

*Promoting skills among health and
social care professionals
Examples from
Eurodiaconia members*

Eurodiaconia is a **dynamic**, Europe wide **community** of organisations founded in the **Christian faith** and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of **solidarity, equality** and **justice**. As the **leading network of Diaconia in Europe**, we connect organisations, institutions and churches providing **social and health services and education** on a Christian value base in over 30 European countries.

We bring members together to **share practices, impact social policy** and **reflect on Diaconia in Europe today**.

Editor: Heather Roy
Authors: Alexander Elu
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Eurodiaconia  Connecting faith
and social justice
through action

Rue Joseph II 166
1000 Bruxelles
Belgium

Tel: +32 (0)2 234 38 60
Fax: +32 (0)2 234 38 65
E-mail: office@eurodiaconia.org

www.eurodiaconia.org



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Introduction

Eurodiaconia is a dynamic, Europe-wide community of organizations founded in the Christian faith that provide social and health care services in the tradition of diaconal service and with a strong commitment to promoting social justice. Eurodiaconia represents over 45 members working in over 30 countries, including churches, not-for-profit welfare organisations and NGOs.

Eurodiaconia facilitates an exchange between members to examine social needs, develop ideas, influence policies and promote a social Europe. As a network, Eurodiaconia strives to strengthen diaconal service provision so as many people as possible have access to affordable, high quality social and healthcare services.

In the view of Eurodiaconia, services are enablers of independent lives, empower each person's autonomy and realise each person's inherent worth and value. To fulfil these aims, the staff in charge of bringing services to users is key. In this regard, it is essential that the growing demand for social services is met with a sufficient number of professionals who also have the right mix of qualifications, skills, experience and motivation.

Against this context, however, the sector is faced with significant challenges that hinder the development of growing levels of quality staff. The lack of adequate investment in the sector, partly as a result of tight public budgets, is a primary limitation in many cases. In other cases, the disconnect between care providers and academic and training institutions produce mismatches that need to be addressed by providers at the workplace. In addition, the difficul-

ties to encourage young people -and especially young men- to consider a career in social services limit the growth potential in the sector and reflect the low status which is still granted to care work.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the care sector remains one of the fastest growing ones, even in a context of economic and social crisis, generating 7% of total economic output in EU28. This rate has remained stable even after the financial crisis of 2008, with an increase of 1.7 million jobs between 2008 and 2015. Whereas these figures are masking some heterogeneity across Europe, the role of social service providers as suppliers of skilling opportunities and professional development among staff in the care sector has been key to enable a quality response to service demands today. This publication provides a few examples of such initiatives. The sample of services contained in it has been gathered from the responses given by our membership to a consultation carried out by the Eurodiaconia secretariat in the form of a questionnaire, supplemented by additional input. The diversity of initiatives showcased in this publication reflects different geographical contexts and service approaches determined, for instance, by the relationship with public authorities and funding settings that result in different staff development needs. In all cases, however, there is a common emphasis on values as a core element of training actions and staff development within diaconal organizations. These examples provide inspiration for our members to develop existing skilling initiatives further or to set up new ones.

Why looking at carers' skills is important

Beyond the use made by our members, this publication should also serve to showcase the work of diaconal organisations among decision makers and strategic partners, raising awareness of their actions to ensure more inclusive societies through high-skilled staff in the social sector. In fact, the key role of skills in the social sector has been constantly stressed in Eurodiaconia's work. In a context of high geographical mobility among care professionals, Eurodiaconia's research on [The education, training and qualifications of nursing and care assistants across Europe](#)¹ made the case for clearer comparability of qualification, training and skills standards in the sector as a way to guarantee quality staffing in all Europe. Skills and skilling interventions within organizations also had a prominent role in a Social Services Europe [report](#)², accompanied by policy [recommendation](#)³, addressing the challenges of recruitment and retention in the social services sector and presenting successful initiatives to that aim already in place.

Our policy paper [Building up skills for social inclusion](#)⁴ underscored the need to put the skills of carers at the heart of the ambitious transition towards a person-centred approach to services and more integrated care provision in which Europe is embarked.

This call echoes the political priority given to skills to develop health care as a strategic sector over the coming years. In this regard, the [New Skills Agenda for Europe](#)⁵ -the EU's ambitious initiative aimed at boosting skills in Europe- acknowledged the need to increase the quality and relevance of skills in the sector in order to prepare Europe for its future challenges. To this aim, the Skills Agenda pro-

posed a *Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills* to design sector-specific skills solutions. The Blueprint puts the demand-side of skills at the centre of this process, viewing employers and providers as shapers of new skill mixes in partnership with training and education actors. The health care sector is viewed as one priority sector for the development of a Blueprint due to identified severe skills shortages. Eurodiaconia believes that a more integrated approach to care should be embraced by the initiative, taking into account the equally pressing skilling issues within the social sector. Nevertheless, Eurodiaconia shares the idea that a skilled care staff lies at the heart of any effort aimed at ensuring that care services are fit to the challenge of an increased demand for care in our societies.

