Federation of European SOCIAL EMPLOYERS

What social services employers expect from the future Strategy on Health & Safety at Work

Feedback on the European Commission's public consultation on an EU Strategic Framework

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What Social Services Employers expect from the future Strategy on Health & Safety at Work

The Social Employers urge the European Commission in its forthcoming Strategic Framework to address some specific issues and needs:

o Adequate national and EU funding to be able to have adequate staffing, to improve working conditions, develop innovative tools, provide training on risk prevention, reduce risk exposure and share good practices.

o Awareness raising though communication tools/actions, peer learning and training on the relevance and key principles of OSH, from risks assessment to implementation of prevention measures and demonstration of the return on investment that risk prevention provides in social services.

o Highlight that collaboration between employer and employees' representatives and employees themselves is key for successful risk prevention. The capacity of social partners and social dialogue at all levels, from EU level to national and company level, to work together is indeed crucial to improve working conditions and prevent risks, through clear and simple guidance and tools adapted to the sector.

o Capacity of social services to develop a health and safety culture, to innovate, use and develop digital technologies, suppress or mitigate the risks and improve the wellbeing of staff and services users.

o Support from specialised OSH organisations focused on social services, which take into account that social services providers are mostly SMEs which cannot spend much time and money on procedures and legislation seen as too complex.

o Anticipation of the change in working conditions brought about by digitalisation, a process the pandemic has accelerated (telework and new ways of delivering social services).

o Support to anticipation and better reaction to potential future crisis and emergencies, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and better considering biological risks as well as drafting crisis protocols.

o Awareness raising on the relevance of policies and initiatives regarding:
  o foresighted planning & career paths management that consider the worker's health;
  o early detection of health conditions related to work;
  o reintegration at work after illness or accident.

1. General Context

In 2021 the European Commission will publish its new EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work for the period 2021-2027 and asks for feedback by 1 March 2021.

Social services providers and their 11 million staff, key actors in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, are facing many challenges across Europe. Apart from underfunding, which is further elaborated below, the most common challenges include:

- With demographic change, European populations have and will develop more support needs, well identified by the recent EU Commission Green Paper on Ageing.
- Changes in social support needs, with the move towards community-based services which take into consideration the individual persons' rights and needs.
- Forthcoming social support needs triggered and accelerated by the pandemic, with enormous social needs linked to difficult social situations but also to psychological support that needs to be provided.

The nature of social services, which includes work in close contact with people, moving, supporting, lifting them, means that the workforce is at a high risk of work accidents and occupational diseases. There may also exist a certain reluctance from people whose occupation is to help and provide support to other individuals to request any kind of assistance, i.e. for asking for a disability recognition.

The fact the high exposure to risks in social services too often stays unknown means a very low awareness on occupational risks and their prevention of the staff and its management teams in many organisations. This is particularly the case in small and medium size structures, which cannot spend time and money on procedures and legislation seen as too complex. Consequently, too few actions are developed.

2. Workforce issues that impact OSH in Social Services

Underfunding of social services for years has many consequences for the workforce:

- Demanding (physical and psychological) working conditions
- Low wages and poor recognition
- Work overload, linked to insufficient staff-user ratios
- Irregular working patterns
- …

Eurofound's recent report on LTC workforce (long-term care being a significant part of social services), highlights a poor "job quality indice"[1]. Also, according to Eurofound, due to the physical and psychological strain, many workers believe they will not be able to keep working until their 60s. Consequently, many workers are likely to leave the sector in the next years, while the sector struggles to attract new workforce.

This overall situation leads to increasing labour shortages in social services that worsen the staffing ratios and then the working conditions.

The pandemic has also increased stress at work due to the personal exposure to the virus and the fear to spread it to services users and to their own family, especially during the first wave, when front line social care workers were not prioritised in PPE attribution[2]. This stressful situation is still ongoing and is taking a physical and emotional toll on the workforce in the long term.

In addition, the social services workforce is overwhelmingly female (82%) and older than the average working population. This makes staff in this sector more exposed to certain risks such as MSDs, which can lead to long sick leaves and early retirement.

All of this makes it very clear that something must urgently be done to improve the situation and promote OSH in social services.

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[1] Multifactor indicator from Eurofound to compare working conditions.

[2] The Social Employers together with EPSU, developed a joint statement on COVID-19 outbreak: the impact on social services and needed support measures, followed by a Joint Position Paper on Preparing the social services sector for the COVID-19 resurgence and increasing its resilience.

3. The most frequent occupational risks Social Services face

Among the most frequent risks in Social Services, are:

Work accidents

The most common are related to manual handling of loads or persons, bruises and blows, sometimes caused by services users and level fall accident.

Occupational diseases

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the most widespread occupational diseases in the sector. The need to raise awareness on these risks recently led the Federation of European Social Employers to be part of the EU-OSHA campaign "Healthy workplaces-lighten the load". In this context, the Social Employers will take initiatives to tackle MSDs in the framework of European social dialogue, with its counterpart EPSU.

Some risks are not always officially recognised as linked to the workplace and must not be overlooked: Psychosocial risks that have multiple causes, lead to long absence periods and are often one of the factors leading to MSDs.

4. What Social Services Employers expect from next Strategy to deliver accessible, affordable and quality services for all in the next years

The Social Employers urge the European Commission in its forthcoming Strategic Framework to address some specific issues and needs:

o   Adequate national and EU funding to be able to have adequate staffing, to improve working conditions, develop innovative tools, provide training on risk prevention, reduce risk exposure and share good practices.
o   Awareness raising though communication tools/actions, peer learning and training on the relevance and key principles of OSH, from risks assessment to implementation of prevention measures and demonstration of the return on investment that risk prevention provides in social services.
o   Highlight that collaboration between employer and employees' representatives and employees themselves is key for successful risk prevention. Capacity of social partners and social dialogue at all levels, from EU level to national and company level, to work together is indeed crucial to improve working conditions and prevent risks, through clear and simple guidance and tools adapted to the sector.
o   Capacity of social services to develop a Health and safety culture, to innovate, use and develop digital technologies, suppress or mitigate the risks and improve the wellbeing of staff and services users.
o   Support from specialised OSH organisations focused on social services, which take into account that social services providers are mostly SMEs which cannot spend much time and money on procedures and legislation seen as too complex.
o   Anticipation of the change in working conditions brought about by digitalisation, a process the pandemic has accelerated (telework and new ways of delivering social services).
o   Support to anticipation and better reaction to potential future crisis and emergencies, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and better considering biological risks as well as drafting crisis protocols.
o   Awareness raising on the relevance of policies and initiatives regarding:
    o   foresighted planning & career paths management that consider the worker's health;
    o   early detection of health conditions related to work;
    o   reintegration at work after illness or accident.