



EPR ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

Leading the Change in Rehabilitation: Towards Future-Proof Services

5 - 6 June
Antwerp, Belgium

REPORT



Co-funded by
the European Union



On 5-6 June 2025, the EPR Annual Conference, co-hosted by our Belgian member GTB, brought the EPR community together in Antwerp, Belgium, under the theme “Leading the Change in Rehabilitation: Towards Future-Proof Services.” Over a day and a half, the more than 90 participants explored how the rehabilitation sector is evolving and how we can collectively shape services that are resilient, inclusive, and future-ready.

The conference featured a variety of speakers and interactive sessions, providing a platform for service providers, advocates, people with lived experience and policymakers to share experiences, discuss challenges, and explore innovative approaches to promoting inclusion and empowerment for persons with disabilities. The diverse range of topics demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the rehabilitation sector and the need for collaborative, long-term strategies to address the evolving needs of the sector.

This Report presents the key insights and take-away messages from the Conference, capturing the collective learning and inspiration from the event.

DAY ONE

Conference Opening and Welcome

The conference opened with an enthusiastic welcome by Patrick Ruppel, EPR Chairperson and GTB Member of Consulting Staff, and Alicia Gomez Campos, EPR Secretary General. Patrick highlighted the evolving needs of people with disabilities that service providers support, stressing that leadership requires not only adapting to change and managing scarce resources, but also inspiring enthusiasm, resilience and a shared vision.

Alicia emphasised that the Annual Conference is a key moment for EPR and its members - an opportunity to connect with peers, exchange and learn together. She invited participants to activate their curiosity to listen and to think and reminded that sustaining humanity in our work is both a guiding principle and a call to action.

Together, Patrick and Alicia's words framed the conference's theme - Leading the Change in Rehabilitation: Towards Future-Proof Services - as not just a professional challenge but a shared responsibility.

Participants were also welcomed by the Conference moderators, Nele Hulselmans, GTB Policy Advisor and Stien Hennaert, GTB Incoming General Director.



Panel Session

Setting the Scene: What are the Main Changes and Trends in Rehabilitation Services?

Moderated by Nele Hulselmans, GTB Policy Advisor and Stien Hennaert, GTB Incoming General Director



The opening panel session provided a comprehensive overview of the main changes and trends in rehabilitation services, with speakers covering different angles on the topic: 1) Living independently in the community; 2) Technology; 3) Inclusion and work; and 4) Cost-effectiveness, tendering and citizens values.

The Panel highlighted the importance of deinstitutionalisation, or transitioning from institutional settings to community-based services that promote the autonomy and inclusion of persons with disabilities. They covered existing challenges in doing so, as well as other important factors that constitute independent living - from inclusive employment to leveraging technology that enables support for the participation and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.

➔ **Living independently in the community:** Marie Fitzgerald, Regional Manager of Rehab Care, Rehab Group (EPR Member); Samanta DeBattista, Senior Executive, and Charlette Camilleri, Leader, Aġenzija Sapport (EPR Member)

Marie Fitzgerald shared that the catalyst for change in Ireland for services for persons with disabilities was the Time to Move on from Congregated Settings – A Strategy for Community Inclusion (2011).



She introduced Rehab Care's Cluain Fionnain Decongregation Project (2015), which transitioned 31 individuals from a highly restrictive institutional setting in County Kerry into community-based homes. Marie described both the successes and challenges of this process, from

sourcing suitable accommodation and navigating regulatory requirements, to overcoming community prejudice and coordinating new support teams. She emphasised the crucial role of service managers in fostering positive culture, advocating for individuals, and ensuring person-centred, solution-focused practices



Samanta DeBattista highlighted how Aġenzija Sapport's implements the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), emphasising the importance of de-institutionalisation and co-production of services with persons with disabilities, centering them around

autonomy and individual choice. She showcased a number of initiatives that Aġenzija Sapport has launched over the past years:

Initiative	Description
The Professional Advisory Prevention Team	Offers training to a number of different entities, both internal and external, on supporting persons with disabilities in managing any behavior of concern, including on sexuality and disability.
Youth Work Department	Supports youth with a disability in accessing community services, integrating into the community and having meaningful employment and social opportunities.
Sharing Lives	An entity that works on socialisation persons with disabilities by accompanying them to social activities, such as concerts and parties.
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services	Support persons who are deaf in accessing the right kind of support, such as sign language interpretation.
Transition Team	A multidisciplinary team, including social workers and occupational therapists, to assess the needs of persons who can live and reintegrate into the community.
Upskill Department	Supports persons with disabilities in accessing employment.