The four cases included in this publication are only an example of how Eurodiaconia members are addressing a key issue which reminds us how a fully-fledged commitment towards social investment should not overlook the importance of qualified, skilled carers to maximise social impact. Within each case study showcased in this publication, we have aimed to highlight the goals of the project, its overall approach to skilling and main actions. Also, we have identified funding sources and, when applicable, partnerships with other stakeholders, such as academic institutions, social partners, employment services, etc. Where possible, an attempt has been made to assess the results of these initiatives and their overall impact on the quality of service provision.

¹<https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/The-education-training-and-qualifications-of-nursing-and-care-assistants-across-Europe-Final.pdf>

²https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/9f45fc_2f94e25a4d6f44b0804cd9d92f01a9e5.pdf

³https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/9f45fc_64f341e27e524d-

<fc8b882fd0cba24f43.pdf>

⁴https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/AI-1-2017_Building-up-Skills-for-social-inclusion.pdf

⁵<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>

Main messages

- The growing demand for social services constitutes a strategic challenge that Europe must address. The European demographic pyramid continues its reversing process and the share of younger people at the base is much lower than the increasing share of elderly and very elderly at the top, where health and social care needs are concentrated. Ensuring the provision of adequate care to an increasing number of people is, therefore, crucial to guarantee the wellbeing, autonomy and inner value of all people. The role of quality staff with the right qualifications, skills and motivation is instrumental to this aim.
- The health and social care sector is among the most dynamic ones in Europe today. It generates about 7% of total economic output in EU28 and the positive trend persisted even after the financial crisis of 2008, with an increase of 1.7 million jobs between 2008 and 2015, whilst all other sectors experienced drops in employment. The positive evolution of jobs in the sector reflects the structural demand for care in our societies, which has in fact overcome the obstacles imposed by a general context of budgetary pressures.
- The efforts to step up skill standards among social services professionals and, ultimately, the quality of services provided cannot be abstracted from such broader financial context. In this regard, it is key to understand that quality in services -and in staffing- has a price. For this reason, all efforts made by providers of social services to step up the quality of professionals in charge of bringing services to users should be underpinned by adequate resources. Public authorities should lead this process and confront the demographic challenge with adequate funding levels in order to render skilling actions on care staff sustainable over time.
- The transformation of care -in particular, the transition from institutional care to the provision of social services on a community- or home-based services- has changed the way in which services are experienced by users and re-defined the role of staff in the sector. Community-based services have little to do with a 'lighter' provision of services. Instead, they call for a different, more individualised approach where services are delivered by multi-disciplinary teams that combine rehabilitation with prevention on an ad hoc basis. The skills of carers should adapt to these changes. Investment in skills for care professionals should further enable their mobility between care areas, taking people's needs as their focal point.
- This includes the development of skills related to ICT and assistive technologies, person-centred case and care management, everyday life assistance, care techniques that support dignity, etc. In line with the transition to more integrated care, specific steps are required towards the promotion of more interdisciplinary professionals who are ready to take a more holistic approach towards person-centred and person-directed services.
- Such a transition in social services has also resulted in a new relationship between service providers, staff and users. Users' right to shape the services that they receive in

co-production with providers calls for professionals with more developed skills to communicate with users. As an interface between the two levels, the importance of soft skills among social services staff cannot be stressed enough.

- Work organization and self-management, communication and interpersonal skills -applied to an increasingly intercultural range of users-, problem solving, innovation and creativity, the ability to understand and empathize, etc.; These soft skills are all key requirements for service practitioners. Professionals also take on a high level of personal responsibility and autonomy, managing health, physical and psychosocial well-being, support of growth and development, caring and rehabilitation.
- Such a comprehensive approach to skills sometimes clashes with day-to-day recruitment practices where there is often an excessive focus on qualifications only, and less attention is paid to hands-on experience or motivation, which are equally key to jobs in the care sector.
- Having the right qualifications and formal skills is a crucial guarantee for quality staffing in the social sector. In this regard, there has to be a clear prioritization of professionalism (and qualifications and skills) to overcome the tension between the pressing demand for care staff and the need to ensure quality services. This is especially important in a context of staff shortages and high geographical mobility of carers to fill in such gaps. In this context, [Eurodiaconia's research on The education, training and qualifications of nursing and care assistants](#)

[across Europe](#) already stressed the need for clearer comparability of qualification, training and skills standards in the sector.

