



## EPR Annual Conference 2025

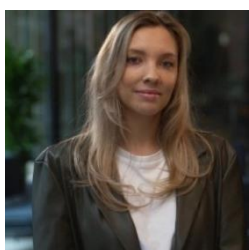
### Speakers

5 June 2025

#### Moderators:



**Nele Hulseimans**, GTB Policy Advisor: With over 14 years at GTB, Nele is a strong advocate for people with disabilities and for connecting them with employment opportunities. She first started out at GTB as a moderator and has since worked for a more inclusive labour market.



**Stien Hennaert**, GTB Incoming General Director: Through her belief in possibilities, Stien will continue GTB's mission to connect people to fulfilling work that they want to have because 'it fits what they can do, who they are and what they want to become'. She is also a PhD researcher at Gent University, with extensive research work throughout the years on ICF.

## Conference Welcome



**Patrick Ruppel** (°1961) is master in Adult Education and master in Hospital Management (KU-Leuven/Belgium). Since 2014 he works for GTB, Specialized Team Mediation NGO. GTB is the in-house partner of the VDAB (Public Employment Service) and this for the target group 'job seekers with a large distance from the labor market due to a health problem or limitation. Within GTB he is an expert and manages the domains 'innovative projects', networking and finance'.

In each job, he paid particular attention to the working capacity of people with disabilities. He was co-founder of the local employment agencies in Limburg, the Flemish Assisted Work platform, the promotor of the tenders for care activation in Limburg. In order to bring this focus on work for disadvantaged groups into organizations, he has shaped various reorganization trajectories and was strongly involved with the reform of the disabled sector by transferring the sheltered workshops, the specialized vocational training and the Consultation Services on Disability to the policy area of work..

Expert in realizing innovative projects in which health and work play a role.

Chairperson of the European Platform of Rehabilitation, EPR.eu



**Alicia Gomez Campos**, EPR Secretary General, serves as the influential voice of the organization in Brussels and across Europe. She is responsible for maintaining strong member relationships, expanding our network across Europe, developing strategic programs, empowering EPR members, and representing EPR's interests in policy domains. With her leadership, EPR continues to shape European policies and regulations, making a positive impact in the social services sector.

## Setting the scene: What are the main changes and trends in rehabilitation services?

### *Living independently in the community*



**Marie Fitzgerald** is a dedicated and highly experienced Regional Manager for RehabCare, with over two decades of service in the social care sector. Based in County Kerry, Ireland, Marie has built her career around supporting adults with disabilities, with a particular focus on accommodation services and the transition from congregated to community-based living.

In 2015, Marie led the Cluain Fhionnain Decongregation Project in Kerry, a landmark initiative that facilitated the move of individuals from institutional settings into inclusive, person-centered homes within the community. Her leadership ensured that the transition was not only smooth but also deeply respectful of each individual's rights, preferences, and potential for independence.

Marie continues to work closely with the individuals who made this transition, overseeing the management of community-based services that support their ongoing development and integration. Her commitment to empowering people with disabilities and fostering inclusive communities remains at the heart of her work.



**Sam DeBattista** holds a Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) and is currently completing a Master of Health Psychology. Her academic background has shaped a strong foundation in understanding the psychological and systemic factors that influence health and wellbeing, particularly within community and disability support contexts.

Since 2018, Sam has been working with Aġenzija Sapport, initially as a social mentor and psychosocial wellbeing officer on an employment-focused project. In 2020, she moved to a newly established team as a Support Executive, supporting persons with disabilities through access to financial subsidies. Her dedication and leadership led to her appointment as Senior Executive II, where she now oversees multiple teams, including the Personal Budget Assistance Team and the Family Assistance Support Team.

Sam integrates her academic training in health psychology with hands-on experience to promote person-centred, inclusive, and sustainable support systems. Her work is guided by evidence-based practice and a deep commitment to empowering individuals and families within the community.).



**Charlette Camilleri** is a dedicated professional with a strong commitment to supporting individuals with disabilities. She graduated from the University of Malta in 2017 with a B.Sc (Hons) in Speech and Language Therapy and has since devoted her career to promoting inclusion and empowerment. Since 2018, Charlette has been part of Aġenzija Sapport, where she has contributed to various initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of life of people with disabilities.