Charlette Camilleri detailed the agency's Personal Budget Assistance Scheme (PBAS) and the Family Assistance Support Scheme (FASS), programs that enable people with disabilities to employ personal assistants. She highlighted the ongoing 2024 reform, of which Agenzija Sapport was one of the initiators, to formally include the right to personal assistance within the country's law. This would ensure choice, funding, and oversight while overcoming challenges such as staffing, rising costs, and increasing demand.

➡ **Technology:** Eveline De Raeve, Care & Well-Being, Thomas More; Nektaria Sifaki, Head of Vocational Training, Theotokos Foundation (EPR Member)

Eveline De Raeve presented on how technology can be key to reintegration and participation in the work place for persons with disabilities or with health conditions. Eveline highlighted examples of existing technologies that can be repurposed or adapted for reintegration, such as exoskeletons (typically used to prevent musculoskeletal disorders, but with potential to support workers with shoulder difficulties), keyboard aids for people with limited hand function, head-controlled mouse systems, and custom-designed tools like joysticks or keyboard grids created through scanning and 3D

printing. The integration of sensors and data into assistive devices, such as crutches equipped with usage sensors, was also presented as a way to finetune technology and improve outcomes. Together, these innovations demonstrate how technology can expand opportunities for participation and inclusion.



Nektaria Sifaki presented the other side of technology - the one associated with risks. She acknowledged that while digital tools are essential for learning and connection, they also expose service users to dangerous situations. Overprotection, limited social experience, a strong desire for

acceptance, and weaker critical thinking skills make people with neurodevelopmental disabilities particularly vulnerable. Following an online incident with a service user at Theotokos Foundation, staff members realized that there was no clear guidance to help service users understand online risks, underlining the urgent need for simple adaptive training on digital behaviour and online safety.

In response, Theotokos and the Greek Cybercrime Unit co-created three manuals tailored for professionals, parents, and trainees. These resources explain key online risks, roles of families and educators, effective methods for teaching safe internet use, experiential activities to build self-esteem and critical thinking, and clear procedures for managing incidents and filing complaints. Tested with 35 service users, educators reported that their online behavior has already changed and improved. The project's next steps include awareness seminars for beneficiaries by the Cybercrime Unit professionals, wider distribution of the manuals, and integration of the training into the general education curriculum.

➔ **Inclusion and work:** Lut Gailly, Staff member, GTB (EPR Member)

Lut Gailly presented the project 'I Earn a Job', supporting people with intellectual and mental disabilities - many officially labeled as having "no earning capacity" - to access meaningful, paid employment. The project aims to re-think GTB's approach and the structural exclusion of policies steering persons with disabilities towards receiving a disability allowance instead of supporting them to seek employment.



PROJECT I EARN A JOB

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

RESULTS

An illustration showing several stylized figures running along a path that leads towards a large target with a bullseye. The path is represented by blue lines that converge towards the target.

Target group with label 'no earning capacity'

- 88% of clients: first contact with an employer **within the first 4 weeks**
- **Employment ratio:** 56% of customers have at least 1 employment
- 81% started their paid job **without any preparatory measures** (internship, training)
- The participants work in a **wide variety of jobs**
- Employment is usually on a **permanent contract**.
- Participants work on **average three days a week**

The project follows the supported employment methodology and has achieved remarkable outcomes over five years. More than a 100 clients with significant barriers and no previous work experience have been supported; 88 made first employer contact within four weeks, and 81 secured paid jobs directly, without preparatory internships. They now work in roles ranging from shop assistants to administrative staff, often on permanent contracts, averaging three paid days per week. Lut outlined the core elements of this model: start from the client's interests and informed choice, provide clear benefit counseling so work doesn't feel financially risky, ensure continuity through a single dedicated job coach, use a "place then train" model with tailored, on-the-job coaching, and maintain ongoing support for both the employee and employer. She stressed the need to convert unpaid roles into paid jobs, collaborate with families and networks, and build proactive partnerships with employers.