- Underscoring the role of quality staff in social services goes hand in hand with fighting informality in the sector. The contribution of informal care is key to address the unmet care needs created by insufficient access to formal care. However, this cannot be an excuse to not addressing the lack of professionalism in the care sector and the increase of undeclared work. These may be perceived as short-term solutions if obstacles to access formal care or its unaffordability make it unavailable. However, undeclared or unprofessional care has sometimes large costs in the form of ineffective care, abuse or other contingencies which have overall damaging effects for quality providers among the general public. Preventing this requires adequate measures and sufficient investments in order to ensure that formal services are affordable for long-term care users.
- The majority of professionals employed in the sector are women. The sector, therefore, has a huge potential to contribute to increased female employment rates, also indirectly as enablers of higher participation in labour markets after care duties are formally covered. However, it is important to ensure that pay levels and work conditions in the sector are not in fact reinforcing gender stereotypes in the care profession.
- For this reason, it is vital to reduce employee turnover, increase pay levels and establish clearer career paths with lifelong learning opportunities in order to render

jobs in the sector more attractive. This will help to ensure the new recruits -both women and men- required to replace an ageing workforce and sustain the sector's growth over the next decades.

- Social service providers should adopt a more proactive role in attracting new entrants in the sector as a way to ensure the future of the services and the quality of their staff. To this aim, many providers have already established strong links with education and training institutions. These partnerships ensure a better matching of curricula with real sector needs, help develop practical contents as part of studies and incentivise a swift transition into work for young graduates.
- In spite of their efforts and direct knowledge of how social services work and what staff needs are, providers and employers cannot respond to the challenge alone. In most cases, social services are not a commodity that users buy in the market. A sustainable provision of social services which are effective in addressing people's needs must be based on a balanced relationship between providers, contracting authorities and users that acknowledge the shared challenges and work jointly towards high quality staff for high quality services.
- Volunteers are vital to the sustainability of many social services. On one hand volunteers are agents of social inclusion through their engagement with those at risk of social exclusion. Eurodiaconia members, on the other hand, experience how volunteering is also a springboard for tapping people's

potential and develop informal and non-formal learning. Volunteering opportunities can thus work as entry options that encourage young people to consider a career in social services and change their views on social and care work. Notwithstanding this, providers of social services should be the first to make a clear distinction between qualified professionals and volunteers. This is essential to promote quality staffing in a credible manner and communicate the social value of care work among stakeholders.

- The future of care will be determined by demographic factors, medical and scientific progress and further advances towards a more person-centred provision of services. In addition, as any other job, employment in the care sector will also be affected by the profound ongoing changes experienced in the area of work. Innovation, ICTs, platform economies and new forms of work can represent an opportunity for the development of different job profiles in the sector instead of a threat for workers and services themselves. It is up to all the stakeholders involved to realise such opportunities and skills will play an essential part in making the sector fit for that purpose.

Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren⁶ (Czech Republic)

An Academy to boost carers' skills through diaconal values

The Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (DECCB) is a Christian non-profit organization offering help and support to live dignified and valuable lives through contingencies such as old age, illness, disability or isolation. It constitutes one of the largest providers of social services in the Czech Republic and runs more than 130 facilities, centres and special schools offering social, medical, educational and pastoral care.

Skills and training of health and social care staff

In order to equip health and social care staff with relevant skills and qualifications, the DECCB has established its own Diaconal Academy (Diakonická akademie s.r.o.) to train social workers, direct care workers, and managers in charge of providing social services. The Academy also organizes open courses and tailor-made courses as needed. Fifty different courses provided by the Academy in different fields of social services have obtained the state accreditation. Every year, the DECCB provides training opportunities to approximately 2 500 persons, one third of whom are DECCB employees. In total, about 200 courses are organized every year.

The DECCB approach to skills centres on developing specific skills for each category of care worker depending on their function. For instance, social work managers are required to gain relevant management skills, while so-

cial care workers are more focused on skills linked with the different groups of service users or developing adequate communication skills, particularly in the case of people with dementia and people with mental health issues.

Instead, the DECCB does not provide basic, entry-level skills for new entrants in the sector. Whereas such options are relatively common in the Czech Republic due to severe staff shortages in the care sector, the DECCB does not regard such types of programmes (approx. 150 hours) as sufficient to prepare workers for a proper career in the field.

