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SOCIAL AFFAIRS - EMPLOYMENT / SOCIAL

Long-term care and early childhood, Commission wants to enhance role of carers and relieve women

Brussels, 07/09/2022 (Agence Europe) – The European Commission wants to improve the quality of long-term care for dependent people and to enhance the role of professional and informal carers.

This is the thrust of its *European Care Strategy* adopted on Wednesday 7 September, which also aims to improve access to childcare services in the EU to ease the daily burden on carers and improve the work-life balance more generally.

The Commission has proposed two new EU Council recommendations, on the revision of the Barcelona targets for early childhood education and care, on access to childcare and on access to affordable, quality long-term care.

For the Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica, the European Care Strategy must in particular help to relieve women "*who still bear the brunt of family responsibilities*": 90% of the formal care workforce are women and 7.7 million women are unemployed due to family responsibilities.

Furthermore, according to Commission data, 1/3 of European households in need of long-term care do not use these services because "*they cannot afford them*". Similarly, "*almost half of people aged 65 or over who require long-term care do not receive the help they need with personal care or household activities*".

For the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, while the organisation of personal care or childcare services remains a national competence, "*the EU can help Member States to design good systems*".

It can also encourage them to value these professions and "*this means higher wages, better career opportunities and better health and safety standards at work*", said the Commissioner.

The total number of people likely to need long-term care in the EU is also expected to rise from around 30.8 million in 2019 to 33.7 million in 2030 and 38.1 million in 2050, an overall increase of 23.5%.

On early childhood education and care, the recommendation specifically proposes to revise the so-called "Barcelona targets" set in 2002 to increase women's participation in the labour market.

The current targets call on Member States to provide childcare to 33% of children under 3 and to 90% of children from age 3 until mandatory school age. The Commission proposes that by 2030, at least 50% of children below the age of 3 are in early childhood education and care and that 96% of children between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education are in early childhood education and care.

The Commission also recommends that Member States ensure that childcare services are affordable, accessible and of high quality, and available also in rural or disadvantaged areas. "*A legal right to early childhood education and care should also be introduced*". Targeted measures should also be taken to increase the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with disabilities or with special needs in education and care services.

Long-term care: improving working conditions and attracting men

The recommendation calls on Member States to draw up national action plans to improve the availability, accessibility and quality of long-term care. They are invited to increase the supply and range of professional long-term care services (home care, community care and residential care) by addressing territorial disparities.

The accessibility of this care for people with disabilities must also be taken into account. Financial and psychological support is also recommended to help carers.

On the working conditions of care providers, it is recommended, among other things, to attract more men, to stimulate collective bargaining and social dialogue to improve wages or to develop continuous education and training for care providers.

The Commission, for its part, will reflect on the establishment of a "*new sectoral social dialogue*" focusing on social services at EU level. It also plans to map the admission conditions and rights of third-country claimants by the end of 2022, with a view to possibly setting up new legal migration schemes.

Reactions

The strategy was generally welcomed by associations, such as *AGE*, the European platform of organisations supporting the elderly, which called it "*historic*".

Caritas Europa also welcomes the provisions on legal migration.

For the *European Federation of Public Services* (EPSU), the strategy goes "*in the right direction, but workers need more*", in particular a real tool for monitoring working conditions "*to avoid other situations like ORPEA in France*", with a scandal of mistreatment of elderly people in institutions.

The *European Federation for Services to Individuals* (EFSI), on the other hand, calls it a "*missed opportunity*", as the specificity "*of the personal and domestic services (PDS) sector in providing care services to thousands of millions of Europeans is not recognised*".

AGE also recognises that "*in the most important areas, the care strategy does not provide clear targets and indicators for long-term care, unlike its ambition for early childhood education and care*". And in most areas, "*the Commission puts the ball back in the court of the Member States*".

Link to the proposals: https://aeur.eu/f/2yu *(Original version in French by Solenn Paulic)*

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