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MEPs and Health Community

For the first time, 9 MEPs, 65 leading trade unions, civil society organisations, health organisations, and industry associations have united in an open letter calling on European leaders to stop cutting essential health and welfare systems and focus on ordinary people living in Europe coping with the dire impact of a financial crisis of which they are the first victims. The toll on physical and mental health is becoming unbearable, and health systems are at breaking point. The coalition is led by the European Public Health Alliance, whose recent briefing note summarises the evidence of the devastating impact of the financial crisis on human health. The evidence in rising suicides, mental health problems, rates of infectious disease are warning signs that current policies are hurtling Europe in a dangerous direction.

For millions of people living in Europe, these last few years have been devastating in a way few had imagined Europe would face again. Rising levels of unemployment, high levels of household debt and cuts to public services have left many people desperate and in need of support. The current cuts to social support and healthcare not only threaten the fundamental right of access to care, but also undermine the core values at the heart of the European vision.

"We need a long-term strategy. What's the point in having social protections during the good times but then taking away the safety net during the tough times? Our happiness and health cannot be solely reliant on the will of the markets, or the performance of the banks," said **Glenis Willmott**, British MEP, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. **Alejandro Cercas**, Spanish MEP, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats is concerned that *"In Spain, health is becoming a commodity instead of a right"*.

Anders Olauson, President of the European Patients' Forum believes that *"Short term 'savings'...undermine access to treatment and care and will create worse health outcomes and higher expenditure as patients will need more intensive and expensive interventions in the longer term. The huge impact among disadvantaged groups living with chronic diseases, including those living in poverty, children, disabled people, and older patients will increase further health disparities."*

"The present lack of political coherence and strong leadership in Europe has cost us far too much. With social instability, inequalities, depression, and suicides ominously rising among the lower and middle classes, Europe's leaders should amend their own mistakes before it is too late," points out **Monika Kosinska**, Secretary General of European Public Health Alliance (EPHA). *"Public healthcare is among the worst-hit sectors across the EU. This is an inevitable outcome of blindly trusting fickle and unaccountable financial markets to set public spending priorities. At this critical juncture, European leaders should meet the legitimate expectations of citizens that put them in office in the first place, as a loss of confidence in the state's ability to support its citizens is a threat to the stability Europe takes for granted,"* stresses Ms. **Kosinska**.

The open letter urges European leaders to realise that cutting spending on essential services such as health, particularly in primary care and early intervention, is a false economy. It will drive up longterm costs, leading to the re-emergence of communicable diseases and put the burden on those people who can afford it least. The lessons learned from the crises of the past are to keep supporting people through the hard times, reform smartly and ensure you have a healthy population that can pick up when the economy improves.

The joint letter concludes that *"at this decisive time the public health community and people living in Europe look for courageous leadership from Heads of States and Government to take action on prioritising and championing the health of people, not sacrificing health for short term financial gains."*

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