

## Short-term savings equals long-term problems for people with Autism

by Nikki Sullings, Autism-Europe

*Amidst the recent budget cuts and austerity measures being implemented in many European countries, people with Autism are suffering significant cuts to the basic services they depend on for housing, health and education. How long can we go on cutting spending on the most vulnerable people in society? Can sacrificing human rights to save money possibly achieve positive outcomes? Autism-Europe warns that the long-term costs may exceed the short-term savings, and meanwhile people with Autism and other disabilities will pay a high price.*

Since the financial crisis began in 2008, it seems that austerity measures have become a permanent fixture of life in Europe. The most recent projected budgets indicate, however, that a new round of cuts is going to be more severe for people with Autism and other disabilities than the previous ones.

In Italy, for example, €10 billion in funding will be cut in 2012-2013 from the regional and local health and social services. These cuts include the cancellation of the 'National fund for persons with dependency needs', which will deprive all forms of assistance to 20% of people with disabilities living in the north of the country, 30% living in the centre and 50% living in the south, from 2012 onwards<sup>i</sup>.

Similarly, in Greece, a 40 percent cut to the state's financial contribution to non-government organisations and charities that provide essential services to people with Autism, including supported living centres, has recently been announced.<sup>ii</sup>

It is not just the countries who have been hardest hit by the crisis who are making ruthless budget cuts. In the United Kingdom, where the availability and standard of services for people with Autism have been among the highest in Europe, severe cuts are also being posed.

A proposed 20 percent cut to the projected spend for the United Kingdom's 'Disability Living Allowance' payments under the Welfare Reform Bill<sup>iii</sup> would mean over 700,000 people with disabilities could have their living support payments cut or cancelled<sup>iv</sup>.

These cuts will leave many people who have Autism Spectrum Disorders unable to meet some of the everyday needs for which they usually rely on a range of health and social services.

Autism encompasses a 'spectrum' of disorders, ranging from mild to severe impairments in a person's ability to understand everyday information and communicate and interact socially with other people. Therefore these people require a wide range of services from basic assistance with job interviews and social interactions, to full-time residential care. Due to their social difficulties it is common for people with Autism to become quite isolated from society and highly dependent on others for everyday things such as transport, shopping and banking.

Ann Griffin is a British mother of a 20 year-old man with Asperger syndrome (an Autism Spectrum Disorder), whose condition had made him unable to work or go out and do everyday tasks like shopping. Ann describes the difference that social services and living support payments have made to her son's life

so far: “He began with three hours on a Thursday morning meeting up with a support worker, going on buses, doing simple things like going to the library and reading papers, to a café to buy himself a drink, playing snooker. From this he was encouraged to attend a local social group but this meant travelling to a town ten miles away on the bus. Initially my husband travelled with him and waited the two-and-a-half hours for him and then travelled back. He now has a travel trainer working with him because we feel it is really important that it is not us [travelling with him] all the time because we don’t open up his world. The change in my son is immense, he is now more at ease with other people. He is becoming slowly more independent.”

Ann describes how the cuts will affect her son, Stephen: “If Stephen did not have access to these benefits, his world now would be very small and his ability to communicate and interact with others would become very limited.”

These cuts are in direct contradiction to the pledges made by the European Union and its members when ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in December 2010, almost one year ago.

Italy, Greece and the United Kingdom are just examples. Autism-Europe’s President, Evelyne Friedel, explains: “We are seeing these funding cuts across many European countries.”

“Providing support to people with disabilities is a human right – the governments of Europe have confirmed that when they signed the Convention.

“It’s not acceptable to put the rights of people with disabilities aside when financial difficulties arise,” Ms Friedel continues.

“Governments and the European Union institutions must ensure that their commitments under the UNCRPD are fulfilled and that persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders benefit from the same opportunities as the rest of Europe’s citizens,” urges Ms Friedel.

Not only is access to basic services for people with disabilities a human right, but the economic cost of not investing in early intervention services in the early stages of life could lead people with Autism to have higher needs – with higher costs – later in life.

A recent study by Dr Michael Ganz, of the Harvard School of Public Health, demonstrated that the cost of supporting people with Autism is highest during their adult years when they no longer live with their parents, often requiring more intensive forms of support such as supported accommodation. The cost of support during early childhood is also high, but as Dr Ganz explains: “[Early intervention] has a high upfront cost. But if it works, it could save a lot of these downstream costs. If you match up children with the appropriate therapies early on, these kids might wind up growing up and being able to compete in the normal job market - downstream costs could be avoided. So we have to be holistic about it.”<sup>v</sup>

If people with Autism, especially children, are denied basic services for the duration of this financial crisis –the length of which remains unknown – we could in fact be creating bigger financial burdens later on.

*Throughout Europe this October, as part of the annual ‘European Days of Autism’, people with Autism and their families are calling on the European Union and national governments to fulfill their recent commitments to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) despite the financial crisis.*

*'European Days of Autism' have been held annually since 2007 to raise awareness about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) and issues faced by people who have ASDs. Events and activities will be held throughout Europe this October. For more details, go to: [www.autismeurope.org/about-us/our-members/](http://www.autismeurope.org/about-us/our-members/)*

*Further studies and campaigns to prevent budget cuts that affect Europe's most vulnerable people have begun. For more details, go to: [www.edf-feph.org](http://www.edf-feph.org) and [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)*

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<sup>i</sup> European Disability Forum, 2011, *Letter to the President of Italy*, [http://www.edf-feph.org/Page\\_Generale.asp?DocID=13854&thebloc=13856](http://www.edf-feph.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=13854&thebloc=13856)

<sup>ii</sup> Bonanou S, 2011, Greek Association for Autism (GSPAP)

<sup>iii</sup> UK Parliament, *Welfare Reform Bill 2010-2011*, <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/welfare-reform.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Disability Alliance, 2011, *Hardest Hit Campaign*, <http://www.disabilityalliance.org/hardesthit.htm>

<sup>v</sup> Ganz ML (2007) 'The Lifetime Distribution of the Incremental Societal Costs of Autism', *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 161:343-349, <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/161/4/343>