



Brussels, 26th January 2024

Ms Stella Kyriakides
European Commissioner

Mr Panayiotis Pourgourides
Cabinet expert

Subject: Promoting and protecting the mental health and wellbeing of people in vulnerable situations

Dear Commissioner Kyriakides,

Mental health has been recognised as a public health priority in the European Union, notably in Commission President von der Leyen's State of the Union speech at the European Parliament in September 2022. The European Commission's Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health and the European Parliament's report on Mental Health are two cornerstones for the future European Health Union. They are important steps in mainstreaming mental health in all EU policies and adopting a comprehensive approach to mental health that addresses social determinants, structural barriers and provide tailored support, ensuring prevention and recovery.

On the 28th of November 2023, together with EURORDIS – Rare Diseases Europe and Mental Health Europe, Members of the European Parliament, MEP Sara Cerdas and MEP Tilly Metz, organised an event in the European Parliament titled 'How to Address the Mental Health Needs of People in Vulnerable Situations'. This event set out to address the specific and intersectional needs of people in vulnerable situations, through a prevention and recovery-based approach to mental health. Considering the recent EC Communication and upcoming European elections, this event aimed to explore the robust commitments needed to promote and protect the mental health and wellbeing of ALL people in vulnerable situations. In doing so, participants were provided the space to identify EU action that can best address the social determinants and intersectionality.

Participants representing a diverse range of stakeholders, spanning EU institutions, European Networks, national experts, persons with lived experience and those living in vulnerable situations/with specific and intersectional needs. They expressed that a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health must lay out a plan to tackle inequalities in mental health care, support prevention and early intervention services. While the European Commission was commended on including people in vulnerable situations and flagship initiatives centred around awareness raising, participants called for more reference to concrete action and resources to respond to the unique challenges faced by marginalised communities. Therefore,

we are sending this letter to deliver the key recommendations from our event, and facilitate for continued prioritisation of mental health, beyond the new EC Communication:

Long-term strategy on mental health and ensure accountability

- In the next phase ensuring the recent EC Communication, develop a long-term action plan on mental health based on the commitment taken in the Communication. The EU Mental Health Action Plan should have concrete targets, objectives, and budget as well as a clear timeline and indicator to monitor progress.
- Act upon the political commitment set out in the EC Communication and support Member States in the process of developing and delivering equitable and affordable systems that are person-centred and human rights compliant and that address societal barriers and economic inequalities in accessing psychological care.
- Promote a recovery-oriented approach to mental health and psychosocial disabilities, where people living in vulnerable situations do not face exclusion and receive adequate, timely and affordable and person-centred support.

Intersectionality

- Position intersectionality at the heart of ALL EU Actions and Flagship Initiatives around mental health and address mental health inequalities through equity, to fulfil diverse mental health needs.
- To achieve better mental health promotion, prevention, and services, the EU and Member States must recognise and address the fundamental flaws preventing Europe from achieving an equitable healthcare system: one where marginalised and vulnerable groups, including those with psychosocial disabilities, can thrive in society and access affordable mental health care tailored to their needs.

Adopt a prevention and recovery-based approach to mental health

- Ensure a human-rights based approach to address the socio-economic determinants of mental health. EU actions on mental health must be informed by a prevention and recovery-based approach, underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to support a paradigm shift away from the biomedical model.

People living in vulnerable situations are more likely to experience increased mental health risk factors and less likely to experience mental health protective factors. Whilst certain groups are more likely to bear an unequal burden, they are also less likely to receive tailored mental health support.

- Adopt and implement actions that are inclusive of all people in vulnerable situations, leaving no one behind. Ensure that all initiatives on tackling stigma and discrimination are inclusive of all vulnerable populations to better protect and prevent mental health problems and reduce further exclusion and marginalisation of the most vulnerable members of society;
- Make sure that these initiatives translate the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach into dedicated Flagship Initiatives and supporting actions with adequate

financial support to improve affordable access to inclusive mental health support for all high risks groups, including in schools and online spaces, from early prevention to full recovery;

- Dedicate funding to accelerate capacity building of educators, healthcare professionals, and social workers in early identification and support of mental health issues for people living in vulnerable situations.
- Allocate funding for a Mental Health & Wellbeing Toolkit for Populations in Vulnerable Situations in order to build the capacities and empowerment of these groups to become mentally healthy communities. This toolkit could be generic in nature, identifying the best and promising practices and evidence-based tools that could be tailored by each population in vulnerable situations to address their specific needs.
- Guarantee mental health promotion, prevention and support efforts do not replace or limit investment in addressing broader socio-economic factors;
- Improve and scale research, data and monitoring on mental health of all vulnerable groups, including establishing comprehensive data collection and robust monitoring mechanisms to guide policy and practice.

Co-creation

- Further efforts to ensure more meaningful cooperation with civil society and the communities they represent, experts and particularly persons with lived experience, in the design, implementation and monitoring of mental health initiatives. Holistic approaches to mental health prevention, support and services should be developed alongside affected communities, including above all the meaningful involvement of people with psychosocial disabilities, through co-creation and in a non-tokenistic manner.

We urge you to take forward our request to ensure future European action on mental health is inclusive of all people in vulnerable situations, and leaves no one behind. Without urgent action, the rise of psychosocial support demands will increase and the mental health impacts of the concurrent and unprecedented crises, such as the cost of living, war in Ukraine, climate crisis, among others, will be long-term and pervasive. While the European elections and new college of Commissioners awaits us, the EU institutions must unite now more than ever to hold steady in their commitment and investment in mental health under the next term of the European Parliament and Commission, to push further in addressing the structural and societal changes needed to turn the tide on the current mental health pandemic, that is devastating lives especially for those marginalised and vulnerable communities.

The European Parliament and organisations such as Mental Health Europe and EURORDIS are dedicated to long-term discussions with the European Commission and relevant stakeholders to ensure adequate, rights-based, and person-centred mental health care and support is a reality for all. We commend the Commission for delivering a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health, with ambitions to place mental health at par with physical health and leave nobody behind. Building on this momentum, the next EU legislature must take a stronger commitment, by delivering a long-term action plan on mental health.

We remain at your full disposal and welcome the opportunity to further discuss the need for a comprehensive European Strategy on Mental Health.

Yours sincerely,

MEP Tilly Metz
MEP Sara Cerdas