



TEAM IV - Training European Active Mentors for  
Inclusive Volunteering

# State of the Art Report: Current Situation On Mentoring Volunteers With Disabilities In Europe

**Project Number:** 2023-1-IE01-KA220-ADU-000164842

**Work Package 2**

**April 2024**



*Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Léargas. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.*





## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Legal Framework of Volunteering in Europe.....	4
2. CURRENT SITUATION OF MENTORING IN EUROPE.....	4
3. Legal Landscape of Mentoring People with Disabilities in Europe.....	5
4. Examples of Mentoring for Volunteers with disabilities across Europe.....	6
5. Best Practices Collected by the Project Partners.....	7
Ireland.....	7
Spain .....	9
Bulgaria .....	10
Romania.....	11
Belgium.....	12
6. Focus Groups Main Findings .....	13
Ireland.....	13
Spain .....	14
Bulgaria .....	15
Romania.....	15
Belgium.....	17
7. Conclusions from the Focus Groups.....	18
General Conclusions.....	19
Sources of information used: .....	21



## Introduction

**This document is developed within the TEAM IV - Training European Active Mentors for Inclusive Volunteering project with the contribution of all project partners: Volunteer Ireland, Centre for European Volunteering (CEV, Belgium), Pro Vobis - National Resource Center for Volunteering (Romania), Big Brothers Big Sisters of Bulgaria, Confederation of European Senior Expert Services (CESES, Belgium) and COCEMFE Sevilla (Spain).**

TEAM IV aims to contribute to the social inclusion of people with disabilities by training 250 mentors specialised in supporting people with disabilities who are volunteers or wish to be volunteers. The project intends to create a platform that can be used for training and for matching mentors and mentees, providing training materials in different languages.

This project will result in offering an online training course for developing and strengthening the capacity for people to act as trained volunteer mentors, through a European mentoring programme for volunteers with disabilities, using online non-formal learning methodologies. This will also allow matching trained mentors with mentees across Europe.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of inclusive practices within volunteering organisations across Europe. While volunteering offers numerous benefits to both individuals and communities, people with disabilities often encounter barriers that hinder their participation in these activities. Recognizing the potential of mentoring programs to support and empower volunteers with disabilities, this State of the art Report aims to provide an in-depth analysis of mentoring initiatives across Europe tailored to this demographic.

The report begins by examining the current landscape of volunteering among people with disabilities in the five European countries represented in the project's consortium, highlighting the challenges they face and the existing gaps in support systems. It then delves into the concept of mentoring and its role in facilitating the integration of volunteers with disabilities into various volunteering programs.

Drawing upon best practices and case studies from different European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Spain and Ireland), the report explores diverse mentoring models and approaches implemented to support disabled volunteers.



## 1. Legal Framework of Volunteering in Europe

Volunteering is an essential part of every contemporary society. Through volunteering, citizens significantly contribute to the social and economic development of their communities. In addition, they expand the influence and capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and at the same time develop their own skills. These contributions have been repeatedly recognised through various initiatives aimed to promote volunteering internationally and throughout Europe.

The legal framework is only one part of the social and institutional contexts that shape volunteering in a country. The level of volunteering also depends on such factors as the economic and political situation, the stage of development of the third sector and its image, the culture of volunteering and the labour market. The legal framework becomes important when it creates obstacles and impedes volunteering, as the experience of several countries in Europe shows (Georgia, Estonia and Poland) . Therefore, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in particular have moved beyond publicly recognizing volunteering to creating a legal environment that will promote volunteering. Several European countries have already adopted legal provisions governing volunteerism, including the Czech Republic, Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Portugal, Romania and Spain. Other countries, including Croatia, Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are drafting such legislation.

In 2021 CEV presented the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 - #BEV2030, which was accepted and supported by all of its member organisations across Europe. This Blueprint is organised around 5 thematic concepts:

1. Independent and inclusive engagement;
2. New volunteers and methods;
3. Empowerment;
4. Appreciation of contribution;
5. Resources for more Value.

It serves as guidance to CEV and other stakeholders concerned with volunteering, especially policymakers, regarding the steps that need to be taken for volunteering to reach its true potential. It also acknowledges that there are different cultural and legal contexts for volunteering in Europe and it takes into account that the outcomes of the suggestions included will vary according to this variety of circumstances and different volunteer profiles, for example regarding age, but stresses that common values and aspects of quality indicators should be common throughout.



## 2. CURRENT SITUATION OF MENTORING IN EUROPE

The current situation of mentoring in Europe varies across countries and sectors. Generally, mentoring programs are recognized as valuable tools for professional development, career advancement and knowledge transfer. Many companies, universities and organisations in Europe offer mentoring programs to support employees, students, entrepreneurs and other professionals. Additionally, there's a growing trend of digital mentoring platforms and networks, which provide opportunities for virtual mentoring relationships. However, the availability and effectiveness of mentoring programs can vary based on factors such as funding, cultural attitudes toward mentorship and the level of institutional support.

