

Urgency needed to address staffing, pay and better conditions for health and care workers

EPSU statement to health ministers on staff shortages

As EU health ministers meet in Czechia on Wednesday, 7 September, the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) representing Europe's health and social care workers reiterates its demands to urgently address the increasing staff shortages in the health and social care sector.

The WHO has predicted a growth in hospitalisation this autumn and winter, caused by the pandemic as well as the outbreak of the monkey pox. This will undoubtedly put additional workload on health and care staff already working under pressure. Many health and care professionals suffer from post-COVID conditions (long-COVID) and many others have left the sector. The pressure caused by existing [staff shortages](#) and unsatisfactory working conditions - including increasing cases of [third-party violence](#) - can no longer be ignored by the policy makers.

Jan Willem Goudriaan, General Secretary, EPSU says: "We need to move from applause to measures that will achieve needs-based, adequate staffing levels in health and in social care. This must go together with improving wages and working conditions for the often low paid woman-led workforce. Workers' discontent and the many actions across Europe are proof of the urgency that is required."

Adam Rogalewski, advisor for Health and Social Services, EPSU adds: "It is unacceptable that real wages of health and social care workers who were applauded at the beginning of the pandemic are now being reduced by high inflation and increasing food and energy prices. Those who protect our health and who care for the most vulnerable members of our society should be adequately supported by policymakers. This includes safeguarding public budgets from any austerity measures."

This year has seen [industrial action](#) taking place across Europe. One such action is currently taking place in Finland, where [nurses are threatening mass resignation](#). We have also seen a positive example in Germany, where government initiatives to address staff shortages were welcomed by the [German unions](#).

Therefore, EPSU calls on health ministers to work closely with employment and finance ministers to:

- Reassure health and social care workers and recipients of care that funding for the sectors will increase to address demands for better health and care and pay a higher wage in line with inflation and productivity growth. Health and care must be excluded from any austerity measures;
- Develop sound measures to deliver adequate, needs-based staffing levels;
- Promote social dialogue and collective bargaining. These are crucial not only to improve working conditions but also to ensure patient centred quality care. European

employers (HOSPEEM) and trade unions (EPSU) recently adopted a [Framework of Action on Recruitment and Retention](#) which shows the way forward;

- Protect health and social care as a public good; prevent the commercialisation of health and care; and ensure that if profit is made it is fully reinvested to improve working conditions and healthcare delivery. The commercialisation of health and care should be reversed to safeguard the sector's resilience and focus on the rights of care recipients;
- Increase protection of occupational health and safety, including psychosocial risks (mental health), and funding for relevant inspections to ensure healthy workplaces;
- Promote collective bargaining and protect workers and trade unionists from anti-union activities;
- Rebuild the public nature of care services and recognise the crucial role social services play in our societies;
- Develop adequate measures to support workers suffering from post-COVID conditions (such as long-COVID);
- Support sectoral social dialogue in the health and social care sector in member states.

On the European level we call on the European Commission to:

- Ensure that funding provided by various EU facilities including EU4Health can be spent on improving the training, working conditions and health and safety conditions of health and care workers;
- Develop a dedicated [Directive on Psychosocial Risks](#) to protect workers from stress and burnout caused by work;
- Approve [EPSU's and Social Employers'](#) request to establish a Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in the social services sector;
- Ensure the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, particularly the right to health and care;
- Recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease as recommended by the [Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work](#).