure progress based on a valid and binding international document. Therefore, we recommend that the Ministry:

- *Commission the Institute for Social Protection, the ISC with people with lived experience to review existing measurement tools to track progress in deinstitutionalization and in ensuring the right to independent living in the community, as outlined in Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.*
- *The Ministry accepts the recommendations made by the Institute of Social Protection and starts using it in support of the transformation of Hrastovec.*

13. Recommendation to the Institute for Social Protection – Good Practices and Methods of Work

Good practices in community-based support already exist in Slovenia, however they are often overlooked or not given enough prominence. We recommend documenting good practices in Slovenia to better understand what makes a service effective. This documentation should include descriptions of the key factors that make these practices successful, steps to establish such practices, and clear definitions of key terms (e.g., empowerment, community service, user perspective, etc.). It would be beneficial if this documentation is created in an interactive format, with the possibility of adding new content continuously. Therefore, we recommend that:

- *The Institute for Social Protection creates a brief, clear, and easily understandable overview of good practices in community-based support in Slovenia, which includes descriptions of the key factors for success, practical tools for service providers and users, and well-defined key concepts.*

14. Recommendation to the Institute for Social Protection – Risk Analysis for Deinstitutionalization

Several potential high risks that could hinder or even halt the deinstitutionalization process in Slovenia (e.g., it is currently unclear whether the government will approve StaDI 2024-2034) were identified through our visits and discussions with stakeholders. It is essential to anticipate these risks in advance to mitigate or prevent them. Therefore, we recommend:

- *The Institute for Social Protection in collaboration with ISC members, prepare a list of risks that could slow down or halt the deinstitutionalization process in Slovenia, including a plan to mitigate the identified risks.*