There are significant differences in the sector between Eastern, Western and Central Europe. This distinction got quite visible at the time the project partners investigated good practices in mentoring of disabled volunteers (end of 2023). Mentoring in Eastern and Western Europe can vary in terms of cultural norms, organisational structures and focus areas. Here's a general comparison:

1. Cultural Context: Eastern and Western Europe have different historical and cultural backgrounds, which can influence mentoring practices. In Western Europe, mentoring may be more formalised and structured, often following established models and frameworks. In Eastern Europe, mentoring might have a more informal approach, relying on personal connections and networks.

2. Organisational Support: In Western Europe, there may be more established mentoring programs within businesses, universities and non-profit organisations, with dedicated resources and support systems. In Eastern Europe, mentoring programs may be less common and may rely more on individual initiative or grassroots efforts.

3. Focus Areas: The focus areas of mentoring can also vary. In Western Europe, mentoring programs may emphasise career development, skill-building and professional networking. In Eastern Europe, mentoring might also address socio-economic challenges, entrepreneurship and leadership development, reflecting the unique needs of the region.

4. Accessibility: Access to mentoring opportunities may differ between Eastern and Western Europe, due to factors such as economic development, infrastructure and social policies. In some cases, mentoring programs in Western Europe may be more accessible to a wider range of individuals, while in Eastern Europe, access could be more limited, particularly in rural or economically disadvantaged areas.



### 3. Legal Landscape of Mentoring People with Disabilities in Europe

The legal framework surrounding mentoring in Europe varies from country to country, as each country has its own set of laws and regulations governing volunteerism, mentoring programs and disability rights. However, there are several common themes and overarching principles that shape the legal landscape of mentoring for disabled individuals across Europe:

1. Disability Rights Legislation: Many European countries have enacted comprehensive legislation to protect the rights of people with disabilities and promote their inclusion in all aspects of society, including volunteering and mentoring programs. These laws often prohibit discrimination based on disability and require organisations to provide reasonable hosting conditions to ensure equal participation opportunities for disabled individuals.

2. Volunteer Protection Laws: In several European countries, there are specific laws and regulations that outline the rights and responsibilities of volunteers and volunteering organisations. These laws may address issues such as volunteer liability, insurance coverage and the duty of care owed to volunteers, including people with disabilities participating in mentoring programs.

3. Data Protection and Privacy Regulations: Mentoring programs often involve the collection and processing of personal data, including sensitive information about participants' disabilities. European countries are subject to stringent data protection laws, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which govern the handling of personal data and impose strict requirements on organisations regarding consent, transparency and security measures.

4. Employment and Labour Laws: In some cases, mentoring programs may involve paid mentors or stipends for volunteers, raising employment and labour law considerations. Organisations must ensure compliance with relevant labour laws, such as minimum wage requirements, working hours regulations and employment contracts, especially when engaging disabled individuals as mentors or mentees.

5. Funding and Grants Compliance: Many mentoring programs receive funding or grants from government agencies, non-profit organisations or private donors. Organisations operating mentoring initiatives for disabled volunteers must adhere to the terms and conditions of funding agreements, including reporting requirements, eligibility criteria and compliance with relevant laws and regulations.

Overall, while there is no uniform legal framework governing mentoring in Europe, organisations operating mentoring programs for volunteers with disabilities must navigate a complex landscape of laws and regulations, to ensure compliance and promote the rights and well-being of all participants. Collaboration with legal experts, disability advocacy groups and relevant stakeholders can help organisations develop and implement mentoring initiatives that are both effective and legally sound.



## 4. Examples of Mentoring for Volunteers with disabilities across Europe

Mentoring people with disabilities in Europe is an important aspect of promoting inclusion and equal opportunities. Various organisations across Europe, both governmental and non-governmental, offer mentoring programs tailored to the needs of disabled individuals. These programs focus on providing support, guidance and skill development to help disabled people overcome barriers and achieve their personal and professional goals. Additionally, initiatives aimed at fostering workplace inclusion often include mentoring as a key component support offered to disabled employees in their careers. However, the availability and effectiveness of such programs may vary from country to country, due to differences in policies, resources and societal attitudes towards disability.

Mentoring programs led by people with disabilities themselves are emerging across Europe, fostering empowerment, peer support and advocacy within the disabled community. These programs provide a platform for people with disabilities to share their experiences, insights, and expertise with others facing similar challenges. They often focus on a wide range of topics including personal development, navigating systems and services, accessing education and employment opportunities and promoting self-advocacy. These initiatives play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity, breaking down stereotypes and empowering people with disabilities to actively participate in society on their own terms. While the availability of such programs may vary by region, there is a growing recognition of their importance in promoting the rights and well-being of people with disabilities across Europe.

These are just a few *examples of mentoring programs led by people with disabilities* in Europe:

1. Disability Mentoring Programme (DMP) - UK: This programme connects disabled mentors with disabled mentees, providing support, guidance and empowerment. Mentors share their personal experiences and expertise, to help mentees navigate various aspects of life, including education, employment and social inclusion.