➔ **Cost-effectiveness, tendering and citizens values:** Michael Backhaus, HR Officer & European Projects Coordinator, Mariaberg (EPR Member)

Michael Backhaus addressed issues that are a reality for most service providers: the challenges of balancing cost-effectiveness, tendering processes, and citizen values in disability services. He used the situation in Germany as an example, highlighting the impact of the country's Federal Participation Law, which shifts funding from budget sums to individualised personalised budgets, driving major organisational, infrastructural, and administrative changes. While the law promotes inclusiveness and deinstitutionalization, it also creates pressure on providers to deliver high-quality services under tight financial conditions. This prioritization of cost-effectiveness over quality, threatens established services and the quality of services for persons with disabilities.

These pressures intersect with broader societal trends, including economic difficulties, migration, and political priorities, which all risk to further take away funding from vulnerable populations. Michael warned that global examples, such as organisations cutting diversity and inclusion programs, reflect how citizen values, rights, and freedoms for people with disabilities can be eroded if not actively defended. He called for service providers to advocate for those without a voice, uphold diversity, and remain politically aware and engaged.



Reflections on challenges and opportunities in inclusion and services

Haydn Hammersley, Social Policy Coordinator, European Disability Forum (EDF)

Haydn Hammersley reiterated the urgent need to move beyond integration toward genuine inclusion. A major focus was deinstitutionalisation: despite commitments under the UNCRPD, 1.5 million people with disabilities still live in institutions across Europe. Institutions, as defined by EDF, deny autonomy by restricting choices over daily life, living arrangements, and personal relationships, and in many cases have been sites of severe human rights violations. Haydn argued that true independent living requires personalised support, personal assistance schemes, and investment in community-based services.



Turning to employment, he highlighted the 24-point employment gap between persons with and without disabilities in the EU, with very low rates of full-time work. Many are still confined to sheltered workshops with poor conditions and below-minimum wages. Barriers include the loss of disability allowances when taking up work, resistance from employers to provide reasonable accommodation, and administrative hurdles to accessing subsidies.



Barriers to employment

- Loss of disability allowance
- Fear of in-work poverty
- Resistance to making work adaptations
- Insufficient knowledge of how to include workers with disabilities
- Gap in digital skills



Inclusion in employment

- 24 percentage point employment gap in the EU
- Persons with disabilities earn less on average
- Only 29% of men and 20% of women with disabilities work full time
- Many still in sheltered workshops

In this regard, EDF has called on the EU to strengthen rules on funding (to prevent money flowing to institutions), tackle systemic barriers to employment, and close digital skills gaps.

Interactive Session: Leading the change in rehabilitation, learning and innovating together

Moderated by Nele Hulselmans, GTB Policy Advisor and Stien Hennaert, GTB Incoming General Director

In this session participants were asked to have discussions in small groups, following some guiding questions. They then wrote down their thoughts on flipcharts, which were displayed in the meeting room. A summary of key points discussed are included below:

