

Bridge of Hope NGO

According to official data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of Armenia, 141,000 individuals with disabilities are officially registered in the country. 14.5 percent of this number are children 0-18 years of age, or 8,427: 2,593 girls and 5,834 boys.

Many believe, however that the number of children with disabilities is much higher than the official data indicates. There is a serious lack of reliable information on the nature and prevalence of disability in Armenia. This is because disability issues are viewed chiefly within a health and welfare framework. Due to officially recognized disability criteria a big number of children with learning, behavioral and emotional difficulties, attention deficit, etc. are not identified as children with disabilities.



Traditionally the approach to disability issues in Armenia (like in other former Soviet countries) is based on the medical model and that is why disability has been regarded as a personal problem requiring treatment and adaptation at the individual level. In brief, the medical model gives society reason to deny services to disabled people.

The social model in contrast to medical model, views disability as a societal issue produced by social values and culture. It is based on the human rights of disabled people and calls for equal opportunity and full participation of all citizens in society.

“Bridge of Hope” Non-Governmental Organization is guided by the principles of social model of disability and focuses on removing the disabling barriers and trusts in the full abilities and potentials of children with disabilities and their parents. "Bridge of Hope" (BoH) was established in December of 1996 to help children and youth with disabilities and their parents to overcome their isolation and to help them participate in community life on an equal basis with others.



Our **mission** is to protect the rights and dignity of children and youth with disabilities and their families, and support their social inclusion in the Republic of Armenia. This inclusion is promoted by means of advocating for access to basic education, community based services and equal opportunities for independent living.

In this regards, the main directions of our activities are:

- Promoting access to basic education
- Provision of community based services of a high quality
- Advocacy, lobbying and awareness rising.

Ever since its establishment BoH has completed 52 projects and reached more than 2600 children with physical and mental disabilities and supported their inclusion into society and education system. Our programs have resulted in changes in policies, practices, ideas and beliefs in Armenia towards protection of rights of children with disabilities and their inclusion, and are directed to secure the fundamental right of children with disabilities to “... enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and

facilitate the child's active participation in the community" (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 23).



We believe that the greatest resource for helping children with disabilities is the immediate family and the community around the family. That is why we give special importance to support children with disabilities in inclusive environment together with their non-disabled peers. This means not only allowing children with disabilities to be in close proximity to their typically developing peers, but also maximizing their full participation in the programs/activities/society.

It is important to note that BoH operates not only in Yerevan, but in the impoverished north-eastern region of Tavush too. The choice of the province was not accidental: the high poverty level and disastrous consequences of the Armenia-Azerbaijan war were taken into account. Today BoH Child Development and Family Support Community Centers operate in the cities of Dilijan, Ijevan, Berd and Noyemberyan, providing services to children with and without disabilities so they develop their social skills to participate in school and community life. The services provided are:

- Speech Development and Social Skills Training
- Special Education: Individual Studies
- Art Therapy
- Consulting Services
- Physical Therapy

In order to further the cause BoH has identified the following **priorities** for the upcoming years:



1. Promote the introduction and reinforcement of a general inclusive education system in all levels of education (pre-school, secondary school, pre and middle vocational, higher education).
2. Develop and strengthen the capacity of the pedagogical-psychological teams of schools.
3. Promote the active participation of parents in the education process of their child by strengthening communication and cooperation between the school-parent-pedagogical psychological team.
4. Promote the active participation of persons with disabilities and their families in the protection of their rights.
5. Raise public awareness on issues relating to persons with disabilities from the standpoint of the social model and gender equality.
6. Further develop the quality of pedagogical physiological, social and rehabilitation services in the 4 cities and 58 rural communities of Tavush Region.

7. Promote the accessibility of the environment (public places, services, transportation, etc.) for people with disability.
8. Organizational development of Bridge of Hope to become an influential player in civil society.

A lot has been done and accomplished in the past 17 years, however much more remains to be done to better the lives of children and youth with disabilities, to change perceptions, break stereotypes and create an inclusive environment for all regardless of abilities and disabilities.

We at Bridge of Hope acknowledge this and understand the need to tirelessly and passionately work in order to realize our **vision**- to see a person with disability living a dignified life and together with everyone else taking part in building the future of his/her country.

We know that the best is yet to come.....



For more information please visit our website at: www.bridgeofhope.am