

How the European Commission has accommodated the needs of staff members with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 emergency

Decision

Case SI/2/2020/MMO - **Opened on** 03/06/2020 - **Decision on** 29/06/2021 - **Institution concerned** European Commission |

Dear President,

I refer to my letter of 3 June 2020 on how the European Commission has been accommodating the needs of staff members with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 emergency.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Commission for its efforts to meet the needs of staff members with disabilities by promptly granting them the possibility to work remotely and making available special leave for staff members who are carers of children with disabilities.

I also welcome the setting up of a Single Entry Point for Disability and Medical Services, to which persons with disabilities or other conditions can turn to report issues and ask for help. Moreover, initiatives such as the HR TELE CARE telephone line and the BUDDY programme, have promoted the development of 'community support networks', alleviating the impact of COVID-19 and the distress it has caused for both active and retired staff members.

I was pleased to discover that Commission departments, such as its Medical Service and the DIGIT Helpdesk, quickly adjusted their working methods to the circumstances and special needs of staff. Some welcome measures have included providing virtual consultations, giving advice on ergonomics, and ensuring connectivity during remote working also by making available IT equipment where possible. It is also very encouraging that, in disseminating relevant information and providing protective equipment, the Commission has taken into account the special needs of its staff with disabilities.

Based on the Commission's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other input I received in the context of this initiative [1], I have drawn up an indicative list of best practices for accommodating the needs of persons with disabilities during emergencies, which is included in the Annex.



The purpose of this initiative is to ensure these indicative best practices are more widely disseminated within and implemented by the EU administration. My aim is to ensure that the experience gained from the challenges and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic enhances the EU administration's readiness for a future crisis and also, serves as a reminder of the importance of respecting the rights and accommodating the special needs of staff members with disabilities on an ongoing basis.

With these considerations in mind, this letter and its Annex will be published on my Office's website.

Thank you again for your reply and for your cooperation on this initiative, which is hereby closed.

Yours sincerely,

Emily O'Reilly European Ombudsman

Strasbourg, 29/06/2021

Annex

Indicative list of best practices for accommodating the needs of staff members with disabilities,

both in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and for future emergency situations

- Use accessible formats, such as sign language and easy-to-read text, to communicate to staff members with disabilities relevant information about ongoing emergency situations, in particular, applicable public health measures.
- Where possible, make available a dedicated support phone line and email contact for staff members with disabilities or their carers to report issues and request assistance.
- Ensure that any safety measures that are implemented, for example in the workplace, take into account the needs of persons with disabilities.
- Make available special health protection and disease prevention tools adapted to the needs of staff members with disabilities, for example transparent masks for sign language users.
- Put in place adequate facilities for remote working for staff members with disabilities, in particular those at higher risk of infection or complication.
- Make available to staff members with disabilities the same facilities for remote working that they would have access to in the office, for example personal assistance during working hours.
- Make available adapted IT equipment, assistive technology and suitable furniture for staff members with disabilities who are working remotely. Examples include special webcams and microphones, online communication tools and remote conference platforms that are fully compatible with sign language interpretation and live captioning.
- Assist staff members with disabilities in bringing equipment from the regular workplace to their home, if this will assist them in carrying out their functions.
- Where staff members with disabilities have an essential or humanitarian reason for being in a



country other than their place of assignment, consider putting in place a mechanism for authorising such arrangements, where appropriate.

- See if it is possible, in the course of the emergency situation, to authorise special leave for staff members who are carers of persons with disabilities and consider providing more flexible provisions for part-time work for those individuals.
- Adjust the working methods of essential departments of the EU administration (such as the medical services or the IT departments/units) to the needs of staff members with disabilities arising from the emergency circumstances.
- Maintain ongoing and meaningful consultations with staff members with disabilities (or their representative organisations) about their special needs.
- Create 'community support networks', which aim to provide support outside work and alleviate possible psychological distress of staff members with disabilities during the emergency.
- Launch targeted awareness-raising campaigns (for managers and/or for staff members with disabilities) on 'reasonable accommodation' in the event of a health emergency.
- Provide training for managers to explain reasonable accommodation possibilities for staff members with disabilities.
- Overall, seek to ensure that any response to an emergency situation is compliant with the obligations enshrined in the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

[1] I received responses from national and regional ombudsmen, through the European Network of Ombudsmen, from members of the EU Framework for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) - the European Parliament, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and the European Disability Forum -, as well as Organisations of Persons with Disabilities.