

Minutes of the High-Level Exchange on Social Services Impact of COVID-19

29th April 2020

The objectives of the conference were:

- **To send a high level political signal that the Commission is taking these issues seriously;**
- **To be in listening mode and to have an informal exchange;**
- **To conclude with a commitment to follow-up with concrete actions.**

Opening remarks by the European Commission

➤ Vice-President Šuica (moderator)

Opened the meeting referring to the additional risk that COVID brings for persons in vulnerable situations such as older persons and persons with disabilities. She highlighted the difficult situation faced by those providing social services to these persons, including work and emotional pressure.

She expressed her condolences for the victims of COVID, including many older persons and persons with disabilities. She conveyed her gratitude for the work of social service care providers.

She invited the participants to share their concerns and suggestions and thanked participants for having reached out to the Commission to provide insights on the situation. The issues are diverse and concern the portfolios of all present Commissioners.

As a procedural note about the meeting, she explained that participants may refer to the call in their communication but not attribute statements to any speakers.

Presentation of recent measures by the European Commission

➤ Commissioner Schmit

Welcomed also the exchange of views in these special circumstances. He highlighted that the most vulnerable persons deserve attention and support. He also expressed his compassion for those that passed away.

He expressed expectations for effective national social protection systems that would work as safety net and refer to the European Pillar of Social Rights and the guidance it provides. He highlighted that COVID has exposed the vulnerability of the system and referred to low level of investments in the past.

He highlighted some of the key actions undertaken by the Commission in the COVID response showing the long-term commitment to social inclusion, referring to CRII and CRII+ and the possibilities provided by EU Funds in terms of flexibility and availability of financial support and liquidity with up to 100% co-financing. He stressed the role that FEAD has to support the most deprived.

Looking to the future, he indicated that the next generation of EU Funds would continue to support social infrastructures and social services.

He ended referring to the Long Term Care activities that will be pursued and to a report being developed with the SPC that will describe common challenges and suggest possible improvements.

➤ Commissioner Kyriakides

Welcomed this exchange recognising the big impact that COVID is having on vulnerable groups. She referred to the work carried out with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) to provide guidance to protect those most vulnerable from risk of infection. She emphasized that the European Commission is working closely with the ECDC to closely monitor and address the

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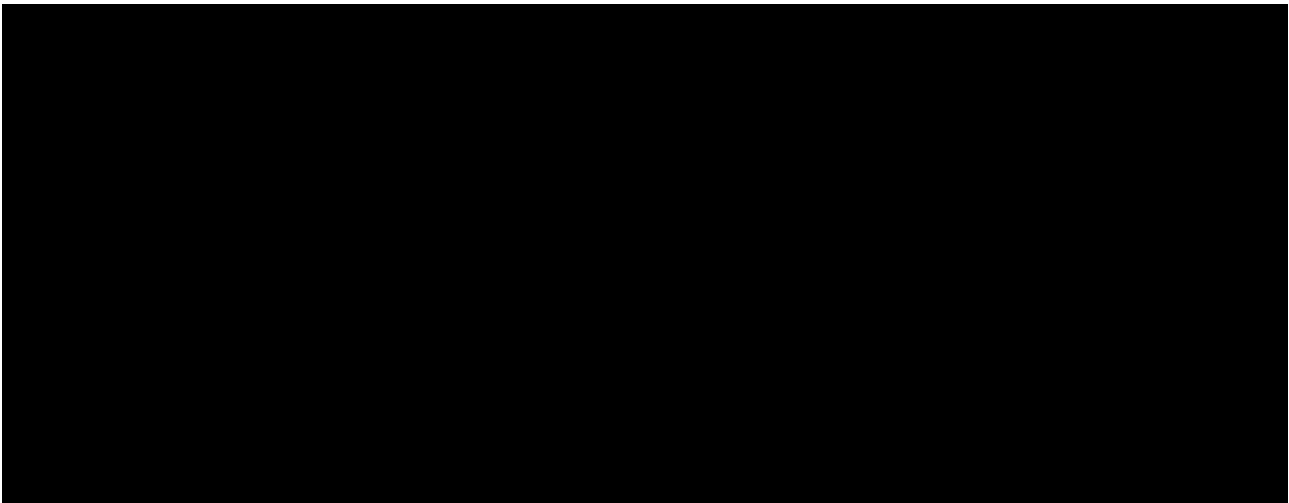
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COVID-19 pandemic in EU countries . She thanked the NGOs for sharing information today that will be used by ECDC for its work and highlighted the importance of working together with other Commissioners

