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Brussels, 15 December 2020  
Ares S(2020) 8003995

Dear Mr Vardakastanis,

On behalf of President Von der Leyen, we thank you for your open letter sharing with us your concerns regarding persons with disabilities in the context of COVID-19 vaccination and testing strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge with far-reaching impact on public health and vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. The Commission continues to work closely with the Member States, supported by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Public health matters such as organisation and delivery of health care, vaccination and testing strategies, however, are within the competence of Member States and national governments decide on the specific measures and strategies based on each country's national epidemiological and social situation.

Within the broader response to the pandemic, it is important to ensure that vulnerable populations such as people with disabilities are protected from infection and have equal access to all necessary procedures especially given that, as you point out, they are more endangered by COVID-19. This is acknowledged by the World Health Organisation which issued a publication on disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak<sup>1</sup>, inviting national authorities to take appropriate actions to ensure that emergency measures include the needs of people with disabilities and that COVID-19 health care is accessible, affordable and inclusive.

Furthermore, the EU was co-signatory to a joint statement endorsing the UN Secretary-General's call for a Disability-inclusive response to the pandemic. The statement stresses that the response and recovery should protect the rights and needs of persons with disabilities and place them at the centre of our efforts, as envisaged in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/disability-considerations-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>

The European Commission works closely with Member States sharing best practice and providing expertise on national measures. The ECDC released in July technical guidance on the provision of support for vulnerable groups including people with disabilities<sup>2</sup> The objective was to provide guidance for civil society, non-governmental organisations and national and regional authorities who are providing support for people with medical and social vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it aimed to identify some of the major cross-cutting challenges, successes and lessons learned by these organisations from March-May 2020.

On 18 September, the Commission published a set of recommendations for a common COVID-19 testing approach in Europe, as a follow-up initiative of the 15 July Communication on Short-Term EU Health Preparedness for COVID-19 Outbreaks. The recommendations set out concrete action points that will support countries in the planning and organisation of their testing efforts in different stages and settings of the pandemic. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has published COVID-19 testing strategies, where it was stressed that ideally, all people with COVID-19 symptoms should be tested as soon as possible after symptom onset.

On 17 June, the European Commission presented a European vaccine strategy to accelerate the development, manufacturing and deployment of vaccines against COVID-19. As the availability of the vaccines improves, vaccines strategies and their objectives will need to be adjusted accordingly. As stated in the recent document *Preparedness for COVID-19 vaccination strategies and vaccine deployment*, priority access to vaccines should be given to particular groups, including persons over 60 years of age, persons whose state of health makes them particularly at risk, vulnerable socioeconomic groups and other groups at higher risk<sup>3</sup>. The latter covers persons with disabilities due to the reasons you highlight in your letter.

We assure you that we are committed to taking all necessary steps to protect the health of our citizens, including persons with disabilities<sup>4</sup>. We appreciate the work of the European Disability Forum in this field and we are looking forward to our continued collaboration and future dialogue.

Yours sincerely,

(e-signed)  
Stella Kyriakides

(e-signed)  
Helena Dalli

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Medically-and-socially-vulnerable-populations-COVID-19.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/vaccination/docs/2020\\_strategies\\_deployment\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/vaccination/docs/2020_strategies_deployment_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Further information on the activities of the European Commission regarding the COVID-19 response: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en)