2. AbilityNet Mentoring Programme - UK: AbilityNet offers a mentoring program specifically tailored to disabled individuals interested in pursuing careers in technology. Mentors, who are often disabled professionals working in the tech industry, provide advice, encouragement and technical guidance to mentees, helping them build skills and confidence.

3. Handisup Mentoring Programme - France: Handisup is a French organisation that offers mentoring and support services to students and graduates with disabilities. Mentors, many of whom also have disabilities, provide guidance in academic and career-related matters, as well as emotional support and advocacy.

4. Bezev Peer Counseling and Mentoring - Germany: Bezev (Beratungs- und Servicezentrum für sehbehinderte und blinde Menschen - Advice and service centre for visually impaired and blind people) offers peer counselling and mentoring services for blind and visually impaired



individuals in Germany. Peer mentors, who are themselves blind or visually impaired, provide practical advice, emotional support and encouragement to help others adjust to life with vision loss and be able to navigate various challenges.

5. My Plus Students' Club - UK: My Plus Students' Club is a networking and support platform for university students and graduates with disabilities in the UK. The club offers mentoring opportunities where disabled professionals mentor students, sharing insights, advice and career guidance tailored to the needs of disabled individuals entering the workforce.

## 5. Best Practices Collected by the Project Partners

At the first stage of the TEAM IV project implementation (November 2023 - March 2024), all the partners conducted national research on **best practices** in the field of mentoring volunteers with disabilities and organised **focus groups** with people with disabilities (either already volunteering or being interested in it) and experienced mentors as well. The main purpose was to collect information about the current status of these actions around Europe, as well as to identify the up-to-date needs of volunteers with disabilities.

### Ireland

In Ireland, there are several organisations and initiatives that offer mentoring and support for disabled volunteers. One example is the National Learning Network (NLN), which provides a range of training and employment support services, including mentoring, to individuals with disabilities. NLN works closely with volunteers to help them develop skills, gain confidence and access opportunities in volunteering and employment.

Another organisation to consider is one of the project partners - Volunteer Ireland, which promotes and supports volunteering across the country. While they may not offer specific mentoring programs tailored to volunteers with disabilities, they provide resources, training and guidance to all volunteers, including those with disabilities, to help them succeed in their volunteer roles.

Additionally, local disability support organisations and community centres offer mentoring or peer support programs for people with disabilities interested in volunteering. It's worth reaching out to these organisations directly to inquire about available resources and opportunities for mentoring (<https://www.independentliving.org/links/links-organisations-disabilities.html>).

Overall, while there may not be dedicated mentoring programs exclusively for volunteers with disabilities in Ireland, there are various avenues for support and guidance to ensure they can fully participate and contribute to their communities. Based on the research of good practices done by the project partners, the following are some examples of programmes and initiatives available in Ireland:





1. **WALK** - A mentoring programme based in Dublin focused on community inclusion for adults with intellectual disabilities and autism. The mentoring program offers a blend of one-on-one interactions, both in-person and virtual. Pairing mentors with adults having intellectual disabilities or autism aims to enhance community integration through socially-valued roles ([www.walk.ie](http://www.walk.ie)).
  - a. **Walk Buddies** - Mentoring for new volunteers. New volunteers joining the team have the option to be paired with a buddy, a seasoned volunteer familiar with their role or a similar one.
  - b. **Volunteer Newsletter** - A support for volunteers. Volunteers receive a monthly newsletter featuring a dedicated section on dementia awareness and profiles spotlighting fellow volunteers.
  - c. **Volunteer meetings** - Support and mentoring for new volunteers in a structured format. Biannual meetings convene all volunteers around a central theme, fostering open discussions and collaboration.
  
2. **Volunteer Coffee Morning** - Peer support in an informal format. Volunteer-led coffee mornings at St. John of God Dementia Care in Shakill, Dublin provide opportunities for community engagement and connection ([www.saintjosephsshankill.ie](http://www.saintjosephsshankill.ie)).
  - a. **Dementia Café** - Peer support for people living with dementia and their family members. Monthly café sessions feature guest speakers addressing various topics, fostering mutual learning and sharing experiences among participants.
  - b. **Bowling Club** - Community bowling initiative for people living with dementia and their family members. Weekly bowling sessions cater to individuals living with dementia and their families, with volunteers offering bowling lessons.
  - c. **TY placements** - Placements for Transition Year students (15-16 years old). Local Transition Year (TY) students have the chance to gain practical work experience for a week or fulfil their Gaisce (The President's Award) requirements ([www.gaisce.ie](http://www.gaisce.ie)).
  - d. **TY School Ambassadors** - Awareness raising programme. Volunteer School Ambassadors conduct workshops on dementia awareness for TY students and teachers at nearby secondary schools.
  - e. **Community Café** - Community café for people living with dementia. A community café initiative is in the works, staffed by a team of volunteers, including individuals living with dementia who receive support from fellow volunteers.