Theme	Points raised
Trends regarding the rights of persons with disabilities	• The need for more disability inclusion. • An increase in the past years of online threats such as scams and cyber-violence targeting vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities. • Difficulties of persons with disabilities in accessing the labour market, exacerbated by the fast integration of AI in the workplace, and the potential loss of their disability allowance.
Trends regarding service provision for persons with disabilities	• Service providers promote the employment of persons with disabilities by offering services related to outreach to employers, collaboration in job design and supported employment. • Services are investing in cybersecurity and digital skills trainings for staff and service users as well as raising awareness of online threats for persons with disabilities. • They are also exploring the use of AI and technological solutions in service provision (e.g. assistive technology, online services and consultation) despite difficulties existing on the reimbursement of certain technologies.
Role of service providers in integrating rights and needs of persons with disabilities	• To ensure the independent living for persons with disabilities, service providers will need more resources to ensure quality services within the community, services will need to move to a supporting role, instead of “doing things for” persons with disabilities, and services will be key actors to help overcome stigmas and prejudice regarding persons with disabilities. • Service providers aim to ensure continuous improvements in the quality of their services, while they call for further guidance for the improvement of services, instead of sanctions.
Next steps at national and EU level to support services	• Support service providers for persons with disabilities in the process of de-institutionalisation/ de-congregation. • Involvement of different stakeholders such as service providers and organisations representing persons with disabilities in policy-making. • Use public procurement to promote the employment of persons with disabilities.



Inspiration Speaker: Driving the Change

William Boeva, Comedian, Presenter, Candid storyteller

Through sharp humor and honesty, Belgian comedian and disability advocate William Boeva challenged the audience to rethink how society views disability, inclusion, and possibility. Born with a rare form of dwarfism, William used personal stories to show how societal attitudes - not physical impairments - create the real barriers.



He opened by prompting participants to consider how many of their close friends have disabilities, revealing how invisible inclusion often is in everyday life despite one in five people worldwide having a disability. Throughout his talk, William challenged how society frames disability. One example is how in Belgium, employers receive compensation for hiring a person with a disability called “loss of efficiency”, language that reinforces stigma rather than inclusion. He closed by urging for more pride within the disability community, noting that unlike other movements for equality, many people with disabilities are taught to minimise their identity instead of embracing it. At the same time, he called on everyone to “Keep your eyes open. Look for possibilities and opportunities - not just disabilities and impossibilities.”

The Sunny Side Up!

Fons Leroy, Chairperson of GTB, Labour Market Expert and Author

Fons Leroy's presentation advocated for a paradigm shift in how societies approach labour markets, urging a move from the narrow focus on "employability" toward the broader, human-centered goal of "work happiness".

He argued that current labour market systems are too short-term, politically driven, and morally hollow. Instead, he called for long-term, ethically grounded policies that sustainability, inclusion, and happiness, the three principles he believes should guide every organisational, governmental, and personal decision related to work.

To achieve this, he outlined five key frameworks for building a sustainable and humane labour market:



1. **Align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Organisations integrate relevant SDGs into their core strategies for a positive societal impact;
2. **Adopt the “House of Work Happiness” model:** Adapted from Finland’s “House of Workability,” this model centers on training, health, leadership, and fair working conditions to create workplaces that foster genuine happiness;
3. **Invest in 21st-century skills:** Education and training should emphasise collaboration, communication, creativity, resilience, and lifelong learning;
4. **Leverage technology to humanise work:** Use digital tools and automation to eliminate dull, repetitive tasks, improve inclusion, and make work more meaningful;
5. **Embrace holistic public management:** Governments must coordinate across education, labour, housing, and social sectors to tackle societal issues systemically.

Open Spaces on Leadership

Moderated by Lisa Willems, staff member for 'strength-oriented work' within the Specialised Mediation Team, GTB

Participants had the opportunity to join any of the four proposed Open Spaces. The outcome of each open space can be found below, by topic.



➡ **Leadership and data management** led by Sander Allert, Plain Sight and joined by Fondazione Don Gnocchi

This session underlined the need to overcome data silos (isolated sets of information within an organization that are inaccessible to other departments), and the need for a strategic and cultural shift towards integrated data management and collaborative leadership to improve organizational performance.

➡ **Leadership and quality management** led by Karen Warson, Association for Supported Employment (ASEE) and joined by Astangu

This open space addressed the importance for service providers to invest in quality, quality as regulatory compliance vs. organizational value, the influence of leadership in quality management and data to improve quality. Participants agreed on the importance of ethical value-based leadership, data-informed decisions, and a shared purpose.

