

Impact of Coronavirus emergency on people with intellectual disabilities, families in France

On Wednesday 13 May 2020, Inclusion Europe held an online meeting with Isabelle Chandler, Director of Advocacy and Influence at Unapei, and her colleague Clara Alibert to learn about the situation of people with intellectual disabilities and families in France during the Coronavirus emergency.

The COVID-19 emergency shows us that there is nothing new about disability discrimination. Mostly, it is making more pronounced and extreme. People with disabilities are facing many challenges, including access to healthcare and education. During the crisis, people with intellectual disabilities and their families are most of the time invisible. The media barely talk about the difficult situation faced by almost 10 million French citizens with disabilities. Even if the country's deconfinement plan began on 11 May, there are still many challenges to overcome. In the near future, [Unapei](#) will continue to work tirelessly to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities and their families.

Q: What have been the main problems for people with intellectual disabilities and their families during the emergency?

Isabelle Chandler: The lockdown has been hard to manage for people with intellectual disabilities as well as for people under guardianship, and it has even led to over-disability. The restriction measures applied during the lockdown have reinforced obstacles to their daily needs and put in danger their fundamental rights (including access to food, to healthcare, and to education). For example, the closure of post offices and banks, particularly in rural areas, made very difficult to withdraw cash for people who are not authorized to use a credit card. As many shops prohibited to pay in cash, people under guardianship could not even buy food! Moreover, people with intellectual disabilities had difficulty to understand the situation and the conditions of the lockdown. As a result, some of them started to accumulate fines because they did not understand they could not leave their house without an official authorisation.

During the lockdown, disability day services were closed. Consequently, people with disabilities carried out by support services providers had to stay all day at home with their family. After two months of lockdown, sometimes without any respite solutions, these families are now exhausted, even suffering from burnout.

During the Coronavirus crisis, 300 people with disabilities have died in hospitals. The government does not have yet the figures regarding people with disabilities who died at home.

Q: What has been the situation with schools during the lockdown?

Clara Alibert: Since schools were closed, the government has tried to implement digital learning for every child, with or without intellectual disabilities. However, many children with intellectual disabilities could not attend these digital classes because they did not have the digital tools required. That is why, associations, such as Unapei, provided digital support to students with intellectual disabilities and shared with caregivers a number of educational teaching resources (educational games, nursery rhymes, speech therapy activities, examples of planning to organize the day, etc.)

Isabelle Chandler: Regarding the plan for school reopening, Sophie Cluzel, Secretary of State in charge of People with Disabilities, explained that children with disabilities must go back to school. According to her, it is a priority. However, 50% of parents of children with disabilities do not want that their children go back to school. They are scared because not every schools can ensure social distancing.

Q: What has been Unapei doing in advocacy during the Coronavirus emergency?

Isabelle Chandler: With *Collectif Handicaps*, we fought against the discriminatory access to healthcare for people with disabilities. Unapei was among the first associations to denounce this discrimination and to alert the government and the media. At the beginning of April, Oliver Veran, Minister of Solidarity and Health, and Sophie Cluzel, Secretary of State in charge of People with Disabilities, hold a press conference during which they reiterated the prohibition of discrimination in access to healthcare and presented a series of measures to guarantee equal access to healthcare during the Coronavirus emergency. After the press conference, the situation got better but we still remain vigilant because equal access to healthcare is a fundamental right.

Clara Alibert: During the lockdown, the government announce that medical staff will receive an economic bonus for its mobilization during the crisis. We advocated to extend this bonus to caregivers and social workers. It is not only about money; it is about consideration. Public authorities need to considerate these professionals too.

Q: The French government did quite a bit of work on making information accessible, at least compared to other countries. What do you think of the response and what do you think other governments could learn from it?

Isabelle Chandler: Since the beginning of the lockdown, the cooperation with the French government is positive. We have conference calls every week and every difficulty we mention is taking into account, including our call to make information accessible to everyone. Now, every presidential or ministerial statement goes along with transcription and sign interpretation.

Regarding easy-to-read, Unapei worked a lot to develop an easy-to-read version of the official authorisation to go out during the lockdown. Thanks to the collaboration with the government, the document was disseminated all over France and get a lot of media attention. In a sense, we managed to popularise this issue among French citizens. At first, we had some cases of policeman who did not accept the easy-to-read authorization as an official document. Therefore, we had to alert the government that law enforcement officials, and many other public servants, are not always trained about easy-to-read.

Q: What will be the main issues/challenges in the near future for you?

Clara Alibert: The lifting of containment measures is going to be difficult and stressful for people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Unapei will support them. Firstly, we already advocated for the same deconfinement procedures for all citizens. For us, disability should not be a criterion of vulnerability when deciding the deconfinement strategy. Secondly, in the near future, we have to ensure that the deconfinement will take place in the safest conditions for people with disabilities and their families. People with disabilities must be able to benefit from routine care quickly, so that the health deficiencies accumulated during the lockdown can be resolved as quickly as possible. It means that caregivers must have access to tests and protective equipment. Thirdly, we will continue to advocate for a non-discriminatory access to healthcare, especially if there is a second wave of contamination in the country. Finally, we are scared that people with disabilities will be more affected by the economic crisis than the others. That is why we will advocate to not cut economic support for people with disabilities.

Inclusion Europe's material about the COVID-19

Inclusion Europe created a webpage gathering the [materials relevant to the Coronavirus emergency](#).

The webpage is updated daily with new content and can be accessed [here](#).

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[5 steps to prevent harm to people with intellectual disabilities and their families in Coronavirus emergency \(.pdf\)](#)