3. **General Volunteering** - Galway Simon Community, an organisation that supports homeless People. Volunteers contribute to activities at the Charity Shop, offering assistance as needed ([www.galwaysimon.ie](http://www.galwaysimon.ie)).
4. **Ambassadors for the Arts** - Galway International Arts Festival ([www.giaf.ie](http://www.giaf.ie)) takes place annually in July in the west of Ireland. Volunteers lend support to various tasks, such as parades and administrative duties, contributing to the smooth operation of initiatives. The programme has excellent engagement with volunteers with hidden and visible disabilities and work closely with Ability West and Cope Galway

## Spain

In Spain, there are some/a few organisations and initiatives that provide support and mentoring for disabled volunteers. One notable example is the Spanish National Organization for the Blind (ONCE), which offers various programs and services to support individuals with visual impairments, including volunteering opportunities and mentorship programs.

Additionally, organisations such as Fundación ONCE and Fundación Adecco focus on promoting employment and social inclusion for people with disabilities, which may include mentoring programs tailored to volunteers.

Furthermore, local disability support groups and community centres across Spain may offer mentoring or peer support initiatives for people with disabilities interested in volunteering. These programs aim to provide guidance, encouragement and practical assistance to help volunteers with disabilities navigate challenges and maximise their contributions.

While specific mentoring programs for volunteers with disabilities may vary depending on the region and organisation, there are resources and support available in Spain to facilitate their participation and success in volunteering efforts. Individuals interested in volunteering should reach out to relevant organisations or community centres to inquire about available programs and opportunities for mentoring.

1. **Awareness-raising & dissemination on inclusion** - success story of PWD (Persons with disabilities) Volunteering in their professional field. Ms. Nirvana, a UNV volunteer (United Nations Volunteers) with hearing impairment, embodies dedication, contributing to the press and communication department with a defined set of responsibilities.
2. **Awareness-raising & teaching** - success story of PWD Volunteering in their professional field. Ms. Ahmed, a UNICEF volunteer, demonstrates resilience in her role as she imparts management skills to fellow staff members despite facing mobility challenges.



3. **Autonomy & inclusion** - PWD Volunteering. A day care centre in Lithuania orchestrates activities engaging Young People With Disabilities (YPWD), closely supervised by organisational staff. These activities range from distributing aid packages to war migrants to organising recreational events aimed at fostering companionship.
4. **Empowerment & leadership by improvement of communication and psychological skills** - mentoring programme for PWD leadership . A mentoring initiative for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) that emphasises enhancing social and communication proficiencies, enabling them to serve as beacons of inclusivity within their rural or urban communities, thereby advancing principles of inclusion.
5. **Training and mentoring of volunteers for people with disabilities** - service of volunteering that includes training and mentoring actions for people with intellectual disabilities. Plena Inclusión Madrid boasts a volunteer network exceeding 2,700 members, dedicated to supporting individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. 'Grandes Amigos', an NGO established in 2003, focuses on alleviating loneliness among the elderly through preventive and supportive programs. Through collaborative efforts, both organisations empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to engage as volunteers, enriching community participation and inclusion.

## Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, organisations such as the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL) and the Bulgarian Disability Rights Fund (BDRF) work to promote the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities, including in volunteer opportunities. While there may not be specific mentoring programs exclusively for volunteers with disabilities, these organisations often offer support, resources and guidance to individuals with disabilities who are interested in volunteering.

Additionally, disability support organisations and community centres across Bulgaria may provide mentoring or peer support initiatives for disabled individuals interested in volunteering. These programs aim to empower volunteers with disabilities, provide practical assistance and foster a supportive environment to help them succeed in their volunteer roles.

Overall, while there may not be dedicated mentoring programs for volunteers with disabilities in Bulgaria, there are resources and support available to facilitate their participation and engagement in volunteering activities. Individuals interested in volunteering should reach out to relevant organisations or community centres to inquire about available programs and opportunities for mentoring.

1. **European Mentoring in Social Care (Erasmus+ KA2 Project)** - Mentoring Program that aims to change attitudes among care workers that cater for disabled people, offering one-to-one mentoring at the workplace. The project seeks to replace the old medical model (a disability-focused model) with a social one, a model based on the UN



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It includes training for trainers, training for mentors and training for mentees.

- 2. Online Platform for Exchange of Special Needs Youth Work Methods (Erasmus+ KA2 Project)** - the main aim is to increase youth worker's effectiveness in facilitating youth activities, involving youth with disabilities and learning difficulties. Training and webinars for youth workers on how to include and actively engage in youth activities young people with learning difficulties (autism and dyslexia), young people with physical disabilities, including blind youngsters and also those suffering from mental hardships.

## Romania

In Romania, institutions such as the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ANPDPD) work to promote the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities, including in volunteering opportunities, alongside several grassroots NGOs. While there may not be specific mentoring programs exclusively for disabled volunteers, these organisations often offer support, resources and guidance to individuals with disabilities who are interested in volunteering.

