

## Mental Health in all policies Stakeholders Network



### Flash Report

#### **Stepping up efforts across Europe to promote and protect the mental health of long-term care workers and informal carers: a win-win strategy**

On 29 October 2024, on occasion of the [International Day of Care and Support](#), building on the [European Carers Day](#) and [World Mental Health Day](#), the webinar “Stepping up efforts across Europe to promote and protect the mental health of long-term care workers and informal carers: a win-win strategy” took place on the EU Health Policy Platform. Organised in the framework of the “Mental Health in all Policies” Stakeholders Network, led by [Mental Health Europe](#), the webinar aimed to shed light on priorities and concrete actions to support the mental health of long-term care (LTC) workers and informal carers.

The webinar was open to all stakeholders and brought together 62 participants.

**Francesca Centola** – Policy and Knowledge Officer, Mental Health Europe- welcomed the audience and stressed that taking concrete actions to support the mental health of long-term care workers and informal carers is key to ensure the fulfilment of fundamental rights and crucial European values, such as the right to receive accessible, affordable, good quality long-term care; gender equality; and the right to health, which includes the right to mental health. She explained that, in addition to the human rights argument, taking action to support the mental health of both informal carers and long-term care workers is instrumental for EU countries to address urgent challenges they are facing, related to the sustainability of long-term care systems, opportunity costs of reliance on informal carers, and the costs related to increasing mental health problems in our societies. Hence, it is a win-win strategy.

**Katarzyna Ptak- Bufkens** - Unit C2 (State of Health, European Semester, Health Technology Assessment), DG SANTE, European Commission- agreed with the consideration that caring more for care workers is a win-win strategy. She stated that care is a crucial component of the European social model with the health and care workers at the core of it. She stressed that those who provide care are often perceived as immune to illness, while they are exposed to high stress levels and need to be protected. She referred to the challenge of staff shortages in the health and care sectors and shared striking figures on job strain (which leads to exhaustion, burnout and even leaving the sector). If on average for workers across all sectors job strain is 30%, in the case of the health sector, the figure is 61% for nurses and 43% for doctors. Ms Ptak- Bufkens then moved on to the concrete actions that the European Commission is carrying out to support Member States in addressing health workforce shortages. She referred to the [Joint Action HEROES \(HEalth woRkfOrce to meet health challEngeS\)](#), aimed to improve the countries’ capacity for health workforce planning to ensure a future accessible, sustainable and resilient health systems. She mentioned a [contribution agreement](#) recently signed by the European Commission with the WHO Regional Office for Europe to support Member States in retaining nurses and making the profession more attractive to nurses. Ms Ptak- Bufkens also

mentioned actions focused on skills - aimed to make a more optimal use of skills in health and care systems- taking into account innovative solutions on how care is provided, moving towards more cross sectoral collaboration and provision of care in teams. She then referred to the actions stemming from the [Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health](#) – with its 20 flagship initiatives and €1.23 billion budget- and informed the audience that the tracking framework on the implementation of the Communication has been updated on 10th October. The Flagship Initiative n 15 “Initiative for more and better trained professionals in the EU” is currently being implemented via the [EU PROMENS Project](#): a capacity-building programme on mental health targeting different groups of professionals. Ms Ptak- Bufkens referred to a recently launched survey on the mental health and well-being of health-care professionals, in the framework of a WHO Europe project funded by the EC. The [survey](#), the largest of its kind to be undertaken in Europe, aims to gather crucial data to better understand the challenges doctors and nurses face in their work environments. Launched on 22 October, it covers the 27 European Union countries, plus Iceland and Norway.

**Mark Bergfeld** - UNI Global Union, Uni Care Europa – highlighted macro level trends that are occurring in the long-term care sector. First, deinstitutionalization, care in the community, a trend that has been called for by people in need of LTC and their families, to ensure person-centred care. He pointed out that this trend – while welcome- has changed the nature of work, as it has eroded the sense of collegiality and community, the working as part of a team that was typical of care provided in institutional settings. He called for policymakers to ensure that the social links that had existed among LTC workers in the institutional settings are also introduced in community settings.

The second macro trend is the Covid-19 crisis, which revealed the cracks and flaws of care systems, shedding light on the challenges of being understaffed and undervalued. Mr Bergfeld pointed out that care workers were labeled essential workers (having to work throughout the pandemic and make sacrifices); yet, the label didn’t go hand in hand with a different level of recognition in the labour market. As a result, a misalignment arose, with consequences in terms of self-value and psychosocial risks.

