

REPORT

INTEREST GROUP ON RHEUMATIC AND MUSCULOSKELETAL DISEASES (RMDs)

Advancing disability polices after the EU Accessibility Act

European Parliament, 26 February 2018

Roberta Metsola (MEP & Chair of the Interest Group on Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases) opened the meeting by highlighting the positive developments with regard to the EU Disability Strategy. She made clear that the European Parliament will support strong provisions in the EU Accessibility Act and that it holds a long-term commitment in supporting its quick and full implementation. The work of the Interest Group on RMDs addresses a wide range of people - young and elderly - affected by these diseases. Ms Metsola also mentioned the great effort demonstrated at EU level in improving accessibility for which the city of Lyon – winner of the 2018 Access City Award is a clear success story.

About the Interest Group on RMDs

The European Parliament Interest Group on Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases (RMDs) is composed of 22 Members of the European Parliament from various political groups and Member States. It aims at promoting EU policy initiatives to improve the lives of people with RMDs and works on parliamentary actions regarding RMD-related policy issues in order to facilitate the discussion with other EU policy makers, stakeholders and experts on ongoing and future policy developments.

Emmanuelle Grange (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) highlighted that the overall EU Disability Strategy was launched within the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. In order to achieve the full implementation of the strategy, important actions still have to be undertaken, especially in the fields of health and employment. The European Accessibility Acts is just the beginning, as the first steps towards a barrier-free Europe for people with disabilities. She likewise confirmed the Commission's commitment in further developing policies aiming at the full inclusion and accessibility of people with disabilities caused by RMDs and other reasons.

Stefani Wolfgarten (European Alliance in Social Insurance - ESIP, Disability & Rehabilitation Committee) underlined the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach including preventive measures to achieve the aim of long-lasting health and emphasised the importance of addressing employees with disabilities, employers and health care providers to further develop the reintegration and social inclusion of peoples affected by chronic diseases such as RMDs and improve the quality and accessibility of social services and equality in the working environment. Among other topics, ESIP works in the field of disability, rehabilitation, reintegration and the overall implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Victoria Romero (Spanish League Against Rheumatism - LIRE) showed data on the impact of disability in Europe, highlighting that RMDs represent the greatest cause of disability. One of the characteristics of these conditions is that they are often invisible and that disability or impairment in people with RMDs is not constant but fluctuates. In addition, people with RMDs very often suffer from other chronic diseases (in particular mental health problems such as depression). The characteristics of RMDs require - among others - high flexibility at the workplace to allow people with RMDs to work when they can, adapted health care protocols, as well as a comprehensive understanding by the immediate environment to prevent discrimination. Health care systems should guarantee - through re-organisation of their structures and rules - that people with disabilities are better integrated and enabled to live their everyday lives without excessive limitations. For her, accessibility needs to address the early steps of life with disabilities, when awareness has to be created among young families, educational bodies and social security systems.

Recommendations to address and improve the lives of people with disability in the coming years presented by Ms Romero focussed on legislation, including the need to improve the EU Accessibility Act and achieve a clear positioning by the EU institutions on the Equal Treatment Directive. In terms of non-legislative measures, the development of tools for sharing of best practices at EU level and cooperation with businesses to improve accessibility and economic inclusion, as well as long-term thinking and funding for research in 9th Framework Programme were underlined as crucial.

François Perl (National Institute for Health Care and Disability Insurance) highlighted the existence of a large definition of disability but the rather narrow approach in practice, which leads to unsolved questions on the side of the insurers. As people with disabilities are not fully integrated into the labour

market, people with disabilities incur great disadvantages in their daily life. The exclusion from the labour market implies in many cases a marginalisation from the social security system, which is based on workers' payment of social contributions in many EU countries. Therefore, he called for a reinvention of social security and social assistance, including for connected services. For this aim, financial benefits are not sufficient and proactive support is needed.

Valentian Polyklas (EUREGHA) presented the role of regional authorities in the delivery of health care services and her organisation's aim to improve cooperation between regional and local health authorities and create collaboration between its members and the European institutions. It helps members approach the EU institutions with their key issues and offers a platform for exchange of information and best practices. She called for the support of the European Parliament to ensure a positive impact with regard to cohesion policies after 2020. She also presented projects that EUREGHA and its members are involved in, including for people with chronic diseases and disabilities.

Antonella Pollazzi (Tuscany Region EU Liaison Office), gave a practical insight into the daily work of the Region of Tuscany in this area. The region is closely involved in the social field and around 20% of its social funds are dedicated to social innovation. In particular, the Regional Interdepartmental Working Group on Disability represents the connection between all the departments that face issue around disability and is a useful instrument for the coordination of regional disability-related measures. Additionally, and in order to increase awareness with regard to policies on disability and improve social inclusion, quality of life and accessibility, the Region of Tuscany launched an online portal on disabilities in 2015.

An-Sofie Leenknecht (European Disability Forum) presented her organisation, which represents organisation of persons with disabilities from across Europe at EU level. She highlighted the success of the EU disability strategy going hand-in-hand with the strengthening of the EU's commitment and further implementation of the UNCRPD. Furthermore, she mentioned the importance of rising debates within further policy areas and between all EU institutions and agencies. Among others, she referred to the right to housing, equal access to education, work and medical treatment. Likewise, the financial strategy should be linked to the general strategy of driving the agenda from 2020 to 2030 towards a more inclusive and equal Europe. Therefore, monitoring and compliance should be assured.



Through every new legislation, Europe should become more accessible and guarantee freedom of movement and living within Europe for all.

During the Q&A session following the presentations, the questions and discussions revolved around issues in the area of invisible and fluctuating conditions causing disabilities which by their nature are not always immediately visible. It was agreed that this requires a specific approach and reasonable accommodation. In addition, key topics discussed were accommodation of the workplace for people with disabilities and assessment of working capacity.