Additionally, disability support organisations and community centres across Romania may provide mentoring or peer support initiatives for disabled individuals interested in volunteering. These programs aim to empower volunteers with disabilities, provide practical assistance, and foster a supportive environment to help them succeed in their volunteer roles.

Overall, while there may not be dedicated mentoring programs for volunteers with disabilities in Romania, there are resources and support available to facilitate their participation and engagement in volunteering activities. Individuals interested in volunteering should reach out to relevant organisations or community centres to inquire about available programs and opportunities for mentoring.

- 1. Preventis Mentoring Program for Vulnerable Youth (association based in Cluj-Napoca)** - This one-on-one mentoring program pairs volunteer mentors with children facing behavioural challenges. Each mentor meets with their assigned child for two hours weekly over the course of a year, engaging in activities they both enjoy. This could involve playing sports, exploring the city, or simply chatting over ice cream. The goal is to build trust and friendship, with the mentor serving as a positive role model who guides the child toward healthier behaviours and aims to prevent addictions or school dropouts.
- 2. Inclusive Volunteering Program within AMAIS** - Association of Integrative Methods for Social Assistance, in Bucharest, is dedicated to social projects and inclusive architectural design, creating spaces that are accessible to everyone, regardless of their disability. It prioritises equity and inclusion in the job market and public spaces, with a



focus on helping vision-impaired individuals achieve independence and develop key skills. The Urban Mobility Club (UMC) School is a major initiative where volunteers assist vision-impaired adults and children in developing skills for independent living, over an academic year.

- 3. Youth Offensive NGO** - hosting ESC Volunteers with disabilities. This local youth NGO based in Arad, Romania supports disabled volunteers engaging with local communities through European-funded volunteering projects. It distinguishes between disabled volunteers and those with fewer opportunities, recognizing that not all disabled individuals need extra support. Over the years, the NGO has managed to involve European or local volunteers with a range of disabilities, including visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, paralysis, hypoacusis, and even dwarfism. While some volunteers require assistance, many can work independently. This organisation has developed an open learning platform with valuable resources created to support the social inclusion of youngsters with disabilities, through peerlead on-line workshops (<https://peers4inclusion.eu/>).

## Belgium

In Belgium, several organisations and initiatives aim to support volunteers with disabilities, although dedicated mentoring programs may vary by region and organisation. Some organisations, such as Handicap International Belgium, provide support and resources to individuals with disabilities, including those interested in volunteering. They may offer guidance, training and assistance to help volunteers with disabilities navigate challenges and maximise their contributions.

Additionally, disability support organisations and community centres across Belgium may offer mentoring or peer support programs tailored to disabled individuals interested in volunteering. These programs aim to provide encouragement, practical assistance and a supportive network to help volunteers with disabilities succeed in their roles.

Furthermore, government agencies and local municipalities may have initiatives or partnerships in place to promote the inclusion of disabled individuals in volunteer opportunities, which could include mentoring or support services.

Overall, while specific mentoring programs for volunteers with disabilities may vary, there are resources and support available in Belgium to facilitate their participation and success in volunteering efforts. Individuals interested in volunteering should reach out to relevant organisations or community centres to inquire about available programs and opportunities for mentoring.

- 1. ParLangi @Brussels** - language-based mentoring. One-on-one or online mentoring sessions prioritise language practice and development. The project adopts a flexible



approach, allowing mentors and mentees to schedule appointments directly, without rigid structural constraints or oversight.

2. **European DAO Mentorship Programme** - peer to peer mentoring of disability access officers in football clubs. Established Disability Access Officers (DOAs) are paired individually with newly appointed DOAs, convening monthly over a minimum period of one year. These sessions emphasise support and knowledge sharing to formulate comprehensive accessibility plans and strategies within clubs, fostering inclusivity for individuals with disabilities.
3. **ESC - Reinforced mentorship** - dedicated to volunteers with disabilities within ESC implementing organisations. Personalised mentorship programs connect mentors with young people facing fewer opportunities. Organisations assign volunteers as mentors, especially in cases where volunteers with disabilities require additional support to execute their activities effectively. This reinforced mentorship model entails increased interaction, closer supervision and extended time dedicated to the personal support provided by the mentor, to ensure autonomy and efficiency of the volunteer in the project tasks and the overall experience

## 6. Focus Groups Main Findings

### Ireland

The discussion revolved around facilitating volunteering opportunities for individuals with disabilities, focusing on various aspects such as support mechanisms, challenges and desired qualities in both mentors and volunteers.