The training provided by the DECCB encompasses both formal and informal skills. In general, the direct providers of skills and qualifications among the Diaconia's staff are both internal and external lecturers and peers. In addition, the DECCB offers specific, eight-hour training on the values underpinning diaconal social services, which all employees are required to attend. Throughout the short course, participants have the chance to explore the role of diaconal values in their daily work and the meaning of working in the Christian faith. With this, employees are expected to increase their satisfaction and self-reliance thanks to a better understanding of the meaning and value of their daily work.

On the other hand, the DECCB is confronted with significant obstacles to mainstream the value of skills within social care activity in the form of limited time and financial resources available to carry out planned programmes and activities. Indeed, the workload of employees very often represents the main obstacle for a greater focus on staff development, along with limited funding to expand the number of trainers working in the education field.

⁶www.diakonie.cz

Assessing skills

The DECCB favours the validation and recognition of each employees' prior competences. In this regard, all employees are initially monitored by a social work manager who is responsible for assessing the skills and knowledge of each staff member in a specific field. After that, the managers are expected to design an individual development plan together with each employees. The plan is updated every year according to progress.

According to national standards on the quality of social services, direct care workers employed at DECCB are required to complete training programmes (of at least 24 hours) every year. Similarly, the skills and qualifications acquired by employees are validated through certificates issued by the DECCB itself, as some of its skill-

ing actions are accredited by state licences.

The DECCB has established comprehensive competence models -including specific skills requirements- for each position of direct care worker. Such a systematic approach is very helpful for an effective assessment of the skills and qualifications acquired by health and social care professionals after skilling actions. In that regard, each social work manager is responsible for evaluating the competences of employees on a regular basis. This evaluation takes place every year and it is recorded together with the individual development plan. When assessing quality outcomes, some variables are specifically taken into account, namely the increase in users' satisfaction, enhanced internal mobility of employees, the level of staff engagement or readiness to undertake new tasks.



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Partnering with academic institutions

In the provision of its skilling services, the DECCB cooperates with education and training institutions, including specialised teachers from social work colleges and universities who very often work as lecturers at Diaconia ECCB schools. In general, all skilling initiatives for health and social care staff (touching around 50 topics) offered by Diaconia ECCB favour an integrated approach to services and they usually mainstream other priorities of service provision such as teamwork skills, ethics and a user-oriented approach to social services.

Financial support and challenges

Among the services provided by the DECCB in the field of skilling and training, the Diaconal Academy is financed by the income generated from the courses' fees. However, in the case of accredited courses, training can be financed by the state. On the other hand, one of the main challenges is represented by the high level of intersectoral mobility of social care workers, due to lower wages in Czech Republic as compared to other European countries. The fact that many young social workers decide to either start a career in this area and then leave it for another field, or that they do not see a potential benefit in investing in long-term training on social work, has become a major issue.

Diaconia Valdese⁷ (Italy)

Understanding Diaconia throughout a diverse service offer

The *Commissione Sinodale per la Diaconia* (CSD)-Diaconia Valdese is a non-profit organisation that gathers the different activities of the Waldensian Organisation. Diaconia Valdese is committed to providing services to all people, both women and men, without discrimination of gender, religious affiliation or cultural background.

Skills and training of health and social care staff

Diaconia Valdese actively provides different initiatives around skills and training of its health and social care staff. These include a training organised twice each year and addressed to a group of about 30 social work managers, which is aimed to equip them with different soft skills and management competencies. In the autumn 2017, a training track on basic management skills for second line managers (shift supervisors, team leaders, etc.) was launched.

Through these skilling actions, Diaconia Valdese intends to prepare those with a technical background to master the key skills of working in a group effectively as well as to underline the nature of Diaconia Valdese as a diaconal organization, different from an ordinary non-governmental organisation.

As the work with migrants has expanded greatly, the organisation also offers new courses in cultural mediation. The trainings also look at the youngest within the organization, for instance through specific trainings for part-time

⁷ www.diaconiavaldese.org

youth workers. In 2017, Diaconia Valdese also provided a two-hour seminar on diaconal values and some aspects of Waldensian history and Waldensian values to all of its employees. The course, given in locations all over Italy to over 550 participants was intended to provide some useful and easily absorbed information to Diaconia's employees, many of whom do not come from a Waldensian background. The aim of this course is to initiate a reflection on the values on which the organisation's diaconal service is based.