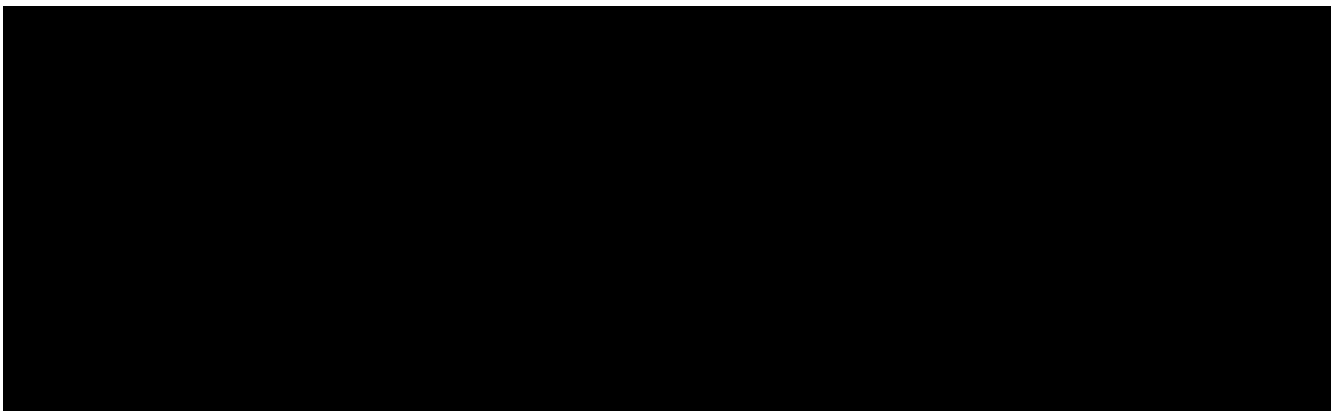
➤ Commissioner Dalli

She indicated that, despite progress on equality, COVID exposed and exacerbated inequalities and indicated her commitment to work to combat them. In this work, it is essential to listen to stakeholders to avoid in the responses discrimination of person with disabilities and older persons who have been hit harder by COVID. In addition, she recognised the difficult working conditions of social service providers. She acknowledged that the EU implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was put to the test and welcomed the WHO-UN Special Rapporteur recommendations referring to the importance of Member States to follow them. She indicated that recommendations received from NGOs had also been shared by the Commission with Member States authorities responsible for disabilities and highlighted that the dialogues with NGOs are essential to ensure that no one is left behind.