1. **Support Mechanisms:** One-on-one support and peer support were deemed essential for individuals with disabilities to gain confidence and practical guidance. Emphasis was placed on accessible information, including easy-to-read documents, to ensure understanding and inclusion. Understanding disability perspectives and involving people with disabilities in the process were highlighted as crucial for effective support.
2. **Mentoring Programs:** Mentoring programs were seen as learning processes for both mentors and mentees, requiring flexibility and patience. The importance of training, understanding and peer support for mentors was emphasised as needed to ensure successful outcomes. Clear communication channels, especially for remote volunteering, were identified as necessary for effective mentoring.
3. **Challenges:** Time constraints were acknowledged as a significant challenge, requiring flexibility and understanding from both mentors and mentees. The need for organisations to identify and address barriers to volunteering, such as lack of flexibility and overwhelming new experiences, was highlighted.
4. **Desired Qualities in Volunteers:** Motivation, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude were identified as key qualities sought in volunteers with disabilities. Flexibility to adapt to



changing circumstances and a willingness to persevere through ups and downs were also highlighted.

5.

6. **Overall Impact:** Participants recognized the value of diverse perspectives and collaborative efforts in supporting volunteering opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The insights gathered from the discussion will inform the development of an online mentoring platform and training materials aimed at enhancing inclusivity and accessibility in volunteering. The discussion demonstrated a commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for individuals with disabilities, recognizing the importance of personalised support, understanding and flexibility in achieving successful outcomes in volunteering endeavours.

Participants mentioned the needs for regular breaks during volunteering, clear training with breaks, the importance of the relationship between the mentor and the persons with disabilities. The stigma of disabilities that some organisations have is a barrier for involvement. Guardians and Parents often have anxieties about their children being in the wider community or with mentors so building a relationship is important. Access to accessible transport is always a limitation on places that can be visited. Finally participants recognised that there were limited volunteer opportunities for those with disabilities or with additional support needs.

## Spain

The main conclusions from the focus group are as follows:

1. **Volunteering:** Most of the participants consider 'volunteering' to be a social action. However, there are significant differences in terms of the motives that lead people to engage in this type of action, with some considering that volunteering can only be understood as such if it is altruistic and supportive (i.e. helping others), while others believe that volunteering also serves personal purposes such as travelling and getting to know cultures and living new experiences, improving educational aspects or with a future employment relationship, etc., without the emphasis being exclusively on thinking of others.
2. **Type of Volunteering:** It was not conceived as an action that had to be exclusively within the scope of an organisation, but could be on an individual basis. However, people generally think that it is better to work within an organisation because of its greater capacity to mobilise resources and implement actions.

Other types of arguments were related to the activities to be carried out within a volunteer organisation. The importance of centralised coordination is understood, but there is considerable unanimity in not accepting volunteering where the volunteer cannot choose what type of tasks they have to perform or when they want to carry





them out. Therefore, they demanded a dialogue between the parties and a more flexible attitude on the part of the institution.

In terms of type of volunteering, the one that attracts the most attention is related to environmental/nature care, followed by activities related to leisure and free time, and social (especially helping the elderly).

- 3. Challenges and barriers:** Most of them honestly stated that they did not really encounter any barriers beyond their lack of commitment or willingness to do an activity. Despite that, some people did mention their physical disability as a barrier to mobility, lack of knowledge, and certain constriction from the institutions in terms of roles and responsibilities assigned to them (which they pointed out as not inclusive and discriminatory).
- 4. Interpersonal skills of a volunteer:** In order of importance, these include empathy, active listening, and being helpful, supportive, responsible, proactive and knowledgeable. Negative characteristics are selfish, uncommitted, untrustworthy, lazy and untidy. It is important to note that, as a reflection on this point, participants came to the conclusion that not everyone has the necessary characteristics to be a volunteer. For this reason the role of the person responsible for the selection of volunteers within the institutions is understood to be necessary.

## Bulgaria

At first, the young people with disabilities shared that they don't know what volunteering means and that they don't know any volunteers. With some help from the social workers, they recollected that there are two people who come to visit them at the institution to help them, spend time together, organise entertaining events, donate books but also money for their summer camps. Then they described a volunteer as a person who cares about the others and wants nothing in return. The best moments between the youngsters and the volunteers are the time spent together talking about different things.

None of the youngsters with disabilities had any experience in volunteering, while one of the social workers mentioned regularly donating money. It brought out a common misconception that giving donations and volunteering are one and the same thing.

The youngsters described the volunteers who visit them as "smiling, caring, positive". When asked, they mentioned they would like to be more like them.

**Elderly people with disabilities** - They have a somewhat clear understanding of volunteering in spite of not encompassing all its variations. They needed more information about mentoring. They need physical help and support as well as to share thoughts with someone. Maybe twice a month would be beneficial for them and they could also use some help with certain tasks, while they can teach them life skills as they have practical experience. Such frequency would





provide consistent support and guidance while allowing for flexibility in scheduling. Considering the participants' preferences and needs, it seems that one-to-one mentoring would be the most effective approach. This personalised interaction would likely encourage participants to open up and share more freely about their needs, interests, etc.

However, it is also worth exploring the possibility of incorporating group creative activities into the mentoring program (such as for instance painting, making collages, etc. These activities could provide valuable opportunities for participants to engage with each other and share experiences and skills.