Her work has included involvement in an EU-funded project that focused on facilitating employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, helping to bridge gaps between potential and opportunity. Since 2020, she has been part of the Personal Budgets Assistance Scheme at Aġenzija Sapport, first serving as a professional frontliner and, for the past six months, in a leadership role.

Charlette is passionate about advocacy, self-empowerment, and equality. She is deeply motivated by the belief that everyone deserves the tools and support to speak up for themselves and lead fulfilling lives.

## Technology



**Eveline De Raeve** is a civil engineer in mechanical-electrical engineering with a specialisation in biomechanics. For over 15 years, she has been working at Mobilab & Care, collaborating within a multidisciplinary team. By developing and implementing practical technological solutions for prevention, rehabilitation, and long-term support in the workplace, she aims to help ensure that everyone can fully participate in society. Her work bridges the gap between technology and real-world application.

Mobilab & Care is Thomas More University of Applied Sciences' centre of expertise for care, rehabilitation, prevention, and inclusive employment. The centre focuses on developing innovative, evidence-based technological solutions that improve the quality of life for people in need of care or support, always through a multidisciplinary approach.



With 26 years of experience at Theotokos Foundation, **Nektaria Sifaki**, Occupational Therapist and Career Counselor, has dedicated her career to supporting individuals with disabilities in their journey toward employment. She began as a vocational trainer in the foundation's workshops and gradually advanced to become Head of Vocational Training. Her work focuses on preparing people with intellectual and developmental disabilities for the transition into the world of work, ensuring they acquire the skills, confidence, and support needed for meaningful employment.

### *Inclusion and work*



**Lut Gailly** holds a Master's degree in Psychology from KU Leuven and currently serves as a staff member at GTB (Gehandicaptenzorg Vlaanderen), specializing in the reintegration of individuals with disabilities and health issues into the workforce.

In her role at GTB, she is involved in initiatives like the "Ik Verdien Werk" project in Leuven, which promotes supported employment for people receiving income replacement benefits. This project aims to facilitate the transition of individuals with disabilities into paid employment through tailored support and collaboration with employers.

Gailly has also contributed to discussions on the integration of work and care, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach that addresses both employment and health challenges. Her expertise aligns with the objectives of the Flemish government's work and care trajectories, which aim to provide integrated support for individuals facing multiple barriers to employment.

### *Cost-effectiveness, tendering and citizens values:*



**Michael Backhaus**, Human Resources officer and European Projects Coordinator at Mariaberg e.V., brings a wealth of experience in social care, education, and human resources. After qualifying as a carer in disability services in 1997, he worked in psychiatric care until 2006, before transitioning into youth work management. With a Bachelor of Arts in Mentoring and Counselling (2010) and a Master of Arts in Human Resources (2017), Michael has held leadership roles in HR management and apprenticeship programs. Since 2011, he has also been active in European project management, fostering international collaboration. From 2008 to 2015, he shared her expertise as a lecturer in social group work at the University of Baden-Württemberg.



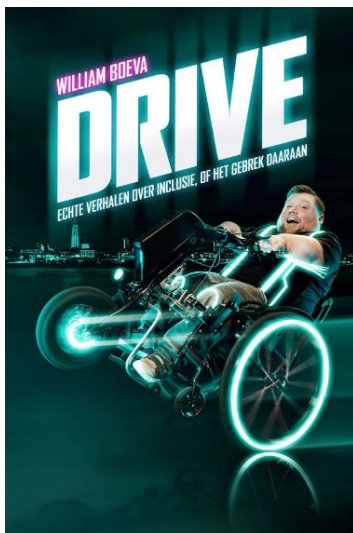
## Reflections on challenges and opportunities in inclusion and services



**Haydn Hammersly**, Social Policy Coordinator at the European Disability Forum (EDF), is responsible for working on EU Cohesion Policy and Structural and Investment Funds, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester, deinstitutionalisation and community-based care, employment, education, social protection, and disability assessment. He also coordinates EDF's work on the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and the post-2020 Strategy.

