The peer-to-peer training aimed at supporting the Community of Practice (CoP) Social Inclusion members to use ESF to train people to take up roles needed to support independent living, including personal assistants and other staff engaged in delivering community-based services.

The peer-to-peer training, organised by the ICF Transnationality Team on behalf of the European Commission, was attended by 32 participants who represented managing authorities (MA), intermediate bodies (IB) as well as national and EU-level stakeholders.

The peer-to-peer training built on previous events organised within the Community of Practice, namely the ‘Peer review on the transition from large-scale institutional care to community-based care’, which took place in April 2021 and the ‘Study visit on integrated support solutions (including supported housing)’, which took place in November 2021.

The event was opened by the Co-Chair of the CoP Social Inclusion, Matúš Tluščák from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, who introduced the format, the topic and aims of the peer-to-peer training.

Maria-Anna Paraskeva from the European Commission introduced the topic of the peer-to-peer training highlighting the strong interlink between deinstitutionalisation and long-term care, which is recognised in the forthcoming European Care Strategy\(^1\), as independent living requires enabling long-term care services. She pointed out the importance of ensuring high-quality standards in the provision of services to all groups with support needs, not only people with physical impairment but also those with intellectual disabilities. Integration of social care with other services, such as health care, is also very important to provide the necessary support.

Maria-Anna moreover observed the tendency of insufficient investments in individualised support and, at the same time, increased investment in institutional and residential care; this approach is not in line neither with the UNCRPD, nor with the guidance with regards to the provision of care for persons with support needs in the context of the EU funds. In many countries informal care (e.g. family members taking up the role of personal assistant) plays an important role, often because of the lack of professional support services. When it comes to professional assistants, the main current challenges are mostly related to the lack of acknowledgement and awareness of their role and tasks.

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\(^1\) [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13298-European-care-strategy_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13298-European-care-strategy_en)
Hence it is important to promote the professionalisation, training and life-long learning of workforce. The role of personal assistant is very complex, as in addition to the traditional skills and competences, they are also increasingly required to have technological expertise, communication skills and to be able to work both on a one-to-one basis and as a part of a multi-disciplinary team with other services.

One of the objectives of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is to promote equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services. This aims at providing person-centred support to people with support needs and services allowing them to be independent. Examples of measures that can be funded by ESF+ include continuous and life-long training, re-training and adaptation of personal assistants and workforce to the context in which they will provide support; as well as measures to valorise the role of personal assistants within the community and to encourage their career advancement.

The introduction was followed by a session on lessons learnt from three ESF-funded projects. Dimitris Lambrianide from the Cyprus Paraplegic Organisation presented the project ‘En Ergo, Independent Living Project’, which offers unemployed people the opportunity to take certified courses to become personal assistants for people with disabilities. They are trained according to a tailored curricula based on practical needs and participate in continuous learning and knowledge-sharing activities. The programme empowers people with disabilities to participate in everyday activities and have more control of their life.

Meredith Raley from the Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) presented the “UNIC project – towards user-centred funding models for long-term care”, an EU project focusing on the use of personal budgets in long-term care. UNIC can help staff of service providers through the UNIC toolbox (i.e. a set of tools designed to help improving services and regulations related to services). In particular the Service Delivery Tool helps long-term care providers to design and deliver user-centred services, including personal budgets.

Eva Bruno, from the National Institute for Rehabilitation (Portugal), presented the 'Support Model for Independent Living' (Modelo de Apoio a vida independente, MAVI), a project promoting a paradigm shift in public policies for the inclusion of people with disabilities by seeking to reverse the trend towards institutionalisation and family dependency. MAVI provides personal assistance to help people with disabilities perform activities they cannot perform by themselves, but based on their decisions. The support covers personal care and domestic assistance, civic participation, training, education, research, culture, leisure and mediation.

**Main messages from the event**

**Developing the skills needed for supporting independent living**

- Different people with support needs need different types of help with their daily lives, hence different workforce skills are required. This means it is crucial that the service user determines which skills are needed by the personal assistant or supporting staff. Personal assistants’ training then needs to be tailored to the specific needs of the users and the types of tasks that will need to be performed.

- Personal assistants should be selected directly by service users, in order to meet their individual needs and to build up a personal relationship, in line with the principles of choice and control related to independent living. A general training to personal assistants can also be provided by disability organisations, as it might be difficult for all persons with disabilities to be ‘trainers’ as well.

- Personal assistants and staff providing support need to acquire a clear knowledge and understanding about the concept of independent living. The change of attitude towards independent living should be the starting point of any workforce training.
In general, the main skills required by workforce mentioned during the event are empathy, patience, capacity to listen and learn, as well as respect and willingness to collaborate. Staff members also need to be able and feel free to take decisions independently. Providing space for personal assistants to share problems and exchange on their experiences, such as via the support of a counsellor, are very important elements.

**Staff recruitment and retention**

- Personal interviews between the personal with disabilities and the personal assistant are important to discuss about the services that the personal assistant will need to offer. Once personal assistants are recruited it is important to continue monitoring their work and evaluate how the relationship is going. For instance, in Portugal, within the MAVI project, the technical team carries out a regular evaluation with the assistant and service user.

- It might be difficult to find or retain the right workforce. Acknowledging and professionalising the role of personal assistants, setting up precise obligations and rights, a better remuneration and a career path, could contribute to making the role more attractive.

**The shift of mindset towards independent living**

- The shift towards independent living can require taking actions to empower people with disabilities to focus on their capacities and provide information on how to plan and manage the transition process. The needs and desires of the persons with disabilities should be placed at the centre of this process.

- Personal assistants need to fully realise the true nature of their role, which goes beyond providing support. In Cyprus, during their training, personal assistants are visited by members of disability organisations to provide further information on what is expected from them.

- It may be challenging for staff working in institutions to change their attitude and become personal assistants supporting independent living. Individual planning, continuous training and peer exchanges are useful in this regard to see how their work can be carried out differently. In some cases (e.g. in Slovakia) the most reluctant actors are the directors and funders of the social services.

- Families and the people that are close to the person with disabilities should also be supported in the shift of mindset. It is important to be careful also to institutional mentality in family settings, for instance for children placed in foster families.

**The role of ESF+**

- The costs of training personal assistants can be covered by ESF+ but the initiative needs to come from the Member States, as the relevant programmes are drafted by the Member States. Stakeholders can play an important role and be in touch with the managing authorities in order to encourage this line, as well as to be part of the monitoring committee to follow the entire programme cycle.

- As the ESF+ funding is limited to a certain period, it is key to mainstream practices related to personal assistants’ training, making it a permanent policy (as it will happen in Portugal, with the MAVI project) in order to ensure their sustainability.