



**Brussels, April 22nd 2020**

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To:

Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life

Cc:

Commissioner Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs

Commissioner Helena Dalli, Commissioner for Equality

**Subject: COVID 19 and refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities**

Dear Vice-President,

I hope this letter finds you, your team, and your family in good health and well-being during this difficult period in Europe. I would like to thank you again for the extremely positive meeting we had in October 2019 and for your commitment to ensuring a Europe of human rights and equality.

We wish to congratulate you on the recent EUs initiative to relocate 1,600 unaccompanied children, who had been living in overcrowded reception and identification centres for several months on the islands of Lesbos, Samos and Chios in Greece.

In the light of the COVID 19 crisis and the important work of the European Commission in enhancing the European response to the crisis, the European Disability Forum would like to draw your attention to the important issue of how refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities are affected by this public health crisis and share guidelines for ensuring their inclusion in the EU's response to it, and in your preparations of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum

UNHCR [reports](#) that refugees are at heightened risk as the COVID 19 virus spreads quickly in refugee camps, where people are living without access to sanitation, food and water supplies. The [International Rescue Committee reports](#) that in overcrowded refugee camps and detention centers, social distancing, washing your hands and isolation is nearly impossible and a public health disaster is real.

Refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities face the same risks as other refugees, however compounded by many other issues: finding themselves at heightened risk of violence, including sexual and domestic abuse, discrimination, inaccessible facilities, inaccessible support services or disruption of these services being disproportionately more likely to put their lives at risk, and in some cases pre-existing health conditions which leave them more at risk of developing serious illness or dying.

As a state party to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), both the EU and all its Member States are obliged to provide persons with disabilities, including refugees with disabilities with the same range and quality of support services, including health care as the ones available to persons without disabilities. It will be important to fully ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in every element of the EUs approach to refugees and asylum seekers and in particular in your initiatives towards a new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

We would therefore like to request a conference call with you to discuss the role you can play in ensuring a European response, inclusive of all refugees and migrants with disabilities.

We have developed recommendations for policy makers, through discussion with our members, and based on our members' current work and priorities. Our members are working in these days and weeks to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities, including refugees with disabilities at national level. You can find our recommendations and a range of resources below my signature.

We would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Yannis Vardakastanis

President

European Disability Forum and National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities,  
Greece

### Our recommendations

- All EU policies, programs and funding on migration and asylum; including the policies taken regarding COVID 19 should be disability inclusive, and pay particular attention to the needs and rights of refugee women and children with disabilities;

- Put in place processes to identify all refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities or chronic health conditions and prioritise their access to healthcare services, essential goods (such as water and food) and accessible housing and services;
- Guarantee better living conditions in care homes where [half of coronavirus deaths happen](#);
- Ensure that a healthcare plan is in place to protect refugees and migrants with disabilities from exposure to the COVID-19 including prevention, early testing and treatment.
- Grant access to the national healthcare systems to all refugees and asylum seekers, including easy and fast pre-registration process to apply for asylum or refugee status/All refugees and asylum seekers, including those with disabilities should be transferred from overcrowded refugee camps, reception centers and other “processing facilities” and be provided with housing and access to services in the communities. Special attention should be paid to accessibility of these housing and services;
- Humanitarian assistance, education, livelihoods and health care services should be accessible and inclusive of all refugees with disabilities. Refugee women and girls with disabilities should have access to healthcare services without discrimination, including sexual and reproductive health services, including prenatal and postnatal healthcare for women;
- Refugees with disabilities should be reunited with their families where possible;
- Refugees with disabilities should not be discriminated in access to life-saving treatment to COVID-19. We have specific information that guidelines in Italy, Spain and some regional guidelines in France specifically de-prioritise persons with disabilities;
- Ensure accessibility of all public health information and healthcare provision that is distributed to refugees and asylum-seekers: this include alternative formats for persons with disabilities and information in the native language of refugees;
- Guarantee access to protective personal equipment to refugees with disabilities and persons that support them. Often social distancing is not possible for persons with disabilities. We hear alarming information about lack of protective equipment which is creating focus of infections and staff shortages in the social care sector;
- Any form of forced or coercive treatment, indeed any treatment without fully informed consent of the person receiving the treatment is a human rights violation, as enshrined in the CRPD. In the light of COVID 19 it is imperative that persons with disabilities have their right to informed consent to treatment

protected. Forced seclusion, forced restraint and forced medication shall not be used or escalated during this crisis;

- Involve persons with disabilities through their representatives organisations, in all issues that concern refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities.

#### Additional information:

- [Letter to Commissioner for Equality](#)
- [Letter to Commissioner Urpilainen and Lenarčič: COVID-19 – Disability inclusive response](#)
- [Open letter to leaders at the EU and in EU countries: COVID-19 – disability inclusive response](#)
- [Letter to WHO from the International Disability Alliance \(the global body of which EDF is a member\)](#)
- Our open letter "[COVID 19 - medical guidelines should not discriminate against persons with disabilities](#)"
- Our statement "[Persons with disabilities stripped of support and protective equipment during COVID 19 crisis](#)"
- Our statement "[Residential institutions are becoming hotbeds of infection and abuse – governments need to act now](#)"
- [Our members' activities](#)