The third trend is labour shortages, which has concrete consequences at workplace level, as care workers have to do more with less time, with no respite. Mr Bergfeld mentioned the [UNI Europa’s RETAIN project](#) (2020-2022), focused on trade union strategies to tackle the issues of labour shortages, high levels of labour turnover and high staff attrition, among others, in the LTC sector.

Mr Bergfeld reflected on the human nature of care work, the fact that most care workers choose this job as it was their calling. Yet, the current working conditions make it impossible to fulfill the vocation and the disjuncture between what they would like to do and what they are able to do creates stress. He emphasized that we can’t have person-centred care without treating LTC workers as persons as well and stressed that the human rights of care users are bound to the human rights of care workers.

In terms of recommendations, Mr Bergfeld stressed the need to tackle undeclared work in the sector, to formalize those working in home settings, to ensure a good staff-user ratio, to end violence and harassment and to ensure that people (mainly women) working in the sector can earn good salaries. He emphasized the vital role that trade unions can play to maintain a sense of sense of collegiality and community amongst the care workforce.

The webinar then broadened up to focus also on those who provide care outside of a professional setting (informal carers), given the importance to consider all actors involved in the care process as equal partners in care, on an equal footing, based on the recognition of each actor's respective knowledge and expertise.

**Elizabeth Hanson** - Prof at Linnaeus University and Advisor to the Board of [Eurocarers](#) - provided the audience with an overview of the Horizon Europe [WELL CARE project](#), of which she is Principal Investigator and Coordinator. The WELL CARE project aims to increase the understanding of successful ways of preventing and managing mental health and wellbeing issues among informal carers and LTC workers. Prof Hanson emphasised that so far LTC workers and informal carers have been seen as two separate groups, rather than interconnected, whereas the project emphasises the concept of care partnerships, understood as the coordination, integration, and mutual recognition of care and caring activities performed by informal carers and LTC workers, in a vision of integrated LTC. The WELL CARE project brings together [stakeholders from different fields](#) and it is based on meaningful user and stakeholders involvement.

Prof Hanson explained the triple penalty that informal carers – especially those providing a high intensity of caring over an extended period of time- may experience because of caring responsibility, which consists in negative impacts on their wellbeing, problems in combining care and paid work and social isolation. Moving to the solutions, Prof Hanson referred to mitigation measures to increase the resilience and wellbeing of the target groups (via tailored information and education/training, broadening their coping strategies, peer support, respite care). Yet, she argued that it is crucial to tackle the issues at the source, by adopting a comprehensive approach, ensuring that informal carers of working age can remain in the labour market and don't fall into poverty, that they are included in society and that they live in a carer friendly society, where care is valued. Most importantly, Member States need to ensure access to good quality, affordable and accessible long-term care, so that care remains a choice.

Prof Hanson presented the main activities of this 4-year project, which include a comprehensive literature review to identify good practices reducing risk factors for mental health among informal carers and LTC workers, developing innovative solutions and implementing and testing them in the 5 project countries; analysis of policies at national and EU level; establishing a sustainable research, innovation and sharing process, involving key stakeholders. She announced that the [first policy report](#) had just been launched. She invited members of the audience to subscribe to the project Newsletter and to contact the [dissemination partner](#) in case they wanted share good practices or to contribute their expertise to the next project activities.

**Francisco Jesús Álvarez Hidalgo** – European Commission, DG EMPL, Health and Safety Unit- explained that the protection of workers' health and safety has been high on the agenda of the EC in the last years. He referred to the [EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027](#). Adopted in 2021 in view of improving Occupational Safety and Health in a changing world of work, the Strategic framework includes psychosocial risks at work. He referred to the [Occupational Safety and Health \(OSH\) Summit](#) (15-16 May 2023), co-organised by the EC and the Swedish Presidency. The OSH Summit confirmed that significant progress has been made in the implementation of the above-mentioned framework. Yet, the Summit has identified ongoing growing OSH issues that need intensified further consideration, such as

psychosocial risks and mental health at work. The summit confirmed that the framework directive is a golden standard because it features a duty to ensure safety and health including psychosocial risks. However, more efforts are needed to fully and effectively apply its provisions - as well as those of the related directives- on the ground.

Mr Alvarez Hidalgo then mentioned the [Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health](#), in particular the chapter dedicated to tackling psychosocial risks at work and two relevant flagship initiatives. The first consists in a peer review to be conducted by the EC on legislative and enforcement approaches to address psychosocial risks at work in the Member States. The second consists in EU-wide campaigns in collaboration with EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign - Safe and healthy work in the digital age, including a focus on mental health at work (2023-2025); as well as a EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign on psychosocial risks and mental health at work with a focus on new and overlooked occupational sectors (2026-2028).