Beforehand, Haydn worked for three years at Autism-Europe, and spent time working for a Member of the European Parliament, as a trainee at the European Commission and for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. He also worked for several years as a care worker and assistant to adults on the autism spectrum and with learning disabilities. Moreover, he holds both a MA in Political Science and EU Studies and a MA in French and Linguistics.

## Inspirational Speaker: Driving the Change



### William Boeva

A powerful voice of lived experience

You don't have to tell William Boeva that life isn't always plain sailing.

Born with a rare form of dwarfism, young William saw the inside of a hospital more often than he would have liked and was mainly told what he wouldn't be able to do later.

Fortunately for us and for himself, he didn't let this get him down. William, supported by his family and friends, **knew that more was possible than becoming a shoemaker.**

His incredible story brought him to where he is today: a celebrated comedian, a popular television and radio guest and a celebrity who dares to use his platform to address the situation of his fellow sufferers.

## Keynote Speech: The Sunny Side Up!



**Fons Leroy**, GTB Chairman, Labour Market Expert, Author: Fons is a prominent Belgian expert in employment policy and public administration. Formerly, he was the CEO of the Flemish Employment and Vocational Training Service VDAB until his retirement in 2019. Fons's work now focuses on sustainable labour market policies, lifelong learning, and the societal impact of employment.

## Open Spaces on Leadership



**Moderator: Lisa Willems** currently works as a staff member for 'strength-oriented work' within the Specialised Mediation Team (GTB) Flanders. GTB supports everyone with a great distance to the labor market and an intensive need for guidance towards work. Strength-oriented training, interventions, coachings and process counseling are her daily work.

Since 2013 she has been running a practice as an independent psychologist and trainer in a secondary profession. In addition to her master's degrees in clinical psychology at the universities of Maastricht and Ghent and the postgraduate course in solution-focused psychotherapy at the Korzybski Institute in Bruges, I am a lifelong learner in numerous fields at home and abroad. Currently I am immersing myself in the intertwining between systemic work and ancient wisdom in a learning trajectory of the 7th C in Antwerp. She is also a member of the VVDO (Flemish Association of Experts in Solution Focused Cognitive and Systemic Therapy) and the BFP (Belgian Federation of Psychologists).

## Leadership and data management



**Sander Allert** is the co-founder of **PlainSight**, a company that builds data products ranging from Business Intelligence to Artificial Intelligence. He is a data platform architect with over 10 years of experience in creating solutions that turn data into insights. He has successfully delivered a broad range of analytical solutions using data & AI. He is passionate about sharing his knowledge on new technologies and trends in the data industry. In his spare time, he enjoys riding his motorcycle and climbing.



**Giada Venier** is an EU policy officer at **Fondazione Don Gnocchi**. Fondazione Don Gnocchi provides high-quality health care, rehabilitation, assisted living and independent living services to people with disabilities of any age, especially those with the most severe disabilities, according to the person-centred approach envisaged by the founder don Carlo Gnocchi.

Fondazione Don Gnocchi aims at developing and deploying our services on the basis of a "continuity of care" paradigm within the national health and social care framework, while staying loyal to the inspiration of the founder and the charity principles of the Christian faith.

## Leadership and quality management



With over 25 years at VDAB (Flemish PES), **Karen Warson** has been instrumental in advancing supported employment in Flanders since 2013. As President of **ASEE** (Association for Supported Employment), she drives policy and research efforts at both Flemish and European levels, building strong partnerships to promote inclusive labour markets.

**ASEE** is a non-Government organisation and was established in 1994 to facilitate the development of Supported Employment throughout Europe.

One of Karen's key achievements is her co-development of the *Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF)* — a recognised, evidence-based model now used by several European governments. The SEQF ensures quality and fidelity in supported employment services, setting a new standard for sustainable and impactful inclusion.



support people with special needs in their process of self-actualisation.