On the other hand, specific skill needs are more prominent among certain profiles of care workers. Diaconia Valdese stresses an intercultural approach to service provision based on the principle that its operators should be always given some background in working with people from other cultures. In particular, those employees in roles demanding interaction with migrants or asylum seekers who require a specific set of skills from staff working with them. Employees with such roles also have regular group meetings with a psychologist who helps them to talk about their difficulties and suggests practical strategies to cope with these. Similarly, all employees working in roles such as nurse, nurse's aide; but also as cleaner, kitchen worker and others, must take a number of technical course hours required by Italian law on such matters as safety, food safety, and fire emergency response among others. Besides, the organisation has started to experiment with the provision of palliative care, and the staff working in that new field is currently receiving training.

At the same time, certain skill needs are also more prominent in specific service settings. While the skills required for those employees working in residential care settings are well

known to their supervisors and are regularly provided, those working in homecare settings will require some additional skills (time management skills, among others). From 2018, this issue will be further discussed for those working in the field of homecare services.

Diaconal services provide a wide range of skills to social and care professionals, which are mainly formal and informal skills. While formal training initiatives include soft skills trainings offered to managers and supervisors along with technical training required by Italian law, in residential facilities informal training and learning on the job are organized by the manager of the facility. Informal training is also important for people working on new projects addressing young people and for adults at risk of social exclusion. The direct providers of skills and qualifications among Diaconia's staff are mostly in-house and outsourced trainers. Indeed, Diaconia Valdese has its own training unit in Florence, called Kaleidos, whose Director usually travels throughout Italy, as needed. For the required technical training the organisation makes use of trainers indicated by the relevant public authority. Generally, a working group on training is made up of three persons: the Executive Secretary of Diaconia Valdese, the Director of Kaleidos and the CSD member responsible for training. This group has formal meetings three times a year to discuss, in March, all training activities undertaken throughout Italy in the previous calendar year and their outcomes, in June the costs of training initiatives and in November the planning for the coming year. This group also meets during the meetings and training sessions of all line managers twice a year.

The organisation's skilling initiatives tend to be more focused on ensuring a universalistic ap-

proach based on equal access to skilling opportunities for all employees. Diaconia Valdese stresses the importance of mainstreaming teambuilding skills in its skilling actions for health and social care professionals, especially those employees working in residential structures. In this case, the team leader within each structure organizes regular meetings to discuss problems with the team and to try to solve them, while a psychologist is in charge of meeting with employees on a monthly basis to facilitate discussions, including those on how to improve performance and analyse occasional areas of conflict within the staff. These groups also regularly discuss how to improve the quality of life of service users.

Skill recognition and validation

Diaconia Valdese pays close attention to the validation of prior learning, and regularly supports foreign employees in their interactions with Italian authorities to this aim. According to Italian procedures, the Embassy of their country of origin sends certificates and records of study of the person seeking Italian certification to the Italian Ministry of Health. The Ministry then decides whether to grant the person immediate certification or to require them to take additional courses. In general, such professional figures coming from Western European countries are given Italian certification right away whereas sometimes those from Eastern Europe are asked to take additional courses.

This certification is not available for nurses' aides, which is usually the largest category in the structures of Diaconia Valdese. Foreign professionals in this sector are required to com-

plete the Italian course programme for that role. Similarly, the validation and recognition of skills and qualifications acquired by employees after the provision of diaconal skilling services is regularly carried out and follows the norms and processes indicated by the relevant authorities.

Partnerships for skills

Throughout its service provision, Diaconia Valdese regularly links with education and training institutions, namely a local public authority (*Consorzio Intercomunale Servizi Sociali*), which provides training courses for nurse's aides a few times a year. In Florence, a number of state supported training schools exist as well. Cooperation has also been established with employment services, social partners and trade unions. In particular, a key social partner in the Piedmont Region is Coldiretti, an organization of companies active in the agricultural sector, which has supported Diaconia Valdese in preparing staff for its social farms.

Monitoring the quality of skills

The assessment of the quality of skills and qualifications acquired by health and social care professionals of Diaconia Valdese is carried out in a specific way. Namely, the appointed Quality Manager regularly conducts surveys on staff satisfaction, user satisfaction and satisfaction of the families of users. These surveys offer pointers on what is working well and what areas or questions remain to be addressed by appropriate training. The variables that are taken into account when assessing quality outcomes include the reduction in turnover, eventual increase in the level of satisfaction among ser-

vice users, increased satisfaction of employees and the level of staff engagement.

Financial support and challenges

Generally, the skilling initiatives for health and social care professionals provided by Diaconia Valdese are mainly funded by regional and local funding, Diaconia's own funding sources, and funding from Bank Foundations. A large portion of the organisation's own funding derives from the Otto per Mille⁸ (the state system for financing churches and religious institutions) projects of the Tavola Valdese, of which a part comes from Diaconia Valdese funds and a part comes from Regional authorities. In that regard, Diaconia Valdese has recently witnessed an overall decline in public spending in a number of areas related to health and social care provision.