Opening remarks



Presentation of State of Play and sector input

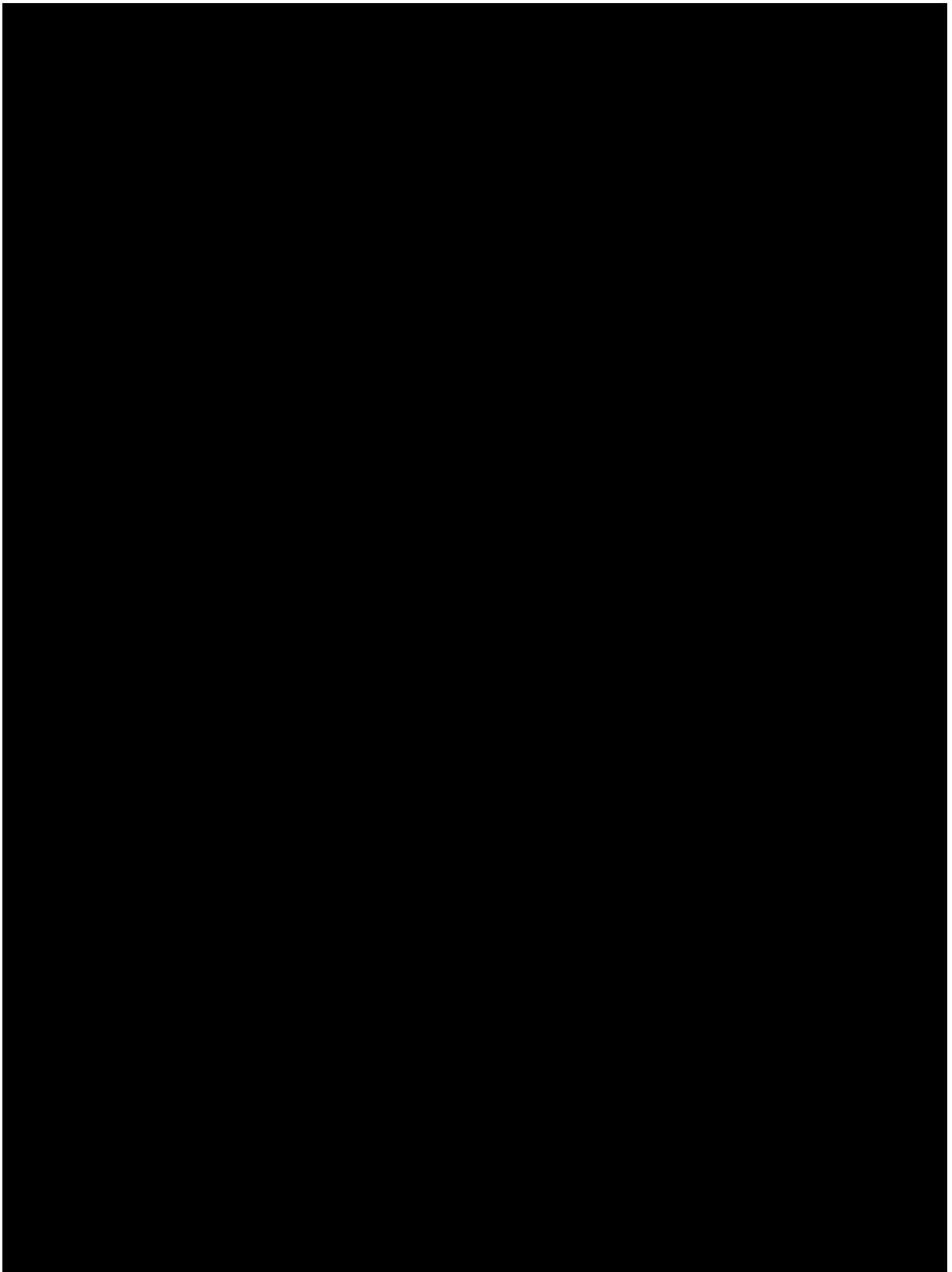


President European Ageing Network, representing Social services Europe, introduced the situation of social services and referred to the increase of jobs in the sector event during the economic crisis. He highlighted the growing demand of social services, for older

