



**Red Cross
work in
health and
care**



RED CROSS
EU OFFICE

REINFORCING HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS AT NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVELS

This document highlights European National Red Cross Societies' role towards public health authorities and illustrates the scope of their support in the field of health and care, particularly for vulnerable groups. It also aims to showcase why the European Union (EU) should partner with the Red Cross to develop a strong and inclusive European Health Union that cares for all.

Supporting Member States in their public health mission, National Red Cross Societies are contributing to the health agenda at national and European levels. As the EU faces changing health trends, including the impacts of climate change, the threat of epidemics, situations of conflict and population movement, amongst others, National Societies are well placed to help address future challenges and be a key partner in shaping the European Health Union.

As stated in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) Healthcare Framework, "ensuring that everyone, everywhere has access to the health services they require in all contexts, defines Red Cross work in health and care".¹

National Red Cross Societies apply a principled approach to health and care. They work across the whole of the EU to reach all people effectively and in a non-discriminatory and equitable manner. Ensuring dignity, access, participation and safety² for the people they accompany are core values that National Societies work to embed in their operations on the ground.

Red Cross activities follow a needs-based and people-centered approach, while aiming to address negative health determinants. They consider social, environmental, economic and cultural conditions as having a direct impact on the health of communities and individuals. Working for and with communities, Red Cross societies pay particular attention to the most vulnerable people, guaranteeing access to quality and sustainable health and care services to everyone.

Anchored to national health plans in some fields and complementing public health authorities in others, National Red Cross Societies are providing essential services in emergency and non-emergency settings.

¹ https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/IFRC_Brochure_HealthCareFramework_EN_Web.pdf

² <https://www.ifrc.org/our-work/inclusion-protection-and-engagement/protection-gender-and-inclusion>



The health caravans from the Romanian Red Cross provide free access to quality health care services to the most vulnerable populations, 2022. © Irina Ruano/IFRC

Based on this practical expertise as an indispensable health actor, the Red Cross has the following recommendations to support an inclusive and resilient European Health Union:

- Prioritising the improvement of the health and well-being of vulnerable groups who have seen their vulnerabilities exacerbated by consecutive crises and countering urgently worsening health conditions; notably through the enhancement of community-based health and outreach approaches.
- Tackling health inequalities through EU-added-value actions by allowing the exchange of information and knowledge between key Member State health and care stakeholders, as well as the development, strengthening and dissemination of successful practices. Addressing health inequalities must thus be an EU work stream in itself; within existing platforms, rather than a cross-cutting strand.
- Adopting a holistic and integrated approach by increasing support to actions tackling health determinants beyond the behaviour of individual and considering social, environmental, economic and cultural conditions as having a direct impact on the health of communities and individuals, particularly when it comes to communicable and non-communicable diseases.
- Recognising the field knowledge and key role of the Red Cross in the implementation of health and care frameworks, policies and services at local, national and European levels. This can be undertaken by ensuring that National Red Cross Societies are involved in the development and implementation of national and European strategies.

- Advancing towards universal health coverage which guarantees all people's right to quality, accessible, affordable, available and resilient health and mental health services throughout their lifetime. To this end, investing in stable and sustainable national healthcare systems capable of meeting the needs of the entire population as well as in frontline service providers, including non-state actors such as the Red Cross, to always ensure the continuum of care for all groups.

SCOPE OF RED CROSS WORK IN THE HEALTH AND CARE SECTOR IN EUROPE

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS THROUGH THE PROVISION OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Across the EU, National Red Cross Societies run activities that are directly integrated into the health systems of Member States, anchored to national strategies, policies and platforms. Carried out by qualified staff and trained volunteers, these services play a vital role in ensuring the functioning of the public health system.

In their responsibility as auxiliaries to public health authorities, Red Cross societies deploy a wide range of services across Europe. These range from supporting ambulance services, emergency rescue and medical transport in Italy, to delivering essential training to medical staff in France, and from managing the administration of national rehabilitation services for patients in Luxembourg, to ensuring blood supply to hospitals in many European countries.

The **Belgian Red Cross (Flemish Community)** is responsible for providing a constant supply and adequate quantities of safe blood products to hospitals across Flanders. In 2021, its donor centres and mobile blood collections completed 415,036 successful blood, plasma and platelet donations. In addition, the Belgian Red Cross' Transfusion Research Center¹ is a key scientific research body, where blood transfusion is studied, including biological, chemical and medical issues related to the collection, preparation, storing and transfusion of blood products. The research findings are published internationally in authoritative journals and contribute to enhancing transfusion medicine.

REINFORCING NATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS AS FRONTLINE RESPONDER IN EMERGENCIES

National Red Cross Societies can also scale up their services to meet increased needs or pressure in times of crisis. While emergencies of all kinds require putting the health and well-being of those affected at the very centre of the response, crises such as large-scale population movements, natural hazards, or public health emergencies, including epidemics, can disturb health systems and jeopardise the availability or quality of services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, National Red Cross Societies across the EU have played a key role, in some cases directly boosting their national health systems to enable service continuity. In addition to

responding to crises, National Red Cross Societies work to prevent and prepare for emergencies. Through a wide network of skilled professionals and volunteers, including emergency health teams, Red Cross societies reinforce health systems to always ensure continued service delivery.