Diakonhjemmet⁹ (Norway)

A specialised university underpinning a value-based provision of health and residential care

Diakonhjemmet (House of Diaconia Foundation) is a major provider of health services in Oslo. It was founded during the high population growth of the city at the end of the XIX century to educate male deacons as care workers for the church. From the onset, nursing became the basic education for all deacon and was perceived as the most suitable activity to educate students under the principles of diaconia. Over the following years, a hospital was established with the original purpose of providing a space for care practice among qualified deacons. Since then, the hospital has become a corner-

⁸Otto per Mille is the Italian system for financing churches and religious institutions. Italian taxpayers can choose to whom devolve a compulsory 0.8% ('eight per thousand') from their annual income tax return between an organised religion recognised by Italy or, alternatively, to a social assistance scheme run by the Italian State.

stone of Diakonhjemmet's activities, serving about 135,000 inhabitants of the Norwegian capital's western districts and representing a local reference for psychiatry care among older people and orthopaedics.

Today, the Diakonhjemmet Foundation gathers all the health, social care and education activities provided by Diakonhjemmet. It employs approximately 2,000 people and has a budget of about 250 EUR million.

Skills and training of health and social care staff

Diakonhjemmet is engaged in the provision of training and education of care staff at several levels. Diakonhjemmet hosts the VID Specialized University. VID is a value-based and Church-based university that offers study programmes in nursing, social education, occupational therapy, social work, theology, diaconia, leadership and family therapy. At VID, theological and existential topics are part of nursing and social work curricula.

Diaconal values are also an important part of training at the different Diakonhjemmet services. A significant part of courses for new employees are linked to the history, traditions and values of Diaconia. The Diakonhjemmet hospital also has a special group of employees, the "diaconal nurses", one at each hospital ward. 'Diaconal nurses' dedicate one full day of work every week to visit patients who need extra care, and organise reflection groups on professional and ethical dilemmas at work for other employees. The diaconal nurses participate themselves in a similar group led by the hospital deacon, where they can reflect systematically upon the ethical challenges met in

⁹ www.diakonhjemmet.no

their daily work. Diaconal nurses are important bearers of the diaconal values.

In Norway, a growing share of care for older people takes place within primary health care and less at hospitals, which provide the more specialised services available at the health care system. In practice, this means that nurses and health care workers in primary health care need to be trained on how to deal with people who suffer from more serious and complex conditions than in earlier days.

A very important skill that is, however, not acquired through formal training regards the ability to communicate with different people, some of whom are unable to express their needs. To better communicate with patients and their relatives, Diakonhjemmet's Hospital offers a course for its health care professionals called "4 Good Habits". The course teaches health care professionals how to communicate with patients, and their relatives in a clear way, providing information on health conditions that is understandable to patients and giving them hope. Training courses on basic communication skills are also taught to the many volunteers who support the healthcare institution.

Promoting lifelong learning among carers

Increasing need of communication skills is required more and more also in Diakonhjemmet's nursing homes for elderly people increase: as more and more treatments are provided in these centres to avoid frequent and unnecessary hospitalisation of patients, nurses and health workers need to practice and train how to deal with people suffering from more serious and complex conditions than previously.