➔ **Leadership and motivation** led by Lisa Willems, GTB, and joined by The Cedar Foundation

This session focused on frameworks for leading organizational change, and the need to re-imagine work processes and future-proofing teams in times of transition. Participants highlighted the importance of collective leadership, effective delegation, the co-creation of a shared purpose on which leaders follow through, and having an effective feedback culture promoting dialogue between leaders and employees.

➔ **Leadership and Inclusivity** led by Bee Academy, Joris Van Hoyer and Eva Dessers, and joined by Anna Duquennoy, former GTB client

In this open space, the B Academy presented its business model, which aims to bridge the gap between jobseekers with disabilities and suitable employment opportunities. In parallel, Anna Duquennoy, an employee with a disability, shared her first-hand experience, highlighting common challenges and prejudices faced when entering or re-entering the labour market.



DAY TWO

Keynote Speech: Organising evidence-based change

Jeroen Stouten, Professor of Organisational Psychology, K.U. Leuven

Professor Jeroen Stouten introduced the AMO (Ability, Motivation, Opportunity) framework as a practical guide for enabling change, highlighting that employees must have the skills, motivation, and resources to successfully adopt new behaviors.



Professor Stouten stressed the importance of accurately diagnosing the problem before implementing solutions, noting that organisations often overlook this step, addressing symptoms rather than root causes. He also highlighted the need for prioritisation, careful timing, and the integration of mutually reinforcing interventions to increase the likelihood of successful change.

Employee involvement, clear communication of the change vision, and training influential employees as ambassadors were identified as critical factors in fostering engagement and commitment.

Professor Stouten emphasised the value of linking changes to long-term strategic objectives and creating psychologically safe environments where employees can voice concerns and experiment without fear of failure. He advocated for a flexible, iterative approach to change, using pilot programs, transition structures, and small wins to monitor progress, adjust interventions, and reinforce learning. Leaders must allow sufficient time for skill development, behavior adoption, and adaptation, while ensuring that training, performance management, and organisational processes are aligned to support the desired changes.

Masterclass: Balancing empathy, the key to meaningful innovation

Yvonne Gillis, Product Owner and Designer, Syntilio

Yvonne Gillis explored the concept of “balanced empathy” as a key foundation for meaningful innovation in healthcare and social services, particularly in rehabilitation contexts. She argued that while empathy is essential in human-centered design, too much empathy can become an “empathy trap”. She explained how



human-centered design guides innovators to deeply understand people before developing solutions. Yet she stressed that genuine empathy is not only about listening or observing, it requires balance and structured reflection. She presented a four-phase model for balanced empathy:

- 1.Discovery:** entering the user’s world with curiosity and without judgment;
- 2.Immersion:** emotionally connecting and understanding people’s lived experiences;
- 3.Connection:** identifying root causes of frustration or unmet needs;
- 4.Detachment:** stepping back to regain objectivity and make rational, inclusive decisions.

To help innovators recognise when empathy goes too far, she outlined three red flags to be conscious about:

- 1.Building only what people say they want instead of identifying their deeper, unmet needs;
- 2.Ignoring boundaries or regulations in the name of compassion or speed;
- 3.Avoiding challenge or conflict - failing to question assumptions out of loyalty or fear of disappointment.

A policy dimension from Flanders and the EU

Helga Stevens, Policy Advisor, FPS Social Security – Directorate General for Persons with Disabilities (DG HAN); Olga Martinez de Briones, DG Justice & Consumers, European Commission



Helga Stevens presented the employment and accessibility landscape for people with disabilities in Belgium. DG HAN is the federal entity in charge of implementing Belgium's disability benefits, accessibility measures, and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) commitments. Helga shared that only 23% of persons with disabilities in Belgium are employed - among the lowest rates in Europe - compared to 65%

of the general population, and 40% of those employed work part-time. The systematic failure to include persons with disabilities in the labour market has put strain on services and the social assistance system.