He then referred to recent policy developments, such as the announcement by the EC President-elect von der Leyen – in her [Political Guidelines](#)- to step up efforts on preventive health, including mental health and mental health at work, as well as the [mission letter](#) to Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice-President-designated for People, Skills and Preparedness, with the mandate to work on improving Europe’s approach to occupational health and safety, ensuring healthier workplaces and mental health at work. Another key policy development is the [European Care Strategy](#), which sets an agenda to improve the situation for both care receivers and carers (both formal and informal carers).

**Petra Vendrig** - a registered LTC nurse from The Netherlands, policy advisor at CNV- shared with the audience concrete actions that can be taken to improve the wellbeing of LTC workers. In particular, she focused on the significance of professional autonomy as a crucial factor in preventing mental health problems of care workers. She pointed out that, as labour shortages are expected to increase and so is job strain, we need to do more work with fewer people. Hence, it is essential to consider how to sustain wellbeing and maintain job satisfaction. Professional autonomy and decision-making authority are key resources: they ensure higher job satisfaction in the worker (as they feel more empowered, more valued and engaged) and help to retain staff, while at the same time improving patients’ outcomes. Ms Vendrig mentioned a nationally supervised and [funded programme for professionals in the Netherlands](#), which can be used to support the development of action plans, networking, research, empowerment of professionals in the LTC sector. She stressed the importance for LTC workers to have their voice heard and, more importantly, for policymakers to act on their needs and requests.

A question from the audience asked to specify the challenges faced by migrant care workers and to clarify how to address these challenges. **Mr Bergfeld** stressed that migrant workers are facing extra challenges: they may work in living care arrangements (where isolation is exacerbated) and they may experience psychosocial issues due to migration but not care specific (e.g. lack of a support network). Because of lack of harmonization, migrant care workers – once in the host country- may find themselves performing tasks below their qualification level, with negative consequences on their self-value and wellbeing. He pointed out that migration is a quick fix for labor shortages in the care sector, whereas what is needed is sustainable measures, which require investments.

During the interaction with the audience, **Ms Ptak- Bufkens** mentioned the [METEOR](#) project, highlighting solutions to retain health workers. She emphasised the importance of promoting good mental health at work place and the importance of cross-sectoral policies.

**Mr Alvarez Hidalgo** stressed the need for legislation on occupational health and safety to be properly implemented, via awareness raising initiatives and practical tools for managers, in collaboration with social partners.

**Prof Hanson**, when asked about what could help progress in the area of improving mental health of informal carers and LTC workers, referred to the [National Action Plans](#) submitted by Member States as part of the European Care Strategy, as well as to the [partnership agreement between the EC and WHO Europe on LTC](#). She emphasised that both the European Care Strategy and the partnership on LTC recognize the crucial role played by informal carers and their need for tailored support.

In her concluding remarks, **Ms Centola** identified key takeaway messages. First, the importance of a “mental health in all policies” approach, focused on prevention and on addressing the broader determinants shaping mental health, moving beyond the individual. Then, the importance of co-creating better mental health policies and practices, by putting stakeholders from different fields around the same table, on an equal basis, to co-create solutions. She stressed that together we can ensure the care is valued and that the human rights of all actors involved are promoted and protected. She thanked the speakers and the participants. She also invited any interested stakeholders to join the Mental Health in all Policies Stakeholders Network. The Network is open to all interested stakeholders who believe in a human rights approach to mental health and are committed to advancing person-centred policies and actions towards better mental health for all. Being part of the Network allows stakeholders to get updates on relevant policy developments and upcoming events on mental health. She explained that a webinar on good practices for recovery is in the pipeline. She called on the audience to remain engaged and continue to support activities for better mental health for all. This will ensure that we reach the vision of a Europe where everybody can thrive and nobody is left behind.

#### Further resources

- ✓ Prof Hanson’s presentation is available [here](#).
- ✓ [WELL CARE policy report on legislation, policies, care frameworks and funding schemes](#)
- ✓ [Homecare and mental health](#)
- ✓ [Retain project](#)
- ✓ [Day of Care Uni Global Union](#)
- ✓ [Burnout](#)
- ✓ [ETUC resolution on specific demands for a European Directive on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work](#)
- ✓ [Community through Corporatization? The case of Spanish nurses in the German care industry](#), Mark Bergfeld
- ✓ [Article on the significance of professional autonomy and decision-making authority](#) (in Dutch)
- ✓ [Working on Well-being - Using Empowerment and Behavioral Insights as Leadership Approaches to Improve the Well-being of Healthcare Employees](#), 2024 Henrico van Roekel