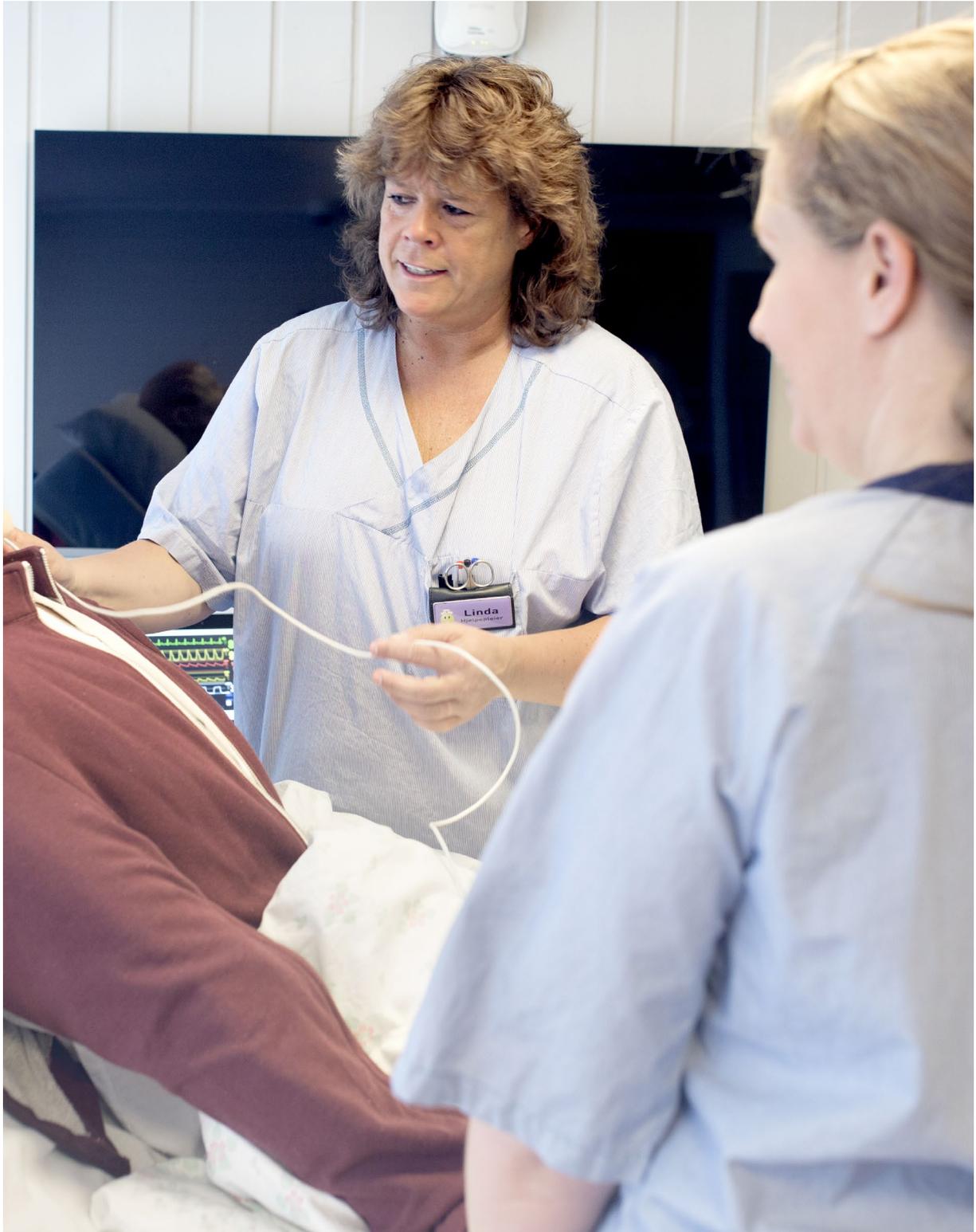
Diakonhjemmet has an open approach to training and the acquisition of competences. For ex-

ample, human resources departments oversee the practical and communication skills taught at the hospital but employees are free to upskill upon their own initiative; many Diakonhjemmet employees undertake a Master's degree during their career; others engage in vocational education and trainings that are often run by non-for-profit organisations.

Health and social care students are obliged to spend two years of guided practice in a hospital, care home, etc. after completing their first two years of college. Diakonhjemmet is involved in such placement arrangements and, as mandatory during these two years, is responsible for monitoring the training in close cooperation with the municipal training office. Following an inclusive approach, Diakonhjemmet is particularly interested in hosting students who have had difficulties completing their education in other institutions.

Skills recognition and external cooperation

Diakonhjemmet is in a unique position to offer certified diplomas issued by its own university and professional school. In addition, an important angle of the recognition of skills and qualifications within Diakonhjemmet has to do with foreign care workers. In this regard, Diakonhjemmet and the VID Specialized University are part of a partnership with the municipality of Oslo and a private company which runs and owns nursing homes (Norlandia). Together, they have set up a training programme aimed at complementing the qualifications and training of foreign care professionals in line with Norwegian standards.



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Diaconal Centre of the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia¹⁰ (Slovakia)

Putting a skilled staff at the base of diaconal service

The Diaconal Center of the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia is a non-profit organisation

which was established to support the diaconal service of the Reformed Christian Church, settled by the Hungarian speaking minority in Slovakia, in the south of the country. The Diaconia, which has been legally established in 2003, is a young and small organization that is rapidly expanding and coordinates the social services and diaconal work in the dioceses of the Slovak Reformed Church.

¹⁰ www.refdiakonia.sk

Skills and training of health and social care staff

The Diaconal Centre of the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia offers targeted skilling initiatives to its health and social care professionals. A specific course for caregivers, which is aimed to equip employees with the relevant skills and

qualifications to work in the field of health and social care, ends up with a certified diploma that can be recognised in any country of the European Union. The 230-hour course is taught by qualified lecturers with proven experience in the



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field. It normally lasts 5 weeks and is composed of three parts; namely theory, praxis and praxis within a specialised institute.

