The EU's public health strategy post-Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic has put European health systems under enormous strain, revealing gaps in the way public health emergencies are addressed. The European Commission's proposal for a new EU Health programme, EU4Health, aims to fill these gaps. During the European Parliament's July plenary session, the Commission and the Council are to make statements on the EU's public health strategy after coronavirus, followed by a debate with Members. A resolution is due to be voted later in the week.

Background: Health system resilience

The responsibility for public health and healthcare systems lies with the EU Member States. Health system resilience has been on the policy agenda for several years. The Commission's 2019 State of Health in the EU country health profiles underscored pre-existing resilience concerns. According to the Commission's 2020 country-specific recommendations issued under the European Semester, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated existing structural challenges related to effectiveness, accessibility and resilience of health systems. A resilient health sector is also deemed relevant for addressing climate change impacts as part of broader disaster and risk strategies.

European Commission work towards a post-pandemic public health strategy

Proposal for a new Health programme, EU4Health

On 28 May 2020, as part of the Next Generation EU recovery plan, the Commission adopted a proposal for a €9.4 billion stand-alone EU4Health programme (2021-2027). According to the Commission, the pandemic has shown that the EU needs more coordination between Member States during a health crisis; more capacity at EU level to prepare for and to fight health crises; and more investment in health systems to make sure they are ready for future challenges. EU4Health's three main priorities are: tackling cross-border health threats; making medicines available and affordable; and strengthening health systems. On 12 June 2020, EU ministers of health held a first exchange of views on the proposal, broadly welcoming it.

Upcoming reports on health systems' resilience and healthcare organisation post-Covid-19

The Commission has also initiated wider reflections on ways to improve healthcare organisation. It requested its expert panel on effective ways of investing in health to draft an opinion on a new framework for the organisation of health and social care, to be finalised by November 2020. The Commission's expert group on health systems performance assessment is drafting a report on health system resilience. A report on the pandemic's impact on health system resilience, jointly prepared by the Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is reportedly due by the end of the year.

European Parliament position

Parliament has consistently promoted a coherent EU public health policy. A May 2020 resolution called for a new stand-alone EU Health programme to be created. An April 2020 resolution called for the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Medicines Agency to be strengthened, as well as for the creation of a European health response mechanism, to improve the preparation and coordination of the response to health crises. It also suggested that a post-crisis strategy could include greater powers for the EU to act in the case of cross-border health threats, with new and strengthened instruments for EU-level coordination. A February 2017 resolution addressed, in particular, the issue of medicines shortages, and the need to prioritise development and implementation of eHealth- and mHealth-related solutions. On 7 July 2020, Parliament's Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) discussed the draft report on the EU4Health programme proposal (Rapporteur: Cristian-Silviu Buşoi, EPP, Romania).

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