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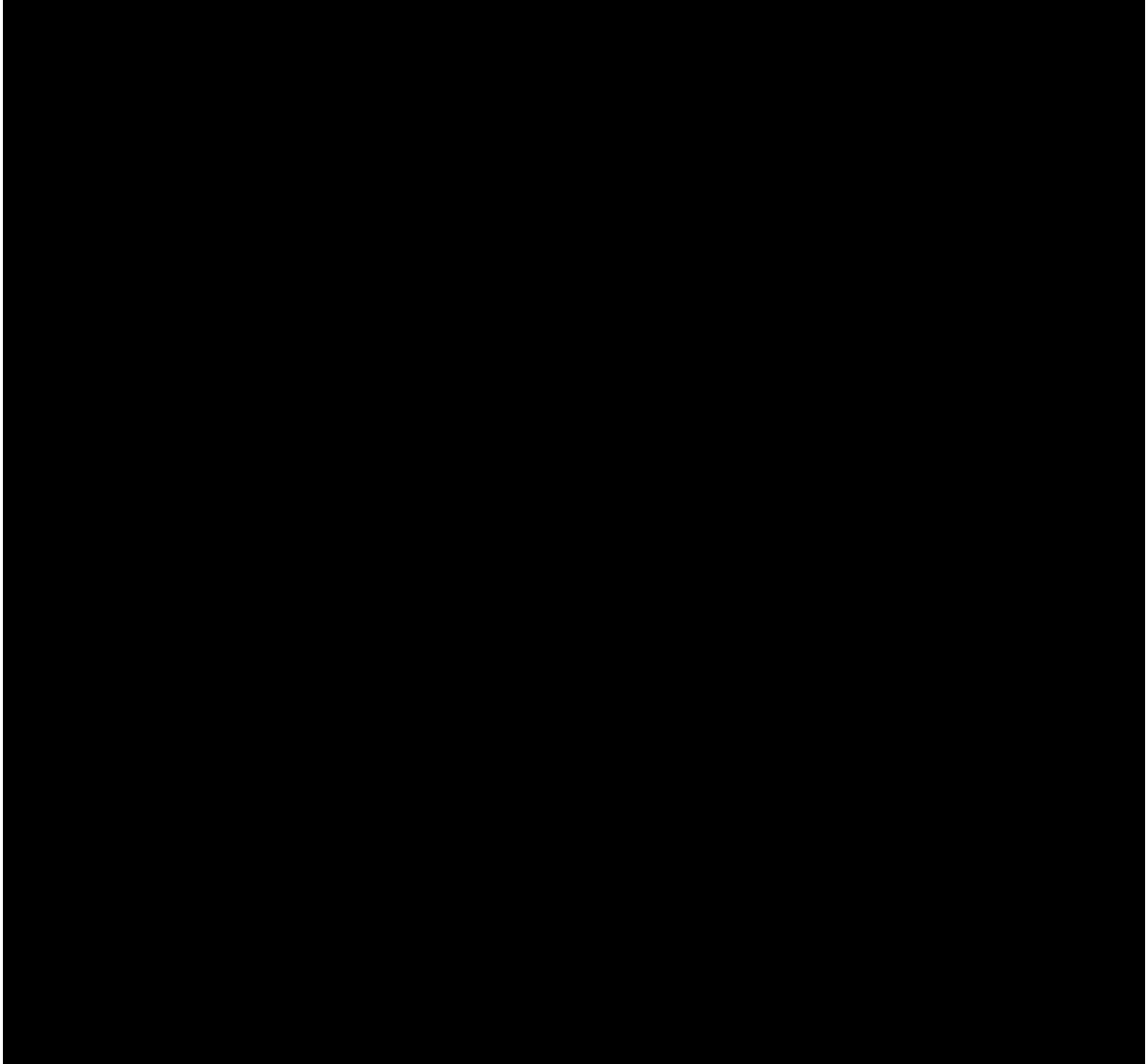
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persons, persons with disabilities, children residential care, in home services, ambulance education, etc. and referred to the European Pillar of Social Rights principles supported by the sector.



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Discussion: What role for the EU

During the discussion, participants highlighted the situation of vulnerable persons, in particular those living in institutions, and asked the Commission to act and engage with Member States.

Again, the provision of a new additional emergency fund for the social sector was requested, as well as the visibility of measures for the social sector in the Commission responses together with guidance in a comprehensive policy response. The NGOs also requested that Commissioners in charge of social portfolios would be added to the EC COVID-19 task force.

Participants offered the participation of their sectors in the preparation of actions and recalled ethical issues.

Concluding remarks and next steps

- **Commissioner Schmit** thanked the speakers and recognised that NGOs are doing tremendous work contributing to the EU response and having a key role in tackling crisis. On the request for Europe to be more visible, he explained that the Commission reacted very rapidly to make funds available in a flexible manner but that it is a decision of Member States how to use the money.

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He indicated being very sensitive to the issue of homelessness, and will work to address the vulnerability of this population. He explained that the Semester already addresses recommendations on social services including on investments. He referred to the OSH for guidance for return to work.

- **Commissioners Kyriakides** thanked the participants for their advice and remarked that the pandemic is not yet over and that guidance for lifting confinement should cater for the most vulnerable including children, elderly in care, persons with disabilities and those in psychiatric facilities. She referred to the joint procurement for protective equipment and indicated that she will refer to ministers of health about the need to address those providers of social care.
- **Commissioner Dalli** thanked the participants for sharing their knowledge and referred to the letter sent with the three Commissioners to ministers, highlighting the need for access to information by persons with disabilities. She showed her concern on the use of age or disability as a criteria to access medical treatment and indicated the intention to follow up with Member States. She underlined the additional impact on women who are more often carers and their conditions of work, including in the informal economy, referring to the Gender Equality Strategy. She concluded, referring to the European Disability Strategy where this new COVID reality will be considered with input of the participants.
- **Vice-President Šuica** thanked all participants and shared the intention to follow up on the recommendations received. She indicated that several instruments and solutions are needed to address all the issues and shared her intention to talk to the Commission President about it. She summarised that in the short term issuing guidance, and in the medium term the mobilisation of resources could be considered and acknowledged the need to address long-term care in the long term, learning from the crisis. She encouraged continuing exchanges also at technical level.