## Romania

About the mentoring experience:

The participants mentioned the importance of being present, seeing and understanding what happens, and being ready to adapt. One needs good intentions shown in a visible way and a lot of mindfulness towards the volunteers' experience, as well as their own. If it's harming them, or the mentor, they need to stop it.

Other points mentioned by the participants included the need:

- To remove the stigma from any context and discussion
- For mentors to put the spotlight on the things that are important for the volunteers
- To find everyone's strengths, help them put them in practice and generally keep the focus on how everyone can best contribute.

Participants mentioned that mentoring is a 2-way street, benefiting both volunteers and mentors, meaning that the mindset that mentors are acting for the benefit of volunteers with disabilities should be removed because the process is mutually beneficial. As such, it is also important that mentoring is based on empathy and on a reciprocal approach

Regarding the question "How can we support the access to volunteering?" the participants mentioned:

- The importance of courage, both for the volunteers and for the organisation
- The importance of having open, destigmatized conversations about disabilities
- "We're lacking the exercise of diversity (in our culture) - we need to practise inclusion until it becomes normal", a quote from a participant.
- "As a person with disabilities, I appreciated very much that our capacity and personality were never in question - the only focus was on what we are able to do", a quote from a participant.
- There are different types of disabilities and so communication with candidates/volunteers is vital



- Something else very much needed for these programs to work is trust and self-confidence in the relationship between the organisation and volunteers.
- The mentality / social view on disabilities needs to change, in any target group - companies, schools, parents, organisations
- The volunteer management process does not differ - trust, empowerment, focused attention on the volunteer are the same.
- "We need to create and grow our "islands of new normality", to spread them as much as we can in the community. We need to overcome our embarrassment through communication, trust, respect, because if we have them, we can really talk about everything we need to know"

Regarding the question "How can we convince other organisations to involve people with disabilities?", the participants mentioned:

- The importance of using real examples, case studies, emphasising advantages.
- The importance of communication and exposure to people with disabilities - we need resource-people that are having disabilities and also speaking up about their condition and/or experience
- For a person with disabilities it is better to ask than to assume (just keep some sensitivity in the question)
- Making spaces and activities accessible can be an impossible first step, but we might start with online volunteering activities
- The need to organise more activities involving volunteers and people with disabilities to expose the other organisations to this as well, show how it is possible to do it and the great value it brings in learning, exchange, inclusion towards normality

"How can support look like during the experience?":

- One good example from France (Elena's experience) - at the interview she was asked about her needs. She then was informed about all the measures she can use, that were already put in place and then she was asked if she will need anything else.
- "Then they sent me to conferences, events, seminars dedicated to issues around disabilities, where I had the opportunity to network and get involved in other projects that interest me."
- It would be useful to have a platform with resources and an extended network of mentors
- Collecting and promoting examples from people with disabilities involved in volunteering

Benefits for the mentors:

- Mentoring is a 2-way street - working with people with disabilities helps mentors discover areas that would otherwise be hidden



- It helps mentors realise how they are lucky, at least in some aspects- it can teach one to appreciate what one has and can do
- It helps mentors adjust or just give up their expectations
- A new appreciation for what a disabled person is actually able to do.

## Belgium

Some of the topics discussed during the focus group were not direct answers to the questions asked, but prompted by the discussions taking place in the room.

When asked “What is volunteering?”, the participants shared, based on their own experiences, that volunteering allows them to contribute to a community while also gaining something in return. This can come in the form of new experiences (trying new things), a way to enjoy free time alone or with friends, an opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. Participants also mentioned that volunteering allowed them to “test” interests before finding their study path, as well as to take part in activities that fit their interests, such as spending time with animals or participating in sports events.

The participants mentioned the importance of volunteering in involving people with fewer opportunities, allowing them to be a part of something bigger in a light way. The participants all agreed on the importance of keeping volunteering pleasant, fun, inclusive, diverse and mentioned that volunteering is self-rewarding.

The discussion steered into wondering if volunteering is inherently good. The participants agreed that this depends on context and intentions behind volunteering activities. As such, they mentioned that values play an important role in maintaining volunteering positions (i.e: if volunteers find their values do not align with those of the organisation, if volunteers engage in volunteering experiences only as a way to develop their careers, if their social image is more important than the volunteering activities they are engaged in).

When confronted with the question “How can we improve this?” the participants mentioned the importance of better volunteering regulations and making sure they are followed, as well as the dangers of voluntourism and philanthropy in these cases. In regards to their own positive experiences with volunteering, the participants mentioned the importance of feeling appreciated, finding a community where they feel like they belong to, and the importance of seeing the direct impact of your actions. Furthermore, participants mentioned how volunteering allows them to meet new people, learn about new cultures, travel, take part in different events and improve their language skills.