The first two sessions span over four weeks, while the remaining sessions are in the form of home studies, with the opportunity to access e-learning tools at any time.

Besides training qualified and well-prepared health and social care professionals to access the labour market, the course is aimed to allow the geographical mobility of caregivers and provide relevant skills and practical knowledge. Generally, professional trainers are the direct providers of skills and qualifications among the health and social care staff of the Diaconal Centre.

The Diaconal Center of Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia carries out a careful assessment of the quality of skills and qualifications acquired by health and social care staff, mainly through the use of questionnaires to be filled in by both employees and service users. The variables taken into account when assessing quality outcomes include the increased level of satisfaction among service users and changes in the level of staff engagement.

The Diaconal Centre also offers training on ethical issues in the homecare sector, which is largely inspired by Christian faith and values. In that regard, the health and social care professionals employed at the center may also take part in biblical devotions, which represent a good chance for them to share their personal experience in the Christian faith. Currently, the Diaconal Centre does not employ any health and social care professionals from abroad, and does not witness

any major trends related to the migration of local workforce abroad. On the other hand, one of the main challenges faced by the Center is the lack of professional nurses in the non-institutional caregiving settings. As the process of deinstitutionalisation is still ongoing in Slovakia, the organisation's efforts are mostly focused on residential care, even though modern residential care facilities are needed to overcome

Working in partnership with education and training institutions

In order to improve the quality of service provision, the Diaconal Center closely cooperates with some education and training institutions, such as the [VaV Institute](#)¹¹, where health and social care professionals can receive specialised training provided by professional educators. Similarly, the Centre also links with employment services including the Support for Homecare Services programme implemented by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Affairs, which is also responsible for monitoring the progress made in the provision of the service.

Financial support and challenges

The skilling initiatives for health and social care professionals provided by the Diaconal Center of Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia are mainly funded by EU funding and partly supported by funds from Ecclesia *Versicherungsdienst GmbH* and HEKS-EPER (Swiss Church Aid), as a training course provider.

¹¹ <https://www.vavslovakia.sk/>



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Conclusions

The increased demand for care by ageing populations in Europe represents a strategic challenge that our societies must address. In this context, care providers have a very important responsibility to respond to such demands. A crucial aspect of such a response regards how providers manage care professionals, guaranteeing adequate staffing levels and the right set of skills among these.

Both aspects -the size and the quality of the workforce- are in fact complementary and feed each other; e.g. the promotion of skill acquisition and their development at the workplace can help address some of the retention issues which characterise the sector.

Acknowledging the role of skills as an organizational instrument to boost the quality of service provision and the wellbeing of users, providers, workers and users must work hand in hand. Together, they should identify skill needs –present and future-, develop skill-based competitive advantages within services and define skilling paths, as well as the ways of implementing these in a coherent manner with the overall priorities of the organization. To this aim, for example, mainstreaming training departments within organizations could bring such priorities into reality.

Also, social services that work closely with education institutions and universities will have an easier access to young professionals at the start of their careers as carers. Regarding skills, such partnerships represent an opportunity for providers to influence curricula, bring them closer to the actual needs of the sector and have a closer contact with innovative approaches to service provision.

Many of the skilling efforts carried out in Eurodiaconia member organizations -and service

providers at large- are applied to new recruits into the sector. In a proactive attempt to address staff shortages and ensure a sustainable provision of services, many Eurodiaconia members have begun to work on innovative ways to increase the number of people entering the sector using media, campaigns, etc. However, these efforts must be accompanied with parallel investments in skills to guarantee that the quality of new staff –for instance, foreign carers with different qualification and training profiles- matches the service quality standards.

However, in spite of a context of staff shortages and competition for human resources, it is still essential to ensure that new recruits possess the key vocational component required among all care professionals. Acknowledging the special nature and social value of care jobs will probably help value the professionals delivering care.

This particular aspect only stresses the unique nature of care services. Social services are not like any other services and in many cases users do not buy social services. Instead, there are tight links between service users, financing authorities and providers and the role of each party is key to how services are delivered. The provision of quality services -and the investment in quality staffing as an essential component of these- relies heavily on a virtuous relationship between such parties where adequate resources -both financial and human- are key.

Rue Joseph II 166
1000 Bruxelles
Belgium

Tel: +32 (0)2 234 38 60

Fax: +32 (0)2 234 38 65

E-mail: office@eurodiaconia.org

 @eurodiaconia

 Eurodiaconia

 Eurodiaconia.Brussels

 eurodiaconia

 eurodiaconia.org

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