**Veronika Kaska** is the Deputy Director of **Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre**. Astangu provides rehabilitation services and scholarly courses to working-age people with special needs. As a valued partner of the Ministry of Social Affairs, they work to improve the social services sector, with an emphasis on vocational rehabilitation in Estonia. Their mission is to create opportunities for people with disabilities developing their operational and work abilities and supporting them on the way to labour market. Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre is a leading centre in Estonia in the field of social and vocational rehabilitation with the aim to

### *Leadership and motivation*



**Lisa Willems** (see description above), is a staff member for 'strength-oriented work' within the Specialised Mediation Team (GTB) Flanders. **GTB** is a specialised service provision and counselling service for people with work disabilities or health problems. GTB promotes job integration into the labor market, empowering persons with special needs and supporting companies to employ persons with special needs.



**Elaine Armstrong** is the CEO of the Cedar Foundation. The Cedar Foundation delivers a range of services that enable people with disabilities to get the most out of life and to be fully included in their communities. Our services are centred around the individual needs of each person and are delivered throughout Northern Ireland. These include community inclusion services, training and employment services and housing support,

### *Leadership and inclusivity*



**Joris Van Hoya** (Bee Sanity Officer), and **Eva Dessers** (Bee Well Officer) are staff members of the **The Bee Academy**. The Bee Academy guides inactive IT profiles back to the labor market with an eye for their background, past and needs. In addition, we ensure that the employers we work with attach importance to a good life-work balance.



Since 2018, **Anna Duquennoy** has been working as a receptionist and administrative assistant (accounting department) at 'De Brug' in Mortsels. Before that, she did volunteer work in various places (Ronde in Brasschaat, WZC Meerminnehof in Mortsels). Former GTB client.

6 June 2025

## Moderator:



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## Keynote: : Organising evidence-based change



**Jeroen Stouten** is a professor of organizational psychology at KU Leuven. He combines academic research and teaching leadership and organizational change with his role as scientific director of the Center for Evidence-Based Management. He previously had appointments as Associate Researcher at the Cambridge University Judge Business School and Visiting Professor at Ghent University. Jeroen shares his insights with practitioners to help support sustainable decision-making in organizations.

Organizational change involves a wide range of complex processes. While popular change models offer clear, structured steps for managing change, academic literature tends to be more fragmented and less accessible. In this talk, I will explore the strengths of these widely used models and synthesize them with research evidence to present a practical and evidence-based overview of what works in implementing organizational change.

## Feedback from the Open Spaces by the service users



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## Masterclass: Balance your empathy to drive innovation



**Yvonne Gillis** is a Product Owner & Designer at Syntilio, specializing in digital healthcare solutions that are both effective and human-centered. Holding a master's degree in Design for Interaction from TU Delft and with over 7 years of international experience in digital innovation within healthcare, she bridges the gap between empathy and practical execution in complex healthcare environments.

At EPR 2025, Yvonne explores a critical question: Why is empathy such a real challenge when innovating for humans? She shares lessons from the field on how balancing empathy—deeply understanding emotions while uncovering unspoken, practical needs—can lead to more impactful and sustainable innovation in healthcare technology.

## A policy dimension from Flanders and the EU



**Helga Stevens** is a Policy Advisor and coordinator at the Belgian Federal Public Service of Social Security's Directorate General for Persons with Disabilities. Throughout her career, she has been a politician, lawyer, and advocate for disability rights. In 1993, she became the first deaf person in Belgium to earn a law degree, graduating from the Catholic University of Leuven, followed by an LL.M. from the University of California, Berkeley in 1994.

Her career began in Brussels as a legal trainee before transitioning to the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), where she served as Director and later President. In 2004, she was elected to the Flemish Parliament and subsequently held a dual mandate as a Belgian Senator. In 2014, she made history as the first female deaf Member of the European Parliament (MEP), representing the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) within the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. During her tenure in the European Parliament, Stevens served as Vice-President of the ECR group and co-chaired the Disability Intergroup.



**Olga Martinez de Briones** joined the unit 'Disability and Inclusion' of the European Commission in May 2018, as policy officer in the area of homelessness and housing exclusion. Since June 2022, she has joined the 'Disability' team in the same unit, working on the implementation of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. Her work in this area includes policy analysis and promoting the closer co-operation and sharing of knowledge among stakeholders in the area of independent living and processes for de-institutionalisation of persons with disabilities.



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the European Union