

11 March 2020

REF. Ensuring EU Response to COVID-19 tackles threat of social care emergency

Dear President of the European Commission,

Dear Ms Ursula von der Leyen,

We are writing to highlight that the provision of essential social care and support services to millions of older persons, persons with disabilities, children and other vulnerable persons in Europe is under threat following the spread of COVID-19.

Across the continent, like many other sectors, social service providers are taking incredible measures to effectively deal with prevention, support and containment. This necessity is even more important given **the nature of social service provision which is to provide care, support and health services to people who can be far more at risk to COVID-19 than the general population**, including for instance many older people, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable persons.

It is becoming increasingly clear that such important, yet basic measures are insufficient. In Italy, alarm bells have already been raised due to the freezing of activities for many social service providers in the northern part of the country, in large part due to funding & staffing difficulties. With the growing spread of the coronavirus, it is only a matter of time before the challenges met by social service providers in Italy are also experienced across the European Union; with an even worst impact in countries with less robust social support systems. There is little to no evidence of detailed plans at Member State level to help the social services sector or their local authorities cope with the outbreak of COVID-19.

The spread of COVID-19 will create major challenges for social service provision in several ways. On the one hand, it is expected that demand for support will increase due to both increased illness and the early release of many patients currently being cared for in hospitals. At the same time, the supply of service provision will be reduced to the point that many services will simply not be able to be provided – as it already the case in some parts of Italy.

Europe already has significant waiting lists and staff shortages in social care and support in most if not all European countries. The potential risk that up to 20% of workers will be unable to work would have significant consequences on an already extremely stretched workforce. The fact that many if not all countries require specific staffing levels in social care will also mean that many service providers will be legally obliged to close. The supply of adequate health & safety equipment for workers (masks,



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gloves, etc.) is also problematic given that the healthcare system is currently being prioritized, thus increasing the risk of contagion in social care.

In short, there is significant risk (and evidence) that the coronavirus could lead to the partial collapse of the care and support services system; thus putting at risk the fundamental rights and lives of millions of people most at risk from COVID-19, as well as the health, employment and work-life balance of millions who will have to fill in the “care gap”. Equally important is to ensure that Europe’s [11 million-strong social services workforce](#) – and millions of volunteers – are able to provide the care and support safely, paid for the hours they work and with decent working conditions. Social service providers need detailed support and advice about staff planning in the event of no longer being able to ensure legislated staff/user ratios, on accessing needed equipment (medicine, gloves, masks, etc.) and on how to provide the needed care if/once care providers freeze or close their activities.

To bring practical responses to this challenge, action is required at all levels.

We therefore urge you to ensure there is a concerted effort at European level to support immediate emergency measures in Member States in view of **guaranteeing the continuous provision of social care and support across Europe**. As such, we support your proposals regarding state aid and the flexibility within the Stability and Growth Pact. We also very much support your proposal for a Corona Response Investment Initiative, which includes targeting the health care systems and other vulnerable parts of our economies. This should also ensure a dedicated strand to supporting the continuity of social service provision across Europe referring to the specific issues mentioned above.

As major representatives of social services sector across Europe, we urge the European Union to include crucial preventive and support measures to avoid that what is primarily a health crisis transforms into a social emergency as well, with very harmful consequences for what constitutes the backbone of social protection systems for the most vulnerable persons in Europe. You will find in annex a list of priorities we believe the European Union should address in this regard.

We look forward to engaging with you or relevant Members of your College to identify specific solutions regarding the needs of social care and support providers. We are available at your request for such an exchange.

Yours sincerely,

Luk Zelderloo
Secretary General EASPD

Jiří Horecký
President European Ageing Network



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