



## MHE's reaction to the 2021 State of the European Union

On 14 September 2021, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, gave her second [State of the Union \(SOTEU\) speech](#) at the European Parliament Plenary, since the outbreak of COVID-19. This year's speech was highly anticipated due to the opportunity it presented to highlight lessons learnt thus far from the pandemic, as well as pressing challenges to address over the next year. In President von der Leyen's statement, she built on last year's speech on the European Commission's ambition to build a strong European Health Union. She conveyed the EU will be focusing on delivery, through a new health preparedness and resilience mission for the whole of the EU, with the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) at its core.

President von der Leyen mentioned that the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is crucial for ensuring decent jobs, fairer working conditions, better healthcare and better balance in people's lives.

Her speech also addressed several other topics including the announcement of a European Care Strategy for 2022, which could be a significant step for carers for persons with psychosocial disabilities, in Europe. Moreover, her speech included the increased focus environment and youth, with 2022 being designated the year of European Youth. In her speech, she announced her commitment to a law on tackling violence against women and also raised concerns over the slow progress of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Notably, a number of the topics President von der Leyen emphasised as the EU's most urgent priorities for the year to come, certainly intersect with mental health. Nevertheless, once again mental health and disability were absent from the statement. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the strains on our mental health systems and the urgent need for mental health to be given equal priority to physical health.

Remarkably, President von Leyen's speech commenced by noting that "many [...] people [...] feel their

lives have been on pause while the world has been on fast forward” and “the speed of events and the enormity of the challenges are sometimes difficult to grasp”. Although mental health was alluded to throughout her speech, and whilst appreciating the ambitious words on better healthcare, ensuring fairer working conditions, and creating more opportunities for Europe’s youth, it is still surprising that neither mental health nor disability were referred to for a second year in a row as critical priorities across the EU. As such, Mental Health Europe (MHE) calls for the European Commission to take comprehensive actions to reaffirm its commitment to mental health and disability. Furthermore, we also note the absence of civil society and the groups they represent, as important partners in ensuring these political priorities become a reality.

Considering the upcoming [EU CRPD review](#), this year’s SOTEU speech was an opportunity to draw upon the lessons learned from the pandemic. This would have been an optimal occasion to echo the need to effectively integrate mental health into the preparedness for, response to, and recovery from crises and emergencies.

In President von der Leyen’ words “we have shown that when we act together, we are able to act fast.” As MHE, we sincerely hope the same urgency will be considered for mental health for short and long term plans, since investing in mental health is an investment in our future, because mental health matters.

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