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Diamantopoulou earmarks 2003 as European Year of Disabled People. Poll shows EU citizens want more done to integrate those with disabilities.

The Commission today adopted a proposal to establish 2003 as the European Year of People with Disabilities. Welcoming the move, which is set to receive EU funding of €12 million, Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou said, "2003 must be a time for Europe to become more aware of disability issues and to challenge the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in many aspects of everyday life." The proposal for a Council decision comes on the day of the first ever EU-wide Eurobarometer survey on attitudes towards disabled people. The survey of 16,000 people shows that over 97% of EU citizens think more could be done to better integrate them into society and that three out of every five EU citizens is personally acquainted with at least one disabled person.

About 38 million Europeans – 10% of the populace - have a disability. Despite some progress to date, they still face numerous barriers throughout the EU in finding accessible transportation, getting into buildings and facilities or gaining access to school and work. Eurobarometer Survey 54, conducted in January among a sample of over 16,000, shows that nearly all Europeans are aware of this reality and believe that community access and participation remain very difficult for people with disabilities. This is despite the fact that 60% say they know one or more disabled individuals, with a quarter of these identifying the acquaintance(s) as family members.

The Eurobarometer shows massive support among European citizens (97 %) for more measures to integrate people with disabilities more fully. A huge 93% of those surveyed also feel more money should be spent on the dismantling of the physical barriers faced by the disabled.

The Commission's initiative is a clear response to the European Social Agenda adopted last December at the Nice Summit, calling for action in this area. The European Year of Disabled People will set out to raise awareness of the rights of people with disabilities and to encourage reflection, discussion and action about measures required to promote equal opportunities.

The Commission's track record on disability issues is already strong, with assistance available under mainstream European Social Fund operations to help with integration into the jobs market. In addition, its EQUAL programme (2000-06), now in hand in the Member States, includes specific provision for activities to combat discrimination against disabled people. The proposed budget for the Year of Disabled People will serve to stimulate wide-ranging involvement and initiatives such as awareness activities, events, meetings and reports and will be complemented by other European and national initiatives.