## 7. Conclusions from the Focus Groups

Based on the findings shared above, several general conclusions can be drawn regarding volunteering for people with disabilities across different contexts:

1. **Understanding and Motivations** - There is a varied understanding of volunteering, with some confusion between personal motivations and altruistic aims. People may engage in volunteering for personal fulfilment or social interaction rather than solely for the benefit of others.
2. **Organisational vs. Individual Volunteering** - While volunteering within organisations offers more resources, individuals may prefer the autonomy of personal volunteering. However, institutional volunteering is seen as enhancing the impact of actions if there is open dialogue and flexibility.
3. **Misconceptions** - There are common misconceptions about volunteering, such as equating it with donating money. Clear communication and education are necessary to address these misunderstandings.
4. **Benefits and Impact** - Volunteering is seen as beneficial for both volunteers and recipients, fostering personal growth, community involvement and cultural exchange. It provides an opportunity for individuals to contribute while gaining new experiences and skills.
5. **Inclusion and Accessibility** - Efforts to involve people with disabilities in volunteering are essential for fostering inclusion and diversity. Organisations need to create accessible opportunities and overcome societal stigmas and barriers.
6. **Mentoring** - Mentoring is highlighted as a valuable aspect of volunteering, emphasising personalised interaction, empathy and mutual benefit. Mentors play a crucial role in supporting volunteers with disabilities and promoting their strengths and contributions. Mentors need to be prepared and trained in order to support individuals with disabilities according to their specific needs.
7. **Regulations and Ethics** - Clear regulations are necessary to ensure the ethical practice of volunteering, preventing voluntourism or exploitation. Volunteers should align with organisational values and engage for genuine reasons rather than personal gain.

Overall, volunteering serves as a means of social contribution, personal development and community engagement, but its effectiveness relies on clear communication, inclusive practices and ethical considerations.



## General Conclusions

According to Eurostat, in January 2022 there were approximately 87 million people with disabilities living in the European Union (EU). We could not find specific, comprehensive data providing the exact number of volunteers with disabilities in Europe. However, various organisations and initiatives actively engage with volunteers with disabilities across Europe, contributing to more diverse and inclusive volunteer communities. The numbers can vary greatly depending on the region, the type of volunteering activities and the accessibility of opportunities for disabled individuals.

Mentoring for volunteers with disabilities in Europe typically focuses on addressing specific needs, such as accessibility, accommodation, skill development, confidence building and social inclusion. These volunteers may require support in navigating physical and digital environments, understanding their rights, building networks and accessing resources tailored to their abilities and interests. Mentoring programs often aim to empower disabled volunteers to contribute effectively, while fostering a sense of belonging and personal growth.

To improve mentoring for disabled volunteers in Europe, several steps can be taken:

1. **Increased Accessibility:** Ensure that mentoring programs are accessible to individuals with various disabilities, by providing facilities such as wheelchair ramps, sign language interpreters, or digital accessibility features, depending on the specific needs of each volunteer.
2. **Tailored Support:** Offer personalised mentoring that addresses the unique needs and challenges faced by disabled volunteers, including assistance with mobility, communication, or adapting tasks to accommodate different abilities.
3. **Training for Mentors:** Provide training for mentors on disability awareness, effective communication strategies and understanding the diverse needs of disabled individuals to ensure they can provide appropriate support and guidance.
4. **Resource Allocation:** Allocate resources and funding to support mentoring initiatives specifically aimed at disabled volunteers, including funding for accessible venues, transportation assistance, or technology accommodations.
5. **Community Engagement:** Foster a supportive community that promotes inclusivity and celebrates the contributions of disabled volunteers, encouraging peer mentoring and collaboration among volunteers with and without disabilities.
6. **Evaluation and Feedback:** Regularly evaluate mentoring programs to assess their effectiveness and gather feedback from both mentors and mentees, using this information to make improvements and adjustments as needed.
7. **Policy Support:** Advocate for policies and regulations that promote equal opportunities and accessibility for disabled individuals in volunteer programs, ensuring that national or European legal frameworks support the development and implementation of inclusive mentoring initiatives.



By implementing these measures, mentoring for volunteers with disabilities in Europe can be developed more effectively, providing valuable support and opportunities for personal and professional growth.



## Sources of information used:

- *Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030*, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1484&langId=en>
- *Eurostat*, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Disability\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Disability_statistics)
- *European Disability Forum (EDF)*, <https://www.edf-feph.org/your-rights-in-the-eu/>
- *Inclusion Europe*, <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/european-disability-strategy/>
- *Centre for European Volunteering (CEV)*, <https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/bev2030>
- *Volunteer Ireland*, <https://www.volunteer.ie/erasmus/volunteering-as-a-tool-for-inclusion/>
- *European Center for Not-for-Profit Law*, <https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Voluntary%20Activities%20-%20European%20Practices%20of%20Regulation%20%28Belarus%20volunteering%20paper%29.pdf>
- *UN Volunteers (UNV) program*, <https://www.unv.org/tags/persons-disabilities>
- *Specific projects funded by the European Union or other bodies, such as Erasmus+ projects focusing on inclusive volunteering*
- *National statistics data*