She then presented a legislative reform aiming to bridge the above-mentioned gaps: Belgium is taking steps to reform 1987 Law on Allowances for Persons with Disabilities to make procedures simpler, more transparent, and more inclusive. A crucial part of the reform will be allowing for a gradual combination of disability benefits with part-time work. Another part of the reform will be for the income replacement allowance to gradually decrease as employment income increases, instead of the abrupt cutoff that currently takes place. The reform also aims for better alignment between disability benefits and other social protections, such as sickness and unemployment benefits.

The planned reform builds on the Excel HAN transformation programme, launched in 2022 to improve public service delivery. The initiative has already enhanced access to rights through redesigned digital platforms, boosted responsiveness, expanded regional accessibility, and introduced inclusive communication practices and stronger interministerial coordination. Moreover DG HAN is in its early stages of reflection on how to use AI to improve service delivery.

EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030



Shifting from national to European perspective, **Olga Martinez de Briones** provided an overview of the **European Union's Disability Strategy 2021-2030**, a 10-year roadmap designed to implement the UNCRPD and support Member States in advancing disability inclusion. She outlined the seven flagship initiatives underpinning the strategy, including among others: the **Disability Employment Package**, which aims to ensure better labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities; **European Accessibility Act**,

which sets binding standards to make products and services accessible across the EU; and the **European Disability Card**, which, for the first time, facilitates mutual recognition of disability status across Member States.

Olga also discussed the strategy's integration into broader EU equality and social rights agendas. By embedding disability perspectives into areas such as employment, education, social protection, and crisis management, the EU seeks to ensure persons with disabilities are not left behind, even in situations of emergencies or humanitarian aid needs.

Reflecting on the strategy's mid-term review, Olga explained that all flagship initiatives except one have been delivered, and the Commission is now assessing remaining gaps, particularly in accessibility and global engagement. She highlighted the strategy's long-term vision: a shift from compliance-focused approaches to systemic, rights-based change, ensuring that persons with disabilities can fully participate in society and benefit from EU-wide policies and programs.

The Strategy contains 8 priority areas :

1. Accessibility – An enabler of rights, autonomy and equality;
2. Enjoying EU rights;
3. Decent quality of life and living independently;
4. Equal participation and non-discrimination;
5. Promoting the rights of persons with disabilities globally;
6. Efficiently delivering the Strategy;
7. The Commission's ambition for the next decade - leading by example;
8. Awareness, governance and measuring progress.



7 Flagship initiatives

1. Disability Platform (2021)
2. **Package to improve labour market outcomes (2022)**
3. European resource centre AccessibleEU (2022)
4. Guidance on independent living (2024)
5. Disability Card (2024)
6. Quality framework social services (2025)
7. New Commission HR strategy

57 Commission actions
23 calls for Member States



Concluding Remarks

Alicia Gómez Campos, EPR Secretary General, underlined how the Annual Conference touched upon the challenges to lead and provide the best services considering the changes the sector is experiencing, and how EPR aims to provide tools to overcome such challenges. She also communicated the election of the new EPR Chairperson, thanked

Patrick Ruppel (GTB), EPR outgoing Chairperson and new Treasurer, and welcomed Furio Grammatica (Fondazione Don Gnocchi) to his new Chairperson position. She gave the floor to Patrick, who expressed his gratitude for the conference, discussions and connections that took place, as well as his time as EPR Chairperson.

Finally, **Furio Grammatica** took the floor, thanking Patrick and Alicia for their work, and underlining his vision as the new EPR chairperson: ensuring resilience and continuity of services for persons with disabilities, and exchanging know-how to continue improving as a sector.



Evaluation

The evaluation of the Annual Conference was very positive. This feedback was collected in person in Antwerp, via an Evaluation Form online. 93.1% of respondents stated that they felt inspired or strongly inspired by the AC and its speakers. “Excellent” and “Very Good” were the ratings most awarded for all sessions, in terms of the participants’ learning experience and the gain of relevant knowledge and information.



European Platform for Rehabilitation – Avenue des Arts, 8
1210 Brussels, Belgium

<https://www.epr.eu/>



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

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 the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

