

<b>What</b>	<b>European Week of Regions and Cities - Strengthening Europe's Healthcare Workforce</b>
<b>When and Where</b>	<b>10 October 2024 - Committee of the Regions, Jacques Delors Building, Room JDE53</b>

### Main relevant speakers

- **Michele Calabrò:** Director at EUREGHA
- **Olena Horlach:** Project and Policy Officer at HOSPEEM (European Hospital and Healthcare Employers' Association)
- **José Diniz:** Medical Doctor, Public Health Specialist at ULS San José, and PhD Candidate at Universidade do Porto
- **Birgitta Sacrédeus:** Chair of the Interregional Group on Health and Well-being at the European Committee of the Regions

### Objective

The session addressed one of the most pressing issues in the European health sector: **attracting and retaining healthcare workers at the regional level.**

The workshop brought together experts, policymakers, and representatives of regional and local health authorities to discuss common challenges and potential solutions for improving workforce retention, focusing on key European initiatives such as DG Regio's Harnessing Talent Platform and the Pact for Skills.

### Main outputs

- **Focus on Working Conditions as a Priority**

One of the strongest messages that came through during the event was the need to improve working conditions and organizational culture in the healthcare sector. Olena Horlach, representing HOSPEEM, emphasized that without better working environments and opportunities for professional development, it will be difficult to make healthcare careers attractive, especially to younger generations. She pointed out that healthcare employers across Europe are struggling with workforce shortages, and many of these issues can be traced back to the quality of the work environment.

This point was echoed in the audience's feedback through the Sli.do platform, where "working conditions" and "organization culture" were the most frequently cited challenges in a word cloud activity. The consensus was clear: improving these aspects is essential for both attracting new talent and keeping experienced professionals in the field.
- **Engaging Younger Generations and Shifting Towards Prevention**

A second major outcome was the recognition that the healthcare sector needs to adapt to the expectations and values of younger professionals. Birgitta Sacrédeus, stressed the importance of engaging youth in healthcare. She highlighted that younger generations are increasingly drawn to roles that focus on prevention rather than treatment, a shift that must be reflected in both training programs and job opportunities.

This perspective aligns with broader trends across Europe, where preventive health measures are becoming more prominent, and many regions are starting to rethink the roles of healthcare workers in this context. Encouraging youth to see

healthcare as a field that can lead to meaningful contributions in prevention could help fill critical gaps in the workforce.

- **The Challenge of Cross-Border Degree Recognition**

Another significant theme that emerged was the difficulty of recognizing medical qualifications across European borders, particularly for healthcare workers coming from third countries. During the Q&A session, an audience member from Emilia Romagna raised concerns about how the current system complicates the recruitment of international talent.

José Diniz responded by acknowledging that there are indeed disparities in the recognition of medical degrees and specializations across different countries. He emphasized the need for greater flexibility and harmonization in recognition processes. This issue, he noted, is particularly urgent in regions that rely on foreign healthcare workers to fill critical staffing gaps, and simplifying these processes could help to strengthen the European healthcare workforce as a whole.

- **The Power of Multilevel Governance and EU Coordination**

The success of multilevel governance, particularly the coordination between regional, national, and EU-level authorities, was another key takeaway from the event. Birgitta Sacrédeus pointed to the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine as a prime example of how cooperation at all levels can lead to tangible results. She argued that this same approach could be applied to the healthcare workforce crisis, with regions, nations, and the EU working together to address staffing shortages and other systemic issues.

This sentiment was also reflected in the audience's input. When asked what policymakers should prioritize, participants overwhelmingly pointed to the need for more collaboration and EU-level support. This underscores the importance of a coordinated European response to what is, at its core, a pan-European challenge.

- **Addressing Mental Health and Well-being of Healthcare Workers**

The well-being of healthcare workers, particularly in relation to mental health, was highlighted as a critical area for improvement. Sacrédeus shared insights from Sweden, where the mental health of healthcare staff has become a major concern. She cited examples of EU initiatives, such as the Data Union, which have successfully contributed to improving mental health outcomes for workers.

The need for mental health support was recognized by the audience as well, with many participants agreeing that without addressing burnout and stress, it will be difficult to retain healthcare workers long-term. This focus on well-being reflects a broader shift in healthcare policies towards ensuring that workers are not only physically safe but also mentally supported.

- **Need for Better Funding and Regional Support**

Finally, a recurring theme throughout the event was the need for more tailored regional support and increased EU funding to address healthcare workforce challenges. During the interactive sessions, participants suggested that the EU should prioritize better funding mechanisms and capacity-building instruments to help regions develop their healthcare workforce strategies.

The importance of region-specific solutions was particularly evident in Diniz's presentation, where he discussed the varying needs of different geographic areas in Europe. He argued that policies must be flexible enough to account for these differences, whether it's in addressing rural shortages or aligning healthcare worker profiles with local population needs.

### **Conclusion**

The session provided valuable insights into the critical issue of attracting and retaining healthcare workers in Europe, emphasizing the need for a multifaceted approach. Improving working conditions and organizational culture was identified as a top priority, with a clear consensus that better environments and opportunities for professional growth are essential to making healthcare careers more appealing, particularly to younger generations.

Cross-border recognition of medical qualifications, especially for workers from non-EU countries, was highlighted as a significant challenge that requires more harmonization across Europe. The importance of multilevel governance and coordination between regional, national, and EU authorities was underscored, particularly as a means to address workforce shortages and systemic healthcare issues effectively.

Mental health and well-being of healthcare workers were also emphasized, with an urgent need to address burnout and stress to ensure long-term retention. Finally, better funding mechanisms and tailored regional support were recognized as key components to help regions address their unique healthcare workforce challenges. Overall, the session called for a coordinated European response, focused on improving working conditions, modernizing healthcare roles, and providing adequate resources to ensure a sustainable workforce for the future.