The scope of Red Cross action in emergency settings ranges from volunteers delivering basic nursing care to patients infected by COVID-19 in the Czech Republic, to providing immediate mental health and psychosocial support services to help people in distress following the 2020 Zagreb earthquake, and from reaching setting up health points on the Hungarian border to support displaced people affected by the international armed conflict in Ukraine, to contributing to research for pandemic risk management together with universities and public authorities in Italy and Austria³.



In five months, the German Red Cross trained more than 2,700 staff and volunteers to carry out over 150,000 COVID-19 rapid test. The initiative, run in collaboration with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health, aimed to reinforce national capacities in fighting the pandemic, 2021. © German Red Cross

Through the European Commission Emergency Support Instrument-funded project “Mobile Testing Initiative”, **Red Cross societies in Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain** boosted testing capacities and provided immediate support to Member States. From September 2020 to September 2021, local Red Cross teams performed more than 1.2 million tests¹ within the scope of the project. Moreover, 6,800 Red Cross staff and volunteers were trained to carry out testing. Across the seven countries, 1,428 mobile teams were set up and equipped to provide COVID-19 testing services, allowing National Societies to reach vulnerable people and migrants in remote areas, working to make RT-PCR and rapid antigen testing available for more people.

³³ <https://pandem-2.eu/>

COMPLEMENTING NATIONAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS' EFFORTS IN PUBLIC HEALTH BY ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES

Communities are an essential link for health systems to address health risks. Community members are best placed to understand factors that can harm or affect their health. As such, they are in a unique position to act towards the improvement of their own health and that of their peers. Bridging gaps between communities and public health authorities, the Red Cross works with and for communities to reinforce their capacities to improve their health and well-being, while complementing healthcare systems' efforts to promote, restore and maintain health.

National Red Cross Societies have a long history in delivering health education and promoting healthy lifestyles and positive mental health throughout the life cycle. Activities implemented range from raising awareness on healthy habits in school settings in Romania, to accompanying young and future parents in Germany, and from increasing knowledge to prevent and combat communicable and non-communicable diseases in food aid distribution in Latvia, to working to reduce hepatitis and HIV infection in Croatia, as well as promoting positive mental health and fighting loneliness of older adults through digital platforms in Denmark.

To help young people and their families, the **Finnish Red Cross** has developed the "Youth Shelter" model. The first shelter was established in Helsinki in 1990. Since then, four more facilities have been set up in other cities in Finland. Their activities sit at a multi-professional crossroads between social work, youth work and civic/voluntary action. The shelters are run by around 60 multi-professional employees and more than 600 volunteers. In 2022, more than 13,000 young people aged 12-28 and their relatives were involved in the shelters' activities. Young people and their families with diverse problems receive flexible support without queues or bureaucracy to help them face acute crises and address long-term psychosocial needs. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Finnish Red Cross started piloting a national digital psychosocial aid platform for young people and their relatives, using the potential of digital to also reach people who can't access physical support.

BRIDGING GAPS IN NATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE

Across the EU, National Red Cross Societies are committed to bridging gaps in the accessibility of healthcare. Through their community presence and outreach work, National Societies are in a special position to understand and monitor the needs of the most vulnerable people. They strive to address the social determinants of health and challenge health inequalities through more targeted and innovative actions. Their interventions are developed with a view to accompanying people towards greater autonomy and agency in their lives. Red Cross societies promote and enable access to care and health rights for people who are in situations of social vulnerability, extreme vulnerability and extreme precariousness, or in instances when the healthcare system has broken down. For people at the margins or outside the formal system, the Red Cross can represent the only connection to healthcare/public health.

The scope of Red Cross activities goes from accompanying and facilitating access to public health and care services through interpreting and cultural mediation in Greece, to outreach activities under a mobile harm reduction programme on the streets of Reykjavik, and from providing medicines for the people living in the enclaved non-government-controlled area of Cyprus, to training aimed at increasing the health skills of vulnerable migrants in the Netherlands.

The **French Red Cross** bases a lot of primary care activities on “Accueil Santé Social” (Health Access Point) – a volunteer-based model which exists since 1987. Across the country, 30 access points welcome and support the care path of all people in situations of severe exclusion. The objective is to ensure access to health rights for all through a combination of fixed and mobile structures. Care and social guidance services are an integral part of the support provided, as well as the prescription and delivery of medicines for people without health coverage and the performance of basic medical and paramedical consultations. Some of these health access points also provide maternal and neonatal health services. Mobile clinics travel to rural areas, camps, urban slums, and precarious and spontaneous settlements. In 2021, more than 15,000 medical consultations were delivered.



Mobile health access point during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rennes. © Livia Saavedra